SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION AS AN EVOLVING CONTEXT OF VIETNAMESE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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Received: 2 May 2025; Revised: 20 May 2025; Accepted: 31 May 2025

ABSTRACT

The concern of food consumption should be recognized from a broader perspective, especially in emerging markets. This research was aimed at investigating the roles of nutrition content and ecological welfare, which correspondingly constitute nutrition and environmental sustainability, within the food consumption behaviour of Vietnamese consumers. A sample size of 312 participants and the structural equation modelling analysis were employed to confirm that both nutrition content and ecological welfare of the food positively affected consumer attitude, which significantly enhanced sustainable food consumption intention in turn. The findings theoretically contributed to the application of the stimulus-organism-response model in the context of sustainable consumption. There were several implications for helping food industry insiders and executives precisely understand consumers' sustainable behavior and being successful in the green food sector

Keywords: Sustainable consumption, green food, sustainable behavior, structural equation modelling.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable consumption has garnered considerable global attention due to its profound implications for long-term economic development, societal well-being, and environmental preservation. It is defined as the satisfaction of essential human needs in a manner that does not jeopardize the Earth's ability to sustain future generations [1]. As environmental and resource concerns intensify, sustainable consumption has become a critical focus in both policy and academic discourse. However, disparities in economic development and sociocultural contexts necessitate differentiated approaches to sustainable consumption and production in developed versus developing countries. In many developing economies, including Vietnam, rising income levels and improved living standards have coincided with escalating environmental pressures. This growing dilemma forces policymakers and stakeholders to confront the trade-off between economic advancement and environmental stewardship [2]. Therefore, further empirical exploration is needed to understand the determinants of sustainable consumption behavior in emerging markets such as Vietnam.

Consumers' increasing awareness of health and environmental issues has stimulated greater interest in sustainable food choices [3]. Significant transformation within the food industry is essential to achieve enduring sustainability [4]. While prior studies have largely concentrated on green product purchasing behaviors or organic food consumption patterns [5, 6], this study adopts a broader lens to examine sustainable food consumption behaviors. In

addition to nutritional information, which has been recognised in various contexts as a tool to facilitate healthier food choices [7], the ethical and ecological dimensions of food choices, such as animal welfare and environmental impact, are increasingly shaping consumer behaviour [8]. Placing greater emphasis on nutritional value tends to positively influence the likelihood of purchasing sustainable food products, as it can enhance perceived product value. Consumers' understanding of a product's nutritional quality, alongside their awareness of its environmental attributes, has shown a significant association with utilitarian benefits. These benefits are more directly linked to consumers' decisions to buy sustainable food [9]. This study aims to address the gap in the literature by investigating both nutritional and ecological factors as joint influences on sustainable food consumption behaviours.

The situation in developing countries presents a unique challenge, as these nations must often balance the demands of economic growth with the imperative of environmental protection. As a result, numerous sustainability-related initiatives have emerged through grassroots or "bottom-up" approaches. In particular, within the food industry, certain sustainability practices remain uncommon or inadequately implemented in these contexts. In contrast, sustainability models developed in industrialized nations typically depend on intricate accounting mechanisms, rigorous monitoring systems, strong governmental oversight, and a high level of corporate social responsibility. Such requirements may be impractical or unattainable for many developing nations [2]. In Vietnam, consumer sensitivity to environmental pollution and sustainable products has grown markedly. A recent PwC survey (2024) found that over 80% of Vietnamese consumers are willing to pay more for sustainably produced goods [10]. Similarly, a survey conducted by the Business Association of High-Quality Vietnamese Products revealed that consumers prioritize quality, safety, durability, cost-effectiveness, freshness, and nutritional content when purchasing food [11]. According to [12], the Deputy Director of the Investment and Trade Promotion Centre, residents of Ho Chi Minh City are increasingly interested in environmentally friendly products. However, actual adoption remains low, primarily due to high prices and limited awareness of product benefits. This underscores the need for a systematic investigation into consumer behavior toward sustainable food products in the Vietnamese context.

Although the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model has been employed in research examining green and organic food consumption, its applicability to sustainable food consumption specifically remains underexplored [9]. This study seeks to conceptualize and empirically test a Sustainable Food Consumption Intention (SFCI) model, where nutritional and ecological stimuli (S) influence consumer attitudes (O), which in turn affect behavioral responses (R). The primary objective is to investigate how perceived nutritional content and ecological welfare—representing the health and environmental dimensions of sustainability—influence attitudes and, subsequently, intentions related to sustainable food consumption among Vietnamese consumers.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

2.1. The S-O-R model

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, originally introduced by [13], conceptualizes human behavior as a reaction to environmental stimuli, processed through internal cognitive and emotional states. The model comprises three core components: stimuli (S), which are external influences; the organism (O), representing the individual's internal evaluations and emotional reactions; and the response (R), which refers to the resulting behavioral outcomes, such as approach or avoidance actions. In essence, the model posits that

environmental inputs are filtered through an individual's psychological state, leading to a specific behavioral reaction [6].

This study applies the S-O-R model to the context of sustainable food consumption by identifying two key external stimuli: perceived nutritional content and ecological welfare. These stimuli symbolize the health-related and environmental dimensions of sustainability, respectively. The internal state—or organism—is represented by consumers' attitudes toward sustainable food consumption, which subsequently influences their behavioral response, measured as SFCI.

The rationale for selecting nutritional content and ecological welfare as stimuli lies in their recognized roles in shaping consumer evaluations. Nutrition labels and health claims serve as pivotal indicators during food selection, significantly guiding purchasing decisions [7]. Concurrently, growing societal concern for environmental protection and animal welfare has amplified the relevance of ecological attributes in consumer decision-making [8]. While the S-O-R model has been widely validated in domains such as organic food [6, 14], food tourism [15], and sustainable packaging [16], its application to the broader and emerging category of sustainable food consumption, particularly in Vietnam, warrants further empirical validation.

2.2. Hypotheses development

Substantial empirical evidence underscores the influence of consumer attitudes on sustainable purchasing behavior. Attitudinal orientation toward environmental issues is a robust predictor of pro-environmental intentions [17]. A meta-analysis conducted by Zhuang et al. [18] confirmed a strong positive correlation between green attitudes and green purchase intentions. Likewise, Gandhi et al. [1] affirmed that favorable attitudes toward sustainable consumption positively affect behavioral intentions. In light of these findings, the present study posits the following hypothesis:

H1: Consumers' attitude toward sustainable food consumption positively influences SFCI.

In the Vietnamese context, nutrition-related information is a key determinant in food choice. Detailed labelling—including nutrient content, ingredient composition, and health-related claims—often enhances consumers' perceptions of product quality [19]. These perceptions can lead to favorable attitudes, especially when consumers perceive exaggerated health benefits [20]. Zainol et al. [21] highlighted the significant role of nutritional knowledge in shaping attitudes toward healthy food choices among young adults. Consequently, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Nutrition content positively influences consumers' attitude toward sustainable food consumption.

Environmental protection and animal welfare considerations are also critical in shaping attitudes toward organic and sustainable food. Prior research demonstrates that heightened concern for ecological welfare is associated with positive attitudes toward organic products [22]. Although earlier studies [23] noted that health and environmental factors tend to outweigh animal welfare in influencing purchase behavior, the importance of ecological attributes remains significant [24]. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Ecological welfare positively influences consumers' attitudes toward sustainable food consumption.

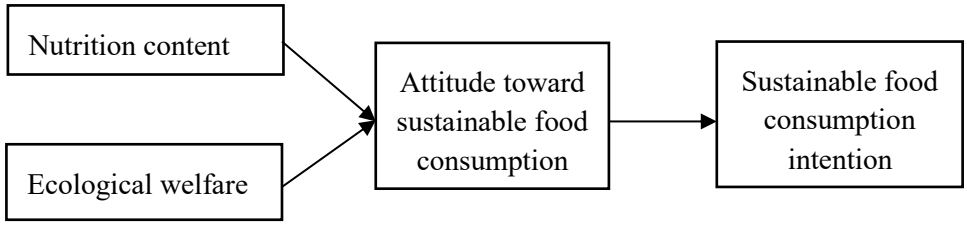

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data collection

This study employed a quantitative research design utilizing a self-administered online questionnaire distributed during March and April 2025. A total of 320 responses were collected from participants across various regions in Vietnam. After data screening, 312 responses were deemed valid and retained for analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM).

To ensure geographic diversity and maximize participation, the questionnaire was disseminated via a range of social media platforms and targeted online communities. These digital environments were selected strategically to capture responses from consumers who are likely to engage in or express interest in SFCI.

All measurement items were adapted from validated sources in prior research to ensure construct validity and reliability. Specifically, Nutrition Content was measured using four items derived from [25], focusing on the perceived health-related attributes of food products. Ecological Welfare was assessed through four items based on the scale developed by Lindeman & Väänänen [26], which evaluates ethical concerns, including animal well-being and environmental impact. Attitude Toward Sustainable Food Consumption was operationalized using three items adopted from [27], capturing consumers' affective and cognitive evaluations of sustainable food. SFCI was measured using three items developed by Yadav & Pathak [28] and further supported by Horrich et al. [29], reflecting the likelihood of consumers engaging in sustainable food purchasing behavior. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), enabling the quantification of consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Table 1. Measurement scales

Constructs	Codes	Items	Sources
Nutrition content	NC1	Sustainable food contains a lot of vitamins and minerals	[25]
	NC2	Sustainable food keeps me healthy	
	NC3	Sustainable food is nutritious	
	NC4	Sustainable food is high in protein	
Ecological welfare	EW1	Sustainable food has been produced in a way which has not shaken the base of nature	[26]

	EW2	Sustainable food is packaged in an environmentally friendly way	
	EW3	Sustainable food has been produced in a way that animals have not experienced pain	
	EW4	Sustainable food has been produced in a way that animals' rights have been respected	
Attitude toward sustainable food consumption	AT1	Buying sustainable food is a good idea	[27]
	AT2	Buying sustainable food is pleasant	
	AT3	I like the idea of buying sustainable food	
Sustainable food consumption intention	CI1	I am willing to buy sustainable food while shopping	[28]
	CI2	I will make an effort to buy sustainable food in the near future	
	CI3	I will definitely consider buying sustainable food	

3.2. Sample description

Demographic analysis revealed that 46% of respondents were aged between 25 and 34 years, with female participants accounting for 55% of the total sample. In terms of income, nearly half of the participants reported earning between USD 500 and USD 1,000 per month. When asked about their familiarity with sustainable food, the majority indicated that they were aware of and understood the concept, while approximately 18% had heard of it but lacked clear comprehension.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Measurement model

Table 2 presents the assessment of validity, reliability, and variance inflation factors (VIF) for the measured constructs. All Cronbach's alpha (α) values for all constructs are above the 0.70 threshold, and the factor loadings for each construct are above the acceptable cutoff of 0.50. Composite reliability (CR) values surpass the 0.70 criterion, while the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeds the minimum threshold of 0.50. These findings confirm that the constructs exhibit satisfactory convergent validity [30]. Moreover, the VIF values reported in Table 2 are well below the critical value of 3.3, suggesting that multicollinearity does not pose an issue in this study [31].

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha, CR, AVE and VIF scores for constructs

Variables	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	VIF
Attitude Toward Sustainable Food Consumption	0.830	0.898	0.747	1.000
Ecological Welfare	0.894	0.926	0.758	1.035
Nutrition Content	0.933	0.952	0.834	1.035
Sustainable Food Consumption Intention	0.773	0.868	0.686	

Table 3. Loading and cross-loadings

	Attitude Toward Sustainable Food Consumption (AT)	Ecological Welfare (EW)	Nutrition Content (NC)	Sustainable Food Consumption Intention (CI)
AT1	0.873	0.230	0.266	0.449
AT2	0.848	0.235	0.286	0.436
AT3	0.871	0.308	0.317	0.436
CI1	0.444	0.229	0.203	0.830
CI2	0.366	0.180	0.145	0.807
CI3	0.448	0.285	0.236	0.848
EW1	0.206	0.839	0.135	0.185
EW2	0.320	0.894	0.122	0.292
EW3	0.238	0.822	0.197	0.258
EW4	0.254	0.924	0.192	0.229
NC1	0.311	0.183	0.908	0.217
NC2	0.319	0.147	0.914	0.216
NC3	0.318	0.177	0.890	0.211
NC4	0.271	0.159	0.939	0.228

Discriminant validity was subsequently assessed using established evaluation criteria. The square roots of the AVE (Table 4) for each construct exceed the correlations with other constructs [32]. Additionally, all Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios were below 0.90 [33], and each construct's item loadings were higher than their corresponding cross-loadings. These results demonstrate satisfactory discriminant validity [34].

Table 4. Discriminant validity

	AT	EW	NC	CI
Fornell-Larcker Criterion				
AT	0.864			
EW	0.299	0.871		
NC	0.336	0.183	0.913	
CI	0.510	0.283	0.239	0.828
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)				
AT				
EW	0.337			
NC	0.379	0.202		
CI	0.632	0.329	0.277	

4.2. Path analysis

Evaluating the suitability and predictability of the model is an important step to confirm the reliability of the research hypotheses. In this study, the index used is the Stone-Geisser Q^2 index, which tests the model's predictability of dependent variables.

Table 5. Stone-Geisser's Q^2 statistic value

	SSO	SSE	Q^2 (=1-SSE/SSO)
Attitude Toward Sustainable Food Consumption	936.000	824.932	0.119
Ecological Welfare	1248.000	1248.000	
Nutrition Content	1248.000	1248.000	
Sustainable Food Consumption Intention	936.000	775.374	0.172

As shown in Table 5, the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 statistics for the key constructs—Attitude Toward Sustainable Food Consumption and Sustainable Food Consumption Intention—are greater than zero, indicating that the model demonstrates satisfactory predictive relevance. Additionally, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value of 0.063 is less than 0.08, indicating an acceptable level of model fit. Overall, the model has good fit [35].

Table 6. Hypothesis testing

	Beta	S.D.	T Statistics	p-values	R^2	f^2
EW -> AT	0.246	0.051	4.869	0.000	0.171	0.071
NC -> AT	0.291	0.063	4.601	0.000		0.099
AT -> CI	0.510	0.061	8.366	0.000	0.260	0.351

As recommended by [34], R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are considered indicative of substantial, moderate, and weak levels of explanatory power, respectively. Based on these benchmarks, the results indicate that the nutrition content and ecological welfare exert a small effect on both Attitude Toward Sustainable Food Consumption and Sustainable Food Consumption Intention (Table 6). Furthermore, following [36] f^2 criteria, the findings reveal a small effect size for Ecological Welfare and Nutrition Content, while Attitude Toward Sustainable Food Consumption demonstrates a large effect size.

As Table 7, all hypotheses are accepted with the path coefficients significant at $p < 0.001$. Nutrition Content has the most significant effect on attitude toward sustainable food consumption ($\beta = 0.291$), followed by Ecological Welfare ($\beta = 0.246$), Finally, attitude toward sustainable food consumption positively influences positive Sustainable Food Consumption Intention ($\beta = 0.510$).

Table 7. Indirect effect

	Beta	T Statistics	p-Values	Mediation
EW -> AT -> CI	0.110	3.962	0.000	Parital
NC -> AT -> CI	0.130	3.654	0.000	Full

Table 7 shows that attitude toward sustainable food consumption has a significant positive mediating effect between Nutrition Content, Ecological Welfare and Sustainable Food Consumption Intention. However, the direct relationship between Nutrition Content and Sustainable Food Consumption Intention is not significant. Thus, attitude toward sustainable food consumption plays as a full mediator between the relationship between Nutrition Content and Sustainable Food Consumption Intention.

5. CONCLUSION

The study investigated the influence of two key stimuli—nutritional content and ecological welfare—on consumer attitudes and their subsequent intention to engage in sustainable food consumption. The findings revealed that both independent variables exerted significant positive effects on consumer attitudes. Among the two, nutritional content demonstrated a more substantial influence, suggesting that health-related attributes are a primary driver of consumer perception in this domain.

This insight aligns with earlier research emphasizing that consumers frequently associate nutritional claims with improved health outcomes, which enhances product appeal and credibility. Nevertheless, ecological considerations—including concern for environmental sustainability and animal welfare—also contributed meaningfully to attitude formation. This dual influence underscores the multidimensional nature of sustainable food evaluation by Vietnamese consumers.

Furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was established between consumer attitudes and their intention to purchase or consume sustainable food. This confirms the proposed theoretical model and is consistent with prior empirical evidence [18, 1], which emphasizes that favorable attitudes are reliable predictors of sustainable consumption behaviors.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This research offers meaningful contributions to the growing body of literature on sustainable consumption by validating the applicability of the S-O-R framework in the specific context of sustainable food in Vietnam. While earlier applications of this model have focused on organic or green products, this study extends its utility by integrating both health and ecological perspectives, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable food consumption behavior.

The study also addresses a notable gap in the literature by focusing on an emerging economy, where sustainable consumption dynamics may differ significantly from those in developed markets. By capturing these contextual nuances, the research contributes to theory-building that is both culturally and economically relevant.

5.2. Managerial implications

From a practical standpoint, the findings yield several implications for businesses, marketers, and policy-makers operating in the sustainable food sector. Given that both nutrition and ecological welfare significantly shape consumer attitudes, stakeholders should design and communicate product offerings that emphasize these dual benefits.

For businesses, this means clearly labelling and marketing nutritional value while simultaneously highlighting environmentally friendly and ethical production practices. Government agencies and non-profit organizations may also play a role by raising public

awareness about the long-term benefits of sustainable food products, thereby reinforcing positive attitudes and promoting behavioral shifts at scale.

Ultimately, by aligning product attributes with consumer values related to health and sustainability, organizations can cultivate more robust and enduring consumer engagement with sustainable food options.

5.3. Limitations and future research

While this study contributes valuable insights into the determinants of sustainable food consumption intentions in Vietnam, several limitations must be acknowledged, which also pave the way for future research.

First, the current research model concentrates on two primary stimuli—nutrition content and ecological welfare—as antecedents to consumer attitudes. Although these factors represent critical dimensions of sustainable consumption, they do not fully capture the broad spectrum of motivations that may influence consumer decision-making. Future studies should consider incorporating additional constructs such as price sensitivity, cultural values, social influence, brand trust, and perceived behavioral control to construct a more holistic framework.

Second, the data collection was confined to an online, self-selected sample, which may not accurately reflect the broader Vietnamese population. Although efforts were made to ensure regional diversity, the possibility of sampling bias cannot be excluded. To enhance generalizability, subsequent research should employ probabilistic sampling techniques and consider larger, nationally representative samples.

Third, the study adopts a cross-sectional design, limiting its ability to infer causality or detect changes in consumer behavior over time. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in capturing evolving consumer perceptions and the long-term effects of marketing or policy interventions aimed at promoting sustainable consumption.

Finally, while this study focuses exclusively on Vietnam—a developing economy—cross-national comparative studies are essential to understand how sustainable food consumption behavior varies across cultural and economic contexts. Future research could explore differences and similarities between developed and developing countries, thereby contributing to a more global understanding of sustainable food consumption dynamics.

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TÓM TẮT

TIÊU DÙNG THỰC PHẨM BỀN VỮNG NHƯ MỘT BỐI CẢNH ĐANG PHÁT TRIỂN TRONG HÀNH VI NGƯỜI TIÊU DÙNG VIỆT NAM

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Vấn đề tiêu dùng thực phẩm cần được nhìn nhận dưới góc độ rộng hơn, đặc biệt trong bối cảnh các thị trường mới nổi. Nghiên cứu này nhằm khám phá vai trò của hàm lượng dinh dưỡng và phúc lợi sinh thái – tương ứng với các khía cạnh bền vững về dinh dưỡng và môi trường – trong hành vi tiêu dùng thực phẩm của người tiêu dùng Việt Nam. Với cỡ mẫu gồm 312 người tham gia và phương pháp phân tích mô hình cấu trúc (SEM), kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy cả hai yếu tố hàm lượng dinh dưỡng và phúc lợi sinh thái của thực phẩm đều có ảnh hưởng tích cực đến thái độ của người tiêu dùng, từ đó góp phần nâng cao ý định tiêu dùng thực phẩm bền vững một cách đáng kể. Về mặt lý thuyết, nghiên cứu đóng góp vào việc vận dụng mô hình Kích thích – Chủ thể – Phản ứng (S-O-R) trong bối cảnh tiêu dùng bền vững. Bên cạnh đó, các kết quả nghiên cứu mang lại nhiều hàm ý thực tiễn cho các nhà sản xuất, kinh doanh và quản lý trong ngành thực phẩm, giúp họ hiểu rõ hơn về hành vi tiêu dùng bền vững và nâng cao khả năng thành công trong lĩnh vực thực phẩm xanh.

Từ khóa: Tiêu dùng bền vững, thực phẩm xanh, hành vi bền vững, mô hình phương trình cấu trúc.