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TOWARDS A CIRCULAR ECONOMY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONSUMER CIRCULAR CONSUMPTION IN THE KLANG VALLEY

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Abstract: *The solid waste crisis is one of the greatest environmental challenges facing modern global society today. The shift towards a more circular economy and circular consumption is crucial, as it could mitigate carbon emissions and resource depletion. In order to contribute to emerging literature in the field and address several notable literature gaps, the study proposed a conceptual framework to explain consumers' circular consumption using a social psychology perspective. It posits that distinct types of attitude (instrumental and affective) and social norms (injunctive and descriptive) have a significant and positive influence on consumers' circular consumption. The study will use a quantitative method via a cross-sectional survey. It will collect data from 420 consumers in the Klang Valley, which will be analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The findings are expected to shed light on the distinct influence of instrumental and affective attitudes, as well as injunctive and descriptive norms, on consumers' circular consumption. The insights could be utilized to develop various interventions and strategies to support Malaysia's efforts towards the circular economy as outlined in the Circular Economy Blueprint for Solid Waste (2025–2035).*

Keywords: *Attitude, Circular Consumption, Consumer, Norms*

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Introduction

The solid waste crisis is one of the greatest environmental challenges facing modern global society today. One pathway towards a more sustainable future is the shift towards a circular economy. Nevertheless, the circular economy requires a shift away from the traditional linear economy, which is predominantly driven by the unsustainable "take-make-dispose" model. (Ellen MacArthur Foundation [EMF], 2024). The traditional model exacerbates resource depletion to meet rising demand and unsustainable consumption, leading to environmental degradation and increased solid waste generation (EMF, 2024).

The shift towards a more circular economy is crucial, as it could mitigate carbon emissions and address the environmental crisis caused by resource depletion. It involves "the regenerative approach of cleaner and more efficient product designs, refurbishing, recycling, and reusing" (Malaysian Investment Development Authority [MIDA], 2026). The agenda to shift to a circular economy has been adopted in various nations worldwide. In Malaysia, the circular economy has been a highlight of various government agendas, such as the Circular Economy Blueprint for Solid Waste (2025–2035). The path to greater circularity requires collective efforts from the government, consumers, communities, and businesses. Consumer actions, in particular, could significantly support the transition, as the circular economy is largely shaped by consumers' circular consumption and sustainable lifestyle choices (Lopes et al., 2023; Vidal-Ayuso et al., 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2024). Consumer engagement could significantly reduce solid waste generation through various circular consumption or "R strategies", such as recycling, reusing old but usable materials, refurbishing, and repairing, among others (Zimmermann et al., 2024).

Malaysia currently generates almost 39,000 tonnes of waste daily, which contributes to various forms of environmental pollution and methane emissions. If no significant actions are taken, the crisis will worsen as the landfills in Malaysia are already operating at their full capacity (MIDA, 2026).

One of the most prevalent circular consumption practices to reduce solid waste generation is recycling and reuse (Zimmermann et al., 2024). Similarly, in Malaysia, recycling is one of the most visible pro-environmental behaviors, especially among consumers. It is reported that the recycling rate is increasing yearly to nearly 38%. Nevertheless, it is still considered low compared to other nations such as Germany and South Korea, with 65% and 59% recycling rates, respectively (MIDA, 2026). Aside from strengthening recycling, consumers need to embark on other forms of circular consumption, which could help further minimize the amount of waste generated in this country. For instance, activities such as refurbishing old products, buying pre-loved items, repairing electronic devices, and reducing single-use plastics, among others (Sajid et al., 2024; Zimmermann et al., 2024). Nevertheless, unlike recycling, these activities are generally less prevalent in society (Lundberg et al., 2024).

A meta-analytical study has shown that circular consumption is driven by the perceived value of the products and consumers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Zimmermann et al., 2024). While factors such as lack of information, low environmental literacy, and low awareness often hinder circular consumption engagement (Zimmermann et al., 2024). Nevertheless, despite the emerging studies, they tend to be concentrated on Western settings. More studies are needed to enrich the literature in developing countries and the multicultural Malaysian context, which has its unique culture, attitudes, and norms towards circular and sustainable consumption (Chiu et al., 2022; Ubaidillah & Zulkarnain, 2025).

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In the pro-environmental and other social psychology domains, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) has been among the most utilized (Kumar & Nayak, 2023; Syed et al., 2024). TRA posits that human intention and actions are shaped by attitudes and subjective/ social norms, which reflect their beliefs (Ajzen, 2005; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Attitude reflects one's evaluation of an action and its possible consequences. Ajzen (2005) highlighted that attitude represents affective (emotional) and instrumental (rational deliberation) dimensions. Nevertheless, there is a lack of pro-environmental studies that distinguish between these two subdimensions, despite evidence from several studies that both subdimensions exert distinct influences on intention and behavior (Gao et al., 2023; Phipps et al., 2021; Rhodes et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2020). Understanding the distinct role of affective and instrumental will shed light on the psychological and cognitive mechanisms driving individuals' decisions and actions, revealing whether they are driven by rational deliberation (instrumental attitude), or emotional evaluation (affective attitude), or a combination of both. The insight could help facilitate the development of behavioral change interventions and strategies that target the right attitudinal levers to encourage consumers' circular consumption.

Similarly, pro-environmental studies may or may not distinguish between social norms as subcomponents, such as injunctive and descriptive norms. Injunctive norms refer to an individual's perceived social pressure to behave in a certain manner. Descriptive norms, on the other hand, denote prevailing norms of an action (Cialdini et al., 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). These constructs tend to have distinct influences on intention and behavior, reflecting different types of norms and how people respond to them. Given Malaysia's collectivistic culture, where independence of community members is the norm, more studies are warranted to examine their distinct influences, especially in the context of circular consumption. The insight into the separate influence of injunctive norms and descriptive norms will reveal whether consumers' circular consumption is influenced by prevalent community norms (descriptive norms) or perceived social pressure to act (injunctive norms), or a combination of both. This insight allows policymakers and campaigners to develop more specific normative-based behavioral change and messaging strategies to nudge consumers to engage in circular consumption.

It is important to note that traditionally, the TRA utilized intention as a mediator or precursor to behavior. Nevertheless, the study examines the direct influence of affective attitude, instrumental attitude, injunctive norms, and descriptive norms on consumers' circular consumption. In other words, it bypasses intention as a mediator to capture their direct influence on actual behavior. The approach could address the intention-behavior gap, thus providing a more pragmatic assessment of drivers that translate into actual behavior for a more streamlined policy assessment.

To sum up, the extant literature uncovered several gaps. First, research on circular consumption among consumers remains limited, as the current literature tends to focus on the circular economy from the supplier/manufacturer's perspective (Lopes et al., 2023; Vidal-Ayuso et al., 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2024). Secondly, there is a comparative lack of studies on circular consumption in collectivistic and developing countries such as Malaysia. Third, previous studies in the pro-environmental behavior domains often study attitudes and social norms as undifferentiated constructs, thereby ignoring their underlying subdimensions, which exert unique influences on intention and behavior.

Based on the notable gaps, the study seeks to contribute to the literature by proposing a conceptual framework that distinguishes attitudes into affective and instrumental

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subdimensions and social norms into injunctive and descriptive norms, to examine their influences on consumers' circular consumption in the Klang Valley. Klang Valley is chosen because of its high population density, economic activities, and it also has the highest solid waste generation in Malaysia (KDEB Waste Management, 2024). In terms of practical significance, the findings could facilitate the development of empirically based intervention strategies that support the shift towards a circular economy and the attainment of SDG NO 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) in Malaysia.

In order to guide the conceptual framework, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does instrumental attitude have a positive influence on consumers' circular consumption?
2. Does affective attitude have a positive influence on consumers' circular consumption?
3. Do descriptive norms have a positive influence on consumers' circular consumption?
4. Do injunctive norms have a positive influence on consumers' circular consumption?

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Consumers' Circular Consumption

Circular consumption among consumers involves various activities that can help minimize solid waste generation. Zimmermann et al. (2024) categorized these as the "R" activities, which represent a range of pro-environmental engagement that could minimize solid waste generation, such as recycling, reducing, reusing, refurbishing, and repairing old materials, among others. In the present study, consumers' circular consumption encompasses consumer engagement in these activities. In several studies, scholars (e.g., Lopes et al., 2023; Vidal-Ayuso et al., 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2024) have highlighted various social psychology theories used to explain consumer circular intention, including the Theory of Planned Behavior, Habit Theory, Value-Belief-Norm, and others. Nevertheless, studies that specifically examine the distinct influence of attitudes and social subdimensions on circular consumption remain scarce, especially in Malaysia. In addition, most studies have been conducted in other
nations with different psychographics, distinct norms, and cultures (e.g., Lopes et al., 2023; Vidal-Ayuso et al., 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2024).

Instrumental Attitude, Affective Attitude, and Consumers' Circular Consumption

Attitude refers to an individual's beliefs regarding an action or behavior and its potential consequences (Ajzen, 2005). In the article, attitude refers to one's evaluation of circular consumption, which involves various R strategies, such as reuse, reduce, recycle, and others. Scholars have emphasized that the construct of attitude can be distinguished into two subdimensions: instrumental attitude and affective attitude (Ajzen & Driver, 1992; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2022; Phipps et al., 2021). Instrumental attitude refers to one's rational evaluation of a behavior; for instance, a person may evaluate circular consumption as beneficial, neutral, harmful, or otherwise perceived as having utility. Affective attitude, on the other hand, involves one's emotional responses or feelings towards a behavior, which may range from joy to sadness, satisfaction to dissatisfaction, and others (Ajzen & Driver, 1992; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2022). Studies have shown that both types of attitudes can strengthen one's pro-environmental behavior and intentions (Gao et al., 2023; Rhodes et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, these studies have also shown that both types of attitude have different salience and exert different influence on intention/behavior (Phipps et al., 2021). For instance, an

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affective attitude was found to exert a stronger positive influence than an instrumental attitude in several pro-environmental behavior studies (Gao et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020). In contrast, another study found that an instrumental attitude has a stronger influence on recycling behavior (Rhodes et al., 2015). Therefore, more research is needed to shed more light on their unique roles, especially in the context of circular consumption. To date, there is a lack of studies in the pro-environmental and related domains that examine their separate influences.

Based on theoretical postulations and previous findings, it is expected that those with stronger instrumental and affective attitudes will be more likely to engage in circular consumption. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:
H1: Instrumental attitude has a positive influence on consumers' circular consumption.
H2: Affective attitude has a positive influence on consumers' circular consumption.

Descriptive Norms, Injunctive Norms, and Consumers' Circular Consumption

Another important construct in the social psychology domain is the social norms construct. It is a key component of the TPB and its predecessor, Theory of Reasoned Action. According to scholars (Cialdini et al., 1991; Goldstein et al., 2008), the social norms construct can be distinguished into two subdimensions: injunctive norms and descriptive norms. In the context of the study, the former refers to a perceived social pressure to engage in circular consumption, while the latter denotes the prevailing norms of circular consumption. Both types of norms have been found to exert a significant positive influence on an individual's intention and action in various pro-environmental behavior domains (Aboelmaged, 2021; Mintz et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2023; Sajid et al., 2024), especially in collectivistic societies with strong social cohesion. (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tam, 2025).

Nevertheless, despite their different conceptualizations and distinctions, some studies do not necessarily treat them as separate constructs to understand their unique roles in behavior/intention. Emerging but limited studies have found that descriptive norms and injunctive norms can have different strengths, salience, and sometimes contradictory influences on behavior or intention (Cheng et al., 2022; Ertz et al., 2021; Moussaoui et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to study the impact of both norms separately, especially in the context of circular consumption, which remains underexplored to date. More specifically, in collectivistic cultures such as Malaysia, it is expected that pro-environmental behavior, such as circular consumption, is strongly driven by both injunctive and descriptive norms. Based on theoretical postulations and previous findings, it is hypothesized that:
H3: Descriptive norms have a positive influence on consumers' circular consumption.
H4: Injunctive norms have a positive influence on consumers' circular consumption. Figure 1 below demonstrates the proposed conceptual framework of the study.

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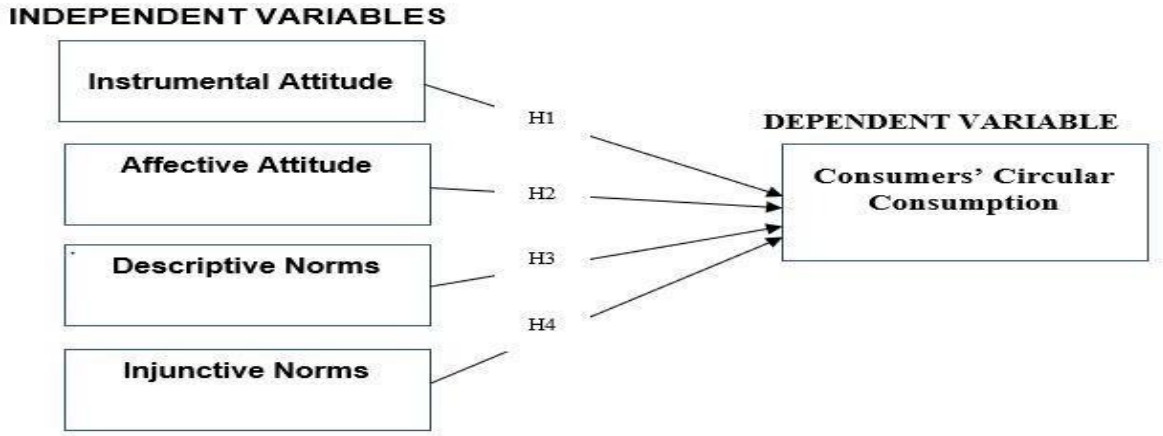

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Source: Author's own proposed framework

Proposed Methodology

The study seeks to investigate the influence of affective attitude, instrumental attitude, descriptive norms, and injunctive norms on consumers' circular consumption in the Klang Valley. The study will use a quantitative method via a cross-sectional survey. The quantitative method is deemed suitable, as the study seeks to find relationships between variables so that generalized trends and relationships can be uncovered to inform policy-making and intervention development (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The targeted respondents are household heads aged 18 and above residing in the Klang Valley. The area is chosen because it is a highly urbanized area with the largest amount of solid waste generation in Malaysia. Based on Cochran's formula (Cochran, 1977), at least 385 respondents are needed for the study. Nevertheless, to account for potentially unusable cases, the study will collect data from at least 420 respondents.

The study will employ a convenience sampling technique to collect data across 11 subdistricts in the Klang Valley. A residential postcode from each of the districts will be selected from an online postcode database, and the questionnaire will be distributed to the residents with the assistance of the resident associations. A new postcode within the same district will be generated in cases where the resident association fails to respond. The study will conduct an online survey using a self-reported bilingual questionnaire (Google Form) as the instrument. The measures will be adopted and adapted from previous validated studies (Lopes et al., 2023; Mintz & Kurman, 2019; Onwezen et al., 2013; Rezvani et al., 2017). It will contain sections on socio-demography and the key variables in the studies (consumers' circular consumption, affective attitude, instrumental attitude, injunctive norms, and descriptive norms). A five-point Likert Scale will be used to measure the key variables, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The dataset will be analyzed using IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize respondents' profiles and analyze means and standard deviations, followed by Cronbach's alpha and Exploratory Factor

Analysis (EFA) to establish the reliability and validity of the decomposed subdimensions of the variables. Diagnostics will also check for univariate normality using skewness and kurtosis thresholds, and screen for multicollinearity issues via the Variance Inflation Factor (V.I.F). The analysis will proceed with Pearson Correlation to establish bivariate correlations. Subsequently,

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a multiple regression analysis will be used to test the predictive strength of the hypothesized relationships and to determine the total variance explained by the model.

Implications

The proposed conceptual framework could contribute to a more nuanced understanding and theoretical building in the consumers' circular consumption and pro-environmental behavior domains. It distinguishes attitudes into affective and instrumental subdimensions and social norms into injunctive and descriptive norms to examine their influences on consumers' circular consumption in the Klang Valley. Understanding their separate roles is crucial, as scholars (Gao et al., 2023; Phipps et al., 2021; Rhodes et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2020) have highlighted that they have different significance and saliency on intention and behavior, but remain underexplored, especially in the pro-environmental behavior domain.

By uncovering their unique role and significance, policymakers, campaigners, local authorities, and other relevant parties can develop more psychologically relevant and specific interventions that align with the salient attitudes and social norms to encourage circular consumption among consumers in the Klang Valley. For instance, intervention strategies and message framing could appeal to the affective attitude of consumers by making circular consumption feel enjoyable and satisfying. On the other hand, instrumental attitudes could be leveraged through financial incentives and message framing that appeals to convenience and other practical benefits. Additionally, intervention strategies and policies leveraging descriptive norms could highlight the prevalence of circular consumption in society. In contrast, those targeting injunctive norms could use community leaders, social media influencers, and other notable personalities to endorse the significance of circular consumption to society and the environment. These efforts are crucial to support Malaysia's aspiration towards greater circularity as outlined in the Circular Economy Blueprint for Solid Waste (2025–2035) and Sustainable Development Goal No. 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (MIDA, 2026).

Conclusion

Understanding the factors that could influence circular consumption among consumers could contribute to minimizing solid waste in Malaysia. The study proposes a conceptual framework that will examine the factors influencing circular consumption among consumers in the Klang Valley. Based on the extant literature, it argues that the attitude and social norms constructs can be distinguished into subdimensions, as they make unique contributions to intention and behavior (Ajzen & Driver, 1992; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2022). More specifically, the study will examine the influence of attitude subdimensions (instrumental and affective attitudes) and social norms subdimensions (descriptive and injunctive norms) on circular consumption among consumers, which remain understudied in the circular consumption context. The findings could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their unique roles and influences and help policymakers, campaigners and other relevant parties to develop more streamlined and targeted interventions and strategies to encourage consumer circular consumption in the Klang Valley. The effort is an integral pathway towards achieving a circular economy and Sustainable Development Goal No. 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (MIDA, 2026).

Limitations and Future Direction of the Study

The study acknowledges several limitations and delimitations of the proposed conceptual framework and its methodologies. First, the study relies on cross-sectional data collection, which only gathers data at a single point in time. Secondly, the study uses a self-reported questionnaire as a research instrument, which could pose a risk of common method bias.

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Thirdly, the study only focuses on urban consumers residing in the Klang Valley, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Based on these limitations and delimitations, it is recommended that future researchers employ a longitudinal study to analyze the temporal causality of the proposed relationships. Future researchers could also minimize the risk of common method bias by emphasizing the anonymity and academic nature of the study to the potential respondents. They could also use a time interval between collecting independent and dependent variables to reduce response bias. It is also recommended that future researchers explore other settings and avenues such as rural areas and organizational settings to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

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