

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Complicated Green Advertising: Understanding the Promotion of Clothing Recycling Efforts

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The fashion industry, a major global polluter, has been paying more attention to the environmental and ecological impacts of clothing production. A subset of established brands — some supported by the US group Cotton Incorporated — have pushed programmes where denim and other types of clothing can be turned in at a store, collected, and then sent for recycling. Often, these recycling efforts are supported with promotional offers that allow customers to purchase new items at a discount. This is potentially paradoxical as in this way recycling is used to promote further consumption. This paper interrogates the promotion of recycling programmes from four US brands: American Eagle, H&M, Madewell and The North Face. To do so, this paper uses a textual analysis and deconstruction of the brands' websites and in-store advertising, as well as a KWIC analysis of Twitter messages. By examining the tangible communication components that support the recycling efforts, this analysis highlights the 'complicated greenness' (Hepburn, 2013) within the process as consumer incentives for recycling promote further consumption and often leave consumers confused as to the environmental efficacy of such practices. This paper offers considerations for ways fashion brands might be more impactful in their foray into environmentalism.

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**Keywords:** advertising; clothing recycling; eco-fashion; fashion brands; green branding; textual analysis

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The fashion industry is one of the largest polluters in the world, with impacts including high greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution, the use of toxic dyes and chemicals and large amounts of textile waste produced by the industry. In the most recent year studied, 2017, only 13.6% of clothing and footwear were recycled — and textiles accounted for 8% of total landfill use (EPA, 2019). In recent decades there has been an increase in research into the environmental impacts of fashion, especially fast fashion, and calls for a course reversal (e.g., Cline, 2013). However, consumers and brands alike are struggling to find the best way forward for sustainability in the industry.

Scholarly interest in green marketing has picked up steam (Kumar, 2016), along with sustainability (Yang, Song and Tong, 2017) and ethics within fashion (Cavusoglu and Dakhli, 2016). Some of this work has looked at the big picture (e.g. Hethorn and Ulasewicz, 2008) with several trying to set out particular frameworks (Carey and Cervellon, 2014; Haug and Busch, 2016; Kozlowski, Bardecki and Searcy, 2012; Thomas, 2019) and definitions (Henninger, 2016). Some studies have paid particular attention to consumers and consumption (Chan and Wong, 2012; Crane, 2016; Joergens, 2006; Weiss, Trevenen and White, 2014) while others have examined other parts of fashion including media and branding (Beard, 2008; De Lenne and Vandenbosch, 2017; Hepburn, 2013; Joy et al., 2012; Michel et al., 2019). Part of this fragmentation can be chalked up to the complexity of the 'fashion system,' which involves not only production and consumption of fashion products, but also design, regulation and media (Kaiser, 2012: 13–27). Because of definitional slippage or blurring (Thomas, 2019: 3–5) and ultimately the 'social construction' of 'sustainable fashion' (Henninger, Alevizou and Oates, 2016: 402–403), there remain significant questions about how best to achieve sustainability in the industry (Thomas, 2019) and how to get consumers to prioritise sustainability (Chan and Wong, 2012; Crane, 2016; Joergens, 2006; Joy et al., 2012).

One area that has received less scholarly attention than other aspects of sustainability within fashion has been the disposal and re-use of clothing. Some researchers have noted clothing's ability to be gifted (Cruz-Cárdenas, González, R. and Gascó, 2017; Kaitala and Klepp, 2017), while other researchers have examined how consumer goods can be upcycled (Wilson, 2016). Meanwhile, despite some recent interest, the idea of clothing recycling has been less examined overall. This paper seeks to explore clothing recycling as it relates to advertising and brand practices. Brands like The North Face, H&M and Madewell have engaged in clothing recycling efforts and several others have joined Cotton Incorporated's denim recycling programme, 'Blue Jeans Go Green' (Cotton Incorporated, 2020). Using deconstruction techniques (Stern, 1996; Campbell, 2012) and KWIC (key-word-in-context) analysis of Twitter messaging, this paper examines the promotions of these recycling efforts and argues that while they seem eco-friendly or otherwise sustainable, they also have a 'complicated greenness' (Hepburn, 2013) whereby they also promote additional consumption.

## Literature review

Research into sustainable and/or ethical fashion practices has been complicated by the nature of fashion production. Clothing, which is both a material good and also the prime driver of the immaterial fashion system, is influenced by a host of processes from production and distribution to regulation and consumption (Kaiser, 2012: 13–27). The increased interest in sustainable fashion has led to varied research agendas, including interrogations of sustainable retailing and fast fashion, green branding, retailing of second-hand fashion, logistics in the fashion industry and opportunities in e-commerce (Yang, Song and Tong, 2017: 6). Three areas of research are especially relevant to our present interests. First, researchers have attempted to create various frameworks in order to understand and promote ethical or sustainable fashion (Kowlowski, Bardecki and Searcy, 2012; Haug and Busch, 2016) or otherwise explore the interactions between stakeholders on the production side (Henninger, Alevizou and Oates, 2016; Palomo-Lovinski and Hahn, 2014; Thomas, 2019: 4). Second, researchers have emphasised the role of consumers, especially in the belief that ethical or sustainable branding will be financially lucrative for firms (Beard, 2008; Chan and Wong, 2012; Crane, 2016; De Lenne and Vandenbosch, 2017; Harris, Roby and Dibb, 2016; Hiller Connell, 2010; Joy et al., 2012; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2014; Manchiraju and Sadachar, 2014; Niinimäki, 2010). Third, researchers have specifically explored advertising as a form of mediation between producers and consumers (D'Souza, 2015; Kumar, 2016; Michel et al., 2019),

although efforts toward sustainable fashion practice are often complicated by financial and economic considerations (Hepburn, 2013; Strähle, Will and Freise, 2015).

### ***Frameworks and production***

Kowlowski, Bardecki and Searcy (2012) lay out an intricate framework for apparel lifecycle, noting how the design processes fits in with other business components including product development, business management, finance and marketing. Their focus is on design aspects because this is where 'the bulk of environmental and social impacts are fixed' through choices like material usage and dyeing (28). They also note that for firms to act ethically, they need to understand the entire lifecycle of a product including its purchase and use by consumers and, finally, its disposal (28). Haug and Busch (2016) extend their ethical fashion framework to include actors outside the fashion firm itself, toward regulators, consumers and cultural intermediaries (326–327).

The overlapping and often conflicting uses of terms like 'ethical' and 'sustainable' display another concern within sustainable fashion circles. Broadly speaking, sustainability references a general approach to decreasing negative environmental impacts and preserving resources for future generations, and should be part of an ethical fashion framework. However, the term 'ethical' has been used quite broadly to refer to everything from labour conditions to advertising. Even when stakeholders (e.g., brands, consumers, and organisations) use the same terminology, their understanding of it can vary widely. For example, Henninger, Alevizou and Oates (2016) use a social constructionist approach to 'sustainability' to explore what producers and other involved organisations understand sustainable fashion to be. Ultimately, they find 'that there is no one way of defining what sustainable fashion entails,' (411) although the use of the term provides something of a common understanding different groups can get behind. Thomas (2019) adds that the difference in understanding between designers and managers is especially stark, with the former group prioritising resources and the latter group highlighting design and production capabilities (4). Given the complexity of the fashion system, understanding what constitutes sustainable and ethical practices is especially important; however, existing research shows that stakeholders are rarely on the same page.

### ***Consumer-centred***

As there is little consensus about what constitutes sustainable or ethical fashion on the production side, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are significant internal and external barriers to getting consumers to act eco-consciously (Harris et al., 2016). Beard (2008) argues that consumers have been a driving force toward eco-consciousness including green branding and the development of the vintage market (463–464). However, others have found that those with the ethical convictions to purchase eco-friendly and sustainable garments are a decidedly niche market (Niinimäki, 2010). It seems that while consumers are willing to purchase ethical and sustainable garments, factors like price (Crane, 2016: 254–255) and fashionability (Joy et al., 2012) can override eco-consciousness. Hiller Connell (2010) notes that consumers lack basic knowledge of garments (e.g., information regarding fabrics, governance and craftsmanship), and that educational efforts about where to find sustainable garments, and better product labelling, could help (284). Others have suggested that additional information might help consumers to support ethical practices (Weiss et al., 2014), and some have found that social media content can lead consumers toward more sustainable purchases (De Lenne and Vandenbosch, 2017). Finally, some have examined how consumers are informally extending the lifecycle of clothing through gifting and upcycling old products (Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2017; Laitala and Klepp, 2017; Wilson, 2016).

### **Advertising and communication**

As advertising provides an important site of communication between producers and consumers (Lury, 2004; Moor, 2012), it not surprising that there has been a rise in eco-conscious branding efforts (Kumar, 2016). Seemingly, however, research toward these ends seems to be lagging. Most extensively, Strähle, Will and Freise (2015) explore how fashion retailers communicate sustainable fashion information online, including the impact of using specific materials and in-store recycling or waste management opportunities. They find that retailers' communications rarely expressed how consumers can limit their fashion consumption; the assumed cause being that the retailer did not want to jeopardise a purchase (82).

Such findings mirror the case study research undertaken by others. Hepburn (2013) follows the marketing of Patagonia to argue that the brand relies on its sport and outdoor mystique while distancing itself from a more mainstream understanding of fashion. Patagonia has taken great pains to become more sustainable and lessen the impacts of the materials it uses, and its transparency has helped instil trust in consumers and employees (636–637). However, through its communication, the firm is engaging in practices that can encourage consumers to buy even more; a 'conundrum' Hepburn notes that is 'almost unavoidable in a capitalist, consumer society' (638).

Similarly, Michel et al. (2019) examine Patagonia's consumer-centric blog efforts 'Stories We Wear' to uncover the green branding themes presented within the content. They found several themes, including a desire to keep the garment (long-term use) as a matter of sustainability, emotional attachment or long term investment; telling stories of adventures with the gear; and describing the gear and its wear (171). While the researchers note that this promotion may be a way to address social responsibility, they also point out that it may lead to increased purchases (Michel et al., 2019: 177) – a consideration that would keep Patagonia in the paradox Hepburn noted.

D'Souza (2015) explores the Australian eco-friendly clothing firm Rant Clothing, which does follow 'reduce, reuse, recycle' principles (70). D'Souza notes that Rant explains its sustainability in its product lines, but also in its packaging and marketing (75–75). Unlike Patagonia, Rant leans into its fashion-forwardness, and D'Souza writes that the firm provided a roadmap for how environmentally-friendly clothing brands can push branding forward (76–77). Still, understanding the need to be financially viable (Beard, 2008: 463–464), Rant remains in the same capitalist bind as Patagonia.

### **Methodology**

Understanding the complicated role advertising plays as a mediator between producers and consumers and also as a promotor of eco-consciousness within a capitalist, consumer society, this paper looks at the promotion of clothing recycling efforts from four retailers: American Eagle Outfitters, H&M, Madewell and The North Face. To understand the promotion of these recycling efforts, this paper uses a textual and visual analysis that deconstructs the in-store advertisements, websites (Stern, 1999; Campbell, 2012) and Twitter messages from each brand. Specifically, this analysis will examine the ways in which these advertisements seek to entice consumers to recycle their used clothing. Textual analysis of this sort works to understand the nominative meaning of the images and to explore the underlying 'cultural assumptions that both sustain and subvert' this meaning (Stern, 1996: 62).

The four retailers were chosen in an attempt to understand different market segments:

- American Eagle Outfitters (frequently referred to as just American Eagle) is a US-based teen-focused speciality retailer with 934 global stores as of February 2019; 800 of those are the in the US;

- H&M is a Swedish retailer and fast fashion pioneer with more than 4,433 stores as of November 2018; 578 of those are in the US;
- Madewell is a clothing brand under the J. Crew umbrella with 129 stores within the US; its clothing is also sold in 11 international concession stores;
- The North Face is a higher-end outdoor sporting goods company, focusing on performance apparel and owned by VP Corporation; VP operates more than 200 stores under The North Face brand, and sells its products through partnerships with others stores.

American Eagle and Madewell have both signed up to Cotton Incorporated's denim recycling initiative, Blue Jeans Go Green (Cotton Incorporated, 2020), while H&M billed itself as the 'first fashion retailer' to collect old clothing 'on a global scale' when it launched its recycling efforts in 2012 (H&M, 2013). The North Face's 'Clothes the Loop' recycling programme began in 2013 in the US and internationally in 2016 (Gabriel, 2017).

The visual analysis was supported with a KWIC analysis of Twitter messages referencing 'recycle' or 'recycling' from each of the brands' US-based accounts: @AEO, @hm, @madewell and @thenorthface. Messages were drawn from each of the brands up to the Twitter API limit for data scraping from a single entity (e.g., a brand's handle) – approximately 3,200 tweets per brand. These tweets were then queried with a function designed to call up specific keywords. The full tweets surrounding these words were then inductively coded and analysed, with a focus on iterative themes and relationships between tweets among and across the brands. In addition, tweets were deductively coded for relationships with specified branding foci for the companies, where appropriate.

The in-store promotions were collected through visual ethnographic methods or brief spot observations akin to 'shopper observation.' While Pettinger (2005) used shopper observation to understand labour issues (356–357), in the case of this work the goal was for the researchers to locate and interpret in-store advertisements as an 'ordinary' shopper would, thus allowing for the understanding of the brands' recycling promotions through three different formats: in-store promotion, website advertisements and social media messages.

## Findings

All four brands had websites promoting their recycling efforts and, in the cases of American Eagle and Madewell, were additionally promoted through Cotton Incorporated's Blue Jeans Go Green website. However, while conducting shopper observation at a high-end mall in Dallas, Texas, in February 2020, it was observed that only three brands had in-store signage for their recycling efforts: Madewell, H&M, and The North Face. There was no signage in the American Eagle store. In fact, during the observation, it appeared that a customer brought used denim with him to the American Eagle location, only to discard it in a nearby shopping centre litter bin after his purchase at the store. While this cannot be considered representative, especially due to the limited nature of the spot observations, it certainly matches the researchers' observation that there was no recycling promotion in the American Eagle store.

The total number of tweets from our queries of each brand hovered around 3,200 due to the nature of the limits imposed by the API, but ranged from 3217 sent by @thenorthface to 3250 by @madewell (**Table 1**). The dates likewise varied, with American Eagle's time range from 27 August 2018 to 29 March 2020; H&M, 30 December 2016 to 29 March 2020; Madewell 28 May 2016 to 29 March 2020; and The North Face from 28 April 2016 to 29 March 2020. While less than 1% of the total tweets of each brand referred to 'recycle' or 'recycling', there was a difference between the total number of recycle/ing-focused tweets between brands, with six at the lowest for @ae to 55 at the highest from @madewell, which

**Table 1:** Brand tweets referencing 'recycle' or 'recycling'.

	Total Tweets	Number of overall tweets referencing 'recycle' or 'recycling'	Percentage of tweets referencing 'recycle' or 'recycling'
<i>American Eagle</i>	3234	6	.002%
<i>H&amp;M</i>	3239	28	.008%
<i>Madewell</i>	3250	55	.017%
<i>The North Face</i>	3217	14	.004%

is considerable especially when one takes into account the timeframe within which these tweets occurred.

### *American Eagle*

The brand's recycling efforts were promoted online through a blog post on its corporate website (<https://blog.ae.com/2019/04/01/donate-your-old-jeans-take-10-off-your-new-favorite-pair>). The post was written on 1 April 2019 and continues to be the first Google search result for 'American Eagle recycling'. At a glance, the recycling promotion seems productive, and even useful in consumer efforts to be environmentally friendly. However, upon closer reading one does see complicated greenness, and possibly something even closer to greenwashing.

To start, the most prominent text on the page reads: 'Bring In Your Old Pair of Jeans to Recycle [line break] Get \$10 Off [line break] A New Pair.' The 'Get \$10 Off' is substantially larger than the rest of the wording and is the largest font on the page. It is the most prominent visual aspect of the page other than the animated graphic with three pairs of jeans moving through the well-known recycling triangle. Also, the large promotional text is directly below a similar phrasing at the top of the page that reads, 'Recycle Your Old Jeans + Take \$10 Off Your New Favorite Pair (Important Update).' As such, the campaign invokes imagery of environmentalism (the recycling triangle), even as it clearly promotes further consumption.

Other parts of the post are equally complicated: An 'Important Update' reads, 'We were so inspired by your participation in our jeans recycling event for Earth Day that we decided to keep it going!' However, noting that participation involves both recycling *and* repurchasing jeans, it stands to wonder how much participation is actually ideal. The next paragraphs lead to more problematic entanglements between 'green' and 'consumer'. Geared toward people who are looking to be more environmentally friendly – who have already 'given up plastic straws' and 'ALWAYS have a reusable shopping bag' – the site asks rhetorically, 'what else can you do?' To which the post encourages the following:

Here's an easy one ... get rid of your old jeans. Seriously. Grab that pair that's been taking up precious closet space for years. [...] We'll even give you \$10 off a pair of brand new AE jeans just for pitching in, PLUS we'll plant a tree to help with the wildfire devastation in California.

The call to action is clear: rather than purchase a pair of jeans that are *needed*, the blog post tells consumers to bring something they are not using to turn into something they will use. Again, this promotes increased consumption rather than recycling and reduced consumption. While the page also touts the success of the programme, the advertisement rests on the ease of the recycling. After a brief explainer of the recycling processes, the final

paragraph drives the point home: 'That's it. Easy, right? A tree gets planted, your old jeans stay out of a landfill and help build homes for those in need, and you get \$10 off your new favorite pair.'

Despite these pronouncements, the fine print proves problematic. A user by the name of 'Lindsey' asked when the promotion ends, and American Eagle responded, 'this offer is running for the entire month of April (through 4.30).' Ultimately, the promotion only lasted a month, making this read like a bait-and-switch. Nowhere in the above post is it indicated that the promotion has a finite end date; rather, it reads as a continuous programme. Moreover, as American Eagle is still promoted on Cotton Incorporated's website as a denim recycler, it is at best confusing for consumers (e.g., the one observed by the researchers), and at worst quite disingenuous not to make the limited timeframe clear.

American Eagle's tweets reflect a similarly confusing relationship regarding the timeframe and scope of the recycling effort. Only six tweets were found for the timeframe referenced, two of which are written so as to portray a constant benefit (e.g., 'Hey there, yes! You can bring in any pair of jeans to recycle and receive \$10 off a new pair of jeans,') whereas three read as time-limited and directly related to Earth Day ('Only 9 days left to recycle your old jeans (any brand!) with @discovercotton ...' on 20 April). However, later on 5 July, another tweet confusingly gave a timeframe for recycling 'through the end of the year'. In short, it seems that even the brand itself is confused by the scope of the programme. No tweets from 2020 refer directly to 'recycle' or 'recycling'. The most interesting thing about these tweets, however, is what is missing. Tweets found by searching for 'recycle' or 'recycling' *only* referred to the recycling programme for jeans. There was no mention of recycled fabrics, nor recycling in the day-to-day activity of the company. This makes the programme seem like a one-off, rather than woven into the fabric of the company more broadly.

### **H&M**

The retailers' 'Garment Collection Program' was both promoted online ([https://www2.hm.com/en\\_us/women/campaigns/16r-garment-collecting.html](https://www2.hm.com/en_us/women/campaigns/16r-garment-collecting.html)) and in store. The promotional design is relatively simple: a monochromatic green box with a green textile seemingly floating in the background with white sans serif letting. The theme was seen both on the H&M website and on its in-store display. The website begins with bold lettering encouraging, 'Be A Fashion Recycler.' The text underneath goes on to explain, 'The Garment Collection Program is a global initiative where H&M set out for a sustainable fashion future.' It goes on to promote rewearing, reusing and recycling. Consumers are told to 'Drop your bag of unwanted clothing in the recycling box at your local store,' and the site explains that all textiles are welcomed 'even odd socks, worn-out T-shirts and old sheets'. Then, for the clincher, the call ends with, 'For every bag of textiles you drop off, you'll receive a discount card for 15% off your next in-store purchase.' Here, the brand's focus on rewear, reuse and recycle implies that some clothing and products can be salvaged for others in need worldwide. And the three-pronged solution riffs on 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle,' (EPA, 2020), again a common refrain in environmental activism. However, the 15% off still encourages further consumption.

The in-store promotion and recycling boxes, which are located next to the cash registers, actually give more substantive information than the online site. The boxes and accompanying signage (**Figure 1**) announce that consumers will get 15% off their purchase for donating. Further, the signage explains, 'For every pound collected we'll make a donation to Keep America Beautiful a nonprofit organization focused on the environment and environmental improvement.' Meanwhile, the box shares that for every bag donated, consumers will receive a 'double reward of 2 coupons!' Again, H&M is offering a discount on future purchases, thus making this a complicated green effort; but it is also, at least textually, promoting the



**Figure 1:** The recycling drop-off bin H&M at NorthPark Center in Dallas, Texas, USA, sits next to the cash register on 2 February 2020. © Myles Ethan Lascity.

reweaving and reuse of clothing. H&M also appears to be attempting to limit the need for new clothing; however, there is a dissociation of the consumer that H&M is targeting from the potential benefit of that rework clothing, as the text reads 'worldwide,' suggesting both 'elsewhere' and 'other people.'

There were 27 mentions of 'recycle' and 'recycling' in H&M tweets (one tweet contained both 'recycle' and 'recycling' and thus was only counted once) for the period studied. Of those tweets, 10 referred directly to their recycling programme, two provided general information about recycling, (e.g., 'did you know that 95% of all clothes that get thrown away could be reworn, reused, or recycled?'), and the remaining 15 broadly referenced recycled components of clothing sold by H&M. Notably, the tweets that directly referenced H&M's recycling programme often referred to 'old' (three tweets)/'unwanted' textiles (three tweets) or the phrase 'rewear, reuse, recycle' (four tweets). However, these tweets do not refer to *who* will do the wearing of this used clothing, only that it can be 'reworn, reused, [or] recycled.' The most recent recycle/recycling programme-related tweet was on 10 August 2019.

### **Madewell**

In contrast to American Eagle's Blue Jeans Go Green promotion, Madewell has seemingly leaned into the recycling effort long-term. Madewell uses both in-store signage (**Figure 2**) and website promotion (<https://www.madewell.com/inspo-do-well-denim-recycling-landing.html>), along with its own 'Do Well' branding to forward the campaign. The online site is part of a larger 'Inspo' microsite within the Madewell homepage that includes a host of corporate social responsibility elements, including tips on how to care for denim (thereby increasing its longevity), and promotional content on LGBTQ+ support, women's empowerment and clean water initiatives.



**Figure 2:** A sign hanging on the wall in Madewell, located at NorthPark Center in Dallas, Texas, USA promotes the company's denim recycling programme on 2 February 2020. © Myles Ethan Lascity.

The denim recycling page itself begins by announcing 'Recycle Your Denim With Us' and notes its partnership with Blue Jeans Go Green. This is directly above four photos showing denim in relation to building projects and insulation made from the denim. The following paragraph encourages consumers to stop by a store with a pair of 'pre-loved' jeans and notes that the 'Blue Jeans Go Green' programme will turn the denim into insulation and that Madewell will give consumers \$20 off a new pair.

In explaining what counts as a 'pre-loved' pair of jeans, Madewell writes that jeans can be 'from any brand: the bootcuts from high school, the baggy ones from your skater days, the bright red ones from who knows when'. The point is that these jeans have been used in some form. This is unlike American Eagle's promotion, which emphasises getting rid of jeans – that might be fine, but not fit *you* – in an attempt to be environmentally friendly. Comparatively, Madewell emphasises the fact that these jeans are used, even in their euphemism of 'pre-loved.'

Madewell's site provides quantitative statistics of its promotions in 'Denim by the numbers.' These stats include the 830,714 pairs of jeans recycled since the Madewell partnership began, that 80% of the insulation made by Blue Jeans Go Green came from post-consumer products, 1,108 houses were built from the insulation and 415 tons of waste were saved from landfill. And, if the numbers are not enough to sell consumers on the programme, the brand goes a step further to note there are 'Infinite good vibes from giving back.' Both the numbers and the idea of 'good vibes' suggest there is something rewarding about being part of the solution, rather than hinging the recycling efforts on the coupon for new jeans.

This fact is also picked up on in an animated video Madewell includes at the bottom of its site. The short, 45-second video, again explains the process. This starts with the question 'Got an old pair of jeans?' and next shows an animated pair of worn jeans (**Figure 3**), depicted with obvious wear and tear. After going through the donation process, the video notes that the jeans will be made into insulation 'for communities in need'. Finally, towards the end of the video, a post scriptum is added: 'PS: For every pair of jeans you recycle with Madewell ... you get \$20 off a new one (Win-Win, Right?)'. Again, Madewell is assuming that helping



**Figure 3:** Madewell's promotion shows old jeans in the company's YouTube video and on its website. © YouTube.

environmental efforts – or humanitarian efforts – is a winning proposition on its own merits, and that the savings are just an added benefit.

Finally, this same feeling can be seen in Madewell's in-store signage. The promotional signage is displayed prominently in the Madewell store, on the wall directly to the left of the entrance. The sign uses the 'Do Well' logo and reads 'Turn Old Jeans Into Good Vibes', highlighting the feel-good nature of recycling. The black-and-white graphic that is also included on the website is framed below the wording, as are the Blue Jeans Go Green logo, Madewell's logo, and the logo for 'Habitat for Humanity', which is one of the groups that receives insulation from the company's efforts. Again, this promotion rests on social and environmental benefits as well as on the financial benefit for the consumer. Madewell had 55 tweets that contained 'recycle' or 'recycling' during the period queried. Notably, during that timeframe they had a 'Denim Forever Tour' on which they had local pickup spots for recycled jeans beyond their stores. This focused in-depth on encouraging people all over the country to recycle (e.g. 'add to your phone alarm memo...tomorrow, recycle your jeans...') and Madewell offered everything from free jeans ('How do we do well? By recycling your old jeans & giving out free pairs, for starters...'), to promotions for coffee @HighBrewCoffee, custom embroidery by @ftlonesome and wine from @unionwine to get people interested, beyond the \$20 off. Madewell also tagged influencer and photographer Alivia Latimer for recycling her jeans; comparatively, H&M referenced influencers, but only in relation to wearing new clothing made with recycled content. The account also called for organisations that may want to host a denim recycling drive in a single tweet. Overall, 47 of the 55 tweets directly referenced Madewell's recycling programme, with the remaining eight referencing recycled content within new clothing. Of the 47 tweets that referenced the recycling programme, four specifically referenced recycling 'pre-loved' jeans, 16 simply 'old' jeans/pairs, and one 'used' denim. Ten tweets gave no modifier for 'jeans/pairs/denim' and simply referred to them as such. Still, the messaging is indeed more clearly geared toward encouraging the idea that the jeans have a 'life' before they are donated. Madewell's latest 'recycle/recycling' tweet occurred on 17 July 2019, with concentrated tweets during the 'Denim Days' tour.

### ***The North Face***

The North Face's Clothes The Loop programme has various similarities to Madewell's efforts, including a unifying promotional logo and language, and emphasis on clothing being used before being discarded. The branding extends to in-store promotion as well (**Figure 4**). Unlike Madewell, however, The North Face partners with a nonprofit organisation, 'Soles4Souls', whose 'mission is to create sustainable jobs and provide relief through the distribution of shoes and clothing' (The North Face, n.d.). As The North Face is not a denim producer, an alternative alliance would be make strategic sense.

On the Clothes the Loop webpage (<https://www.thenorthface.com/about-us/responsibility/product/clothes-the-loop.html>), the emphasis is on the lifecycle of clothing and other goods. The promotional material emphasises 'outgrowing' and 'wearing through' clothes before just replacing them. Even the incentive offered by The North Face – \$10 off a purchase of \$100 or more – is a smaller percentage than is offered by the other brands being examined. Further, the North Face's Clothes the Loop site introduces its partnership with Soles4Souls by noting that the recycled items 'are repurposed for micro-enterprise programs' which help provide small business opportunities. More importantly, the site adds, 'Clothes the Loop stems from our commitment to reduce the environmental impacts of our products at all stages of their life cycle, including extending the life of apparel and footwear to keep it out of landfills.' Again, this underscores extending the lifecycle of products as opposed to emphasising the purchase and consumption of new products.



**Figure 4:** The recycle drop-off bin at The North Face location at NorthPark Center in Dallas, Texas, USA sits in an unused corner at the front of the store on 2 February 2020. © Myles Ethan Lascity.

At the bottom of the page is an infographic which implores people to 'Protect Our Playground' and gives more information about the programme and its environmental impact. The graphic notes that an estimated 10 million tons of textiles go to landfill each year and that

95% of those goods could have been reused or recycled. The left hand of the graphic explains that the programme works by 'Recycling,' where consumers bring in their used apparel and footwear; 'Rewarding,' where they receive their coupon after placing their items in the bin; and, 'Renewing,' where the goods are used to lift people out of poverty. Interestingly, this entire programme promotes recycling at the same time as it promotes clothing longevity. The unstated assumption is that doing both protects the environment, although there is no direct incentive for reducing actual consumption built into the programme.

Compared to both H&M and Madewell, the recycling bin and in-store signage at The North Face location is less prominent; the bin is located near the front of the store, but around the corner from the main entryway. Without looking for it, a consumer would be unlikely to see it. The circular bin has the large Clothes the Loop logo and similar imagery from the website. The large lettering reading 'Recycle Used Apparel & Footwear Here,' again focuses on the used aspects from the donations rather than the monetary incentive to buy more products. In fact, the bin does not indicate the financial incentive at all, rather it points customers to find more information on the website mentioned above. At the same time, the smaller wording expresses that it is an 'innovative program,' but there is no specific justification for that. However, even on The North Face's website there is little explanation of what is 'innovative' about the programme.

Of the 14 North Face tweets that referenced recycle/recycling, 12 referenced recyclable/recycled materials used in the company's clothing, one tweet gave general information about recycling ('Only 15% of the 25 million pounds of textiles made in the US are recycled. Learn how companies are solving this...'), and one gave information about the recycling program. The one tweet that referenced the recycling programme assured a user that 'Our stores have recycling bins for items of all kinds...' (22 July 2017). However, it is worth noting again that in-store the observed labelling was for 'apparel and footwear' only.

## Discussion

Ultimately, as Hepburn (2013) noted, advertising for environmentally friendly products within a consumer culture is an often paradoxical undertaking: how can advertising promote environmentally friendly efforts without also encouraging further consumption and brand patronage, and still stay viable as an enterprise? From the four retailers analysed, it is clear that the promotion of clothing recycling efforts can be seen as a spectrum of varied levels of 'complicated' greenness, as the focus on consumer incentives versus education or promotion of sustainability is varied. As there is no clear guidance on sustainable practices from production (Henninger, Alevizou and Oates, 2016; Thomas, 2019), nor a clear understanding of what practices inspire consumers to act more eco-consciously (Crane, 2016), it might be asking a lot of retailers to get this balance right. However, if retailers and their stakeholders were able to adopt a framework that takes into account the complete lifecycle of garments (Kowalski, Bardecki and Searcy, 2012), perhaps then advertising could also move in that direction (Strähle, Will and Freise, 2015). There is certainly a tension that comes from critiquing brands that are making efforts toward 'green' ends when so many others are not even trying. As such, this discussion offers critiques in a spirit of uncovering potential areas for improvement rather than forwarding overly harsh invectives.

### *Getting rewarded*

A key component of 'complicated greenness' seen in these cases is that brands' messaging and approaches valorise future consumption as a reward for 'doing the green thing' and recycling. However, this reveals a key tension: can brands still make a profit while supporting less consumption? If consumers keep clothing longer and make good choices about purchases

in the first place, and if firms take responsibility for production processes and the waste produced through recycling and other efforts, there could perhaps be real change in the industry. But this is not what is occurring at this time.

In these four cases, we still see brands attempting to entice consumers to recycle their clothing through a 'reward' centred on consumption. Granted, a potential alternative might be to purchase new clothing *without* recycling used products, which would be worse. But in benefitting from the 'green' associations of their recycling initiatives through increased sales or attention, brands do have a certain responsibility to provide transparent and ethical discussions of the efficacy and scope of these programmes. On the low end, we might ask if these kinds of initiatives could encourage responsible consumption alongside/on a par with recycling, at least (i.e., keep your Madewell jeans for at least two years OR recycle any pair – wear them and tag #rewearyourpair in store or bring in your old jeans to recycle; we'll give you \$20 off in store either way). On the high end, we wonder if such initiatives could offer other types of structurally focused 'rewards' for consumer action. For instance, 'OK, H&M shoppers – if you increase the amount of textile recycling you do this year vs. last year, we're going to change our company processes to better support lower-waste design in X way.'

### ***Lack of training/teaching***

Overall, there was a very low level of general information or recommendations offered by brands about how to consume less or how to consider an alternative shopping approach. This supports Strähle, Will and Freise's (2015) argument that brands miss a key communicative component when they do not inform shoppers of how to consume more sustainably. The level of information offered to consumers about how to decrease consumption could be a marker of a more or less evolved approach to encouraging recycling; put another way, it could be a hallmark of a brand's dedication to sustainable practices, rather than a dedication to green-sounding (read: profitable) initiatives, if they actually teach their consumers how to buy less.

### ***A nod in a green direction***

As seen in the above analysis, steps toward teaching about environmental issues among the brands studied here are veiled, and at this point, mostly semantic or buzzword-focused. Still, Madewell and The North Face emphasise the idea that donated products are outgrown, worn out or otherwise 'pre-loved' (to use Madewell's term) – they're 'old,' they're 'used.' This is an important modifier, and one that is lacking in American Eagle's promotion, for instance. Extending the life of garments remains a key practice that can limit the environmental impact of clothing waste through source reduction and, as such, implying or suggesting that the garments donated have been used or otherwise have outlived their usefulness can be seen as a nod toward supporting using what one has.

### ***Messaging confusion***

Some brands had contradictory online messaging, tweets and in-store realities. This confused customers, as evidenced by several tweets asking for clarity on the recycling processes of various retailers studied, and as witnessed in the spot observations. Any messaging and programming related to recycling is potentially beneficial – but consumers will be more apt to participate if they understand the rules, timelines and approaches to these programmes.

### ***Lack of structural/process-based responsibility***

While The North Face, Madewell and H&M did reference using recycled fabrics, and each of the brands chosen had a recycling programme of some sort, the focus on recycling and con-

sumer action (e.g., bring in your clothes, save the world) takes centre-stage across the board, leaving a whole sector of action that brands could be taking – structural, internal manufacturing and processual change – unspoken. Not only does this beg the question of how consumer efforts are driving structural change, but also the question of how businesses themselves can ‘rewear, reuse, recycle’. Environmentally-conscious messaging related to customer incentives can encourage focus on one particular avenue of ‘change making’ – the consumer – and cloak shortcomings on the part of corporations. The question of ‘what’s missing’ and what else brands can do to make their overall structures and processes more sustainable remains an important opportunity for corporate responsibility and communication with consumers.

### ***One foot in, one foot out***

Dedication to the recycling initiative is of key importance for the impact of the recycling plan and for clear messaging to the consumer. American Eagle, for instance, joined the Blue Jeans Go Green campaign for a day and then a month. But the brand is still being promoted by the Cotton Incorporated website. Generously, one might see American Eagle’s commitment to recycling as simply time-limited or, more cynically, one could see the continued reward that American Eagle is experiencing from a time-limited programme as an example of profiting from greenwashing. Meanwhile, The North Face and H&M have had garment recycling promotions for seven and eight years, respectively, and Madewell has year-round recycling opportunities as well as ‘recycling tours.’

### ***Where to send gains from recycling initiatives***

These brands have varied approaches to ‘paying it forward’ with their recycling initiatives, and the unstated assumption is that the programmes and beneficiaries are undoubtedly doing good and should be supported. However, The North Face’s efforts working with Soles4Souls, which focuses on micro-enterprises to help lift people out of poverty, is one example of a beneficial-sounding but potentially problematic endeavour. While the programme’s website (soles4souls.com) seems vague about the locations of the microenterprises, it seems likely that these recycled garments end up being sent to the developing world. Other efforts to import secondhand clothing to developing countries have been criticised for undercutting local economic development (Brooks, 2015; Chitrakorn, 2017; De Freytas-Tamura, 2017). Comparatively, using the recycled denim to create insulation to be used in ‘Habitat for Humanity’ building projects, as the Blue Jeans Go Green campaign does, could offer a more local, non-disruptive approach to recycling. However, all of this still leaves potential reuse or upcycling of used but not worn-out garments off the table.

### ***Cui bono?***

The final question that is raised by our analysis is, roughly, who benefits? We noted that brands often did not give voice or specificity to who was being helped – e.g. Soles4Souls had unclear messaging about what groups would be beneficiaries. Without transparency, ‘paying it forward’ can disconnect the consumer from the overall process of environmental protection and ethical fashion, while leaving brands unaccountable. When clothing is responsibly recycled or reused, there is a benefit to the consumer, directly and indirectly, beyond just a \$10 reduction coupon. There is benefit to society beyond housing insulation. Brands have an opportunity to message about the importance of *collective* environmental protection and action, and the *collective* benefits of such an approach – connecting the consumer and the eventual beneficiary of the programme in a way that shows they’re in this environment thing together – but this isn’t happening currently. We found general informational messaging was very sparse, with ‘Do Well’ and other messaging about the importance of doing good often

unclear, and the specific connection to the existential benefit for society often ignored in favour of individual, monetary gain.

## Conclusion

With current economic realities, including a hearty cultural focus on consumerism and the steady rise of fast fashion in the zeitgeist, most (if not all) promotional efforts to be environmentally conscious these days will likely prove complicated. For fashion brands, moving toward environmentally friendly practices is complex not only due to production considerations, but also due to the expectations that today's consumer has about the cost of that product. We cannot let good efforts within the industry go unnoticed, but we likewise must continue to hold brands to a higher standard of responsibility for the externalities (i.e. waste) created by their wares, upon which they profit.

This work found that the promotion of fashion recycling efforts is complicated because it promotes recycling *while also* promoting additional consumption. Yet, there is ample room for growth and optimism for future efforts. In this case, we were able to identify some brands' current promotional practices as marginally more effective at encouraging and supporting sustainable practices than others. Yet, irrespective of these differences, the overall take-away is that there is capacious room for improvement in both sustainable practices and sustainable advertising for every brand in the clothing sector, including the four assessed here. Encouraging fashion brands and other advertisers to move toward design, processes and promotions that a) increase the longevity of clothing, b) support socially-conscious groups and efforts with transparent processes and beneficiaries, and c) provide for ethical reuse of textiles that remain usable and/or responsible recycling or disposal of textiles past their use, is certainly appropriate. While brands' commitment to recycling efforts may vary, consumers and companies alike can drive change by adopting greener habits, supporting recycling initiatives within and beyond brands' programmes, and holding brands and the industry accountable for structural change. And while fashion brands still have a long way to go before their recycling efforts are truly 'sustainable', these first steps at change — even limited as they are — give us a tiny peek at what corporate responsibility and leadership within the 'greenness' realm could do for the planet.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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