Sustainable Lifestyles in Advertising

↳ A user guide for brands and agencies

UBA

Behaven

Why this guide

Collaboration from all parts of society — including brands and consumers — is crucial for the transition to a *sustainable future*. Only through collective effort can we *significantly transform* lifestyles and consumption habits.

Advertising plays a key role in this transformation, as commercial messages significantly impact consumer perceptions and behaviours. This influence goes beyond merely promoting products and services. The content and lifestyles shown in ads shape consumer perceptions and contribute to culture. Over time, these lifestyles become references in consumers' minds, forming norms and values.

By recognising and challenging existing representations and promoting sustainable lifestyles through their content, brands can drive meaningful change that respects the Earth's limits. Integrating representations of environmentally friendly practices and eco-responsible behaviours — such as walking, eating vegetarian, or buying in bulk — into ad messages can be a key part of the solution. Advertising has the potential to not only boost sales but also to cultivate more environmentally conscious norms and values over time.

Brands and their agencies have the opportunity to make sustainable lifestyles irresistibly attractive, turning them into the ultimate consumer aspiration.

The entire sector — brands, agencies, and media — can harness their energy and creative talent to champion a new environmentally-friendly consumer society and drive the transition towards more sustainable lifestyles. With the power of our combined creativity and passion, **we have the ability to ignite a future that is both brighter and more sustainable for everyone.**

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About ↘

This guide was adapted for the Belgian market by UBA and Behaven, based on EpE's *Lifestyle Representations and the Ecological Transition — User Guide for Advertisers, 2022*, which can be found on the EpE website.

How it works

Lifestyles are *as diverse as people*, leading to varying *environmental impacts*. To address this *diversity*, this guide classifies *existing advertising representations* — or stereotypes — into eight categories, offering a *practical framework* for identifying and addressing *problematic portrayals*.

To help brands and their agencies make sustainable behaviours and lifestyles more desirable, the guide first highlights the current issues and stereotypes associated with each of these eight topics. It then provides guidance on two types of representations.

↳ **To be limited:** Representations that should be used sparingly in advertising or restricted to minimise their impact, or problematic portrayals that need reengineering to propose better alternatives.

↳ **To be promoted:** Representations that should be included as frequently as possible in advertising to help make these behaviours widespread and encourage the adoption of associated practices.

8 lifestyle representations ↘

On the following pages, you will find the eight lifestyle representations, along with the problems they present and potential solutions to better promote sustainable lifestyles in advertising.

01	**02**	**03**
Food: The *meat-obsessed* diet	**Mobility:** The car as *status symbol*	**Housing:** The detached *house fantasy*
04	**05**	**06**
Clothing: The *t-shirt in winter*	**Leisure:** The *distant escape*	**Modernity:** The *high-speed* life
07	**08**	
Nature: The *conquest* of *wilderness*	**(Over)consumption:** The *source* of *happiness*	

01

Food: The meat-obsessed diet

The problem ↘

Meals and foods that showcase meat dishes, such as roasts, chicken and barbecues, are commonly featured.

According to the United Nations, the production and consumption of meat and dairy contribute to 14.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions and 80% of deforestation. Large areas of agriculture are dedicated to growing animal feed, such as soybeans. Livestock farming occupies 70% of agricultural land and approximately 30% of the world's land surface, with these figures rising as more populations adopt Western lifestyles. Additionally, excessive meat consumption, particularly red meat, is linked to adverse health effects, as reported by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). A better balance between animal and plant proteins in our diets would offer significant health benefits.

The opportunity ↘

The goal is not to eliminate meat from advertising or to convert everyone to vegetarianism, but to show that hearty, healthy, and festive meals can be prepared without meat. Brands can promote fruits, vegetables and carbohydrates as more than just side dishes, which is critical for trans-formation. By diversifying diets through the introduction of new foods, such as rare or ancient vegetable varieties, and experimenting with new recipes, brands can help facilitate this transition.

To be limited ↘

↳ **Meat-only meals:** depicting meat as the only food item.

↳ **Excessive portions:** showing meals with excessively large portions of meat.

To be promoted ↘

↳ **Balanced meals:** showing scenes of enjoyable meals that include a balance of meat, vegetables, and carbohydrates.

↳ **Meat-free meals:** visualing appealing, meat-free meals that showcase tasty alternatives to meat.

02

Mobility: the car as status symbol

The problem ↘

The private car is often depicted as a symbol of status, individual freedom, and unrestricted mobility.

Mobility is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Combustion engines release greenhouse gases and other pollutants that harm the climate, air quality, biodiversity, and our living environment through noise, odour, and safety concerns. Additionally, the average number of occupants per car journey is decreasing, currently ranging from 1.2 to 1.5. This trend, known as 'solo driving', results in more cars on the road. Advertising reinforces this issue by portraying cars in idyllic or empty settings, creating an unrealistic image of private cars as symbols of personal freedom and daily convenience. This portrayal can encourage excessive car use and undermine efforts to mitigate the environmental impact of transportation.

The opportunity ↘

Brands have the opportunity to reshape the narrative around mobility by promoting alternatives to the most polluting transport options and by redefining what constitutes status and freedom in the context of mobility.

To be limited ↘

↳ **Non-urban vehicles in urban areas:** depicting vehicles designed for non-urban environments, such as 4x4s, in city settings.

↳ **Idealised freedom associations:** showing private vehicles as symbols of personal freedom and fulfilment.

↳ **Unrealistic traffic scenes:** presenting empty roads that are impractical and rarely encountered.

↳ **Idyllic and wild landscapes:** portraying vehicles in pristine natural settings or wilderness areas as if they are part of the everyday driving experience.

↳ **Solo driving:** depicting a single person in a vehicle, except in clearly defined professional or personal contexts.

To be promoted ↘

↳ **Sustainable transport modes:** featuring walking, cycling, public transport, and carpooling.

↳ **Positive public transport:** regularly showcasing travel options such as trains and buses to establish these as the 'new normal'.

↳ **Realistic traffic conditions:** depicting vehicles in typical road traffic scenarios, such as holiday departures.

↳ **Carpooling depictions:** featuring multiple individuals in a car to suggest that carpooling and car-sharing are enjoyable.

03

Housing: the detached house fantasy

The problem ↘

The detached house is often presented as the ideal, evoking the dream of suburban living and home ownership.

Urban expansion driven by the ideal of the detached house, along with the development of shopping malls and infrastructure on city outskirts and in the countryside, is leading to a gradual loss of biodiversity, increased flood risks, and a reduction in agricultural and natural spaces. This challenges ecological transitions, including our natural carbon absorption capacity, and exacerbates social insecurity by making access to services and public transportation more difficult, often resulting in increased solo driving. Additionally, such expansion raises development and investment costs, particularly for infrastructure such as water, sanitation, energy and transportation.

The opportunity ↘

Cities are launching various initiatives to revitalise town centres, including densification and redevelopment, as well as reintroducing neighbourhood services to reduce the need for travel. Brands and agencies play a key role in supporting these efforts.

To be limited ↘

↳ **Detached suburban houses:** portraying large, detached houses in suburban areas.

↳ **Large country houses:** depicting expansive rural homes that reinforce the ideal of the detached house.

To be promoted ↘

↳ **Multi-family buildings:** highlighting multi-family housing surrounded by vegetation that supports urban biodiversity.

↳ **Attractive urban dwellings:** showcasing appealing urban homes integrated with natural spaces.

↳ **Walkability and cycling:** promoting the convenience of getting around on foot or by bicycle.

↳ **Convenient access:** emphasising easy access to public transport, cultural and sports facilities, and shops.

04

Clothing: the t-shirt in winter

The problem ↘

Clothing choices that disregard seasonal appropriateness and do not match current outdoor temperatures are frequently depicted in advertising.

Beyond the impact of fast fashion, the mismatch between clothing and seasonal conditions raises concerns about energy consumption. In 2015, heating accounted for approximately 70% of total energy consumption in the housing sector, and this figure is expected to rise significantly by 2050 due to climate change. Increased use of air conditioning not only contributes to greenhouse gas emissions but also exacerbates to higher urban temperatures during heatwaves. Wearing seasonally appropriate clothing, both in summer and winter, can help reduce energy consumption and its environmental impacts. However, it is important to acknowledge that ads may feature next season's fashion or holiday promotions, which can create a disconnect between the season represented and the actual time of year.

The opportunity ↘

To avoid encouraging excessive heating and air conditioning use, and to reflect the natural variability of weather throughout the year, brands and agencies should promote clothing that aligns with the current season.
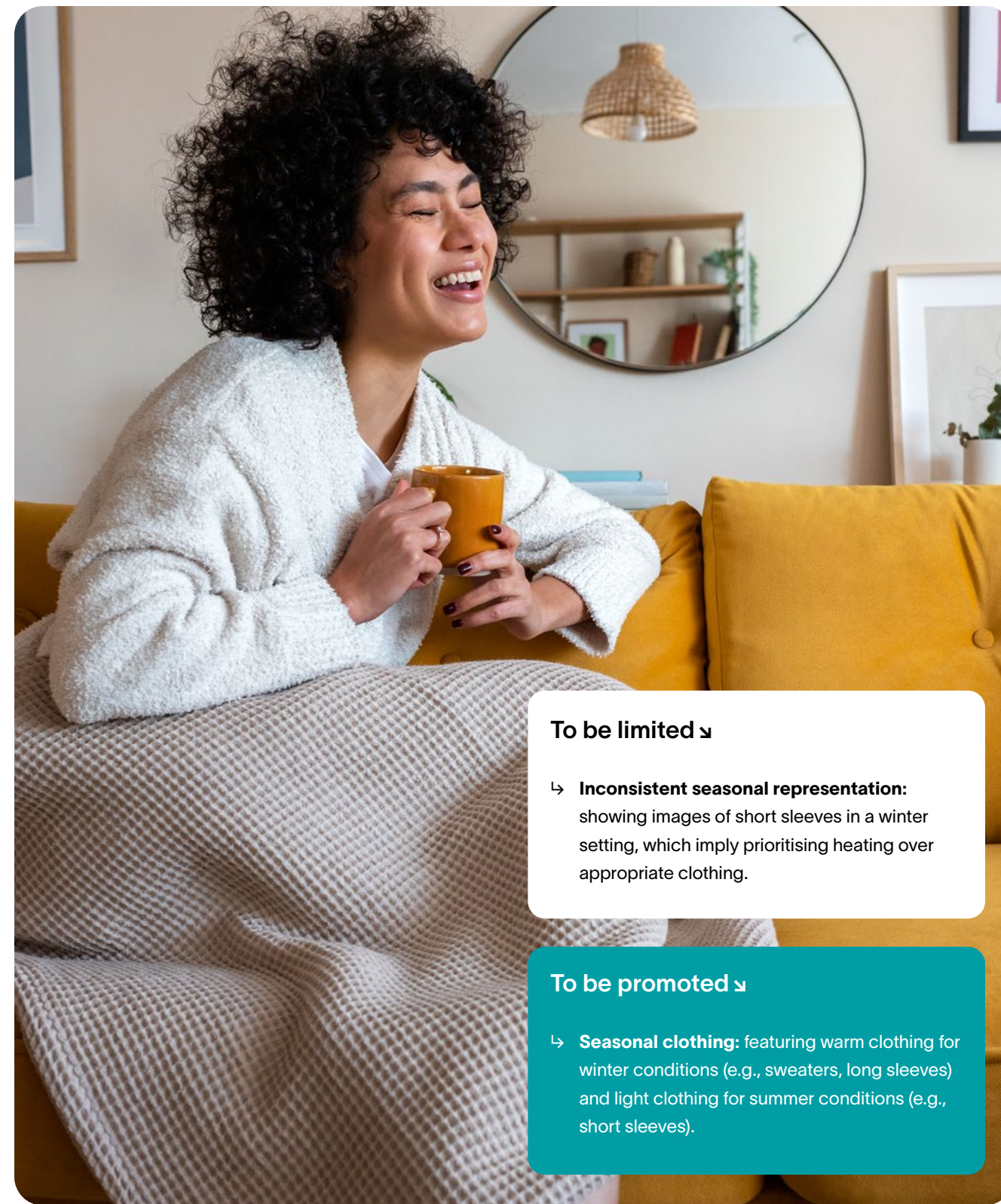
To be limited ↘

↳ **Inconsistent seasonal representation:** showing images of short sleeves in a winter setting, which imply prioritising heating over appropriate clothing.

To be promoted ↘

↳ **Seasonal clothing:** featuring warm clothing for winter conditions (e.g., sweaters, long sleeves) and light clothing for summer conditions (e.g., short sleeves).

05

Leisure: the distant escape

The problem ↘

Successful holidays or leisure activities are portrayed as dependent on distant destinations or significant resources, such as flying.

While tourism and leisure activities contribute to economic and social development, they also have significant environmental impacts. These activities are often energy- and resource-intensive, with tourism alone accounting for around 5% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The environmental footprint increases with the distance of travel and the duration of stays, as longer trips and farther destinations exacerbate pollution.

The opportunity ↘

To mitigate the environmental impact of tourism and leisure, brands and agencies could promote activities and destinations with lower ecological footprints.

To be limited ↘

↳ **Remote destinations:** promoting holidays in distant locations.

↳ **Idealised destinations:** depicting pristine beaches and islands.

↳ **Short-term flights:** promoting weekend flights.

↳ **Polluting activities:** promoting high-pollution leisure activities, such as jet skiing and cruises.

To be promoted ↘

↳ **Sustainable travel:** encouraging traveling by train or bus.

↳ **Local landscapes:** highlighting local destinations and natural scenery.

↳ **Low-impact recreation:** featuring leisure activities with minimal environmental impact, such as hiking, cycling, canoeing and kayaking.

↳ **Responsible tourism:** highlighting eco-friendly travel options and practices, such as ecotourism.

06

Modernity: the high-speed life

The problem ↘

Individuals who are constantly updating everything, maximising their efficiency, and defying ageing are often portrayed as symbols of social success.

The rapid pace of modern life is fuelled by advancing technologies and the quick rotation of consumer goods, causing people to move, produce and consume at an ever-increasing rate. However, this relentless pace, marked by the constant push to fill every moment and the fragmentation of our time, is increasingly associated with stress and a decline in quality of life. Additionally, the increase in screen time due to digital technologies contributes to a sense of time saturation.

The opportunity ↘

To promote a slower, more mindful lifestyle and encourage higher-quality consumption practices, brands could consider promoting slow living, single-tasking and thoughtful purchasing.
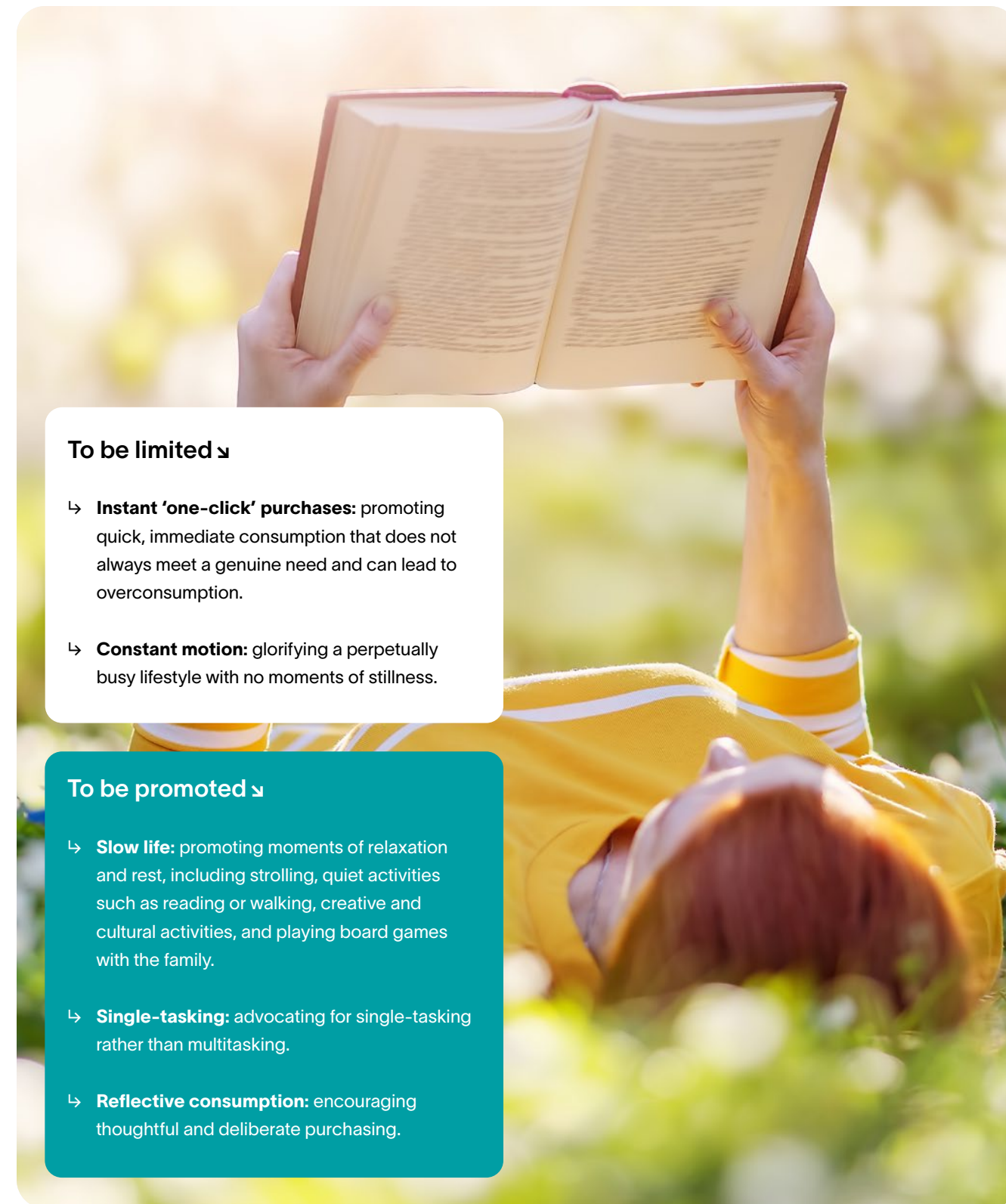
To be limited ↘

↳ **Instant 'one-click' purchases:** promoting quick, immediate consumption that does not always meet a genuine need and can lead to overconsumption.

↳ **Constant motion:** glorifying a perpetually busy lifestyle with no moments of stillness.

To be promoted ↘

↳ **Slow life:** promoting moments of relaxation and rest, including strolling, quiet activities such as reading or walking, creative and cultural activities, and playing board games with the family.

↳ **Single-tasking:** advocating for single-tasking rather than multitasking.

↳ **Reflective consumption:** encouraging thoughtful and deliberate purchasing.

07

# Nature: the conquest of wilderness

The problem ↳

Our society has a complex and contradictory relationship with nature, constantly shifting between an over-domesticated perspective and an idealised, pristine image.

Nature is often portrayed as overly controlled, sanitised, or even absent, presenting it as a completely human-managed environment. This portrayal of nature as something to be mastered or dominated can undermine biodiversity conservation efforts by encouraging construction in natural areas. Individuals may mistakenly believe that a 'clean' garden is free of insects and wild plants. Conversely, romanticising natural, pristine, and idyllic spaces can have the opposite effect, making these areas more appealing and increasing human encroachment. Advertising that glorifies wilderness and untouched natural landscapes can increase tourism and human access to these areas, leading to pollution and environmental degradation. For example, the increase in tourism to previously inaccessible areas such as Antarctica has resulted in both global greenhouse gas emissions and local pollution.

The opportunity ↳

To foster a more sustainable connection with nature, brands and agencies could focus on nature as it truly is.
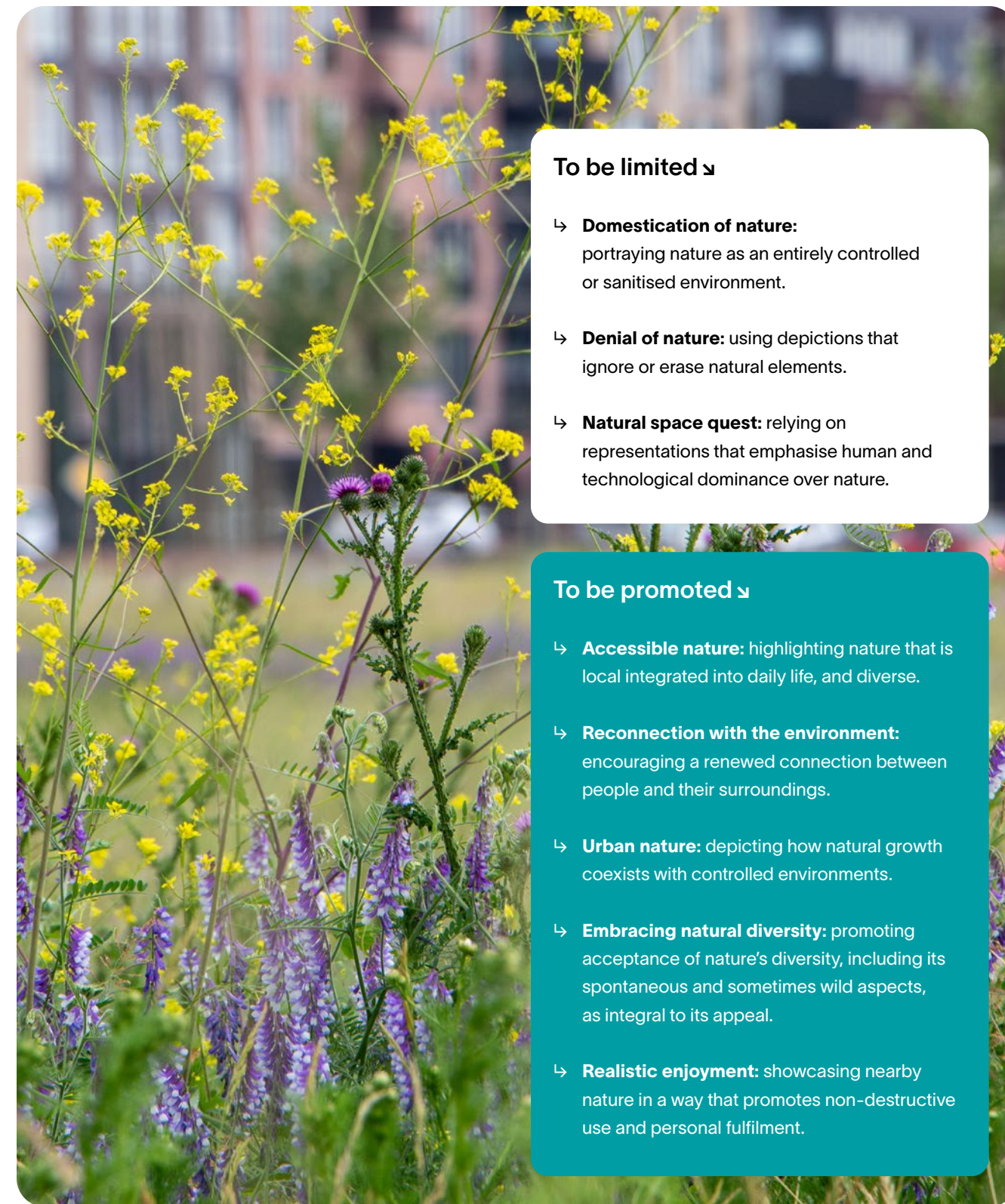
To be limited ↳

↳ **Domestication of nature:** portraying nature as an entirely controlled or sanitised environment.

↳ **Denial of nature:** using depictions that ignore or erase natural elements.

↳ **Natural space quest:** relying on representations that emphasise human and technological dominance over nature.

To be promoted ↳

↳ **Accessible nature:** highlighting nature that is local integrated into daily life, and diverse.

↳ **Reconnection with the environment:** encouraging a renewed connection between people and their surroundings.

↳ **Urban nature:** depicting how natural growth coexists with controlled environments.

↳ **Embracing natural diversity:** promoting acceptance of nature's diversity, including its spontaneous and sometimes wild aspects, as integral to its appeal.

↳ **Realistic enjoyment:** showcasing nearby nature in a way that promotes non-destructive use and personal fulfilment.

08

(Over)consumption: the source of happiness

The problem ↘

The idea that happiness can be achieved through the consumption of goods is frequently promoted.

This belief — that purchasing goods and services is the key to happiness — has contributed to resource depletion and increased waste. It often results in consumer frustration, contrary to the promise of satisfaction. Additionally, the portrayal of competition between individuals — such as neighbours — is a common tactic designed to stimulate consumption driven by a desire for status or superiority rather than genuine need.

The opportunity ↘

Brands have the opportunity to shift their focus and offer alternative visions of success and happiness that go beyond material possessions.

To be limited ↘

↳ **Materialism:** associating happiness and success solely with the possession or abundance of goods.

↳ **Competitive consumption:** promoting competition among individuals where purchases are driven by the desire to outdo others.

To be promoted ↘

↳ **Moderation:** focusing on sensible consumption that meets actual needs.

↳ **Moments of connection:** highlighting moments of sharing and conviviality.

↳ **Sustainable consumption:** promoting practices such as repairing and renting items, as well as using reusable bags.

How to get the most out of this guide

↳ Understand

Understand the importance of the ecological transition. Provide training if needed. UBA offers various training opportunities on how brands, marketing, and advertising can promote sustainable consumption choices.

↳ Adapt

Tailor these eight categories to suit your specific activities and integrate them with existing tools that address social, gender, and diversity stereotypes. Consider developing a matrix to track the frequency of non-sustainable behaviours in your ad content and focus on areas where changes can have the most significant positive impact.

↳ Workshop

Regularly review your ads with your marketing, communications, and agency teams to discuss lifestyle representations and identify areas for improvement using the eight categories outlined in this guide. Use panels and focus groups to uncover unconscious biases and stimulate discussion.

↳ Mobilise

Set goals and voluntary commitments for addressing stereotypes within your team. Encourage agencies, partners, and suppliers to participate by signing charters or including specific criteria in contracts and tenders. Implement a reporting system to monitor progress and communicate updates to both internal and external stakeholders.

Sources: ADEME (Agence de Transition Écologique), *Communication Responsable* • Autorité de Régulation Professionnelle de la Publicité (ARPP), *Recommandation de développement durable* • Behaven, 2021: *Advertising and Sustainability, Interview of Thierry Libaert* • Dhakal, S., J.C. Minx, F.L. Toth, A. Abdel-Aziz, M.J. Figueroa Meza, K. Hubacek, I.G.C. Jonckheere, Yong-Gun Kim, G.F.Nemet, S. Pachauri, X.C. Tan, T. Wiedmann, 2022: *Emissions Trends and Drivers* in IPCC, 2022: *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change*, Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [P.R. Shukla, J. Skea, R. Slade, A. Al Khourdajie, R. van Diemen, D. McCollum, M. Pathak, S. Some, P. Vyas, R. Fradera, M. Belkacemi, A. Hasija, G. Lisboa, S. Luz, J. Malley, (eds.)], Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA • Géraud Guibert & Thierry Libaert, 2020: *Advertising and ecological transition* • Thierry Libaert, 2017: *Quelle publicité pour un monde sobre et désirable ? Fondation pour la nature et l'homme* • Union des Marques, 2021: *Guide FAIRe : les comportements responsables en publicité* • World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), 2017: *Why don't we Redefine the Good Life?*

Taking brands further

About UBA ↘

UBA stands for 'United Brands Association' and is the Belgian association of and for brands. UBA represents the interests of brand builders and its mission is to create a creative, innovative and dynamic ecosystem that provides room for ambitious brands to grow sustainably. The UBA community consists of 384 companies, representing 1050 brands and more than 8000 advertisers.

↦ **ubabelgium.be**

About Behaven ↘

Behaven is a B Corp-certified behaviour change consultancy on a mission to tackle the toughest sustainability challenges. They drive positive impact and achieve results for brands by combining cutting-edge behavioural science, marketing and systems thinking.

↦ **behaven.com**

About EpE ↘

Entreprises pour l'Environnement (EpE), a French association set up in 1992, is a forum for dialogue between business leaders, environmental managers and policymakers who share the vision of the environment as a driver of transformation, progress and opportunity. They exchange best practices and work together to better incorporate the environment into their strategies and operations.

↦ **epe-asso.org**

Taking brands further