

DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY: HOW ONLINE  
ACTIVISM CAN LEAD TO OFFLINE ACTION

by  
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This research asks: What makes a digital environmental advocacy campaign successful, and how can the social media platform Instagram influence success? Digital environmental activism and advocacy build on non-digital activist efforts to educate people about environmental issues and bring people together to fight for solutions. While digital spaces allow activists to reach a wider audience, “wider audiences translate into the loss of meaningful engagement and impactful activism” (Jacqmarcq, 2021). Activists need to find methods to engage online audiences offline and combat the increased spread of misinformation that occurs on the internet. Successful environmental advocacy campaigns typically employ a mix of emotionally appealing visuals, such as images, and some sort of education, but succinct text. Audiences also typically respond more favorably to campaigns that they can personally connect to or relate to. This research will evaluate existing literature on environmental activism and advocacy and aim to address gaps in the research. The project will conclude with an implementation of the findings in the form of an Instagram account targeted at providing alternatives to fast fashion overconsumption in audiences looking for solutions.

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## Introduction

Social media and the internet have become incredibly popular tools for environmental advocacy groups and sustainable companies to raise awareness about important environmental issues and encourage audience involvement in their campaigns. In the context of environmentalism, advocacy campaigns are defined as “A strategic course of action involving communication that is undertaken for a specific purpose” (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018). Often, the “specific purpose” of environmental advocacy campaigns is to initiate audience behavioral changes, educate audiences on critical environmental issues, or advocate for specific political action. This is especially prevalent with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that aim to create changes in human behaviors, which negatively impact the environment. The photo below illustrates anti-plastic-straw advocacy. The image, taken from Figgner’s 2015 video, features a sea turtle with a plastic straw stuck up its nostril, which went viral on the internet. The Anti-Plastic Straw Movement’s success can be partly attributed to the video and similar content showing animals hurt by human plastic use.



Figure 1: “Sea Turtle with Straw up its Nostril”

Source: Sea Turtle Biologist on YouTube

People often feel emotions such as empathy or compassion for “cute” animals like sea turtles, and these images are impactful in motivating behavioral changes.

The Last Plastic Straw campaign and videos like the one pictured above have contributed to restrictions on single-use plastic products nationwide and globally. Continuing with the plastic straw example, in 2017, Lonely Whale, an organization aiming to keep plastic out of the ocean, began partnering with companies throughout Seattle, such as the Seattle Mariners, the Sea-Tac Airport, and the Seattle Aquarium, to reduce the use of plastic straws. In 2018, Seattle became the first major city in the United States to ban plastic straws, at least in part because of Lonely Whale's activism. Environmental advocacy campaigns are a form of environmental communication, which broadly refers to any communication relating to the environment. Understanding environmental communication is essential for successful environmental advocacy because as Julie Corbett, author of *Communicating Nature* asserts, "Part of (the solution to environmental problems) is a bigger and broader understanding of how we 'talk' to each other - in word, thought, and practice-about natural resources and our relationship with them" (Corbett, 2006, p. 8).

This research will analyze the methods used by environmental groups and companies on digital platforms, focusing on which methods are successful and which are not. Success will be loosely defined as audience engagement with the materials and actual behavioral changes, as well as policy changes following the campaign. Comforts and Hester define the "three dimensions of social media messaging success" by NGOs as volume, referring to how often the NGO posts, topic or valence, referring to their ability to stay with the relevant topic, and participants, referring to the public engagement with the posts (Comforts & Hester, 2019, p. 282). This research builds on Comforts and Hester's findings, stating that there needs to be evidence to demonstrate a direct relationship between engagement with the campaign and subsequent behavioral or political change. With the above example, if the video had received the

same 110 million views but had no tangible impact, it would not have been considered successful under these requirements. The scale of a campaign or social media account can differ significantly, affecting these success parameters. For example, a smaller creator may have a few thousand followers, while a larger brand may have over a million. Some campaigns aim for a global impact, while many hope to create change within a smaller community. As the analysis depends on the campaign's traction and potential to influence political movements, I will primarily focus on these more widespread campaigns that have garnered mainstream news attention or significant audience engagement. The analysis will focus on campaigns centered around overconsumption or improper use of materials, discussing the campaigns themselves, the ways popular media (mainly mainstream news sites) cover the campaigns/issues, and the campaigns' impacts. The analysis will conclude with a summary of the key factors that contribute to the success of an environmental digital campaign. The project itself will conclude with a creative element in the form of an Instagram account targeted at combating fast fashion overconsumption.

## Literature Review

### Introducing (Digital) Environmental Communication

Environmental Communication is an intersectional and broad field, encompassing communication about any environment-related topic, from wildfires to recreational kayaking, to endangered species, and everything in between. Phaedra Pezzullo and Robert Cox, authors of *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* (2018), define **communication** as “expression in specific contexts, as well as the significance of these symbolic modes of interaction to create shared meanings, values, and/or actions.” Communication is valuable in helping people share their perspectives or thoughts, and in bringing people together over a shared interest. This is important in environmental activism, as there is power in numbers. Often, activism relies on people communicating about the issues to the people around them, as well as people coming together to create actions toward change. Scholars often draw inspiration from linguistics to delve more deeply into the various aspects of communication, including visual and written elements, as well as the impact of communication on the audience engaging with it. In this context, communication becomes more symbolic, and analysis focuses on “what we express, how we express it, and/or with what *consequences*” (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018). **Environmental Communication** addresses communication from an environmental lens and can be defined as “Pragmatic and constitutive modes of expression - the naming, shaping, orienting, and negotiating - of our ecological relationships in the world, including those with nonhuman systems, elements, and species” (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018). This emphasis on the nonhuman is vital because the environmental issues addressed through environmental advocacy and activism do not solely impact humans. **Digital environmental communication** refers to the use of digital media as part of environmental communication. This includes, but is not limited to, social media,

digital forms of general news articles, and nongovernmental organizations' (NGO) websites that focus on environmental issues. Pezzullo and Cox state that, "digital media continue(s) to transform how we circulate arguments, record events, issue calls to action, network, and more, we need to continue to assess how we are publicizing and/or privatizing environmental communication" (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018). They outline the goals of digital environmental communication as alerting people to the issues, amplifying important voices and perspectives, and engaging in online and offline activism.

This research will primarily focus on expanding our understanding of the offline impacts of online activism, while also examining how online engagement may support or hinder offline movements. Digital platforms also allow spaces for activists to grow their networks and collaborate on projects. Additionally, NGOs can build an identity and create ways for their work to be recognizable to audiences, which is helpful in building support and maintaining a personable approach to their work.

### **Addressing limitations of collaborative media**

Limitations to collaborative media, including social media, include a lack of fact-checking and the potential for individuals to disseminate false information. Other limitations include shorter attention spans from exposure to fast-moving short-form content, negative emotions, and inaction due to the consistent influx of content on collaborative media platforms. Solutions journalism, a type of journalism and communication that emphasizes solutions to societal issues, introduces us to a solutions-based perspective that could help mitigate negative emotions and feelings of being overwhelmed by content on collaborative media.

### *Disinformation and misinformation*

Social media applications also allow space for organizations that are not supportive of environmental advocacy to spread misinformation or disinformation. Chen's study on combating climate misinformation cites three main types of climate change misinformation: existence denial, attribution denial, and impact denial (Chen, 2024, pp. 184-185). Much environment-related misinformation stems from what Löwgren and Reimer define as **collaborative media**. They propose collaborative media as "a form of mediated communication whereby people collaborate on messages, content, and meaning" (Löwgren & Reimer, 2013, p. 4). On the use of collaborative media in "societal crises" like the COVID-19 pandemic or periods with intense climate change impacts, Karhu states, "For constructing a crisis response based on positive citizen engagement, there needs to be a specific focus on collaboration in online environments" (Karhu, 2023, p. 6). Karhu argues that for online activism to succeed in bringing people together for a specific cause, there needs to be room for collaboration in the communication. Citizen journalism, a form of collaborative media, has become increasingly prevalent on social media, leading to an increase in misinformation and disinformation from a wide range of sources, many of which lack the proper credentials to discuss specific topics. **Citizen journalism** is defined as "When citizens in the general public, not trained in the field of journalism, share information (usually via social media) about an environmental event or condition they have witnessed and/or wish to advocate on behalf of" (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018).

While it is valuable to have people who are not experts and have personal experience with an event involved in conversations, collaborative media can become a negative when used maliciously to spread disinformation. In some cases, individuals opposed to a specific message may employ the "**firehose strategy**," which involves disseminating a multitude of potentially false statements, thereby burying the truth. In such situations, it is beneficial for NGOs or

activists to have a well-established digital presence to counteract misleading statements. DeLuca touches on the limitations of environmentalism in the digital age, discussing the audience's shorter attention spans due to the large number of public screens and constantly changing media in public and on mobile devices (DeLuca, 2024, p. 658). One potential strategy to combat mis/disinformation and maintain audience attention is to utilize “**refutation texts**,” which are “texts that rebut scientific misconceptions and explain the normative concept” (Nussbaum et al., 2017). Nussbaum and collaborators found that refutation texts are effective in “increasing knowledge and addressing the misconceptions that they were designed to address,” but are only successful if the intended audience engages with them. Chen's findings on combating misinformation agree that there is value in refutation texts from credible sources that the audience trusts.

**Brandolini's principle** defines another barrier to open communication platforms, stating that it is far more difficult to debunk misinformation or disinformation than it is to spread it (Bergstrom & West, 2021). Misinformation is information that is unintentionally misleading or false, while disinformation is intentionally designed to mislead or harm the audience. Due to the level of difficulty involved in changing people's minds about scientific issues, my project's target audience will be individuals seeking solutions or alternatives to their habits of overconsumption.

### *Solutions journalism and solutions-based perspectives*

**Solutions journalism**, which the Solutions Journalism Network states “investigates and explains, in a critical and clear-eyed way, how people try to solve widely shared problems,” could be used to construct a framework for combating the feelings of inaction or defeat that often come from environmental news stories (Solutions Journalism, 2020). Solutions journalism

balances discussing the problem while also exploring how people or groups are attempting to address the issue, examining both the benefits and limitations of a given solution. Thier and Lin explore how solutions journalism fosters support for “collective climate change adaptation,” arguing that current news media coverage often frames climate change as individual disasters or events. A focus on potential solutions to climate change, they suggest, could increase individuals’ desire to act (Thier & Lin, 2022). The study focused on college students, examining how solution-based stories influence audience perceptions of responsibility. It hypothesized that these stories would increase attribution of responsibility to governments and businesses, while reducing attribution of responsibility to individuals, ultimately leading to support for collective action against climate change. While Thier and Lin's hypotheses about attribution were not entirely accurate because the perceived attributions did not change after audiences read solution-based stories rather than problem-based content, they did find that the existing attributions supported “collective action toward climate change” (Thier & Lin, 2022, p. 1035). Thier and Lin also found that individuals felt increased “perceived behavioral control” from reading solutions-based stories, though there was no increase in “feelings of hope” (Thier & Lin, 2022, p. 1036).

A recent University of Oregon study found that solutions journalism stories increased “pro-environmental behaviors” (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024). While authors Maduneme and Cohen found a positive correlation between solution stories and engagement with climate change-related news, they also found that there needs to be a balance between exploring solutions and emphasizing the need for further work. In the study’s discussion they declare, “where individuals read about how others are tackling the issue of climate change, they may feel positive and confident about the solutions while also simultaneously thinking it is no longer their responsibility since others have already taken the subject on” (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024, p.

259). Along with a focus on solutions and forward movement, honing in on a specific and tangible goal with specific objectives can be beneficial for motivating action. The “**Dragonfly Effect**” explains how social media can be utilized as a tool to create social change when users focus on a specific goal (Aaker & Smith, 2010). A solutions-based framework that builds on ideas from solutions journalism would include a focus on addressing both the issue and potential solutions, which could be utilized on social media to further motivate action and educate audiences.

### **Analyzing communication styles**

While digital campaign strategies differ based on the target audience, the platform, message, and current communication trends, effective and ineffective campaigns share many notable commonalities.

#### *Visual appeals*

The visuals and images that make up a campaign are particularly influential on audiences. Much of the literature on how visuals influence people’s behaviors on social media centers on applications such as Instagram and Twitter, as well as issues like climate change. These platforms rely on algorithms to determine whether people will be exposed to specific media, and audience engagement with the media typically drives these algorithms. Therefore, when more people engage with a campaign, more people will see it. Effective media can motivate audiences to take action offline as well, encouraging them to participate in activism efforts and make positive behavioral changes. León and collaborators explore the potential of social media campaigns to motivate political action, finding that visual representations, including photographs, graphics, and videos, are effective in enhancing engagement and educating audiences. Effective visuals are essential because, as the authors state, “Interaction with climate

content on social media is relevant to citizen actions on climate and their attitudes towards climate policy” (León et al., 2022). The authors additionally state that the types of images that are most effective depend on the audience's background and values, as well as the intended purpose of the communication. Generally, images featuring real people, telling a story, and incorporating a local connection are often the most successful.

### *Emotional appeals*

Interaction with campaigns is typically prevalent when the posts evoke a sense of empathy or connection to the discussed issue. This is generally achieved by graphically illustrating the issue, telling a story, making the topic relatable to the audience, or showing the impacts and actions being taken by those affected by the problems (León et al., 2022). Both images below, from National Geographic articles, exemplify effective strategies for engaging people with content.



Figure 2: “Meet the mom who took on toxic waste – and won”

Source: National Geographic

The image above depicts Lois Gibbs fighting to remove toxic chemical waste from her hometown of the Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls. The area was a previous dumping ground for

harmful chemicals in the 1940s and 50s, leading to major health issues for residents. Gibbs's political action led to the federal government declaring the area a national emergency site, and by 1980, 950 families had been evacuated. The image and story appeal to audiences because Gibbs's success story is inspiring, many people can relate to being a mom or caring about family, and the discussion of "toxic waste" has negative associations regarding its long-term effects, which evoke empathetic feelings.



Figure 3: "Fast fashion dump in Chile's Atacama Desert"

Source: National Geographic

The image shows a man walking on a fast fashion dump site. The size of the mass of clothes compared to the size of the man, as well as the text targeting the audience with the word "your," makes the issue more personal.

Visual and written communication have a significant impact on audiences, either motivating action or leading to inaction. People tend to be demotivated and less likely to take action or make changes when faced with knowledge that can lead to negative emotional responses, such as fear, helplessness, and/or guilt, which makes it valuable to find balance when creating an environmental advocacy campaign that utilizes images (Norgaard, 2011). Hart and collaborators found that while negative sentiments in environmental communication can increase engagement, "This does not mean that environmental organizations should only focus on

negative sentiment without also offering actions that individuals can take to address the issue” (Sol Hart et al., 2024).

### *Social media as a tool for inclusive environmentalism*

Nicole Seymour, author of *Bad Environmentalism*, critiques the fact that a significant portion of environmental and scientific knowledge is inaccessible to the broader public because it employs complex language designed primarily for other scientists to understand. Seymour turns to films as a medium to examine alternative approaches to communicating environmental issues and solutions, though her findings are transferable to other forms of media, such as social media. Seymour argues that you do not need to be a scientist or even a self-proclaimed “environmentalist” to care about and discuss the environment. Including ordinary people in the conversation provides space for accessible language, innovative ideas and approaches to issues, and an overall increase in awareness of environmental issues. However, it also opens the door to potential misinformation and fearmongering. Lambrinidou advocates for community involvement in scientific communication, asserting, “It is also important that scientists and communicators working with communities resist the temptation to view themselves as ‘heroes,’ ‘martyrs,’ or ‘saviors,’” (Kearns, 2021). On the other hand, it is crucial for individuals who are aware of the truth behind an issue to have a stronger voice than those who may not be as informed and have the potential to spread misinformation. It is essential to communicate both the issue and potential solutions to address it.

It is also valuable to maintain humility when using platforms like social media to avoid sounding like an all-knowing being with all the solutions (Seymour, 2018). Seymour advocates for the use of “humor and irony” in communication to remain relatable while also conveying the message to a broader audience. Furthering the emphasis on relatability, much of social media’s

success in gaining traction for activism stems from the opportunities for collaborative communication and for people to share their own experiences with the issue or the activism movement (Maryville University, 2023).

### *The value of language*

The wording used in a campaign involving a call-to-action or other behavioral or political movements is additionally valuable. Environmental messaging is not only used in advocacy campaigns but also in other forms of advertising for products or media. Emotional appeals are typically effective in both advertisements and environmental campaigns, though the specific wording of these appeals relies heavily on the target audience (Decker & Feier, 2023). Decker and Feier found that people tend to think more favorably about advertisements that use positive language but are less likely to follow through with whatever the advertisement is asking.

Pezzullo and Cox propose that the disconnect between people caring about the environment and acting sustainably is an “**attitude-behavior gap**,” continuing to argue that campaigns aimed at educating audiences need to incorporate both emotional and educational appeals to be effective in creating behavioral change (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018, p. 221). Additionally, in the context of environmental advertising, the audience’s previous knowledge about the discussed issue also influences their behavior after being exposed to an advertisement. “Green” advertising typically involves words like “environmentally friendly,” “recycled,” or “biodegradable,” which can be deceptive because the claims may not be entirely accurate, but they are also effective in appealing to consumers (Corbett, 2006).

In environmental communication about crises or events, language choices can influence, motivate, or demotivate action. As discussed in the visual and emotional appeals sections, people are often less likely to make behavioral changes if the communication has a doomsday-like

framing or if they are not aware of any easy ways to get involved and help. In a study on solutions journalism in “alternative” media about environmental topics, Beck and Daoust-Boisvert write “Over exposition to news, such as negatively framed environmental and climate news, contribute to audience fatigue (Gurr & Metag, 2022; Schumann, 2022) and people growing somewhat disillusioned and apathetic (Newman et al., 2022)” (Beck & Daoust-Boisvert, 2025, pp. 1-2). The authors assert that there is no exact definition of **alternative media**, but “these outlets can be understood collectively as having distinct structures, modes of participation, and values in comparison to mainstream media” (Beck & Daoust-Boisvert, 2025, p. 3). Beck and Daoust-Boisvert propose that alternative or local media organizations have the opportunity to fill in gaps of content left by larger corporations, citing solutions journalism as a potential way to balance discussing content with “negative” language and motivating action in audiences, a sentiment shared by many researchers mentioned above.

### **Intersectionality of Environmental Issues**

The environmental issues discussed in this research are deeply intertwined with other social injustices. While environmental injustices and concerns are only a small part of the problem, addressing these concerns will be valuable in working toward progress in other sectors. On young women’s ability to create identity and shape environmental activism through platforms like Instagram, Hannouch and Milstein explore how the identities formed through being active on these platforms translate into other aspects of a person’s life and how social media provides a platform for a wider diversity of voices. The study’s emphasis on women is significant because women are among the identities that disproportionately experience environmental harms. Bell attributes this increase in exposure to environmental harms among female-identifying individuals to their lower incomes and perceived lower social status, as exemplified in political and social

settings (Bell, 2016). Corbett cites Kalof, writing “women and people of color feel more vulnerable to risk because they possess less power and control” (Corbett, 2006, p. 60)

Out of the 15 activists Hannouch and Milstein studied, 12 identified as neurodivergent, gender nonconforming, and/or a person of color, further exemplifying the presence of “minority” groups in digital environmental activism. Hannouch and Milstein state that activists have six central values or themes that they aim to cover with their outreach: “a collective over individual action, intersectionality, climate optimism, corporate and political responsibility, ethics of care, and more-than-human connection” (Hannouch & Milstein, 2024, p. 3). Hannouch and Milstein additionally state that digital environmental activism is more accessible and allows for a wider breadth of participants on a global scale. Increased accessibility also enables greater educational opportunities about social and environmental justice issues, as well as related activist efforts, as Hannouch and Milstein touched on. Sturgeon says, “Education in the ways in which environmental and social justice issues are connected is crucial to ensure that this unprecedented opportunity to make real change is not wasted” (Sturgeon, 2009, p.183).

### **Fast fashion (over)consumption’s relevance**

In *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire*, Peter Stearns attributes the origins of consumerism and consumer culture to the influx of trade and globalization in the late 17th or early 18th century. Stearns says that consumerism stemmed from the introduction of new goods from other countries or regions and from wealthier people trying to showcase their wealth through decorative items. While much of the increase in trade between cultures originated in colonialism, it is valuable to connect past consumerism through international relations with modern-day trade. As of May 14, 2025, President Trump has placed extensive tariffs on imported consumer goods. There is now a 10% tariff on all imported goods,

with some country specific tariffs, including a 34% tariff on goods from China, a 49% tariff on goods from Cambodia, a 46% tariff on goods from Vietnam, and a 20% tariff on goods from the European Union (Bain & Kennedy, 2025). These are all major fashion exporters. Much of fast fashion’s appeal lies in its lower prices, and these tariffs will likely impact clothing prices, influencing consumer behavior. Along with typically being cheaper for the consumer, fast fashion can be defined as pieces that are cheaply and quickly produced, following continually evolving trends and micro-trends (Bick et al., 2018). In an article by Rachel Bick and collaborators on fast-fashion-related injustices, the authors state that the industry produces 80 billion pieces of fast-fashion clothing annually, totaling approximately \$1.2 trillion in revenue for the fast-fashion industry (Bick et al., 2018, p. 1).

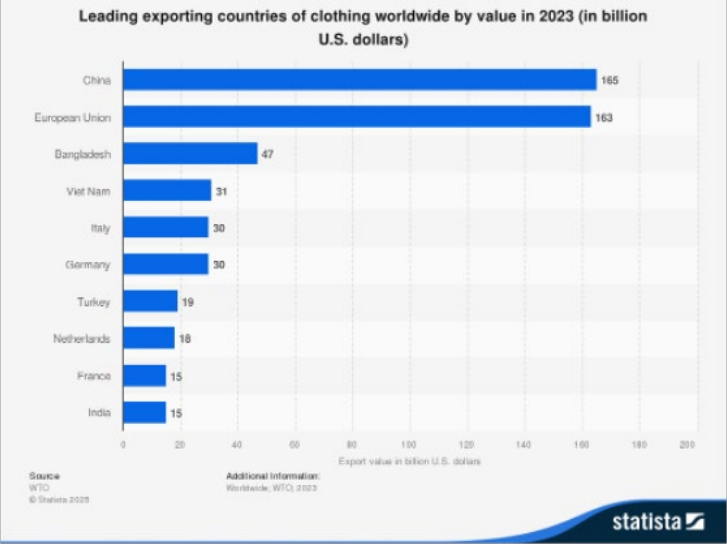


Figure 4: “Leading exporting countries of clothing worldwide by value in 2023 (in billion U.S. dollars)”

Source: The World Trade Organization on Statista

The top four clothing exporters in 2023 directly reflect 4 of the countries or regions listed by CNN as places with high export tariffs (China, the European Union, Bangladesh, and Vietnam). These statistics have been consistent over the past 5 years and are trending to remain constant in 2025.

Tariffs against China have increased drastically, reaching 145% as of April 9, 2025. China retaliated with tariffs up to 25% on April 11, 2025. As of May 12, 2025, tariffs from the United States sit at 30% and 10% from China, but negotiations are underway to remove or reduce tariffs (The New York Times, 2025). The New York Times states that these tariffs will support the American economy as the United States exports higher-quality goods than it imports. Trump proposes that the tariffs will motivate companies to manufacture goods in the United States, creating more jobs domestically. However, fast fashion's appeal is in how cheaply the clothes can be made, how little the workers are paid, and the poor conditions they work in, none of which would translate into American-made products. In China, Shein garment workers are paid \$554 a month, creating over 500 pieces of clothing daily and working 18-hour shifts with no weekends (Jackson, 2022). Based on the United States' minimum wage of \$7.25, workers working the same 18-hour shift would make \$3,915 a month, substantially more than the Chinese workers.

Additionally, materials are often more expensive in the United States, making the cost of producing the clothing even higher. Trump has also eliminated the "de minimis" exemption, which allowed companies like Shein to ship their inexpensive, low-quality items without paying fees or taxes, replacing it with various country-specific tariffs. These costs, along with tariffs and increased worker wages, would raise prices for consumer goods, potentially leading people to buy less or opt for locally produced goods. Whether or not it was intentional, these tariffs would likely help reduce overall consumption of goods and the resulting environmental impacts. Still, they would likely harm the United States economy, which relies heavily on individual consumption and international economies that depend on American consumption. Approximately

70% of the United States' economic activity revolves around consumerism, underscoring the significant impact these tariffs are likely to have on the American economy (Wiseman, 2024).

### *Consumerism and anti-consumerism cultures*

Maniates reviews the Voluntary Simplicity movement, which involves reducing one's consumption of material goods, and states, "satisfaction with one's material life is significantly influenced by how much one spends and consumers *relative to others*," emphasizing the prevalence of comparison between individuals based on their consumer habits and the use of consumerism as a way to show wealth or status (Maniates, 2002, p. 204). Some smaller movements have emerged from this desire to reduce consumption and environmental impact, such as Project Pan, which involves using all owned beauty products before purchasing new ones (Yan, 2021). Along with reducing environmental impacts, many people buy less because of the financial benefits of not spending money on unnecessary products. In a study on the social aspects of mass consumerism, Boström states that "bottom-up processes," which include consumer education and pressure on companies, will be necessary for any fundamental changes in consumer industries (Boström, 2020).

Other movements that aim to bring people together to reduce consumption and related waste often gain traction on social media as people share their experiences and motivate others to join the cause. A study on the Zero Waste Movement, which encompasses several smaller movements aimed at reducing household waste, examines social media's role in increasing the movement's traction and participation. The study also discusses potential barriers to individual involvement in the Zero Waste Movement, including the normalization of overconsumption, which makes behavior change toward reduced consumption difficult, and the stigmas associated with low-waste behaviors, such as using typically discarded parts of foods. Certain behaviors,

such as thrifting or buying things second-hand, are often more socially accepted (Lu, 2023, p. 12).

A study by Wiederhold and Martinez on ethical consumerism and the attitude-behavior gap specifically addresses some of these low-waste behaviors in the context of clothing consumerism. In the study, the authors state that “ethical fashion aims to minimize the impact on the environment,” discussing both the efforts stemming from those involved in clothing creation and the emerging trends surrounding ethical consumerism (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018).

**Ethical consumerism** is “the conscious and deliberate choice to make certain consumption choices due to personal and moral beliefs (Carrigan et al., 2004, p. 401). Wiederhold and Martinez discuss the challenges of bridging the attitude-behavior gap by altering consumer habits and boycotting specific companies or products based on personal and moral principles. Furthermore, they expand on Maniates’ point of consumerism being part of one’s social identity, writing “Being caught between their desire to behave ethically and their need to pursue belonging and self-esteem, as well as obtaining social acceptance, consumers are exposed to a variety of influencing factors, all contributing to the buying decision” (Wiederhold & Martinec, 2018).

### *Social Media and Green Advertising*

Along with NGOs and activists, many companies also have a presence on social media. In *Environmentalism in Popular Culture*, Noel Sturgeon argues that individual environmental or “green” consumerism cannot be the sole solution, writing “it must move beyond individual modifications of ways of living to address the systematic, institutionalized structures that maintain inequality and promote environmental devastation” (Sturgeon, 2009, p. 182). However, Sturgeon argues that “consumer pressure” can successfully motivate more sustainable business

practices and that these practices must continually evolve in response to new research, changing consumer behaviors, or emerging regulations. As sustainable business practices continue to evolve, solutions-based communication will remain effective because it focuses on both the benefits and limitations, which change in response to new developments.

A study on social media's ability to influence eco-consumerism examines the effectiveness of "green" businesses in utilizing social media to showcase their environmental sustainability and influence consumers (Byrum, 2017). On ecological consumerism, Byrum writes, "Consumers who migrate to environmental purchasing habits can also exhibit behaviors that defy conventional logic, as they may pay more for an ethically conscious company's products (Creyer & Ross, 1996) and psychologically overcome purchasing risk by believing the conscious company offers greater value (Kwok, Wong, & Lau, 2015)" (Byrum, 2017, p. 210). Byrum's finding that environmentalist-leaning consumers' behaviors differ from typical consumer behavior highlights the need for further research on "green" advertising and consumption-based environmental communication. Byrum states that brands and companies could benefit from "sharing environmentally friendly information" to draw in new customers (Byrum, 2017, p. 218). Through, it is valuable for consumers to be cautious when encountering "environmentally friendly information" due to the threat of greenwashing or misinformation in marketing. **Greenwashing** is defined as "the act or practice of making a product, policy, activity, etc. appear to be more environmentally friendly or less environmentally damaging than it really is" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Ziyadin and collaborators discuss the increase in adult internet and social media use, and how this increase has led consumer brands to shift their digital marketing and advertising strategies (Ziyadin et al., 2019, p. 2). The authors define **social media marketing** as "the process

of drawing attention to the brand through social media,” often targeting content creators with influence over a large audience of like-minded consumers (Ziyadin et al., 2019, p. 2). They refer to content creators’ ability to reach large audiences as the “megaphone effect,” reflecting previously examined research on how female activists create identities and audiences on social media (Ziyadin et al., 2019, p. 3).

Contrasting literature on anti-consumerism culture and furthering the emphasis on social media’s role in advertising, a study on the branded content’s impact on consumer culture states that “social media has enabled consumers to interpret the branded content experiences in their way collectively (Gensler et al., 2013) and redefine the experiences by cocreating the meanings of such experiences based on their community culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005)” (Waqas et al., 2022, p. 225). Advertisements often aim to be relatable or represent something/someone the audience strives to be more like, which can be detrimental and beneficial to environmental activism on the social media platforms where these advertisements are shown, depending on the advertisement’s goal. Following the discussion on visual and emotional appeals, which similarly found that people enjoy seeing relatable and attainable content, green advertising, especially when it originates from social media content creators, can have a substantial impact on audiences. Furthermore, a study on Instagram’s ability to make people more charitable and willing to participate in activism found that “heavy users,” who the authors define as people who spend more than 90 minutes on Instagram a day, are more capable of avoiding harmful content and exposing themselves to feelings of gratitude (Mendini, 2022).

### *Consumer good lifecycles*

A **life cycle assessment (LCA)** considers every step of a product's lifecycle, from its natural resources to production, consumer use, disposal, and everything in between, when measuring its environmental impact. LCAs benefit a wide variety of individuals, including those interested in the environmental impacts of consumer industries, those working in supply chain management, individuals in marketing or sales, and the consumers of the products (Quist, 2024). Investigating a product's lifecycle can reveal necessary information about the environmental, social, and other conditions under which the product was manufactured.

Many consumer goods are produced in lower-income countries and exported to wealthier countries, such as the United States, to mitigate the impacts on more affluent countries and place the social, environmental, economic, and other costs on lower-income countries. Bick and collaborators say, "The textile and garment industries, for example, shift the environmental and occupational burdens associated with mass production and disposal from high income countries to the under-resourced (e.g. low income, low-wage workers, women) communities in (lower and middle-income countries)," highlighting the industry's tendency to capitalize on cheap labor and natural resources in less wealthy countries and on other "minorities" like women and people of color. A study on the social justice issues that follow a piece of clothing's lifecycle describes the poor working conditions are made in. The study describes "low worker wages, gender discrimination, excessive working hours, lack of job security, low safety standards, child labour, and the exposure of local residents to health and safety risks" further emphasizing the unequal distribution of social and environmental injustices that continue to harm "minority" groups and communities (Zamani et al., 2016, pp. 536-537). Interestingly, a study on post-consumer textile waste in Florida found that higher-income counties generated 95.7 pounds of textile waste per person, compared to 54.7 pounds in less affluent counties (DeVoy et al., 2021).

Bick's article also discusses the materials from which fast-fashion items are often made, including cotton and polyester, which significantly impact the environment. The authors discuss the oil required for polyester production, the water and pesticides used in cotton cultivation, and the toxins often associated with textile dyeing for clothing. On the post-consumer waste stemming from the textile industry, they state that the average American throws away "80 pounds of clothing and textiles annually, occupying nearly 5% of landfill space," and around 500 thousand tons of clothing are exported from the United States annually (Bick et al., 2018, p. 2). The mass of clothing would be enough to fill 200 Olympic swimming pools. An article featuring DeVoy, the author of the study on Florida, states that out of the 34 billion pounds of textile waste Americans produce annually, 66% ends up in American landfills and the 500 thousand tons Bick states are exported into other countries make up around 15% of the waste (Lunderberg & DeVoy, 2022). Bick and her co-authors report that approximately 85% of clothing purchased by Americans ends up in landfills, totaling around 3.8 billion pounds, or approximately 80 pounds per American annually (Bick et al., 2018, p. 1). Additionally, clothing pieces are typically worn only seven to ten times before being discarded, and Americans purchase an average of 53 new pieces annually (Igini, 2024; Horvath, 2024).

A study on **circular economies**, which would significantly reduce the environmental impacts related to the textile and apparel industry, discusses a potential shift from clothing's linear lifecycle that ends with the clothing ending in a landfill to a more circular lifecycle (Chen et al., 2021). The study delves deeply into the numerous environmental hazards associated with the various stages of clothing production, ownership, and disposal, culminating in a diagram that illustrates the potential benefits of a circular lifecycle/economy.

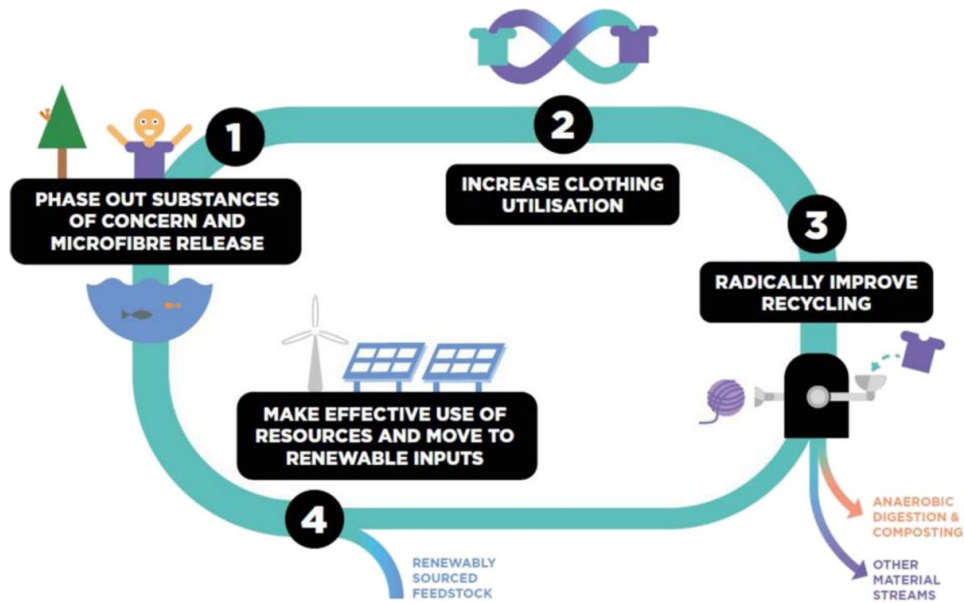


Figure 5: “The ambitions of the proposed clothing circular economy”

Source: Chen et al., 2021

Chen and collaborators discuss the economic, social, and environmental benefits of the circular economy in their study. The graphic above displays their ideas for improving the clothing’s lifecycle to maximize these benefits.

### *The Knowledge Gap*

Along with an attitude-behavior gap, which explains the increase in interest in ethical fashion practices with minimal tangible changes, there is also an extensive knowledge gap where consumers are unaware of the environmental or social impacts. Clapp defines this knowledge or, as she puts it, “understanding” gap as the “mental distance” between consumers and the information and responsibilities that stem from the lifecycles of consumer goods. This distance between consumers and the costs of their consumption often comes from the geographic distances between the good’s production, consumption, and disposal. Clapp says that as the physical and mental distance between consumers and waste increases, so will the amount of waste. It may additionally lead people to blame the waste on other groups, placing responsibility on someone else, such as the government, companies, or other consumers. Contributing to the

discussion of social media as a space for both advertisements for consumer goods and environmental activists, social media, and the evolution of the internet in general, has made it much easier for this knowledge gap to persist and for people to buy things digitally without much thought for the consequences (Boström, 2020).

Clapp writes that closing this “understanding gap” would involve educating people on where their postconsumer waste goes, as well as where the product’s natural resources originated, likely leading people to have a better understanding of the environmental impacts involved in their consumption (Clapp, 2002, p. 158). While Clapp’s chapter was published in 2002, before the emergence of social media, her thoughts on educating consumers reflect much of the literature on how activists or “green” companies can utilize their platforms for good. Clapp additionally states that “a better understanding of the root causes of waste distancing should help promote policies to reduce it,” reflecting this research’s focus on tangible changes following an environmental advocacy campaign (Clapp, 2002, p. 159).

Addressing the knowledge gap surrounding consumer good lifecycles would be a valuable step toward creating a circular economy; however, it does come with several limitations. Audiences are often overwhelmed by an overload of information, and, as lifecycle assessments cover every step of a product’s “life,” they are very detailed, making it difficult for people to find a simple way to get involved. Life cycle assessments are also time-consuming and often challenging due to the scarcity of information. It is valuable to address this scarcity and push for more public information to reduce the knowledge gap further and allow ourselves to be conscious consumers. Currently, with the difficulties in gathering and analyzing data, a valuable step toward a circular economy would be to address a smaller part of the product’s lifecycle, specifically personal consumption and disposal. These are steps that individuals have control

over and will influence other steps that we may not be aware of, such as reducing overall production due to lower demand or reducing litter through proper waste disposal.

### **In Summary**

Environmental Communication, both online and offline, is an incredibly useful tool for activists to educate broader audiences and bring communities together for action. The primary aspects of environmental communication encompass both visual and written elements, comprising graphics, images, and written text. While digital communication enables activists and NGOs to reach a wider audience, it also allows skeptics or deniers to spread misinformation and disinformation to their target audiences. Simultaneously combating misleading information and educating the audience is difficult, but essential for moving toward sustainability. Along with being a platform for individuals to share their opinions, social media has also become a space for environmental activists to disseminate their message and for “green” companies to promote their products.

One of the most significant contributors to environmental degradation stemming from consumer industries is a lack of education on product lifecycles. Education from these activist organizations and companies is essential for making change. These organizations have the potential to drastically increase participation in their campaigns through effective social media use, leading to a shift from consumer culture to solutions-based anti-consumer cultures.

## **Methodology**

### **Critical Analysis: Data and Content**

Digital Environmental Communication is a continually growing and changing field, and so are the methodologies used in related research. The most common methodologies include content or data analysis, case studies or experiments, and creative projects. As my research centers on the question of what makes a digital environmental advocacy campaign successful, I will primarily utilize a critical analysis, which will include data analysis and content analysis, providing the groundwork for a creative project. This critical lens will be useful for my work, as I will investigate specific details of each campaign from a critical perspective to determine whether they contributed to its successes or failures.

My analysis began with my literature review, where I examined several academic texts related to environmental communication, comparing the methodologies they suggest and have previously employed, as well as how they have reached the conclusions or arguments they support. These texts are also valuable in exploring how digital environmental communication has evolved and how it can be utilized as a tool for advocacy campaigns. Regarding the content analysis, an important question to ask throughout my research is “What methodologies do the sources I am analyzing use?” As I designed my proposed campaign based on aspects of successful environmental advocacy campaigns, it is valuable for me to understand how the creators of these campaigns gathered their information and how they designed their campaigns. Many of the creators of these campaigns share similar identities to mine and have found success in communicating with a variety of demographics.

Hannocuh and Milstein’s study on the prevalence of young women in environmental activism cites Instagram as the leading platform for young female activists to gain traction. The study discusses Greta Thunberg’s climate activism, noting that her work on Instagram and on the

streets has led the School Strike for Climate movement to grow from “one person to approximately 10 million people in less than a year” (Hannouch & Milstein, 2024, p. 1).

Thunberg’s activism has also impacted people outside of the “young” age group, motivating a wide range of climate activists. Michael Allen, the leader of the Florence Climate Emergency Campaign and a founding member of the Elders Climate Action Oregon chapter, was in his mid-80s when he became involved in climate activism and attributes his interest in part to Thunberg, emulating Thunberg’s climate strikes each week at the Florence, Oregon, city hall. Allen’s work reflects the ability of young activists to influence people from diverse backgrounds, thereby expanding the target audience for this research.

The data analysis will encompass both quantitative and qualitative data, investigating changes in social media and consumption trends, as well as examining sales-related data and analyzing existing surveys related to the advocacy campaigns. The qualitative data, in the form of discourse related to the campaign topics, reported behavioral changes, and political developments, will indicate whether consumer behaviors have changed over the timeline of a related campaign. I will investigate the popularity of specific internet searches related to the topic or participation in related challenges, such as not buying new clothing for a month or trying a meatless diet for a specified period. There is limited quantitative data available regarding the relationship between environmental advocacy and consumption; therefore, this discussion will primarily focus on analyzing trends, sales-related data, and data from organizations on audience participation to further visualize changes in consumer habits. My discussion will also touch on the impact of this limited data and the potential effects that increasing available data may have on future activism. In combination, the content analysis and the data analysis will provide me

with a more holistic understanding of what goes into a digital environmental advocacy campaign and what the true outcomes of specific campaigns are.

Through content analysis, I will examine several primary sources, including general news websites that discuss the issues a campaign addresses and the campaign itself, as well as social media posts and supplemental materials associated with a given campaign. The content analysis will center more on the creative aspects of the campaign, while the data analysis will focus on the logistical aspects. Creative aspects include the word choice, the choice and use of images, and the overall design of the campaign.

This choice of a critical analysis allows me to examine the negative impacts of consumerism and how certain campaigns may not be successful, while still centering on the positives through exploring strong and successful campaigns, as well as solutions to the environmental issues related to our current consumption habits. It is valuable to look forward and reflect on what we can do better and what actions we can learn from, rather than focusing solely on the negatives of the past. The focus on advertisements on social media, social media advocacy posts, and general news articles allows me to examine each piece of content more thoroughly and keep my focus on digital media. I will narrow the scope to focus on three specific campaign topics, ensuring I fully examine each. These topics all fall under the wider category of consumerism and contribute to environmental harm. Along with my central focus on fast fashion, I will be analyzing campaigns focused on food waste and plastic. I will be analyzing each topic individually, with space for a collective analysis and summary of strong strategies in the discussion and conclusion sections. Additionally, my focus on the environmental impacts of consumerism enables me to concentrate on a specific aspect within a much larger issue, as environmentalism is a highly intersectional field.

## **Creative Project**

The creative project aims to implement the findings of my literature review and content analysis. Through an Instagram account, it will adopt a solutions lens to address fast fashion consumption and its alternatives. This decision is based on a range of literature stating that audiences appreciate communication that provides them with personal, actionable steps toward solutions while also educating them on the issues. To create the posts, I will use Canva, Adobe Express, and Adobe Illustrator, utilizing a combination of their existing templates and designing new ones that best fit my goals. The content in the posts stems from the critical analysis and some outside research on solutions.

Additionally, while drawing inspiration from existing Instagram accounts that receive high engagement, I will ensure that my content is accessible to diverse audiences. In this context, accessibility refers to using large enough text, legible fonts, and adequate contrast between background and text colors. Mostly, the posts will be in carousel form, which involves several photos that the audience can swipe through. Statistics on which form of Instagram posts receive the most engagement, as well as the carousel's ability to present a lot of information in a single post due to the option for multiple photo slides, support the carousel format choice. The target audience for this project, which will influence the content I create and the solutions I choose to focus on, will be young people interested in participating in more sustainable consumption habits related to clothing.

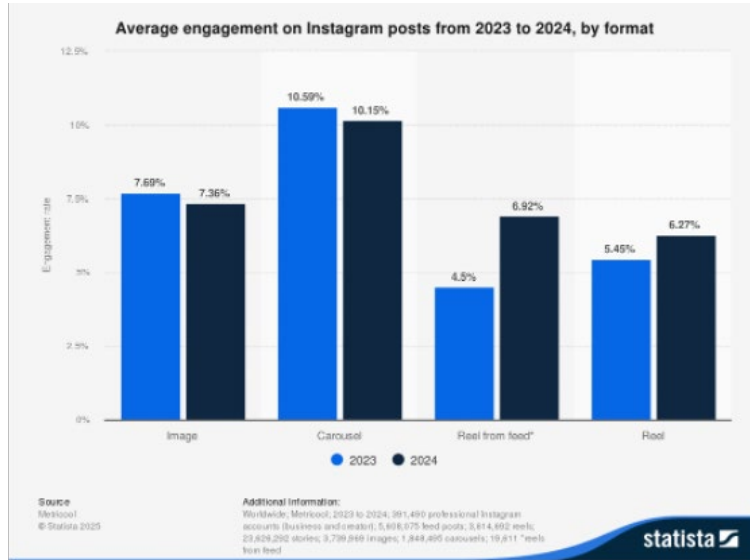


Figure 6: “Average engagement on Instagram posts from 2023 to 2024, by format”

Source: Stacy Jo Dixon on Statista

While the average engagement on carousel posts has decreased slightly, from 10.59% to 10.19%, carousel posts receive substantially more engagement than alternative post formats.

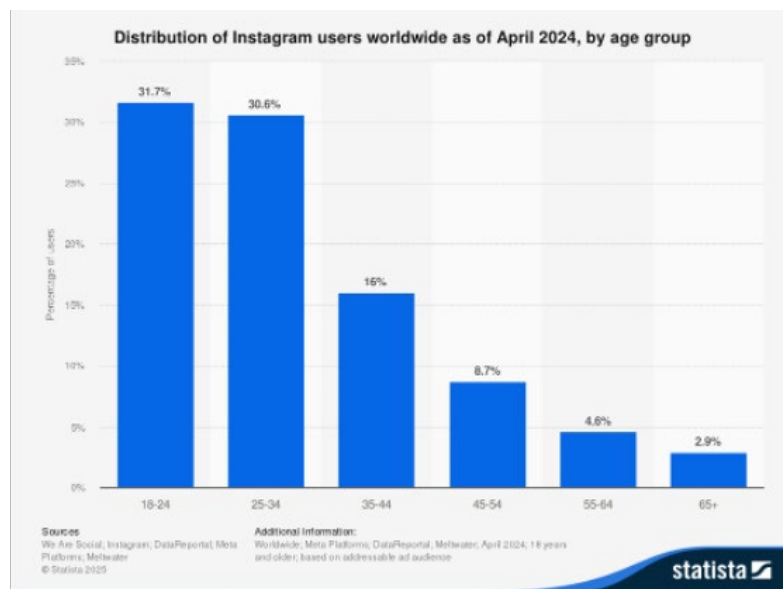


Figure 7: “Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of April 2024, by age group”

Source: Dixon on Statista

Along with being the primary consumers of fast fashion, individuals aged 18-34 are the main users of Instagram, comprising 60.2% of all users, making them the ideal target audience for this project. According to statistics from the United States, individuals aged 18-24 comprised 54.8% of users (Dixon, 2025).

I chose Instagram over other social media applications because, compared to other short-form content platforms like TikTok, X, or Snapchat, it has the most active users and a larger young user base.

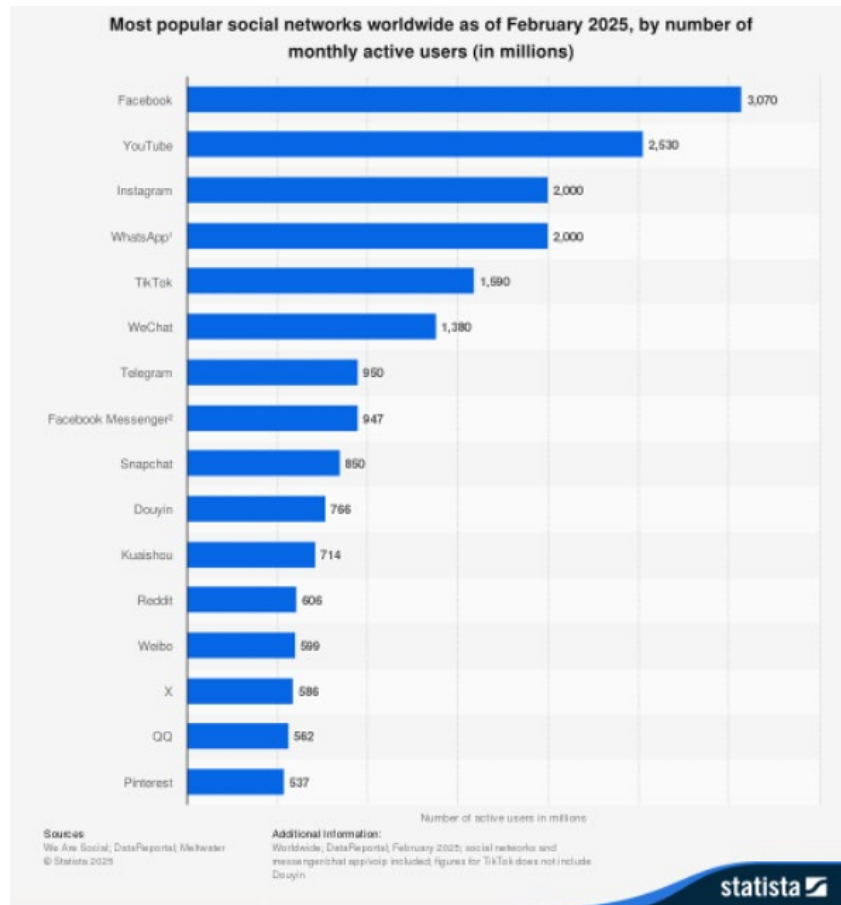


Figure 8: “Most popular social media networks worldwide as of February 2025, by number of active users (in millions)”

Source: Dixon on Statista

As of February 2025, Instagram has approximately 2 billion users. Given this statistic, individuals aged 18-34 make up 62.3% of Instagram users, which translates to 1.246 billion users in my target age group. Even if many of these people are not interested in sustainable consumption, there is a high chance that many will be, making my campaign’s potential reach wider.

## **Analysis of Selected Campaigns**

I chose six environmental advocacy campaigns related to my three topics, single-use plastic, food waste, and fast fashion, with two campaigns per topic. Additionally, I chose campaigns from small businesses, larger businesses, and nonprofit organizations to compare strategies. The analysis will apply the methods outlined above to these six campaigns, examining whether they were successful in achieving their target behavioral or political change based on the success parameters outlined in the literature review. These parameters include audience engagement, educational and visually and/or emotionally appealing content, and tangible, results-driven outcomes.

### **Single Use Plastic**

A report called "Campaigns that Work" simplified this section greatly, providing 50 examples of anti-plastic advocacy campaigns stemming from a wide variety of international nonprofit organizations, for-profit companies, and governments. Created by One Planet Network and the Stockholm Environment Institute, the report aims to address the question of "how can campaigns from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), companies, and government use more effective behavior change strategies to influence individuals' sustainable use of plastic," touching on psychological and communication-based solutions (Moss, n.d., p. 4). It highlights the channels used, such as websites or social media, the organizations involved, and the elements featured in the campaign, including videos, websites, or social media posts. It additionally discusses the objectives and results following the campaign's implementation, which will contribute to my emphasis on success, which I define as tangible changes following the campaign.

## *East West Market: Embarrassing Bags*

Embarrassing Bags is a campaign launched by East-West Market in Vancouver, Canada, in 2019, aimed at reducing plastic bag use among their customers. The campaign's premise was that their plastic bags would feature embarrassing text, representing stores like adult film stores or medical offices, motivating customers to bring their reusable bags and avoid receiving an embarrassing one. However, as Seymour expressed in her discussion on humor and irony in communication, people found the bags funny. They wanted them as a novelty, going directly against the campaign's objectives. The company has since embraced the failures of their previous campaign, launching reusable tote bags with the embarrassing text featured on the plastic bags in late 2019.



Figure 9: “East West Market’s reusable canvas tote”

Source: @eastwest.market on Instagram

East West Market’s embarrassing plastic bag campaign launched in June 2019, and by December, they had released a more sustainable version of those bags in the form of a canvas tote. However, the market does not disclose where the materials for these bags originate or where they are made.

The campaign was successful as part of a larger movement, but it arguably did not have individual success.

The post launching the tote bags does not place guilt on people who intentionally buy plastic bags, but instead encourages them to move forward by purchasing the tote bag. The post's caption reads, "Were you one of our customers that actively sought out the bags of shame? Well, we might have a guilt-free update for you," with the guilt-free option being the new tote bags. However, it is worth noting that creating the tote bags and purchasing one when you do not truly need it still has an environmental impact. Still, it is better than continually purchasing plastic bags. Avoiding shaming the audience for purposefully buying plastic bags assists the market in preventing one of the four most common mistakes Moss found in her research, which is "using guilt to change behavior." The other three common mistakes are reflected in what I have discovered through reviewing past studies and literature, and include "stopping at awareness" or education, "reinforcing bad norms," and "allowing distance" (Moss, n.d., p. 7). Moss critiques the campaign's use of humor, arguing that it detracts from the seriousness of the issue and fails to provide a realistic solution to plastic waste. Additionally, there is no information on whether the embarrassing bag campaign or the subsequent tote bags truly influenced consumer habits. East West Market's Instagram posts have consistently received around 20 likes, with no comments or shares. The posts about the bags have received substantially more engagement than other content.

While it may not have been an individual success, the Embarrassing Bags campaign was part of a larger effort from around 30 different small businesses in Horseshoe Bay, a part of Vancouver where the East West Market is. Alison Wood, the co-founder of Ocean Ambassadors Canada, stated that Horseshoe Bay was the first "business community" in British Columbia to attempt to ban plastic bags collectively. Strict regulations against plastic are now in place

throughout the province (Boyton, 2023). As of July 2024, restrictions on plastic shopping bags and plastic cutlery in food service environments, along with additional restrictions, are in progress (Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, 2024). Given the news attention this campaign received, as it was featured on many mainstream news websites, including Global News Canada, NPR, The Guardian, and The New York Times, it may have contributed to these restrictions. Even the negative press about the campaign backfiring has potentially beneficial consequences. Not only is this a learning moment for future activist campaigns, but in the example of the NPR article, the author discusses why the campaign happened in the first place, emphasizing the need for improved sustainability now (McMahon, 2019).

#### *Surfers Against Sewage: Message in a Bottle and The Million Mile Clean*

Surfers Against Sewage's Message in a Bottle campaign launched in 2016 in support of a bottle deposit return system in the UK. The campaign had support from Caroline Lucas, a Member of Parliament, representing the Green Party from 2010 to 2024, and aimed to gain parliamentary support for the Deposit Return System (DRS). The campaign achieved success with its petition receiving 329,000 signatures, and in 2017, the Scottish government agreed to implement a DRS. The UK governmental website states that a region-wide DRS system will be in place by October 2027 (Gov.UK, 2025).

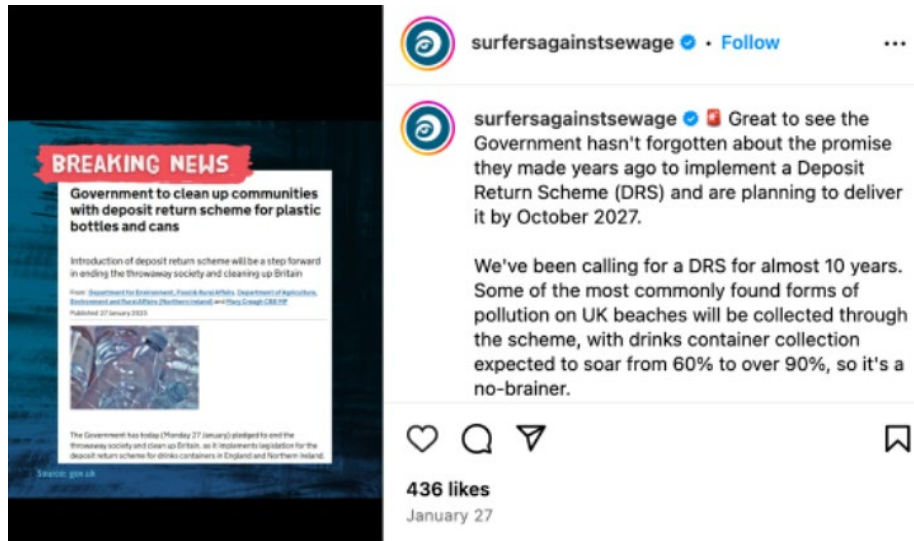


Figure 10: “Government to clean up communities with deposit return scheme for plastic bottles and cans”

Source: @surfersagainstsewage on Instagram

Surfers Against Sewage has an ongoing Instagram campaign that features “breaking news” related to its activist efforts, continuing to update audiences on progress. These updates receive around 1,000 likes, 30 comments, and over 75 shares, making them some of the account's most successful posts. These positive news stories help keep audiences engaged and interested in being part of the cause, as shown through the high number of shares.

Surfers Against Sewage has 183 million Instagram followers and posts content to its grid at least once a day, often multiple times when an event is approaching or a campaign is underway. Their content exemplifies many aspects that the literature defines as effective, including educational content with opportunities for audience involvement, engaging language, support from well-known and respected figures, and involvement from regular people in the campaign.

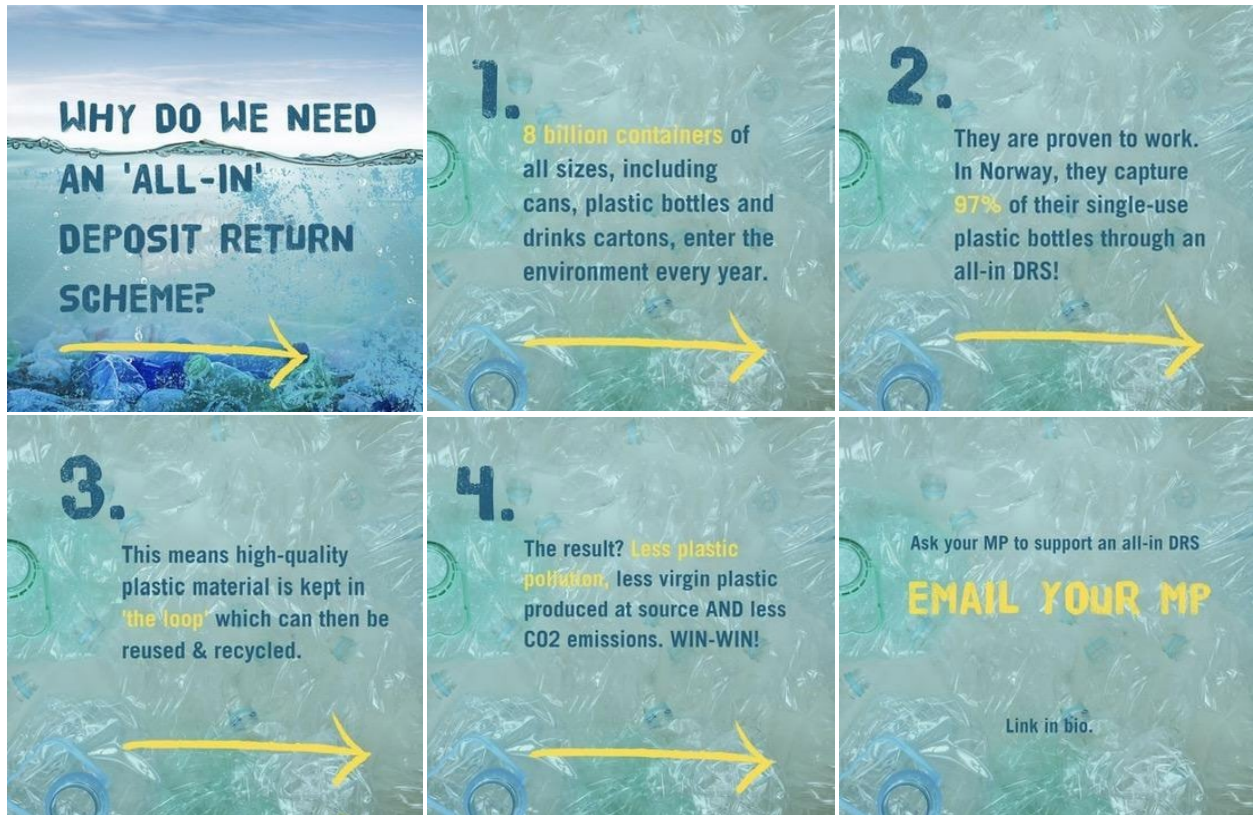


Figure 11: “Why do we need an ‘all-in’ deposit return scheme?”

Source: @surfersagainstsewage on Instagram

The six photos above come from a carousel post that educates audiences on why the Message in a Bottle campaign is essential and motivates them to participate. As discussed in the methodology section, this form of content receives the most engagement on Instagram, and this specific post received 1,163 likes. One critique of this post is that the yellow font is difficult to read against the green background.



Figure 12: “See it, snap it, share it”

Source: @surfersagainstsewage on Instagram

Message in a Bottle’s slogan, “See it, snap it, share it,” helped keep the campaign posts cohesive and further motivated audience participation and outreach. The posts asked the audience to take photos of any plastic bottles they saw outdoors and share them with friends and family to spread the campaign. They also continued to invite people to write to their MPs to support the DRS movement.

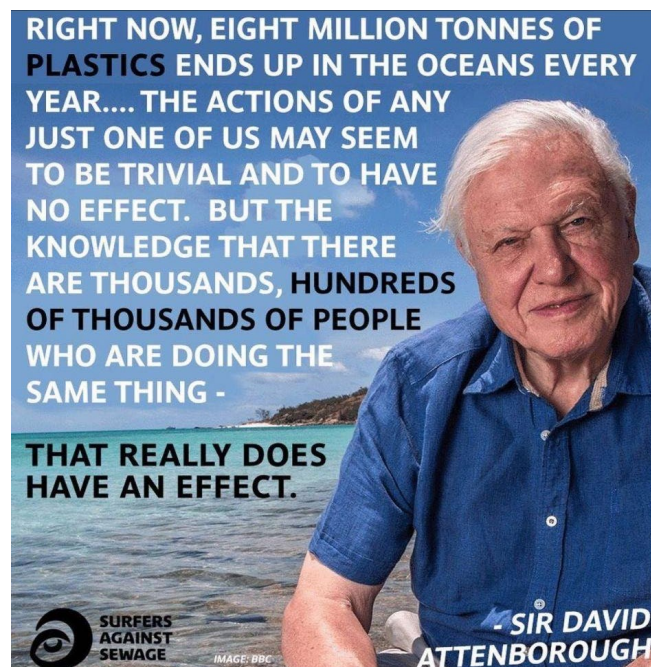


Figure 13: “Sir David Attenborough on plastic pollution”

Source: @surfersagainstsewage on Instagram (photo credit: BBC)

David Attenborough is an Englishman mainly known for producing and narrating nature documentaries like *Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth*. He is globally trusted and liked as an environmentalist, making him a powerful face for an environmental activism campaign. Educational information from trusted sources can help combat misinformation when the audience seeks clarity.

While the campaign achieved success with 329 thousand signatures and real, tangible political action through the planned implementation of DRS systems throughout the UK, it did not receive significant mainstream news coverage. When searching for “Message in a Bottle,” the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s (NASA) campaign of the same name appears much more prominently, making it difficult for audiences unfamiliar with the organization or campaign to find it online. There is additionally a lack of outside media attention for the campaign, as it is not featured on any well-known news sites. However, the organization had enough support within its ranks to be effective without outside assistance. The support is illustrated through quantitative data, which shows they have 183,000 Instagram followers, 9,700 reviews on their app, and 329,000 signatures on their petition.

Surfers Against Sewage’s activism often targets plastic waste with several ongoing campaigns at a time. As plastic is one of the largest ocean polluters, work towards reducing plastic waste in the oceans has been increasingly valuable. Surfers Against Sewage has an extensive webpage on plastic-related issues and activism, stating that the UK uses around 38.5 million plastic bottles daily. They continue to declare that over 255 million bottles are littered annually, many of which end up on beaches or in the ocean. If correctly used, a DRS system would help recycle 95% of plastic bottles and other containers (Surfers Against Sewage, 2018).

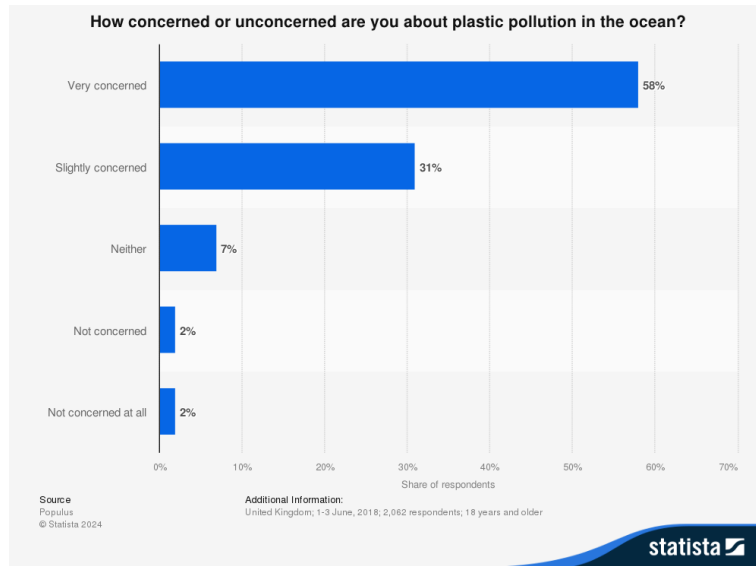


Figure 14: **“How concerned or unconcerned are you about plastic pollution in the ocean?”**

Source: Ian Tiseo on Statista

Data on concern about oceanic plastic pollution in the UK states that 58% of participants are concerned. This information further highlights the significance of the work undertaken by organizations like Surfers Against Sewage.

Along with more targeted campaigns, such as Message in a Bottle, Surfers Against Sewage has several ongoing campaigns that target broader plastic cleanup efforts. One of their most prominent campaigns is the Million Mile Clean, launched in 2021. The campaign involves volunteer-led clean-up events. Their website features a “Find a clean near you” map, allowing people to get involved in local efforts. This emphasis on local activism fosters community and enables people to get directly involved with the cause, thereby strengthening their interest and motivation to contribute.

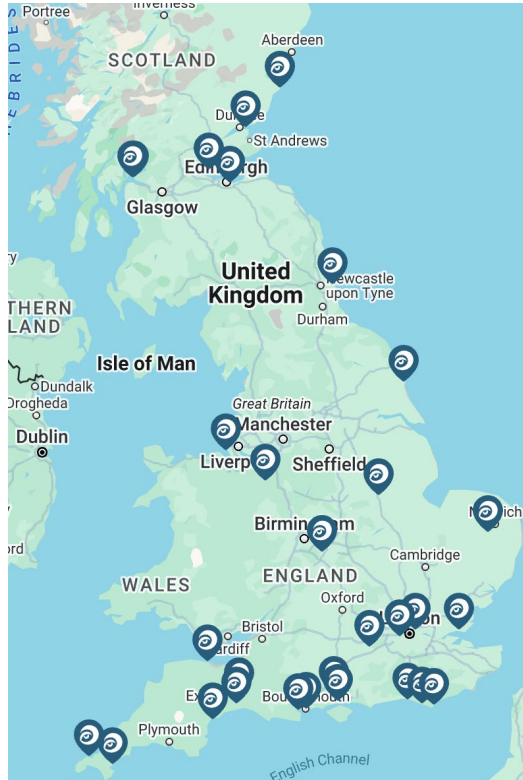


Figure 15: “Million Mile Clean map”

Source: Surfers Against Sewage

The screenshot above shows an interactive map where users can locate nearby clean-up events. The map and list versions are updated daily and can be added to by volunteers who wish to organize a cleanup.



### Register your clean

From large community cleans to individual action, private or public, we've got you covered. Find out how easy it is to set up your clean from scratch, register it with us, and get hold of your free equipment to make your clean a success.



### Submit your results

Upload the results from your cleans here and join our citizen science project. By entering your data you're helping us track down the worst plastic polluting companies out there - the "Dirty Dozen"!



### Find a clean near you

Want to lend a hand and bring your energy to an existing clean? Perfect. Find your region and get the where, when and how of your nearest clean. All these cleans are run by local volunteers, you don't need to pre-register. Just turn up and get stuck in.

Figure 16: “Million Mile Clean ‘get involved’ links”

Source: Surfers Against Sewage

Participating in a clean through the Million Mile Clean program involves two steps: registering your clean so that others can join or joining an existing clean, and then submitting your results to contribute to data on which brands contribute to plastic pollution, motivating people through the efforts of other volunteers.

The resulting data from these cleans contributes to Surfers Against Sewages's brand audit, where they provide data from their volunteers about the volume of trash collected and which brands contribute the most to the trash. While I cannot verify the accuracy of the data, a common limitation of self-reported data, the most recent brand audit from 2023 stated that over 4,200 volunteers collected more than 30,000 pieces. Only 11,000 pieces were branded, with 17% coming from Coca-Cola, 11% from McDonald's, and 9% from PepsiCo (Surfers Against Sewage, 2023). The brand audit additionally includes a section comparing the brand's sustainability messaging to the facts, which is valuable for combating greenwashing.

In Coca-Cola's case, when this report came out, the company said they aimed to "make 100% of (their) packaging recyclable globally by 2025 – and use at least 50% recycled materials in (their) packaging by 2030" (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.). The audit states that Coca-Cola produces 3.224 million metric tons of plastic annually, a figure supported by the Global Commitment 2023 Progress Report. The progress report also states that 99.9% of Coca-Cola packaging is recyclable; however, the post-consumer recycling data shows low rates (The Ellen MacArthur Foundation & The UN Environment Programme, 2023). Coca-Cola now states that it aims to use 35-40% recycled materials in its packaging by 2035, which is a revision from its previously stated goal of 50% by 2030, as reported in the Surfers Against Sewage Brand Audit (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.).



Figure 17: “The Coca-Cola Company Surfers Against Sewage brand audit”

Source: Surfers Against Sewage

The graphic above is an example of the material used in the campaign's effort to combat greenwashing-related misinformation. The information is based on the “citizen science” completed by the campaign’s volunteers and the organization’s research. Like citizen journalism, citizen science comes from people outside of science and is based on their experiences and observations.

It is unclear if the brand audit has any impact on the company’s actions, but it is a valuable resource for consumers to educate themselves on company sustainability behaviors and for volunteers to feel fulfilled through contributing to holding companies accountable. The Global Commitment 2023 Progress Report revealed that less than 25% of Coca-Cola products are currently recycled, a figure that would likely increase if a widespread Deposit-Return System (DRS) were implemented to encourage recycling of bottles and cans (The Ellen MacArthur Foundation & The UN Environment Programme, 2023). As the literature shows, combating the knowledge gap between consumers and their waste is valuable in reducing overall waste and increasing pressure on companies to act more sustainably.

Along with the brand audit and map, Surfers Against Sewage often posts photos from the Million Mile Clean events, showcasing the community successes resulting from the campaign and motivating audiences to take part in future events.

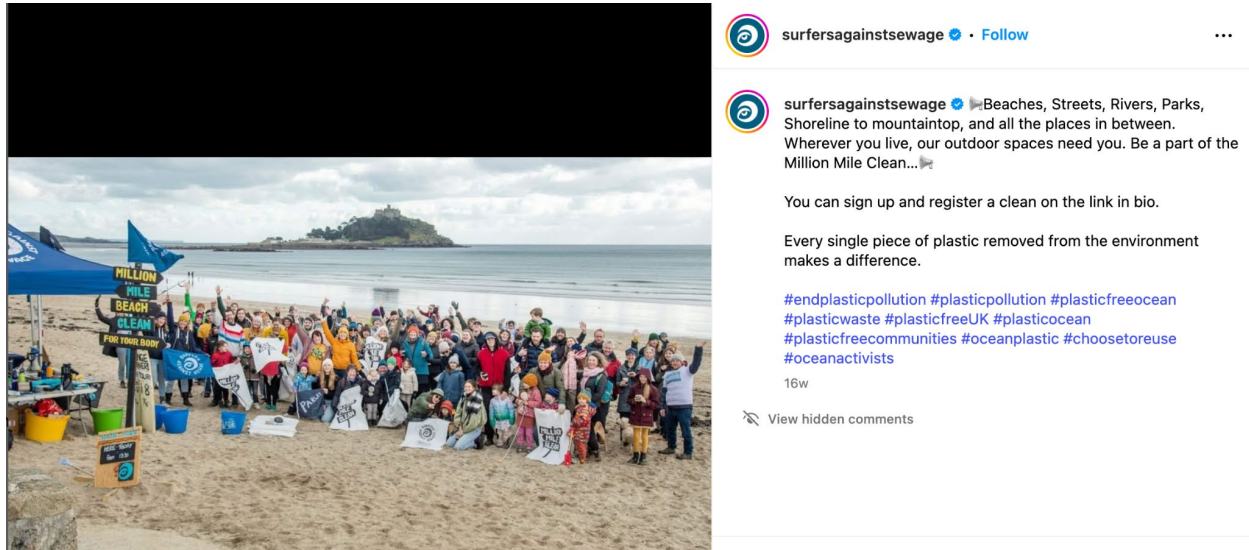


Figure 18: “Million Mile Clean event on Instagram”

Source: @surfersagainstsewage on Instagram

Along with wrap-ups from other events, highlights of impactful volunteers, and breaking news stories, Surfers Against Sewage often features the Million Mile Clean events on their Instagram. The photo and caption emphasize the importance of action on any scale and how easy and rewarding helping out can be.

Comparing the 2023 Brand Audit to the 2021 and 2022 reports, the campaign's growth is evident from 2021 to 2023; however, there is no data available for 2022. The link to the “Brand Audit Report (2022)” page directs users to the 2023 report. In 2021, 3,913 volunteers collected 26,938 items, and in 2023, 4,240 volunteers collected over 30,000 pieces. Furthermore, there is limited news coverage on this campaign.

Surfers Against Sewage campaigns are often successful because they target a specific goal and utilize educational and motivational materials to achieve it. The organization is also successful because it is very active on its social media account(s) and continually puts on events

or provides information for people with a wide range of plastic-related interests. For example, when posting about a Million Mile Clean event, it also addresses topics such as water quality and public health issues.

**Food waste**

In the United States, 92 billion pounds of food are wasted yearly, with 38% of all food being unsold or uneaten (Feeding America, n.d.). In 2022, globally, people wasted 1.05 million tons of food (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). Food production is an energy-intensive industry, contributing to landfill waste and thereby increasing the ecological footprint of the resulting waste. As of 2021, agriculture accounts for 11.7% of all greenhouse gas emissions globally, contributing less than the energy sector (Ge et al., 2024). Additionally, agriculture takes in 70% of all global water withdrawals annually (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2024).

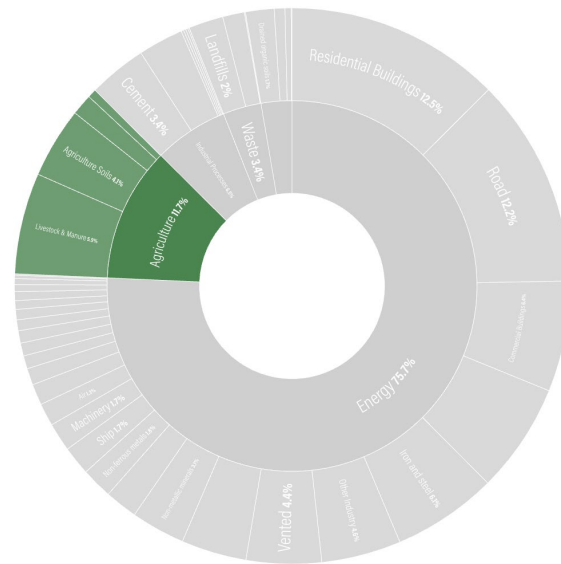


Figure 19: “Global greenhouse emissions by sector and end use, 2021  
 Source: Ge et al. (World Resource Institute)

The chart above illustrates global greenhouse gas emissions by sector, dividing the sectors by end use. Agriculture accounts for 11.7% of all emissions, with 5.9% coming from livestock and manure, 4.1% from agricultural soils, 1.2% from rice cultivation, and 0.5% from burnings.

Along with being an important topic to address due to its environmental impacts, the number of hungry people has increased and is likely to continue growing as food and shipping prices rise.

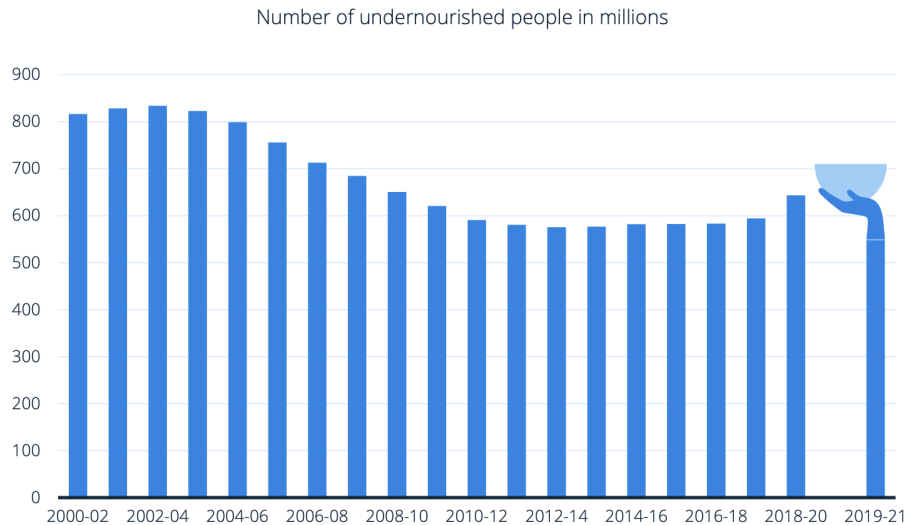
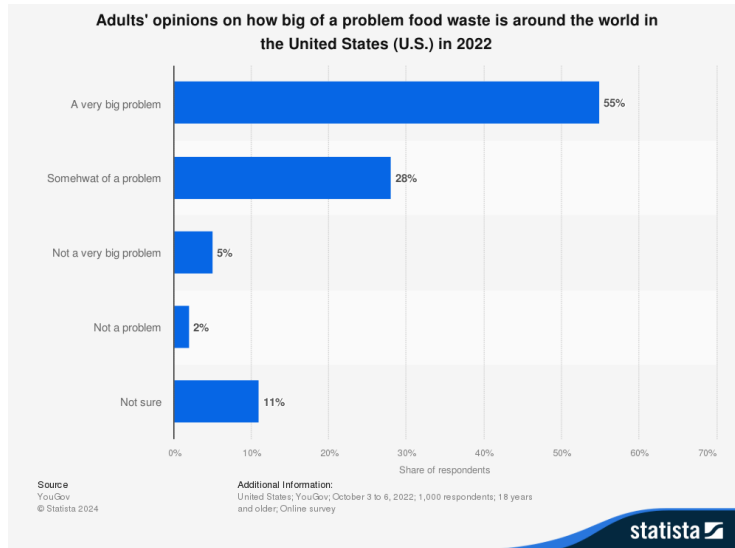


Figure 20: “Number of undernourished people in millions”

Source: Statista

The data above shows the number of undernourished people globally from 2000 to 2021. While the number has decreased from above 800 million to 702.7 million in the past 20 years, it remains high. Reducing food waste would likely help reduce this number.

Importantly for environmental activists seeking to address food waste concerns, data indicate that most people recognize food waste as a problem, making communication about related solutions valuable. Additionally, 60% of food waste originates from households, making it increasingly necessary for individual consumers to reduce waste (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024).



**Figure 21: “Adults’ opinion on how big of a problem food waste is around the world in the United States (U.S.) in 2022”**

Source: Nils-Gerrit Wunsch on Statista

55% of surveyed adults believe that food waste is “a very big problem” globally, 28% believe it is “somewhat of a problem,” and only 7% believe it is not a problem.

*Misfits Market: Cooking with Bobby Flay*

Misfits Market is an American company founded in 2018. It aims to reduce food waste by collecting food that would typically be discarded before it reaches the grocery store and selling it at a reduced price. They declare that around 1/3 of food in the United States does not meet grocery store standards, which, along with increasingly high prices, makes it even more difficult for food-insecure people to get enough nutritious food (Misfits Market, n.d.).

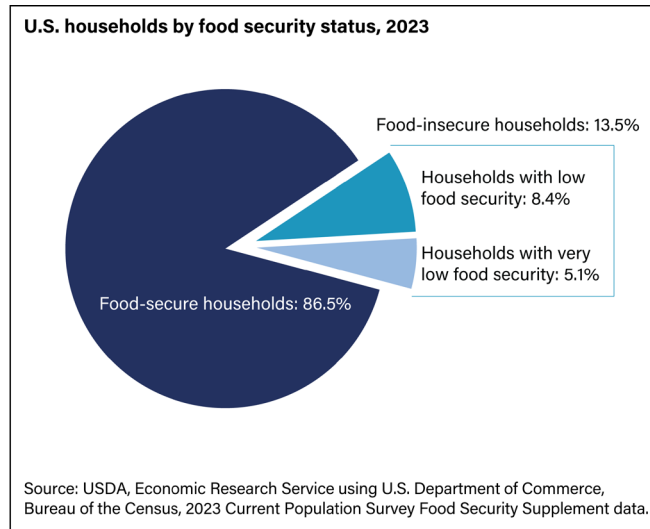


Figure 22: “U.S. households by food security status, 2023”

Source: United States Department of Agriculture

13.5% of households in the United States are food insecure, and 17.5% of households with children are food insecure. In 2022, 87.2% of households were food secure, indicating that the number of food-insecure households increased by approximately one million between 2022 and 2023.

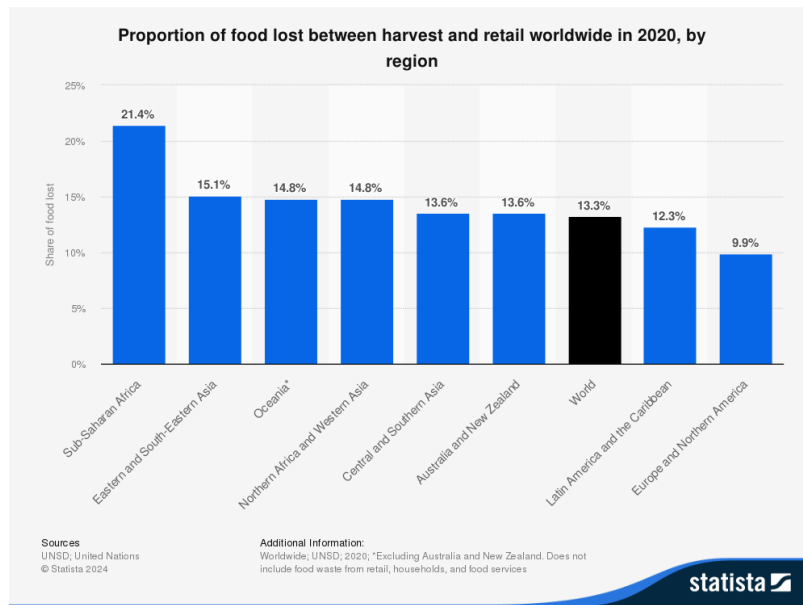


Figure 23: **“Proportion of food lost between harvest and retail worldwide, 2020, by region”**

Source: Wunsch on Statista

Globally, 13.3% of food is lost between harvest and retail. According to Misfits Market, the industry loses around 15% more through production due to poor packaging or excess product (Misfits Market, n.d.).

Along with often partnering with other companies, individuals, and organizations to spread advocacy, Misfits Market's communication primarily includes education on food waste and product marketing. They do a good job advertising their positive environmental impact and using this information to motivate potential customers to join their efforts. Their 2023 Impact Report highlights their social and environmental impacts, noting that they saved over 210 million pounds of food. They break it down further to state that each customer saved five pounds of food, 197 gallons of water, and 7 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions (Misfits Market, 2024). Big numbers are often difficult to digest, so breaking them down into individual numbers benefits audience understanding and allows customers to feel their personal impact. The impact report additionally discusses their packaging, stating that through their “free packaging return

program,” they have collected over 2,776,433 pounds of packaging from their customers (Misfits Market, 2024).

Along with its active blog and website, which describe its efforts and impact, Misfits Market has a strong social media presence. On Instagram, they have 812 thousand followers, consistently posting once a day on their main grid feed and their story. The content combines advertisements for their brand, educational materials about food waste or sustainable food creation, and recipes. For the most part, the page adheres to a consistent color scheme, making it appear more cohesive despite the differences in information within each post. They also utilize a potent mixture of post types, featuring reels, carousels, and single-image posts interspersed throughout the page. Additionally, they partner with well-known social media creators and others who already have an established presence in the food industry.

Since 2020, well-known chef and television personality Bobby Flay has served as the chef-in-residence for Misfits Market. Last summer, they featured him cooking various recipes in reels on Instagram. The Cooking with Bobby Flay campaign received much engagement compared to other content. In the reels, Flay walks the audience through easy recipes using food from Misfits Market, motivating them to order a box of food to make the recipe. Along with the recipes, Flay conducted a snack taste test, allowing him to showcase some of the snack options that Misfit Markets offers.

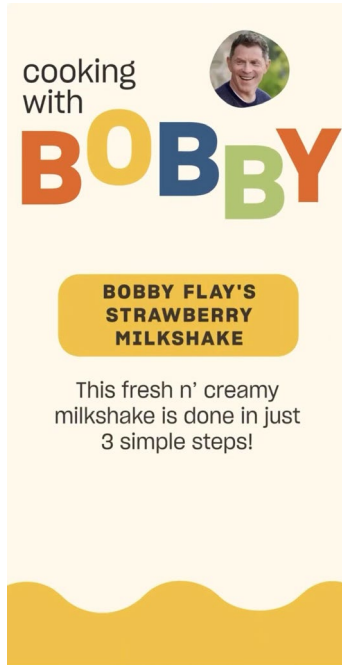


Figure 24: “Cooking with Bobby”

Source: @misfitsmarket on Instagram

Misfits Market’s “Cooking with Bobby” campaign increased post engagements by using a well-known media personality to create simple, accessible recipes with their products.

Aside from an increase in post engagements, it is difficult to determine whether the Cooking with Bobby campaign increased Misfit Market’s customer base or reduced food waste. It would make more sense for audiences to find the recipes’ ingredients at a regular grocery store than to order from the website and wait for the food to ship. The campaign lasted from June 7, 2024, to September 4, 2024, and does not appear to have impacted Misfit Market’s engagement outside of Instagram.

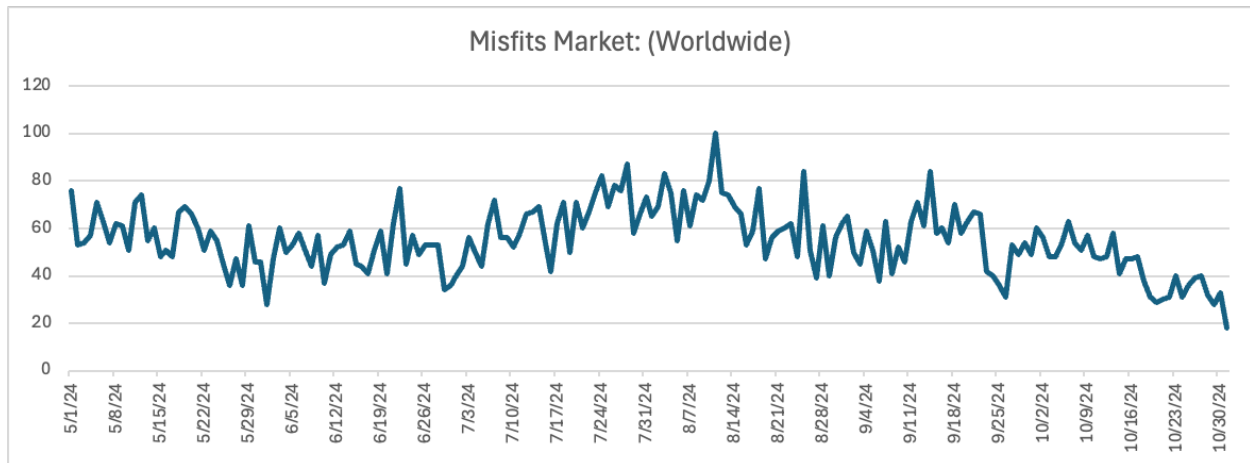


Figure 25: “Misfits Market: (Worldwide)”

Source: Google Trends

The graph above illustrates the frequency of searches for "Misfits Market" on Google from May 1, 2024, to October 30, 2024. There is no significant difference in searches before, after, and during the campaign. The peak is on August 11, 2024, and there was no related post on that day. Many days when Misfits Market posted content, such as August 23 and September 4, saw decreases in searches, while the Instagram posts received engagement.

### *Feedback: Feeding the 5,000*

Feedback, a UK and Netherlands-based company, is working to improve the sustainability of food systems and reduce food-related injustices and waste. The global organization was founded in 2013 to encourage people to get involved in environmental activism. Their campaigns focus on food, addressing various topics including the livestock industry, food justice, and food waste. Their website also features a “Knowledge Hub” that showcases Feedback’s research and other work on these topics. The combination of educational materials, including research and visually appealing content on their website, exemplifies the literature’s emphasis on building credibility and utilizing visuals to keep audiences engaged.

One of their food waste-related campaigns is Feeding the 5,000, launched in 2009, which aims to educate participants on solutions to food waste and provide them with opportunities to get involved. Like the Million Mile Clean events, volunteers can organize their own Feeding the

5,000 events, which can feed any number of people. Another similarity to the Million Mile Clean is that the Feedback webpage on the Feeding the 5,000 events has a section on how individuals can get involved. Every campaign webpage on Feedback’s website has “What’s the problem,” “What’s the solution,” and “What can you do to make a difference” sections, exemplifying the solutions-based framework and the literature’s emphasis on providing ways for audiences to get involved and avoid feeling like they cannot do anything.

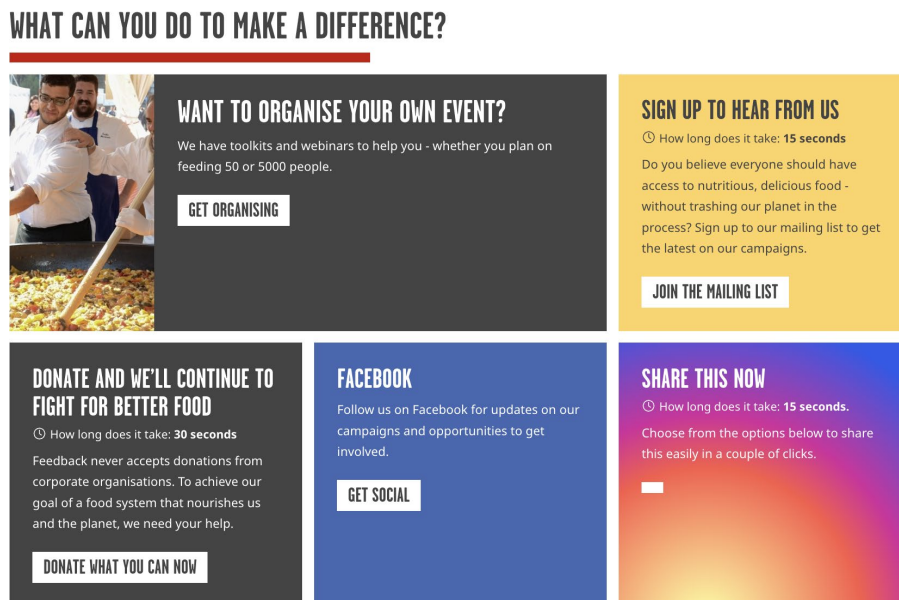


Figure 26: “Feeding the 5,000: What can you do to make a difference?”

Source: Feedback

Feedback’s webpage on its Feeding the 5,000 campaign features resources for individuals who want to get involved and the organization’s reasoning for creating the campaign to spread knowledge on solutions to food waste.

They do not provide a space to submit results from your feed, and rather than advertising their Instagram, they tell people to follow their Facebook, which makes sense given the number of followers they have on each platform. Feedback has over 28 thousand followers on Facebook, but only 7,534 on Instagram. Interestingly, the content on both platforms is almost identical, so it is unclear why there is such a difference in follower count. Additionally, they only follow 321

people on Facebook and 3,469 on Instagram, so the high number of followers is not due to their following a larger number of people on Facebook.

Unlike Surfers Against Sewage and its Million Mile Clean events, Feedback does not post content about its Feeding the 5,000 events. Over 50 Feeding the 5,000 events have occurred throughout the campaign's history. Still, quantitative information about when the campaign originated, how much food it has saved, and how many people it has helped is unavailable, making it difficult to state whether or not this campaign is successful. A report on a wide-scale Feeding the 5,000 in the United States in 2016 said that it saved 21,000 pounds of food and distributed 29,000 meals to people across five major U.S. cities (Feedback, n.d.). Additionally, the Feeding the 5,000 toolkit has not been updated since 2017. However, it does contain valuable information on how to organize an event, what to do before, during, and after, as well as how to publicize your impact. There is an emphasis on sharing on Facebook, rather than other social media platforms, which, along with their overall high number of followers, reflects the UK's preference for Facebook over Instagram.

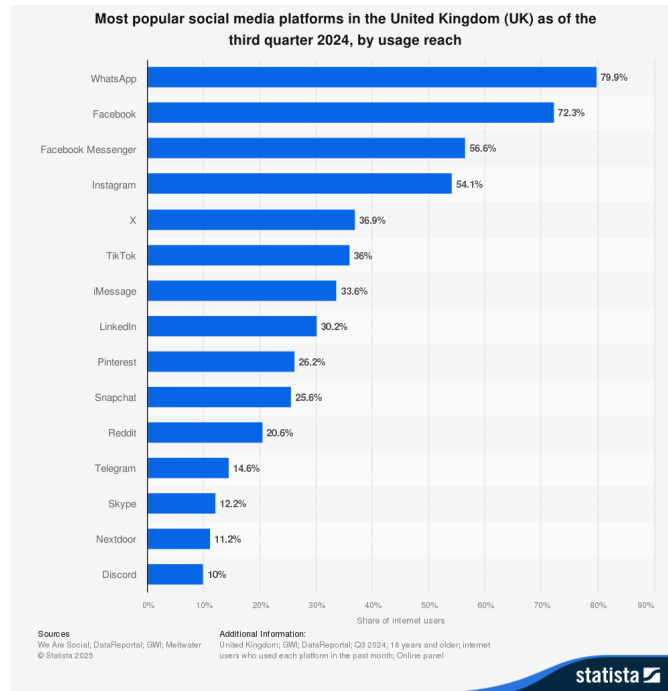


Figure 27: “Most popular social media platforms in the United Kingdom (UK) as of the third quarter 2024, by usage reach”

Source: Dixon on Statista

72.3% of internet users in the UK use Facebook, while only 54.1% use Instagram.

As potential evidence of that campaign's ineffectiveness, when searching for "Feeding the 5,000," the Feeding of the 5,000 New Testament story appears much more prominently. It is often beneficial to name campaigns after something people are familiar with to spark interest, especially in this case, because the Bible story also addresses food waste. However, since the campaign and organization are relatively small, these similarities do more harm than good because it is difficult to find the campaign without already knowing about it.

As information is scarce, it is unclear based on their social media or website whether Feeding the 5,000 events are still happening, and information on previous events is difficult to access. Additionally, the “Want to organise your own event?” button goes to a dead link, making it appear unlikely that events are still happening. Based on personal communication with a digital campaigner from Feedback, the organization is not currently organizing Feeding the 5,000

events, but they have not publicly discussed this break. Feedback would benefit from posting more about volunteer involvement to motivate action on this global scale, despite the lack of official events. This content would also increase their social media activity, as they are currently posting very irregularly, which may be impacting their engagement.

Regarding past Feeding the 5,000 events, the two images below appear to be part of the Feeding the 5,000 campaign based on their emphasis on feeding communities and reducing food waste. However, there are no distinguishing factors, such as an icon in the photo or a hashtag in the caption, to verify if they are. An icon or hashtag would improve campaign cohesiveness and allow Feedback to publicize current volunteer-led Feeding the 5,000 events.



Figure 28: “Feedback Instagram posts on combatting food waste”

Source: @Feedbackorg on Instagram

These photos from June 2020 appear to be from Feeding the 5,000 events, but do not specify their involvement in the campaign, making it difficult for audiences to take further action on these posts. While it is great to see examples of community activism, the lack of a call to action or campaign designation makes these posts ineffective.

## **Fast Fashion**

### *Remake: No New Clothes*

Remake is a nonprofit organization aiming to tackle fashion-related issues from an intersectional perspective. In particular, they are interested in addressing the social and environmental injustices within the fashion industry through corporate accountability and education (Remake, 2025). Their central values are radical collaboration, accountability, intersectionality, and education, reflecting many core ideas that the literature says are valuable for addressing larger systemic problems, such as unethical consumerism. Like Surfers Against Sewage's brand audit and Feedback's Knowledge Hub, Remake has a Fashion Accountability Report. However, this report, along with many other educational resources, is behind a paywall, requiring a donation to access, and thus making the resources inaccessible to many audiences.

One of their free resources is the #NoNewClothes Toolkit, part of the #NoNewClothes challenge, which encourages participants to refrain from buying new clothes for 90 days. Their website features a tab for other active campaigns, primarily focused on supporting worker rights, including fair wages and improved safety. However, the #NoNewClothes campaign relies entirely on audience participation, making it a strong candidate for analysis in this research. The campaign's webpage highlights participants' impact and describes how you could save water, reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and other waste, as well as money, by participating in the challenge. It also discusses broader impacts, such as supporting workers and the environment, and potentially improving your mental health through boycotting fashion companies. Participants have officially completed 9,062 projects, saving 35,341,800 liters of water, 272,034 kilograms of carbon, and 81,558 kilograms of waste, totaling \$2,591,732 (Remake, 2025). The challenge does not have a set timeline, other than the minimum 90 days, meaning participants can take it on

whenever it is convenient for them and for as long as they want. This flexibility extends Remake’s opportunity to create social media content about the campaign and for participants to join in. Remake has 294 thousand followers on Instagram and consistently posts daily on their main grid feed. Their advocacy campaigns are displayed prominently in the bio as hashtags.

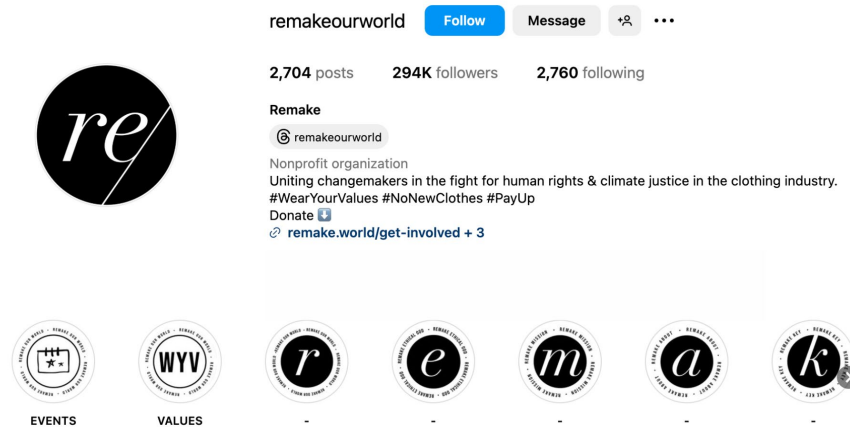


Figure 29: “Remake on Instagram”

Source: @Remakeourworld on Instagram

Remake’s Instagram bio is simple, with no distracting colors or unnecessary text. It brings attention to significant pieces, such as their purpose and the campaign hashtags.

For the most part, the #NoNewClothes campaign’s Instagram content consists of reels that combine education and comedy, as well as content from or about well-known figures, such as celebrities or content creators, sharing their participation, and weekly memes. The posts additionally include a watermark to further continuity and cohesiveness. Meme-based or comedy content often receives the most engagement, reflecting Seymour’s point that humor and irony can make science more accessible. Additionally, literature shows that humor increases audience engagement in science communication (Cacciatore et al., 2024).



Figure 30: “#NoNewClothes humorous Instagram posts”

Source: @Remakeourworld on Instagram

Many of Remake’s Instagram posts for all their interests and campaigns utilize comedy or are meme-based. The photo on the left comes from a reel that received 20 thousand likes, reflecting the increased popularity of posts that target well-known brands like Shein. The image on the right is a meme using a photo of Moodeng, an internet-famous baby hippo.

Many of their meme-based posts follow internet trends or include content from well-known pop culture figures. Recent posts include content about *The White Lotus*, the *Barbie Movie*, and *Brandy Hellville*, the recent documentary on popular fast fashion Brand Brandy Melville. Along with humor-based communication, much of the content is educational, featuring research reports or recent news about the issues their activism targets. Educational posts strike a balance between discussing negative topics and providing opportunities for audiences to get involved by participating in the campaign.



Figure 31: “#NoNewClothes educational Instagram posts”

Source: @Remakeourworld on Instagram

Along with being educational, many of these posts provide resources for further education, such as books or reports to read or documentaries to watch, like the one on the right, which comes from the *Brandy Hellville* documentary.

As seen in the National Geographic photo of the fast fashion landfill in Chile, visuals are often compelling and make people care about the issue. The post discussing waste from consumer returns also includes consumer-based solutions, such as boycotting specific brands, reducing overall consumption, thinking more deeply before making a purchase, or buying second-hand and locally. This post reflects the literature’s emphasis on combining communication about negative topics with solutions.

Earlier this year, on their Instagram, Remake posted about participant impacts, balancing their normal content about the negative aspects of the fast fashion industry, and potentially motivating audiences to participate. However, the statistics show that less than half of the people are making a change, which could reduce their effectiveness in motivating more participants.

**re/**

**Your Boycotts are Working**  
PROOF THAT CONSUMERS HOLD COLLECTIVE POWER

A quarter of US shoppers have dumped favorite stores over political stances  
theguardian.com

**Target's Stock Drop is the Result of a Typical Modern-Day Montgomery Bus Company Blunder**  
medium.com

Target slammed with lawsuit as investors demand refunds  
re/make.com

**Your Boycotts are Working**  
PROOF THAT CONSUMERS HOLD COLLECTIVE POWER

**36% of Americans are "opting out" of the economy to avoid supporting companies who don't align with their values**

36%

64%

**re/make**

Source: The Harris Poll, The Guardian

**Your Boycotts are Working**  
PROOF THAT CONSUMERS HOLD COLLECTIVE POWER

**4 out of 10 Americans polled have shifted spending to align with moral views in recent months**

**re/make**

Source: The Harris Poll, The Guardian

**Your Boycotts are Working**  
PROOF THAT CONSUMERS HOLD COLLECTIVE POWER

Remake has always championed "No buy" boycotts with our #NoNewClothes challenge, sustain your boycott, build better habits and we'll track our collective impact.

Take the challenge through the link in our bio.

**NO NEW CLOTHES**

**re/make**

Figure 32: "Your boycotts are working."

Source: @Remakeourworld on Instagram

The first slide highlights political action related to the campaign, and the other slides highlight statistics related to consumer participation in reducing fast fashion waste.

Overall, the #NoNewClothes campaign effectively motivates people who want to make a difference to act on those desires, closing the attitude-behavior gap through a challenge and community. The campaign is prevalent on Remake's Instagram, though

outside of quantitative engagement statistics, it is unclear if the posts impact the number of participants.

*Earthday.org: Fashion for the Earth*

The first Earth Day in 1970 stemmed from a surge in air pollution and a growing concern about the connection between environmental health and human health. Today, Earthday.org leads celebration efforts, providing a hub for people to advertise their events or learn more about global environmental activism. Similar to the Surfers Against Sewage Million Mile Clean map, Earthday.org features an interactive map that allows users to locate activism events near them throughout the year, not just on Earth Day.



Figure 33: “**Earth Day Event map**”

Source: Earthday.org

The map illustrates Earthday.org’s global reach and success in attracting people to participate in its campaigns.

The Earth Day 2025 webpage also features a section showcasing recent social media content, with the option to explore individual platforms. On Instagram, 7.8 million posts feature the hashtag #EarthDay.

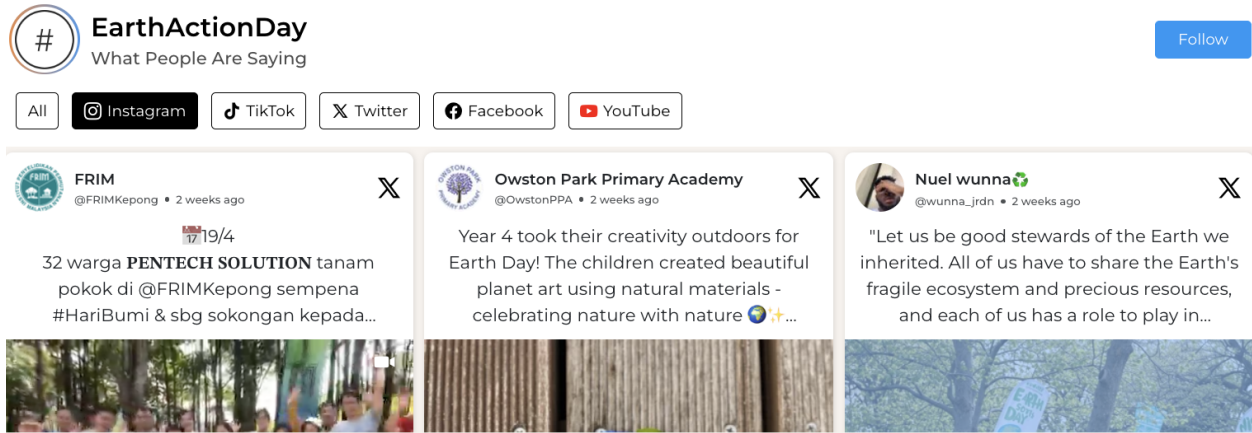


Figure 34: “Earth Day social media mentions”

Source: [Earthday.org](http://Earthday.org)

The Earth Day 2025 webpage features recent social media posts and enables users to share their thoughts on Earth Day.

Similar to other organizations, [Earthday.org](http://Earthday.org) has webpages featuring educational resources, including toolkits, research, quizzes, recent news stories, and information on its advocacy campaigns. While its campaigns address various topics, such as plastic pollution, climate education, and deforestation, one aims to reform the fashion industry (Rogers & Cosgrove, 2025). The campaign is titled Fashion for the Earth and, along with social media content, includes an annual themed report on efforts to mitigate fashion’s environmental and social impact. The 2025 campaign, titled "Broken Threads & Twisted Yarns: Legislating the Reform of Fashion," focuses on reforming legislation within the fashion industry. The report highlights fast fashion explicitly, drawing attention to the lack of regulations within the industry and the poor environmental and social conditions under which clothing is produced (Rogers & Cosgrove, 2025). It concludes with a list of future actions, which, given the theme, comprise pieces of legislation that would enhance workers’ rights, narrow the knowledge gap between consumers and companies, and mitigate environmental impacts. While these are all actions that take time or do not directly involve consumer participation, like a challenge or event, the report

still ends with a call to action, which reads “We call on Consumers to write to their lawmakers in Washington to pass legislation that will affect the entire industry” (Rogers & Cosgrove, 2025).

However, the report has minimal quantitative data for audiences to engage with.

Fashion-related material accounts for a small portion of Earth.org's social media content, with only three posts (all listed below) this year out of 75. Each post aligns with the theme, highlighting legislative changes and directing readers to their website for more information. The posts are also visually engaging, showing the vast amount of clothing waste and providing additional emotional or educational material.

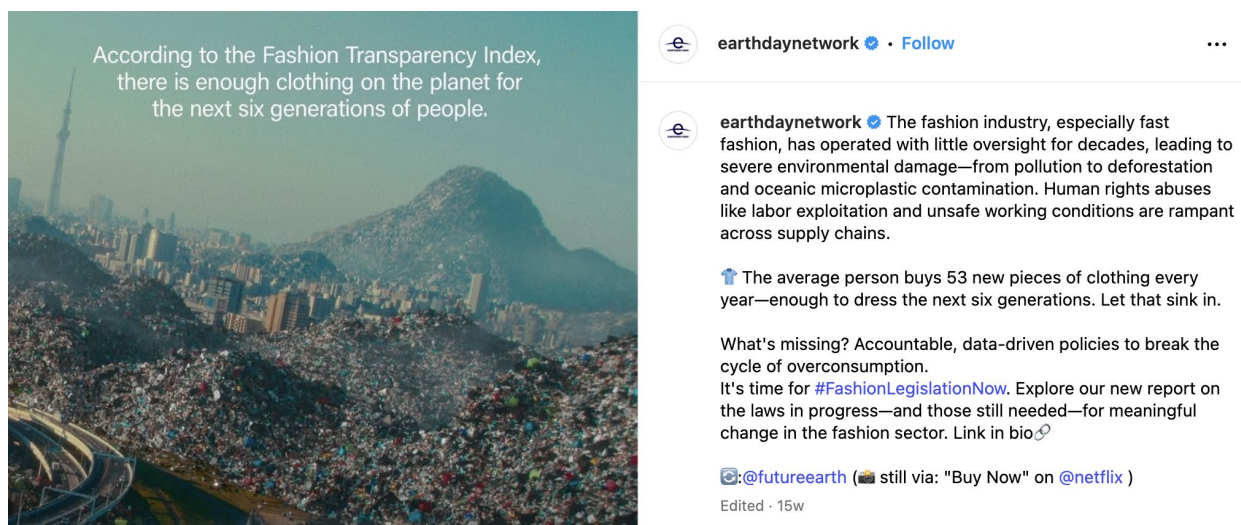


Figure 35: “Earth Day Fashion Transparency Index Instagram post”

Source: @Earthdaynetwork on Instagram

This post provides educational material on the fashion industry, citing a reliable source and offering digestible quantitative information in the caption, accompanied by a call to action that encourages readers to review the report. The report will instruct them to contact their local politicians.

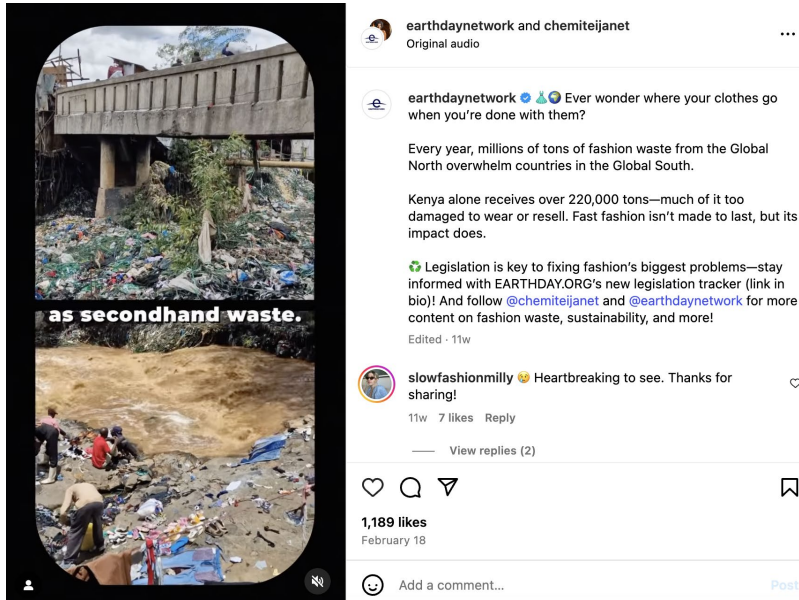


Figure 36: “Earth Day Fashion Exports Instagram post”

Source: @Earthdaynetwork on Instagram

The video follows a local Kenyan woman who describes the large amount of unwearable and unsellable clothes (220,000 tons or 440 million pounds) that the “Global North” exports into Kenya, touching on the clothing’s social and environmental impact. The post has both educational and emotional appeals, as it showcases people directly impacted by the issue and educates the audience.



Figure 37: “Earth Day Shein Instagram post”

Source: @Earthdaynetwork on Instagram

Shein is the most well-known fast fashion company, so using their advertisement for this campaign is likely to contribute to engagement. This photo’s appeal is mainly visual, but the caption provides valuable quantitative educational material.

As it is impossible to know how many people have contacted their lawmakers, the only information available is the post engagements, which do not differ from posts outside the campaign. Search trends indicate an increase in searches following the most recent post about Shein on May 5, 2025.

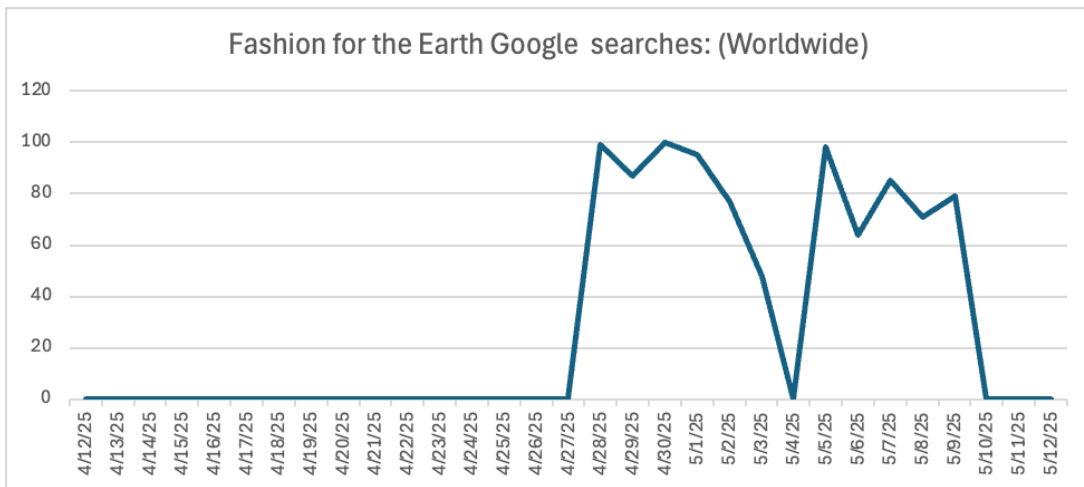


Figure 38: “Fashion for the Earth Google searches: (Worldwide)”

Source: Google Trends

While not included in this graph, there were no searches for 'Fashion for the Earth' when the other posts were published in January and February. However, the searches jumped from 0 to 100 when [Earth.org](#) posted the Shein content.

## Discussion and Summary of Findings

Most campaigns originated from broadly environmentalist organizations, with other campaigns targeting issues outside the scope of the given campaign’s issue. However, as environmental issues are intersectional and interconnected, the campaigns often highlighted broader ecological impacts, which added to their effectiveness. The campaigns that achieved the most success in bringing about real change followed the guidance of the literature. They found a balance between educational, visually appealing, and emotionally engaging content, utilized

various avenues to engage audiences, and collaborated with well-known figures and other companies. It was also effective to present quantitative data related to the campaign participants' individual and collective impacts. Many organizations did this through well-organized and visually appealing posts or reports. However, the reports were posted on their website rather than social media, making them technically not part of the social media advocacy campaign. Many posts directed audiences to the campaign's webpage, so I included these reports in my analysis, as they were valuable in many campaigns' success.

On social media, none of the campaigns created any substantial difference in engagement compared to content from the given organization's other campaigns. There was also no verifiable information on whether or not the social media content truly influenced the campaigns, other than Google search trends. Many campaigns, including both broad digital campaigns and social media content, found success by making their call-to-actions easily accessible and doable for audiences, offering multiple easy options for participation, and avoiding guilt-tripping participants for not being able to commit a significant amount of resources to the cause. Except for the case of Remake's #NoNewClothes challenge, which had a 90-day minimum, none of the challenges or volunteering events had a specific time or size requirement. Even the Earth Day events did not need to occur on Earth Day. However, Remake did not guilt participants for not fully committing to the 90 days. It did provide several resources for people who may need a new outfit for a specific event or something similar. Overall, the campaigns verified the literature's claims and provided further evidence that visually appealing educational content, which leads to emotional responses, emphasizes community involvement, and offers accessible, actionable steps for audiences, is the most effective in leading to behavioral change.

# **My Campaign Proposal**

## **Translating findings into action**

From my literature review, science communication courses, and research, I learned that effective campaigns to create behavioral change typically involve educational content and an opportunity for the audience to act on the educational material. This information has motivated me to act upon my findings from this research, creating an Instagram account to provide content on potential alternatives or solutions to fast fashion consumption. Given the emphasis on industry solutions, I will center most of my content on companies or organizations working towards reducing waste throughout the product's lifecycle and promoting a circular economy. I will also draw inspiration from the campaigns above and ensure that the solution includes opportunities for audience involvement, as consumers have a significant impact on the industry.

## **Excerpt**

The carousel post below discusses Patagonia's Worn Wear campaign, which involves taking in and reselling used clothing. Patagonia has been a leader in the industry's transition toward sustainable fashion, making it a strong candidate for this campaign. Additionally, take-back programs like Worn Wear are a viable solution for many companies, aligning with both the solutions-based perspective and audience participation requirements. I begin the post by introducing the issue and then discussing the campaign. Throughout the post, I keep everything cohesive using the same fonts, backgrounds for each section, and Patagonia's colors. I end the post with a call to action, reflecting what I found effective in the campaigns I analyzed above.

# Patagonia's Worn Wear take back campaign



You're done, your gear isn't

Visit our website



<https://wornwear.patagonia.com/pages/trade-it-in>

In the United States, people buy an average of **53 new pieces** of clothing annually, only wearing pieces **7-10 times** before discarding them (Igini, 2024; Horvath, 2024).

**85% of clothing waste** ends up in the landfill and **15% is exported** to other countries whose landfills are overwhelmed with unwearable and unsellable clothing (Lungerberg & DeVoy, 2022)

Patagonia's Worn Wear program allows customers to return used clothing for a partial refund, providing cheaper options to other customers and keeping the clothing out of the landfill in **3 easy steps**.

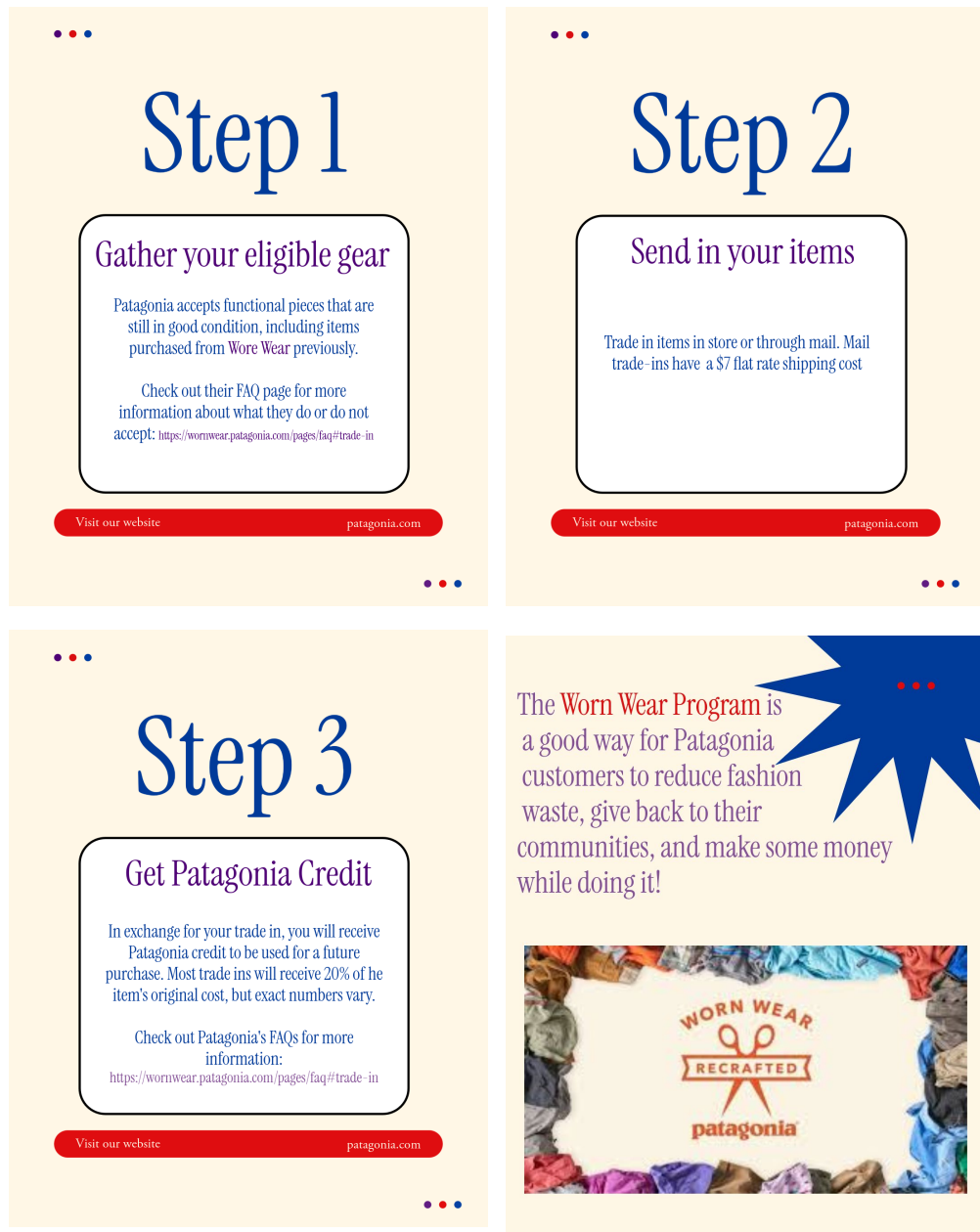


Figure 39: “Patagonia’s Worn Wear campaign”

Source: author created

My post for Patagonia’s Worn Wear campaign featured educational content from the literature and discussed how audiences can participate in the campaign.

## **Conclusion**

My project aimed to identify the key aspects of a digital environmental advocacy campaign that contributed to its success or failure, and to explore how Instagram could support that success. I defined success as online and offline traction, meaning the campaign must lead to behavioral or political change following engagement. My process involved creating a comprehensive literature review that analyzed what is successful in previous studies on environmental communication, and assessing whether the findings in the literature reflected what was happening online. To achieve this, I analyzed six campaigns using Instagram to target different environmental issues. I then applied the overlap between the literature and my analysis to a proposed Instagram account that aims to provide consumer-based solutions to fast fashion overconsumption.

### **Limitations and further research**

The most significant limitation of this research was the lack of access to behind-the-scenes information on each campaign's intention and how audiences perceived it as it unfolded. For the most part, the campaigns I analyzed all began and/or ended before my research began, making it easy to see the aftermath but difficult to understand how the campaign impacted online discourse. Additionally, the time constraint prevented me from thoroughly examining many campaigns, resulting in incomplete data.

While I investigated a wide variety of organizations and strategies, it would be beneficial for further research to examine other aspects I did not consider or other campaigns that may have employed different strategies from those I studied. Additionally, I regret not posting the content for my proposed campaign sooner, as I do not have as much data as I would like to see if implementing my findings was effective. Future research could also explore other social media

platforms, such as TikTok or X, which many environmental organizations and companies utilize for marketing purposes. It could be interesting to compare campaign strategies to consumer goods advertising strategies to see how different ends of the consumerism and anti-consumerism spectrum relate or differ. This research did not follow any campaigns that had specific company counterparts, which would have made choosing advertisements difficult.

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