

FRENCH SUSTAINABLE FASHION DIPLOMACY: SOFT POWER STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana Prancis memanfaatkan fashion berkelanjutan sebagai strategi diplomasi publik yang berorientasi pada soft power. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi kasus deskriptif, penelitian ini bertumpu pada data sekunder yang berasal dari dokumen kebijakan, laporan industri, indikator persepsi global, literatur akademik, dan pemberitaan media internasional. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa diplomasi fashion berkelanjutan Prancis tidak dapat dipahami sebagai bukti langsung meningkatnya pengaruh Prancis, melainkan sebagai sumber daya soft power yang bersifat terqualifikasi, melalui mana Prancis menghubungkan prestise budaya, kredibilitas regulasi, dan tanggung jawab lingkungan. Melalui *Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Law*, *The Fashion Pact*, dan kebijakan *anti-fast fashion*, Prancis mengubah tata kelola fashion menjadi narasi ekologis yang terlihat secara internasional dan disirkulasikan melalui media, institusi fashion, jaringan transnasional, serta aktor non-negara. Namun, strategi ini tetap rentan terhadap tantangan kredibilitas, terutama *greenwashing* dan kemungkinan persepsi *eco-protectionism*. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada kajian Hubungan Internasional dengan menunjukkan bagaimana industri budaya tradisional dapat direposisi sebagai ruang pertemuan antara budaya, keberlanjutan, diplomasi publik, reputasi nasional, dan soft power.

Kata kunci: Prancis; Diplomasi Fashion Berkelanjutan; Soft Power; Diplomasi Publik; Reputasi Nasional

ABSTRACT

This article examines how France utilizes sustainable fashion as a soft power-oriented public diplomacy strategy. Using a qualitative descriptive case study approach, the research draws on secondary data from policy documents, industry reports, global perception indicators, academic literature, and international media coverage. The study argues that France's sustainable fashion diplomacy should not be understood as direct evidence of increased French influence, but rather as a qualified soft power resource through which France connects cultural prestige, regulatory credibility, and environmental responsibility. Through the Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Law, The Fashion Pact, and anti-fast fashion measures, France transforms fashion governance into an internationally visible ecological narrative circulated through media, fashion institutions, transnational networks, and non-state actors. However, this strategy remains vulnerable to credibility challenges, particularly greenwashing and the possible perception of eco-protectionism. The article contributes to International Relations scholarship by showing how a traditional cultural industry can be repositioned as a site where culture, sustainability, public diplomacy, national reputation, and soft power intersect.

Keywords: France; Sustainable Fashion Diplomacy; Soft Power; Public Diplomacy; National Reputation

INTRODUCTION

Behind the glamour of *haute couture* and the prestige of Paris Fashion Week lies a public diplomacy narrative that positions sustainable fashion as a potential medium through which France projects cultural influence and normative leadership. As one of the “big four” fashion capitals of the twenty-first century, alongside Milan, London, and New York, France serves not only as a global hub for the fashion industry but

also as a symbolic and institutional representation of French cultural diplomacy (Vega, 2022). The elegant, innovative, and prestigious image associated with the country is shaped not merely by the reputation of legendary fashion houses like Chanel, Dior, and Louis Vuitton, but also by strategic state efforts to position the fashion industry within its public diplomacy framework. Compared with more market-driven approaches often associated with countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, France demonstrates a more assertive state-led approach to sustainable fashion governance, making it a relevant case for examining eco-centric public diplomacy (Dubé-Sénécal, 2024).

In recent decades, the global landscape has shifted significantly due to rising awareness of the climate crisis, production ethics, and sustainability. This transformation has compelled nation-states to reconstruct their soft power narratives to remain relevant and competitive in the eyes of the international public (Nye, 2004). Since 2020, France has further institutionalized sustainability principles within its fashion industry, positioning it beyond a mere industrial practice and increasingly linking it to its contemporary public diplomacy strategy (France, 2020; Melissen, 2005).

France has positioned itself among the leading countries addressing the adverse impacts of fast fashion through the *Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Law* (AGEC Law) enacted in 2020 (France, 2020), which prohibits the destruction of unsold non-food goods and strengthens consumer information obligations concerning the environmental qualities and characteristics of products. It also spearheaded *The Fashion Pact* in 2019 (*The Fashion Pact*, 2019), a voluntary coalition of global fashion companies aimed at advancing commitments on climate, biodiversity, and ocean protection. This regulatory momentum was reinforced in June 2025, when the French Senate backed a bill aimed at curbing ultra-fast fashion through advertising restrictions and environmental penalties that could progressively reach up to 10 euros per item by 2030, or up to 50 percent of the product's pre-tax price, subject to further legislative and implementation procedures (Sénat Français, 2025).

Together, these initiatives show how sustainable fashion can operate as a cultural diplomacy instrument rather than merely an industrial trend. By linking fashion governance to ethical production, circular consumption, and Sustainable Development Goal 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production, France projects an image of cultural prestige combined with environmental responsibility (United Nations, 2015). In soft power terms, this matters because attraction increasingly depends not only on aesthetic appeal, but also on whether cultural industries are associated with credible public values (Nye, 2004).

To avoid treating soft power as an abstract or merely rhetorical concept, this study situates France's sustainable fashion diplomacy within selected perception-based indicators, particularly the *Global Soft Power Index 2025*, the *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023*, and the *RepCore® Nations 2025* ranking. These indicators are used not as direct causal proof of an increase in French soft power, but as contextual evidence for assessing how France's sustainability-oriented fashion diplomacy relates to broader patterns of soft power, national image, and country reputation.

In the *Global Soft Power Index 2025*, France was ranked sixth after the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany, indicating its continued position among leading global soft power actors (Brand Finance, 2025). The report is relevant to this study because its Sustainable Future pillar

evaluates perceptions of environmental sustainability, including cities and transport, climate action, green energy and technologies, and environmental protection. In the 2023 *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index*, France ranked eighth overall, its lowest recorded position, while remaining within the top ten on Culture, Tourism, Exports, and Immigration and Investment (Ipsos, 2023). The *RepCore® Nations 2025* ranking also provides a useful reputational reference point: France is placed 21st among the 60 largest economies assessed in the ranking, suggesting that its strong cultural and symbolic prominence coexists with a more moderate overall country reputation profile (Reputation Lab, 2025; The Place Brand Observer, 2025). These indicators do not prove that sustainable fashion automatically strengthens French soft power. Rather, they provide a macro-level context for examining how sustainability-oriented fashion diplomacy relates to national image, reputation, and international attractiveness.

The study of French soft power has long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry. Lane (2013) analyzed how France leverages cultural diplomacy instruments, such as language, education, tourism, and cultural institutions like the *Institut Français* and *Alliance Française*, to expand its global influence, while comparing the French soft power model with those of other nations. Within the context of creative industries, Dubé-Sénécal (2024) and Rana (2024) demonstrated that France has utilized *haute couture* and fashion weeks as instruments of prestige-based commercial diplomacy and as mediums for non-verbal political communication to project national identity and shape global public opinion. Meanwhile, the literature on sustainability in the fashion industry remains concentrated on technical and policy dimensions. Niinimäki *et al.* (2020), Mukendi *et al.* (2020), and Buchel *et al.* (2022) mapped circular business models, barriers to sustainable fashion consumption, and strategic transition pathways toward sustainable fashion in line with the *EU Circular Economy Action Plan*, without linking these elements to the functions of public diplomacy.

Although the aforementioned studies have made significant contributions to understanding French soft power, fashion diplomacy, and sustainable fashion policies independently, a notable gap persists in the literature regarding an integrative linkage of these three dimensions. Studies on French soft power generally focus on traditional cultural diplomacy instruments such as language, gastronomy, and cultural institutions, yet they fail to specifically analyze how the sustainability dimension of the fashion industry is integrated into contemporary public diplomacy strategies. Conversely, the literature on fashion diplomacy heavily emphasizes aesthetics, prestige, and nation branding without connecting them to the sustainability agenda as a state-promoted political value. Meanwhile, research on sustainable fashion tends to be technical and oriented toward environmental policy or consumer behavior, overlooking the diplomatic functions or international political influence projected by these sustainable practices.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing sustainable fashion not merely as an industrial practice or environmental policy, but as a soft power-oriented public diplomacy strategy through which France seeks to project cultural influence, moral credibility, and normative leadership. Empirically, this study focuses on the period between 2019 and 2025, beginning with the launch of The Fashion Pact and continuing through the institutionalization of France's circular economy and anti-fast fashion policies. The year 2026 is treated only as a projected context for the further legislative and regulatory development of France's latest anti-ultra-fast fashion measures. This article is guided by the following research question: How does France utilize sustainable fashion as a soft power-oriented public diplomacy strategy through policies, narratives, and actor involvement, and how can its relevance to national image formation be

contextualized through selected perception-based indicators? Drawing on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power and Jan Melissen's and Nicholas J. Cull's perspectives on public diplomacy, this study offers a new perspective on how ecological responsibility can be institutionalized as a diplomatic asset in contemporary public diplomacy.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical case study design to examine how France utilizes sustainable fashion as a soft power-oriented instrument within the framework of its public diplomacy. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on the interpretation of state narratives, symbolic representations, policy meanings, and diplomatic practices that cannot be fully explained through numerical measurement alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A case study design is also appropriate for examining a single case in depth within a specific political, institutional, and socio-cultural context (Yin, 2018). France was selected as the case study because of its position as a global fashion hub, its strong tradition of cultural diplomacy, and its increasingly assertive sustainability governance in the fashion sector.

Research data were collected through qualitative document analysis. The empirical corpus consists of 25 selected documents, mainly published between 2019 and 2025, while 2026 is used only as a projective context for the further legislative and regulatory development of France's latest anti-ultra-fast fashion measures. These documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to France's sustainable fashion policies, circular economy agenda, anti-fast fashion regulation, public diplomacy, soft power, nation branding, national image, and international reputation. The empirical corpus includes policy and legislative documents, institutional and corporate reports, perception-based index reports, and credible industry or media sources, including France's AGECE Law, the 2022 consumer information decree, the French Senate's anti-fast fashion legislative dossier, The Fashion Pact, Brand Finance's *Global Soft Power Index 2025*, the *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023*, *RepCore® Nations 2025*, and selected reports from Reuters, France 24, Euronews, Vogue, Vogue Business, Business of Fashion, Kering, LVMH, and the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode. Theoretical and methodological works, such as Nye, Melissen, Cull, Anholt, Creswell and Creswell, Yin, and Braun and Clarke, are used as analytical and methodological references rather than as part of the empirical corpus.

Policy and institutional documents are used as primary sources for examining French domestic policy narratives, while selected perception index reports are used as contextual data to understand France's position in relation to soft power, national image, and international reputation. These indices are not used to test causal relationships quantitatively, but rather as descriptive supporting evidence within the framework of qualitative analysis. Thus, this study does not conduct an original international public opinion survey or media sentiment analysis because its focus is on the qualitative analysis of policies, narratives, and stakeholder involvement.

The selection of documents was carried out through inclusion and exclusion criteria. Documents were included when they: (1) were issued between 2019 and 2025 or were relevant to the 2026 legislative and regulatory projection; (2) discussed France's sustainable fashion policies, circular economy agenda, or anti-fast fashion regulations; (3) associated French fashion with sustainability, public diplomacy, soft power,

national image, or nation branding; and/or (4) provided a theoretical basis or global perception data relevant to the research. Documents were excluded if they only addressed technical aspects of textile production that were irrelevant to diplomacy or national image, were not related to France, lacked institutional or academic credibility, were not available in full text, or did not contribute directly to the research question.

The unit of analysis in this research is textual or narrative segments found in the selected documents, such as policy statements, institutional narratives, report findings, and academic arguments related to sustainability, fashion diplomacy, soft power, public diplomacy, national image, and international reputation. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis through manual coding based on conceptual categorization, without qualitative data analysis software.

The coding process was conducted deductively based on three main themes derived from the theoretical framework of the research: (a) Soft Power Attraction, based on Joseph Nye; (b) Public Diplomacy, based on Jan Melissen and Nicholas J. Cull; and (c) Reputational Trajectory and Challenges, which focuses on credibility, international perception, *greenwashing*, *eco-protectionism*, and reputational risks. The first theme is used to examine how sustainable fashion is positioned as a source of French attraction. The second theme is used to analyze how sustainable fashion operates as an instrument of public diplomacy through regulation, international communication, media circulation, and transnational networks. The third theme is used to assess the challenges that may weaken the credibility, legitimacy, and international reception of French sustainable fashion diplomacy.

The analysis process was carried out in three stages. First, the documents were reviewed to identify text segments relevant to keywords such as "French fashion diplomacy," "sustainable fashion," "circular economy," "public diplomacy," "soft power," "nation branding," "environmental reputation," and "normative leadership." Second, the relevant segments were grouped into three main themes based on the coding framework. Third, these themes were interpreted to answer the research questions, namely how France uses sustainable fashion as a soft power-based public diplomacy strategy and how its relevance to the formation of national image can be contextualized through global perception indicators.

To reinforce qualitative validity, this study uses source triangulation by cross-examining France's domestic policy narratives in policy and institutional documents with selected global perception reports, particularly the *Global Soft Power Index 2025*, the *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023*, and *RepCore® Nations 2025*. Policy documents are used to identify French regulatory claims, strategies, and policy directions, while the global indices are used to examine whether these claims align with France's position and reputational challenges in international perception. This triangulation helps the research remain critical: sustainable fashion is not assumed to automatically increase France's soft power, but is analyzed as a public diplomacy strategy whose relevance is examined through policies, narratives, actors, and the context of global reputation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes French sustainable fashion diplomacy through five connected arguments. First, sustainable fashion is treated as a qualified soft power resource rather than as direct proof of increased French influence. Second, it is examined as a public diplomacy modality through which domestic regulation

becomes international communication. Third, the role of transnational networks and non-state actors is assessed as a means of amplifying, mediating, and contesting France's ecological fashion narrative. Fourth, the analysis considers how sustainability contributes to the repositioning of French national identity from aesthetic hegemony toward ecological stewardship. Finally, the section evaluates two critical pressures that may weaken this diplomatic narrative: *greenwashing* and *eco-protectionism*.

Sustainable Fashion as a Source of French Power

This Sustainable fashion cannot be understood as automatic evidence that France has strengthened its global influence. More cautiously, it can be read as a sectoral channel through which France attempts to convert cultural prestige, regulatory credibility, and environmental commitment into a soft power resource. In Joseph Nye's framework, soft power refers to a country's ability to shape the preferences of other actors through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). French sustainable fashion is relevant within this framework because it connects one of France's most globally recognized cultural assets, fashion, with contemporary international expectations regarding climate responsibility, ethical production, circular consumption, and environmental governance.

The empirical basis for this argument can be situated in the *Global Soft Power Index 2025* published by Brand Finance. In the 2025 index, France ranks sixth globally after the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany (Brand Finance, 2025). This ranking provides a measurable reference point for discussing France's position as a major soft power actor without relying only on abstract or normative claims. More importantly, the index assesses soft power not only through cultural visibility but also through perception-based pillars, including the Sustainable Future pillar. This pillar measures global perceptions of a country's environmental sustainability through indicators related to cities and transportation, support for global climate action, green energy and technology, and environmental protection (Brand Finance, 2025).

The Sustainable Future pillar is particularly relevant because it indicates that sustainability has become part of contemporary soft power evaluation. Brand Finance reports a strong correlation between a country's performance in the Sustainable Future pillar and its overall Reputation score, with a correlation of $r = 0.90$. The report also identifies correlations between Sustainable Future and Business and Trade influence ($r = 0.97$), as well as International Relations strength ($r = 0.92$) (Brand Finance, 2025). These indicators are not used here to prove a direct causal relationship between fashion policy and France's soft power ranking. Rather, they provide a perception-based macro context for assessing how France's sustainable fashion initiatives relate to broader measures of environmental credibility, reputation, economic influence, and international standing.

This macro-level context is important because contemporary soft power is increasingly shaped by the perceived coherence between a country's cultural assets and its policy commitments. In the French case, fashion has long functioned as a recognizable cultural resource, but its diplomatic value becomes more complex in an era marked by climate awareness, ethical consumption, and criticism of overproduction. Sustainable fashion allows France to reinterpret an established cultural asset through values that are increasingly relevant to international audiences. In this sense, the relationship between fashion and soft power does not depend only on France's historical prestige in luxury and *haute couture*, but also on whether that prestige can be associated with credible environmental governance.

The relevance of perception-based indicators also lies in their ability to show that reputation is multidimensional. France's strong position in the Global Soft Power Index 2025 and its continued visibility in cultural and export-related dimensions of the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023 indicate that French cultural appeal remains significant. However, the more moderate reputational profile reflected in RepCore® Nations 2025 suggests that cultural prominence does not automatically translate into overall reputational strength. This reinforces the need to interpret sustainable fashion diplomacy as a strategic effort to strengthen specific dimensions of France's national image, particularly environmental credibility, governance responsibility, and ethical cultural leadership.

Therefore, sustainable fashion should be understood as a field in which France attempts to make its existing cultural capital more responsive to contemporary global norms. Rather than replacing traditional French fashion diplomacy, sustainability adds a new normative layer to it. The diplomatic significance of this shift lies in the attempt to connect aesthetic distinction with ecological responsibility. If this connection is perceived as credible, sustainable fashion can enhance the attractiveness of French cultural identity. If it is perceived as inconsistent or performative, it may instead expose France to reputational criticism. This conditionality is central to understanding sustainable fashion as a qualified, rather than automatic, source of soft power.

Within this context, initiatives such as The Fashion Pact, the Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Law (AGEC Law), and anti-fast fashion regulation can be understood as sectoral practices that correspond to the values captured by the Sustainable Future pillar. The Fashion Pact, launched in 2019 in the context of the G7 Summit in Biarritz, gathered major fashion and textile companies around commitments to climate, biodiversity, and ocean protection (The Fashion Pact, 2019). Its relevance to soft power lies not in proving an immediate shift in international perception, but in showing how France positioned its fashion network as a platform for communicating environmental responsibility to global publics.

The AGEC Law, adopted in 2020, reinforces this connection between policy and perception. The law seeks to move France away from a linear "produce, consume, throw away" model toward a circular economy model that reduces waste and extends product life cycles (France, 2020). In the fashion sector, this is significant because debates over fashion sustainability increasingly focus on overproduction, unsold inventory, textile waste, and environmentally damaging consumption patterns. By prohibiting the destruction of unsold non-food goods and promoting circular economy principles, France creates a policy narrative that links fashion governance with environmental protection.

France's more recent efforts to regulate fast fashion and ultra-fast fashion extend this logic. Through proposed measures such as environmental penalties on highly polluting ultra-fast fashion products and advertising restrictions, alongside strengthened transparency requirements concerning the environmental qualities and characteristics of products, France seeks to present itself not only as a hub of luxury fashion but also as a regulator of unsustainable consumption (France, 2022; Sénat Français, 2025). This matters for soft power because attraction depends on credibility. Cultural prestige becomes more persuasive when it is supported by visible policy commitments. In this sense, sustainable fashion bridges France's established cultural image and the environmental values increasingly recognized in global perception indexes.

The relationship between French fashion initiatives and the *Global Soft Power Index* should therefore be understood through a sector-to-macro logic. The index captures broad perceptions of national soft power, while The Fashion Pact, the AGEC Law, and anti-fast fashion measures represent sectoral practices through which France attempts to align fashion prestige with environmental credibility. Sustainable fashion does not determine France's sixth-place ranking, but it provides an empirical arena in which cultural appeal, policy credibility, and sustainability norms intersect. In this qualified sense, sustainable fashion can be read as a soft power resource: not as proof of increased influence, but as a strategic effort to make French fashion attractive through both aesthetic and ethical value.

Fashion as an Instrument of State Public Diplomacy

If the previous section established sustainable fashion as a potential soft power resource, this section explains how that resource is communicated. Sustainable fashion is understood here not merely as an industrial practice or domestic environmental policy, but as an instrument of state public diplomacy. It operates through a transmission chain: sustainability regulation → international communication and media exposure → global public interpretation → potential reputational reinforcement → possible diplomatic leverage. Influence does not emerge from policy alone, but from how policy is communicated, mediated, interpreted, and attached to national reputation.

The first stage in this chain is the conversion of domestic regulation into international communication content. Policies such as the AGEC Law, The Fashion Pact, and anti-fast fashion regulation do not only govern the domestic market; they also communicate how France seeks to be perceived globally: not simply as the center of *haute couture*, but as a state linking cultural prestige with environmental responsibility. In a sector often criticized for overproduction, unsold inventory, and textile waste, the AGEC Law gives France a concrete basis for framing sustainability as a matter of governance rather than branding alone (France, 2020).

This illustrates how regulation can function as communication in contemporary public diplomacy. France's sustainable fashion policies do not operate like a conventional image campaign, yet they generate internationally readable signals about the values the state seeks to associate with its fashion industry. The prohibition of destroying unsold goods, consumer information requirements, and proposed restrictions on ultra-fast fashion communicate a policy-backed message that environmental responsibility is being incorporated into the governance of cultural production. In this sense, public diplomacy is not limited to what a state says about itself through official communication, but also includes what its policies make visible to foreign publics, media, firms, and international observers.

The diplomatic significance of these signals depends on their capacity to transform domestic policy performance into external credibility. When France regulates waste, transparency, and overconsumption in fashion, it creates a basis for interpreting French cultural leadership as more than aesthetic prestige. The AGEC Law and anti-fast fashion measures therefore operate as instruments of policy performance: they demonstrate how France attempts to align its national image with sustainability norms through concrete governance practices. This does not mean that every foreign audience will receive the message positively, but it shows how domestic regulation can become part of the communicative infrastructure of public diplomacy.

The second stage is international media exposure. Coverage such as Vogue Business's discussion of how France "laid down the law on sustainability" frames France as an actor imposing transparency and traceability demands on fashion brands operating in its market (Vogue Business, 2022). France's regulation on consumer information concerning the environmental qualities and characteristics of waste-generating products reinforces this transparency narrative (France, 2022). Coverage of anti-fast fashion measures further presents France as a major fashion market willing to confront disposable consumption through proposed penalties, advertising restrictions, and transparency requirements, while still requiring further legislative and implementation procedures (Sénat Français, 2025).

Melissen's concept of new public diplomacy and Cull's typology help explain why fashion can operate as public diplomacy. Contemporary public diplomacy engages foreign publics through networks, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and mediated communication (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2008). France does not communicate sustainability only through official diplomatic statements. It does so through regulation, fashion institutions, designers, luxury brands, global industry platforms, and international media circulation. Sustainable fashion diplomacy therefore works through a combination of policy performance and symbolic communication: policy provides credibility, while media and industry networks extend the narrative's reach.

The third stage is the formation of global public interpretation. This should not be understood as an immediate or fully measurable transformation caused by a single law. Rather, international media exposure creates a new interpretive space for the French national image. Historically, France has been associated with luxury, aesthetics, *haute couture*, and Paris Fashion Week. Sustainability narratives expand this association by positioning France not only as a country of cultural prestige but also as a state seeking ethical leadership in fashion governance. The shift is not from luxury to sustainability, but from luxury alone toward luxury combined with environmental responsibility.

However, global public interpretation is not a uniform process. Different audiences may read France's sustainable fashion diplomacy through different lenses depending on their social position, market interests, environmental awareness, and relationship to the fashion industry. For environmentally conscious publics, France's regulatory efforts may be interpreted as evidence of ecological leadership and policy seriousness. For industry actors, they may be read as a signal that access to the French and European fashion market increasingly requires transparency, traceability, and environmental accountability. For lower-income consumers or foreign ultra-fast fashion producers, however, the same measures may be perceived as restrictive, elitist, or economically exclusionary. This shows that public diplomacy does not operate through one-way message delivery, but through interpretation, negotiation, and contestation.

This interpretive plurality is important because soft power depends not only on the message a state projects, but also on how that message is received. France may intend to frame sustainable fashion as a symbol of ethical leadership, yet the reception of this narrative depends on whether external audiences perceive the policy as legitimate, consistent, and inclusive. If the narrative is accepted, sustainable fashion can strengthen the association between French cultural prestige and environmental responsibility. If it is rejected or contested, the same narrative may generate suspicion about selective regulation, luxury-sector privilege, or ecological branding. Therefore, the diplomatic value of sustainable fashion lies not simply in its

visibility, but in the ability of French policies and fashion actors to sustain credibility across diverse audiences.

In this sense, sustainable fashion diplomacy highlights a central feature of contemporary public diplomacy: influence is co-produced by the sender and the audience. France can create regulatory frameworks, mobilize fashion institutions, and generate media narratives, but it cannot fully control how these efforts are interpreted abroad. The meaning of sustainable fashion diplomacy emerges through interaction among state policy, corporate practice, media framing, consumer perception, and activist critique. This makes France's strategy both potentially powerful and inherently fragile. Its effectiveness depends on whether the ecological narrative attached to French fashion can remain persuasive across different publics, markets, and political contexts.

This shift matters because soft power depends on credible attraction. If French fashion is understood only as a symbol of prestige, its appeal remains primarily aesthetic and commercial. When fashion is connected to circular economy principles, anti-waste regulation, and criticism of ultra-fast fashion, its appeal gains a normative dimension. France therefore seeks to expand the diplomatic meaning of fashion from refinement toward responsibility.

The Fashion Pact strengthens this dynamic by involving non-state actors. Launched in the context of the 2019 G7 Summit in Biarritz, the initiative brought together global fashion and textile companies around commitments to climate, biodiversity, and ocean protection (The Fashion Pact, 2019). Its significance lies in how France positioned itself as a convening actor between the state, industry, and global sustainability agendas. In this way, sustainable fashion policy functions as a qualitative pathway of public diplomacy: regulation becomes communication, media circulation shapes interpretation, and interpretation may contribute to reputational reinforcement and possible diplomatic leverage.

Transnational Networks and Non-State Actors: Amplifying the Visual Narrative of French Eco-Diplomacy

The public diplomacy framework described above depends on actors beyond the state. French sustainable fashion diplomacy cannot be understood solely through regulation or formal diplomatic messaging. Its visibility depends on transnational networks and non-state actors that translate state-supported sustainability agendas into corporate, cultural, and visual forms. In the fashion sector, influence is rarely produced through policy language alone. It is mediated through brands, designers, industry coalitions, runway platforms, sustainability reports, visual campaigns, fashion journalism, and digital circulation.

This logic is closely aligned with Melissen's concept of new public diplomacy, which emphasizes that contemporary diplomacy is no longer confined to state-to-state interaction or centralized government communication (Melissen, 2005). In the case of French sustainable fashion, the state does not simply broadcast an environmental agenda. It facilitates a wider communicative ecosystem in which corporations, fashion institutions, designers, and industry coalitions carry sustainability narratives. France functions less as a sole speaker and more as a convening actor that aligns public authority, cultural prestige, and private-sector visibility around an ecological narrative.

The clearest empirical example of this networked diplomacy is The Fashion Pact. At its launch, the initiative was signed by 32 global fashion and textile companies and focused on three environmental pillars: climate, biodiversity, and oceans (The Fashion Pact, 2019). Its significance lies not only in the environmental commitments themselves but also in the diplomatic form it created. The initiative enabled France to connect state leadership, global fashion corporations, and sustainability governance within one transnational platform. In Melissen's terms, this reflects the movement from rigid, state-centric diplomacy toward a network-based model in which influence is mediated through coalitions with social, cultural, and market reach.

The scale of this coalition strengthens its analytical relevance. At its launch, the initiative gathered 32 fashion companies representing approximately 150 brands. The Fashion Pact's own network description later refers to more than 50 CEOs, approximately 150 brands, around 20 countries, and roughly one third of the fashion industry by volume (The Fashion Pact, n.d.; Vogue, 2019). These figures should not be interpreted as proof that French public diplomacy has achieved its objectives. Rather, they indicate the breadth of the transnational infrastructure through which France-linked sustainability narratives can circulate.

This scale matters because it shows how public diplomacy can work through distributed visibility rather than traditional diplomatic messaging. Through corporate reports, brand campaigns, sustainability commitments, industry events, and media coverage, the ecological narrative associated with The Fashion Pact travels across markets and publics that formal state communication would rarely reach directly. Major corporate actors such as Kering, Inditex, H&M Group, Ralph Lauren, and Prada amplify this reach through global supply chains, consumer markets, and cultural imaginaries (The Fashion Pact, n.d.). Their participation can strengthen the visibility of France's ecological fashion narrative, although it should not be treated as automatic validation because these actors remain embedded in commercial systems shaped by consumption, exclusivity, and competitive branding.

In this sense, brands, fashion institutions, and media platforms function as carriers of reputation. They do not merely repeat state narratives; they translate them into corporate strategies, runway practices, visual symbols, sustainability reports, and media stories that can circulate globally. Kering's role in The Fashion Pact, the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode's eco-scenography framework, and Vogue's coverage of sustainability commitments show how France's ecological fashion narrative is mediated through actors that possess their own cultural authority and public visibility. These actors help make sustainability legible to audiences that may not directly engage with French policy documents, but do encounter French fashion through brands, events, and media circulation.

However, the same actors that amplify France's eco-diplomatic narrative also introduce reputational risk. Because fashion brands and media platforms operate within commercial systems, their sustainability messages may be interpreted as strategic branding rather than substantive transformation. This means that non-state actors are not neutral transmitters of French public diplomacy; they are both amplifiers and potential sources of contestation. Their involvement can strengthen France's credibility when corporate practices, event infrastructures, and media narratives appear consistent with ecological commitments.

Conversely, if these actors are perceived as performative or insufficiently accountable, they can intensify accusations of *greenwashing* and weaken the very soft power narrative they are meant to support.

Kering Group provides an important example of this credibility dimension. The company was central to the early development of The Fashion Pact, with François-Henri Pinault called upon by President Emmanuel Macron to mobilize fashion industry commitments in the context of the G7 process (The Fashion Pact, 2019). Beyond symbolic leadership, Kering has developed the Environmental Profit and Loss account (EP&L) as a tool to quantify, monitor, and communicate the environmental footprint of its activities across the value chain. The EP&L covers indicators such as greenhouse gas emissions, air emissions, water pollution, water consumption, waste production, and land use (Kering, n.d.).

From a Nye perspective, the EP&L links attraction to credibility. French luxury fashion already possesses strong symbolic capital, but symbolic capital alone is insufficient in an era of environmental scrutiny. The EP&L gives sustainability claims a more measurable basis than branding language alone. It does not resolve all tensions between luxury consumption and ecological responsibility, but it provides an instrument through which a major French corporate actor can demonstrate environmental accountability. Kering's role therefore helps bridge French fashion as a cultural symbol and French fashion as a field of environmental governance.

Paris Fashion Week provides another arena through which non-state and institutional actors amplify France's eco-diplomatic narrative. As one of the most visible fashion platforms in the world, it offers a stage on which sustainability themes can be transformed into aesthetic and symbolic narratives. *The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode* has introduced a common framework for eco-scenography at Paris Fashion Week events, consisting of 75 criteria designed to help production teams integrate eco-design principles into show production. The framework forms part of actions undertaken since 2019 in areas such as transport, venue sharing, waste management, and material reuse (Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, 2025).

These measures do not prove that Paris Fashion Week has become fully sustainable. Their significance lies in showing that sustainability is increasingly embedded into the event infrastructure through which French fashion becomes globally visible. International fashion media further amplify this process. Vogue's coverage of The Fashion Pact, for example, reported that around 150 brands joined Emmanuel Macron's Fashion Pact to make the fashion industry more sustainable, highlighting science-based commitments on global warming, biodiversity restoration, and ocean protection (Vogue, 2019). Through such media circulation, environmental commitments are reframed as culturally relevant stories that travel among fashion publics, consumers, industry professionals, and observers beyond France.

The overall contribution of transnational networks and non-state actors lies in their ability to move sustainability from the language of policy into the language of culture. The Fashion Pact provides corporate coordination, Kering's EP&L provides an example of environmental accountability, Paris Fashion Week provides a visual stage, and fashion media provide cultural circulation. Together, these actors form a communicative ecosystem through which French eco-diplomacy is amplified, mediated, and contested. Its

efficacy remains conditional because reliance on non-state actors also introduces risks of *greenwashing* and performative compliance.

The Repositioning of French National Identity: From Aesthetic Hegemony to Ecological Stewardship

The preceding sections show how sustainable fashion operates as a soft power resource, a public diplomacy, and a networked communicative field. This section turns to the identity effect of that process: how France uses sustainability to reposition the meaning of its fashion identity from aesthetic hegemony toward ecological stewardship. Consistent with the reputational complexities identified in the *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index*, *RepCore® Nations 2025*, and the broader soft power indicators mentioned earlier, France's sustainability policies serve as a strategic response to bridge the gap between cultural prestige and perceived ethical responsibility. The focus is not to restate France's long-standing status as a global fashion center, but to analyze how that status is being recalibrated under conditions of climate anxiety, overconsumption, and growing scrutiny of fashion's environmental costs.

The identity being repositioned may be understood as aesthetic hegemony: France's symbolic authority in defining elegance, prestige, refinement, and luxury value. This identity has long functioned as a reputational asset, but under contemporary sustainability norms it has also become more ambivalent. Luxury fashion may still generate admiration, yet it can invite criticism when associated with excess, exclusivity, overproduction, and environmentally costly consumption. The issue is therefore not that France's aesthetic authority has disappeared, but that aesthetic prestige alone is no longer sufficient unless it is connected to credible ecological responsibility.

Simon Anholt's argument on national reputation is useful for understanding this shift. Anholt warns against treating nation branding as promotional slogans, image campaigns, or surface-level symbolic management. A country's reputation is shaped more durably by what it does, how it behaves, and whether its policies correspond to the identity it seeks to project (Anholt, 2007; Anholt, 2010). Applied to this case, France's repositioning cannot rest merely on claiming that French fashion is sustainable. It requires visible policy action through which sustainability can be interpreted as part of national conduct. The move from aesthetic hegemony to ecological stewardship therefore depends on substantive governance rather than branding vocabulary.

The AGECL Law is central to this repositioning because it recodes French fashion from a culture of linear consumption toward a culture of circularity. By targeting practices such as the destruction of unsold goods and by promoting circular economy principles, the law attaches ecological responsibility to a sector historically associated with aesthetic distinction (France, 2020). Its symbolic importance lies in this identity shift: French fashion is no longer positioned only as beautiful, desirable, or prestigious, but also as accountable to environmental limits. The law should not be read as single-handedly transforming French fashion identity. Rather, it functions as a policy marker through which France attempts to make its ecological repositioning observable. However, the persistence of *greenwashing* risks remains a critical constraint; for this identity shift to be credible, France must ensure that these regulations are robust enough to distinguish substantive sustainable practice from mere performative compliance.

The regulation of fast fashion and ultra-fast fashion further sharpens this repositioning by operating as a form of differentiation. These policies allow France to distinguish its fashion identity from a global model of rapid, disposable, and low-cost consumption. Ultra-fast fashion represents speed, volume, algorithmic demand, and accelerated disposability. France's response, by contrast, attempts to associate its fashion identity with durability, transparency, restraint, and environmental accountability (France, 2022). This does not mean that France has fully moved beyond consumption-based fashion. Rather, it suggests that France is renegotiating the symbolic hierarchy of fashion: aesthetic superiority remains important, but ecological credibility becomes an additional marker of authority.

This differentiation is significant because national identity in the fashion sector is not formed only through cultural memory, but also through contrast with competing models of production and consumption. By positioning ultra-fast fashion as environmentally problematic, France implicitly contrasts its own fashion identity with a model associated with disposability, acceleration, and low-cost mass consumption. This does not mean that French fashion is free from consumerist contradictions, especially given the global reach of luxury supply chains. However, it shows how France attempts to construct a symbolic boundary between fashion as disposable consumption and fashion as durable cultural value. Within this boundary-making process, sustainability becomes a language through which France seeks to defend the relevance of its fashion tradition in a period when luxury, excess, and environmental responsibility are increasingly questioned together.

The identity shift is also important for understanding France's broader reputational position. The perception-based indicators discussed earlier suggest that France retains strong cultural recognition, but that cultural recognition alone does not guarantee overall reputational strength. In this context, sustainable fashion diplomacy can be interpreted as an attempt to transform cultural prestige into reputational credibility. The issue is not simply whether France is admired for fashion, but whether its fashion leadership can be perceived as ethically and environmentally responsive. This makes sustainability a strategic addition to French national identity: it allows France to preserve the symbolic value of elegance and craftsmanship while adapting that value to contemporary expectations of responsibility, transparency, and ecological awareness.

This repositioning also reflects a broader transformation in the meaning of cultural power. In earlier forms of fashion diplomacy, attraction was often built through exclusivity, beauty, innovation, and elite cultural distinction. In the current context, however, attraction increasingly requires ethical justification. A fashion system that is visually prestigious but environmentally questionable may generate admiration and criticism at the same time. France's sustainable fashion diplomacy therefore attempts to manage this tension by presenting ecological responsibility as compatible with, rather than opposed to, French fashion prestige. The effectiveness of this identity project depends on whether sustainability becomes embedded in regulation, institutional practice, and corporate accountability, rather than remaining a symbolic extension of luxury branding.

This transformation can be described as a move toward ecological stewardship, understood not as an achieved status but as an identity project. In the older identity, France's authority came from defining what was elegant. In the emerging identity, France seeks to claim relevance by helping define what is

responsible, durable, and ethically defensible in fashion governance. This shift is not from fashion to environment, but from aesthetic attraction to ethically inflected attraction.

Anholt and Nye are complementary for interpreting this repositioning. Anholt clarifies that national reputation depends on substantive conduct rather than cosmetic branding, while Nye explains why credible conduct matters for international attraction. France therefore cannot simply declare that its fashion identity has become ecological; it must sustain that claim through policy, transparency, and institutional practice. The AGEC Law and anti-fast fashion measures are analytically important because they provide policy substance for this identity shift, even though they do not resolve the contradictions of luxury consumption, global supply chains, and consumer desire.

Ultimately, the shift from aesthetic hegemony to ecological stewardship represents an attempt to renew France's national identity in the fashion sector. Sustainable fashion diplomacy should therefore not be read as final evidence that France has become an ecological leader, but as a strategic effort to transform inherited cultural prestige into a more contemporary and ethically relevant form of soft power.

Challenges and Critical Dimensions of France's Sustainable Fashion Diplomacy

The previous sections show how France attempts to transform sustainable fashion into soft power, public diplomacy, networked visibility, and identity repositioning. However, this diplomatic narrative remains persuasive only if its credibility survives two systemic pressure points: the gap between ecological narratives and luxury-industry practices, and the risk that environmental regulation is perceived abroad as selective economic protectionism. These challenges strike at the core of contemporary soft power and public diplomacy. In Nye's terms, attraction depends fundamentally on credibility. Once projected values appear inconsistent with corporate and material realities, soft power resources may become sources of suspicion. In Melissen's framework, public diplomacy operates within non-linear networks of foreign publics, transnational firms, and media ecosystems. Assertive domestic policies, even when normatively justified, can generate resistance when external stakeholders perceive them as exclusionary, self-serving, or structurally asymmetrical.

Greenwashing and the Threat to Soft Power Credibility. The first challenge concerns the vulnerability of state credibility to accusations of corporate *greenwashing*. France's eco-diplomatic narrative depends on the claim that the fashion ecosystem can be reoriented toward circularity and environmental stewardship. However, this projection confronts the material realities of the French luxury sector. Conglomerates such as Kering and LVMH anchor France's global fashion identity, but they also operate through complex transnational supply chains, high-volume distribution, resource-intensive production, and carbon-heavy logistics. This misalignment exposes France's national image to scrutiny over whether its foundational industries embody the ecological values projected by state diplomacy.

From a Nye perspective, this gap directly affects the conversion of cultural resources into soft power attraction. Soft power is not generated through self-description alone, but through perceived credibility. French luxury groups have institutionalized environmental frameworks, including Kering's EP&L and LVMH's LIFE 360 roadmap, yet these commitments coexist with commercial imperatives for continued expansion (Kering, n.d.; LVMH, n.d.). Critics, including The Business of Fashion, have highlighted this

paradox by noting that luxury conglomerates may report reductions in emissions intensity while absolute environmental pressures continue to scale alongside rising revenues (Business of Fashion, 2023).

France's regulatory framework on consumer information concerning the environmental qualities and characteristics of products is therefore relevant to this credibility problem, as it seeks to make environmental claims more visible, verifiable, and accountable (France, 2022). However, regulation alone does not eliminate the reputational risk of *greenwashing*. When international audiences interpret sustainability claims as commercial public relations rather than environmental mitigation, the state's diplomatic narrative becomes vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy. In Nye's framework, credibility is the condition that transforms a national asset into legitimate attraction. If French luxury fashion is perceived as aesthetically green but materially carbon-intensive, its usefulness as a soft power resource becomes compromised. In this case, fashion may shift from an object of admiration into a target of external skepticism.

Eco-Protectionism and the Paradox of Networked Public Diplomacy. The second challenge concerns the geopolitical reception of environmental mandates. Within a networked global economy, domestic legislation is simultaneously interpreted by foreign publics, platform companies, and trading partners that may contest the state's intent. This friction is visible in France's legislative efforts to penalize the ultra-fast fashion sector. The French Senate's backing of targeted measures, including an environmental index system, advertising restrictions, and progressive penalties that could reach up to €10 per item by 2030, specifically affects hyper-scalable e-commerce platforms such as Shein and Temu, although these measures still require further legislative and implementation procedures (Sénat Français, 2025).

Although domestically framed as climate policy designed to curb overproduction and textile waste, the measure enters a contested geopolitical arena internationally. Because these regulations may be perceived as disproportionately affecting Asian-based ultra-fast fashion platforms while leaving high-margin European luxury actors less directly targeted, foreign state and market actors may decode the policy as *eco-protectionism*: the strategic deployment of environmental standards to shield domestic industries from hyper-competitive external actors. This perception does not necessarily invalidate the environmental rationale of the policy, but it complicates its diplomatic reception.

This interpretive conflict is further shaped by class and consumer politics. Ultra-fast fashion entities have attempted to neutralize French environmental critiques by framing affordable fashion as a democratic consumer right. For lower-income global consumers, penalties on ultra-fast fashion may appear less as ethical stewardship and more as an elitist restriction on affordability. This dynamic illustrates the paradox of networked public diplomacy: a policy designed to elevate a nation's moral authority can damage its transnational relationships if foreign publics perceive it as paternalistic or economically exclusionary.

In a networked diplomatic environment where legitimacy is negotiated rather than imposed, France's potentially asymmetric enforcement may create a hierarchy of accountability. If low-cost foreign platforms are more directly targeted while carbon-intensive luxury actors remain less constrained, France's claim to ethical consistency becomes more vulnerable. The issue is not whether France should regulate ultra-fast

fashion, but whether its environmental standards are applied consistently enough to avoid being read as selective protectionism.

This concern also shows that the credibility of France's sustainable fashion diplomacy depends on policy coherence across different segments of the fashion industry. If environmental responsibility is applied mainly to ultra-fast fashion while luxury fashion is treated primarily as a cultural asset, the diplomatic narrative may appear uneven. A more coherent approach requires France to demonstrate that sustainability standards are not only directed at foreign low-cost platforms, but also relevant to domestic luxury houses, fashion events, supply chains, and corporate reporting practices. Such coherence is essential because public diplomacy is persuasive only when the values projected internationally are reflected in consistent domestic governance. In this sense, the challenge of *eco-protectionism* is closely connected to the challenge of greenwashing: both question whether France's ecological narrative is applied as a general principle or selectively mobilized for reputational advantage.

These two challenges should therefore be understood not merely as external criticisms, but as credibility tests for France's sustainable fashion diplomacy. *Greenwashing* tests whether the ecological values projected through luxury brands, fashion institutions, and sustainability initiatives are supported by measurable changes in production, reporting, and supply-chain accountability. *Eco-protectionism*, meanwhile, tests whether France's environmental regulation can be perceived as consistent, fair, and globally legitimate rather than selectively protective of domestic or European interests. Both issues reveal that public diplomacy depends not only on visibility, but also on the perceived coherence between projected values and material practices.

Ultimately, French sustainable fashion diplomacy faces a dual credibility trap. Greenwashing threatens its soft power from within by exposing the possible decoupling of sustainability discourse and luxury corporate practice. *Eco-protectionism* threatens its public diplomacy from without by provoking resistance among foreign market actors and trading partners. To preserve its persuasive force, France cannot treat eco-diplomacy as communication alone. It requires greater consistency in applying rigorous environmental standards across domestic luxury conglomerates, global digital platforms, and the transnational networks affected by its regulatory reach.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that French sustainable fashion diplomacy is a strategic attempt to reposition a traditional cultural industry as a contemporary instrument of public diplomacy and soft power. Through the AGECE Law, The Fashion Pact, anti-fast fashion regulation, and the involvement of fashion institutions and corporate actors, France seeks to connect cultural prestige with environmental responsibility. Rather than proving a direct increase in French global influence, the analysis shows how sustainable fashion functions as a qualified soft power resource whose relevance depends on policy credibility, international communication, and public interpretation.

The findings show that this strategy operates through a networked process rather than a single state campaign. Regulation provides policy substance; fashion institutions, brands, and media translate that substance into cultural visibility; and transnational networks circulate the narrative beyond France. However,

this diplomacy remains conditional and contested. *Greenwashing* may weaken its credibility if luxury actors fail to align environmental claims with material practice, while *eco-protectionism* may challenge its reception if anti-fast fashion policies are interpreted as selective economic defense rather than environmental governance.

This also suggests that France's sustainable fashion diplomacy should be understood as an ongoing reputational project rather than a completed achievement. Its significance lies not in proving that France has already secured ecological leadership, but in showing how the country attempts to adapt its cultural authority to changing global expectations. The interaction between regulation, fashion institutions, corporate actors, and media narratives demonstrates that sustainable fashion has become a strategic arena where national image is continuously produced, tested, and contested. Such a process makes sustainable fashion relevant not only to fashion studies, but also to broader debates on public diplomacy, soft power, and reputation politics.

Nevertheless, the scope of this study remains interpretive rather than causal. The analysis does not claim to measure the direct impact of sustainable fashion policies on foreign public opinion or France's overall soft power ranking. Instead, it examines how policy documents, institutional narratives, industry initiatives, media coverage, and perception-based indicators can be read together to understand the diplomatic meaning of sustainable fashion. This limitation is important because public diplomacy outcomes are shaped by multiple variables beyond the fashion sector, including foreign policy behavior, economic performance, geopolitical context, and broader national reputation. Therefore, the value of this study lies in identifying sustainable fashion as one strategic arena within France's wider soft power and public diplomacy ecosystem, rather than treating it as the sole determinant of French international influence.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in showing that cultural commodities in the twenty-first century are no longer limited to symbolic representation, commercial branding, or aesthetic distinction. Fashion, as the French case demonstrates, can become a site where culture, environmental norms, public diplomacy, national reputation, and soft power converge. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing France's sustainable fashion diplomacy with other fashion-producing states to examine whether ecological stewardship is becoming a broader pattern in cultural diplomacy or remains specific to France's distinctive fusion of luxury, regulation, and public diplomacy.

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SHORT PROFILE

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