

From Intention to Transformation: A Conceptual Model of Consumer Identity and Sustainable Fashion Behaviour Change

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ABSTRACT

The global fashion industry generates substantial environmental pressures through rapid production cycles, excessive consumption, and escalating textile waste. Despite growing consumer awareness of sustainability issues, a persistent intention behaviour gap continues to limit the adoption of responsible fashion practices. Existing research has largely focused on cognitive determinants of purchase intention, providing limited insight into the mechanisms that translate sustainability intentions into consistent behaviour. This study develops a conceptual framework that positions consumer identity as a central mediator in sustainable fashion behaviour. Adopting a theory driven conceptual research design, the paper integrates the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour, Identity Based Motivation, and Innovation Resistance Theory to explain how sustainability intentions evolve into long term behavioural transformation. The framework proposes that while environmental awareness and social influence may initiate sustainable intentions, behavioural change is more likely when sustainability becomes aligned with an individual's green self identity. In addition, sensory product experiences and behavioural nudges are identified as enabling mechanisms that can reduce structural barriers such as price sensitivity and habitual fast fashion consumption. Theoretically, this study extends current understanding of the intention behaviour gap by integrating identity based psychological mechanisms with structural and experiential determinants of fashion consumption. Practically, the framework offers insights for policymakers and fashion retailers seeking to promote circular consumption practices in emerging economies. In the Malaysian context, where approximately two million kilograms of textile waste are generated daily, aligning sustainable apparel with consumer identity may play a critical role in advancing national circular economy initiatives such as the Circular Economy Blueprint for Solid Waste 2025–2035.

Keywords: Consumer Identity, Sustainable Fashion, Intention-Behaviour Gap, Innovation Resistance, Malaysian Textile Waste.

INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry has become one of the most resource intensive sectors in the world, exerting substantial environmental and social pressures across the entire production and consumption chain. Rapid production cycles, declining garment prices, and the expansion of fast fashion retail models have significantly increased global clothing consumption per capita. While technological innovation and corporate sustainability initiatives have gained momentum in recent years, the ecological footprint of the industry continues to expand through rising carbon emissions, excessive water consumption, and the accumulation of textile waste. These trends present a direct challenge to global sustainability agendas, particularly the need to transition toward more responsible consumption patterns. Consequently, fostering sustainable consumption has become a critical priority for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12), which emphasises responsible consumption and production.

Despite increasing public awareness of environmental issues, a persistent intention behaviour gap continues to limit the effectiveness of sustainable consumption initiatives. Numerous studies have shown that consumers

frequently express strong environmental concern and positive attitudes toward ethical fashion. However, these intentions often fail to translate into consistent purchasing behaviour. This discrepancy highlights the complexity of consumer decision making, where psychological motivations, structural barriers, and habitual consumption patterns interact to shape actual behaviour. As a result, understanding the mechanisms that enable consumers to move beyond favourable attitudes toward sustained behavioural change remains a central challenge within the sustainable fashion literature.

These global challenges are increasingly evident in emerging economies such as Malaysia, where rapid urbanisation and expanding retail markets have accelerated apparel consumption. The Malaysian textile and apparel sector generates approximately two million kilograms of textile waste daily, placing significant strain on national waste management systems. According to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT), fabric waste now constitutes a substantial proportion of total solid waste in the country. This issue is further compounded by Malaysia's role as a major importer of used textiles, which intensifies landfill pressure and complicates efforts to develop a circular economy. In response, national initiatives such as the Circular Economy Blueprint for Solid Waste 2025–2035 have emphasised the urgent need to promote responsible consumption and extend the lifecycle of textile products.

Although Malaysian consumers increasingly demonstrate awareness of sustainability concerns, empirical research suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to drive behavioural change. Studies indicate that while environmental motivation and perceived behavioural control may influence purchase intentions, structural barriers such as price sensitivity, product availability, and entrenched fast fashion habits often prevent these intentions from materialising into consistent action. This pattern reflects a broader limitation within traditional behavioural models, which tend to emphasise the formation of intentions but provide less insight into the mechanisms that sustain behavioural transformation over time.

Recent scholarship suggests that addressing the intention behaviour gap requires a deeper examination of identity related processes in consumer behaviour. When sustainable practices align with an individual's self concept and social identity, they are more likely to become embedded within everyday routines. Identity based motivations therefore provide an important theoretical lens for understanding how sustainability can transition from an abstract ethical preference into a lived lifestyle practice. However, existing studies often examine identity factors in isolation without integrating them with broader structural and experiential determinants of consumer behaviour.

To address this limitation, the present study proposes a conceptual framework that positions consumer identity as the central mediator linking sustainability intentions to long term behavioural transformation. By integrating the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour, Identity Based Motivation, and Innovation Resistance Theory, this research develops a multidimensional perspective that captures the psychological, structural, and experiential factors shaping sustainable fashion consumption. Specifically, the study aims to examine how identity congruence influences sustainable fashion behaviour and to explore the barriers and enabling mechanisms that affect the translation of intentions into action. By situating these processes within the Malaysian context, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable consumption in emerging economies and provides insights for policymakers and industry practitioners seeking to promote circular fashion practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding sustainable fashion behaviour requires a multidimensional theoretical perspective that extends beyond traditional intention based models. While the Theory of Planned Behaviour has been widely applied to explain pro environmental consumption, it primarily focuses on the formation of behavioural intentions and provides limited explanation for why these intentions frequently fail to translate into consistent action. This limitation has led scholars to explore alternative frameworks that better capture the complexity of consumer decision making within rapidly evolving retail environments.

One such framework is the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour, which emphasises the role of habit, facilitating conditions, and emotional responses in shaping behaviour. In the Malaysian fashion context, this perspective is particularly relevant because urban retail environments are saturated with fast fashion outlets that reinforce

habitual purchasing patterns. Even when consumers possess positive environmental attitudes, these entrenched habits and the widespread availability of low cost apparel often override sustainability intentions.

Identity Based Motivation further expands this understanding by suggesting that behaviours are more likely to occur when they are perceived as consistent with an individual's self concept. In societies where fashion functions as a key medium of self expression and social signalling, sustainable clothing must align with identity related motives to gain widespread acceptance. When environmentally responsible consumption becomes associated with positive identity attributes such as ethical awareness, social responsibility, or modern lifestyle values, sustainable fashion can transition from a niche practice into a socially desirable norm.

Another important perspective is Innovation Resistance Theory, which explains why consumers may hesitate to adopt sustainable alternatives despite recognising their environmental benefits. In emerging economies such as Malaysia, perceived barriers including higher price points, uncertainty regarding product performance, and unfamiliarity with bio based materials often discourage adoption. These barriers create friction within the intention behaviour gap, preventing consumers from converting favourable attitudes into consistent purchasing behaviour.

Beyond these psychological and structural factors, the product experience itself also plays a critical role in shaping sustainable consumption. In tropical markets like Malaysia, garment attributes such as breathability, comfort, and durability strongly influence consumer satisfaction. When sustainable apparel successfully delivers superior sensory and functional experiences, it can decouple consumer satisfaction from the pursuit of constant novelty. In this context, sustainable garments become valued not only for their environmental attributes but also for their emotional durability and cultural significance, particularly when linked to local craftsmanship such as batik or traditional weaving practices.

Finally, the rapid expansion of digital platforms has significantly reshaped the social dynamics of fashion consumption. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok increasingly serve as spaces where sustainable practices including thrifting, repairing, and clothing reuse are publicly shared and socially validated. These online communities provide peer reinforcement that can normalise circular fashion practices among younger consumers, thereby strengthening the connection between sustainability intentions and actual behaviour.

Research Gaps and Synthesis of Findings

Although the existing literature provides valuable insights into sustainable fashion consumption, several important research gaps remain. First, many studies rely primarily on cross sectional survey designs that capture consumer attitudes and intentions at a single point in time. Such approaches offer limited insight into how sustainable behaviours evolve or persist over longer periods. Longitudinal perspectives are therefore necessary to better understand the behavioural transformation required for a circular fashion economy.

Second, the majority of empirical studies have been conducted in Western markets, creating a geographical imbalance in the literature. Emerging economies such as Malaysia possess distinct cultural, economic, and climatic contexts that may shape sustainable consumption differently. For instance, religious values and cultural ethics such as the Islamic concept of stewardship or *Mizan* may influence perceptions of environmental responsibility, yet these dimensions remain underexplored in current research.

Third, existing models often emphasise cognitive awareness and environmental concern while underestimating the importance of identity related motivations. Recent studies increasingly suggest that sustainable behaviour becomes more consistent when it is internalised as part of an individual's self concept. Without this identity alignment, sustainability intentions may remain abstract ideals rather than everyday practices.

Taken together, these gaps suggest the need for an integrated conceptual framework that connects psychological identity processes with structural and experiential factors influencing fashion consumption. Recent evidence indicates that sensory product experiences, digital social influence, and habit disrupting interventions can play critical roles in overcoming innovation resistance and strengthening sustainable behaviour. By synthesising these

perspectives, the present study proposes a framework that places consumer identity at the centre of behavioural transformation while acknowledging the structural and experiential factors that shape consumer choices within the Malaysian fashion ecosystem.

Table 1

Author(s)	Year	Title	Methodology	Key Findings
Busalim et al.	2025	Consumer Behaviour in Sustainable Fashion: A Systematic Review information.	Systematic Literature Review (SLR)	Identified that "innovation resistance" is a primary barrier in emerging markets; suggests that sensory product experiences are more effective than purely cognitive
Syed et al. (2025)	2025	Bridging the Intention-Behaviour Gap in Malaysian Sustainable Retail	PLS-SEM Quantitative	Analysis Validated that identity-based motivation acts as a significant mediator in translating sustainability intentions into actual purchase behaviour within the Malaysian context.
Cosma et al.	2025	The Digital Influence: Social Media and Circular Fashion Norms	Qualitative Netnography	Found that peer-to-peer digital communities on TikTok/Instagram are more effective at establishing "repair and reuse" norms than traditional top-down corporate marketing.
Alexander & Nobbs	2024	Sensory Branding and the Sustainable Product Experience	Mixed-Methods (Case Study & Survey)	Demonstrated that multi-sensory retail environments (touch, scent, and aesthetics) increase the perceived value and emotional durability of sustainable garments.
Luo, Wu, & Luximon	2024	Tactile Perception and Choice Architecture in Bio-material Design	Experimental Design	Proved that consumers are more likely to adopt sustainable alternatives when the "hand-feel" matches or exceeds that of conventional synthetic materials.
Hasbullah et al.	2022	Determinants of Sustainable Apparel Purchase Intention among Millennials	Quantitative Survey	Highlighted that while Malaysian millennials have high awareness, "perceived behavioural control" and "facilitating conditions" (price/access) remain the ultimate bottlenecks.
Goworek et al.	2021	Behavioural Change for Clothing Longevity: A Framework for Repair	Thematic Analysis & Behaviour Change Wheel	Concluded that interventions must move beyond "nudging" to "enablement," making repair skills part of the consumer's social identity.

As summarised in Table 1, recent studies highlight three key dimensions shaping sustainable fashion consumption: identity alignment, sensory product experience, and social influence within digital communities. Collectively, these studies suggest that sustainable behaviour cannot be explained solely through cognitive awareness or environmental concern. Instead, behavioural transformation emerges from the interaction between internal motivations, product related experiences, and external social environments. These insights provide the conceptual foundation for the framework proposed in this study, which integrates identity based psychological mechanisms with structural and experiential factors to explain how sustainability intentions can evolve into long term behavioural change.

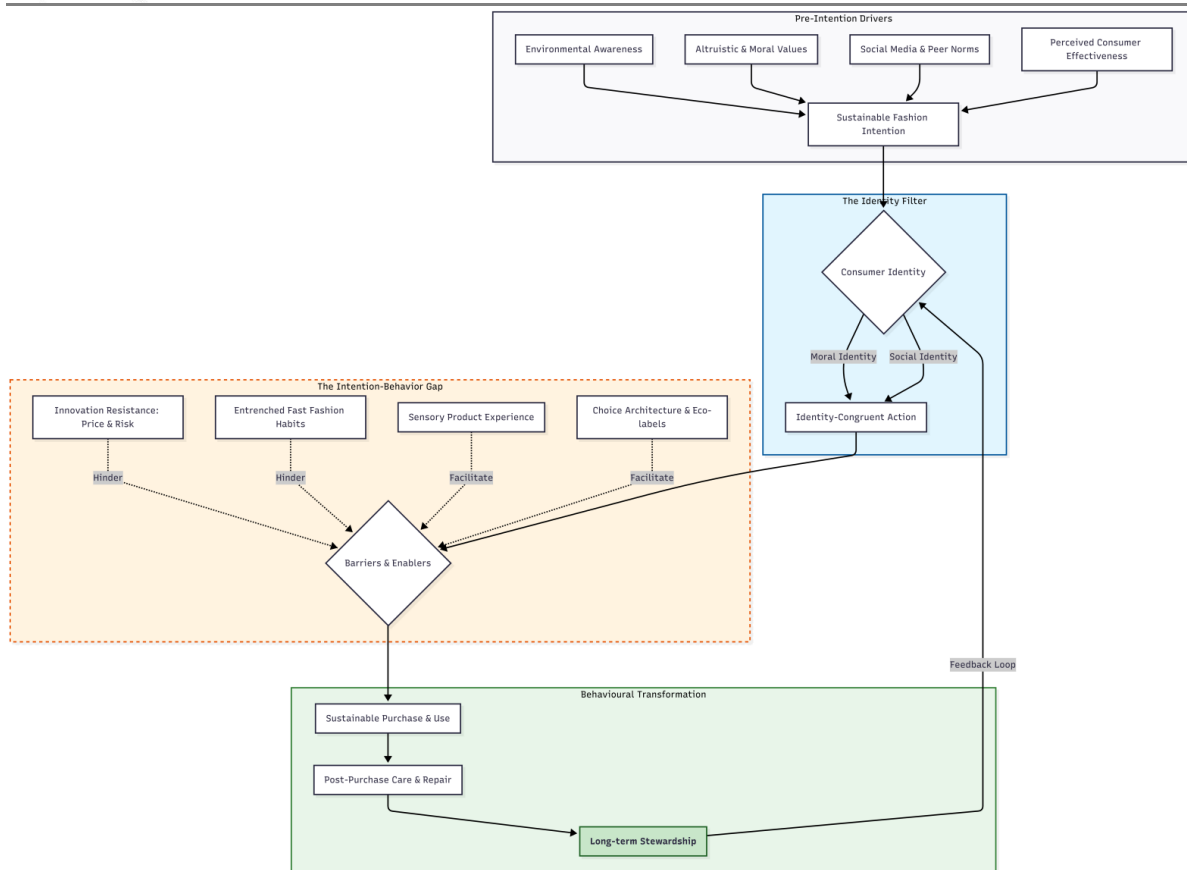


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework Diagram

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework, which integrates the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour, Identity Based Motivation, and Innovation Resistance Theory to explain how sustainable intentions evolve into long term behavioural transformation. Within this model, consumer identity functions as the central mediator because intentions are more likely to translate into action when they are perceived as consistent with an individual’s self concept. The framework begins with several drivers that shape sustainability intentions, including environmental awareness and social media influence. These factors establish a baseline motivation for responsible consumption. However, the transition from intention to behaviour is frequently disrupted by structural barriers such as innovation resistance, habitual purchasing patterns, and perceived financial risks associated with sustainable alternatives. At the same time, enabling mechanisms can facilitate behavioural transformation. Sensory product experience plays an important role in this process, as tactile quality, comfort, and aesthetic appeal enhance the perceived value of sustainable garments. When these experiential attributes meet or exceed consumer expectations, satisfaction becomes less dependent on the constant acquisition of new clothing and more oriented toward long term product stewardship. The framework also incorporates a reinforcing feedback loop that highlights the importance of post purchase practices such as garment care, repair, and reuse. These behaviours strengthen the individual’s green self concept and gradually embed sustainability within everyday lifestyle routines. Through this cyclical process, a single sustainable purchase can evolve into a broader behavioural transformation aligned with circular economy principles.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Conceptual Orientation

This study adopts a conceptual research design which focuses on the integration and expansion of existing theoretical structures rather than the empirical testing of data. This non empirical orientation is grounded in a theory driven approach that synthesizes the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour, Identity Based Motivation, and Innovation Resistance Theory. By prioritizing the logical connection between psychological constructs and behavioral outcomes, the study aims to refine the theoretical understanding of the intention behaviour gap within the sustainable fashion domain. This design is particularly appropriate for exploring the transformative role of

consumer identity as it allows for the high level abstraction and synthesis of complex internal and external variables that traditional cross sectional empirical models may fail to capture.

Literature Identification and Selection Process

The identification of relevant academic literature followed a systematic and rigorous screening process to ensure the inclusion of high quality and contemporary evidence. Searches were primarily conducted across major databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science using keywords such as sustainable fashion behavior, consumer identity, intention behaviour gap, and Malaysian textile waste. To ensure the reliability of the synthesis, specific inclusion criteria were applied: only peer reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2026 were selected, and priority was given to studies focusing on emerging economies or the Malaysian retail landscape. Articles were excluded if they lacked a focus on consumer psychology or if they were published in predatory or non indexed journals. Sources were screened based on their relevance to the conceptual orientation of the study, with emphasis placed on studies exploring identity based motivation, sensory product experiences, and structural barriers.

Conceptual Analysis and Synthesis Process

The conceptual analysis involved a multi dimensional comparison of different theoretical perspectives to identify overlapping constructs and critical research gaps. Key constructs such as moral identity, social norms, and innovation resistance were extracted from the selected literature and systematically compared across different geographical and cultural contexts. This synthesis process aimed to reconcile the limitations of the Theory of Planned Behaviour by integrating more comprehensive frameworks like the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour to account for habit and social factors. By evaluating how sensory design and digital peer influence interact with internal self concepts, the study synthesized these disparate elements into a unified narrative regarding consumer transformation.

Development of the Conceptual Framework

The final conceptual framework was developed by organizing the synthesized constructs into a coherent structure that aligns with the primary research objectives. The model was structured into four logical phases including pre intention drivers, the identity core, the intention behaviour gap, and behavioral transformation. This organization illustrates the sequential and cyclical nature of sustainable fashion consumption where identity acts as the central mediator. The framework specifically incorporates the feedback loop of identity reinforcement to explain how post purchase care and repair lead to long term lifestyle shifts. This structured alignment ensures that the model provides both theoretical depth for scholars and actionable insights for practitioners aiming to facilitate a shift toward a circular economy in Malaysia.

DISCUSSION

The conceptual model developed in this study elucidates how consumer identity serves as the transformative bridge between sustainable intentions and long term fashion behaviour change. The findings suggest that while environmental awareness and social media norms establish initial purchase intentions, these are frequently stymied by innovation resistance and entrenched fast fashion habits within the Malaysian market. However, when sustainability is internalised as part of a green self identity, it acts as a primary mediator that aligns individual self concept with identity congruent actions like garment repair and long term stewardship. These results align with contemporary literature (Busalim et al. 2025) suggesting that sensory product experiences, specifically tactile quality and aesthetic appeal, are essential to overcoming the perceived risks associated with sustainable alternatives in emerging markets. By shifting the focus from the act of acquisition to the emotional durability of clothing, the model demonstrates that sustainable consumption is a qualitative enhancement of the user experience rather than a mere ethical obligation.

Theoretically, this research contributes by integrating the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour and Identity Based Motivation to provide a more predictive framework than the traditional Theory of Planned Behaviour. It addresses a critical gap in the literature by highlighting how cultural ethics and digital peer influence on

platforms like TikTok and Instagram reshape social norms toward circularity. Practically, the study offers actionable insights for Malaysian policymakers and fashion retailers who must address the daily generation of two million kilograms of textile waste (The Star, 2025). By leveraging nudge theory, such as providing pre-selected repair services or intuitive eco labels at the point of sale, practitioners can reduce the friction of sustainable choices and facilitate the transition toward a circular economy.

Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its conceptual nature as the proposed relationships have not yet been empirically validated through longitudinal data. Furthermore, while the model highlights the Malaysian context, the influence of specific religious ethics on circularity remains under explored. Future research should utilise PLS SEM quantitative analysis to test the strength of identity based motivation as a mediator across diverse demographic cohorts. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to track actual behavioural shifts over time rather than relying on cross sectional snapshots of intention. Exploring the role of AI driven personalised nudges in fostering a culture of repair represents another promising avenue for shifting consumption patterns in emerging economies.

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