

## Gen Z's thrifting ninjas save cash, help the planet

Young consumers mean serious business when they shop resale, and their eclectic, eco-minded style is anything but cliché. Ohio State students and Fashion Retail Studies faculty offer tips for scoring big in thrift stores.

### 2023 Fashion Production Association Show

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Robin Chenoweth: Alex Tremblay and Bergen Eppers, two Ohio State University students with a flair for finding affordable fabulousness, are on the hunt.

Alex Tremblay: I found a jacket that I really like, and I think it kind of goes with my style.

Robin Chenoweth: And we at Inspire, like spectators of a modern hunter-gatherer salvo-fest, are taking it all in.

Bergen Eppers: I found, like, a Filo sweatshirt; multiple, like, nighties with lace on the —on the top or on the bottom. I found some really cute, like, silk skirts.

Robin Chenoweth: They are young and eco-conscious consumers in a worldwide apparel resale market that was worth \$182 billion in 2022 and is still expanding. They are Gen Z's answer to thrift shop swagger of a decade ago.

*Macklemore: Imma take your grandpa's style. No for real, ask your grandpa. Can I have his hand-me-downs? Velour jumpsuit and some house slippers. Duggie Brown linen jacket that I found, take it! I had a broken keyboard. I bought a broken keyboard. I bought a skeet blanket, then I bought a kneeboard.*

*Hello, hello, my ace man, my mellow. John Wayne ain't got nothing on my fringe game, hell no."*

Robin Chenoweth: And because their values underpin their purchasing power, they are driving change in the way the fashion industry does business, says Tasha Lewis, clinical associate professor of fashion and retail studies at Ohio State's College of Education and Human Ecology.

Tasha Lewis: Now, I think it looks different than when I was growing up going to a thrift store. This definitely, this is like the thrift store I would have wanted, you know, in the '90s to go to. ... I think in the past, they kind of had this idea: It's a charity shop; it's where you just go in, you dump it in the bin. We don't know what happens to it. But now we kind of know what happens to it. And we need to be more conscious of how that's managed and what that looks like for us to even buy some of the things that we throw out. So I think we are at a different tipping point in the United States and probably in other parts of Europe, where they're also looking at some solutions.

Robin Chenoweth: In this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we look at why secondhand shopping is among the fastest-growing apparel industries in America, how our clothing waste hurts developing countries and get tips from students and faculty experts on how to snag the

gems. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Meghan Beery is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Digitally sophisticated, environmentally concerned, socially responsible: members of Gen Z are calling out both the makers and the consumers of fast fashion. Now in their late teens to early to middle 20s, many of these shoppers are hyper-aware of the impact their clothing has on the environment. Look at social media, and you will find young consumers talking about fashion waste and buyer responsibility:

TikTok theberrybestt: They say they produce less waste than traditional retail companies which is just not true. ....I was told tales of entire warehouses going straight to the landfill from production.

TikTok thoughtswgracie: I saw that at one point that H&M was holding \$4.3 billion worth of unsold inventory that needed to go to the incinerator. Do you know how much carbon emission that would put into the air? And then landfills: 66% of the textiles, which is cloth and clothing thrown out, ends up in landfills ....It has to go somewhere once you throw it out or are done with the trend.

Robin Chenoweth: In fact, fashion is the [third highest-polluting](#) industry in the world. Across the globe, the equivalent of a garbage truck full of clothes is thrown away or incinerated every second, according to the United Nations Environment Program. Even tossing fast fashion into your washing machine puts the planet in peril, according to that same U.N. report, because 35% of earth's ocean microplastics comes from simply laundering synthetic fibers, which makes them break down and enter waterways. Alex Tremblay, a first-year student majoring in fashion and retail studies, says we can't keep going down that path. Alex joined our thrifting spree, starting at Out of the Closet, a curated resale shop in downtown Columbus whose proceeds benefit the AIDS Healthcare Foundation.

Alex Tremblay: I think that's kind of the struggle with fashion anyway. Nowadays, people just want to cycle through their wardrobe every week, or every month even. It's just, it's not sustainable anymore. Maybe it has never been sustainable. But I feel like the future of it is trying to really find what works and try to stick with that. Because just cycling through all these seasons and buying, buying, buying, throwing it all away, like after a few wears? It's really awful. Like, it really does so much harm. Places like this is just really good for keeping it in cycle.

Robin Chenoweth: Do you want to be a designer? Is that what you're thinking of doing? Or retail?

Alex Tremblay: I really want to do I'm a psych major, too. So, a lot of the stuff I want to do, I want to do research about what people look for when they're, like, what people are trying to communicate with the clothes that they wear — specifically stuff like that — and how it relates to subcultures, like the punk subculture, Goth subculture and stuff like that is really interesting to me. I like looking at how the fashion of those form, but I do really want to be a designer too. That's like a huge passion of mine — creating designs and making clothes.

Robin Chenoweth: In a sustainable way, it sounds like.

Alex Tremblay: Yeah, in a sustainable way, in a very, like, forward-moving way that's not going to do as much harm.

Robin Chenoweth: Tasha Lewis, our fashion sustainability expert, is working through a rack of shirts and athletic tops with her fellow faculty member, Ann Paulins. Lewis hangs onto a black and pink Dri Fit shirt that she plans to use as a fabric sample for her classes. She also has a music suggestion for thrifters.

Tasha Lewis: Macklemore's Thrift Shop song: We have to have that as the theme song for this podcast.

Tasha Lewis: I like it. It's one of my favorite songs to go along with the idea of thrifting. Because it's very...

Robin Chenoweth: Is there any lyric that stands out in your head?

Tasha Lewis: Is it, I'm going ... I'm going to pop some tags? I think ... this is horrible for a professor to try to remember a rap song that I heard a few years ago. But I think it's I'm going to pop some tags.

Robin Chenoweth: I'm going to pop some tags?

Tasha Lewis: I think it's, 'I'm going to pop some tags. I got \$30 in my pocket.' That's about all I remember. It's from a few years ago. But if I hear it, I think I'll know the words.

Robin Chenoweth: Well, you know, inflation and all.... The 2012 song really says:

Macklemore: *I'm gonna pop some tags  
Only got 20 dollars in my pocket  
I'm, I'm, I'm hunting, looking for a come up  
This is f\*\*\*\*\* awesome.  
What you know about rocking no wolf on your noggin?  
What you knowing about wearing a fur fox skin?  
I'm digging, I'm digging, I'm searching right through that luggage  
One man's trash, that's another man's come up.  
Like your granddad...*

Robin Chenoweth: I want to just ask you a very general question: Why should people consider thrifting over buying new?

Tasha Lewis: Well, the main thing is sustainability. So, we're thinking of using a garment for more than one lifecycle. So, thrifting is a way to use clothing to its maximum utility, which is something we don't always think about. Because we usually get rid of clothing because it's out of fashion; we're tired of looking at it; it's just been sitting in the closet. Not necessarily because it's threadbare or, you know, it's torn up. Some things are but look at most of the things here. They're in really good condition. Some of them even have new price tags on them. So thrifting is important because it still helps support the sustainability of a garment, the life of a garment. And I think it's important to just understand that quality, and that value because most of our clothing has to be sewn by hand. Somebody has to sew it manually; it's not automated. So, we're actually appreciating that this has a value beyond just the first person who bought it and got rid of it. And so, I think that's why thrifting is important. And even every time I come in a thrift store, I'm like, why don't I just do this more often?

Robin Chenoweth: Clearly, some people are thrifting more often — particularly Gen Z and Millennials. Secondhand clothing sales overtook fast fashion sales in 2021 and are predicted to grow three times faster than the global apparel market overall, according to a 2022 report by GlobalData for the online resale retailer ThredUp. And 62% of Gen Z and Millennial shoppers surveyed say they looked for an item secondhand before purchasing it new. Some of that is through online retailers, some of it is in brick-and-mortar shops like Out of the Closet. I asked Alex why this store.

Robin Chenoweth: I was going to ask, what is the appeal for Gen Z? But is there some other kind of appeal to going thrifting in a place like this?

Alex Tremblay: I'm non-binary. So, a lot of the fashion that I search out isn't gendered. And I feel like in a thrift store environment, it's a lot easier to find that kind of gender-fluid, any gender, any occasion clothing that's really versatile in a wardrobe. So, I can find a shirt and I can make it look as feminine and masculine as I want. It's harder to do that in retail. It's hard to do that, like, when it's new clothes, I feel. I don't know why that is, but everything just feels very streamlined towards one gender. Whereas I feel like a lot of this stuff here is very gender-fluid.

Robin Chenoweth: And you like the vibe of this place, too.

Alex Tremblay: I love the vibe of this place. Yeah. Oh, it's great here. Yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: Secondhand clientele in the United States are diverse, spanning race, class and gender. They include pop singer Lorde; players from the University of Virginia Basketball team, who shop together in their free time; and, also, Bergen Eppers — our fellow thrifter and fourth-year human resources major, who disappeared some time ago into the dressing room at Out of the Closet with a huge stack of garments. I hunt her down.

Robin Chenoweth: So, what are you trying on here?

Bergen Eppers: I'm trying on a blue, little lace tank top. And I really love the color. I love the color and I'm sitting there and I'm like, fiddling with it. I'm like, let's tuck like the bottom half into my bra and make a crop top.

Alex Tremblay with Bergen Eppers: Like, what can you wear with it? What can you do with it?

Bergen Eppers: Yeah, I think it will look really good with, like, white or white pants. That will look really really cute or like if one of those white skirts fit me? That will look so good.

Robin Chenoweth: How much of your wanting to go thrift shopping ... you find something like this and it's not going to be what every other person is wearing, right? You've got your own sort of spin on things.

Bergen Eppers: Exactly. It's very...it's very entertaining to see, like, what I can create personally. It's just, like, this is my own unique style. Like, it's not some generic thing I got from like H&M or Forever 21. It's something that someone didn't want, and I repurposed it. And I gave it a new look and a new life and a new outfit. And one of my favorite things is when people are, like, "Oh, my gosh, like, I love your outfit! Like, where did you get it?" And I'm, like, "Half of it's thrifted." Like, and, and they're always, like, "Dang,

I can't go and get it, or I can't go and replicate it." And you're just like, it's, like, unique to me, and like my personality, and it really showcases who I am. And that's what I love about it.

Robin Chenoweth: On the other side of the store, Ann Paulins is giving a pop-up course on fabric quality, garment construction and pocket seams.

Ann Paulins: I found a jacket, a Talbots jacket, just a suit jacket that is \$9. And so regular price, if you're going to buy a jacket like that at Talbots, probably about \$150. And it's really pristine condition. And it does have that nice feel. You can tell the quality, like if someone's looking for something to do a suit jacket, for a go-to-work, kind of business-y function, it's easy to find something of a cheaper quality at some of the more fast fashion type places but you're definitely going to tell the difference between the nice feel and the tailoring that goes into the Talbots. So, someone should rush in and buy that size 8 Talbots jacket for \$9.

Tasha Lewis: So, it's good to know your brands when you thrift because there are some really nice brands. I saw a St. John Knits, which is a very high-end knitwear brand. And they have a jacket on the rack here, which is fabulous. So, if you know your brands, and when you come thrifting you can really find some treasures.

Ann Paulins: Because similarly, I found another jacket near the — I was showing Dr. Lewis as well — but near the Talbots jacket. And it's also \$9 here, but probably it was more like \$70 or \$80 jacket instead of, say, \$150 jacket, new. And you can just tell if you compare them that the fabrics aren't quite as nice and the lines aren't quite as crisp. But it has its appeal.

Robin Chenoweth: So, when you're talking about it doesn't have good as good of a feel or the lines aren't as crisp, give us a little bit of a lesson on how to look for those things.

Ann Paulins: Yeah, well, you really have to feel it to, to understand that you've got this sort of silky feeling. Actually...

Robin Chenoweth: Yeah, go let's look at it.

Ann Paulins: Here's the Talbots jacket. And you can see, I mean, it is brand new, probably, you know, someone's something happened to the person that bought it or, or they just never wore it. But you can see that it's got nice, crisp kind of tailoring and sort of stands on its own a little bit. And if you feel the jacket itself, it's got a soft feel to it. And it's well-made. See how these pockets are hidden in the seam? That takes extra manufacturing that's, that's, that's hard to do. And it makes just a really nice statement because it's a clean, crisp line.

Robin Chenoweth: Just the fabric itself has a sort of a posher feel to it.

Ann Paulins: And then here's a Jones of New York which is also sort of a bridge line. But it's not quite as tailored or as expensive new as the Talbots and so if you feel both of them, you can kind of tell that the Talbots is...

Robin Chenoweth: It's smoother.

Ann Paulins: It's smoother, it's, it's just got a little more staying power. Notice how it's got top stitching — no top stitching ... So there's a little more juju fashion with the Jones of New York, but it's, it's still, in my estimation, not quite the quality. I mean, even if you look at the ways that the arms are set in, the sleeves are set in, it's just a little more crisp But both are pretty good deals for \$9.

Robin Chenoweth: Some Cliff notes from Dr. Paulins: Shop with your fingertips, look for top stitching and linings, notice the construction of the garment. Look for plaids that match the pattern at the seam. You can get a lot of botta-bing for not much cha-ching.

Macklemore: *They be like, "Oh that Gucci, that's hella tight." I'm like, "Yo, that's 50 dollars for a t-shirt" Limited edition, let's do some simple addition 50 dollars for a t-shirt, that's just some ignorant bitch I call that getting swindled and pimped I call that getting tricked by a business, that shirt's hella dough And having the same one as six other people in this club is a hella don't*

Robin Chenoweth: Do you feel like you can find more things that you like in a place like this that's curated or does it matter?

Bergen Eppers: There are different types of thrift stores. There's a lot of like theory around how thrifting has become more expensive nowadays, which in part, yes, it is true, especially with like inflation and inflation rates. Everything's increasing. Like Rag-O-Rama or Uptown Cheapskate, usually their lowest price is around like \$14, \$15.

Robin Chenoweth: Those for-profit and more curated resale stores buy clothing from individuals rather than accepting donations.

Bergen Eppers: Rather than just putting out everything that's donated, which is what you get at Goodwill or Salvation Army as well. Those are where you get the lower prices like dresses for \$5, pants for \$2, etc, etc So, I feel like a lot this, thrifting Goodwill or Salvation Army is definitely undervalued. And I feel like it needs to be brought to people's attention more because so many people don't want to go through one piece at a time and find those selective items. They don't want to dedicate that much time. And I don't blame them. Like, we all have busy schedules. But I feel like if you do actually take the time, like set out a day in your in your schedule to, like, "Okay, today I'm going thrifting," you'll be shocked at what you find.

Robin Chenoweth: Well, are you going to go to VOA with us just so that you can

shock me? Bergen Eppers: Yes, I am. After I'm done trying on these bits.

Robin Chenoweth: It will take her a good while to try all those finds on, but then we are off to the Volunteers of America on Indianola Avenue, a whopping 23,000 square feet of thrifting delight just a few miles north of campus, whose proceeds benefit programs for veterans, individuals and families in communities. Here we go. A confession. I'm bad at thrift shopping. This is my local resale store and, while I buy lots of home goods here, I get paralyzed by the racks and racks of clothing options. I hope to put Ann Paulins' tips to work.

Robin Chenoweth: This is my store. And this is the one that I'm overwhelmed in because....

Ann Paulins: It is overwhelming.

Robin Chenoweth: Are you feeling even overwhelmed?

Ann Paulins: I am. And just the whole mindset is different. Because a real opportunist can find a great bargain here. I think, you know, previously we're at a thrift store where there's a bit more curating. So, if you're looking for a higher-end brand, it's likely to have, you know, still a thrift price but at a higher price. But here we've got a Calvin Klein, \$3.99 shirt next to a Shein \$3.99 shirt. And then down the row, a little bit of Talbots \$3.99 shirt, and H&M and so on and so forth. Because the shirts are \$3.99. So, if you are looking for quality, you've got to define it for yourself because the pricing isn't defining the quality.

Robin Chenoweth: So, it's not giving you any clues?

Ann Paulins: Right so you kind of have to know or if you care, I mean that's what I'm always interested in is if you take a closer look at the construction value, you'll see things like the Calvin Klein shirt down the way is a really nice 100% cotton, poplin, solid fabric, flat felled seams, tucks to make it shaped, extra detail. And the finishings, or the fabrics themselves, the buttons are higher quality. But if you're looking for a certain color or a certain fashion, you know, it's just like what are you looking for to invest in?

Robin Chenoweth: So, you might find a really good deal here if you know what you're looking for.

Ann Paulins: So you could find, if you know what you're looking for ... I mean, you can find a good deal because everything's pretty low priced. But if you are also looking for an investment dressing something that's going to last a few, well multiple years, then you're going to find it for a lower price here because you've got to do a little extra legwork.

Robin Chenoweth: Checking in with our sustainability guru, Tasha Lewis....

Robin Chenoweth: What did you find?

Tasha Lewis: I was just coming to find you. I found a skirt from L.L.Bean. I was looking for a long, denim skirt and Alex and I are on the same mission to find a denim...

Robin Chenoweth: Yeah, actually I am too.

Tasha Lewis: The denim skirt is elusive here, so I'm not really sure.

Robin Chenoweth: Is it elusive everywhere?

Tasha Lewis: I don't know. It's a trend now. So, I told Alex, maybe we can get crop denim and turn it into a skirt if we have the energy. That might be a solution, but I would just want to ... I wanted to skirt but this was an L.L. Bean. It's a khaki it'll go with a denim jacket, so it's my closest find that will go. So, I might settle on this one.

Robin Chenoweth: Cute.

Tasha Lewis: I think this is where we are now. But I've employed the fit ninjas to ...

Robin Chenoweth: The fit ninjas!

Tasha Lewis: Deployed the fit ninjas to see if they can help me. And I noticed they were in a bit of a ..... there was a bit of a, not competition, but I think there was another ... I think they were two others students or something that was shopping and they found something that they liked. There was a quite an interesting interaction and I went and spoke to them. And Alex like, "I wish I'd found those pants." There was a little bit of a competition going on.

Robin Chenoweth: Give me the pants! I'll pay you \$5!

Tasha Lewis: Right? So it was kind of interesting to see their tastes.

Robin Chenoweth: Of course, I have to track these two down. They are Mahima Daburri and Lucas Ng, both Ohio State architecture students. I found them with a cart, stuffed full of clothes and on top: a pair of cream, wide-leg denim pants, the ones that Alex must have coveted. But apparently Mahima has pants envy, too.

Robin Chenoweth: And so, I heard that there was like some competition going on.

Mahima Deburry: Not actually, but you know, if, if he finds something cool, then I'm gonna be a little bit jealous and ask to borrow it a few times.

Robin Chenoweth: Tell me why you both like to thrift instead of going to the mall.

Mahima Deburry: So I've done it for quite a few years now, mostly towards like my adult life. And I think that it started as trying to find things that were more affordable for my budget, and then slowly realizing that I could actually find really good quality pieces at the thrift that honestly last a lot longer than things at the mall. Because things at the mall tend to be very fast fashion, very cheap, thinner materials that I feel like don't last that long or even don't have that many wears to them. They're very seasonal. They're very trendy in the moment but maybe not years in the future. And I think that's also kind of influenced my style. I've kind of gone away from the more trendy pieces to the more basics that I think I can wear for years to come.

Robin Chenoweth: Okay, how about you? Same thing?

Lucas Ng: Oh, yeah, for the most part. I think it also reflects in the way I thrift. I do look at the material to clothing first and foremost, and a fit that is more universal that would, you know, I would get the most the most wears out of them.

Robin Chenoweth: Okay. What tips do you have for would-be thrifters?

Mahima Deburry: First I think is try to not get overwhelmed. I think that it's very easy to just kind of look at the extents of a thrift store and forget that there's just too much to look at. And maybe you should start small and start in certain sections start looking for one type of thing. But yeah, I think it's slowly trying to figure out what materials will last long, and it sometimes is trial and error. So maybe buying a few things and seeing how long they last, and if you wear them as many times as you hoped you would.



Robin Chenoweth: I can't seem to catch up with Bergen. She moves a lot faster than me through the store.

Robin Chenoweth: Okay. Where did Bergen go? She around?

Alex Tremblay: Yeah, she went to look at the jewelry. So, she's right there.

Robin Chenoweth: So, Dr. Lewis just called you both thrifting ninjas. Do you like that?

Alex Tremblay: Yeah, I like the term. I'll claim that. I'm a thrifting ninja. That's so true.

Robin Chenoweth: I read somewhere that you approach it, you should approach it like a sport. Does that sound...

Alex Tremblay: Oh, I would say, you know, I think it's more like an art. Like, you're looking for stuff that you can pair with other outfits. Like, when I'm thrifting, I'm looking for clothes that I ... that I know will work with what I have. Like, when I find a shirt, I'll say, "Oh, that'll great with that skirt that I have or those jeans that I wear." You know, stuff that I can really wear around and is versatile. So I think it's more of an art trying to ... that sounds stupid. I know calling anything art sounds stupid, but.

Robin Chenoweth: Well, you're matching colors, textures and things

like that. Alex Tremblay: Exactly. That's exactly it.

Robin Chenoweth: So, it's like art hunting kind of thing.

Alex Tremblay: I think so. Yeah. Because you're, you're sorting through all this stuff to try to find a gem that you can really use to make something that looks nice with everything else you own.

Robin Chenoweth: Okay, all right. Well, I'm gonna let you sort.

Alex Tremblay: Not to be pretentious at all. I hope I don't present that.

Robin Chenoweth: Uh, uh. No, not one bit.

Robin Chenoweth: Still hunting for Bergen. The last I saw of her was her feet beneath the door of the dressing room. And despite her second stack of clothing of the day, and those tried on by Lucas and Mahima, I have a sinking feeling: Thrift stores in general sell a lot less than the donations they take in. I ask Tasha Lewis about this.

Tasha Lewis: They might sell about maybe 20-30% of it. And I did know that from my research: They don't sell most of what they get. It usually ends up going to a rag trader. So, what we see, when we get to stores, is what they've actually curated and said this is the best of what we sorted.

Robin Chenoweth: Rag traders, like in your grandparents' day. People who gathered used clothing to resell to rug and furniture manufacturers. Some still do. But now they send millions of tons each year to foreign countries that only use a portion of what they receive.

Tasha Lewis: So, the rag traders usually get what the thrift stores decide is something they can't sell for value. And so the rag traders do the sorting, and they bail it and a lot of it gets exported, which is the part I think we will start to have to deal with. Because more countries are starting to say, "We don't want your, you know, imported secondhand clothing in our markets," because it's starting to affect their industries. Because the cheap clothing that comes in that's used suppresses their domestic industries for making garments. So I think we're getting to a point where we have to deal with all of it, the good and the bad, and the ugly.

Robin Chenoweth: Countries such as Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda are banning secondhand clothing imported from the United States and Britain to bolster their own local manufacturing. Other countries seem ready to follow suit as their waterways and garbage dumps are filled to overflowing with clothes that we don't want.

Tasha Lewis: I think that's the challenge. And we can't forever continue to depend on a developing country to take in our waste.

Robin Chenoweth: As online resale grows, and as more of Bergen's friends get jealous of her fabulous, thrifted crop tops. As Alex rocks their new-used Karl Lagerfeld rhinestone studded t-shirt, maybe more of us will follow them into the spaces on secondhand shopping. And maybe manufacturers will take notice, open resale shops of their own lines, begin to manufacture using reclaimed garments. And maybe, also, thrift stores should try something Alex discovered in Zurich.

Alex Tremblay: There's one in Zurich actually. It's like four stories tall. And they've got a bar like right in the middle of it. So you can order drinks, like while you're shopping.

Robin Chenoweth: Let's go!

*Slimeroni: Got sales at the doors. Vintage Michael Kors. It's designer galore. I dress really retro. And I bump that new Metro. Yeah I'm booming like a bomb. I ain't talking about Saddam. Take a trip to the past. Yeah we finna have a blast. You don't need that much cash. Ralph Lauren on my ass. Going in on a mission. Give the workers they commission. No rules no permission. This a whole other dimension. Yeah.*

*Our thanks to Out of the Closet, and also to Volunteers of America, which through its sales in stores in Ohio and Michigan diverts 1 million pounds of clothing out of the waste stream each year. To get tickets to Ohio State's student-run Fashion Production Association runway show on April 22, see the link in our episode notes.*

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Credits: Macklemore; theberrybestt on TikTok; @thoughtswgracie on TikTok; Slimeroni

See Green America's [Toxic Textiles Scorecard](#) for more information on sustainability and major U.S. apparel retailers.