

# Clicking Our Way to Conscious Consumption

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## KEYWORDS

**Activism, Conscious Consumption, Empowerment, Platforms, Social Media**

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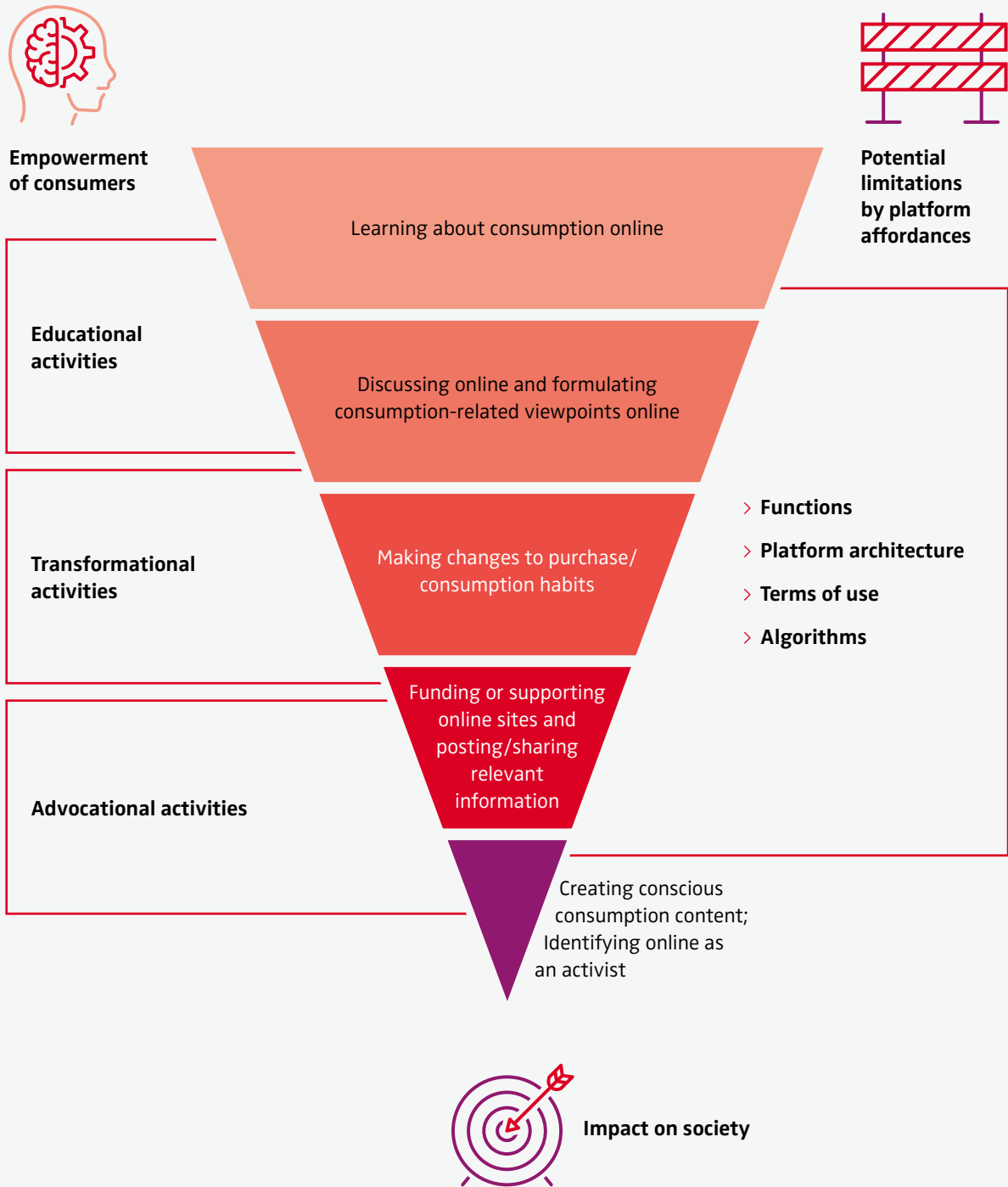
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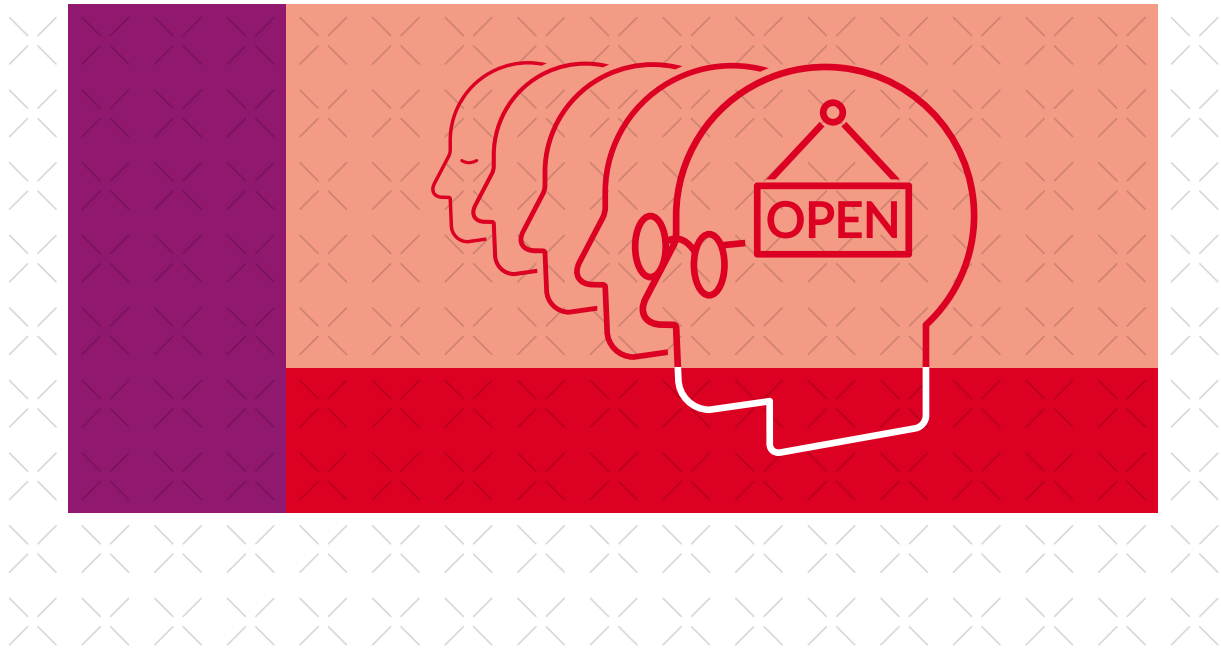
**Online Consumer Resistance is almost as old as the internet** ✕ People turning to online platforms to discuss consumption is certainly not a new development. Indeed, it can be traced back to some of the earliest uses of electronic communication over 50 years ago. Already in the 1990s, a wide variety of activities related to conscious consumption happened online. Numerous online communications were dedicated to intentional purchasing, such as exchanges about boycotts and boycotts. These conversations cut across online sites on many topics that might seem unrelated, such as groups dedicated to discussions of sports, music, lifestyles, and politics. In research at that time, we discovered that these consumers wanted to flex their muscles by affecting other people's consumption – they wanted to feel like they could do something to positively affect the world.

Many of the consumers in our studies also saw their online activity as a form of consciousness raising. Online information helped consumers move beyond what online activists considered the pleasant and nonreflective consumption habits of the average person. People we interviewed talked about conscious consumption allowing them to escape “the robotic buy-sell-buy-sell system,” the general “self-enslavement” to media corporations, and as a type of “mental hygiene” that helped them to perceive the world more clearly.

**Becoming conscious and active in the network** ✕ What does it mean to say that consumption becomes more conscious – and that this can happen online? Consider that the opposite of being conscious is to be unaware, unintentional, inattentive, or insensitive, or even to be unconscious entirely. Becoming a more conscious consumer does simply mean that you have information about your consumption that you didn't previously possess. It also means that you are sensitized to the importance of acting on that information. It is, in

FIGURE 1 > The Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel





effect, a type of awakening. Becoming a conscious, or more conscious, or even an activist consumer means that you go from being unaware and uncaring about some aspect of consumption to being deliberate, emotionally and physically and culturally engaged with it.

**The chances of social media to engage others** × Conscious consumption and consumer resistance are two sides of the same coin. As the people we studied became more aware and engaged, they couldn't help but become a bit more activist. From interviewed activists, we learned how valuable they considered social media in their early awakening. They found Internet webpages and online groups increasingly important as the tools of their trade. Social media platforms made it easier for them to educate and engage other consumers. We discovered a distinct process guiding the use of online resources to become a more conscious consumer. This

process evolved through time as social media platforms and practices developed. Not all activities related to conscious consumption lead to activism. But what evolves can be described as going through a funnel-like process.

#### **The Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel**

× Most marketers are familiar with the classic marketing funnel that illustrates how people are led from awareness to interest, desire, and then purchasing action for a product or brand. The Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel depicts a similar process of increasing involvement. In this new funnel, people move from learning about some aspect of consumption online to becoming more and more involved in digital activism relating to it. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and others may empower consumers to raise awareness but at the same time they may also restrict their users' abilities to promote a cause.



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In the original marketing funnel, not everyone who becomes aware of a product ends up moving all the way to the purchase stage. Similarly, in the Conscious Consumption Funnel, not everyone who learns something meaningful about their consumption will act on it or become a digital activist. As the funnel narrows at the bottom, it expresses the idea that smaller and smaller numbers will make it to the next stage. The funnel consists of three main stages of platform-mediated consumer action.

> **Educational activities** ✕ The initial stage of the funnel is like the awareness stage in the marketing funnel. But rather than referencing a brand or product, it refers to awareness of the links between a particular kind of consumption and some of its social, ethical, or environmental implications. This can happen in surprising locations, such as with Harry Potter fans educating the public about the importance of buying fair trade chocolate.

Not everyone who encounters this information will engage with it. But some might post a question about it. Or they could verify and look up additional information on news sources, webpages, or Wikipedia.

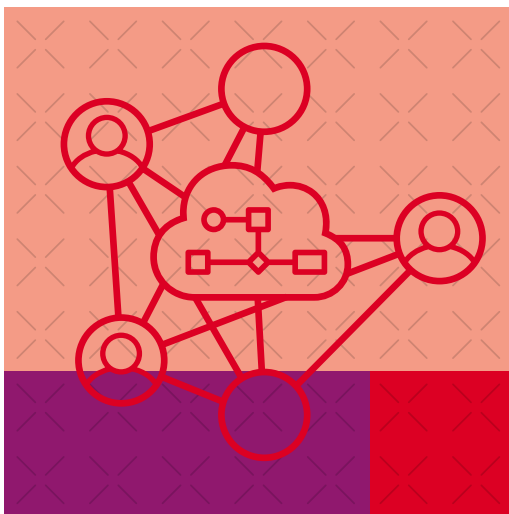
> **Transformational activities** ✕ A smaller subset of these engaged consumers will transition from educational types of online activities to transformational activities. At this point, the consumption information people learn online ends up affecting them. As a result, they change their purchase or consumption behaviors. Perhaps, after hearing a vlogger, someone who is shopping for fast fashion chooses to buy vintage instead. Their consumption has been transformed, even in a small way, by the information they learned online.

> **Advocational activities** ✕ In the final, advocational, phases of the funnel, consumers find purpose by passionately and actively supporting causes related to their newfound conscious consumption. Perhaps they donate to help support their favorite investigative journalism site related to the healthy farming of family-based businesses. Or they spread to their social network a story about how a corporate brand abuses its offshore laborers. At this point, they have moved from merely receiving information online to passionately promoting it.

The consumers become creators of content, or perhaps become influencers who dedicate personal posts to the conscious consumption topic. They may, at this point, identify themselves as activists. Sometimes, they will combine their consumption lifestyle activism with their professional life. An example of an online activist who did such as thing is the YouTube vlogger Monami Frost, who started a vegan restaurant called Frost Burgers.

#### **Platforms enable but also restrict conscious consumption**

✕ Social media offers a powerful way for consumers to educate one another about the moral sphere of their consumption and to support certain behavior. However, platforms, their functions and algorithms also color and influence



the way people learn about consumption. In fact, they can even restrict the kinds of empowerment that consumers might experience. Platforms put fences around conscious consumption and limit potential consumer actions.

- > **Functional limits** ✕ All platforms with the potential to affect consumers, affect empowerment through their architecture and the functions they offer. On Facebook, WeChat, and Twitter, consumers can easily and quite freely discuss issues that matter to them. One consumer can discuss deforestation issues and another one employment inequality. Consumers can enter text and images, teaching people to grow their own food, reuse packaging, attempt zero waste, or use community-supported options. However, this open functionality is not found on all platforms. Many platforms, such as Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Amazon will only allow their users to review something very specific or to rate it on a scale. These platforms are no place for organizing an activist response.
- > **Restrictive terms of use** ✕ Also, reviews or comments may not ever be made public because the platform's terms of use may reserve a right to prohibit or censor specific content. The Brazilian consumer feedback platform "Reclame Aqui" that we studied in detail explicitly forbid conversations about activism and boycott campaigns. Even more importantly, the platform only allowed feedback on the service related to purchased items, not on social or environmental issues that might be involved in their production. There was simply no open way to use the platform for consciousness-raising.
- > **Algorithms and economic limits** ✕ And even major social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter allowing a wide arrange of functional possibilities end up limiting discussions in different ways. Unless they are promoted, countercultural discussions are far less likely to appear in people's newsfeeds than the many promoted and sponsored posts from profit-making companies. Therefore, it is more difficult to raise awareness for hard to monetize topics. Platforms are businesses. Their functions and algorithms are not there to help people become more conscious consumers, but to make a profit for their owners by selling data and targeted advertising.

**Consumer action abound in the platform age** ✕ Today, social media is filled with people informing and persuading each other about a myriad of topics, including consumption. On Reddit, two million consumers turn to the group r/frugal to discuss ways to purchase and consume more deliberately in their daily lives. On Facebook, pages and clubs with names

like "Environmentally Conscious Consumers" and "Conscious Consumers Club" allow consumers to share content with each other about concerns relating to sustainability and mindful consuming.

Conscious consumption related content creators and influencers also abound. Kate Hall is an Instagrammer and online influencer who focuses on ethical fashion and an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. Jane Velez-Mitchell started the online news service "Jane Unchained News" to spread information about animal rights, vegan life, and the effect of our food consumption on climate.

Social media presents a vast world of information to help people learn more about the deeper implications of their consumption. The funnel model illustrates how consumers can move through a process of learning or awakening to greater levels of awareness, action, and advocacy. Yet, there can be significant constraints on this consciousness raising. As platforms and social media evolve, so too will the ever-evolving opportunities and challenges that consumers face. Just as consumer groups found ways to voice concerns in the early internet days, there is no doubt that consumers will successfully navigate today's broad and fluid digital landscape. They will continue to use online platforms to learn more about their own consumption. And then some, perhaps many, of them will be moved to promote what they learn online, doing their part to create more conscious, moral, and compassionate consumption. ✕



#### FURTHER READING

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