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Impact of Citizens' Personal Values, Knowledge, Awareness, Informing, Advertising, and Truth of Environmental and Climate Challenges in Support of the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract: In order to raise citizens' awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to develop an effective communication campaign on the SDGs, it is crucial to know citizens' values, their awareness and knowledge of the SDGs, as well as how they receive information on sustainability. As no previous study has addressed this issue, this study aimed to fill a research gap and find out how demographic variables, personal values, awareness of sustainability challenges, information, and advertising influence citizens' support for the SDGs. An online survey was conducted with representative Slovenian citizens (N = 502). The results showed that Slovenian citizens know little about sustainability issues and the SDGs. The greater the personal values, awareness of sustainability issues, higher education, efficient information, and trust in advertising, the greater the public support for the SDGs. To gain citizen support for the SDGs, it is important to plan a systematic communication campaign and government-led communication about the SDGs in the media. This includes information on sustainability issues, presentation of the environmental friendliness of a product/service, potential positive actions, and potential negative consequences.

Keywords: sustainable development goals; public support; communication; policy implementation

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1. Introduction

The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework for coordinating and shaping government policies to achieve an environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable world by 2030. Although the SDGs are led by national governments, achieving the goals also requires bottom-up engagement and grassroots support from local stakeholders [1,2], as well as effective public support and active involvement [3,4]. Citizens' values and their awareness and understanding of the SDGs and sustainability can influence, or in other words have the capacity to have an effect on, this engagement, as people are more willing to accept and share information that is consistent with their own values [5] and with the way they want to receive information [6,7]. To facilitate citizens' support for the SDGs, it is crucial to examine their values, awareness, and knowledge of the SDGs, as well as how they receive information on sustainability.

As communication is the key tool to inform citizens about sustainability and mobilize them to achieve the SDGs [7,8], it is important to develop a communication strategy for the SDGs that is aligned with citizens' information and advertising reception [9,10]. It is therefore important to know how citizens want to be informed about sustainability and the SDGs in particular.

Many studies have examined how policymakers understand and use the SDGs to improve policy development [9–11]. However, little is known about how citizens perceive and understand the SDGs and how they want to be informed about the SDGs. This is

important for the development of a communication strategy on sustainability [4], as citizens can be motivated to act through appropriately presented information [12,13].

The increasing complexity of the environment and the growth dynamics of change call for agile competencies that require rapid and systematic adaptation of behavior in changing situations that are characteristic of current and future changes in the environment. From this perspective, citizens' competence capital needs to be regularly updated to meet the demands of a rapidly changing environment. According to the competence niche model, the adjustment gap is expressed by the difference between the desired and the existing state [14]. Thus, due to the dynamic changes in the environment, the adjustment gap of citizens in relation to the SDGs and sustainability issues could be reduced mainly by creating knowledge about them. It is therefore important to know the knowledge of citizens. So far, surveys have been conducted mainly at the regional or transnational level to examine public awareness of the SDGs, and it has been noted that awareness of the SDGs seems to be increasing. For example, the Eurobarometer survey found that, in 2015, 36% of the public was aware of the SDGs and 10% knew about them [15]. In 2016, 41% and 12% of the public knew about the SDGs [16]. There are large differences between countries. In Germany and France, 2 out of 10 citizens said they were not aware of the SDGs, compared to about 4 out of 10 citizens in the United Kingdom and the United States [17]. However, there is no study on citizens' perceptions, information gathering, and knowledge of the SDGs in post-socialist Eastern European countries such as Slovenia.

Given the lack of studies on the influence of socio-demographic variables, personal values, awareness of sustainability challenges, knowledge, informing, advertising, and trust on citizens' support for the SDGs, this study aimed to investigate the factors that influence public support for the SDGs.

Since public support can be understood as a result of attitude, we focused on public support for the SDGs as an attitude that reflects the public's preferences and agreement with the SDGs [5]. According to the systematic processing model, an attitude is built through content-based cognitive resources and knowledge. Therefore, it is generally assumed that public understanding of or **knowledge** of an issue is positively associated with the level of support [18,19]. People's policy judgments depend on the relevant knowledge they possess; previous studies have shown that the relationship between knowledge and attitudes cannot be clearly established. Better knowledge of citizens about the SDGs is not automatically associated with higher support, although Guan et al. [5] discovered that the Chinese public with a higher level of SDG-relevant knowledge tend to show higher support for SDGs. Therefore, the question arises of how citizens' knowledge about the SDGs is related to the level of support for the SDGs.

Many studies have shown that citizens' awareness and supportive attitudes towards the SDGs are influenced by **socio-demographic characteristics**. For example, according to the Eurobarometer surveys, awareness of the SDGs is higher than average among young people compared to the general public. A Chinese study showed that males, younger, and better educated people are more likely to support the SDGs [5].

Studies show that most citizens are unaware of the environmental and climate issues due to a lack of information [20]. **Informing** citizens about sustainability challenges has both education and commercial focus. First, citizens should be informed about the implications of global sustainability and the consequences that people's actions have on the environment [7]. However, some researchers [21] emphasize the importance of positive information, such as that about the benefits of an activity, which can evoke emotional responses. Communicating about the SDGs and building awareness is a critical initial and ongoing step in the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In communicating the SDGs, it is important to present a clear understanding of the benefits of aligning national and sub-national plans with the 2030 Agenda and of linking the SDGs to local concerns.

Therefore, informing can help to form a **citizen's values**, as environmental values and principles play an important role in pro-environmental behavior because beliefs affect the attitudes of personal norms, which in turn influence moral expectations that contribute

to consumers' pro-environmental actions [22]. Personal values are beliefs we hold most dear, and they often weave into our personalities and define who we are as a person. They become a part of us in influence on our decisions and actions; in other words they are the primary drivers behind our personality and actions. Analysis of personal values related to environmental sustainability [23] has shown that they are largely driven by a lack of knowledge or perception of how an individual can make an influence. The main citizen's values on sustainability based on previous research are self-transcendence, conservation, openness to change, and self-enhancement [24].

However, the pro-environmental approach is not automatically promoted by providing information on the environmental issues [25]. Existing studies are highlighting **advertising** and its effect, i.e., a change that is a result or consequence of it on awareness, where results confirm citizens become more environmentally conscious and aware of the crisis facing the environment [26]. There are three types of sustainability advertising: first, it discusses the relationship between a product and the environment; second, it presents a product that promotes a sustainable lifestyle; and third, it conveys a corporate image of environmental responsibility. As a result, citizens will be more willing to purchase environmentally-friendly products or services. This plays a significant role in changing consumers' purchasing behavior in favor of environmentally friendly products, thereby reducing the negative impact of artificial products on the environment [22]. A study on green marketing awareness [25] found that advertising should be appealing and attractive to consumers and important to their lifestyle. The prevailing consensus is that optimistic messages should be used to encourage people to change their behavior [27]. Some researchers [22] also emphasize that environmentally-sustainable products or services are not commercially viable if the qualities of sustainability are not adequately articulated.

Further evidence argues that information provided from a **trusted source** is more likely to be incorporated into sustainable citizens' decision making [7,8], which means the key to successful sustainable advertising is credibility [28]. Claim credibility has a significant and favorable impact on purchase intent [7]. Unregulated sustainability communication and advertising efforts by companies have been shown to have a counterproductive effect, as the increasing number of sustainability claims may increase consumer skepticism toward such claims [29]. Therefore, environmental claims should not be exaggerated or create unrealistic expectations. However, some marketing methods are susceptible to manipulation, e.g., some marketers convey false and misleading environmental claims to gain a competitive advantage, which leads to a high level of concern among consumers [22]. Trust plays a vital role in the study of advertising and SGD support because the trustworthiness of advertisement may affect citizens' behavior, while the truthfulness of advertising claims may determine the quality and effectiveness of the advertising message [30]. Therefore, gaining trust is a crucial criterion for advertisers to build and enhance trusting relationships. The literature review showed that there are some studies that researched the effect of marketing communication factors; however, there is no study on citizens' marketing communication and their influence on the citizens' support of SDGs.

Awareness of sustainability problems represents the understanding of fragility of the environment and the importance of its protection, namely understanding of and consciousness toward the environment and its problems, including human interactions and effects [31]. Awareness about the problems' impacts on individual actions on sustainability [32], since awareness refers to personalization, perceiving, and self-focus, depends on and directs to personal concerns. When citizens become more mindful and aware of the challenges, they are more likely to act according to SDGs [26], and this is the reason why the magnitude of the SDG support should be researched more in depth. Information about sustainability challenges is more available than ever, but the transference of awareness into action has been very slow [33,34]. Scientists and researchers are emphasizing that the widespread interference of human-related activities has resulted in major problems, including climate change, global warming, environmental pollution, and biodiversity loss [35].

Since there is no study on citizens' awareness of sustainability challenges on a national level, this study will fill the existing research gap.

2. Materials and Methods

Quantitative causal research was used to determine how demographic variables, personal values, awareness of sustainability issues, and marketing communications influence citizens' support for the SDGs (see Figure 1). An online, self-administered questionnaire was conducted in April 2022 by a marketing and research company.

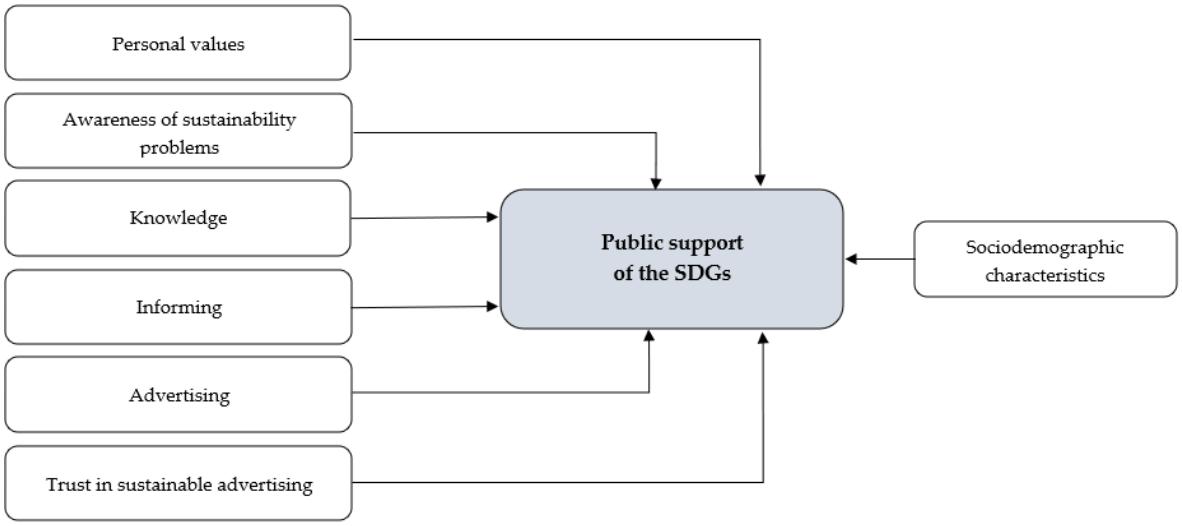


Figure 1. Model of citizens' support.

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the nationally representative sample of Slovenian citizens in terms of gender, education, age (18–65 years), and place of residence with a total number of 502 participants, of whom 52.1% were male and 47.9% were female. Most (24.7%) were between 55 and 65 years old, followed by those who were between 35 and 44 years old (23.4%), and those who were between 45 and 54 years old (22.9%). Up to 43.9% of the respondents had a secondary school degree, 37.2% had a college and university degree (bachelor), and 6.3% had a postgraduate degree (master and doctor degree).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 502).

Socio-Demographic Factors		**N**	**%**
Gender	Male	262	52.1
	Female	240	47.9
Age (years)	18−24	53	10.6
	25−34	93	18.5
	35−44	117	23.4
	45−54	115	22.9
	55−65	124	24.7
Education	Vocational school and less	63	12.5
	Secondary school	221	43.9
	College and university degree	187	37.2
	Postgraduate degree	32	6.3
Income	Less than 999 EUR	85	16.9
	1000−1999 EUR	162	32.2
	2000−2999 EUR	111	22.1
	More than 3000 EUR	68	13.5
	I do not want to answer	76	15.1

The questionnaire consisted of several sets of measurements to approximate the study's main variables. In the first part of the questionnaire, we adopted Guan et al.'s [5] question on objective knowledge about SDGs and public support for SDGs. The second question included four statements about awareness of environmental and climate challenges (global warming, ecological footprint, industry, and biodiversity) based on the literature review of the most challenging issues [36]. For the next questionnaire segments, we adopted the Anggraeni and Islamy [7], Kansal [37], and Kidd et al. [27] studies. First, an assessment of four statements related to informing about SDGs was included. The next question section included five statements referring to advertising SDGs and actual problems. This was followed by an assessment of two statements related to trust in advertising. Respondents assessed their agreement with statements on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1—I strongly disagree to 5—I strongly agree). In the last section, questions about the level of income, education, age, and gender were assessed.

A pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted with sustainability experts (N = 5) and citizens (N = 20), which helped us to assess the clarity of the questionnaire and to identify possible problems with the questionnaire that might lead to misinterpretation of the questions or biased answers. Cronbach's coefficient α was calculated to calculate the internal consistency coefficients of the items included in the questionnaire. Results of the reliability analysis showed that the components had a satisfactory discriminating power, since α was above 0.8 in all four constructs.

To define the underlying dimensions of public support for SDGs, we used the principal component approach. The goal was to reduce the size of the variables and reduce it to an actual underlying dimensionality.

Using multiple regression analysis, we sequentially entered the independent variables into blocks to identify the factors influencing public support for the SDGs. In accordance with the postulated causal order, demographic factors were installed first, followed by the personal values, awareness, marketing, informing, trust, and then systematic factor knowledge about SDGs. Correlation analysis was used to determine the association between the individual components included in the model. For socio-demographic components, one-way ANOVA was also used for the overall test of equality of the group in public support of the SDGs. Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS 24.0.

3. Results

The results in Table 2 show that citizens, on average, support SDGs; however, almost 75% of respondents have never heard about SDGs or Agenda 2030. Those respondents were excluded from the measurement of citizens knowledge about SDGs, which means only 128 (15.4%) respondents were invited to complete this section of the questionnaire. The results show that most of them (72.3%) had a middle level of knowledge, meaning they answered 3–5 answers correctly, followed by those with no or low level of knowledge (0–2 correct answers) (22.4%). Only 1.4% of the included respondents in our sample had a high level of knowledge (6–7 correct answers).

Table 2. Description statistics of knowledge and public support of the SDGs.

Variable	Scale	f (n (%))	Mean	Std. Dev	N
Public support of the SDGs	I do not support in any way	4 (7.0%)	4.10	0.707	502
	I do not support	3 (0.6%)			
	Undecided	72 (14.3%)			
	I support	285 (56.7%)			
	I strongly support	139 (27.7%)			
Knowledge	Never heard about SDGs	374 (74.6%)	1.83	0.500	374
	Low level of knowledge	29 (22.4%)			
	Middle level of knowledge	92 (72.3)			128
	High level of knowledge	7 (5.3%)			

We proceeded with the principal component approach, using a correlation matrix as the input. Barlett's test for sphericity (p-value < 0.05) and KMO statistic (>0.5) indicated that the analysis was reasonable. Based on the results of the component matrix, we defined five underlying dimensions of public support of the SDGs (Table 3), namely personal values (component 1), awareness about sustainability (component 2), advertising (component 3), informing (component 4), and trust (component 5). Personal values are a linear combination of variables relating to personal norms, moral commitment to sustainable actions, creating a positive opinion about yourself after sustainable actions are performed, and the actual use and purchase of sustainable products and services in everyday life. Awareness about sustainability problems is a linear combination of variables in regard to the awareness of global warming, importance of lowering ecological footprint, negative effects of industry on the environment, and the importance of biodiversity and its conservation. Advertising is a linear combination of variables related to sustainable advertisements and the level of attention stimulated by them, the adequacy of advertising in connection with an individual's lifestyle, the attractiveness of sustainable advertisements, and the stimulation of positive or negative emotions that lead to forming a greater awareness about sustainability problems and therefore sustainable behavior. Component informing is a linear combination of variables that refer to the main purposes of informing citizens about SDGs, namely informing them about problems that we face, an environment friendliness of a specific product or service that is being advertised (or in other words, it's effect (positive or negative) on the environment), information about how our positive actions can improve our environment and vice versa, and what consequences our negative actions can have. The last component refers to trust, and it is a linear combination of two variables. First is the trust citizens have in claims that are being advertised, namely if they believe in their validity, and second is the importance of government regulation and control of sustainability advertising.

Table 3. Components matrix.

Component	Included Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Total Variance Explained
Personal Values	Positive opinion about yourself because of sustainable actions	3.86	0.822	73.59%
	Importance of sustainability	3.94	0.782	
	Moral commitment	3.72	0.893	
	Use and purchase of sustainable products/service	3.92	0.824	
Awareness about sustainability problems	Global warming	4.11	0.913	78.10%
	Ecological footprint	4.05	0.766	
	Industry	4.32	0.670	
	Biodiversity	4.24	0.721	
Advertising	Attention to sustainable advertisements	3.19	1.094	70.80%
	Adequacy of advertising	3.48	1.067	
	Attractiveness of advertisement	3.56	1.117	
	Positive emotions	3.50	1.122	
	Negative emotions	3.34	1.193	
Informing	Info about sustainability problems	3.97	0.785	65.42%
	Info about environment friendliness of a product/service	3.89	0.777	
	Info about potential positive actions	3.95	0.748	
	Info about potential negative consequences	3.90	0.822	
Trust	The truth of the claims	3.28	0.953	65.20%
	Importance of government regulation	4.09	0.897	

Each component thus defined was then used in a regression analysis to determine the relationship between each component and public support for the SDGs. The regression model, according to the F-test, proved to be statistically significant (p-value < 0.05), with

R^2 = 0.436. The results obtained (Table 4), considering standardized coefficients, showed, first, that the greater personal values, awareness about sustainability problems, higher education, efficient informing, and trust, the greater the public support for the SDGs (p-value < 0.05). Second, public support for the SDGs decreased by increasing age, which means that the younger population supports the SDGs more than the older population. Third, knowledge and sustainable advertising have a positive impact on support of the SDGs, but they have not been statistically significant.

Table 4. Estimation of coefficients.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error			
1	(constant)	3.922	0.146		26.954	0.000
	Personal values	0.319	0.029	0.451	11.141	0.000
	Awareness	0.086	0.030	0.122	2.848	0.005
	Age	−0.053	0.018	−0.099	−2.931	0.004
	Education	0.082	0.029	0.095	2.794	0.005
	Informing	0.075	0.031	0.106	2.461	0.014
	Trust	0.089	0.027	0.127	3.371	0.001
	Knowledge	0.105	0.107	0.068	0.981	0.329
	Advertising	0.065	0.057	0.086	1.156	0.250

Figure 2 shows the final model of citizens' support based on the results of multiple regression analysis. Two components, knowledge and advertising, that were included in the preliminary model had to be excluded. The correlation analysis showed very low or no correlation between the excluded components and public support for the SDGs. Personal values had the highest correlation with public support, followed by awareness of sustainability problems, information, and trust. The correlation coefficients of socio-demographic characteristics were also very low, but they were still statistically significant. From this component, gender and income were excluded as statistically insignificant variables in the multiple regression analysis. For the other two variables, namely age and education, an ANOVA test was performed. Based on the test for homogeneity of variances, both showed statistically significant differences in public support for the SDGs. The results showed that the older the person, the lower the public support (p-value = 0.035), and the higher the education, the higher the public support (p-value = 0.19).

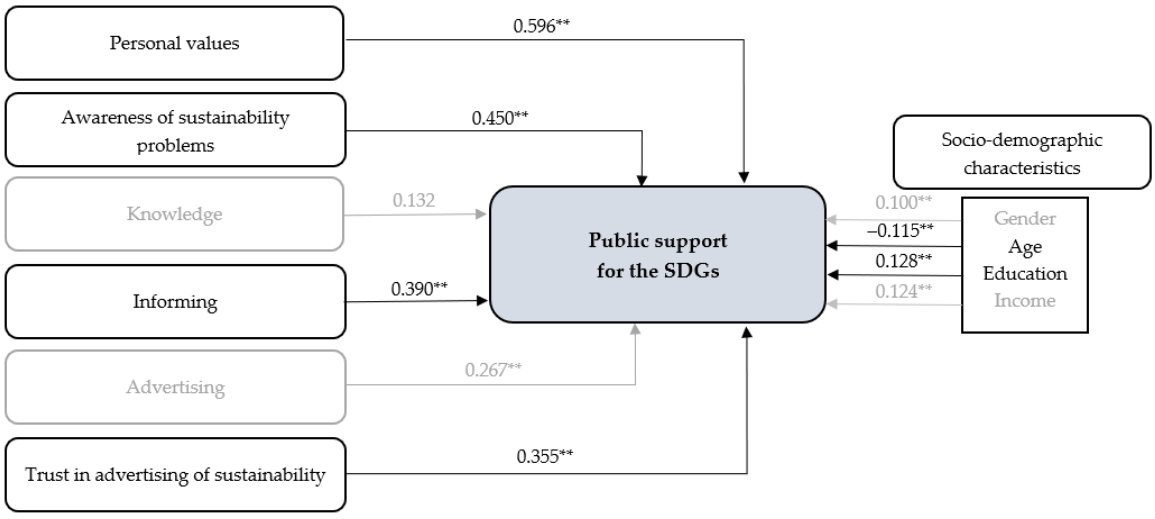


Figure 2. Model of citizens' support as a result of multiple regression analysis. ** p-value < 0.01.

4. Discussion

Achieving the SDGs requires citizens' understanding of the SDGs and their support. In order to develop a communication strategy for the SDGs, it is important to know how to inform and mobilize citizens in relation to sustainability and the SDGs in particular. Therefore, it is valuable to identify how citizens perceive the challenges of sustainability, what they know about the SDGs, and how they want to be informed about the SDGs. Since, according to the available literature, no study has dealt with this topic so far, this study aimed to fill a research gap.

The results confirmed the findings of previous surveys that Slovenian citizens are not aware of the SDGs, as almost 75% of citizens said they had never heard of the SDGs or the 2030 Agenda. This means that the situation regarding awareness of the SDGs has worsened, as 63% claimed this in 2015, which was in line with the EU average [15]. This can be explained by the fact that no extensive communication campaign on the SDGs was carried out during this period. In previous studies, the results regarding knowledge and its effect on attitude and behavior intention have been inconclusive; some have argued that knowledge and attitudes are positively linked, while others have denied the existence of any causality at all [5]. Our examination of the relationship between the level of knowledge and public support revealed an insignificant effect of individual SDG-relevant knowledge on public support for SDGs. Of particular interest, however, is the finding, contradictory at first sight, that Slovenian citizens support the SDGs on average, even if they have only a low awareness of sustainability issues and very low level of knowledge. This can be explained by the fact that "sustainability" is a term that is often mentioned in the media and associated with a positive meaning [34], and it is therefore socially desirable to support the SDGs.

Findings show that the greater the personal values, the awareness about sustainability problems, efficient informing, and the trust in advertising, the greater the public support for the SDGs. In contrast to a Chinese study, this study showed no differences in support by gender, but it confirmed that younger and better educated people are more likely to support the SDGs [5].

Personal values and beliefs of the individual influence the attitudes of personal norms, which then influence moral expectations and consequently contribute to higher public support and sustainable behavior. This study confirmed that citizens are strongly motivated to behave consistently with their self-expectations and personal values because these lead to a positive feeling about themselves [38]. People who value sustainability highly, and thus feel a stronger moral obligation to act sustainably, will likely be affected more by perceived sustainability and respond more positively to SDG goals and promotion.

Sustainable advertising has become a very important marketing concept in recent years, as it has proven to be effective in promoting and strengthening the concept of sustainable development [26]. The results indicate that marketing communication about the SDGs is important; however, advertising itself as an important part of marketing communication, in our study, proved to be statistically insignificant, which is inconsistent with other studies [26,39] where they emphasize emotions, adequacy, and attractiveness of advertisements about sustainability and its implications on citizens' behavior.

Nevertheless, the results confirmed the importance of claims credibility in advertising and informing, as it was shown in previous studies before [40,41]. Citizens believe that information about the SDGs should be communicated and promoted through the media, which should be directed by the state. It needs to establish stricter rules and regulations to support sustainable marketing communication and ensure that these rules are implemented in order to increase citizens' trust in advertising. Thus, Slovenian citizens expect the government to conduct an information and advertising campaign through the media. This can be attributed to the Slovenian culture associated with post-socialism, where citizens expect a strong regulation of public affairs primarily by the state/government [42]. Although the Sustainable Development Report 2021 [43] ranks Slovenia 9th out of 165 countries in achieving the 17 SDGs, it pointed out that the country has achieved the

best results in eradicating extreme forms of poverty, ensuring decent work and economic growth, and strengthening peace, justice, and institutions. Other assessments are that the Slovenian government is only partially successful [44] and does not make sufficient efforts for sustainable development, having weak mechanisms to ensure the full inclusion of all people, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, insufficient coherence of policies for sustainable development, no comprehensive analysis and measures to fully implement the principle of "leaving no one aside", no state advisory body for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and no systematic inclusion in the curriculum [45].

As the support of society as a whole for the SDGs is crucial for achieving the SDGs, systematically-planned and government-led communication about the SDGs through the media, with information on sustainability issues, presentation of the environmental friendliness of a product/service, potential positive actions, and potential negative consequences, will help to raise awareness and knowledge about the SDGs, which are currently at a low level.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, along with the war in Ukraine, has likely reignited country and public interest in the challenges of sustainability and, in particular, the implementation of the SDGs, in part due to low levels of sustainability and SDG knowledge. The survey revealed what sustainability messages citizens want to see in order to be better informed about the SDGs. Perhaps future studies using, on the one hand, a wider range of possible information and promotional means, including schooling, and, on the other hand, more in-depth methods, such as face-to-face interviews for gaining more in-depth information, would shed even more light on how to inform the population about sustainability and increase support for the SDGs.

5. Conclusions

Slovenian citizens have a low awareness of sustainability issues, as almost 75% of citizens said they had never heard of the SDGs or the 2030 Agenda. The situation regarding awareness of the SDGs has worsened, as 63% claimed this in 2015. Even if they have a low awareness of sustainability issues, Slovenian citizens are generally supportive of the SDGs, which is probably due to the popularity of sustainability issues in public discourse.

The greater the personal values, the awareness of sustainability problems, the higher the education, the more efficient the informing, and the more trust in advertising, the greater the public support for the SDGs. Thus, there are no differences in support by gender, but younger and better educated people are more likely to support the SDGs.

Citizens believe that information about the SDGs should be communicated and promoted through the media, which should be directed by the state. It needs to establish stricter rules and regulations to support sustainable marketing communication and ensure that these rules are implemented in order to increase citizens' trust in advertising. In order to gain citizen support for the SDGs, it is important to plan a systematic communication campaign and government-led communication about the SDGs through the media, with information on sustainability issues, presentation of the environmental friendliness of a product/service, potential positive actions, and potential negative consequences.

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