

Sustainable Food Consumption Promotion Through Online Marketing Communication: The Case of Slovenian and Croatian Grocery Stores

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss promotion of sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication. In the research we comparatively analyze selected Slovenian and Croatian grocery stores' webpages from the aspect of the scope and the approaches of sustainable food consumption promotion. We focused on the sustainable/green products in the grocery stores' sales offers, including products' packaging, brands and labels, sustainable food products' related projects, additional informing of consumers about important sustainability topics, placement, and the scope of advertising of sustainable products on the grocery stores' websites, as well as on the comprehensiveness of communication, reflected also in the provision of sustainability reports. The research findings show that sustainability efforts are visible from the webpages of all analyzed grocery stores, however, the online marketing communication of sustainable food products is most developed in international grocery stores' chains that are globally present and have more resources at their disposal. We noticed several differences in the scope of sustainable food products sales offers between the observed grocery stores, and in the approaches towards branding, labelling, and providing information about sustainable/green food products. We recognize the importance of institutional support to the awareness rising about the importance of sustainable consumer behaviour for society's long-term common good. We indicate the COVID-19 pandemic as an important turning point for future orientations of businesses and consumers, particularly in the case of food products. Here, the digital marketing communication can take a leading role in promoting sustainable food consumption.

Keywords: sustainable consumer, sustainable food consumption, green marketing, digital marketing communication, grocery stores, Slovenia, Croatia

INTRODUCTION

As a society we have exceeded the planet's ability to support our lifestyles. We use more ecological resources and services than nature can restore (Global Footprint Network, 2021). Therefore, in recent decades, sustainability has been given priority by consumers, who are

increasingly paying attention to quality, affordable and environmentally friendly products. It has also become a guide for companies to design green products and business activities, including marketing strategies (ADEC Innovations, 2016). Businesses can play a leading role in promoting more sustainable patterns and levels of consumption. Sustainable development is achieved through business processes, such as innovation, marketing, and communications, and through collaboration with consumers, governments, and other stakeholders. Green marketing can play a very important role in ensuring the well-being of society (Nadanyiova, Gajanova, & Majerova, 2020, p. 2), and represents a way to adapt the consumption cycle to a more sustainable one (Degli Esposti, 2012, p. 103). A key aspect of sustainable development is the marketing communication of sustainable consumption (Castiglioni, Sesini, & Lozza, 2020, p. 1). Among consumer goods, food, transport, and housing are the most important in terms of the effects on absolute consumption. Food products are defined as commodities with the most important environmental footprint due to the large impacts of its production processes as well as consumer patterns on the natural environment (WBCSD, 2008, p. 11). Sustainable food consumption is therefore gaining increasing importance. The consumers' awareness of the importance of sustainable food products is increasing, wherewith the number of so-called sustainable consumers is also increasing. Consequently, grocery stores introduce novelties in the field of supply and promotion of food products. In doing so they are adapting to the new needs of consumers and offer more ecological and local food products. By carrying out the sustainable projects and marketing communication campaigns, grocery stores are directing towards sustainable business. Since modern consumers often obtain information on companies' websites, it is important that grocery stores design appropriate online marketing communication. By mastering digital marketing communication, they can successfully raise consumers' awareness of the importance of sustainable consumption. We believe that grocery stores play a particularly important role in raising public awareness of sustainability, as interactions could be daily. Many of grocery stores are already aware of their responsibilities, and they have also found that their focus on sustainability brings them several benefits.

Our paper assumes that the importance of sustainable development and sustainable consumption will be strengthened in the future and that the provision of online marketing communication is crucial for promotion of sustainable consumption. The purpose of the paper is to analyse to what extent, and in which forms the selected Slovenian and Croatian grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication. The research questions are the following:

- R1: To what extent selected grocery stores use their websites as tools for marketing communication?
- R2: What are the characteristics and scope of sustainable food consumption promotion through online marketing communication in selected grocery stores?
- R2: Which are the key differences in approaches of sustainable food consumption promotion through online marketing communication between selected grocery stores?

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: in the second Section we provide broad theoretical backgrounds, including digital marketing communication, sustainable consumption, sustainable/green marketing, and the role of grocery stores in promotion of sustainable food consumption. In the third Section we present the methodology and data and develop hypotheses. In the fourth Section we perform the empirical analysis, followed by a

discussion in the fifth Section. Sixth Section is conclusion, including the results of hypotheses' testing, limitations statements and suggestions for further research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

Digital marketing

In the digital age it is important for companies to connect their business online and maximize their online visibility. Digital marketing is a common term for marketing services and products through digital technologies. Its tools differ from conventional marketing communication tools, since they are interactive, mobile, highly measurable, cost-effective and can access broad audience (Lumen Learning, 2021; Vibrant Publishers, 2020, p. 14-17; Simplilearn, 2019).

Chris (2021) divides digital marketing channels into online channels (website marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, e-mail marketing, marketing on social networks, affiliate marketing, mobile marketing) and channels without an online connection (TV marketing, SMS marketing, radio marketing and marketing with billboards).

Online or internet marketing, as a subset of digital marketing, is the most important component, as most digital marketing activities fall within its boundaries. Online marketing includes tools such as websites, search engine marketing, marketing on social networks, content marketing, e-mail marketing, mobile marketing, and banner advertising (Chris, 2021).

Online marketing communication

Marketing communication strategies are changing dramatically in the online world. The Internet offers new targeting options that will increasingly influence the way marketers combine and organize different communication activities. It is easier than ever to send a message to many people on the Internet. Unlike marketing in the physical market, the internet enables the entire buying process: from awareness, identification, information evaluation, choice to transaction (Hollensen, 2019, p. 528 - 555). Key advantages of an online marketing communication strategy are immediate communication, obtaining information from the right source, preparing, and designing a product according to the wishes and needs of a particular consumer, increasing direct sales, encouraging immediate purchase, as well as brand development and maintenance.

Website as a tool of online marketing communication

A website is an important aspect of digital marketing because all digital marketing elements drive traffic to a website. It is a tool with which a company virtually realizes the goal of its marketing strategy and all activities that are part of that strategy. The design of an appropriate website is influenced by the existing website standards that apply to different industries (Obednikovska, Sotiroski, & Mateska, 2019, p. 83). With an effective website, a company communicates to the world that it exists and what value it offers. Websites can be a way to get information about existing and potential customers. If an online store is added to a website, it is often cheaper than a physical one and can reach customers almost anywhere in the world. Websites are highly flexible and allow organizations to design the features and capabilities they need to operate effectively.

The company's website must be designed considering the offer, purpose, mission, and vision of the company. To be competent, a website must consider 7 Cs (Business Jargons, 2021): Content

that can contain graphics, sound, text and video; Context that refers to the layout and design of a website; Customization that refers to the ability of a website to deliver results according to customer requirements; Communication that is established two-way; Community that facilitates user-to-user communication; Connection that means the extent to which one website offers links to others; Commerce that can enable business transactions.

Sustainable development

The goal of sustainable development is universal call to action to eradicate poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and opportunities of everyone and everywhere. With sustainable development the needs of present generations do not compromise the needs of the future ones (Strange & Bayley, 2008, p. 24). To achieve sustainable development, it is crucial to harmonize the three basic elements: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. Global action and cooperation between countries and key organizations are important for achieving sustainable development. In 2015, United Nations Member States adopted 17 goals as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which sets out a 15-year plan (United Nations, 2021). According to the topic of this paper, we highlight goal 12: sustainable consumption and production. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2021) states that to achieve economic growth and sustainable development, it is essential to reduce the ecological footprint by changing the mode of production and consumption of goods and resources. Encouraging industries, businesses, and consumers to recycle and reduce waste, as well as supporting countries to move towards more sustainable consumption patterns by 2030, are important.

Sustainable consumption

Contemporary consumers buy and consume more than they really need. They also generate all too much waste by discarding products too quickly and replacing them with newer ones. Particularly in developed countries, there are worrying trends where the consumer feels compelled to demonstrate ownership of new products. Companies take advantage of this opportunity to produce more and faster. The problems are reflected in increasing pressures on the consumption of natural resources, the burden on ecosystems and the well-being of people and society. Levels and patterns of global consumption are based primarily on rapid global population growth, rising global wealth (middle- and lower-income consumers), and a culture of "consumerism" (higher-income consumers) (WBCSD, 2008, p. 8 - 10).

Sustainable consumption is defined as the use of services and related products that meet basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while reducing the use of natural resources and toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants in life service or product cycle without compromising the needs of future generations (OECD 1999, p. 11). Sustainable consumption is a systemic challenge. Consumers may be morally responsible for sustainable living, but they cannot achieve this without the effective support of governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and businesses. It is important for all actors to coordinate and cooperate to make progress in sustainable consumption and at the same time move closer to the goals of sustainable development. Businesses (manufacturers and their suppliers, retailers, processors, and waste management companies) choose the method of sourcing and processing resources and materials, selling products and managing end-of-life products. These decisions are influenced by shopping and the lifestyle of consumers and financial institutions (through

lending policies and bonuses) and governments (through laws, taxes, regulations, and guidelines) (WBCSD, 2008, p. 34).

Consumption patterns will affect the performance of companies and their production. Manufacturers can also influence consumers. Production and consumption help to determine social status and create a natural environment. Sustainability of production and consumption means considering the entire life cycle of the product, from the raw materials needed for production, costs and working conditions to the costs of transport, retail, use and disposal (Strange & Bayley, 2008, p. 81). Promoting sustainable consumption and production is important aspect of sustainable development.

Sustainable consumer

Recent trends in sustainable practices call for a more active role for the consumer, which includes more active commitment and cooperation in promoting sustainability. The sustainable consumer buys as much as he/she needs, and in doing so chooses products that put less strain on the environment or not at all. By prudently shopping and demanding certain products, sustainable consumers consequently influence the production and supply of providers (Peterman, 2020; Castiglioni, Sesini, & Lozza, 2020, p. 17). However, sustainable consumer behaviour can be limited by the availability, affordability, product performance, conflicting priorities, scepticism, the power of habits, a lack of understanding, costs, and taxes (WBCSD, 2008, p. 15-18).

Types of sustainable consumers

Kos Koklič and Golob (2019, p. 44-45) identify five sustainable consumer segments. The responsible ones have an above-average positive view of all three dimensions of sustainability. They have the strongest feeling that they must personally contribute a lot to sustainability, and a high level of perception that achieving sustainability depends on the actions of everyone. Aware people express the environmental dimension of sustainability above average, while social and economic dimensions are below average. They also have an above-average sense of responsibility for their personal contribution to a sustainable society. Economically oriented have a below-average environmental and social dimension. The economic dimension is, on average, important. They have a below-average sense of personal return to sustainability. Declarators have an above-average high level of sustainability. However, they have a relatively low sense of personal responsibility. The disinterested are below average for all sustainability variables, on the other hand, they have a strong sense of personal responsibility.

Natural Marketing Institute (2008, p. 8-13) identifies the following five types of sustainable consumer segments:

- LOHAS (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability consumers) customers are socially responsible, environmentally oriented, and enthusiastic users of green products. These consumers are often the first to constantly look for organic alternatives and try new green products, while encouraging and influencing other consumers. They are always learning about sustainability, as they are also the most questionable in the face of growing efforts for green marketing. They are the least price sensitive as they are willing to pay more for quality products that match their personal values. They use Internet for a variety of activities more than other consumers. They have a desire for information, read news and research products. They search the Internet for green products and services that they may not be

able to find in regular stores. An online presence of a company is key to achieving the full consumer potential of this segment;

- For NATURALITES consumers most purchases of natural and organic products are based on the benefits to their personal health. They are interested in protecting the environment because it is related to personal health reasons;
- DRIFTERS consumers are motivated by the latest trends and the commitment of these consumers to trends is constantly changing. They represent the youngest segment and are more likely to see price as a barrier to buying green products;
- CONVENTIONALS consumers are not particularly environmentally aware. They are driven by practicality and economy. However, they could show certain LOHAS-related behaviours, such as recycling and energy saving;
- UNCONCERNEDS do not have a sense of environmental responsibility.

Despite the benefits of sustainable consumption, it is important to be critical of whether the segments of sustainable consumers are creating a new additional market for which additional products are produced. Although products are sustainable, this may mean that production and consumption increase more than necessary.

Sustainable business/organization

Achieving sustainable business requires comprehensive approaches based on three categories (WBCSD, 2008, p. 22-36): innovation, influence on choice and change of choice.

Innovation means developing and increasing the availability of more sustainable products, services, and business models. Innovation is an essential driver of more sustainable consumption. The goal of sustainable innovation is to ensure a high level of emotional and functional value, while reducing resource use and environmental impacts. Innovation responds to the challenge of sustainable consumption through environmental efficiency measures, innovation and product design, production and supply chain management, and business model innovation.

Influencing choice involves the use of market communications and thus the ways in which a company seeks to influence consumer behaviour for more sustainable consumption. Consumers are encouraged and enabled to choose and use products more efficiently. It also refers to a partnership between a business and a consumer, ranging from sustainable production and design of products to their selection, use and disposal. Examples of approaches are responsible marketing, advertising, and sponsorships of three partnerships with key opinion formers such as NGOs and the media.

Changing the choice involves removing unsustainable products, product components, processes, and business models in partnership with other actors in society, such as policy makers and retailers. Changing the choice represents an effective approach to changing consumer behaviour and achieving goals so that only the most sustainable products are available on the market. Companies regulate the choice by controlling elements of their supply chain or by removing product components that endanger the environment or human health. Policy makers can regulate legislation that would ban a product or substance.

Sustainability needs to be implemented throughout the organization. Factors contributing to success (Siemssen & Lierow, 2019, p. 86) are a clear strategic purpose for the organization, which requires constant and unambiguous support at the highest level, greater transparency and measurement of the ecological and social footprint of the organization's products and operations, in addition to availability, cost and time in the supply chain, more emphasis needs to be placed on resource use, renewables and social standards in supply chain management, it is necessary to set goals that will be quantified, both short-term and long-term, sustainability must be integrated into day-to-day decision-making in an impartial, transparent and quantitative way, continuous measurement with key performance indicators.

Businesses should also produce corporate sustainability reports, which they use to inform consumers about their social and environmental values and practices. Reporting topics include corporate governance, environmental performance, employee health and safety, community contributions, and supply chain management (OECD, 2008, p. 33).

Sustainable/green marketing

In sustainable/green marketing, some peculiarities in the design of the marketing mix can be found. Green products need to be more sustainable throughout the life cycle. They may have characteristics such as: energy efficiency, easy repairability, longer durability, possible reuse and recycling, production from renewable sources, use of local materials, minimally packaged, provision of sufficient information, no animal testing and no child and forced labour in production (Charter, Peattie, Ottman, & Polonsky, 2002, p. 20). Sustainable changes include many costs, such as the installation of new technology and machinery, training people, converting waste into recycled products. Higher costs of sustainable products are considered in the price of the product, which makes the green price a premium price. Businesses need to justify these costs so that consumers are willing to pay the premium. The challenge is to translate these improvements into value for the consumer (Charter et al., 2002, p. 23-24). A business should emphasize how a sustainable/green product or service can help consumers save key resources. This allows consumers to actively participate in sustainability. They are aware that their choice is about investing in something that will save them money and resources in the future, not just a short-term purchase (ADEC Innovations, 2016). Green marketing channels involve the choice of such channels to minimize the environmental damage that occurs to a large extent during the transport of goods (Peattie, 1999, cited upon Arseculeratne & Yazdanifard, 2014, p. 133). Charter et al. (2002, p. 25) state that physical distribution, wholesale, and retail have both direct and indirect impacts on the environment. These can be reduced through careful and prudent management. Sustainable marketing channels will focus as much as possible on more localized production and distribution systems. Retailers are expected to carry out inspections covering suppliers, warehouses, transport, and other distribution activities. Energy efficiency trade management and proper waste management are needed. A green marketing communication strategy must consider the fact that many customers are not aware of the importance of a green product because they do not have enough information. Customers need to be informed about the types of environmental problems that the product would solve first, and they need to be confident about the effectiveness of sustainable/green products. A company should explicitly promote its sustainable performance as a key component of its business activities. A company should not claim to be sustainable if business practices are unsustainable, as this would destroy its credibility (ADEC Innovations, 2016). Some companies use market tactics to take advantage of

the demand for more sustainable products and services that are not. Such misleading advertising means that consumers are unknowingly convinced to buy products that companies advertise as sustainable or environmentally friendly. “Green washing” can damage a company’s reputation, so it’s a reckless and risky move. It is extremely important for companies to develop legitimate and effective sustainable/green marketing strategies. A company that is sincere and genuinely committed to sustainability can earn the respect and loyalty of consumers.

The role of grocery stores

Sustainability in the supply chain requires retailers to extend system integration throughout the supply chain to minimize damage to the environment and society. It includes full consideration of the environmental and social impacts of the business, from the procurement of raw materials to the disposal, reuse, or recycling of products, and to the safety and well-being of employees and the whole society (Vadakkepat, et al. 2021, p. 3).

Retailers are a source of stakeholder support in educating the public. Retailers are the first to meet consumer demand and have direct access to influential green consumers. Siemssen and Lierow (2019, p. 84) state that most retailers agree that sustainability will be a key competitive advantage in the future. Most retail chains reduce and dispose of plastic packaging, eliminate the use of disposable bags, require producers to increase animal welfare, introduce better sales deadlines and discounts on products at the end of their shelf life, donate food to reduce waste, encourage local shopping for reducing emissions, eliminate products that would threaten rainforests and other vulnerable areas, facilitate recycling, optimize the value chain to improve quality and reduce the carbon footprint (Johannessen, 2019).

Grocery stores need to consider who they work with and in what way. Attention needs to be paid to how sustainable suppliers and other partners are. In doing so, they can also develop their own sustainability standards to influence suppliers to take sustainability aspects into account.

Sustainable labelling

In grocery stores, we can find many different labels that provide consumers with information about the content, properties and use of the product, as well as information related to consumer safety and health. Grocery stores can communicate and support their sustainable business with appropriate sustainability labels.

Mandatory labels may be added to inform consumers of their obligations to recycle waste products and packaging, labels on the type of materials and the possibility of recycling. Health warning labels may be included, as well as nutrition information, organic foods, and labels of genetically modified foods. Labelling instruments have become more comprehensive and have expanded from environmental to social and ethical aspects (OECD, 2008, p. 10 - 30).

The most used instrument to influence sustainable consumer choice is voluntary labelling. There are different ways to use and choose sustainable labels. Products can be certified by an internationally recognized and respected body, which can be local, national, or regional. Many companies, including food retailers, have also developed their own brands. Companies can also use uncertified but trusted methods or state claims on packaging, such as “natural” (WBCSD 2008, p. 19). Labels in which environmental or social claims are verified by a third party

(governmental or non-governmental organization) are the most used. These can be multi-criteria labels that compare products with others in the same category in terms of the number of impacts throughout their life cycle, or stand-alone labels that relate to a particular environmental or social characteristic of a product. These labels communicate complex sustainability information in a simple way and ensure transparency (OECD 2008, p. 29).

Food products can be traced to international sustainability labels such as the Aquaculture Stewardship Council ASC, the EU Ecotrain, Fairtrade, the Marine Stewardship Council MSC, the Rainforest Alliance Certified, the RSPO Certified Sustainable Palm Oil and UTZ Certified (Ecolabel Index, 2021). Among the sustainable labels in Slovenia, we can highlight the "Selected Quality - Slovenia" label, which assures consumers that they have bought food produced and processed in Slovenia. This food is also of higher quality and has been additionally controlled (RS MAFF, 2021).

Eco-labelling is intended to raise consumer awareness. Eco-labels can be used to communicate the environmental benefits of a product and to differentiate between competing products. Labels can be a source of reliable information based on which consumers make purchasing decisions (Mikelopoulou, Karabatsos, Konstantinou, & Sarigiannis, 2012, p. 159).

Consumers who do not prioritize sustainable products will not pay attention to labels. Confusion between different concepts that occur, such as natural, organic, bio, eco, ethical, etc. can represent obstacles for consumers. Due to the large number of labels, consumers may doubt some of them and think that they are greenwashing. It is important that retailers use authentic and certified labels. It is also welcomed to educate consumers about labels' credibility.

Food producers should also be required to be more transparent in terms of labelling and reliability in providing correct and comprehensive information on the product, the sustainability of production processes and the origin of raw materials. This would support public awareness of healthier shopping (Borsellino, Kali, & Schimmenti, 2020, p. 20).

Supermarkets and other food services should be included in the challenge of recommending regional and local food consumption. Due to the sustainability concept, sustainable foods are also local foods. Businesses should pay attention to maximizing the involvement of the products of domestic farmers, growers, and other businesses. Consumers can perceive such products as higher quality and fresher, as well as supporting local businesses.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The empirical part of this paper is a comparative case study analysis, based on secondary data. We analysed the promotion of sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication of selected grocery stores in Slovenia and Croatia, according to their websites' contents in 2021. In each country we selected one domestic and two international grocery stores. Additionally, we compared the websites' contents of two international grocery stores in Slovenia with their websites in the country of origin. Based on the set research questions we developed four hypotheses.

Businesses are recognizing the growing consumer demand for sustainable products and are therefore offering more and more green labels and products with sustainable characteristics (Vadakkapatt, et al., 2021, p. 13):

H1: Selected grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication by at least one brand / label.

Businesses can implement a variety of sustainable projects to support an advertising strategy that develops based on environmental and social issues (Charter, Peattie, Ottman, & Polonsky, 2002, p. 26, 27):

H2: Selected grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication by at least one project.

Sustainable products also include those that are produced from local sources (Charter, Peattie, Ottman, & Polonsky, 2002, p. 20):

H3: Selected grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication by the range of products of local origin.

A big part of social responsibility is reporting - informing the public about what companies are doing. It is also a way for companies to communicate their "good deeds" for public relations purposes (Strange & Bayley, 2008, p. 86):

H4: Selected grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication by the comprehensive information about their efforts for sustainable development.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Selected grocery stores' online promotion of sustainable consumption in Slovenia

Tuš

Tuš is a Slovenian company whose main activity is retail trade. It has been operating for more than 30 years and is the largest Slovenian retailer.

According to the company's webpage the sustainability is a key aspect of its strategy. From a social perspective, it states responsibility to customers, their time and health. It emphasizes cooperation with Slovenian local producers and informing customers about the importance of local products. These activities are implemented within the project "Let's Respect Slovenia". He also mentions charitable activities, such as children's holidays at Debeli rtič, gifting children from socially disadvantaged families and donating food to vulnerable groups. From an economic point of view, the company emphasizes its support for Slovenian producers by including more and more locally produced food. Concerning the environmental aspect of sustainability, the company is intensively renovating its facilities to meet the guidelines and standards. It has an established waste management system and takes care of the energy transition to the renewable sources. It optimizes transport routes and reduces fuel consumption. It promotes the use of durable and biodegradable bags. Company obtained the international environmental certificate "Certificate resources SAVED" for the recycling of material flow (Tuš, 2021c).

Under the slogan "We take care of ours", information is given about the sustainable aspect of the Tuš Group. Under the slogan "Let's respect Slovenian, let's buy domestic" we can see the

company's commitment to offering local products. We can also see the "Ana Roš & Tuš" line, within which Tuš offers Slovenian food and top-quality cuisine. The company explains that they mostly offer Slovenian products. Due to the locality, they can thus ensure the freshness of the products and delivery in the shortest possible time. The company states that (Tuš, 2021č) it cooperates with renowned Slovenian food suppliers and recognized research institutions.

Locally produced food is sold under two brands: Slovenian delicacies and Slovenian, from the countryside. The first one represents an offer of Slovenian locally produced products of higher quality that promote Slovenian nature, tradition, and innovation (Tuš, 2021d). The second one indicates the offer of locally grown fruits and vegetables.

The company emphasizes its commitment to freshness and quality. Videos have been added where they present the offer of fruits and vegetables, delicacies, meat, bread and bakery and dairy products. In the videos, they present key products, highlight organic products and Slovenian products. The video also features some representatives of Slovenian suppliers, farmers, and growers, who explain their offer and business. The latter adds added value to the presentation, supports credibility and cooperation with Slovenian companies.

Under the auspices of the campaign "Let's respect Slovenian, let's buy domestic", the Tuš company supports the offer of Slovenian products. They combine local products with freshness, integrity, top quality, tradition, a sustainable approach, dedication, and care (Tuš, 2021e). We can see a tag in the image that supports the campaign. As part of this, Tuš also addresses its customers with fun slogans that contain words in dialects, such as "Home, but nothing else.", "Directly from the mountain to the shops.", "Beautiful, mature and fat.", "This is for sure fresh." The fresh offer of 100% Slovenian beef and pork of the Pigi brand according to a sustainable breeding process is emphasized - the latter is offered as the only one in Slovenia. The offer of Slovenian milk and dairy products is stated, as well as fruit and vegetables. They offer Slovenian bakery products from nine local bakeries (Tuš, 2021e). On the topic of four slogans to encourage the purchase of Slovenian food, the website also shows humorous advertising videos. As part of its sustainable orientation, the company also included fruits and vegetables of irregular shapes and sizes under the label "Naturally Different" (Tuš, 2021c).

Hofer

The company Aldi was established in 1946 and in 1961 it was divided into Aldi Süd and Aldi Nord that operate independently (Hofer, 2021a). In addition to Hofer Austria, Aldi Switzerland, Aldi Hungary and Aldi Italy, Hofer Slovenia is part of the Hofer Group, which operates within the Aldi Süd Group (Hofer, 2021b). The name Hofer originates from the acquisition in 1967, when the company took over the existing Helmut Hofer chain in Austria. The stores kept their established name and took over the business concept of Aldi. Hofer has been present in Slovenia since 2005 (Hofer, 2021a).

Hofer's vision is to provide the highest quality products at the lowest price. Values such as reliability, simplicity and accountability are highlighted (Hofer, 2021c).

Hofer Slovenia website's contents show the "Today for Tomorrow" initiative, which contains all the information that includes sustainable measures in business (Hofer, 2021č). It is stated that as a successful trader in Slovenia the company is aware of the responsibility and the

international influence of the entire group. It strives for transparent operations, fairness, and prudent use of raw materials. It lists its supporting pillars: raw materials, environmental and health protection, people, and trust (Hofer, 2021h). We can highlight the supporting pillar of the raw material, as these represent the foods or food ingredients on offer. Hofer highlights sustainable care for fish, cocoa, coffee, palm oil and tea. A company carefully plans the ordering of goods and states that the quantity of unsold products is negligibly small. Unsold products are offered to processors or farmers for feed. Food and other products are often donated to non-profit organizations (Hofer, 2021d).

The company describes in detail all its sustainable projects and campaigns, such as: The CO2 Project, We take care of our health, Pink October, Packaging on the Hofer mission, For a honeymoon future, Animal Friends, For a better future for children, Less is more, Glasses collection and numerous others. On the website, we can access the sustainability report "International Corporate Responsibility Report". This represents the sustainable business of the entire Aldi Süd Group and is available in English.

Hofer Slovenia states that it complements its wide range with seasonal products, expanding the range of organic, vegetarian, and vegan products. It also emphasizes working with local suppliers, smaller growers, and family farms with which they work long-term. The website visitor is informed about the importance of local delivery. They state that this means shorter distribution channels and thus a reduction in the carbon footprint. The locality allows for greater freshness in the supply of fruit and vegetables, as well as better traceability (Hofer, 2021e). They state the cooperation with more than 120 Slovenian suppliers. They state that the percentage of local products is the majority in fresh meat, fruit and vegetables, packaged bread, and freshly baked bakery products (Hofer, 2021f). On the website we can also find some advertising phrases that emphasize Slovenian origin. They illustrate that the company combines its offer of Slovenian products with freshness, good taste, and quality assurance. Examples of advertising phrases: "Fresh. Delicious. Slovenian." "Fresh. Checked. Slovenian.", "Daily freshness is our virtue." In 2021, Hofer designed three new labels, which indicate Slovenian quality products (Hofer, 2021g): "100% Slovenian" (products that are produced in Slovenia and are exclusively of Slovenian raw materials); "Quality from Slovenia" (products produced in Slovenia from at least 50% of raw materials of Slovenian origin); "Produced in Slovenia" (products manufactured in Slovenia are included, the raw materials of which may originate in Slovenia or elsewhere). Three new labels were developed from the "Quality from Slovenia" brand, which was developed by Hofer in 2009 (Hofer, 2021). Hofer ensures the authenticity of local origins by collaborating with the specialized Imprint Analytics laboratory in Austria (Hofer, 2021h).

Since 2006, Hofer has been offering its own brand "NATUR aktiv", which characterizes a line of products that are produced in an environmentally friendly way. The line includes fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, bread, dairy products, seeds and nuts, types of biscuits, sauces, jams, and pasta. The products are stated to be produced under strict organic production standards and in accordance with the provisions of Council Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007 on organic products (Hofer, 2021i).

Hofer provides on its website an overview of the production and processing of products and states that the products are regularly inspected by independent experts. Since the introduction

of the organic brand, it has been cooperating with the independent external organization ARGE BIO. The ARGE BIO quality mark is found on all NATUR Aktiv products. Safety standards should be respected by all suppliers. Hofer cites controls to the level of raw material extraction, which allows the criteria for implementing the European regulation to be considered outside the European Union (Hofer, 2021i). On the website, Hofer informs about the characteristics of organic production, thus educating consumers. It also informs about the method of farming, which uses only organic fertilizers. Such organic farming preserves biodiversity and fertile soils, prevents disease and pest development. Organic products represent proper handling throughout production and processing. This also includes free-range farming, appropriate stables, and organic feed in livestock farming (Hofer, 2021i). When presenting the importance of organic products, we can also observe some highlighted concepts, such as authentic and full taste, richness of vitamins and minerals, sustainable farming, organic fertilizers, natural means and methods, conservation of biological diversity, maintaining soil fertility, untouched nature, a healthy and quick meal (Hofer, 2021i).

Hofer confirms the quality of its products with ratings and awards of Slovenian scientific institution, chamber of commerce, agricultural fair, and consumers' association (Hofer, 2021j). The Hofer's website presents all products that have received any of the ratings or awards. Along the image of the product, we can see various markings that define its characteristics. Detailed information on the grade or award achieved is also provided. Among them are also products of the brands "Quality from Slovenia" and "NATUR Aktiv". In this way, the consumer can be informed about quality products and, above all, about which of the local and organic products achieve even higher quality.

Through the website, Hofer informs consumers about the importance of international sustainable food labels. This information is not in a visible place and is not collected within a common area. They are available on the "Hofer A-Ž" subpage, where related content can be accessed in letters.

As the packaging is closely related to the product itself, among the sustainable projects we highlight the project "Packaging on the HOFER mission: Reduce. Reuse. Recycle." Hofer states examples of reducing packaging for products such as composting foils and examples of introducing reusable packaging such as shopping bags and shipping crates. They strive to include as much packaging as possible that can be recycled after use (Hofer, 2021l).

Spar

Spar was founded in 1932 and today it is present in more than 48 countries in Europe, Africa, South America, Australia, and Asia. Together with Croatia, Hungary, and north-eastern Italy, Spar Slovenia is part of the Aspiag Group (Spar, 2021a). Spar has been operating in Slovenia for 30 years. Spar Slovenia also offers an online store.

In its vision, Spar states offering the best value for money, providing a wide selection, care for fresh products and customer satisfaction. It claims to be driven by development and innovation and to be based on quality, reliability, and responsibility. Values such as justice, human and environmentally friendly operation, simplicity, and modernity are reflecting company's orientation toward sustainability (Spar, 2021a).

On the company's website we can find many sustainable projects within the campaign "Together for a better tomorrow". Examples of projects are: "Think ECOLOGICAL", "Food does not belong in the trash", "Good among us", "Kuhnapato", "Our commitment: we change the sugar and salt content". Various donations are also presented.

Spar provides visitors to the website with an insight into their 2019 Sustainability Report, which is prepared in accordance with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards.

On the Spar Slovenia website, we can see the presentation of two current sustainable projects: the campaign "Together for less plastic" and current news related to it, as well as the project "THIS IS US: committed to local production and self-sufficiency in food", in which Spar states cooperation with Slovenian producers and food processors. It also mentions cooperation with both large and small companies from all over Slovenia. Spar states that 70% of its offered products are produced in Slovenia. At the same time, the website urges consumers to support Slovenian producers by purchasing their products. We can find the slogan: "Together we support Slovenian" (Spar, 2021). Examples of Slovenian products are also given.

On the Spar Slovenia website, we can see also the company's brands that cover a sustainable food supply. The "SPAR Natur * pur" brand represents organic or organic products. There are more than 300 nature-friendly products. Of these, more than 80 are fruit and vegetable units during the year. Spar lists the characteristics of such products (Spar, 2021d): fuller taste, free of genetically modified ingredients, organic production and strict control, the ecological integrity of the products is considered, preserve unspoiled nature. The production of SPAR Natur * pur products is said to be strictly controlled and inspected by independent inspection bodies. At the presentation of the brand, Spar also informs consumers about the importance and characteristics of organic farming. It also informs about the packaging of SPAR Natur * pur brand fruits and vegetables. All products of this brand have the European eco-label (Spar, 2021d).

Spar's brand "DESPAR Bio, Logico" presents organic products coming from Italy. With these products, Spar ensures quality, safety, and a fuller taste, as they are completely organic. They are also stated to not contain genetically modified ingredients and to be strictly controlled (Spar, 2021e). On the presented products of the DESPAR Bio, Logico brand, we notice a certified ecological label that is valid in the European Union.

The "SPAR Veggie" brand is a line of vegetarian products. Spar informs that the products are certified by the European Vegetarian Society and are marked with a label valid in the European Union. It also states that more than 50% of these products bear the European organic label, as they are made from organically produced raw materials. Among more than 50 products of the SPAR Veggie brand are 24 Slovenian products (Spar, 2021f).

With the "Vegan" brand, Spar offers vegan products and complements the "SPAR Veggie" brand with it. The Vegan brand includes snacks, desserts, protein dishes and superfoods. All products are 100% vegan foods that are grown organically. These products are also marked with the logo of the European Vegetarian Association (Spar, 2021g).

Spar uses two labels on SPAR brand products that support the local origin of the goods. These are the labels “Made in Slovenia” and “Produced in Slovenia”. The quality of more than 300 products under brand Made in Slovenia is being checked by various Slovenian scientific and professional institutes. Under the label Produced in Slovenia are Slovenian fruit and vegetables. Spar cites cooperation with large and small producers and explains that most vegetables, when harvested, are in the store within one day (Spar, 2021h).

On its website, Spar also informs about Slovenian apples and Slovenian potatoes on special subpages and presents them comprehensively, from a short history, meaning, characteristics, types to recipes for use. The given advice, use in dishes and interesting things show the promotion of the purchase of apples and potatoes of Slovenian origin (Spar, 2021i, 2021j). On the website about Slovenian potatoes, we can see the topicality of the website, where Spar encourages consumers to buy Slovenian potatoes and to support Slovenian farmers who could not make mass sales due to the COVID-19 crisis (Spar, 2021i). Spar also states that all the apples it offers are grown in Slovenia and informs about their organic production. He informs about buying larger quantities of apples from Brkini fruit growers that had been damaged by the COVID-19 crisis (Spar, 2021j).

Spar also offers a lot of information and tips about meat on the website. He also states that the meat of the SPAR brand, which is bred in Slovenia, has a proven quality and is traceable. Spar obtained the “Selected Quality of Slovenia” certificate for the sale of pre-packaged and served fresh poultry and beef. Processing is said to be carried out to high standards, the animals are fed with natural feed and the transport route is short. Spar also urges consumers to increase the level of self-sufficiency and support producers by buying locally produced meat (Spar, 2021k).

Spar mentions that it offers more and more products that carry international certificates, such as MSC, UTZ, Fairtrade.

As part of the “Together for less plastic” campaign, Spar promotes the purchase of food without packaging or shopping with reusable packaging. Some stores offer food in bulk. Thus, foods such as pasta, rice, legumes, porridge, seeds, nuts, dried fruits, and cereals are offered. In total, they offer 49 of such foods. Spar states that more than 70% of fruits and vegetables are available in their stores without packaging (Spar, 2021l).

Spar also emphasizes the effort to abandon the use of palm oil. It explains the harmful effects of palm oil production and states that its use in the manufacture of more than 60% of SPAR products has been abandoned. It also states the objectives of phasing out this type of oil. It also presents examples of products that are free of palm oil (Spar, 2021l).

Selected grocery stores’ online promotion of sustainable consumption in Croatia

Since Tuš and Hofer do not operate in Croatia we selected the two other grocery stores for empirical analysis in Croatia: Konzum and Kaufland. Also, in Slovenia we analysed the website of one local company (Konzum) and websites of two international companies (Spar and Kaufland). Kaufland is a German company, like Hofer.

Spar Croatia presents a sustainable local food campaign “Yes, it's home-made”, in which local suppliers of certain foods are presented (SPAR HR, 2021a). Among the food brands, we can see the brand of organic food, as found in Spar Slovenia. These are the Natur * pur brands and most of the products under the Spar Veggie brand (SPAR HR, 2021b).

On the Konzum's website we do not find sustainable campaigns. We also do not find a sustainable or local offer on Konzum's website. We came across the brand of ecological (organic) products and the given products, but the brand itself is not described in detail (Konzum, 2021).

On the Kaufland's website, we noticed the campaign “Our best suits us”, in which the campaign and its characteristics are described in more detail. Some smaller suppliers and their products are also presented (Kaufland, 2021a). The label of local foods is also described in more detail (Kaufland, 2021b). The brand of organic products is presented in detail and these products also bear the European eco-label (Kaufland, 2021c).

DISCUSSION

The results of our analysis show that grocery stores in Slovenia largely promote sustainable consumption. In addition to labels and brands, they also design sustainable campaigns and have a lot of different sustainable projects. Support for local production stands out at their webpages. Through analyzing the websites of Tuš, Hofer and Spar grocery stores in Slovenia, we found that all companies also emphasize sustainable contents in the context of their visions and business values. However, we can find a different extent of exposure of individual areas of sustainability.

In general, promoting and informing about sustainable consumption is less present in Croatian grocery stores. The least sustainable sales offer and information was found at the webpage of Konzum grocery store. There is more of this at Spar and Kaufland webpages, where the higher level of sustainable business orientation is obvious. In the table 1 we summarize selected grocery stores' websites information on promotion of sustainable consumption by products' labelling and branding. For the sake of clarity of information, we give only a numerical comparison.

Table 1. Promotion of sustainable consumption by brands and labels at webpages of selected grocery stores in Slovenia and Croatia

Grocery stores/Brands and labels		Brands of local products	Brands of ecological products	Labels of local products	Labels of ecological products	Certified labels of sustainable food products
Grocery stores in Slovenia	Tuš	2		1	2	
	Hofer		1	3		5
	Spar Slovenija		2	2		9
Grocery stores in Croatia	Konzum		1			
	Kaufland		1	1		
	Spar Croatia		2	1		

Sources: own research upon Hofer, 2021m; Spar, 2021m; Tuš, 2021f; Kaufland, 2021a; Konzum, 2021

Sustainable contents occupy about the same place on the websites of all selected retailers in Slovenia. These are found behind various current contents and campaigns of grocery stores. Each retailer lists projects and campaigns, being carrying out in the context of environmental and social responsibility. In advertising messages, we find words such as Slovenian, fresh, quality, countryside, domestic, verified, environmentally friendly, local, self-sufficiency, ecological, sustainable.

Our research shows that grocery stores in Slovenia within their online promotion of sustainable consumption expose products of Slovenian/local origin. Tuš particularly takes advantage of the trend of providing local products, as it is a Slovenian company. Some grocery stores also state the shares of the offer of Slovenian products in the entire offer. Tuš states that the share of its local products offerings represents 70%. Spar states that it offers 70% of products from Slovenian manufacturers.

We noticed that selected grocery stores ensure the quality and credibility of sustainable food by the organizations and institutions that check the food offer. All companies also state concerns about waste reduction and the introduction of sustainable packaging. Consumers are especially thoroughly informed by Hofer and Spar that list factual examples and provide a broader explanation.

We found that Hofer and Spar inform customers about their sustainability endeavours much more comprehensively than Tuš. We can clearly see the sustainability report on the Hofer and Spar websites, while Tuš does not state sustainability or other reports. Hofer also informs and explains the importance of local and organic production. On Spar's website you can find explanations about organic farming, sustainable packaging, and the importance of organic production of some Slovenian vegetables and fruits.

We found that Tuš mainly uses brands and labels that mark Slovenian products, within which it provides a certain amount of organic production. At Hofer Slovenia and Spar Slovenia, we notice that they offer brands of organic products, and label Slovenian products with additional

labels. All three grocery stores also list certified sustainable food labels, with Spar listing the most of them. Hofer also provides descriptions and explanations of international certified sustainability labels.

CONCLUSION

We have learned that sustainable food consumption is one of the most important aspects of achieving sustainability. Many stakeholders are responsible for supporting it, with grocery stores playing a special role. We have learned that grocery stores can do a lot to help change consumption patterns. Retailers can have a convincing and encouraging effect on consumer purchases and educate them. The latter can be successfully implemented with the help of their websites, where, in addition to informing about novelties and improvements in the offer, they can also take care of a convincing image of a company with a visual appearance. For a company to realize this, it needs to study the consumers' segments and how to create a green marketing mix.

In the research we compared the promotion of sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication of grocery stores in Slovenia and Croatia. In this way, we gained insight into the differences and similarities of this promotion. We found that all grocery stores in Slovenia perform quite strong online promotion of sustainable consumption, which is not the case for all observed grocery stores in Croatia. However, in Slovenia and Croatia we could see that concerning the online marketing promotion of sustainable consumption the local grocery stores (Tuš, Konzum) can't compare with the international grocery chains (Spar, Hofer, Kaufland). This could be the consequence of different available sources, awareness, and knowledge for implementation of such online communication. Partly could be also the consequence of target grocery stores' consumers and the competitive circumstances at grocery stores' markets.

Through the study of various fields and the analysis of the websites of selected grocery stores, we answered the set research questions. We used the obtained data to test the hypotheses. By analyzing the websites of selected retailers, we found that Hofer and Spar have established brands of sustainable foods, namely they offer mainly organic foods. They have appropriate labels for local food, while Tuš offers food of organic and sustainable production and production within the offer of local product brands. Konzum and Kaufland in Croatia also apply such labels/brands. Based on these findings, we confirm the first hypothesis that *"Selected grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication by at least one brand/label"*.

Each of the selected grocery stores in Slovenia lists at least one project, campaign, or initiative to support sustainable consumption and encourage consumers to buy it. Within the framework of these projects, we can also find more extensive information on the importance of this type of consumption. Konzum's webpage do not show the engagement in such projects. Therefore, we partly confirmed the second hypothesis that *selected grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication by at least one project*.

Through the analysis, we realized that food stores place great emphasis on foods of local origin. Some of them also mention cooperation with local companies, producers and farmers who supply them with local food. We found out that Tuš has well-established brands of local

products, and Hofer and Tuš mainly use specific labels for local products. Konzum's webpage, however, do not show the grocery store concern for the food of local origin. Therefore, we partly confirmed the third hypothesis that *selected grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication by the range of products of local origin*.

Most of the selected companies list some of the measures they are taking to improve their business to make it more environmentally friendly. After analyzing the websites, we noticed that the dealers inform Hofer and Spar in much more detail and with given examples than Tuš. Hofer and Spar also file a sustainability report, while Tuš and Konzum do not. Based on this, we partially confirmed the fourth hypothesis that *selected grocery stores promote sustainable food consumption through online marketing communication by the comprehensive information about their efforts for sustainable development*.

Our study offered an insight into the approaches of online marketing communication of sustainable food products. We found that this communication is on a high level in the globally oriented international grocery stores chains. Locally oriented companies fall behind in this communication although they try to follow the trends of digital green marketing. Sustainable marketing orientation of companies depends on their awareness about the importance of sustainable consumption and its long-term benefits for them, broader society, and future generations, on their resources and on their strategic marketing focus. Since the local companies are part of specific institutional environment, the governmental and regional strategic support to sustainable businesses plays significant role in companies' adaptations of supply and marketing orientations. Such support is particularly important for local companies from less competitive business environments. Policies should strive to find the ways for spreading the public consciousness about the importance of common efforts towards sustainable economies and societies. The contemporary crisis because of COVID-19 pandemic could represent an opportunity to become aware that every individual, every company, and every state count. It tells us that only together we can mitigate the current ecological, social, and economic challenges. This crisis has already led to the development of global trends and habits in the field of food consumption and purchase. Cooking at home and shopping at small local vendors and online have increased. Despite price volatility and concerns about future incomes, a significant proportion of consumers have shifted to buying healthier and more sustainable food (Borsellino, Kali, & Schimmenti, 2020, p. 1-19). The greater importance of health offers a path to sustainability. Producers and retailers should make strategic use of this opportunity to meet consumer demand, especially those who want to buy healthier and more sustainable food and are already classified as a group of sustainable consumers. The COVID-19 crisis has offered a tremendous opportunity for stronger and fairer partnerships between farmers, producers, retailers, and consumers. The companies must turn its challenges into opportunities.

Small samples of countries and grocery stores, as well as absence of web analytics could be the limitations of our research. Future analyses could be also supplemented with the grocery stores' promotion of sustainable consumption through social networks. Their usage is on the rise nowadays as they allow for greater consumer reach. We also see the research gap in the assessments of compliance between the reality of sustainable products' offer in the branches of selected food stores and the marketing communication that is present on the websites of these food stores.

Our research shows that sustainable food consumption is on the rise, and we could certainly monitor further trends that will develop in this area. We believe that the range of sustainable and local products will increase in the future, but it will take even more active business and, above all, time for consumer habits to change.

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