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The role of subjective norms in forming the intention to purchase green food

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The purpose of this article is to analyse the specific role of two types of subjective norms in forming the intention to purchase green food. Based on the outcomes of a questionnaire completed by a sample of 411 household primary shoppers from a transitional country in the Southeast Europe region, we developed three models that depict the predictive power of attitudes, perceived behavioural control and subjective norms, and confirmed a significant positive relationship between green food purchasing intention and all three antecedents. Furthermore, regression analysis revealed two important theoretical insights: (1) descriptive norms represent statistically significant predictors of green food purchase behaviour; and (2) incorporating both social and descriptive norms increases the variance explained in intention. The latter also empirically proves that the meaning behind the two variables (social and descriptive norms) is different. These results contribute to the strengthening of the theory of planned behaviour in the part which has so far been referred to as the weakest link.

Keywords: theory of planned behaviour; subjective norms; descriptive norms; purchasing intention; green food

JEL Classification: M31; Q57; D12; C18; C52; C83

1. Introduction

On the demand side of the global market of green food (implying the same on the supply side), there are strong positive trends, and it is expected that in the future they will only increase (Salleh, Ali, Harun, Jalil, & Shaharudin, 2010). This is due to the influence of consumers' increased and continuously growing interest in nutrition, health, and environmental protection (Brčić-Stipčević, Petljak, & Guszak, 2013; Gil, Gracia, & Sánchez, 2000), in addition to the influence of increased confidence of consumers based on the certification and improvement of the availability of these products through their increasing penetration into standard channels of distribution. Foods which are safe to use, have fine quality, are nutritious, are produced using methods which show concern for animal welfare and are grown and produced in line with the principles of sustainable development, are known as green foods (Saleki & Seydsaleki, 2012). Given that this represents a trend that takes on the proportions of the global social change, this issue has become a point of interest to many scientists from different fields. There is a consensus among them that it is a positive social trend and that it is of great importance to examine the underlying factors that might influence the tendency of consumers to purchase green food products (Ahmad & Juhdi, 2010; Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008).

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Authors thereby often rely on the theory of planned behaviour (Amran & Nee, 2012; Phuah, Rezai, Mohamed, & Shamsudin, 2012; Saleki & Seydsaleki, 2012; Saleki, Seydsaleki, & Rahimi, 2012; Salleh et al., 2010; Voon, Ngui, & Agrawal, 2011), which proved to be the most applicable theoretical framework for the study of this issue. As such, this theory has experienced numerous adaptations, modifications, and updates.

This research aims to contribute to the development of the theory of planned behaviour and (as a secondary objective) to gain some insight in the motives for buying green food in Croatia. Previous research in Croatia provides insight into the level of environmental awareness of consumers (Ham, 2009) and consumers' attitudes towards environmental products (Krupka & Kelečić, 2011). More specifically put, into the attitudes related to the purchase of environmentally friendly food products (Brčić-Stipčević & Petljak, 2011; Renko & Bošnjak, 2009; Štefanić, Štefanić, & Haas, 2001). Our research attempts to contribute to answering the question that is commonly referred to as the most difficult one, and that is 'why?' In other words, what is the source, cause, or determinants of intention for environmentally-oriented consumer behaviour.

This research will contribute to the development of the theory of planned behaviour in general and in the context of green marketing through new insights regarding the direction and strength of the influence of inherent factors. Despite the encouraging success of previous research, there is room for new research and the effort to eliminate shortcomings of the existing theory. The theory of planned behaviour has faced criticism from some researchers. It often refers to the weak (or nonexistent) relationship between subjective norms and intentions. This article, therefore, focuses precisely on subjective norms and on filling some of the gaps in research in this regard. To account for potential interactive effect with other predictors (attitudes and perceived behaviour control) and to keep the clear picture of predictive power of the whole model, different types of subjective norms will be tested as part of the integrative model. Overall, this research provides empirically based answers to research questions related to the predictive power and the meaning behind two types of subjective norms – social norms and descriptive norms.

2. Theoretical framework

The theory of planned behaviour is based on the assumption that most human behaviour is the result of an individual's intention to undertake a particular behaviour and the ability of an individual to make a conscious decision about it (volitional aspect). According to the theory of planned behaviour, the intention to undertake a certain behaviour is directly influenced by three factors, the so-called antecedents of intention: personal attitude (the answer to the question: Do I want to do that?), subjective norms (the answer to the question: Do other people want me to do that?) and perceived behavioural control (the answer to the question: Do I have the necessary ability to do that?).

Personal attitude is usually defined as permanent mental or neural willingness gained from the experience, making the directive or dynamic influence on an individual's response to objects and situations that he comes into contact with (Allport, 1935). In the case of the attitude towards a certain behaviour, each belief links the behaviour with a specific outcome, consequence, or some other attribute (such as the cost of undertaking a specific behaviour). Since each attribute is evaluated in advance as positive or negative (emotional component of the attitude), the behaviour is therefore automatically perceived as desirable (if it has predominantly positive outcomes) or undesirable (if it is linked with the predominantly negative outcomes). The relationship

between attitude and intention is confirmed to be stronger than the relationship between intentions and actual behaviour (Kim & Hunter, 1993), which is expected, considering that the relationship of intentions and behaviour is under the powerful influence of external factors.

Subjective norms refer to the belief that an important person or group of people will approve and support a particular behaviour. Subjective norms are determined by the perceived social pressure from others for an individual to behave in a certain manner and their motivation to comply with those people's views. The influence of subjective norms on forming intention proved to be generally weaker in previous studies than the influence of attitude. Moreover, the study of Norris Krueger and his colleagues (Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000) showed that subjective norms are not correlated with the intention of individuals to establish their own businesses; therefore, the authors call for further research and further improvement on the used measures. One possible reason for the inconsistencies in the significance of the subjective norms variable stems from the fact that a part of information that this variable contains is already present in the desirability of undertaking a particular behaviour variable. One of the most frequently mentioned weak points of the theory of planned behaviour is precisely the very weak relationship between subjective norms and intentions. The author of the theory of planned behaviour, Icek Ajzen (1991), explains this with the fact that intentions are heavily influenced by personal factors, such as attitudes and perceived behavioural control. Armitage and Conner (2001) criticise the narrow conceptualisation of the subjective norms variable, which results in a weak correlation between normative beliefs and intentions. In this context, Ravis and Sheeran (2003) argue that the confirmed correlation between descriptive norms and intentions implies the possibility of the predictive power of this variable, which gives a strong motivation for further research in this area. Descriptive norms refer to real activities and behaviours that others are undertaking. In contrast, social norms refer to the perception of other people's opinions on how the individual should behave. We consider both of these variables (descriptive and social norms) to be a part of the subjective norms factor. Conceptually, it can be presented as in Figure 1.

Perceived behavioural control includes the perception of one's own abilities and sense of control over the situation and is defined as a combination of locus of control

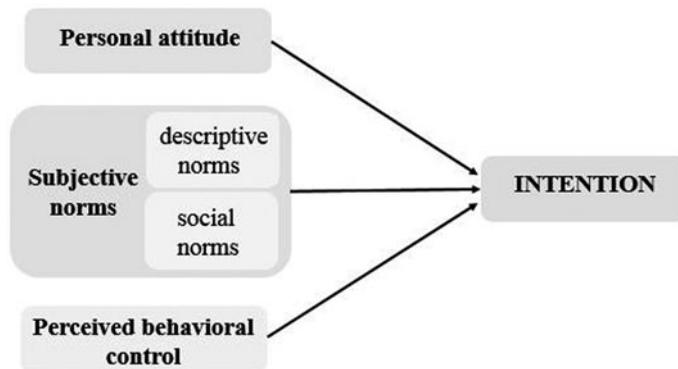


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the theory of planned behaviour. Source: An adapted model from Ajzen (2002), Ravis and Sheeran (2003).

(belief about the amount of control that a person has over events and outcomes in his life) and self-efficacy (perceived ability to perform the task) (Ajzen, 2002). This variable refers to the presence of the necessary resources and opportunities for a particular behaviour and is influenced by a number of factors, such as previous experiences related to the purchase of green food products, convenience perceptions, perceived monetary barriers, perceived time barriers, and other factors, that increase or decrease the perceived level of feasibility of this behaviour.

These constructs, considered together, determine the intention of the individual and ultimately predict the behaviour. The more favourable attitudes and subjective norms combined with greater perceived behavioural control, the stronger the intention for environmentally-oriented behaviour. In context of buying green food products, besides these inherent factors, research confirmed the influence of various other variables, such as socio-demographic variables (Phuah et al., 2012), health awareness (First & Brozina, 2009; Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008; Salleh et al., 2010), and reference knowledge (Amran & Nee, 2012; Saleki, Seydsaleki & Rahimi, 2012).

3. Previous research on subjective norms

As already mentioned, normative beliefs result in perceived social pressure, or so called subjective norms. In other words, subjective norms relate to the individual's perception of social pressure from others who are important to them (e.g. family, friends, colleagues, and others) to behave (or not) in a certain manner and their motivation to comply with those people's views (for a scientometric study on subjective norms and other theories including this term, see Eckhardt, 2009). According to Ravis and Sheeran (2003), subjective norms are determined by beliefs about the extent to which significant others want them to perform a behaviour (again multiplied by one's motivation to comply with those people's views).

To obtain a direct measure of subjective norms, one should formulate several different questions (see Ajzen, 2002 for details). As Ajzen (2002) points out, those questions have an injunctive quality consistent with the concept of the subjective norm, but the responses themselves often have low variability motivated by an obvious reason: important others are perceived to approve desirable behaviours and disapprove undesirable behaviours. Therefore, Ajzen (2002) further suggests that the measure of subjective norms should also include items designed to capture descriptive norms (sometimes called group or behavioural norms), to check whether important others themselves perform the same behaviour. Ravis and Sheeran (2003) also distinguish between injunctive and descriptive norms as separate sources of motivation, with the subjective norms component of the theory of planned behaviour being injunctive social norms, since it relates to the opinion of significant others, and descriptive norms referring to perceptions of significant others' own attitudes and behaviour in the domain.

Some injunctive questions (what significant others think the person ought to do) can be reformulated in order to check if those important others really pursue the actual behaviour (descriptive questions). A high degree of internal consistency of injunctive and descriptive questions in measuring subjective norms is welcome (Ajzen, 2002). Some previous studies have shown medium to strong correlations between descriptive norms and intentions (Ravis & Sheeran, 2003), and some found this relationship to be weak or even insignificant (Stanton et al., 1996). In their study, Ravis and Sheeran (2003) applied meta-analytics procedures to determine whether descriptive norms enhance the variance explained in intentions after main predictors have been taken into

account. Their results show that descriptive norms significantly increased the variance in intentions (contributing a further 5% over and above the main theory of planned behaviour predictors), so the authors argue that the confirmed relationship between descriptive norms and intentions implies the possible existence of predictive power of these variables, giving way to a strong motivation for further research. In the wake of these ideas, authors argue for such a dual approach in measuring subjective norms (taking into consideration injunctive and descriptive questions, as shown in Figure 1).

This dual approach is justified and confirmed with the results of our research and can give important theoretical insights and proof of different meanings behind social and descriptive norms. Some other authors (Grube, Morgan, & McGree, 1986 ; White, Terry, & Hogg, 1994) have found weak correlations between descriptive norms and social norms; the underlying intuition is that their meanings are different. However, a lot of previous studies, when measuring subjective norms, often have failed to take into account both components, but instead relied solely on injunctive questions, i.e. the measurement of social norms (what others think I should do), and less on descriptive norms (what others really do). The above is also true in the frame of research dealing with green/organic/sustainable food purchasing decisions.

Among the studies on environmentally responsible behaviour, some authors analyse subjective norms (e.g. Biel & Thøgersen, 2007). Kumar (2012) was looking for the strength of determinants of purchase intention with regard to environmentally sustainable products that lead to purchase behaviour, and found subjective norms (measured by four injunctive questions) as not significantly related to purchase intention. Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) and Chen (2007) found a significant positive relationship between subjective norms and a consumer's intention to buy sustainable and organic food.

Precisely, Chen (2007, 1,011) argues that organic foods are perceived as healthier and environmentally friendly, and therefore, test the following hypothesis regarding subjective norms: 'When a consumer has a positive subjective norm to purchase organic foods, he or she will be more likely to have the intention of purchasing organic foods.' His results supported the specified statement: positive subjective norms (measured only with two injunctive statements) significantly enhance the consumer's intention to buy organic food. In the process of testing the hypothesis about positive and significant relationships between personal norms and sustainable food products, Amran and Nee (2012) used only injunctive questions (regarding norms and religious values). The hypothesis was rejected, since the study failed to see any significant relation to the intention to purchase sustainable food products for low income groups, which is why the authors argue that environmental knowledge is essential in order to render consumption sustainable.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Participants and procedure

The research is based on an in-person survey carried out on a convenient sample of 411 primary household shoppers from five counties in Croatia in December 2013 and January 2014. According to Tanner and Kast (Tanner & Wölfling Kast, 2003, 85), primary household shoppers are defined as 'the people who make purchasing decisions and regulate what the other members of the household eat,' therefore representing the most relevant source of information. Survey respondents were asked to answer the questions addressing their personal attitudes toward green food purchase, perceived control

over this particular behaviour, subjective norms observed from the perspective of five groups of relevant stakeholders, and respondents' intention to purchase green food. All collected questionnaires were found to be complete and useable for data analysis.

The information obtained was analysed using the statistical software package SPSS version 17.0. Statistical techniques of univariate analysis (frequency distribution, central tendency measures) and multivariate analysis (factor analysis, linear regression) were used. The sample included predominantly female participants (78%), within age group from 45 to 54 (35%), employed (57%) and living in urban areas (53%). The main data collection was preceded by a pilot survey, the aim of which was to ensure that proposed methods and procedures effectively fulfilled the purpose of the study.

4.2. Variables and measurement

Measurement scales for main elements of the theory of planned behaviour were created by authors (measure for intention and personal attitude) or adapted from previous studies in this field (perceived behavioural control, social norms, and descriptive norms). Each scale comprised a set of statements presented in Likert-type format with a five-point scale to capture the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the statements in the questionnaire¹. Mejovšek (2003, 42) states that five-point Likert type scale is especially suitable for collecting data on populations that have educational systems with grades from 1 to 5, as individuals are used to thinking and evaluating things in terms of that range. The final score for each of the measurement scales is the average of the scores on the items included in the scale.

The intention to purchase green food has been measured using various measurement scales ranging from a single question to a multi-statement scales. Phuah et al. (2012) used only one statement with a six-point Likert-type scale to gauge the purchase intention ('I intend to purchase green foods in the near future'). Most of the authors used multi-item Likert-type scales to account for a trade-off between reaching a desired level of internal validity (which can be boosted with larger number of items in a scale) and fulfilling the request to produce simple measurement scales. In line with that, some authors opted for a three-item scale (Amran & Nee, 2012; Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010; Tan, 2013), five-item scale (Voon et al., 2011), or even 19-item scale (Tanner & Kast, 2003). Authors of this study used a five-item scale to evaluate the individual's intention to purchase green food products.

An individual's attitude toward performing a certain behaviour is defined as a multidimensional construct comprised of cognitive, affective, and conative components, and it represents one of the most important predictors of the behaviour (Voon et al., 2011). In the context of green food purchasing decision, those dimensions are usually associated with health concerns, environmental protection, trust in product labels, and perception of food taste. For the purpose of this study, attitudes toward green food purchase are measured with an 8-item scale that primarily relates to the most frequently used dimensions of attitude – health and environmental consciousness. The measurement scale is adapted from previous studies conducted by Voon et al. (2011).

Perceived behavioural control refers to an individual's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour of interest (Ajzen, 1991). Green food purchasing decisions are predominantly under the influence of perceived monetary, time, and knowledge barriers. Accordingly, perceived behavioural control is measured by a 3-item scale depicting the perception of the aforementioned barriers.

Subjective norms reflect an individual's perception of social pressures to perform or not to perform the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The assumption is that individuals are more likely to undertake the behaviour that is regarded as desirable by significant others. However, this construct can be approached from different angles.

Firstly, subjective norms can be measured and analysed from the perspective of expectations set by groups of important people (such as family, relatives, and friends) in terms of whether an individual should or should not engage in a behaviour. To capture the real extent to which those referent groups can influence an individual's behaviour, the strength of each normative belief is weighted by the individual's motivation to comply with the specific referent group. For the purpose of this study, subjective norms derived in the aforementioned way are labelled as social norms. The measurement scale used to access social norms includes five referent groups: family, relatives, friends, work colleagues, and society.

Secondly, an individual may not only be concerned with what other people think, but also with how other people behave. Therefore, the opinions and actions of others provide information that people may use in deciding how to behave themselves (Rivis & Sheeran, 2003). Subjective norms defined this way are called descriptive norms and are measured by a 4-item scale that incorporates the behaviour of family, friends, colleagues, and society in general.

All proposed constructs have adequate reliability (Table 1).

The lowest level of reliability was found for perceived behavioural control (0,745), and that may be due to the small number of statements included in the scale (only three). However, since this scale represents adaptation from several other studies, and in a way represents a new measurement scale, Cronbach's Alpha indicator above 0,7 is considered to be acceptable.

5. Research results

The results of linear regression analysis confirmed the main postulates of the theory of planned behaviour; the intention to purchase green food items was found to have a statistically significant correlation with personal attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. However, the aim of this article was to investigate the role that social norms and descriptive norms play in terms of the character of their relationship with purchase intention, as well as their contribution to the predictive power in the model. Therefore, three models have been created (see Tables 2 and 3).

The first model follows the same logic as most of the research studies in this field, and includes social norms as a measure for social pressure affecting an individual's decision to behave in a certain manner. Social norms reflect an individual's perception

Table 1. Reliability analysis of the constructs.

<i>Measurement scale</i>	<i>Number of items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>	<i>Average inter-item correlation</i>
Intention	5	14.76	5.289	0.929	0.724
Attitude	8	28.76	6.173	0.826	0.370
Perceived behavioural control	3	8.73	2.775	0.745	0.491
Social norms	5	14.70	5.088	0.908	0.665
Descriptive norms	4	10.33	3.676	0.908	0.715

Source: Authors' analysis.

Table 2. Summary of models.

<i>Model</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>r</i> ²	<i>Adjusted r</i> ²	<i>Std. Error of the Estimate</i>
1	0.642 ^a	0.413	0.408	0,81371
2	0.621 ^b	0.386	0.381	0,83211
3	0.671 ^c	0.450	0.445	0,78827

a. Dependent variable: Intention.

Predictors: (Constant), Personal attitude, Perceived Behavioural Control, Social Norms.

b. Dependent variable: Intention.

Predictors: (Constant), Personal attitude, Perceived Behavioural Control, Descriptive norms.

c. Dependent variable: Intention.

Predictors: (Constant), Personal attitude, Perceived Behavioural Control, Social norms, Descriptive norms.

Source: Authors' analysis.

Table 3. Regression coefficients.

<i>Model</i>	<i>Unstandardized Coefficients</i>		<i>Standardised Coefficients</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Significance</i>
	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>			
1 (Constant)	1.013	0.225		4.495	0.000
Personal attitude	0.302	0.058	0.220	5.234	0.000
Perceived behavioural control	0.264	0.046	0.231	5.755	0.000
Social norms	0.132	0.014	0.408	9.725	0.000
2 (Constant)	-0.297	0.220		-1,345	0.179
Personal attitude	0.431	0.056	0.313	7.691	0.000
Perceived behavioural control	0.221	0.048	0.193	4.559	0.000
Descriptive norms	0.411	0.048	0.356	8.528	0.000
3 (Constant)	0.503	0.239		2.104	0.036
Personal attitude	0.308	0.056	0.224	5.514	0.000
Perceived behavioural control	0.204	0.046	0.179	4.450	0.000
Descriptive norms	0.264	0.050	0.229	5.249	0.000
Social norms	0.100	0.015	0.308	6.877	0.000

Source: Authors' analysis.

of what significant others think the appropriate behaviour is, weighted by the importance attached to each of the referent groups. In the first model, all three antecedents are statistically significant predictors of green food purchase intention. Overall, the model explains 40.8% of the variance in intentions.

The second model ignores the influence of significant others' opinions on the individual's behaviour, and incorporates only the effect their behaviour has on an individual. Personal attitude remains the strongest predictor of purchase intention, while descriptive norms overweighed the predictive power of perceived behavioural control. However, the second model explains the smallest percentage of variance (38.6%) among all three proposed models.

The third model integrates both dimensions of subjective norms; the influence of significant others' opinions and the influence of their behaviour on an individual's intention to pursue green food purchases. The fact that both variables are significantly related to intention suggests that the information behind each of the variables is unique and

relevant in explaining the purchase intention. Moreover, both variables represent fundamental component of the models and contribute to its predictive power. The third model explains the highest percentage of variance (44.5%) in this study.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study add to existing research that argues for the importance of taking subjective norms into account when analysing green food purchase behaviour. Moreover, researchers should strive for the application of comprehensive measures of subjective norms that capture more than one dimension of social pressure an individual experiences in the process of undertaking certain behaviours. In line with that, this study provides evidence of the role that descriptive norms play in a situation involving the purchase of green food.

Further research in this field should focus on even more specific contexts and investigate the prospective mediating or moderating influence of various socio-demographic variables on the relationship between subjective norms and intention. For instance, young people may be under a stronger influence of their peers, and therefore may modify their behaviour accordingly. Furthermore, educational background may be linked to personal attitudes, which eventually can have a positive or negative impact on the predictive strength of subjective norms. Additionally, attitudinal ambivalence may play a role in intention development or even play a moderating role on attitude-behaviour relationship.

Besides, cultural context proved to be important in the previous research on intentions. Individuals coming from countries that are more collectivistic seem to experience stronger pressure from significant others and are more willing to comply with their opinions. On the other hand, individuals born and raised in predominantly individualistic countries may have stronger attitudes toward certain behaviours and may pay less attention to what other people think or do.

Finally, taking into account overall research based on the theory of planned behaviour, what happens between the moment the intention was formed and the moment the behaviour is undertaken is still substantially a black box (Krueger, 2009). Future efforts should definitely be directed to that area of research.

In practical terms, the fact that subjective norms are significant in the model and that they consist of both social and descriptive norms suggests possible directions for the marketing activities of various stakeholders interested in the dissemination of the environmentally-oriented behaviour of individuals in society. Because of the clear impact of descriptive norms, it is possible to assume that in terms of directing social change in a positive direction, it would be effective to highlight the environmentally-oriented behaviour of certain people with whom individuals can identify themselves. This can refer to different kind of celebrities, given the large number of people that identify with them and aspire to the celebrity lifestyle, or to persons that have a line of impact on a large number of people (e.g. teachers). Similarly, the positive effect can be achieved by emphasising the general growth in the consumption of green food products, because individuals will be more inclined to do what a growing number of people seem to be doing.

Encouraging individuals to purchase green food products is undoubtedly a desirable social goal. Individuals can then, through their demand for a particular kind of product, focus production systems in the direction of environmentally friendly modes of production and a better supply of green food products. Also, it should be added that a certain spillover effect on other forms of environmentally-oriented behaviour is possible.

Note

1. Questionnaire is available upon request, please feel free to contact authors via email for further details.

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