

## Article

# Learning like a Minimalist—Learning from a Minimalist. Consumers as Disseminators for Sustainable Clothes Usage

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## ABSTRACT

Are minimalists pioneers for sustainable clothes usage? According to old and new media, minimalists use less resources and appear as sustainable consumers. So there is much to be learned from minimalists who turned from regular consumers into use-intensive consumers in a matter of months. Minimalists change their own everyday practices and in doing so, they gain knowledge that is later disseminated through blogs, videos, books or talks and seminars.

As sustainability and clothing is a growing research field more studies are needed to not only understand mainstream consumers and their practices but also more sustainable niche consumption and the change from one to the other. This article focuses on the sartorial everyday practices of the niche group of self-described minimalists in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Wardrobe interviews have been conducted in direct presence of all clothing in 46 households. The results of the study document the minimalist learnings through an ongoing process of reducing material objects together with an intensification of the relationship to the remaining items. The process is analysed in the three phases of sorting, using and gaining that each contain varied patterns of the practices of knowledge appropriation, trying out and establishing new behaviour. Minimalists, we conclude, are important disseminators for sustainable change because they broadcast the necessary change in everyday practices on a personal bottom-up level.

## Open Access

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**KEYWORDS:** sustainable clothing; minimalism; education; material culture; everyday practices; wardrobe studies

## INTRODUCTION

As one of 17 goals in the Agenda 2030, UN sustainable development goal number 12 contains the area of sustainable consumption and production patterns. Target 12.8 states: “By 2030, ensure that people have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature” [1]. Stakeholders should commit themselves to implementing strategies in order to achieve these goals. These contain state regulations as well as educational schemes. The following indicators

are listed for goal 12: “Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development (including climate change education) are mainstreamed in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education; and (d) student assessment” [1]. With a clear focus on youth education, the description solely focuses on a new generation of consumers, leaving out the industrial development of products and adults who educate their children in everyday householding practices. So how should the knowledge about sustainable everyday practices disseminate to adult consumers? And how does knowledge about sustainability transfer into everyday practices?

Aiming to contribute to the field of sustainable consumption of clothing, this article focuses on everyday practices in the Global North. Sustainability and clothing is a growing research field [2–4], unfolding from the art and fashion schools on the one hand and from consumer research on the other hand. These two disciplinary strands discuss sustainability problems in both production and consumption processes [5] adding the recent issue of the resolution of clothing into raw material [6] as well as the processes beyond these phases [7,8]. The need for new research is immense, as not much is known about everyday practices in the changing household environment with chemical fibres and new household products, nor what practices in modern households are sustainable at all (cotton or long-lasting chemical fibres; washing nuts etc.). In 2008, a group of interdisciplinary British scholars tried to answer the fundamental question of what consumers in the UK know about sustainable clothing [9]. They conclude that generally speaking “the level of awareness of the sustainability impacts of clothing is low” [9]. In light of the Agenda 2030 goals, the results were disheartening—Identity and economy as well as habits and concepts of cleanliness take precedence over sustainable pursuits. They also provided answers concerning information and education, stating that people talked about their lack of knowledge [9], gaining information through shopping or mass media [9] and although they knew about more sustainable alternatives they did not act accordingly [9]. The authors propose policy interventions as well as information campaigns for more awareness [9]. They describe, however, that some consumers are open and willing to change.

In order to study this connection between knowledge and practices to disseminate a more sustainable lifestyle in the Global North, a group of self-described minimalists that meet up and act as disseminators in social media as well as mass media has been chosen. A minimalist way of life, also known as downshifting or voluntary simplicity [10], exemplifies a change towards a conscious consumption carried out through learning and practicing alternative everyday practices within the societies of overconsumption. Generally, sources place their lifestyle in the area of sustainable lifestyles [11–13]. Through an ethnographic fieldwork phase, minimalists in Germany, Austria and Switzerland were visited at home, where wardrobe interviews in interaction with clothing, furniture, space

and other household objects were conducted. In minimalist households, practices appear under a magnifier: With less pieces of clothing, wear and tear occurs more frequently. But also equally important, the awareness of their belongings and practices is very high, making it easier for them to speak about it and demonstrate what they do.

This article's disciplinary background is twofold: On the one hand it is rooted in education for sustainable development as discussed in environmental education [14]. On the other hand, it lies in cultural anthropology [15–17] and specifically material culture studies [18,19]. The last ones are main contributors to the research field of fashion and dress studies along with the history of art [20,21]. Fashion and dress studies opened up to everyday mass-produced clothing in the last years [22], enlarging both the range of methods and its scope [23,24]. However, clothing is still mostly studied as a signifier for identity and style [23,25] and starting from that as part of a meaningful consumption process [26]. Even though a material like denim is taken into account in its global dimension [27,28], the research focuses on the social role of clothing for humans. Everyday practices in their material dimension are better studied in the Science and Technology Studies, which should be crucial for a sustainability perspective.

Nevertheless two contributions from anthropology in the area of clothing and sustainability are integrated. First of all, the understanding of the social role of consumption and especially the factor that fashions play beyond a reductionist concept of homo economicus in the social sciences and the messiness of everyday behavior [26]. Secondly, it contributed ethnographic methods as a set of qualitative instruments to collect data beyond questionnaires underlying the attitude-behavior gap or the social desirability [3,9]. In this complex empirical field, the adventure of contemporary wardrobe studies starts with an ever expanding range of instruments in a strictly research-process oriented manner [29,30]. Developed by authors from the field of sustainability and clothing, the research takes place at the homes of interviewees and the material is integrated in the production of data.

The methodological foundation in ethnography enables us to understand what British sociologist Elisabeth Shove first described as a nexus of technology, practice as well as rationales and discourses [31] in her book on comfort, cleanliness and convenience and the change of everyday practices in 2003. She later studied them with other colleagues, selecting three elements that together form a practice: firstly, materials: things, technologies, raw materials and so on; secondly, competences such as skill, know-how and technique and thirdly, meanings which include symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations [32]. As Shove keeps an eye on social change towards a more sustainable lifestyle, the authors underline the dynamic in this perspective: “We go on to argue that practices emerge, persist, shift and disappear when connections between elements of these three types are made, sustained or broken” [32]. Practice theory in general

underlines the complex connectedness between practical and theoretical knowledge and serves to understand the everyday in connection to technology and infrastructure. According to Elisabeth Shove, a real societal innovation requires a change in all “domains of daily” life, not stopping at social institutions such as the status quo, technological regimes, conventions or markets [33]. In this line of thinking Jaeger-Erben et al. describe social innovations as “alternative practices or new variations of practices which differ substantially from established or mainstream routines” [34]. We describe minimalism as a patchwork of a wide range of practices, both old and new.

Rooted in ethnographic methodology and with a background in practice theory, the article provides insights into the range of everyday practices that occur within the minimalist lifestyle, their daily routines in which social structures and individual views occur simultaneously. The most important aspect, however, is the concept of minimalist lifestyle as strongly processual, where ethnographic data can only provide snapshots within this larger process. An ethnographic account from households provides narratives and pictures that differ from the specifically produced and often stereotypical picture of empty and white or beige minimalist rooms [35] circulated through media and social media. For these reasons minimalists are taken as the sample group of consumers in transformation to a more sustainable lifestyle in the global north communicating about their learnings and transition.

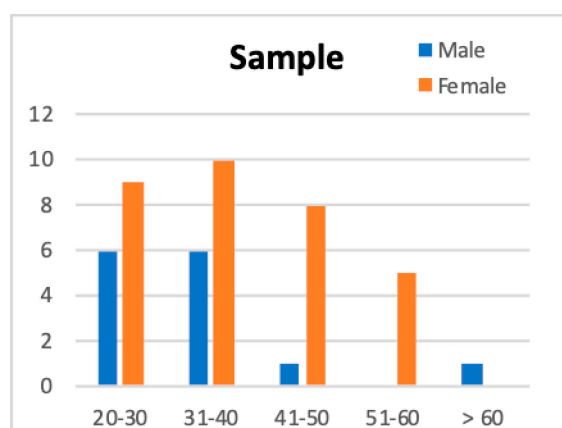
## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study worked with people who communicate their minimalist way of living through social events or social media. The term derived from the mainly US-American avantgarde art movement of the 1960s [35]. The history of thought to reduce one’s lifestyle to one’s needs and not pursue material overexposure however appears in different times and cultures such as Buddhism, Christianity or the voluntary simplicity movement of the 1970s [10,35,36]. Not all self-described minimalists refer to these cultural roots. Some turn to minimalism as a reaction to personal crisis and/or as a means of personal development [35].

Interviewees were mainly contacted through minimalist meet-ups that took place in bigger cities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Organized by locals, these groups formed mostly between 2010 and 2016 through internet sites and social media. Twelve meet-ups were visited in ten cities, as well as the annual minimalist convention in 2019. Additionally, some of the most well-known minimalist bloggers or media activists were contacted online and asked to participate. Interested interlocutors were visited at their homes for 46 wardrobe interviews, taking between 45 to 180 min, in a few cases up to 4 h. We generally anonymised their names but some explicitly wished to appear with their names especially in connection with their social media products. None of them specifically minimised their textiles or clothes but usually focus on all aspects of life.

The participants were visited alone by one of the two authors. The transcripts were later coded and analysed through MAXQDA software following the tradition of Grounded Theory.

Participants have not been chosen according to any social sample. The group of participants represents a group of persons interested in the communication about their minimalist lifestyle. Of these interviewees, 32 are female and 87% younger than 50 (Figure 1). 24 lived alone, 14 with a partner, 5 with children and 6 were sharing their flat with other family members or flatmates. The interviews were transcribed and triangulated with photographs and fieldwork journals to conduct the analysis in form of a reflexive grounded theory [37].



**Figure 1.** Gender and age distribution of interviewee sample (participants/age).

In 2017, the ethnologist Ingun Grimstad Klepp and designer Kate Fletcher published *Opening up the Wardrobe*, a collection of 50 different methods from the field of Wardrobe Studies. They describe that the methods “provide insight into collections of clothes and the garment-related world that takes place in the extended ‘space of the wardrobe’.” [30]. This garment-related world, or the “universe of things” as German material culture scholar Hans Peter Hahn conceptualizes it [38], is of the highest importance for a study of everyday practices as described by Elisabeth Shove above.

The conducted wardrobe interviews were developed in reference to Ingrid Hausgrud’s wardrobe study methodology as well as Else Skjold’s, who experimented with different forms of wardrobe interviews [39]. Hausgrud describes her method as a “semi-structured face-to-face interview followed by photography and additional questions concerning the specific garments identified by the participants as valuable to them” [30]. In contrast to Hausgrud, we did not focus mainly on the garments that were especially valuable to the interviewees, but rather on the interrelated everyday practices such as storage, care, laundry, repair, consumption and disposal. Pictures of the wardrobe (Figures 2–5), of specific garments and caring tools were taken during the interview.

Direct contact with the actual garments within the surrounding

household is necessary for mainly two reasons: First of all, the wardrobe interview is a memory-stimulating method. By being able to visualize and haptically interact with the garments during the interview, the interviewees were able to keep a better overview of their collection of clothes and develop answers to the questions in the interview situation itself. When asked about their oldest garment, they usually had to visually search through their wardrobe. On the other hand, it was made possible to correlate given answers with what we observed. Interviewees who stated that they reject non-organic material for clothing, for instance, could present them. In this way, it became possible to observe the actions rather than just rely on the interviewees' answers. This difference is expressed in the attitude-behavior gap, meaning that people do not necessarily show a practical behavior that matches their attitude and values [3,9]. This possible difference between the psychological mindset and actual behavior can either be consciously chosen in order to show desirable or socially accepted behavior (e.g., to act sustainably) or unconsciously adapted while not recognizing that there is a difference between thought and action [29]. In Skjold's words, an advantage of methods with direct access to the wardrobe is that "through observing people's emotional and physical interactions with what they store, dress objects can be regarded as material evidence of lived lives that are immediately accessible at the site of the study, and can lead beyond people's own rationalisations" [39].

## RESULTS

In the following result section, we will explain through ethnographic descriptions three main areas of results about how minimalists learn and disseminate knowledge. The first finding focuses on the complex embeddedness of everyday household practices with clothing and their potential to learn and change. Following this, we propose a three-level structured model to analyze the interviewees' process, underlining the fact that minimalists mostly learn through gradual changes of routines and their evaluation. The second section will focus on the management of consumers knowledge gained from information on the one hand and trial and error on the other hand. The third ethnographic example explains the end of the process of the minimisation of belongings and reflects on the two main obstacles for textile minimalists and consumers with smaller wardrobes, which is the intensity of use and product lifetime.

### Selma: Development and Learning in the Minimalist Process

We visited 22-year-old student Selma for two wardrobe interviews with a time gap of 14 months—in May 2018 and July 2019. During this time, she changed her student dormitory. Ten years before, she had already come in contact with sustainable thinking through one of her cousins. After her mother died and she later moved out of her parent's home, she felt burdened by her amount of belongings and started sorting out. Minimalism for Selma is a process that incorporates many aspects of life,



ranging from food and belongings to her practice as a musician and spirituality. Her second room in the dormitory contains a plank with a thin mattress, a small wardrobe, a shelf, a low table and two stools, all in white or wooden colors.

At the time of the first interview, Selma explained that she had two wardrobes in one: the clothes of her dead mother and clothes she received from relatives, neighbors and friends. After realizing that she had too many clothes, she now recalls that she had to confront the death of her mother and the memories the clothes contained. Only the realisation that she will not need the objects to keep the memories of her mother enabled her to give them to a local fair shop, an Oxfam shop as well as to friends.

It was a surprise to see the difference from this state to the second wardrobe interview. Whereas the old wardrobe was dominated by clothes that were up to forty years old—twice as old as Selma herself—her wardrobe later contained some newly bought eco-fair clothing made of natural fibres. A re-evaluation of clothing took place that replaced aesthetics and memories of the clothing with actual comfort in wearing. Selma changed cuts with the help of tailors and dyed items so that instead of red-patterned items, blue, black and green items took over. She personalised items and chose them according to their material function. She reduced her skirts to five, which she bought herself and recirculated all dresses and skirts from her mother as well as the jewelry and scarves.

The difference between the first wardrobe interview and the second underlines the fact that wardrobe interviews have to be seen as time snapshots. The case of Selma exemplifies the processuality of reduction and reorganisation and practices like sorting out and recirculating associated with them as well as individualisation. In order to do so, Selma developed criteria that she consciously uses to choose new clothing. On the one hand, she searches for ecological and fair produced garments from high-quality eco-fibres such as cotton, wool or silk. She rejects most man-made fibres in order to avoid sweating and electrical charging. On the other hand, she chooses colours she can combine in order to simplify dressing and combining clothes. Such a reduced wardrobe that is highly adapted to the requirements of the wearer's individual life is called capsule wardrobe [40,41].

**Table 1.** Sets of minimalist practices with clothing.

Reduction and Reorganization	Enhancing Product Lifetime	(Conscious) Consumption
Sorting out	Washing and care	Buying new
Passing on	Repair	Circulation
Conceptualizing an individual wardrobe	Redoing/DIY	(Self)manufacture

Up to this point, Selma actively changed her wardrobe through sorting

out, adapting to her needs and buying. But she also adapted practices concerning the care for clothing. The set of routines stems firstly from her family that also tried to prolong the life of high-quality clothing which is repeated now with Selma's new purchases. Recalling childhood memories about moth holes and moth eggs, she is especially keen to prevent the intrusion of moths. To save her silk and wool garments, she uses moth paper as well as lavender sachets. She uses additional envelopes to protect her clothing while travelling, brushes her shoes regularly and resoles them.

Within this example, we want to outline three sets of practices that also refer to what Fisher et al. call acquisition, use and disposal [9]. But in contrast to this, minimalists do not usually start with acquisition as the phase of most attention but rather with disposal (Table 1). Through our empirical analysis, we identified this scheme as a typical minimalist process specifically associated with clothing. The minimalist process most often starts with obtaining an overview of all clothing currently owned and

1. sorting out the redundant items by reducing and (re-)organising the remaining clothes.

There are different techniques to identify superfluous clothing, like the KonMari method, which works with the question: "Does it spark joy?" Ways of (re-)organizing one's wardrobe can include setting rules about the number of clothes or restricting the repertory to a specific range of colours, shapes or materials. These rules/concepts aim to reduce the complexity of outfit formations. A typical rule prioritises clothing that is combinable in a variety of ways, which for instance applies to the concept of a Capsule Wardrobe [42]. Even more simplification can be reached by establishing a uniform in terms of a consistent wardrobe.

After sorting out the superfluous garments, these are often passed on to other people or converted for further utilisation.

On another level of more routine everyday practices is the

2. extension of the life cycle of the remaining garments through repair, care and further utilization.

Repairing clothes requires knowledge about reparation techniques and the corresponding skills. The appropriate care for clothing starts with material literacy, meaning the knowledge about how durable a material is and with what treatment it lasts longest. This includes knowledge about appropriate washing, storing and other care techniques like using a lint shaver or an iron. At the end of a garment's life cycle, it can be processed for further utilisation, by passing it on for further usage or up-, down- or recycling it, for example by transforming it into a different kind of garment or cleaning rags.

3. Conscious consumption of the required/needed clothing

is located at the end of the chain and is part of the practices of anti-consumption (rejecting, reducing and reusing) also displaying a form of



sustainable behaviour [43]. If consumption is necessary, some interviewees use alternative ways of purchase through second-hand or free shops, clothes swapping parties or digital groups. Sharing clothes through collective usage or lending services would be another option, but this was not practiced in our sample. Unless the knowledge and skills for creating the needed garment by oneself are available, purchasing ecologically produced and fair-trade products is highly important for most interviewees. Two of the interviewees were even professionalising self-production and opening up their own fashion business.

A next level of minimalist practices can start on top of these three which is the optional (4) Knowledge transfer and multiplication that is now described.

### **Lia: Digital Communication about Materials, Competences and Meanings**

At the time of the interview in April 2019, Lia was 23 years old and studying social work. She lived with her partner and 3-years old son in a three-room apartment in one of Germany's biggest cities. As a child, Lia used to play sorting out with her sister. Together they passed on the sorted out items to their younger sister. She attended a Waldorf school. She started learning about minimalism in 2015 and got in contact with sustainability issues through minimalism. Sustainability plays a big part in her thinking and daily life now. She shares her thoughts about sustainability and minimalism on her blog Lulalia.de and her YouTube channel ecofriend.lia as well as her Instagram account. Here she writes about her own development, frustrations and inspirations. All of her clothing fits into one drawer of IKEA's MALM dresser (Figure 2). At the time of the interview, Lia owned one pair of jeans, one pair of leggings, three T-shirts, a woolen shirt, three jumpers, two pairs of shorts, a bikini, one pair of gloves, two scarves, one hat, one rain jacket, one pair of snow and rain trousers, three pairs of shoes, socks and underwear. When we met Lia, she had already finished sorting out her clothing and had reorganized her household accordingly.



**Figure 2.** Lia's drawer with all her clothing, April 2019 (Photo: Verena Strebing).

The second set of practices concerns repair, care and utilisation. Two routines will be described to get an impression of how much knowledge and thought Lia invested. Many of our interviewees developed a washing routine in a repeated set of practices that is adapted to the amount of clothing as well as actual wear and their conceptions of hygiene. Lia's washing routine speaks of resource savings on different levels: She generally only washes a full machine, avoids harmful chemicals and tries to wash rarely in general. She therefore uses one machine every five days in her household with two adults and one child. To fill the machine to a maximum load, she washes all pieces together and therefore does not have white clothing. She decides to wash an item based on how it smells, for example jeans after approximately ten days. As she only owns one pair of jeans Lia needs to plan the washing accordingly so that she can stay warm on the day the trousers are drying. She uses horse chestnuts as washing detergent and baking powder to disinfect the washing machine from time to time. Especially the use of chestnuts as an eco-friendly replacement for chemical washing powder is a trend that is discussed on many blogs about sustainability and minimalism. If her own chestnuts are no more available, she uses eco-friendly detergent in paper packaging with a low rate of tenside. To avoid off odours, bedding, towels and cleaning rags are partly washed at 60 degrees. To stop the pollution of microplastics, Lia uses washing bags for clothing with synthetic fibers.

If items tear or wear down, Lia wears them with little holes whereas she mends bigger holes by herself. She learned how to sew at her Waldorf school, which emphasises arts and crafts. The definition of whether an item is still wearable and repairable is very individual and still thought provoking for Lia. Some of the interviewees like Lia wear items with little holes, others wear their clothes until they are "falling off". Some of Lia's items show signs of mending and she explains that to her, repair is about putting clothes back into their function and not back into their untouched aesthetic. She also applied techniques of visible mending [44], a technique that visually highlights repair as well as prolongs the usage phase. Although dissatisfied with her first attempt at visual mending, she is very enthusiastic about the concept. On her blog she shows how she sews new clothing by cutting up worn items and reattaching the parts together. She also sews hats for her son out of old clothes. To avoid hoarding repair fabric at home, she gives pieces away to others. Torn clothes that she doesn't know how to recycle go into collection bins. Although she does not want to support their businesses, she hopes that her clothes are professionally recycled.

The third field of Lia's sustainable practices concerns the circulation of clothes. She herself does not only recirculate her used clothes but also tries to supply herself through second-hand wear. That means instead of buying a second pair of jeans in a shop although she needs one, she looks for a suitable one in second-hand shops, on the internet platform Kleiderkreisel or at swapping parties. Her deep involvement in aspects of

sustainability only allows her to buy new items on rare occasions. This is mostly underwear and shoes. To circulate clothing in a non-commercial way is common for children's clothes, but it is a new development in Germany for adults clothing [10]. Lia tries to serve as an ideal for other people and therefore avoids brand names and other signs of brands that could stimulate buying new items. She gives the example of the characteristic form of H&M's jeans pockets. By not wearing these jeans, she is not stimulating others to buy fast fashion. Lia is very aware of her function as a cultural influencer.

Lia uses her blog to document her own practices and learnings as well as communicating them to others. These others are surely minimalists but maybe also consumers who are not willing to commit to sustainability in this way. The practices described above emphasise the level of competence that Lia has acquired. Whereas giving away clothing to others and sewing are clearly practices learned in childhood, many other forms of knowledge stem from critical discussions in ecological groups that are not the existing norm in German households. Wearing clothes with holes or visible repair, washing rarely, using chestnuts instead of detergent or sewing new clothes out of torn items are sustainable practices that are not common on the one hand but also require specific knowledge about these alternative practices. Additionally, we should also highlight that to form this sustainable attitude, Lia uses background knowledge such as how Indian soapberries or European second-hand clothing affect local economies in other parts of the world. At this point the meaning behind the practices appears again as a main motivation to acquire new competences and even new material to speak in Elisabeth Shove's terms. In addition to the sustainable narrative itself that aims to "save the planet" [11], other moral decisions about the power of consumers come into play here. Lia therefore does not only give a picture of what sustainable everyday practices can look like and explains how they are practiced, she also circulates alternative knowledge contrary to existing mainstream knowledge that is tied to moral obligations.

### **Joachim: Describing and Showcasing Possible Intensities of Use and Product Longevity**

Joachim has been practicing minimalism for thirty years and his belongings fit into one Eastpak backpack. For twenty years now he has been living with friends or as house-sitter. He used to work as an engine builder and later as an energy consultant. Today he is seventy years old, a pensioner and media person. He is known for radio and TV as well as print media and published the guide on minimalism *Der kleine Minimalist* in 2018. With his pension under the German poverty line, he does not feel poor because minimalism allows him to have time, energy and capacities for his life.

Joachim has been reflecting about his clothes consumption for thirty years. Tailors produced his clothing according to his designs until he found an overall in a workwear shop. His goal was to be completely dressed with

only one piece of clothing. He created his signature outfit with a white overall with additional white or yellow accessories as everyday dress suitable for all purposes. With this he reminds people of Steve Jobs whose dress is frequently talked of at minimalist meet-ups when it comes to the topic of uniforms. Steve Jobs famously wore jeans, a black turtleneck pullover designed by Issey Miyake which he is said to have had hundreds of [45] and sneakers as everyday uniform. Joachim instead does not like to call his outfit as a uniform but something individualised.

At the time of our interview, Joachim owned two white overalls: an old one with arms and legs cut short and a long one. He combines them with T-shirts, poncho, socks, underwear and shoes, all in yellow or white, according to temperature. During the winter, he additionally uses thermal underwear, long socks and winter boots.

Joachim chooses the material for his clothing according to its function. He started with cotton overalls, which only lasted two years. He later changed to a fibre mix, hoping that it would make care less intensive for him. He repairs his overalls with what is at hand, being it tape or needle and thread. Because of his nomadic lifestyle, he wants his clothing to dry very fast. Every one or two weeks, he washes all his clothing in a washing machine where he lives or in a self-service laundry. He also washes clothing by hand and leaves it to dry overnight. Joachim would like to produce his own overalls from an upcycled material which equalizes temperatures, cleans itself and changes colours. In his thinking, this overall would fit all occasions of life. But he has not yet found a material that satisfies these needs in all functions and features.

Joachim is the person in our sample of 46 wardrobes who owns the least and therefore uses his clothing most intensely, namely every day. Like Selma and Lia, he experimented with materials and styles until he arrived at a combination of aesthetic and functional satisfaction. His backpack as wardrobe exemplifies extreme minimalism as not “normal” in contemporary western societies. It can serve as a microscope for the functions clothing could have: on the one hand protection and on the other hand cultural functions such as belonging to groups or individual expression. In media articles and TV shows he emphasizes the nexus of function and necessity in his choices and demonstrates contrasting alternatives to mainstream householding.

## DISCUSSION

The last pages indicate that minimalists can serve as pioneers for a more sustainable usage of clothing as well as disseminators and even educators via different media. In our examples minimalists used media to self-publish on blogs or Instagram using a mixture of text and picture to explain their learnings. They also respond to media requests and therefore reach mass media as well as the specific interested community via social media. However, in the following discussion we want to critically discuss this presentation in three steps: Firstly, the difference between media

representations, Instagram minimalism, and everyday minimalism should be highlighted. Secondly, with the additional example of Michael, we want to outline the differences in the minimalist community itself. Thirdly, we come back and triangulate the sustainable practices with literature findings on sustainable everyday practices. With this background information, we will finally ask what potential the diffusion of sustainable everyday practices through a lifestyle trend like minimalism has. We will show that minimalist consumers are “normal” consumers “on the way” to shifting practices but not per se outside of the existing alternatives. However, their role as pioneers and educators is also taken into consideration again.

### **Minimalism between Media Representation and the Everyday**

On June 29th 2020, Lia posted a picture of her drawer on her Instagram account (Figure 3). The photo looks significantly different from the photo taken at the wardrobe interview on the 10th of April 2019 (Figure 2) concerning aesthetics, order, colours and in general: beauty. In his book *The Longing for Less*, art historian Kyle Chayka describes “its aesthetic of fashionable austerity” [35] with an imagery of “clean white subway tile, furniture in the style of Scandinavian mid-century modern, and clothing made of organic fabrics” [35]. The style that he traces back to the American avantgarde art movement of the 1960s now turned into “generic luxury style” [35]. For Chayka it reappears perfectly adapted to internet and social media today as it matches or competes with website backgrounds through “subtle qualities” [35]. Chayka’s book is one of the critical voices towards minimalism. More often writing about minimalism and their sustainable practices has the tendency to glorify the sustainable impact of minimalists and overemphasise their influence. It is therefore important to introduce a first restriction in the discussion section that deals with the difference of Instagram and media representations of minimalism and the households taken part in our study.



**Figure 3.** Instagram post of Lia’s drawer, June 2020 (Photo: Lia Eberli).



In a direct confrontation of the three examples described above and that of “Instagram minimalism”, a contrast between the staging of minimalism in social media or books and situations found within wardrobe interviews becomes apparent. The households that Marie Kondo visits in her Netflix series, for example, are described by communication and cultural studies scholar Laurie Ouelette as “ordinary, and sometimes drab, filled with unremarkable furniture, mass-produced decorations, and of course, piles of papers, boxes and bins” [46]. Most of the households we visited also looked this “ordinary”, furnished with IKEA furniture and not to be singled out as minimalist, at first glance.

The definition as minimalist followed mainly through the comparison with the same household before the minimalist process and the resulting change of the situation of living. As seen in the above example of Selma, it is important to keep the individuality of the minimalist process in mind which then transforms everyday practices and establishes new ones. Processuality means further that the minimalist “journey” or “way” does usually not stop. Minimalists look into change, actively facilitating change and interpreting the resulting changes as positive. As seen with Shove’s practice theoretical approach, everyday practices are based on specific bodily practices and competences in tension between social structures and norms and individual needs. A minimalist lifestyle, in this sense, is less a mental construction but rather a method that is experienced through practice. Minimalists break the connections between the three elements materials, competences and meanings, in the way Elisabeth Shove described [32]. While the examples told a lot about the shifting materials and growing competences, minimalists actively try to lead a “good life”. The sample of minimalists in this study shows a wide range of meanings from role model, saving the world, being frugal or just being less burdened by material possessions. The fieldwork examples might not look different from non-minimalist households but the owners actively reflect at their relationship to things and their lifestyle, actively changing it and learning continuously. What we term “Instagram minimalism” is a commodified representation of this and uses specific aesthetic references as Chayka describes.

The communication on minimalist websites and books differs from NGOs, magazines or governmental recommendations: Firstly, minimalists are private persons and are seen to believe in what they say without financial interest. Secondly, minimalists show that they practice what they communicate and mostly speak about, often in form of a trial-and-error process. Both reasons form a relation of trust and work with a high level of authenticity, even more so when people meet in person at meet-ups or at minimalist conventions. In this function, minimalists such as Lia and Joachim but also Michael can be seen as contemporary social media influencers (SMIs). Daniel et al. define SMIs as “third-party endorsers who shape attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other uses of social media [47]. Moreover, SMIs approach very specific needs of their followers and thus

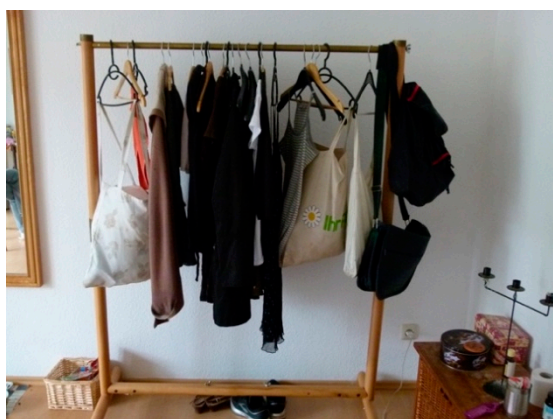


become a source of credibility for that specific issue” [48]. Mostly studied in marketing research, SMIs content is perceived by consumers as opinion based on experience [48]. Communication researcher Nils Borchers describes social media influencers in diverse roles from producer of content to testimonial or even event and community managers [49] which is the case with Michael.

With all its potential for the communication of a more sustainable everyday life, it is important to also include critical discussions on media influences. German anthropologist Timo Heimerdinger, for example, wrote about the genre of guidebooks, especially *Simplify Your Life* [50]. He underlines that guidebooks as a scientific source for popular culture do not represent a lived reality but rather idealized role models [51]. He finds that readers deal with the content in an unpredictable multimodal way but do not practice what they read [51]. Instead they feel confirmed in their already established world views, use it in case of necessity, as background information, for a communal feeling or as an imagined future [51]. The transformation of the everyday according to the book content however does not take place [51]. The guidebook, according to Heimerdinger, could also be used as a representative object in the home [51] which is certainly the case with books on minimalism.

### Range of Practices and Differentiation among the Sample

In the findings section, we outlined the proportions of Selma’s, Lia’s and Joachim’s wardrobe as well as their minimalist process and practices with clothes. All three of them fit into the image of a very sustainable consumer with a high level of knowledge and engagement with his or her clothes. But just as everyday minimalism should be compared to Instagram minimalism, the range of practices among the sample itself should be taken into consideration. A minimalist wardrobe can range from a backpack in Joachim’s case, a clothes rail (Figure 4) with bags for underwear that replace drawers as well as a fully furnished wardrobe wall (Figure 5). To highlight additional differences in the practices with clothes, we introduce the example of Michael.



**Figure 4.** Silke’s clothing rail, June 2018 (Photo: Verena Strebinger).



**Figure 5.** Christian's and Sophie's wardrobe, January 2019 (Photo: Verena Strebingner).

Michael was actively blogging between 2011 and 2018 on [www.minimalismus-leben.de](http://www.minimalismus-leben.de), restarting in summer 2020 with his own podcast. He started documenting his minimalist process when media coverage was still scarce on the topic, reading the famous book *Simplify Your Life* and books about Feng Shui as well as only a handful of American and German blogs. At the time of our interview, he was 36 years old and working in IT. Since 2014, he has been organising a minimalist meet-up and later the German minimalist convention. He is one of the faces of the German scene, broadcasted in TV, radio and print. The interview took place in his one-room apartment. His wardrobe consisted of two pairs of jeans, two hoodies, ten black T-shirts and three polo shirts for everyday usage. For work he additionally owns two business jackets, suits and shirts for more representational occasions. His main goal and pleasure is the possibility to combine every garment with the others. For him, his black T-shirts together with jeans, sneakers and a business jacket form an ideal outfit for whatever occasion.

Michael describes himself as pragmatic when choosing clothes. He defines a “pain threshold” for prices. If he finds items that fit and seem to be durable, he usually buys more than one item and also rebuys the same products. In our focus groups interview at the minimal convention, Michael and other interviewees described buying not as a pleasurable leisure activity but as a necessary evil. Most of the participants only search for something new when the old item is torn and not repairable or doesn't fit into the concept of the wardrobe. Michael problematises that sizes bigger than XL are not present in most of the German shops and especially not in eco-fair clothing. Because of this, he enjoys basic clothing that fits and survives washings without shrinking.

However, he also owns a green patterned camouflage hoodie he does not necessarily like but bought because of the good fit. The jacket produces lint on his black T-shirts and does not fit in his colours but stems from a shortage of offers on clothing in big sizes that Kaori O'Connor also described in a text about women's leggings in size 48 [52]. Another criterion how Michael chooses his clothing is the practicability of clothes. Because of this, he prefers hoodies with zipper over pullovers and clothing

that only needs a small amount of care as exemplified in non-iron shirts.

If Michael needs to change or repair his clothes, he asks his aunt to alter his trousers and do repairs. If a piece needs a second repair, he substitutes it with a new one. He justifies his consumption in saying that he only has a very little amount of clothing, like two pairs of jeans, and if they tear, it feels okay to buy new ones. Used items he describes as not usable anymore as well as underwear he discards in the household trash. However still wearable clothing is brought to a second-hand shop or collection bin providing for local charities. His hope is that people in need wear his clothing up to the very end. Clothes, he reckons, are a resource that should be used intensely.

In comparison to Joachim, Michael still owns a vast amount of clothing. In comparison to Lia and Selma, his relationship with his clothes is not that intense. His clothes are chosen in a different pragmatic decision process than the former examples and can be easily replaced if damages occur. When talking about his learnings concerning the consumption of clothes and especially product durability in his podcast or blog he is aiming for eco and fair solutions but also informs about its limits in realisation.

### **Minimalist Practices and Sustainability**

Michael's example also leads to the question if minimalism represents a more sustainable lifestyle per se. Our interview data rarely indicate ecological sustainability as the reason for acting. The transformation into a minimalist life is more often motivated by the wish to gain satisfaction and wellbeing that could be sensed through the minimalist process. Lia and Selma follow their own moral code, to bring no harm to the world and their own comfort with their preference for certain materials when choosing eco-fair and second-hand clothing. As an integral part of the minimalist process, most minimalists confront themselves with their patterns of consumption and want to pursue conscious consumption. They have reframed societal "consumerist beliefs" making "responsible purchase acts based on knowledge and critical thinking" [53]. In our sample, this conscious consumption can lead to a more sustainable form of consumption that we can describe through four characteristics: Firstly, minimalists try to consciously rethink every acquisition, in whatever form, of new clothing. Secondly, they try to acquire only things they really need and frequently also decide against it. Thirdly, their consumption decision grounds in self-selected criteria such as product longevity, ecological production and fair production. But most characteristic and fourth is the demand for durable clothing as quality issues appear in a short period of time after intense and frequent wear and washing.

In the interviews, minimalists often expressed frustration and disappointment about the durability of eco-fair fashion. Following this, they prefer and communicate user experiences instead of producer information or eco-fair materials. Some of our interviewees tried to rebuy

clothes in high numbers if products showed a satisfactory performance at home. They also communicate a wish for a producer guarantee on clothing. But in contrast to these empowering strategies within the community, an excessive level of protection against moths and a fear of disposals in clothing bins also indicate consumer helplessness. As well as other consumers, their behaviour shows insecurities about the problems in clothing consumption, such as nontransparent production, lack of competences with textiles to access differences in quality, lack of competencies in repair and altering techniques of textiles, uncertainties how to correctly care for clothing and the ecological footprint of clothing.

One of the institutions that officially provide knowledge about sustainability and textiles in this situation of insecurity is the German Federal Environmental Agency with the following consumer advice:

- Search for textile labels that guarantee eco and fair production.
- Buy cotton in organic cotton quality.
- Buy second-hand clothing and swap clothes.
- Rent clothes for single occasions such as weddings, parties and other festivities.
- Wear your clothes as long as possible.
- Bring clothes and shoes to tailors and cobblers.
- Recirculate clothes you do not use or dispose of them correctly.
- Handle fashion trends critically and be critical with fast fashion. Discuss this with your children.

For washing, the Environmental Agency recommends to load machines fully and wash with lower temperature and less laundry detergent without fabric softener.

Most of these recommended actions are mirrored in our interviews when Selma buys new clothing, but eco-friendly and fair, or when Lia buys only second-hand or swaps. Also a long usage phase and repair can be found frequently in our sample as well as careful recirculation or disposal. The first three examples are also very critical about the fast fashion production and use of clothes. Joachim and Lia wash accordingly to the recommendations. We did not find, however, the renting of clothes, which could serve as possibility for minimalists to access clothes for special occasions.

However, all these practices are known in the sustainability and clothing literature also as slow fashion practices that reduce the overconsumption of clothing. But when interviewees search for guidelines and background knowledge, they also observe the critical discussions, for example about greenwashing as deceit with eco-labels [54] fueling new consumption [55]. Media provides friction in knowledge and sometimes even for opposing instructions, for example concerning the right disposal of clothing. Minimalists provide examples of consumers who actively engaged, publish their experiences and reflections and decided for themselves what to do. In contrast to official guidelines of a governmental

agency they provide role models of action within their social group.

## CONCLUSION

This article presented research that uses qualitative data analysis in the field of sustainable everyday practices with clothing in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. In comparison to a quantitative approach, one specific group of consumers has been chosen to ethnographically outline the range of possibilities for German consumers to engage in more sustainable everyday practices. The group was also chosen because they demonstrate a desire to communicate their practices and function as disseminators of a more sustainable lifestyle.

As most governmental programmes aim to educate children, the article gives one example of how adult consumers do not only educate themselves about sustainability but also change their everyday behaviour. We found that minimalists can serve as important disseminators for sustainable change because they demonstrate the necessary change on a personal bottom-up level, for example as social media influencers, book authors, online tutors or convenors of meet-ups or conventions. From a practice theory perspective, the ethnographic examples described in detail how the three elements of practices itself, material, competencies and meanings [32], and their connections to each other change in a minimalist lifestyle. In this way, new practices can be established in everyday life and a higher level of sustainability can be achieved.

The minimalist lifestyle is characterised by the pursuit of owning less objects and often also saving consumption time for other purposes [10]. Key to the resulting change is the processuality of the “minimalist journey” that is characterised by embracing change and learning. It takes place through three sets of practices, which are firstly reduction and reorganization, secondly enhancing product lifetime and thirdly conscious consumption. Although practices like choosing clothes, wear, care and washing are routines and therefore often occur on an unconscious level, minimalism’s key message highlights the awareness of the material world around individuals and their relationship with each other [10]. Having fewer clothes and keeping them functional provides the chance to engage more intensely with them. Minimalists are therefore especially confronted with the aesthetic and material quality of clothes. In combination with their own usage and care, the quality results in the lifetime of the products. As frequent buying of new clothing in our sample of 46 interviews is not desirable, minimalists therefore try actively to consume their clothes for a long time.

Minimalists source their knowledge about everyday practices from all sorts of media, but they communicate a high level of own experiences which can bridge conflicting knowledge. They use a wide range of media for their communication, such as blogs, Instagram and Facebook accounts, books, online courses, podcasts and live events such as talks, regional meet-ups and conventions. A few of them can be described as social media

influencers and also started professional careers. Despite being a living example, literature in sustainability and fashion often points to the attitude-behaviour gap [3,9] which influences the actual sustainable behaviour of persons [56] aspiring a minimalist lifestyle. Another restriction comes from cultural anthropology underlining the different cultural uses of guiding literature that does not lead into a transition of practices [51].

From an anthropological perspective, the minimalist movement today is a reaction to the fight for urban space, environmental and economic crises and overconsumption. Because of the small number of minimalists in comparison to the total population, it is not likely to be a mass movement of social innovation as outlined by Jaeger-Erben et al. 2015: fehlt. Due to its focus on personal development, minimalism lacks pursuits of communal or political action (in comparison see Jaeger-Erben et al. 2015: 792f: fehlt). But the aim of the article was not to access the potential of minimalism as a mass movement but rather as role models to learn from for a more sustainable lifestyle, which is certainly a fruitful perspective.

#### **DATA AVAILABILITY**

The dataset from the study is not available because of the sensibility of the data.

#### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Heike Derwanz designed the study. Verena Strebinger collected most of the ethnographic data. Both authors analysed the data. Heike Derwanz wrote the paper with input from Verena Strebinger.

#### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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