The Conscientious Consumer

Is there such a thing as a conscientious consumer in the fashion industry?

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Abstract

Without consumerism there would be no fashion industry. But with increasing awareness about the environmental issues that we are facing, buying to satisfy our longings isn’t as relevant as it once was. The consumer needs to start taking responsibility and stop hiding behind the statement that big companies are the ones doing all the harm.

With conscientious decision-making and relevant information seeking, the consumer can make a difference: voting with their dollars. There are many different ways of being a conscientious consumer, and the reasons and focuses differ from person to person. You might care for the environment or the welfare of animals. You might want to fight for human rights and buy only Fairtrade or take a more drastic change and start living a zero-waste lifestyle. Maybe you make the switch to a minimalistic lifestyle and follow the slow fashion movement. And some might even try to do it all. That said there are countless different approaches to being and becoming a conscientious consumer, but the place to begin is to start taking responsibility and stepping back to see the bigger picture. Fast fashion being one of the biggest issues, being unsustainable in almost every aspect, as consumers we need to set pressure on brands, demanding more ethical and sustainable products for what ever reason one might find conscientious.
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1. **Introduction**

The fashion industry is all about supply and demand. Brands endlessly come up with things to sell, the big new trend, and consumers want, crave, need and eventually, but quickly: buy. In the last few years this has gone out of hand, the term “Fast Fashion” has taken its toll and we have started to feel and see the consequences.¹

Conscientiousness has been a big part of my life in the past few months. I have in the last two years been gradually building up an interest and my own opinions of the environmental issues that we are facing in the world today. Following people on social media that have made the switch to a zero-waste lifestyle, and people, organizations and companies that are taking a clear stance, has influenced me and inspired to head my own way. As of May 2015 I started wearing only one outfit every day, and as of today I am still wearing the same outfit daily. As a fashion student, this has widened my perspective and belief in the sustainable and ethical fashion world substantially and influenced me further in other aspects of my life. I would like to address myself as a conscientious consumer.

In this thesis I will take a deeper look into the consumer patterns of today’s fashion consumer. Is there such a thing in the fashion industry as a conscientious consumer? With that as my leading point I will go on discussing what ‘being conscientious’ really means, and other similar concepts. From there on I want to see when and how it started, but most of all why. The why leads to different types of being conscientious, giving examples of what the consumer might be conscientious of. At last I want to take a look at if the consumers of today are informed or can be informed enough to be or become conscientious. In the end I will be able to state if there is such a thing as a conscientious consumer, is it something that is taking a toll in the fashion industry or something that will never fully establish.

Self-interest has long been promoted and accepted as a sound principle. Doing whatever it takes to cut costs and boost sales; businesses have been encouraged to drive profits and shareholders value. Consumers have been exhorted into buying ‘now!’ by eager sellers, made possible with easy credit, enjoying the opportunity of receiving constantly improving

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¹ Jasmin Mali Chua, “Livia Firth: Fast Fashion is an “Evil Machine” of Exploitation,” Ecouterre, May 21,
offers of better, tastier, trendier, more convenient and more affordable products. It is this kind of thinking and operating that has led the fast fashion phenomenon going on in the industry today. The need for taking a step back and looking beyond the next big bargain is now greater than ever, and we need to, every single one of us, start taking responsibility for our action. It is our world that we live in, it is not owned by big companies, and we all have to start taking care of it. Although it is easily done to blame big corporations for things going wrong, we also have to take note that we too, as consumers, do have – or at least are able to have a voice in the matter.

2. **Consumerism in fashion**

Today, there are more than 7.3 billion people living on earth. If each person owned one shirt, one pair of pants and one jacket, that would make approximately 22 billion pieces of clothing. To put this in perspective, if you count each number as one second, it would take you around 672 years to count up to 22 billion. It can quite easily be assumed that a lot of people have more than 3 items of clothing.

Clothing consumer patterns have come a long way from what they were in the past, and it is safe to say that in those times clothing consumption was far more ecologically responsible. In contrast to current habits, only the rich bought more than they used. Clothes were taken care of and cascaded through social hierarchy of uses, either from ladies to maids or from formal wear to everyday wear. Clothing was washed far less frequently which had a significant effect on their expanded lifetime. Women had skills for making, altering, upgrading and mending clothes, which was done rather than discarding them or buying new ones. “Thus, basic principles of ecology and frugality were maintained - take only what you need, use it until it is no longer useable, repair rather than replace, refashion to provide variety.”

After taking a newly purchased item in a shiny colorful plastic bag home, clothes often end up either not being used at all or getting over-washed. Washing them too often, using too much soap or washing on unnecessarily high temperatures is where the consumer himself is the most unsustainable. AEG, an electronic appliance company, recently produced a fashion film about the future of fashion, called *The Next Black*, where they take a look into the future of textiles and clothing with innovative technologies and methods. At the same time they promote their own washing machine, telling people to take better care of their clothes by washing them correctly. On their website they quote from WRAP, a registered environmental charity, that by “extending the life of clothing by extra nine months of

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6 Juliet B. Schor, “Cleaning the closet: Toward a New Fashion Ethic,” 54.
7 Juliet B. Schor, “Cleaning the closet: Toward a New Fashion Ethic,” 54.
8 Juliet B. Schor, “Cleaning the closet: Toward a New Fashion Ethic,” 54.
active use would reduce carbon, waste and water footprints by around 20-30% each.⁹ This same charity also states in their Love Your Clothes campaign, a campaign that encourages the consumer to take better care of their clothes, both while being used and after the consumer doesn’t want it any more, that in the average household in the UK around 30% of their wardrobe has not been used in a year, and that the cost of this unused clothing is around £30 billion.¹⁰

Even Levi’s own CEO, Chip Bergh, encourages people to wear their jeans dirty, he hasn’t washed his own in the last year.¹¹ Chip states that people should wash their jeans after at least 10 or more wears, using cold water and hang them up to dry. He says that if people would have followed the washing instructions for their jeans it would have prevented massive CO₂ emissions and saved 35 billion liters of water in the last 4 years.¹² “We build our products to last; if you treat them right, they will last a long, long time—probably longer than most people’s waistlines.”¹³

**Fast Fashion**

Since globalization started growing rapidly in the 1980’s and 1990’s, brands have been looking for new ways to increase their profits and slowly started to shift their production from local to the developing world where the labor prices were just a small fraction of those in the Western world.¹⁴ Brands felt the pressure from low-cost supermarkets that started producing their own lines, initially with just underwear and t-shirts, but quickly moved over to a full season collection of low cost clothing with a switch into the high street fashion.¹⁵ It used to be a biannual event for fashion houses to showcase a new collection, but being pressured by retail and high street stores, the numbers of collections per year within the big fashion houses have doubled. Fast fashion is thereby a phenomenon originating from retailers wanting to frequently bring costumers to their stores by bringing new trends to the market as cheaply and quickly as possible.¹⁶ The industry of fast fashion

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has also been highly accused of stealing looks and designs straight from the runway of bigger fashion houses and thereby getting their versions quicker, and of course cheaper, into their stores. The person with the right knowledge can easily spot examples of these high street knock-offs. For those of us who don’t have a clue there are websites like fashioncopycats.com, critically pointing out similarities between high street clothing and the big fashion houses’ designs.¹⁷

Figure 1: Screenshot from fashioncopycats.com showing similarities between high fashion brand Gucci (left) and high street brand Asos (right).

**Conscientious vs. conscious**

It seems there are different words being used for this type of consumer activism: conscientious consumerism, conscious consumerism, ethical consumerism, moral consumerism, green consumerism etc. But what is actually the difference between being a conscientious and a conscious consumer?

Conscientious

Adjective

- Governed by conscience; controlled by or done according to one's inner sense of what is right; principled: She's a conscientious judge, who does not let personal prejudices influence her decisions.
- Careful and painstaking; particular; meticulous; scrupulous: conscientious application to the work at hand.\(^{18}\)

Conscious

Adjective

- Aware of one's own existence, sensations, thoughts, surroundings, etc.
- Fully aware of or sensitive to something (often followed by of): conscious of one's own faults; He wasn't conscious of the gossip about his past.
- Deliberate; intentional: a conscious insult; a conscious effort.\(^{19}\)

Comparing the words together in this context it seems that ‘conscientious’ fits better for this consumer activism. The consumer finds it in his inner sense what is wrong and what is right and acts accordingly, whereas the conscious one could be conscious of what is right and wrong, but not acting in accordance to his belief. Although these words are both used for the similar thing, I will choose to use conscientious, as I feel it has a closer meaning to the subject.

For the consumer to be able to be conscientious in the first place the initiative needs to start sooner in the production line. Designers need to consider the whole life cycle of the garment: all stages of production, to consumption and disposal. Issues in either small or large increments or even by radical change, that have to be addressed include:

- Investment and profitability in research.
- Consumer and retail facing.
- Education on ethical and environmental issues.
- Transparency and communication.
- Traceability of production chain.
- Social justice and responsibility.
- End of product life – new responsibility and take-back.\(^{20}\)


Most of the steps concerning how sustainable, ecological, fair trade and so on, a garment might be made are already taken care of before the consumer gets it in his hands, leaving it to the consumer to make the decision about whether it meets their personal standards of conscientiousness. Taking into consideration that there is enough relevant information available of the product, but these can often by hard to find. Despite of this fact it has been suggested that the laundering and aftercare phase of for example a t-shirt or typical everyday clothing, is the major environmental impact of the garment when carbon footprints and energy usage have been taken into account.\(^{21}\) Looking at underwear or next to skin garment, a t-shirt for example. If it is washed 25 times on 60 degrees and then tumble dried and ironed every time, the laundering will be 65% of the total energy profile of the garment.\(^{22}\) That means that the total energy consumption of the t-shirt, from production to shipping to disposal, the laundering part uses more than half of all the energy that goes into the t-shirt. That is far more than transportation and material.

Information is the key factor for the consumer to be able to be conscientious, and the information has to come from the company itself, being that they are responsible for their product. It is then based on this information, in the hands of the consumer to be responsible for choosing the better alternative. With demand and supply in mind, the conscientious consumer has to make up the demand for more product information and transparency.

3. Conscientious consumerism

There has been a rejection of the course of the fashion industry ever since the 70’s. At that time it was a part of the hippie revolution and was often looked at as an anti-fashion stance where they would opt out of mainstream lifestyles and come with alternative ones, with handcrafted and ethnic clothing and fabrics. The next wave hit in the 90’s in a more commercial way where Esprit, an eco-aware company, was the most noticeable one with their *Ecollection* in 1994. Substantial examples of eco-activism was growing at this point, especially in California, with outdoor-wear companies such as Patagonia and J Crew that had already started to develop environmentally-sensitive ranges. In London there were similar things going on at this time, fashion trade magazine *Drapers Records* included “Going Green”, a special report in 1994. The EU put legislation in place concerning the effluent standards from dye houses.

As we can see awareness concerning the fashion industry has been recognized for many years but the conscientiousness amongst consumers of today is a new phenomenon. It is not old-style consumer behavior, it’s not business as usual. People longing to change drive these new consumer patterns where the change can vary from person to person. For whatever their reasons for becoming conscientious, there is a shared feeling of concern for the status quo and the recognition of being able to have some positive influence. The people that really care and make the effort of being conscientious consumers are key ingredients to spread the word around. “Called “social entrepreneurs,” they must be able to persuade, enlighten, touch hearts, shift perceptions, articulate new meanings, and move new concepts through the fashion system.” They are the influence needed for awareness amongst those around them and often are the examples for other people to follow. “These are people who are relentless in pursuit of their visions, who will not take no for an answer, and who will not give up until they have created the change they believe needs to happen.”

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26 “Because It Matters: The conscientious behavior of consumers around the world,” *Havas Pr.*, 4.
Today’s conscientious consumers embody numerous diverse approaches. Some make their changes deliberately while others change gradually with the tide of changing public sentiment. They look for opportunities to make a change and actively seek information relevant to their own areas of concern.\textsuperscript{29}

These consumers’ ethical interest and behavior can be different and vary widely. Their own aspirations and motivation may come from numerous different means, and can even seem contradictory. Some might focus on and care for reusing, recycling and reducing, while others might put their efforts in reducing packaging, plastics and waste disposal in their lives, and even others would solely care for the welfare of animals. Certain consumers might feel outraged by how little tax big corporations pay, but don’t care where the corporations source their products. Some might care one week and feel indifferent the other, depending on topics they have seen, read or discussed. And there are even a few that try to do the most they can, being conscientious in every aspect of their life, all the time.\textsuperscript{30}

The fashion industry is a humongous globalized business that involves long and varied supply chains of different productions, raw materials, textile manufactures, clothing constructions, shipping, retail, use and finally disposal of the garment. It is hard to pinpoint the exact carbon footprint of the industry while it varies from garment to garment, but it is certain that it is tremendous. There are many sides to the matter when the industry has become so complex and globalized, and they must all be taken into consideration. This includes amongst others all the obvious pollutants, pesticides that are used when farming cotton, toxic chemicals from different washings and dyeing methods and the waste created by the industry. Harvesting the resources, water pollution, manufacturing, labeling and not to forget the pollution from flying the merchandise half way around the globe.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29} “Because It Matters: The conscientious behavior of consumers around the world,” Havas Pr., 4.

\textsuperscript{30} “Because It Matters: The conscientious behavior of consumers around the world,” Havas Pr., 4.

4. Different approaches to being conscientious

There are countless ways and paths towards becoming a conscientious consumer, followed by even more reasons and approaches. In this chapter I will take a look at a few examples of these consumer activisms.

**Environmental awareness**

Temperature is increasing, glaciers and Arctic Sea ice are melting and our oceans are acidifying, all mainly as a result of human activity. For at least 335 consecutive months, the temperature has been above the average temperature of the 20th century. Numerous experts believe that consumerism and what consumerism involves, from growing and using resources; to manufacturing and shipping; and finally disposal of waste, plays a big part in these environmental issues. And the products that are being consumed often depend on cheap, unfair laboring and lack environmental regulations.

The environmental issues stemming from clothing consumption not only takes place before we get the product in our hands, but are also affected by how we treat them and dispose of them. Being a conscientious consumer with the environment as a focus point is maybe the most challenging one. The consumer must research on their own, which of the companies and brands out there are really doing a better job than the others.

*Takepart*, a digital news and lifestyle magazine, has published the pledge: “Help Reduce the True Cost of Fast Fashion: Become a Responsible Clothing Consumer,” where people can commit to becoming a more responsible consumers. They state that being more responsible will help minimizing the impact of the fashion industry on the globe, and suggest that among others consumers should:

- Ask brands where, how and who made their clothes. Use social media; be visible so others can join in on the conversation/information.
- Choose clothing made from sustainable materials like organic cotton or recycled polyester.
- Recycle clothing: sell, donate, swap.
- Buy what you need, but not always what you want.

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• Practice slow fashion.
• Buy clothing that lasts and that has value to you.
• Wash your clothing less, especially jeans.  

Fair trade
Better prices, fair terms of trade and decent working condition for workers and farmers is what the Fairtrade Foundation pursues. Giving worker communities more control over their future, protecting their everyday environment where they live and work by supporting their communities and development of thriving farming.

The Fairtrade Mark implies that the ingredients used in the product have been made by a small-scale farmer organizations or plantations that meet the standard of the Fairtrade Foundation concerning social, economical and environmental values. These standards include worker’s right protection as well as their environment and the Minimum Fairtrade Price.  

In the context of fashion, fair-trade began within minor co-operatives developing handicrafts and textiles, that has now been developed to include fair-trade cotton. In 2005 the Fairtrade Certification for cotton was launched in the UK by The Fairtrade Foundation. Although the certification only covers the production of the cotton itself, companies that do so are required to have a compliance assessment for the garment manufacturing as well.  

Fair-trade associations or federations existing today include WTFO (The World Fair Trade Organization), BAFTS (British Association for Fair Trade Shops) and EFTA (European Fair Trade Association).  

Animal welfare/veganism
Leather, wool, fur, skin and silk are all fabrics made from animal products, most of which the animal must be killed to obtain the materials (with an exception of wool and the Ahimsa or the Peace Silk; a silk processing method where the silk worm is not killed.) The most known organization for animal welfare is probably PETA (People for the Ethical

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Treatment of Animals) that fights against any kind of animal cruelty. They declare they have “Uncompromising Stands on Animal Rights” and that “PETA believes that animals are not our to: eat, wear, experiment on, use for entertainment, abuse in any other way.”

Zero-waste

Clothing, appliances, carpets, plastic packaging, old furniture, organic materials like paper, wood and food waste. These are things that are expected to be found at a typical landfill today. Most, if not all of these things, were made from valuable material, worth billions of dollars in material assets and required tremendous amount of effort and expense to extract and make. The things we throw in our bins, the things we actually see being thrown out, are most of the time just a small friction of the waste these specific things have produced on their way to us. It is set in our hands as consumers, as it is our responsibility to dispose of these things that in most cases end up in landfills. From cradle to grave: where products’ constituent components do not get the opportunity to get back into the resource cycle. Even precious organic and biodegradable materials tend to end up there, losing its potential. As a consumer there is not much you can actually consume: food and liquids mostly, but everything is designed in a throwaway mentality. “But where is "away"? Of course, "away" does not really exist. "Away" has gone away.”

It’s easy for you to be sitting there at home, in front of your television, consuming whatever you want, tossing everything in the trash, and leaving it out on the street for the garbage truck to take it away. But where does the garbage go?

With this in mind there are people that have made a switch over to a zero-waste lifestyle. Living a zero-waste lifestyle is based on a philosophy of avoiding as much waste as possible, with a set of practices as guidelines. In the production line this inspires a cradle-to-cradle design, but engages the consumer in its own home to act responsibly. “In cradle to cradle production all material inputs and outputs are seen either as technical or biological nutrients. Technical nutrients can be recycled or reused with no loss of quality and biological nutrients composted or consumed.” A misconception is the thinking that the lifestyle involves recycling in extensive ways, when in fact the lifestyle does not

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40 William McDonough and Michael Braungart, Cradle to Cradle: remaking the way we make things, (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 27.
41 William McDonough and Michael Braungart, Cradle to Cradle: remaking the way we make things, 27.
42 “Cradle-to-Cradle,” The Dictionary of Sustainable Management.
promote recycling. Recycling is only an alternative way to handle waste materials and taking into consideration the cost and uncertainties of recycling, the lifestyle pursues eliminating all waste in general.\textsuperscript{43} The five steps to a zero-waste lifestyle are: “Refuse what you don’t need; reduce what you do need; reuse what you consume; recycle what you cannot refuse, reduce, or reuse; and rot (compost) the rest.”\textsuperscript{44}

**Minimalistic lifestyle**

Friends, hobbies, travel and experiences. These are the things minimalists try to focus on, rather than the possession of things. They like to say they are living a more meaningful life as a result of getting rid of most of their material possessions. Instead of letting things and purchases boost up their happiness they make the most of the things you can do, see, hear, feel and so on To them; the important things in life.\textsuperscript{45} Tom Gilovich, a psychology professor at Cornell University has been studying happiness in terms of experiences and possessions for over ten years, points out three reasons for why doing something makes people happier than owning something. Experiences mold us, they leave something behind and become part of our identity, the experiences encourage social connections with other people and they don’t generate this kind of envy or jealousy people get when thinking of others’ material possessions.\textsuperscript{46}

Living a minimalistic lifestyle helps people question what things add value to their lives, so by clearing away the clutter from life’s path, there is enough room for the important aspects of life: health, passion, relationships growth and contribution.\textsuperscript{47}

**Slow Fashion**

Juliet B. Schor, labor economist has written quite a lot on consumerism and sustainability, including her article “Cleaning the Closet: Toward A New Fashion Ethic”. Here she states that while clothing minimalism is certainly a morally satisfying position, most people will not find this kind of lifestyle appealing. Not because they are shallow or fashion addicted. “Rather, minimalism fails because it does not recognize the centrality of clothing to human

\textsuperscript{46} Josh Sanburn, “Minimalist Living: When a Lot Less Is More;” *Time*.
culture, relationships, aesthetic desires, and identity. Ultimately, minimalism lacks a positive vision of the role of clothing and appearance in human societies.\textsuperscript{48}

Juliet points out that if we reject the need to keep up with fashion and are satisfied with a smaller wardrobe, we could spend more per garment. The negative impact on the world would be less, and it contributes to longevity, not by skimping on quality, tailoring or quantity of yardage and the clothes would last longer. In the long run the consumer would be better off since high quality means more comfort and better looks.\textsuperscript{49}

Ultimately we could think of clothing purchases as long-term commitments in which we take responsibility for seeing each garment through its natural life. That does not mean we couldn’t ever divest ourselves, but if we grew tired of a useful garment we would find it a new home with a loving owner, kind of like with pets. Of course, to facilitate such a change, consumers would need to reject the reigning imperative of variety in clothes, especially as it pertains to the workplace and for social occasions. Just because you wore that dress to last year’s holiday party doesn’t mean you can’t show up in it again.\textsuperscript{50}

Raymond Williams, a cultural critic, notes that because we fail to invest deep or sacred meanings in material goods, we are not truly materialists. Instead, our materialism connotes an unbounded desire to acquire, followed by a throwaway mentality. True materialism could become part of a new ecological consciousness.\textsuperscript{51} In other words Williams is saying that we do not connect or care enough for our things, they have become disposable to us. But by changing over to consuming less and caring more we would be able to become closer to becoming true materialists.


\textsuperscript{49} Juliet B. Schor, “Cleaning the Closet: Toward a New Fashion Ethic,” 55.

\textsuperscript{50} Juliet B. Schor, “Cleaning the Closet: Toward a New Fashion Ethic,” 55.

\textsuperscript{51} Juliet B. Schor, “Cleaning the Closet: Toward a New Fashion Ethic,” 55-56.
One-outfit experiment

In April 2015, I took the decision to start my own little experiment, influenced by a mix of environmental thoughts, zero-waste/minimalistic lifestyles and social patterns I decided to try wearing the exact same outfit for one month.

Having been conscious of the environmental issues we are facing and constantly thinking about what I buy, what kind of packaging it comes in and where it finally goes when I throw it out, I was eager to see what would happen in this experimental time. Having been following people on social media for quite some time that are environmentalist, minimalists or living a zero-waste lifestyle, I thought I also wanted to make a change in my own way of living and being. As fashion is my field of study, therefore this would be the area of change.

So I went out and bought me a pair of shirts and two pairs of pants. Two shirts, two pants, both identical. One jacket, one sweater and one pair of shoes, with no added accessories or nail polish or anything to mix things up, just the same look every day. And now 7 months later I am still wearing the same outfit every day. At the beginning I was interested to see what would happen or how I would feel in so many different aspects. I decided to hold out a little blog on the experiment while it lasted, jhafberg.blogspot.com. I had so many thoughts going on before and in the first few days: What would people say? Would they notice? What would they think? How would I feel? Would I get tired?

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I found out that if people didn’t know about my experiment; because I had told them, they had seen my blog or that they had heard about it, they wouldn’t ask me about it. Although I could notice glares from people from time to time, I don’t think that a lot of people actually paid any attention to it. I chose a bright blue shirt for exactly this reason, because wearing black from head to toe would never get noticed in the sense that I was constantly wearing the same clothes every day. I also found out that every single person I talked to or had questions for me were very interested and almost always in a positive way. People would often tell me they would like to try for themselves and more often than I could count people said they envied me for not having to make the choice every morning or when going out on what to wear. And I felt it too, the relief, the freedom and the extra time I had in the morning and when I went out, from not having to worry about what to wear. Amazingly it was this feeling of freedom that I felt the strongest, in contradiction with that I had set my self such strict conduct of clothing.

I washed all my garments by hand in the sink with relatively cold water and a little soap and let them air dry every time. I had two shirts and two pants, knowing that I regularly had to wash them made everything a lot easier, it was quickly done and a good system; everything had a place and a time, everything was thought through. Restriction came with ease.

After a month I couldn’t imagine stopping, I felt good doing it, it made me a stronger person in some way and now more than half a year later it is just as natural to me as getting dressed in the morning. Before I started the experiment I thought it was going to be a lot more difficult, that the rules I had set for myself would be much harder to follow. But the truth is that it was easier than dressing has ever been to me. Just by following my own values and belief, it was quickly a routine and it slowly became a part of my identity. In this period of time I have not bought a single new garment or any kind of accessory and I don’t feel the need nor the longing to either. I have become a conscientious consumer and I can feel that I influence people around me.

Figure 4: The outfit
5. Establishing conscientiousness in the fashion industry

Considering the examples of being conscientious laid out before, there is no doubt they all have some things in common. Although different in approach and having diverse values, these consumer activisms all work towards seeking the greater good. No matter what the approach is, the field of focus is well thought through, where the consumer collects relevant information and as a result takes a conscientious decision pro-purchase. By doing so the consumer is voting with their dollars, taking informed decisions, leading towards a growing demand for sustainable and ethical product.

Looking at the organic food industry, one can find an interesting parallel. Environmental journalist Michael Pollan, author of The Omnivore’s Dilemma (2006), writes that consumers voting with their dollars created the $30 billion organic-food industry. He explains that normally a sharp distinction is made between people’s actions as citizens, in which they are expected to consider the well-being of society, and their actions as consumers, which are assumed to be more selfish.53

Every one would be the conscientious consumer if it were easy, with no additional effort or cost.54 The reality is that today it is not. Despite that there are a precious few that are taking the step and by doing so demand more effort from the industry.55

By wanting to become more conscientious, consumers need to give more effort than going to the store and finding things they like. Thorough research in a sea of uncertainties can often be misleading or lacking the real answers. It takes a lot more effort for the consumer to be truly conscientious, but at the same time it is not as much a commitment for the consumer to address himself conscientious as it is for a brand. Brands and companies are vulnerable to making mistakes and are set under a more judging microscope, that is likely to be trumpeted widely as examples of hypocrisy.56

Becoming a conscientious brand is therefore much harder than becoming a conscientious consumer. There are so many levels that have to be taken care of within the company.

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54 “Because It Matters: The conscientious behavior of consumers around the world,” Havas Pr., 12.
55 “Because It Matters: The conscientious behavior of consumers around the world,” Havas Pr., 12.
56 “Because It Matters: The conscientious behavior of consumers around the world,” Havas Pr., 12.
“In addition to keeping the P&L [profit and loss] in good shape, brands also have to make a lot of extra effort and incur additional expenses; they have to develop disciplines such as auditing their suppliers, monitoring their environmental impact and ensuring that their employees are well cared for.”

But every small step that each company makes towards sustainability and ethicality is a step towards a brighter future. And we as consumers have to encourage these little steps. Rome wasn’t built in one day, they say.

Consumers are active agents, and shopping is not only a necessary activity for survival but the dominant mode of social interaction and primary way for people to participate in social interaction and primary way for people to participate in social and public life. Shopping gives individuals knowledge about themselves as individuals and about their own society as well as education about the product choice. Shopping choices also help individuals manage and express their complex identities in a fragmented society. This is the meaning of lifestyle politics. What we buy influences how we construct our everyday life. Conflicts over what to consume are, therefore, central to understanding the functioning of affluent western societies. Sociologists even view the refusal to consume as a form of resistance. Shopping is, therefore, potentially empowering. Conscious consumerism can, thus, change the world.

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57 “Because It Matters: The conscientious behavior of consumers around the world,” Havas Pr., 12.
58 Michele Micheletti, *Shopping and the re-invention of a democracy*, (Stockholm; Stockholm and City University, 2000), 4.
6. Conclusion

Our planet is running out of water and oil, our icebergs are melting and we have permanently altered our climate. By treating clothes as though they were disposable, buying too much of them adds a tremendous amount of weight on the environment while we are at the same time simply being unsustainable.\(^5^9\)

Consider this: all the ants on the planet, taken together, have a biomass greater than that of humans. Ants have been incredibly industrious for millions of years. Yet their productiveness nourishes plants, animals, and soil. Human industry has been in full swing for little over a century, yet it has brought about a decline in almost every ecosystem on the planet. Nature doesn't have a design problem. People do.\(^6^0\)

Looking at the diverse perspective of possibly being conscientious there is a clear pattern of social responsibility. People are driven by their own believes, aesthetics, opinions and moral values to make better choices in their lives. Conscientiousness is not presented in a single right definition; it is presented in countless different manifestos. Whether it might be because you care for the planet, the oceans, the animals, your family, the economy, politics, other people or yourself, it is conscientious. If you feel what is the better thing to do, for whatever reason you might imply - and consume accordingly, then you are a conscientious consumer. While not being a totally established sector inside of the fashion world today, the conscientious consumer does exist; getting a long way with consumer activism and increased talk about the need for a more sustainable world.

With the building of more informative and transparent platforms designed for easy access for the consumer, we work our way towards a much more ethical fashion industry. With demand comes supply, so with increasing demand from the conscientious consumers out there; putting pressure on design labels and fashion companies to act more ethically, we could see a drastic change inside within the industry. We have made the world as it is today, and we should just as easily be able to change it.

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\(^6^0\) William McDonoguh and Michael Braungart, Cradle to Cradle: remaking the way we make things, 16.
7. References:


**Table of figures**

Figure 1: Screenshot from fashioncopycat.com showing similarities between high fashion brand Gucci (left) and high street brand Asos (right). Accessed December 8, 2015. http://fashioncopycats.com/post/130201292005/gucci-x-asos-asos-softer-version-right-of-the.


Figure 4: Júlíanna Ósk Hafberg. “The Outfit.” 2015. Private possession.