

FROM ENVIRONMENTAL CUES AND TRIGGERS TO SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION: EXAMINING THE ROLES OF SELF-EXPRESSIVENESS AND EMOTIONAL STATE IN SUSTAINABLE PURCHASING, USAGE AND DISPOSAL BEHAVIORS

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ABSTRACT

The awareness of sustainability in fashion has been growing but it has been predominant in sustainable purchasing intentions and cognitive determinants while the post-purchase sustainable consumption behavior is less studied, with studies being fragmented. The study focused on environmental cues and triggers as stimulants of self-expressiveness and emotional state in sustainable purchasing, usage and disposal behaviors. An online study was adopted with snowball sampling. An adopted and modified structured questionnaire was used as the main instrument for data collection, gathering 683 responses after data cleaning and reliability checks for appropriateness. SPSS and AMOS v23 were used in the analysis. The results show that cues and triggers are significant stimuli on self-expressiveness and emotional state in motivating sustainable purchasing and disposal behavioral responses, with emotional state having a comparably stronger effect on the response sustainable behavioral variables. The findings imply that businesses can highlight symbolic values in marketing campaigns to show how clothes enhance consumers' personal identity, and also direct marketing actions and communication efforts by focusing on sustainable consumption prompts and what triggers consumers to engage in sustainable consumption behavior rather than just the emotional state. The study recommends organizations effectively utilize experiential strategies, such as calm music in a store that promotes a calm environment, as it can serve as an enabler of sustainable choices rather than impulsive panic-purchases.

Keywords: Stimulus-organism-response; self-expressiveness; emotional state; consumption behavior; cues and triggers

1. Introduction

In the age of the rising wave of sustainable practices, the damages from the fashion industry arising from wanton consumption and waste generation has become a significant concern (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023), especially in developing economies such as Nigeria. Evidence shows that the industry has the most damaging effect on the environment globally (Cheramie & Balasubramanian, 2024). Reflective and pro-environmental actions are rising from governments, pro-environmental societies and the research community on a sustainable consumption model (Centobelli et al., 2022), such that scientific publications on sustainable fashion have increased within the last decade (Jacobs et al., 2018). As a result, the rising concerns and awareness about environmental issues and choice of sustainable products, particularly in developing nations, is leading consumers to increase consumption of sustainable products (Nguyen & Doan, 2026). This is reflective of the rising needs and necessity to alter sustainable fashion positively by changing consumption behavior to reflect sustainability (Soyer & Dittrich, 2021), given the fashion phenomenon in the industry that takes undue advantage of consumers' desire to change clothes before the cycle of their natural usage is exhausted (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023). Eventually, the effect is seen in environmental damage and a lack of ethical applications among fashion producers (Williams & Hodges, 2022).

The concept of sustainable fashion is not just about purchase behavior but the entire sustainable consumption cycle that involves sustainable purchase, usage and disposal behavior, while pointing to a more circular economy. This idea addresses rethinking purchases that align with a safe and healthy environment, retaining and refurbishing clothes, and reusing and recycling clothes (Soyer & Dittrich, 2021). Although consumer purchase decisions are influenced by product price and availability (Fogg, 2009), green consumers often pay a premium price for sustainable fashion given their understanding of the significant impact of unsustainable usage in our societies (Soyer & Dittrich, 2021). This perspective connects sustainable consumption to how consumers feel about their growth and well-being, in addition to their experiential pleasure (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2005), especially as consumers' involvement in sustainable consumption is driven by their ability to find alternatives that minimize damage to the environment without compromising their style (Domingos et al., 2022). One of these alternatives in fashion is regarded as the secondhand market (Meital & Ori, 2025), otherwise known as “okirika” in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the footprints are not on wallets but the environment, given the cluttered gutters from wastes, dumped clothes in landfills and incineration of clothes. The 32 million tons of waste generated annually negatively affects the environment, with evidence of flooding and water pollution leading to the deaths of aquatic life (Save the Consumers, n.d.). Fragmented mandates, weak enforcement and scarcity of data are entrenching unsustainable practices in Nigeria (Omokaro et al., 2026), while the market in the African region is a concern, as it has eventually become a home to worn-out clothes, outdated apparel and damaged textiles (Ogundepo, 2022). The scenario is more critical following the shipping of poor-quality fashion by merchants to the region, given that many of the clothes end up incinerated or in landfills, thereby damaging the environment (Chirona, 2023).

However, most studies on sustainability focus majorly on sustainable purchasing, with emphasis on the Theory of Planned Behavior, and less attention on the sustainable consumption cycle that involves purchasing, usage and disposal, despite the presence of environmental impact on these behavioral aspects (Soyer & Dittrich, 2021). The focus on Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) is a shift to understand the response behaviors holistically from the stimulants that are inherent in the cues and triggers, and not just the organism, such as attitudes and perceived value. While localization of the study differs from diverse findings that emanate from advanced countries and serves as one of the contributions of the study, the dimension of S-O-R and the whole sustainable consumption cycle gives a whole picture of sustainable fashion behavior in Nigeria. Therefore, the study explores the influence of cues and triggers on sustainable fashion consumption by examining the role of self-expressiveness and emotional state in sustainable purchasing, usage and disposal behavior among Nigerian undergraduate students. They comprise the Nigerian youthful

population, with the majority being under 30 years while being associated with Nigeria's economic transformation (Oduwole & Ibrahim, 2025).

2. Literature Review

The present study focuses on the cues and triggers to sustainable consumption in examining the roles of self-expressiveness and emotional state on sustainable purchasing, usage and disposal behaviors. Therefore, Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R), proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), was adopted such that environmental cues and triggers act as stimulus, whereas psychological factors that include self-expressiveness and emotional state act as organism variables, while sustainable behaviors that include sustainable purchasing, usage and disposal serve as responses. Essentially, stimulus (S) encompasses internal and external forces that elicit mental reactions, such as marketing factors, cultural factors, personal traits and attitudinal effects, which impact the organism (O), representing inducements and alterations in personal emotions that ultimately affect the behavioral response (R) (Xue et al., 2024).

Sustainable Consumption, Sustainable Purchasing, Usage, and Disposal Behavior

The concept of sustainability has continued to be a discourse in different fields of study, following the pillars anchored on people, planet and profit, as well as uncompromisingly meeting the future needs of people while satisfying present needs. In consumption practices, meeting consumers' basic needs should be done by minimizing waste and depletion of resources. Sustainable consumption behavior encompasses consumers' actions undertaken to protect and preserve the needs of generations, as well as minimizing waste damage (Sargin & Dursun, 2023). The concept of sustainable behavior occurs in energy and water consumption, purchasing and waste, such as in alcohol-free drinks (Onya et al., 2026), food and agriculture (Oloveze et al., 2023), and pro-environmental advocacy. Consumer behavior is a function of several factors, such as price, quality and other marketing factors that include captive promotional messages. Consumers who desire to preserve the environment are often willing to pay premium prices (Soyer & Dittrich, 2021). While sustainable purchasing encompasses the entire buying cycle that supports humans and the environment, sustainable usage focuses on maximizing products' lifespan, in addition to the efficiency of owned products, particularly in saving money and lowering carbon footprints. However, sustainable disposal considers re-entry of materials into the production cycle, as well as the diversion of waste from landfills. Sustainable usage practices are identified with repairs and repurposing, while disposal practices encompass actions that include donation, swapping, reselling, incineration and disposal in landfills or recycling bins (Soyer & Dittrich, 2021).

Cues and Triggers

These are internal or external stimuli that not only guide an individual's behavior but also represent experiences and events capable of eliciting feelings such as emotional responses. While triggers can result from psychology, such as previous experiences or emotions, cues are external, serving as signposts to signal emotional reactions, although they often bypass rationality by nudging consumers toward behavioral actions based on habit or immediacy of want. In marketing, they influence consumers' decision-making (Ali et al., 2025), such as environmental cues that exert influence on consumers' product purchases (Wang et al., 2022) and technical and situational cues that impact impulse buying (Xue et al., 2024). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: Cues and triggers significantly influence self-expressiveness in sustainable behaviors.

H2: Cues and triggers significantly influence emotional state in sustainable behaviors.

Self-Expressiveness

This is the extent to which an individual attaches special meaning to a product to self-concept or identity. In shopping, it connects consumers to shopping activity as a vital aspect of their self-concept (Sirgy et al., 2016). Consumers often

express themselves with brands as a social identity, such that brands that express consumers' identities are preferred (Xie et al., 2015). Studies show that self-expressive consumption enables consumers to repair their self-worth (Dalton, 2024) and achieve life satisfaction (Sirgy et al., 2016). In sustainability, self-expressiveness can operate through identity signaling, such as eco-consciousness, psychological ownership such as pro-environmental commitment, and value alignment. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Self-expressiveness significantly influences sustainable purchasing.

H4: Self-expressiveness significantly influences sustainable usage.

H5: Self-expressiveness significantly influences sustainable disposal.

Emotional State

This encompasses an individual's experiences in the form of transient moods, such as guilt and anxiety. It drives behavior by bypassing rationality (Wang et al., 2025), although not all purchase behaviors are a product of rationality. It is important because it provides an explanation for need fulfilment, processing marketing messages, and improving brand loyalty. Emotional state is not simply about good or bad, but a psychological continuum, such as pleasure versus displeasure and arousal versus calmness. It is a vital aspect of consumer motivation (Chenini & Elbachir, 2016). Studies confirm its significance in consumer behavior (Wang et al., 2025), including rational decision-making, such as cases of panic buying and moral emotions that consumers feel as a result of marketing actions (Bagozzi & Yaprak, 2025). Thus, we hypothesize:

H6: Emotional state significantly influences sustainable purchasing.

H7: Emotional state significantly influences sustainable usage.

H8: Emotional state significantly influences sustainable disposal.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a standardized, online questionnaire with items adapted from Soyer and Dittrich (2021) in surveying undergraduate students aged 18 years and above. The instrument was also subjected to preliminary tests to ensure reliability. The questionnaire was developed on Google Forms, with the links shared via students' social media platforms using the snowball sampling technique to facilitate a farther reach of respondents. The final questionnaire consisted of 21 items, including age, gender and marital status, in addition to the main constructs measured on a 5-point Likert scale graduating from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The analysis was conducted via covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), which is a fitting approach for testing established models following hypotheses based on existing literature, needing hundreds of observations, with the indicators being caused by latent constructs while acting as their manifestations. Through SPSS and AMOS v23, the analysis was executed, while the significance level in the study ranged from 1% to 10% for all hypotheses.

4. Results

The total validated sample is 683 after data screening. 36.3% were male while 63.7% were female. The mean age is approximately 21 years, indicating a youthful composition of the sample, while the majority of respondents were single (98.2%), with 1.8% married. The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) shows a fair representation of the variables in the factor space, following high communalities ($\lambda > 0.5$). The common method bias (CMB) was assessed through Harman's single-factor test. At 26.500, CMB is not a problem, as it is below the 50% threshold in the literature. However, the full factor solution accounted for 60.357% of total variance. Sampling adequacy was also confirmed through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (.862), which is above the .500 minimum reference. Reliability

and validity were assessed through Cronbach's alpha, construct reliability and convergent reliability. As indicated in Table 1, the constructs met the 0.6 reference for Cronbach's alpha reliability (Malhotra, 1997; Otey et al., 2021), 0.7 for construct reliability (Hair et al., 2010; Oloveze et al., 2022). Validity was assessed via factor loadings with a 0.6 reference as recommended in the literature (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Oloveze et al., 2024).

Table 1: Reliability and Validity Assessment

Variable	Scale Items	λ	CA	CR	AVE
Cues and Triggers (CT)	CT1: I shop when friends and family are posting new outfits	.58	.65	.73	.40
	CT2: I shop for clothes before I realize that I am doing it	.69			
	CT3: Shopping for fashion items is something I do automatically	.64			
	CT4: I shop for clothes at least twice in a month	.61			
Self-expressiveness (SE)	SE1: I buy and wear clothes that reflect my personality (fashion belief)	.72	.86	.87	.62
	SE2: I buy and wear clothes that show who I really am (what I stand for)	.80			
	SE3: The garments I wear express my individuality (values)	.82			
	SE4: The garments I buy and wear communicate my environmental identity (sustainable garments)	.80			
Emotional state (ES)	ES1: I feel guilty when I purchase garments that are not sustainable	.62	.72	.73	.41
	ES2: Buying sustainable garments lifts my mood	.55			
	ES3: I feel anxious about the environmental impact of my fashion choices	.64			
	ES4: I feel emotionally connected to sustainable garments	.74			
Sustainable purchasing (SP)	SP1: I read the clothing label to check what materials the product is made of before buying	.75	.66	.75	.60
	SP2: I purposely select fibers that require cooler washing temperature, shorter drying time or less ironing	.80			
Sustainable usage (SU)	SU1: I use shared clothes	.83	.69	.81	.69
	SU2: I share my clothes (lend, exchange, or make my clothes available to others for a fee)	.83			
Sustainable disposal (SD)	SD1: I give clothes away to friends or family	.67	.67	.70	.43
	SD2: I donate clothes to a good cause such as charity homes and less privileged homes	.64			
	SD3: Before discarding clothes, I use them as rags for cleaning purposes	.66			

Note: λ = factor loading; CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR = construct reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

The structural model was evaluated and confirmed through recommended indicators, following the assumptions and reference thresholds against the model's values, as indicated in Table 2. The model is a good fit, as the values in the model reasonably satisfied the references. This includes the R^2 values (emotional state, self-expressiveness, sustainable purchasing and disposal) that provided a reasonable explanation of the variance in the model.

Table 2: Structural Model Assessment

Indicator	Reference	Value in the Model
CMIN/DF	≤ 5.0	2.301
Goodness-of-fit index	≥ 0.90	.952
Adjusted goodness-of-fit index	≥ 0.90	.932
Normed fit index	≥ 0.90	.910
Relative fit index	≥ 0.90	.884
Incremental fit index	≥ 0.90	.947
Tucker-Lewis index	≥ 0.90	.931
Comparative fit index	≥ 0.90	.946
Root mean square error of approximation	≤ 0.08	.044
R ² Emotional state		.948
R ² Self-expressiveness		.725
R ² Sustainable disposal		.550
R ² Sustainable usage		.001
R ² Sustainable purchasing		.350

In the hypotheses test, statistical significance provided empirical support for all the proposed hypotheses except the influence of self-expressiveness on sustainable usage, and the effect of emotional state on sustainable usage. Therefore, Table 3 summarizes the results using unstandardized B results. From cues and triggers, it was found to significantly influence self-expressiveness (H1: $B = 3.034$; $p = 0.000$) and emotional state (H2: $B = 2.527$; $p = 0.000$). From self-expressiveness, it was found to be significantly related to sustainable purchasing (H3: $B = .294$; $p = 0.028$), and sustainable disposal (H5: $B = .213$; $p = 0.077$), and not sustainable usage (H4: $B = .011$; $p = 0.869$). From emotional state, it was found to have a significant effect on sustainable purchasing (H6: $B = .409$; $p = 0.031$), and sustainable disposal (H8: $B = .691$; $p = 0.000$), and not sustainable usage (H7: $B = .000$; $p = 0.997$).

Table 3: Hypotheses Test

Variable	Hypotheses (Path)	Unstd. B	Std. β	Critical Value	Sig.	Support
Cues and Triggers (CT)	H1: CT $\rightarrow$ SE	3.034	.852	4.309	.000	Supported
	H2: CT $\rightarrow$ ES	2.527	.974	4.028	.000	Supported
Self-expressiveness (SE)	H3: SE $\rightarrow$ SP	.294	.307	2.198	.028	Supported
	H4: SE $\rightarrow$ SU	.011	.025	.164	.869	Not supported
	H5: SE $\rightarrow$ SD	.213	.228	1.767	.077	Supported
Emotional state (ES)	H6: ES $\rightarrow$ SP	.409	.312	2.151	.031	Supported
	H7: ES $\rightarrow$ SU	.000	.000	.003	.997	Not supported
	H8: ES $\rightarrow$ SD	.691	.541	3.862	.000	Supported

5. Discussion

The study built on existing literature in consumer psychology and sustainability in fashion. It focused on self-expressiveness and emotional state as organisms reacting from cues and triggers to provide a response in the form of sustainable purchasing, usage and disposal behavior. The model was validated via universally recognized indicators. Of the eight hypothesized relationships, only six were supported, following the statistical significance levels (0.001–0.1). Significant contributions were advanced, especially by extending sustainable consumption beyond sustainable purchase behavior and considering the entire sustainable consumption cycle: purchasing, usage, and disposal. Therefore, the validated model from the results extends the literature by examining the entire consumption cycle (purchase-usage-disposal) and incorporating both identity-based (self-expressiveness) and affective (emotional state) mechanisms in identifying sustainable consumption behavior in emerging economies such as Nigeria. Second, it integrated psychological and situational factors, cues and triggers, to offer depth in understanding the formation of sustainable behavior. Third, it provides evidence from an African perspective, given the scarcity of literature on the consumption cycle from African economies. Fourth, it fills a gap in the literature by conceptualizing the full sustainable consumption behavior cycle in Africa, which is missing in the literature; filling the mechanism gap by identifying the nature of responses from cues and organisms; and filling a contextual gap by providing evidence from Nigeria, given the predominance of literature on sustainable consumption from advanced nations.

The results show that consumers are first influenced by cues and triggers that lead to the development of a sustainability-related identity (self-expressiveness) and the generation of positive emotions that lead to sustainable behaviors, namely sustainable purchasing and disposal. No significant result was found for the paths leading to sustainable usage. Following the R^2 (.001), the indication is that the predictors explained only a negligible proportion of its variance, thereby pointing to the need for important explanatory variables and direction for future research. The implication is that other factors not included in the model are likely to play a more substantial role in explaining the construct. The R^2 of self-expressiveness and emotional state were strong indicators of cues and triggers, explaining much of the variance in self-expressiveness (.725) and emotional state (.948) respectively, revealing a high variance. Similarly, the R^2 of sustainable purchasing (.350) and sustainable disposal (.550) has a reasonable proportion of variance from self-expressiveness and emotional state.

Following the results of the hypothesized relationships, cues and triggers positively influence self-expressiveness and emotional state. This is consistent with extant literature (Ali et al., 2025; Xue et al., 2024). The influence arises from posts of new outfits from a close circle, automaticity, and regularity of shopping. These influences connect to fashion beliefs, self-identity, self-values, and sustainability of garments, in addition to mood, such as anxiety about choices affecting the environment, emotional attachment, and feelings of guilt about unsustainable practice. However, while cues and triggers positively influence self-expressiveness and emotional state, the effect is comparably stronger on emotional state. The implication is a faster automatic consumer reaction than rational behavior, in ways that logic and rationality are shut down. Although rooted in consumer psychology, it identifies a behavioral disconnection, but in the case of the guilt feelings of consumers toward unsustainable practices, as found in the study, it reveals a positive disposition to sustainable fashion behavior from an emotional perspective. Although cues and triggers may be mistakenly perceived by marketing organizations, leading to communication breakdown when consumers cannot self-express, the study reveals the need to connect with the guilt feelings of consumers regarding unsustainable behavior. In this case, a celebrity endorsement strategy in marketing communications will create an impact (Oteh et al., 2022), especially in Nigeria, where there is a large followership and imitation of celebrities by fans. Therefore, cues and triggers act as an indirect stimulus to sustainable consumption behavior, but the comparable effect calls for caution in businesses' understanding of the emotional state, which can be misleading in consumers' self-expressiveness. Further, the implication for managers is to direct marketing actions and communication efforts by focusing on sustainable consumption prompts and what triggers consumers to engage in sustainable consumption behavior, rather than just the emotional state.

As one of the organisms in the study, self-expressiveness influences sustainable purchasing and disposal. It supports extant literature (Nguyen & Doan, 2026; Dalton, 2024). Consumers' inner identity, thoughts and personality dictate their purchase behavior, such as double-checking material composition of the cloth and preference for materials that promote sustainability, like cooler washing temperature. Comparably, self-expressiveness is slightly weaker on sustainable purchasing and disposal when compared with emotional state. It shows consumers being more emotional about sustainable behavior than being self-expressive in sustainable purchasing and disposal behavior. Because self-expressiveness indicates identity building, personal choices and everyday style, the practical implication for businesses is to highlight symbolic values in marketing campaigns to show how clothes enhance consumers' personal identity. Also, by visibly showing eco-branding, green consumers can easily show off their green self-identity (Nguyen & Doan, 2026).

Emotional state, as the second organism in the study, influences sustainable purchasing and disposal. This is also supported in the literature (Wang et al., 2025; Bahrudin & Aurisicchio, 2018). Emotional state connects with how consumers relate to sustainable fashion in terms of what is purchased and how it is disposed of. The positive result indicates the effect of positive emotions, such as a lifted mood in purchasing sustainable garments and conscious disposal, such as donating for a good cause, using it for cleaning purposes, and giving to friends. Practically, organizations can leverage these feelings by shifting to an emotionally rewarding experience for consumers. For instance, advertisements can involve warm-glow pricing that offsets the financial cost for happy consumers, or ones that highlight and trigger joy from the collective impact of sustainable fashion behavior.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study shows that cues and triggers are important external and internal stimuli in driving organisms (self-expressiveness and emotional state) to influence a response that involves sustainable purchasing and disposal in clothing literature. The importance of self-expressiveness and emotional state as organisms confirms the need for organizational consideration of the psychology of consumers in green practices. The study recommends that organizations adopt experiential retail that promotes a calm environment, as it can serve as an enabler of sustainable choices rather than impulsive panic-purchases. Also, green pride messaging campaigns can be used by organizations to leverage anticipated emotions to drive sustainable purchasing behavior, while the need to communicate self-expressive benefits will enable green consumers to project their identity to others. Utilization of clear green imagery and eco-labels is also encouraged. With respect to sustainable disposal, organizations can resort to campaigns to harness social motivations that encourage responsible disposal, while the use of visual cues, such as the cost of inappropriate disposal, can generate feelings of accountability and responsibility.

Future lines of study are suggested given the limitations of the study. First, although reliability was satisfied, measurement validity was not satisfied, following the poor AVE and lower factor loadings for convergent validity. Second, the survey adopted a non-probability technique and majorly focused on tertiary education consumers. Therefore, a population with diverse occupations is encouraged, while a probability sample can also be adopted in future studies. In addition, examining the role of education, age and gender in these relationships can also produce a clearer picture of the direction and source of the effects.

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