



A Conversation with Livia Firth



LIVIA FIRTH CREATIVE DIRECTOR, ECO-AGE

Livia Firth is the Creative Director of Eco-Age and founder of the Green Carpet Challenge. Livia is also an Executive Producer on The True Cost. We asked about her hopes for the film, why she started Eco-Age, the global issues borne out of fast fashion, and how customers can be part of building a new system of consumption.

Can you tell us about the work you do with Eco-Age?

Eco-Age is a brand consultancy that enables businesses to achieve growth by adding value through sustainability. We have a highly skilled team at Eco-Age who works directly with brands and businesses to develop and deliver sustainability strategies that are not only completely relevant to business needs, but are delivered within the commercial realities of today's world. Eco-Age simplifies sustainability, offering achievable, sustainable solutions that help our clients demonstrate sector leadership and enhance the bottom line.

How did the Green Carpet Challenge Begin?

“Lucy Siegle challenged me to walk the huge carpets of Awards Season wearing only sustainable/ethical

The Green Carpet Challenge started as a “game” – when Colin, my husband, received a Golden Globes nomination for Tom Ford’s movie, *A Single Man*. Lucy Siegle challenged me to walk the huge carpets of Awards Season wearing only sustainable/ethical fashion. We started it together and recorded the

fashion.”

efforts on the pages of Vogue.co.uk. It was so successful and we had so much

fun. It also gave me a great purpose to be on the carpets next to Colin, and I still get a kick every time I am on a red (green) carpet wearing a powerful story.

Why does fashion play such a pivotal role in our world today?

Take two very simple actions that we perform every single day: getting dressed and eating. Now start a journey backwards – to where your food and your clothes come from. At the other end, you will rarely find happy people, treated with dignity and respect. Human beings working at the bottom of any supply chain – whether is strawberry picking, prawn fishing, cotton farming, garment workers – are often treated like slaves, without reference to our common humanity. So “fashion” – i.e. what we wear every single day, has huge relevance and huge consequences on human, social and environmental capital.

What sparked your personal involvement as an activist in this area? What made you care about the impact this industry was having?

“When you get back you can’t pretend it is ‘business as usual’.”

I went to Bangladesh in 2009 with Lucy Siegle and for the first time in my life I saw the impact of what I was wearing was having miles away from me. It was like having someone throw a bucket of iced water on you.

When you get back you can’t pretend it is ‘business as usual’. It’s the same when you witness an accident on the other side of the street, you run and offer your help. But how far away does that accident have to happen for you not to care anymore, for it not to be your business anymore? Today, as Lucy

puts it, 'brands, retailers and consumers have all become fantastically adept at divorcing fashion from the very fact that it is been made by an army of living, breathing, human beings with resources which are depleting the environment'.

What does the term 'fast-fashion' mean to you?

Over the past two decades fashion has changed thanks to this new phenomenon called "fast fashion" and now we have a situation where, as consumers, we are caught in an absurd circle of micro trends. Think about it. Around two mini seasons a week in stores. Disposable clothes that stay in a woman's closet for an average of just five weeks, before being thrown out – all in the name of the democratization of fashion.

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In reality, this evil machine is exploiting everyone and everything: the consumer, the planet's resources and the people who produce them. Each year across the world, 1.5 billion garments are sewn by an estimated 40 million people, working in 250,000 factories. These are predominantly made in countries described by the UN as the world's least developed. All in all, the garment and textile industry is estimated to be worth some \$3 trillion.

And the bulk of that goes into the pockets of the owners of those fast fashion brands.

It's a complicated mess we are in....

When production is outsourced to poor countries, they are enslaved by an addiction to the idea of enrichment. That is when corporations start driving production costs down with volume. Like any good pusher, they offer their

potential clients a great deal, only to get them addicted. Once they've succeeded, they're in the driving seat. In the case of poor economies, they addict them to the idea of lifting their people out of poverty. In fact, they're like the big bad wolf, lying in wait for the dependency to start. And their citizens get enslaved in the same machine. At the same time, they operate as distributors and addict consumers to the idea of always faster, ever cheaper fashion, despite the human and environmental cost. It's the old problem. Out of sight, out of mind. It happens far away so we don't see it.

You've spent time with garment workers all around the world. What concerns or desires do you hear from them?

Last year, for the first anniversary of the Rana Plaza factory collapse, I interviewed Nazma Aktar a union worker in Dhaka. She said she wants brands to treat the lives of garment workers at the same level as they treat the lives of people in the West. Their lives are not cheaper and yet we consider them like that. Also in *The True Cost*, Shima Akhter, the garment worker we follow, says it as it is: they believe the clothes are produced using their blood. But they are stuck. They have no other choice unless we break this cycle.

Do you believe the fashion supply chain is something we can change? What is the responsibility of business in catalyzing this change?

Businesses have a huge role to play – and they need to take ownership of their supply chains without using excuses like local government legislation (or the very lack of them). It can be a huge challenge for brands to start these journeys and the path is very complex. Francois-Henri Pinault, CEO of Kering, said recently that “Transforming our industry so that it addresses our social and environmental challenges is a formidable task, but it is an achievable one.” Fortunately others – see Chopard, Kering or Marks & Spencer – have started this journey and are now leading the way.

It is impossible to change for fast fashion brands unless they change their

business model as it will always be impossible to produce those huge volumes ethically. The issue, as Raj Sisodia put it when talking about Conscious Capitalism, is: “what do we, as business people, leaders, citizens take responsibility for? The consequences ripple out... Is it my responsibility simply delivering profits for shareholders this quarter and not looking at the impact this has on my people, my employees, my children?”

How can consumers to be a part building a new system, what questions should they be asking brands?

“Become an active citizen through your wardrobe.”

Consumers are becoming more intelligent and taking charge – they now understand the true cost of buying so cheaply and so fast. The solution can be very simple. Buy less and get more ‘fashion mileage’ out of each piece. Buy heritage pieces that will last. Become an active citizen through your wardrobe. Lucy said “if we can all commit to wearing something a minimum of 30 times, then we can buy it.” This is a great simple tool and you would be surprised how many times we would reply “actually I wouldn’t wear it so many times” so why would you buy it in the first place?! We need to buy clothes that we love. Clothes that will sustain our wardrobe for years to come. This is why I love fashion. It can truly empower you!

What does the word ‘citizen’ mean to you?

“We start to die the day that we become silent about the things that matter to us.”MLK

Being active – an active citizen is what we should all aim for every single day. There are two quotes which I keep at heart. One is from Martin Luther King who once said that we start to die the day that we become silent about the things that matter to us. And the other

one is from a sticker someone handed me on Venice Beach years ago which reads “Stop bitching and start a revolution.” You can’t underestimate the impact of not being silent and trigger a mini- revolution every day – starting from what you eat and what you wear!

You came on board *The True Cost* as an Executive Producer. What is your hope for the film as we prepare for release?

That it is seen by every single person on the planet. Is that too ambitious?!!!
And that fast fashion will finally say “OK we get it – we are slowing down...”

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