

THE SUSTAINABLE FASHION COMMUNICATION PLAYBOOK

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

The fashion sector is not on track to meet its sustainability targets, nor contribute to the global intention of the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), the [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change or the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework \(GBF\)](#). Its basis in unsustainable patterns of consumption and production is contributing directly and significantly to the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste (UNEP 2021c; UNEP 2023).

Currently, it is considered responsible for between 2% and 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, as well as significant pollution, water extraction and biodiversity impacts, not to mention social injustices worldwide (UNEP 2023).

Changing consumption rates, increasing consumer knowledge and shifting consumer behaviours are seen as crucial to reducing the overall impact of the sector (UNEP 2023). This means confronting the dominant linear economic model and its accompanying narrative of newness, immediacy and disposability. While engagement with fashion and levels of consumption significantly vary by market, the way fashion is consumed all over the world needs to be much more sustainable, both in daily lives and for religious rituals, cultural events and celebrations.

The Sustainable Fashion Communication Playbook acknowledges the cultural influence the fashion sector has through its storytelling and visual language. It presents the need to direct such efforts towards sustainable and circular solutions as a creative opportunity, and provides a much needed framework when policies around how to communicate environmental claims increasingly come into force.

It invites all fashion communicators to the table to contribute towards the transition, showing them how to take action through: 1) countering misinformation and greenwashing, 2) reducing messages perpetuating overconsumption, 3) redirecting aspiration to more sustainable

lifestyles, and 4) empowering consumers into their role as citizens to demand greater action from businesses and policymakers.

The Playbook is written for those communicating directly with individual consumer audiences about the fashion sector. This incorporates a wide range of roles and practitioners, from those in marketing, branding, advertising, public relations, creative direction, visual media, event production, content or social media at brands and retailers, to those involved in the wider communication ecosystem. This includes agencies, fashion and news media, imagemakers, digital platforms, entertainment properties, influencers, advocacy groups and educators. It is written for a global audience – as much for multinational organisations as small and medium enterprises (SMEs) – recognising that speed of adoption and support required will vary.

The Playbook was developed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UN Climate Change) Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action (Fashion Charter), and is the result of industry-wide consultations, literature analysis and peer review. It follows the recognition of communication as a driving force in fashion's climate response through the development and implementation of a dedicated commitment in the renewed Fashion Charter at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26). This is to: "Align consumer and industry communication efforts to a 1.5-degree or Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) compatible pathway, as set out by the Paris Agreement Goals, as well as a more just and equitable future." (UN Climate Change 2021, p. 4).

In 2022 and 2023, UNEP and the Global Fashion Agenda (GFA) launched the Fashion Industry Target Consultation (FITC) to identify and converge industry ambitions, including on circular systems. This Playbook further serves as the framework for a proposed target on eliminating messages encouraging overconsumption.

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Encompassing both of these and looking more broadly at the triple planetary crisis, the Playbook aims to provide a shared vision, principles and guidance on how to align consumer-facing communication across the global fashion industry with sustainability targets, incorporating both environmental and social factors.

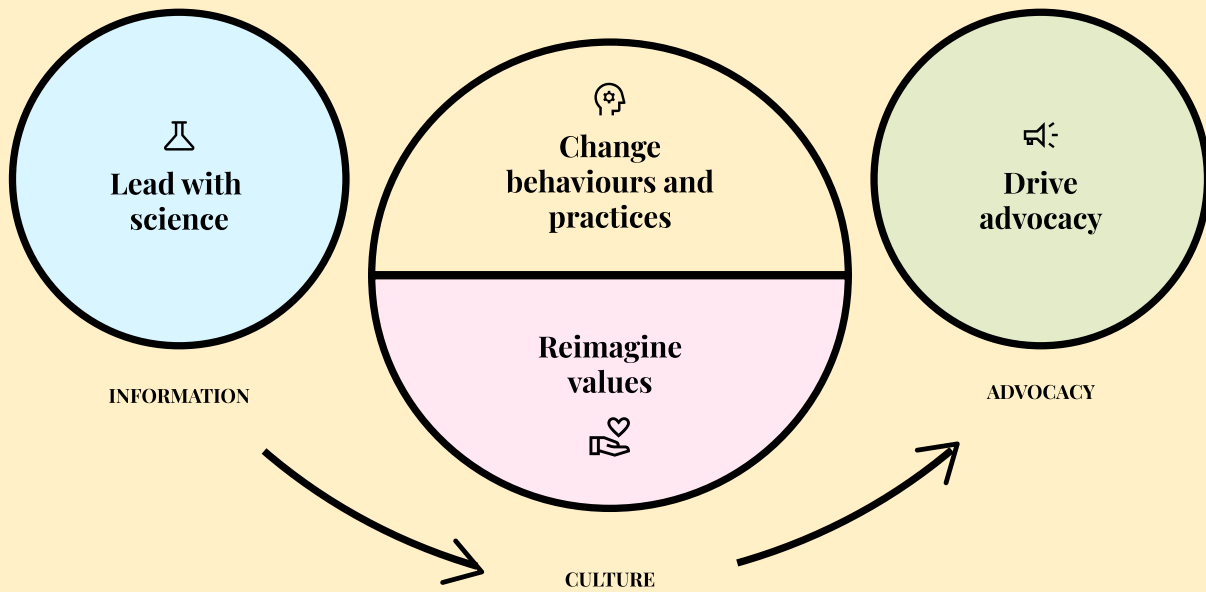
Doing so comes with confronting the role of the system communicators exist within. Mass consumption is a systemic issue (UNEP 2016b). Shifting the narrative of the fashion sector towards sustainability is inherently inhibited by the dominant economic system this is built on and the traditional objective of business. Ultimately this Playbook intends to help fashion communicators explore how to assist in decoupling value creation from resource extraction and volume growth, while improving wellbeing.

In doing so, it emphasises for the first time in this sector the importance of the role of the fashion communicator to be an enabler and driver of systemic change. It considers communication an under-addressed area in the sector's sustainability efforts to date, and key to the transformation of the entire textile value chain, encompassing the design, production, retail and use of a textile product.

The Playbook is broken down into different levels for action, detailed with practical guidance, including globally-relevant advice on implementation, alongside best practice case studies for inspiration and replication across different forms of media and messaging.



The principles for sustainable fashion communication



Principle 1: Commit to evidence-based and transparent communication efforts

Principle 2: Ensure information is shared in a clear and accessible manner

Principle 3: Eradicate all messages encouraging overconsumption

Principle 4: Champion positive changes and demonstrate accessible circular solutions to help individuals live more sustainable lifestyles

Principle 5: Spotlight new role models and notions of aspiration or success

Principle 6: Focus on inclusive marketing and storytelling that celebrates the positive ecological, cultural and social values of fashion

Principle 7: Motivate and mobilise the public to advocate for broader change

Principle 8: Support dialogue with leadership and policymakers to enable wider industry sustainability

Foundation level: Information

Misinformation and greenwashing are ubiquitous and a significant challenge. As sustainability has grown as a selling point, all manner of vague and inflated claims have appeared across advertising, marketing, media, packaging and beyond. A 2020 study by the European Commission found 53.3% of environmental claims communicated in the EU at large were vague, misleading or unfounded (European Commission 2022). Meanwhile, a fashion specific report finds 60% of sustainability claims by European fashion giants are “unsubstantiated” and “misleading” (Changing Markets Foundation 2021).

This has resulted in a confusing landscape for fashion consumers, with growing mistrust for what is and is not sustainable. A greater number of regulators are creating guidelines, investigating claims and taking enforcement action as a result.

Dedication to evidence and transparency are fundamental to communication change. This is presented as the foundation level of sustainable fashion communication within the Playbook, recognising the importance of translating technical, science-based information into credible and meaningful messaging. Communicators must work with sustainability experts to ensure relevant information is clearly and transparently shared, providing an evidence-base that is verifiable and comparable in an accessible way.

Build level: Culture

Fashion is essential to human culture. It inspires self-expression, identity and belonging and informs the values and actions of billions of people across all segments of society. In possessing one of the most powerful marketing engines on earth, fashion shapes the very notion of desire and aspiration, in turn impacting wider cultural norms and expectations. The role of influence and the subsequent impact communication has on consumption sits at the heart of what this Playbook addresses.

Communicators must eradicate messages of overconsumption and instead point consumers towards lower-impact and circular solutions. Fashion communication, when directed the right way, can use its cultural reach, powers of persuasion and educational role to both raise awareness and drive a shift towards a more sustainable and equitable industry. In doing so, it can provide a gateway to influence sustainable consumption, lifestyles and wellbeing at large.

To achieve this, storytellers, imagemakers and role models need to help portray alternative models of status and success, decoupling identity from newness and recalibrating what is deemed aspirational so as to social proof a sustainable future. This is not about educating communicators on sustainability so much as it is about asking them to put their existing skill sets to the task of redirecting and reimagining how people engage with fashion. The balance between the science of sustainability and reimagining the fashion narrative is where communicators can excel. Approached creatively, there is a distinct value opportunity at play in this new paradigm.

When it comes to storytelling, the Playbook further emphasises how communication can play a significant role in exploring, explaining and celebrating the positive ecological, cultural and social values of the fashion sector. This includes the way in which fashion is deeply intertwined with the natural environment; with the diversity found in cultural heritage, art and craft traditions, customs, beliefs, histories and practices; and with the wellbeing of the individuals and communities it depends upon (Williams et al. 2021). Part of the communicator's role is about changing the standard for what is deemed acceptable, encouraging a more equitable industry and ensuring a just transition.

Leadership level: Advocacy

In spite of its focus on consumer-facing communicators, the Playbook recognises that individual behaviour change alone will not suffice and systemic shifts are also required at the business, societal and policy levels. Governments and companies have to be in the driving seat when it comes to rethinking, designing, delivering and enabling access to more sustainable solutions through policies, services and products, and ensuring that everyone's needs are met (UNEP 2020a).

Collectively, however, consumers play a key role in advocating for the broad and systemic change required for the fashion sector to reach its sustainability targets. While on the one hand, this is about enabling consumers to make more informed decisions based on effective and accurate communication from the market, on the other hand, the wider goal is to empower consumers in their role as citizens towards interrogating and demanding greater action from businesses and policymakers, holding stakeholders throughout the sector to account.

Communicators in varying forms, but particularly influencers, the media, brand marketers and advocacy groups, can help educate for this. Education is needed inside organisations too, where communicators can further advocate for change, calling out challenges and critical areas that need to be addressed, beyond the confines of marketing towards confronting the complexity of the system and value creation itself.

The Playbook acknowledges the need for policy intervention to enact this level of change. It demonstrates how communicators can support and encourage policymakers to lead with measures that enable wider industry sustainability, and ultimately outlines the current and incoming policies that will impact communication work. It calls on policymakers to help shift unsustainable consumption patterns and discourage overproduction, while incentivising a just transition towards a sustainable and circular global value chain.

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