

## Article

# The Roles of Professional Socialization and Higher Education Context in Prosocial and Pro-Environmental Attitudes of Social Science and Humanities versus Business Students in Italy and Croatia

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**Abstract:** According to the bio-ecological model, individuals are highly influenced by the context and dynamic interactions occurring within their environment over time. Therefore, prolonged shared contexts that people are exposed to, such as the higher education system, should contribute to more similarities in their cognition. We examine two research models, specifying the influence of the national higher education system as a variable, that moderates the potential relationship between the students' country of origin and their prosocial (Model 1) and pro-environmental (Model 2) attitudes. Two culturally similar countries (Croatia and Italy) and two student subsamples from both countries (one group with social science and humanities majors and another with business and economics major) are considered. We used A. F. Hayes' PROCESS macro to estimate the results using the regression approach. The research results show statistically significant moderated relationships between study major and prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes. However, the national HE contexts, when considered as moderating variables, suppressed the main effects in both models. We discuss possible explanations of the suppression of the main effect by the conditional one, outline implications of the present findings and provide guidelines for future research.

**Keywords:** higher education; context; prosocialness; pro-environmental attitudes; Croatia; Italy



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## 1. Introduction

This paper extends the discussion of professional socialization, building on previous research on the role of occupational choices and vocational determinants in determining personal values [1]. In this context, two significant social and enterprising orientations entail vocational interest(s). According to Holland's theory, there is a distinction between an orientation toward guiding and helping others vs. leading others toward organizational goals [2]. Socialization patterns are expected to influence personal values, attitudes, and behaviors, starting from the very introduction to the professional communities an individual belongs to throughout their life. These processes occur as soon as young adults enter their professional education and continue as workplace experience is accumulated.

The role of higher education (HE) and the differences in professional socialization related to young adults' choice of study major have been empirically analyzed by Arieli et al. [3]. Their findings show that business students, compared to social work students, place more emphasis on personal values of power and achievement and much less on prosocial values. They also found that the power of professional socialization is not as high

as might be contemplated, suggesting that self-selection could be at work, as young adults choose their studies according to the estimated compatibility between their own and the perceived professional value profiles. Such a conclusion aligns with previous studies [4] indicating that business education is determined by self-selection rather than indoctrination based on the professional principles instilled during the education process. However, the HE context, previous education, and even the questionnaire items' wording seem to be relevant when judging socialization vs. self-selection effects [5].

The notion of context, which is set by the vocational characteristics of the professional community into which young adults are being socialized, stems from an extensive discussion of ethical developments within professions. Emphasis on the principles of rationality, profit maximization, and market distribution and the 'stigmatization of goodness' [6], propelled by self-selection processes, have caused an exceptionally inappropriate business school response to the corporate scandals of the early 2000s [7].

However, it is challenging to design generic responses to develop more responsible higher education because of the role of personal and institutional contexts. Although personal characteristics and their influence on framing socially responsible higher education have been under-researched, the role of gender was confirmed by Lämsä et al. [8]. At the same time, age had mixed effects [9]. On the other hand, studying institutional and cultural contexts has attracted multiple efforts to evaluate higher education's response to instilling ethical, prosocial, and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors in new student generations [10].

While Sleeper et al. [11] have demonstrated the general interest of business students in social responsibility and showing pro-socialness, Alfirević, Arslanagić-Kalajžić, and Lep [12] confirmed the usefulness of social responsibility teaching based on the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education (UN PRME) initiative. While these studies suggest that adopting a well-designed global intervention could be considered a panacea for addressing the responsible higher education issue, contextualization matters more than ever. Institutions trying to develop 'quick fixes' for the curriculum rather than including social and environmental responsibility issues within their purpose and mission are bound to fail [13].

In addition, new generations seem to have a high demand for organizational responsibility and an instilled skepticism toward formally proclaimed organizational ethics and charitable activities [14]. Applying an idealist lens, young adults seek authenticity and commitment, especially in the post-transition societies of central and eastern Europe that are prone to ethical misconduct and 'CSR-washing' practices [15]. While the initial empirical research leading to such a conceptualization has been performed in the for-profit sector, it is supported by an analysis of business students' attitudes [16], confirming that current student generations seek authenticity and reflections of their own perceptions and concerns in their schools' social responsibility topics and initiatives.

The main research objective of this study is to assess the role of professional socialization and the institutional (higher education) context as related to the development of prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes. While the indirect effect of the national context could significantly modify the previously described patterns of professional socialization in higher education and their outcomes, this issue has not been previously empirically studied.

Specific research questions to be covered in this study are related to:

- The empirical testing of professional socialization's role in the development of students' prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes;
- The assessment of the potential conditional effects based on the influence of the national higher education context.

Responding to the need to study the contextualization of ethical and responsible higher education in different countries and cultures [16], we extend the previous study of students' prosociality [12] into a comparative analysis of the prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes of two student groups (business and economics majors versus helping professions

with majors in the social sciences and humanities) in two countries (Croatia and Italy). Although the two countries belong to different socio-cultural contexts of a developed market economy and democracy versus the post-transition countries of southeastern Europe, they share a comparable cultural identity. On the Inglehart–Welzel Word Cultural Map 2023 (See: The Inglehart–Welzel World Cultural Map—World Values Survey 7 (2023). Available online: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>; accessed on 5 June 2023), considering traditional versus secular and survival versus self-expression values, both countries belong to the ‘Catholic Europe’ cluster. While they differ in the power distance, individualism, and masculinity dimensions of the Hofstede model, they are very similar in the uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence dimensions (See: Country Comparison Tool (2023). Available online: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=croatia%2Citaly>; accessed on 5 June 2023). This fact makes the two countries a good choice for the initial study of the role of national contexts in higher education, before studying the diverging cultures and addressing the differences potentially caused by intercultural influences.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Attitude conceptualization, definition, and measurement have been widely debated. However, there seems to be agreement that attitudes, at least to a certain extent, play a significant role in understanding human behavior [17]. Therefore, if we want to predict someone’s prosocial and pro-environmental behavior and possibly create a sustainability-driven intervention, we should consider existing prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes but also the factors (internal or external) suggested by the literature. This study focuses on external factors, i.e., the context in which prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes occur, exploring the effect of cultural and institutional factors in two Mediterranean countries.

According to Bronfenbrenner’s (bio)ecological theory of human development and process–person–context–time (PPCT) model [18,19], individuals are highly influenced by the context and dynamic interactions occurring within their environment over time. More specifically, above and beyond the internal characteristics of an individual (*person*, e.g., gender, IQ, personality), one’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions are affected not only by the immediate environment (*microsystem*, e.g., peers, school) and the relationships within it (*mesosystem*, e.g., the interaction between peers and school) but also by the broader context, including formal and informal structures, influential and immediate settings (*exosystem*, e.g., agencies of local government, social networks), culture (*macrosystem*, e.g., political economy, education system), and time (*chronosystem*, i.e., changes or consistencies within a certain period), that one interacts with both immediately and more remotely (*proximal processes*) [18,20,21]. Therefore, though individuals can highly differ in their characteristics and previous experiences, prolonged shared contexts/systems that people are exposed to should contribute to more similarities in their cognition and behavior.

On a broad (macro) context level, people living in one country/culture share a socio-economic, political, and educational context influencing their prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes and behavior; comparing them with people from another country/culture with a different socio-economic, political, and educational context might reveal differences in cognition and behavior between the two groups. Feygina and Henry [22] pointed out that group-level socio-structural and economic factors can explain up to 38 percent of cultural differences in prosociality. Furthermore, while one of the first cross-cultural studies on prosociality found economic productivity to be the only predictor of helping behavior (with wealthier countries being less inclined toward prosocial behavior) [23], subsequent studies also found lower cultural embeddedness [24], lower in-group favoritism, lower uncertainty avoidance, and greater income inequality to be related to more frequent prosociality [25]. Recent studies also found financial crises experienced in adolescence [26] and perceived economic threats (mediated by empathic concern) [27] to be predictors of prosociality. With the rising attention and interest of both the public and

the academic community regarding the pro-environmental orientation of individuals and organizations, the role of different economic, social, and cultural factors has been considered in the recent body of literature. External factors, such as social norms, convenience, prompt voice intervention, and recycling programs, positively influence pro-environmental orientation [28], with collectivistic societies being more likely to display pro-environmental values, attitudes, and behavior [29,30].

The higher education system, with its three primary missions (teaching, research, and public service) [31], is expected to influence individuals' and organizations' pro-environmental orientation. However, its context also plays a part, although the nominal orientation toward environmentalism has been demonstrated by several declarations, showing commitment to all forms of sustainability [32].

The desired effect of encouraging sustainability-oriented attitudes might require less time and effort in some higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly those whose study programs and policies are (already) highly congruent with this endeavor. Students choosing to major in a specific area have similar interests and educational programs in common and similar values and (pro)social experiences formed/supported by interactions with peers, teachers, and the community. This is particularly true for specific types of social sciences (e.g., psychology, social work) that commonly encourage high levels of prosocial attitudes and behavior in theory and practice [33]. The next and final (meso and micro) context levels are represented by the policies and practices of local higher education (HE), which could make a difference in converting a nominal orientation into everyday practice.

### 3. Hypotheses and Conceptual Model Development

This study aims to investigate the effect of context in two southern European countries (Italy vs. Croatia) on the prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes of students majoring in different fields (social science and the humanities vs. business-oriented professions) in the social sciences, which are used as a proxy for the overall professional socialization.

Italy and Croatia are two countries with similar geopolitical status (Mediterranean countries, members of the EU, parliamentary republics with a prime minister and a president) but different sizes, populations, length of EU membership, living standards (GDP per capita in PPS), income inequality (Gini coefficient), and percent of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion—with Italy surpassing Croatia in all of the above [34–37]. Though Italy is generally wealthier than Croatia (which, according to the results of a cross-cultural study by Levine et al. [23], might suggest its lower prosociality), because of its higher income inequality, higher percentage of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion [36,37], higher levels of perceived economic threat due to recent financial crises [38], and more extended membership in the EU (and dedication to its prosocial politics and initiatives), we expected the Italian participants to display higher levels of prosocial attitudes. Regarding the pro-environmental attitudes of the two countries, because studies have reported similar (medium-low) levels of pro-environmental behavior [39] and no large discrepancies in environment-related sustainable development goals [37], we expected no differences in pro-environmental attitudes between the Italian and Croatian participants.

Though members of the same broader field of the social sciences, the educational contexts of social science and humanities students (studying psychology and social work) and business-oriented students (studying economics and business) differ on several levels. It may very well be that individuals choosing a major in social science or the humanities tend to be more inclined to help others in the first place. Still, they are also exposed to a larger amount of course content promoting prosociality, more interactions with peer students and teachers inclined toward prosociality, and more HEI-supported opportunities to engage in prosocial actions [40]—which is why we expected higher prosocial attitudes in students majoring in social science and the humanities when compared with students majoring in economics and business. There should not be significant variations in the relationship regarding the moderating influence of the national higher education context because the relationship is driven by personal and professional value compatibility and

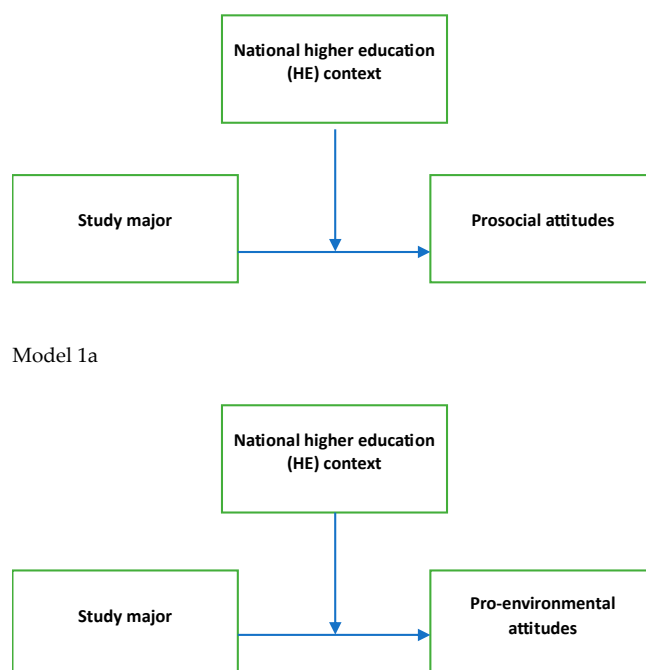
professional socialization patterns. Those effects should be much higher than the potential influence of the national higher education context. Therefore, hypothesis H1 is formulated as follows:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** *National higher education context moderates the relationship between study major and students' prosocialness.*

Knowledge also predicts pro-environmental orientation [41], which could lead to a different pattern when determining the differences in the HE context. Business-oriented students have been exposed lately to more academic content related to enhancing students' ethical, prosocial, and pro-environmental orientation because of the global UN PRME initiative, created in 2007 [42], joined by four business schools from Croatia and eleven from Italy [43]. Therefore, pro-environmental orientation might be more susceptible to the influence of the national HE context. Such orientation could encourage HEIs to accept the sustainability declarations and join the global responsibility and sustainability initiatives. Therefore, we should expect a decisive moderating role of the national HE context to be present in the relationship between study major and students' orientation toward environmental sustainability, as suggested by the formulation of hypothesis H2:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** *National higher education context moderates the relationship between study major and students' orientation toward environmental sustainability.*

Two resulting theoretical models imply a simple moderation, where study field is considered an independent variable, the resulting level of prosocial (i.e., pro-environmental) attitudes is considered a dependent variable, and the dichotomous variable indicating country of origin describes the overall moderating influence of the national higher education context (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized conceptual models.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

This article continues the study of southeast European (SEE) students' prosociality and the contribution of business schools to young adults' prosocial attitudes and behavior [12]. The current study extends the previous research on samples of business students from the



SEE region. In addition to students of business and economics enrolled at the University of Split (Faculty of Economics, Business, and Tourism), students of psychology and social work (i.e., the humanities and social sciences) enrolled at the University of Zagreb (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences—Department of Psychology and Faculty of Law—Social Work Study Center) have been included in the research sample. To achieve a comparison of the SEE higher education context with another regional academic context, the current study has been extended to include a sample of Italian business and economics students, as well as social sciences and humanities students. The Italian subsample includes students of psychology enrolled at the University of L'Aquila (Department of Biotechnological and Applied Clinical Sciences) and business and economics students enrolled at the Sapienza University of Rome (Faculty of Economics). After removing the incomplete answers, a total number of 476 responses were recorded.

The study design is cross-sectional, which makes it difficult to infer any causal relationships between the constructs involved. However, the results of student surveys, such as those in the current study, are interesting and relevant because young adults currently pursuing undergraduate studies will soon enter the workforce and assume their professional roles. They will be expected to deal with the current social and environmental challenges and gradually take on leadership roles. Therefore, understanding their current prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes could help organizations accommodate their expectations with the requirements of corporate social and environmental responsibility.

A questionnaire has been developed for this study for measuring students' prosociality on the basis of the previously administered survey instrument (for the measurement of students' prosocialness) approved by the institutional ethics committee of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia (No. 231-2021). The previously used questionnaire has been extended to cover pro-environmental attitudes. The survey items measuring pro-environmental orientation were reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics committee of the Faculty of Economics, Business, and Tourism at the University of Split, Croatia (Decision dated 27 April 2021). The data collection procedure has closely followed the procedure that was previously reviewed and approved by both institutional ethics review boards.

We used a non-systematic sampling procedure employing a Web-based questionnaire to conduct the student survey. The invitation link was posted on all participating institutions' internal Moodle Learning Management System pages and distributed to student mailing lists. Before starting the survey, potential participants were informed about its purpose and the extent of the collected data and that their statistical processing and reporting were to be used for research purposes only. No data enabling the personal identification of participants (such as names, IDs, e-mail addresses, etc.) were collected. Students were asked for their consent for usage of their anonymous data before accessing the Web-based questionnaire. We did not use any technologies or tools enabling the individual tracking of submissions to the survey's Web server. Personal details were not collected, and answers to the demographic questions (including age, year of study, major, grades, and socio-economic status) were optional.

The constructs and measures describing students' prosocialness are described by Alfrević et al. [12]. This study also includes samples of items measuring prosocial attitude which were measured using the individual responsibility subscale initially designed and validated by Starrett [44]. Individual pro-environmental attitudes were measured using the well-established revised New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) scale proposed by Dunlap et al. [45]. The first version of the scale and its preliminary validation were published by Dunlap and van Liere [46] as a response to the dominant paradigm of unlimited economic growth and development that disregards the growth consequences and the ecological limits of the environment. The initial NEP scale consisted of twelve items, with preliminary empirical verification for the general public and environmental organization samples. The revised 15-item NEP scale covers additional dimensions of natural sustainability developed after the construction of the original scale as well as recognizes the need to

address theoretical and language corrections. The items comprising the revised NEP scale are widely available. They include perceptions of the limits of growth and human intervention in the natural environment and attitudes toward the usage of natural resources, the balance of nature, and the human dominance in the natural ecosystem(s).

The revised NEP scale has also been validated in an extensive US (Washington State) household sample [45] and used internationally in 69 studies and 36 nations, with the methodological issues identified, related to the scale length and content and potential correlations with participants' demographic characteristics [47]. Nevertheless, both versions of the NEP scale are recommended when forming a pool of pro-environmental attitude items [48], and their use for institutional environmental initiatives in higher education is advocated by Harraway et al. [49].

Participants rated their agreement with the described constructs using the nine-point Likert scale (with a value of one denoting complete disagreement and nine denoting complete agreement). The method used is consistent with the recommendation of Wu and Leung [50], who encourage researchers to use Likert scales with a higher number of scale points, which results in underlying distributions closer to normality and statistical properties of interval scales.

All measurement scales had adequate internal consistency as measured with the Cronbach's alpha indicator. The internal reliability of the prosocial attitudes scale was within the lower acceptable threshold ( $\alpha = 0.719$ ). The revised NEP scale, used in its complete form to measure pro-environmental attitudes, had a somewhat higher internal consistency than the prosocial attitudes scale ( $\alpha = 0.765$ ). The obtained values are acceptable for a preliminary empirical study [51].

After consolidating data (available as Supplementary Materials to this manuscript), data were visually examined for normality (using Quantile–Quantile plots) and outliers. According to theoretical recommendations [52], we removed the cases with outliers, bringing the final dataset to 459 cases.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Demographic Characteristics and the Mean Values of the Fundamental Constructs

The final sample comprised 275 Croatian (59.9%) and 184 Italian (40.1%) participants. In the Croatian subsample, there were 172 students of business studying at the Faculty of Economics, Business, and Tourism at the University of Split (37.5% of the entire sample), and 103 students (18.7% of the entire sample) were enrolled at the University of Zagreb (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences—Department of Psychology and Faculty of Law—Social Work Study Center) with helping professions (psychology and social work) as their major (representing the social sciences and humanities). The Italian subsample consisted of 98 students (21.4% of the sample) majoring in psychology enrolled at the University of L'Aquila and 86 business students (18.7% of the entire sample) enrolled at the Faculty of Economics at the Sapienza University of Rome.

There were 359 female (79.4%) and 93 male participants (20.6%), leading to a gender-unbalanced sample. We acknowledge this issue as a research limitation because female participants tend to be much more aware of ethical issues than male ones [53]. At the same time, they are also more responsive to Web surveys [54]. Such non-balanced samples in terms of gender are often encountered in regional southern and central European research studies [12,16], and this issue needs to be addressed in future research.

We first created composite variables for prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes using the item-average approach and further reported on the descriptive statistics of those measures across both the entire sample and the subgroups that consider the students' country of origin and their study major. The mean value of students' prosocial attitudes for the entire sample equals 6.21 (with a standard deviation of 0.96), and the mean value of the pro-environmental attitudes equals 6.37 (with a standard deviation of 0.85). Table 1 shows the average values of students' prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes, grouped by country of origin, study major, and both grouping variables.

**Table 1.** Mean prosocial and pro-environmental attitude values for groups by country and study major.

Grouping Variable	Prosocial Attitudes	Pro-Environmental Attitudes
<i>Country</i>	<i>Mean (Std. dev.)</i>	<i>Mean (Std. dev.)</i>
Croatia	5.90 (0.97)	6.32 (0.89)
Italy	6.67 (0.74)	6.45 (0.78)
<i>Study major</i>	<i>Mean (Std. dev.)</i>	<i>Mean (Std. dev.)</i>
Business	5.74 (0.83)	6.28 (0.88)
Social Sciences & Humanities	6.81 (0.76)	6.49 (0.79)
<i>Country and study major</i>	<i>Mean (Std. dev.)</i>	<i>Mean (Std. dev.)</i>
Croatia—Business	5.34 (0.56)	6.19 (0.92)
Croatia—Soc. Sci. & Hum.	6.82 (0.79)	6.53 (0.78)
Italy—Business	6.53 (0.73)	6.46 (0.75)
Italy—Soc. Sci. & Hum.	6.80 (0.73)	6.44 (0.81)

According to the hypotheses, we expected the empirical values of the prosocial attitudes characterizing the students to be grouped according to the students' country of origin and study major. Students in helping professions, i.e., the social sciences and humanities, have a much higher prosocial orientation than those enrolled in business studies, which could be expected considering the previously discussed theoretical background. Italian students consistently outperform Croatian students, which could be attributed to the lower level of social capital [55] and trust [56] in the region of southeast Europe (SEE) when compared to the other European regions.

Regarding pro-environmental attitudes, there are mixed findings, with a somewhat higher level of pro-environmental orientation for Italian students across the entire sample. In Croatia, students of business studies have a somewhat lower mean pro-environmental orientation than students of the social sciences and humanities. However, the difference is slight, and it is up to debate if there is a generalizable relationship between prosocial and pro-environmental orientation and how strong it might be [57,58]. Although an in-depth discussion and a potential empirical verification are outside of the scope of this study, It could be suggested that the role of the higher education context might significantly influence such a relationship.

Namely, in our sample, the Italian business students have a somewhat higher level of pro-environmental orientation than those majoring in the social sciences and humanities. This could be attributed to the exposure to prosocial and pro-environmental academic content, as influenced by the recent emphasis on social and environmental responsibility in management education [59]. There has already been empirical confirmation of the influence of UN PRME academic content on students' prosociality by Alfrević et al. [12], who analyzed a SEE sample of business students. In this study, we further discuss the role of the national higher education context in the relationship between study major (as a proxy of professional socialization) and pro-environmental attitudes (orientation).

### 5.2. Moderation Analysis Results

To verify the hypothesized conceptual models and the two hypotheses on the moderating role of the national higher education context in the relationship between study major and prosocial (i.e., pro-environmental) student attitudes, we used the A.F. Hayes' [60] PROCESS macro. The PROCESS v 4.0 software package can reliably assess a range of mediation, moderation, and conditional process analyses, with many conceptual models already being pre-programmed. We utilized the PROCESS Model 1, which empirically evaluates simple moderation models, such as our models proposed in Section 3 (see Figure 1).

An empirical evaluation of hypothesis H1 is presented in Table 2, with 95% confidence intervals used on 5000 bootstrap samples. The empirical evaluation of Model 1a, related to



hypothesis H1 regarding the moderating role of the overall higher education (HE) context in the relationship between study major and students' prosocial attitudes, shows the significant moderating effect of the HE context ( $\beta = -1.1953$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) on the hypothesized relationship. The model is significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) and has a very high  $R^2$  value of 0.49. The conditional effects of the national HE context are significant at the moderator values for both countries (see Table 2), which confirms hypothesis H1.

**Table 2.** Analysis of hypothesis H1.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta (SE.)	LLCI	ULCI	R <sup>2</sup>
Hypothesis (H1)	Study major → Prosocial attitudes	2.6689 (0.1983)	2.2792	3.0586	0.4966
	National HE context → Prosocial attitudes	2.3778 (0.2050)	1.9750	2.7806	
	Study major * National HE context → Prosocial attitudes	−1.1953 (0.1232)	−1.4552	−0.9359	
Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator					
Country	Effect	SE.	LLCI	ULCI	<i>p</i>
Croatia	1.4736	0.0853	1.3061	1.6412	0.000
Italy	0.2784	0.1011	0.0796	0.4771	0.006

**Note:** SE—standard error, LLCI—lower-level confidence interval, ULCI—upper-level confidence interval. \* Moderating effect.

The empirical test of Model 1b shows an overall significant moderation effect of the national HE context ( $\beta = -0.3647$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) on the hypothesized relationship between study major and students' pro-environmental attitudes. The model is significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), which leads to a formal acceptance of hypothesis H2. However, a very low explanatory power ( $R^2 = 0.03$ ) suggests that the choice of the predictors might be improved by future research, which should incorporate additional theoretical and empirical considerations of pro-environmental attitudes in student populations. The results also show uneven values of the conditional effects (see Table 3), implying that the higher education context 'takes over' the main effect in the case of the Italian subsample, which is further discussed in the Section 6.

**Table 3.** Analysis of hypothesis H2.

Hypothesis		Relationship	Beta (SE.)	LLCI	ULCI	R <sup>2</sup>
Hypothesis 2 (H2)	Study major → Pro-environmental attitudes		0.7087 (0.2427)	0.2318	1.1856	0.0293
	National HE context → Pro-environmental attitudes		0.6397 (0.6397)	0.1467	1.1326	
	Study major * National HE context→ Pro-environmental attitudes		−0.3647 (0.1619)	−0.6829	−0.0466	
Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator						
Country	Effect	SE.	LLCI	ULCI	<i>p</i>	
Croatia	0.3439	0.1044	0.1388	0.5490	0.001	
Italy	−0.0208	0.1238	−0.2641	0.2224	0.867	

**Note:** SE—standard error, LLCI—lower-level confidence interval, ULCI—upper-level confidence interval. \* Moderating effect.

## 6. Discussion

The contribution of this study can be found in the evaluation of the national HE context and its role in influencing students' prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes. The

role of the national context has been empirically validated as significant for both attitude groups (see Tables 2 and 3).

The relationship between study major and students' prosocial attitudes, as proposed by hypothesis H1, shows the already well-established dynamics of professional socialization and students' self-selection into their HEIs of choice. However, when considered as a moderator, both the Croatian and the Italian national HE contexts suppress the relationship between study major and prosocial attitudes. Namely, the main effect is higher when moderation is not considered, even more so in Italy than in Croatia. This could be interpreted as a 'competition for students' minds' between the national and the institutional context of higher education, which seem to exclude each other when shaping students' prosocialness. It seems that the effects of professional socialization are at odds with the characteristics of the national higher education system in general. This empirical proposition must be further analyzed in future research that focuses on different aspects of the national HE context and the implied values.

There is also a significant empirical relationship between study major and pro-environmental attitudes when the national HE context is not considered. However, even in this case, when the context is introduced as a moderating variable, there is a suppression of the main effect (i.e., the direct relationship between study major and students' attitudes) by the conditional effect, representing the influence of the national HE systems and the generally considered contextual educational variables. The influence of the Italian national HE context is much stronger than that in Croatia, altogether canceling out the influence of the institutional effects implied by the choice of study major when it comes to supporting pro-environmental attitudes. To explain these effects, a potential explanation could be put forward that the individual HE institutions are not able to create specific patterns of professional socialization, i.e., to influence their students' attitude profiles. This could hint at the low levels of social impact exerted by HEIs in the two analyzed countries, at least in the social sciences field.

If future research confirms such a proposition, some implications should be considered. Provided that professional socialization is already challenged by new student generations' subjective perceptions of social responsibility [16], HEI administrators need to find ways to communicate the authenticity of their institutions instead of relying on 'best practices' from different socio-economic and educational environments [61]. The imperative of following global benchmarks is even higher for business schools wishing to obtain relevant international accreditations, as those might lead toward the global standardization of educational practices and less concern for institutional diversity [62].

Another venue worth exploring is related to HEIs' potential focus on how students value their educational experiences based on the idea of students as educational customers [63]. Because of the increased role of student fees in HE financing, students might find themselves in the role of paying customers, 'shopping around' for courses with low academic standards and generous grades. In addition to the potential quality impact, HEIs' principal orientation toward satisfying students' expectations can undermine relationships with other relevant stakeholders and decrease the HEIs' role in preparing students to serve as responsible citizens [64].

The implications of the 'student-as-customer' mental model overlap with the subjectivization of HE's social and environmental responsibility. Namely, the increased marketization could make HEIs reluctant to adhere to strict enforcement of ethical principles or professional socialization patterns, preferring rather to accept lenient policies and yield to the prevalent social trends. Alternatively, we could speculate that, at least in Italy, there is a strong and stable culture of sharing typical national values at the social level. Recent data coming from a survey carried out in 15 universities located in different Italian cities covering the entire national territory [65] indicated that attitudes toward pro-environmental behaviors were positive for more than 70% of students and positively related to health risk perception, an internal locus of control, and health literacy. The correspondence between positive attitudes towards pro-environmental behaviors and adopting such behaviors was approximately 20% for most behaviors. A companion study [66] also showed an association

between functional health literacy, health risk perception, and trust in institutions. These empirical data support the second hypothesis about a shared and stable culture among Italian university students of pro-environmental behavior.

## 7. Conclusions

The presented findings highlight the indirect effect of the national higher education context on the relationship between professional socialization and forming prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes among the selected student populations in Croatia and Italy. Both proposed hypotheses are acceptable because there is a statistically significant moderating relationship between study major and prosocial and pro-environmental attitudes (see Tables 2 and 3). However, while the choice of study field (as a proxy of professional socialization) is an excellent predictor of prosocial attitudes, it is not a good predictor of the students' pro-environmental attitudes, as demonstrated by the low explanatory power of the model (see Table 3).

In both cases, the main effect is suppressed by the moderating effect of the national higher education context. A potential explanation for this effect in Italy could be a high commitment to national values, while previous empirical research in Croatia does not offer similar interpretations. In both countries, the suppression of the main effect by the conditional one could also signal the academic conformity of HEI administrators to the prevalent social trends, which has been previously recognized as one of the weaknesses of the 'student-as-customer' model.

There are quite a few limitations of the current study. The most important one is that the role of the national context should not be treated simplistically. In further research, this limitation should be addressed by examining the structural elements of the national higher education context and a complex model of its direct and indirect relationships with higher education outcomes. This suggested course of further research would also benefit from empirical verification in multiple educational and cultural environments, because the current study focuses on two culturally similar countries, especially regarding uncertainty avoidance, which is particularly relevant for the development of prosocial attitudes [67].

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