Good afternoon,

It is an honor to speak here today and to celebrate the opening of the academic year with you. I will start my talk by asking you a question.

Imagine you have 100 euros to go shopping. You can choose between two options

1 clothing item costing 100 euros which I call Option A, OR 5 clothing items totaling 100 euros which I call option B. The clothing items can be anything you want: t-shirts, dresses, etc.

What would you prefer?

This is a question we use in our research on fashion consumption – a topic I study as professor of Consumer Ethics at the department of Marketing.

Research by my PhD student Janneke Koster shows that almost 87% of the people choose the 5 clothing items. And this is problematic. Let me explain why.

It creates enormous waste.

And then I am not only talking about the water, petroleum-based chemicals, and other raw materials needed to produce the textiles, and to make every single item.

But I am also referring to the massive waste after we no longer can - or want to use it. It does not magically disappear when we discard it.

It ends up on landfills like these in Ghana. Our local fashion consumption has global effects.

All of this implies that avoiding fashion purchases would clearly benefit the global environment. Milieu Centraal (the Dutch environmental agency) calculated that if all residents of the Netherlands would buy 6 fewer clothing items per year, it would reduce CO2 emissions by the same amount as driving around the world 85,000 times in a regular car. And we can certainly do with less: our current generation has for about six generations of clothing items.

How to reduce this excessive fashion consumption and production? That is what I am studying in my group. We are trying to better understand what drives people's preferences.

Back to the initial choice I gave you and that we studied in an experiment: in that study we also measured how people scored on so-called biospheric values: this means how much people value biodiversity and the environment in their lives.

We expected that this value would predict a higher preference for Option A, because 1 item is more sustainable than 5 items. The difference is similar to over 55.000 fewer rounds around the world with a car. Yet, we found that this value did NOT predict at all whether people preferred 1 or 5 items.

Now what happens when we change the options of the choice a little bit.

Option A –the 1 item option- we now describe as an environmentally sustainable product. Option B remains the same: 5 regular items.

Which of the two options would you prefer now?

Interestingly, in this situation the biospheric values of a person was a predictor of the choice people made: the more people care about the climate, the less likely they are to choose 5 items. But our study also shows that in this situation still 78% chose the 5 clothing items— so also now the vast majority prefers the less sustainable 5 items option.

These findings - together with insights from qualitative data – seems to imply that people simply do not realize themselves that basket size – 1 or 5 items – matters for sustainability.

So the question remains: why do we prefer more?

To answer that, we looked at past research on the societal role of fashion. We know that fashion enables us to express our identity. We use it to show our unique self.

The fact that we want to show our unique self is also reflected in those somewhat awkward situations where you see that you are wearing the same as someone else, so-called accidental twinning.

At the same time, our outfits can show to which group we belong to – or want to belong to. Wearing the same type of outfit as the popular girl or boy at school might give you confidence.

Or wearing a gown: it shows society what academic rank you belong to.

These examples show that fashion not only has a very practical and necessary function: to keep us warm and safe.

But fashion ALSO has social functions created by culture that could explain why we prefer more over less.

We tested the importance of basket size (1 vs 5), price – well-known driver of purchases - as well as these social functions of fashion – is the option trendy or timeless, does it help you to stand out or blend in, etc.

Our results showed that price by far was the strongest predictor of people's preferences: cheaper is better. Basket size (1 vs 5) was much less important, but did influence the preference. Most interestingly, the aspects reflecting the social functions of fashion did NOT predict preferences.

How then to get people prefer a smaller basket size? Our initial evidence seems to suggest that by informing people about how unsustainable the fashion industry as a whole is and how much waste there is – like I am doing now in this talk -, makes people consider a lower basket size. However, we do not know yet whether these effects are long lasting.

Importantly, so far, I mainly focused on the role of consumers. But it is the entire system of the fashion industry that is at play.

There is also an important role for business. For example, the fashion retailers. It might very well be that the content and images of the advertisements from fashion retailers steered our increased desire for a bigger basket size. We are currently studying this.

We also see that business models based on REUSE of fashion, like Vinted, become more common. Yet, are such business models really environmentally sustainable? Do they reduce the total volume of clothing? Or do they offer consumers simply another opportunity to make purchases ON TOP OF our regular purchases of newly produced fashion items?

Third, there is the role of the government: local, national, or European government can influence what consumers and business know and can do. For instance, how we deal with our massive waste. Currently, not all waste ends up in recycle bins, not all materials are recyclable, and it is very labor intensive to sort the old items. Innovations in the recycling process, but also public awareness campaigns are needed to create a viable route towards discarding textiles sustainably. The recent new EU policies for textile industry could steer these innovations and campaigns, but we don't know yet what the effects will be.

All in all, to make an impact on the GLOBAL challenges of fashion we need all stakeholders. That is complex but also doable if we go LOCAL.

In the coming years I am fortunate to be able to work on many of the questions I just addressed within a large consortium of the North. It consists of local business: Sympany, located in Assen and a collector and processor of old garments, Demcon – located here at Zernike working on innovative production technology. It consists of Northern municipalities and the provinces. Of education and research institutes like the Hanze, MBO DC Terra and our university. And many more. This is where local meets global.

This consortium - and my talk - also clearly demonstrates that to have impact without borders, we should look beyond the borders within academia and of our own research disciplines. Global societal challenges need inter- and transdisciplinary research and collaboration. Our interdisciplinary schools are highly valuable for this.

To me personally, this is what gives me most energy: to share and use my expertise for students, researchers, policy-makers, teachers, entrepreneurs, and the general public – the enthusiasts as well as the sceptics. And to learn from their experiences and their expertise.

To conclude my lecture I would like to provide you with another question. Because we ALL can make a local impact to the global problems of fashion. Simply ask yourself each time you think of buying something new: do I really, really need it?

Thank you.