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Master's Thesis

Title: Visual communication in CSR campaigns on Instagram: a thematic analysis of visual strategies for communicating environmental sustainability in the cosmetic industry.

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Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate how B-Corp certified cosmetic brands use visual strategies on Instagram to communicate environmental sustainability as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts. While CSR has become an integral part in the cosmetics industry, especially concerning environmental responsibility, research on how visual content, both images and videos, shaping sustainability narratives on social media remains limited. In order to close this gap, the study applies Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) visual framing theory to analyze 166 Instagram posts, both images and videos from 30 purposefully selected B-Corp certified beauty brands. Using a netnographic approach and thematic analysis facilitated by MAXQDA tool, the research identifies key visual themes including educational messaging, branding elements, nature imagery and abstract nature symbols. The findings reveal a dominant reliance on symbolic and emotionally resonant visuals, such as nature imagery, green aesthetics, and human-centered storytelling, which construct a cohesive brand identity aligned with sustainability values. While brands emphasize aspirational and informative messages, they underutilize the participatory or accountability-focused contents. This reflects a strategic preference for emotionally appealing and ideologically safe narratives that frame sustainability as a consumer-friendly, market-driven solution. In this paper, insights emphasizing the significance of visuals in CSR campaigns on Instagram will be provided, enriching the literature on both CSR communication and media.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development has long been a direction for business because climate change remains an unresolved problem and increased consumer expectations for businesses to take action. Therefore, corporate social responsibility (CSR), a business model that emphasizes the responsibility of companies to improve society and protect the environment, plays an important role in shaping both corporate policies and actual business operations in the cosmetics and personal care industry (Kolling et al., 2021; Fernando, 2024). Not only being a moral obligation, CSR has expanded to become part of the growth strategy for both large multinational corporations and smaller independent companies (Bashar, 2020). Currently, CSR frameworks have three pillars of sustainability: social, economic, and environmental responsibility. This is a popular framework that cosmetic companies across Europe and globally are adopting (Sahota, 2013; Purvis et al., 2018).

All three pillars are important and closely related to each other. However, this study will only consider environmental sustainability because environmental degradation has always received much attention from consumers as well as changes in policies and regulations have been made to protect the environment (Bashar, 2020). In the cosmetics industry, current actions to protect the environment involve the entire product life cycle, starting from the source of raw materials, the manufacturing process to product packaging, consumer use and end-of-life disposal (Sahota, 2013). For example, Rocca et al. (2022) point out that many cosmetics companies are adopting recycled packaging materials for their products, a trend that is increasingly visible on the shelves. At the same time, improved production processes use renewable energy sources to reduce negative environmental impacts while ensuring production efficiency (Rocca et al., 2022; Sahota, 2013). Companies are also assessing and reducing carbon emissions, water use, and pollutant emissions to meet both regulatory expectations and consumer demands (Sahota, 2013).

However, as Bashar (2020) argues, sustainability activities are only one part of a CSR campaign. The success of a CSR campaign also depends on the efforts made to communicate it to internal and external stakeholders. Engaging in CSR will no longer be an expense but a valuable investment with long-term benefits if communicated transparently and convincingly (Bashar, 2020). CSR communication has been shown to

enhance an organization's reputation, strengthen public trust, reduce reputational risk, foster customer loyalty, and encourage positive word of mouth (Chladek, 2019; Bashar, 2020). Especially as the cosmetics industry is increasingly demanding clean, ethical, and sustainable products, effectively communicating CSR strategies will become increasingly influential in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors (Doolan, 2024). Genç (2017) emphasized that the success of a sustainability strategy depends on effective internal and external communications. Without strong internal communications, CSR initiatives risk being inconsistent or failing to be implemented; without external communications, companies may face skepticism, reduced competitiveness, or even backlash from increasingly sustainability-conscious consumers (Genç, 2017).

To communicate their CSR contributions, many companies use a variety of communication channels, including sustainability reports, product packaging, advertising campaigns, websites, and social media platforms. Each of these platforms has its own advantages: while traditional channels such as reports and websites provide comprehensive documentation, newer platforms such as social media allow for dynamic, real-time interactions (Türkel & Akan, 2015). Bashar (2020) argues that traditional formats—including CSR reports, corporate annual reports, and formal advertising—are losing their popularity and impact. Instead, stakeholders increasingly rely on informal or third-party media, such as newspaper articles, academic case studies, social media content, and endorsements from associations or government agencies (Bashar, 2020).

Among these, social media stands out as a particularly influential tool for CSR communication, providing brands with a direct, interactive, and visual channel to engage consumers. Despite the growing use of social media, the research literature on CSR communication via social media remains limited. While some studies have explored CSR-related activities on digital platforms, few studies have examined how companies use these platforms as strategic tools to communicate their CSR actions and values (Gómez, 2017). In particular, Delvaux & Van Den Broeckm (2023) point out that studies focusing on environmental communication and visual content analysis in sustainable development strategies have not received sufficient attention from scholars. Most existing studies do not explore the communicative power of visual content, but

rather prioritize the study of textual forms of communication and framing techniques (León et al., 2022; Guenther et al., 2023).

According to Brantner et al. (2013), in the context of complex and abstract climate change issues, visual communication, including images and videos, plays a central role in shaping public perceptions. Brantner et al.'s (2013) research has shown that although visual frames are essential in shaping how audiences interpret information, they are largely overlooked in communication and media research. This is particularly worrying given that in modern times, images play an integral role in corporate communications. O'Neill (2019) highlights that in the social sciences, images are often undervalued or overlooked despite their ability to shape climate narratives and influence collective action. Therefore, there is a growing need for research that addresses visual representations in environmental communication, especially on image-first platforms such as Instagram (León et al., 2022). Regarding Instagram, characterized by its focus on the aesthetics of images and content, it is now a popular platform for companies to communicate sustainability stories through visual storytelling. Despite its strong commercial appeal among beauty and lifestyle brands, the use of Instagram to communicate environmental CSR messages has not been systematically studied. The power of images to create emotional resonance, evoke ethical values, and reinforce sustainability commitments has not been explored in the academic literature. Furthermore, while studies have analyzed textual or symbolic representations of CSR in corporate communications, very few studies have critically examined the visual strategies used by cosmetic brands to express sustainability on Instagram (Brantner et al., 2013; Hansen, 2017).

To address this research gap, the current thesis explores how B Corp certified cosmetic brands use images and videos in their CSR campaigns on Instagram to communicate environmental sustainability. The study applies Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) four-level visual framing theory: denotation, stylistic-semiotic, connotative, and ideological as a framework to analyze underlying meanings within visual contents. By conducting a thematic analysis of visuals used in CSR campaigns, this thesis will provide both theoretical and practical contributions. In addition to advancing scholarship in CSR communication, visual narratives on climate change, and sustainability branding, it provides insights that can be used to help companies design more effective social media communication strategies. In summary, the purpose of this

research is to understand how cosmetic brands construct visual narratives about environmental responsibility and how these narratives shape public understandings of corporate sustainability.

2. Literature review

2.1 The role of visuals on social media

According to Russmann and Svensson (2017), social media is becoming increasingly multimodal, combining different components such as images, videos, and text. This change allows brands to invest more in content production to convey their messages to audiences more effectively, helping to define the brand identity (Russmann and Svensson, 2017). Among social media platforms, Instagram stands out with a variety of visual content that engages users, including photo posts, carousels, stories, reels, and IGTV. Each feature has its own function and is specifically designed to engage users in unique ways (Stephanie, 2022).

To be specific, photo posts are static images that capture single moments, while carousels allow for multiple images or videos in a single post, ideal for storytelling or showcasing a range of products (Stephanie, 2022). Instagram stories are short 30-second videos that temporarily disappear after 24 hours, creating a sense of urgency and facilitating timely content sharing (Singh, 2024). Reels, on the other hand, are short vertical videos designed for entertainment and broader exploration, often featuring behind-the-scenes footage, tutorials, or viral challenges (Srivastava & Malik, 2024). For longer content, IGTV provides a platform where brands can delve deeper into different topics and provide more comprehensive insights (Awa-aboun, 2024).

In addition to these features, Instagram's algorithm in 2025 will prioritize content based on user behavior, engagement, and relevance. The algorithm uses metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and saves to predict and display content that will keep users interested (Adapting Social, 2025). Instagram feed, stories, reels, and explore each operate with their own algorithmic system that reflects user behavior specific to that section. For example, the Instagram Feed algorithm prioritizes recent posts from frequently engaged accounts, and the Instagram Reels algorithm promotes content similar to previously viewed videos (Gagliardi, 2025).

However, the influence of visual materials has extended beyond entertainment, as Lee et al. (2022) demonstrate in their analysis of how humanitarian organizations use images. Images consistently achieve higher engagement rates than text-based posts (Lee et al., 2022). This visual advantage is even more evident in the cosmetics industry, where aesthetics directly influence product perceptions and brand identity (Phillips et al., 2014). As a result, platforms such as Instagram have emerged as central channels for corporate communications with their focus on visual contents, providing ideal conditions for brand storytelling and user engagement (Russmann and Svensson, 2017). Brands can use a variety of multimedia formats to showcase products, provide behind-the-scenes insights, and express their identity in more approachable and engaging ways (Kuligowski, 2025).

Furthermore, the advantages of visual communication via social media have been comprehensively demonstrated. According to Lee et al. (2022), research confirms that images and videos can convey complex ideas faster than text while bridging the language gap. Compelling elements such as high-quality images and dynamic videos not only attract users' attention but also drive engagement, leading to greater visibility and reach. This is especially important for conveying environmental messages because visually framed content significantly increases engagement and message memorability compared to text-only content. When looking at such visuals, immediate emotional connection will be created and make abstract sustainability concepts more understandable (Salazar et al., 2022; Lopes & Azevedo, 2023). Additionally, Instagram features like stories and reels allow for timely, relevant content to be shared, keeping your target audience updated and engaged (Ziff, n.d.). When valuable and relatable contents are consistently provided, they can form loyal communities and drive conversions effectively through the platform (Stephanie, 2022).

2.2 Visuals in online CSR communication

Visual communications have emerged as an essential component of CSR messaging in the digital landscape, serving as a critical bridge between complex sustainability concepts and audience understandings (Hansen, 2017). The power of visual contents in CSR campaigns stems from its ability to transform abstract social and environmental issues into tangible, emotionally resonant content that appeals to a wide range of stakeholders (Salazar et al., 2022). Studies consistently show that visual features outperform text-only communications in attracting attention because the human

brain processes images more quickly, a key benefit for CSR awareness efforts (Salazar et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022).

Visual CSR communication on social media channels has been through a major shift from a one-way broadcast model to a multi-stakeholder co-creation process. This means that on these platforms, user interactions through comments, shares, and creative adaptations continuously re-create CSR imagery, thus creating an “Amplification loop” as Smith (2010) suggested in his research, whereby audience participation enhances the reach and impact of the message. Researchers have recognized that engagement metrics not only inform reach but also build credibility, so companies are increasingly placing emphasis on creating engagement in visual content (Smith, 2010; Gómez, 2017). This shift is a result of the movement toward dialogic communication models in the digital CSR space (Gómez, 2017).

In addition to conveying basic information, images in CSR campaigns also play a strategic role in creating an emotional connection with viewers (Hansen, 2017). By consciously framing images, brands can communicate their sustainability plans as relevant, human-centered stories that inspire trust and loyalty (Smith, 2010). This emotional appeal is especially important during crises, when visual materials allow for the rapid dissemination of information and the mobilization of stakeholders in ways that text alone cannot (Smith, 2010; Bashar, 2020). Social media platforms such as Instagram therefore allow for real-time CSR communication, thus directly influencing public opinion as issues develop (Smith, 2010).

Researchers have found distinct types of CSR imagery, each with specific communicative benefits (Hansen, 2017). For example, while human-centered imagery provides immediate relatability through human stories, nature-focused imagery, such as landscapes or wildlife, often relies on accompanying text to convey context (Hansen, 2017). Iconic imagery, which risks oversimplification, includes standardized symbols such as recycling logos that provide instant recognition (Hansen, 2017). Reflecting more general trends in digital communications, emerging visual strategies include personal stories, pop culture references, and uplifting narratives to increase engagement (Cornelio et al., 2024). In their research, they observed a shift from purely iconic nature photography to more personal and narrative-driven materials that emphasize the brand’s sustainability initiatives. For example, the cosmetics brand L’occitane (2024) sponsored the “Plastic Odyssey” program, aiming to reduce plastic waste in the ocean. The crew

on the ship will travel around the world to collect, sort, and process plastic waste. As a result, their media, including Instagram, focuses on images of plastic waste, staff collecting and sorting waste, and the ship itself, which are repeated throughout to tell a story. Cornelio et al.'s (2024) study of Instagram posts finds that authentic, behind-the-scenes images showing real-life sustainability practices tended to generate more meaningful engagement than carefully crafted iconic nature shots. Kolling et al. (2021) also support this finding by highlighting the growing need for visual authenticity in cosmetics industry communication strategies. Another study by Rocca et al. (2022) notes that industry certifications often raise stakeholder expectations, so it is important to combine inspirational imagery with verifiable visual evidence of sustainability practices to increase transparency. Infographics demonstrating quantifiable reductions in environmental impact or behind-the-scenes videos of ethical sourcing processes are two prominent examples.

On the other hand, researchers are also exploring how platform-specific characteristics influence visual communication tactics. Many of the current trends on Instagram were predicted by Smith's (2010) early analysis of Twitter, particularly how interactive visual elements can turn passive viewers into active participants in sustainability stories. Expanding on this, Cornelio et al. (2024) demonstrated how cosmetics companies responded to Instagram's evolving algorithms by creating more authentic content that encouraged deeper engagement.

From a different angle, the strategic use of color in visual CSR communications has also received scholarly attention. The use of natural hues and earth tones to enhance visual consistency and subtly reinforce environmental themes is one of the principles identified by León et al. (2022) for effectively communicating environmental messages through color, although they are not exclusive to the cosmetics industry.

Another component of visual CSR strategies that is becoming increasingly important is user-generated content (UGC). "Visual content created and shared by users is often more credible than branded material" as Smith (2010) first noted in the context of crisis communications (p. 332). This awareness has been proven relevant in the cosmetics sector, where companies increasingly incorporate user-generated images and videos demonstrating the real-world applications of sustainable products into their official marketing channels.

However, even if visuals are proven to have many benefits, there are still concerning issues that need to be addressed. Studies point out that there are many cases where a brand's actual environmental performance does not match its published sustainability message (Hahn & Lülfs, 2014). Furthermore, brands must be agile and constantly adapt their visual communication tactics to maintain engagement as platforms and algorithms change, thus preserving the authenticity of their sustainability promises (Cornelio et al., 2024).

For the cosmetics industry, visual CSR communication also presents certain opportunities and challenges. Dalen's (2021) study of the sustainable fashion industry found that visual consistency, preserving recognizable aesthetic elements across materials, can support brand identity while clearly communicating sustainability values. However, Phillips et al. (2014) caution that brand visual consistency must not only be accompanied by authenticity to avoid misrepresentation. Hahn and Lülfs (2014) support this by stating that images that do not faithfully reflect the reality of a company's operations risk creating skepticism rather than trust.

2.3 Visual framing theory

To promote CSR campaigns on Instagram, brands carefully select images and messages. According to Brantner et. al (2013), this intentional image selection is a technique by which brands select and highlight certain aspects of reality to shape the audience's impression of the brand. In CSR communications, images can be carefully selected to highlight sustainability stories and focus attention on a company's beneficial environmental activities. Thus, visual framing theory provides an important perspective for examining how companies deliberately create and communicate CSR messages visually.

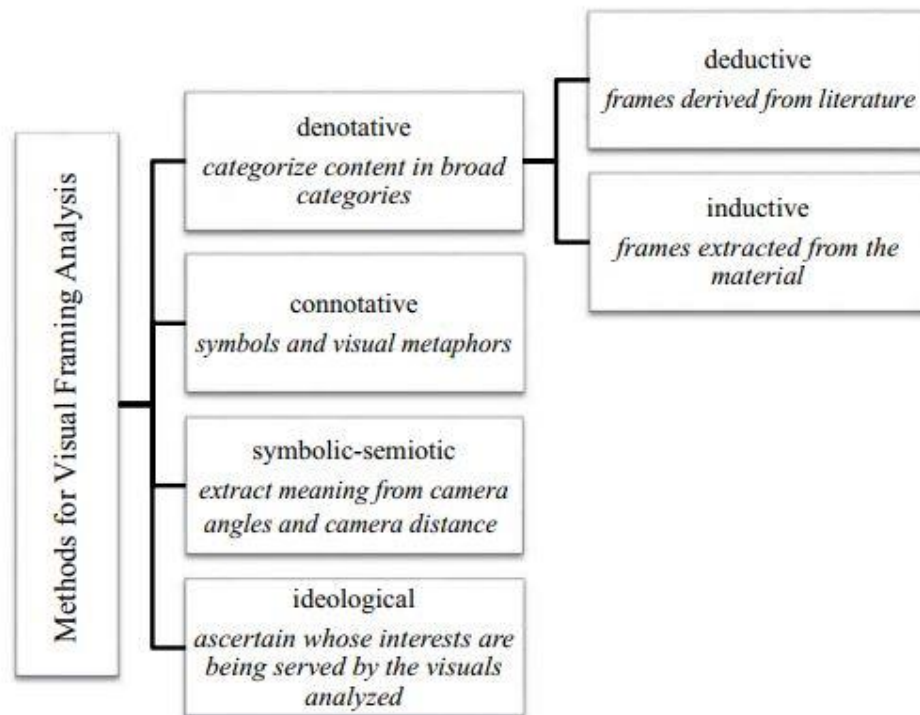
On visually driven platforms like Instagram, where framing decisions significantly influence how users perceive a company's environmental commitments, this strategic approach is particularly effective (Lee et al., 2022). In addition to influencing perceptions at the representational level, framing also influences how audiences process CSR materials cognitively and emotionally. Value framing, where CSR initiatives are presented as motivated by social benefit rather than corporate benefit will significantly improve corporate reputation and encourages favorable word-of-mouth (WOM), according to Dalla-Pria and Rodríguez-de-Dios (2022). These results

align with Entman's (1993) framing theory, which argues that bringing specific meanings to the forefront helps guide the interpretation of communicative elements. Although visual framing theory typically emphasizes the composition and aesthetics of images, it helps increase the persuasiveness of visual decisions in conveying authenticity and trustworthiness. Thus, framing not only influences the surface material and symbolic meaning of an image but also significantly shapes stakeholder perceptions and behavioral intentions (Entman, 1993). Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) multi-level visual framing model was applied in this study because it allows for a closer look at how visual components, when intentionally constructed, create perceived legitimacy and trust in CSR communications.

Figure 1 provides a methodical way to examine CSR visuals using Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) framework, which consists of (1) denotative, (2) stylistic-semiotic, (3) connotative, and (4) ideological levels (Lee et al., 2022). Every level has a unique analytical function:

(1) Denotative level focuses on the actual content of visuals (e.g., objects, people, or settings). This could involve pictures of people involved in community projects or renewable energy infrastructure for CSR campaigns. At this stage, the focus is on surface-level composition rather than deeper meaning (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

Figure 1. *Approaches to Visual Framing Analysis.*



Note. Dan, V. (2018). *Integrative Framing Analysis: Framing Health through Words and Visuals* [Photo]. Routledge.

(2) Stylistic-semiotic level looks into how design choices (e.g., camera angles, color palettes, or subject prominence) convey social meaning (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). For instance, a low-angle shot of a CEO planting trees may visually emphasize corporate leadership in sustainability. Editorial choices, such as putting CSR images front and center in Instagram feeds, further indicate their relevance (Lee et al., 2022).

(3) Connotative level interprets visuals as symbols of abstract concepts. These meanings are culturally created and depend on research of how visual metaphors fit with audience values (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). In the cosmetics business, connotative framing could mean using water droplets to suggest "purity" or simple packaging to indicate "eco-friendliness" (Hansen, 2017).

(4) Ideological level exposes hidden worldviews embedded in visuals, for example corporate neoliberalism or environmental stewardship. This level questions why particular frames are selected and whose interests they serve (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). A cosmetic brand's emphasis on "clean beauty," for instance, might

reflect more general ideas of ethical capitalism or health-conscious consumerism (Kolling et al., 2021).

There are several reasons why visual framing theory is particularly relevant to the focus of this paper on CSR visual communications in the cosmetics industry. First, CSR visuals are those chosen intentionally so as to persuade consumers, and framing theory explains how specific visual decisions influence meaning and influence interpretation. Particularly in the cosmetics industry, where images play a large role in connecting with customers, it makes sense to use an analytical framework that focuses on intention and meaning making (Brantner et al., 2013; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

Second, the multi-level structure of Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) framework allows for a layered analysis of CSR imagery, thus capturing not only what is displayed but also how and why it is displayed. This is particularly important for brands because on social media sites such as Instagram, visual aesthetics are closely linked to brand strategies and consumer expectations (Lee et al., 2022). The stylistic-semiotic and connotative levels can reveal how elements in an image are visually coordinated (e.g. the combination of human and nature images). Furthermore, the ideological level allows for critical questioning of the deeper values embedded in sustainability narratives (Kolling et al., 2021).

Finally, there is little research using this model in relation to the cosmetics industry; even less research on social media. Existing research has focused on textual analysis of CSR communications on traditional media channels such as websites and reports, leaving a gap in examining how visual framing works in fast-paced, image-centric social media settings (Bulmer et al., 2024). Using this approach would not only fill that gap but also provide additional insights into how brands visually construct their environmental responsibility and how such framings may distort, exaggerate, or understate their sustainability promises. This framework will therefore be the analytical lens through which this study reads the visual tactics used by cosmetics brands on Instagram.

To address these gaps, this study therefore asks: What intentions and meanings underlie the visual elements that cosmetic companies employ in their Instagram CSR campaigns, and how do these choices reflect broader framing strategies?

3. Methodology

This section describes the methodological approach used to study how cosmetic brands on Instagram communicate environmental sustainability through visual strategies. It begins with the rationale for using a qualitative approach in the research design for this thesis. The chapter then goes on to explain how netnography and thematic analysis were used to evaluate the data collected. This is followed by the sampling methods used to select appropriate visual materials along with the research instrument and data collection techniques. Finally, participant consideration, ethical issues, and data analysis are discussed to ensure the integrity and validity of the study.

3.1 Research design

The research design of this paper uses a qualitative approach because it is particularly well suited to capturing the rich and complex meanings that visual strategies express. Unlike quantitative methods, which emphasize generalization and statistical analysis, qualitative methods can emphasize the interpretation of symbolic representations and investigate the deeper meanings behind visual materials, which is consistent with the aim of this study: investigating how cosmetic brands communicate environmental sustainability through Instagram imagery (Creswell, 2013; Silverman, 2017). As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasize, qualitative research is invaluable in examining social phenomena in their natural context, so this approach is perfect for explaining how brands construct sustainability narratives online.

Given Instagram's role as a platform for social and cultural interaction, the richness and complexity of visual communications and their associated meanings are evident. Furthermore, social media imagery is not a direct reflection of reality, but rather a phenomenon built on the cultural norms of society, the intentions, and goals of brands (Rose, 2016). Therefore, the application of qualitative research is essential to capture the richness and complexity of visual communications and the symbolic meanings of visuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Netnography, a qualitative approach, provides a suitable framework for the study of visual materials on Instagram to explore the underlying meanings embedded in brand communications (Kozinets, 2002). As introduced by Kozinets (2002), netnography is an adaptation of ethnography and is designed to focus on the study of digital communities and cultures. Unlike conventional ethnography, which requires

extensive fieldwork in physical locations, netnography emphasizes publicly available materials in online settings, thus allowing researchers to investigate specific issues or events of research subjects in their natural digital environment (Kozinets, 2015). Returning to this study, netnography was applied because it allows researchers to examine existing data, in this case Instagram posts. Through this approach, scholars can study how companies frame visual elements to express cultural meanings and values related to sustainability. The iterative nature of netnography also allows researchers to revisit brand posts over time, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the changing tactics that brands use to communicate sustainability (Kozinets, 2015). In short, netnography is a useful tool for this study to explore how brand imagery shapes the larger cultural conversation about sustainability due to its adaptability.

Although netnography provides useful analysis of brand communications, the method itself has its own challenges. Interpretation of visual content can be personal and its meaning may vary depending on the sociocultural background of the audience. Furthermore, ethical issues related to privacy and consent must be carefully considered when examining publicly accessible online material (Bryman, 2016). Despite these limitations, netnography remains a suitable tool for qualitative research examining how companies use visual material on social media channels to communicate complex ideas, including environmental sustainability.

While netnography is a research tool flexible enough to study a wide range of research topics related to social media and other online media, thematic analysis is a fundamental approach to analyzing the collected qualitative data that netnography has facilitated (Dineva, 2022). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative technique that is often used to search for, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes in data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method, thematic analysis consists of: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. This adaptive analysis is particularly suitable for this study because in order to answer the research question stated above, main themes in the environmental sustainability images must be identified. But rather than counting the frequency, the goal of this study is to explore the underlying meanings expressed through the images. This approach not only allows for flexibility to accommodate different visual styles and

messaging on Instagram, but also ensuring a methodical and thorough examination of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ultimately, netnography and thematic analysis are two qualitative research techniques that can often complement each other due to their relevance and great adaptability to fit a variety of research models and topics. Both are important tools that aid this study in gaining a better understanding of how brands intentionally construct visual materials to communicate sustainability initiatives on Instagram (Dineva, 2022).

3.2 Sampling technique

This study employs a purposive sampling approach, commonly used in netnography, to carefully select online accounts that were most relevant to the research topic (Dineva, 2022). As a non-probability sampling technique, purposive sampling allows participants or data sources to be selected purposefully based on their ability to provide rich and relevant information (Patton, 2015). In line with the topic, Instagram accounts of B Corp certified beauty brands are used as the primary data source in this study. The selection of B Corp certified cosmetic companies was purely purposeful because of their demonstrated commitment to sustainability and ethical practices. These accounts were appropriate for the research objective of investigating how cosmetic brands communicate environmental sustainability on Instagram.

According to B Lab Europe (2025), Certified B Corporations (B Corps) are companies, verified by B Lab, that meet the high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability. An examination of a business' practices and outputs across five categories, including governance, workers, the community, the environment, and customers, as introduced on its website. Business practices that reduce a company's footprint and prioritize the impact on air, climate, water, land, and biodiversity as part of their sustainability efforts. The assessment also explores the impact of a company's facilities, materials, emissions, and resource and energy use as well as logistics, distribution channels and the environmental impact of their supply chain. With this rigorous certification process, when cosmetic brands are certified as B Corp, they always consider it a worthy achievement for the efforts they put in. Thus, communicating their efforts to the audience on Instagram is the one of the communication strategies. This makes these brands the perfect candidates for this study

because of their dedication to sustainability and promotion activities (B Lab Europe, 2025).

Several criteria were considered when selecting brands to ensure a representative and inclusive sample. First, only brands with active B Corp certification were included, as this certification demonstrates a proven commitment to social and environmental performance. Second, brands were selected from a variety of geographic regions to observe possible cultural differences in sustainability communication. Third, large and small businesses were included to reflect differences in resource availability and communication tactics. And finally, brands need to have an active presence on Instagram, consistently posting sustainability-related visual material.

Additionally, the sampling process focused on Instagram posts published within the past year, 2024, to ensure the data reflects current trends and strategies in sustainability communication. Posts were identified by using relevant hashtags (e.g., #sustainable, #sustainability, #ecobeauty, #BCorp) and keywords (e.g. Earth day, environment, eco-friendly, sustainable packaging, zero waste, etc.) to make sure the visuals explicitly related to environmental sustainability.

While purposive sampling is advantageous for its ability to provide comprehensive and relevant data, this technique also comes with negative aspects. A major drawback is that the results may not apply to all cosmetic brands because the sample was limited to B Corp certified brands with a particular emphasis on environmental sustainability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive brand selection may also introduce bias because the sample may overrepresent particular perspectives or tactics (Palinkas et al., 2013). However, these limitations are considered acceptable given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, which values depth of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although the results cannot be statistically generalized, Patton (2015) argues that the power of purposeful sampling lies in its ability to generate deep, context-specific insights.

Ethically, this study relied solely on posts from the brands' public Instagram accounts. The data was posted and used publicly, so no further permission was required from the brands. However, to maintain ethical standards, this study followed Instagram's terms of service and ensured that no private or restricted material was accessed. Furthermore, although the information was public, the study focused on the

visual material and its communication techniques rather than specific people or their interactions, thus minimizing any potential ethical issues.

3.3 Data collection

166 images and videos on Instagram from B Corp certified cosmetic brands (Table 1) were purposefully selected for this study, highlighting their commitment to environmental sustainability and social responsibility. Exhibiting a diverse range of business models, these companies span several sectors of the beauty industry including skincare, hair care, fragrance, and more. While their Instagram followers vary, what they have in common is their active social media presence, where they regularly share their environmental sustainability projects and incorporate their values into their social media approach. A sample image used as data for the study analysis is shown in Figure 2.

Table 1. *Overview of Participating Brands*

Brand	Brand Overview
Skandinavisk	A Scandinavian-inspired fragrance and skincare brand utilizing natural ingredients and emphasizing sustainable practices, especially eco-friendly packaging and support for Nordic nature preservation (Skandinavisk, n.d.).
Davines	A luxury Italian haircare and skincare brand dedicating to environmental sustainability, utilizing renewable energy, minimizing carbon emissions, and providing eco-friendly packaging (Davines, 2023).
Weleda	A leading brand since 1921 in organic, natural cosmetics and anthroposophic medicines. A natural cosmetics company committed to biodynamic farming, ethical sourcing, and sustainable manufacturing with various products certified organic and cruelty-free (Weleda, n.d.).
Prose	A carbon-neutral haircare brand using sustainable materials and eco-friendly packaging, highlighting waste reduction through personalized formulas (Prose, n.d.).
N&B Natural Is Better	An Italian cosmetic company offering minimalist skincare products and prioritizing natural ingredients and ecological processes (N&B Natural Is Better, 2024).
Cha Tzu Tang	A Taiwanese brand providing beauty products formulated from natural materials, especially camellia seed. This brand is dedicated to sustainable operations, including environmentally

	conscious contract farming and the thorough exploitation of camellia seeds (Social Enterprise Insights, n.d.).
Dr. Bronner's	The brand is recognized for its organic soaps and skincare products and is dedicated to fair trade, regenerative agriculture, and the utilization of 100% post-consumer recycled packaging (Dr. Bronner's, n.d.).
Neal's Yard Remedies	A renowned natural and organic skincare company, utilizing the ethically sourced herbs, botanicals, and essential oils. Using a holistic methodology, they integrate external aesthetics and internal wellness, assisting you in achieving balance through nature's purest ingredients (Neal's Yard Remedies, n.d.).
Mustela	A skincare brand for infants and families that emphasizes natural organic products, environmental-friendly packaging, and sustainable sourcing and production (Mustela, n.d.).
Babo Botanicals	A family-oriented natural skincare business delivering eco-friendly, plant-based products with a focus on sustainability and safety (Babo Botanicals, n.d.).
Arbonne	A worldwide cosmetics and wellness business that prioritizes vegan, cruelty-free products and engages in many ecological practices, including recyclable packaging and carbon neutrality (Arbonne, 2023).
Rituals	A lifestyle brand offering home and body products, with a focus on sustainability through collaboration with organizations (e.g. Sacred Forest, Super Chill Foundation, Tiny Miracles, etc.) and profit pledge (Rituals, n.d.).
Herbatint by Antica Erboristeria	A natural hair color brand that uses plant-based ingredients, emphasizes eco-friendly practices and green energy in production (Herbatint, n.d.).
Beauty Kitchen	A UK-based brand offering sustainable, vegan and cruelty-free skincare products with a focus on cradle-to-cradle circularity principles throughout product development and supply chain (Beauty Kitchen, n.d.).
Made For Life Organics	A skincare brand in Cornwall offering organic skincare products, with a commitment to sustainability and ethical practices (Made For Life Organics, n.d.).
Badger Balm	A family-owned brand offering natural skincare products, with a focus on organic ingredients, regenerative agriculture, green energy and eco-friendly packaging (Badger Balm, n.d.).
Oneka Elements	A Canadian brand offering natural, biodegradable haircare products, with a focus on organic ingredients, water source protection and the preservation of natural ecosystems (Oneka Elements, n.d.).

Dermophysiologique	The first B-Corp certified Italian Professional Skin Care company in the world offering professional products with a focus on biodegradable formulas and sustainable packaging, (Dermophysiologique, n.d.).
Koa + Roy	A natural skincare brand offering eco-friendly, plant-based products with a focus on sustainability: trees planting, zero waste, plastic neutral, etc. (Koa + Roy, 2022).
Elemis London	A luxury skincare brand that emphasizes natural ingredients and sustainable practices, including biodiversity, climate and people (Elemis London, n.d.).
Juliart	A Taiwanese haircare brand offering over 1% of revenue and working hours into initiatives promoting environmental sustainability and advancing arts education in rural areas, ensuring a brighter future for the community (Juliart, n.d.).
Aromase	A Taiwanese haircare brand specializing in scalp care, using natural ingredients, renewable energy and carbon neutrality practices (Aromase, n.d.).
Lafe's	A natural skincare brand offering organic, cruelty-free products with a focus on sustainability (Lafe's, n.d.).
Kaffe Bueno	A brand using upcycled coffee ingredients in skincare, with a focus on sustainability and reducing food waste (Kaffe Bueno, n.d.).
Naïf	A Dutch baby skincare brand offering natural, vegan products with a focus on climate neutral and plastic-free products (Naïf, 2022).
Innersense Organic Beauty	A haircare brand offering organic, sustainable products with a focus on reducing the amount of plastic and packaging waste that is used in the beauty industry, and making sure our consumers have the information they need to properly reuse and recycle our packaging to create a more circular structure (Innersense Organic Beauty, n.d.).
Captain Blankenship	A natural beauty brand that uses fewer ingredients, fewer products, conscious packaging and mutually beneficial partnerships that help restore natural resources (Captain Blankenship, n.d.).
Dr.Hauschka	A natural skincare brand offering with a focus on organic regional ingredients, biodiversity, eco-friendly packaging and climate neutral (Dr. Hauschka, n.d.).
L'occitane	A French skincare brand offering natural, sustainably sourced products, with a focus on eco-friendly packaging and reducing plastic waste (L'occitane, n.d.).
Sunday Riley	A skincare brand powered by research and balanced by botanicals. The brand delivers high-performance formulas with

	visible results, while committing to sustainability through initiatives like Zero Waste Oil Process and Plastic Neutral certification (Sunday Riley, n.d).
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Figure 2. An example of Visual Data for Analysis



Note. Aromase [@aromaseofficial]. (2024). 🌱🌿 AROMASE Achieved Carbon Neutrality 🌿🌱 ...[Photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C-w9x0lx1xZ/?img_index=1

4. Data analysis

According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2017), there are three main methods of qualitative content analysis: conventional qualitative content analysis, directed content analysis, and summative content analysis. Each method is defined by the extent to which it uses inductive thinking. In this study, summative content analysis will be used because the analysis starts with word counts or explicit content before expanding to investigate underlying meanings and themes. Although the initial stage may seem quantitative, the ultimate goal of this method is to investigate language use or indicators

in an inductive manner (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). Qualitative content analysis can vary from flexible procedures to more standardized procedures depending on the research objectives. However, analysis typically begins with data preparation and ends with the compilation and presentation of results following a methodical set of procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017).

Visual data in this study were interpreted using thematic analysis based on the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2016). At the same time, MAXQDA - a qualitative data analysis tool, was used to support the methodical and organized coding process in line with this approach. With a combination of theoretical foundation and technological support, the goal was to ensure thorough investigation of underlying themes while maintaining openness and consistency of the entire analysis process. By allowing for rapid data organization, code categorization, and thematic visualization, MAXQDA supported data organization, provided depth, and ensured the rigor of the study (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

Step 1: Familiarization. The initial stage of thematic analysis is learning about the data, which means an immersive and iterative interaction with the visual materials (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this research, this stage involved observing the pictures multiple times to gain a thorough knowledge of their possible thematic meanings and contextual components. Initial impressions including visual symbols, colours, and other important elements visible in the photographs were carefully recorded (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

All visual materials were imported into MAXQDA and organized into groups according to specific brand names to help systematic data management. This arrangement enabled systematic examination of the data and efficient coding and cross-comparison across visual materials (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). Using memos in MAXQDA to document first thoughts and findings was essential to guarantee a clear and methodical approach to the familiarisation process.

Step 2 and 3: Coding and generating themes. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2017), categories and coding schemes can be derived from three main sources: the data itself, previous related studies, and established theories. These codes can be created deductively as well as inductively. Some research start with a model or theory as a basis for coding; this can change as inductive new categories appear during

the analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). The coding process in this study also aligned with the first level of visual framing theory, as shown in Figure 1 (Dan V., 2018).

Driven by theory, deductive coding uses current frameworks and literature to identify initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Prior studies will be useful as this method allows established theories be validated and extended (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Hence, in general, deductive codes were guided by research on visual communications (Schroeder, 2006), CSR strategy, and sustainable marketing (Parguel et al., 2011), specifically frameworks for examining corporate ethical messaging and visual semiotics. Based on O'Neill's (2017) suggestion, I also created a coding scheme to classify climate change images by content, including identifiable people, climate change effects, representations of energy, causes of climate change (i.e. emissions and pollution), protests, and scientific imagery. At last, I reviewed seven principles suggested by León et al. (2022) regarding how these visual elements can enhance audience engagement with climate change through imagery. Those seven principles are: (1) showing "real" people, (2) telling a story, (3) illustrating the causes of climate change at an appropriate scale, (4) depicting dramatic climate impacts, (5) presenting solutions, (6) establishing local connections, and (7) representing individuals directly affected.

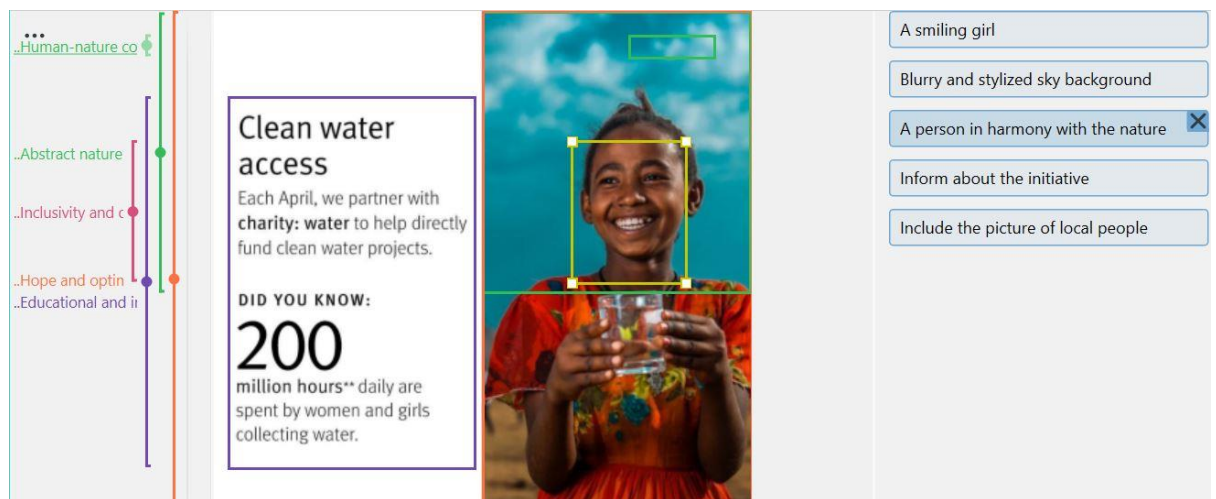
In this step, I used MAXQDA software to conduct the qualitative analysis, starting with importing multimedia data including images and videos from the participants. I then, using a deductive approach, imported an existing coding framework to guide the analysis. Parent codes and sub codes were established to manage the coding process and organize the data in a hierarchical manner. For example, "Representation of environmental sustainability" is the parent code, and "Nature imagery," "Eco-friendly products," and others are sub codes, which fall under the same parent code. Next, I manually coded each bit of information, using multiple codes as needed to make sure all relevant elements were included in a single image or video. This approach ensured a comprehensive and organized analysis of the data, allowing for a deep understanding of the phenomena under study. Figure 3 is an example of the coding process applied to one of the images in the dataset.

Nonetheless, the exploratory character of visual analysis also calls for the adaptability of inductive coding, in which codes are generated directly from the data without the use of initial assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Unexpected patterns can

be found through inductive coding, which is particularly valuable when examining the complicated visual tactics used in CSR campaigns on Instagram (Hansen & Machin, 2018).

In summary, the codes used to analyze visual strategies in this study were developed by applying deductive codes from existing literature, then generating inductive codes during the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To ensure rich and contextually grounded interpretation of visual data, this mixed method successfully balanced the need for theoretical foundations and the freedom to explore new ideas (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017) (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Figure 3. *The coding process in MAXQDA analysis tool*



Note. Screenshot by the author from MAXQDA analysis tool

Step 4: Reviewing themes. After generating the initial themes, I revisited the coded MAXQDA segments to assess consistency, add new codes observed from the data, and find overlap between themes. For example, I added a new subcode for information that represents measurable results such as milestones, specific numbers, and achieved goals in brand imagery, called “Progress Indicators” under the theme “Action-Oriented Messaging”. In contrast to general information or text that serves to educate customers, this subcode emphasizes how brands visually communicate achievements to support credibility. Applying the same iterative approach, the final themes were honed to appropriately reflect important data trends.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes. Once the themes were identified, I organized and provided specific examples for each theme, highlighting their relevance and function in analyzing visual strategies used in CSR initiatives. The themes' names were carefully chosen to reflect the broad nature of these visual strategies, thus ensuring both their descriptive and robust database. For example, the theme "Emotional appeal and symbolism" describes strategies that use visual elements to evoke emotions such as hope, fear, or anxiety. The theme "Brand and corporate identity" includes visual elements that remind audience of the brand, while the theme "Action-oriented messaging" relates to elements that promote, inform, or encourages actual actions for environmental benefits.

Step 6: Producing the report. The final phase of the thematic analysis is to bring together the results and demonstrate them methodically so that the data interpretation is consistent and fits the research objectives. Particularly in relation to communicating environmental sustainability, this part involves organizing the identified codes and themes, clarifying their relevance, and analyzing how they support understanding the visual strategies used in CSR campaigns on Instagram (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Initially, the final codes and themes identified throughout the analysis were methodically categorized and organized. For this research, the thematic analysis employed a hybrid method combining deductive coding, guided by existing research on CSR and sustainability communication, and inductive coding, which emerged as new patterns and themes from the visual data itself. The deductive codes offered a framework for interpreting the key components already defined in previous studies, such as "Nature imagery" and "Branding elements" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). The inductive codes, on the other hand, appeared as the analysis evolved with themes such as "Stakeholder representation" and "Progress metrics" as new visual patterns emerged.

Then these codes were organized into more general themes. As an example, a theme called "Brand and corporate identity" was created by combining initial deductive codes like "Branding elements, influencer endorsements, corporate responsibility visuals, consumer engagement" with inductive codes like "Stakeholder representation and employee involvement." The combination of "Nature imagery, eco-friendly products, ingredient sourcing, sustainability symbols, human-nature connection and abstract nature symbolism" produced another theme named "Representation of

environmental sustainability". An iterative process of code review and modification helped to refine these topics so they precisely represented the data and caught every detail of the observed visual strategies.

To help clearly demonstrate the coding system, table 2 was created including themes and subcodes to clearly demonstrate the relationship of both with accompanying definitions and examples. Table 2 organizes the primary and secondary codes to demonstrate the framework of the coding process and provides a summary of how the visual data was categorized. The reader can use the coding table as a clear tool to grasp the coding hierarchy and the relationship between several codes and each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this final section, table 2 will allow for a clear and concise overview of the analysis process.

The findings, later, will reveal the code frequency and code co-occurrence in the data analysis. These statistics will demonstrate which codes identified most often throughout the visual data, therefore helping to clarify dominant trends. Besides, code co-occurrence results will show how multiple codes interact with each other, therefore offering more understanding of the connections between visual strategies (Hansen & Machin, 2018). Tables or visual examples will be inserted to present these aspects, therefore enhancing the written results (Nowell et al., 2017).

In general, the identified themes and supporting data will be presented in the last step, which explains how the themes and codes address the research question and objectives. Drawing on both theoretical and empirical findings, the final finding seeks to provide a rich and comprehensive reading of the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It also connects the themes together, thus emphasizing their relevance to understanding the visual strategies used in Instagram CSR campaigns to convey environmental sustainability (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 2. *Thematic Analysis Coding Template*

Theme	Description	Code	Examples
Representation of environmental sustainability	Visual depictions of nature, eco-friendly products, or sustainability symbols that signal	Nature imagery	Forests, oceans, plants or wildlife (Figure 4).

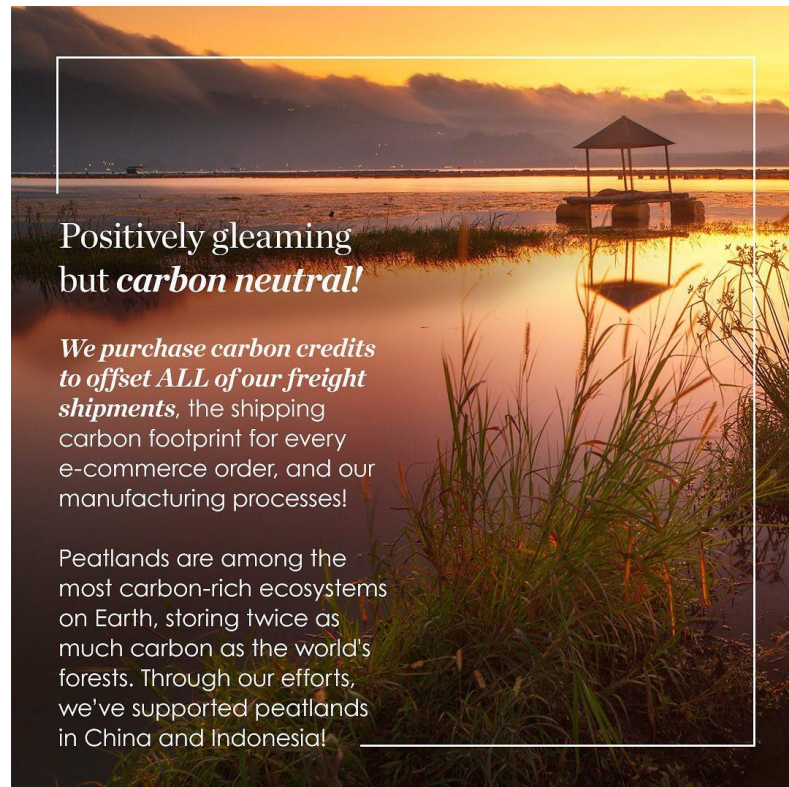
	environmental commitment (Fuentes, 2015; Hartmann et al., 2005).		
		Eco-friendly products	Visual emphasis on recyclable (e.g. glass, paper) packaging
		Ingredient sourcing	Organic ingredients
		Sustainability symbols	Recycling icons, green certification logos, eco- labels.
		Human-nature connection	People interacting with nature, harmony with the environment.
		Abstract nature symbolism	Green or brown gradients, illustration (e.g. watercolor leaves), isolated elements
Emotional and symbolic appeals	Visual strategies leveraging emotions (hope, guilt) or contrasts (luxury vs. simplicity) to persuade or inspire action (Hartmann et al., 2005; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998).	Hope and optimism	Bright colors, positive expressions, clean environments.
		Guilt and fear appeals	Images of pollution, endangered species,

			negative climate impact.
Brand and corporate identity	Visuals integrating sustainability into brand identity (logos, influencers) or corporate actions (renewable energy)(Schroeder, 2006; Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002).	Branding elements	Logo, colors, or typography relate to sustainability.
		Corporate responsibility visuals	Factory images, renewable energy use, corporate pledges.
		Influencer endorsements	Use of public figures to promote sustainability.
		Stakeholder representation	Local communities, experts, CEOs
		Employee involvement	Company volunteer programs (e.g. team building, beach cleanups)
		Consumer engagement	Hashtags (e.g. #GoGreen, #SustainableBeauty).
Action-oriented messaging	Visuals prompting consumer action (e.g., recycling) or demonstrating impact (before/after comparisons) (Dahl, 2010; Peattie, 2001).	Call to action	Direct instruction to increase engagement with sustainability behaviors (e.g. recycle, plant trees, or support initiatives).

		Before and after transformations	Showing environmental improvement due to the brand's efforts.
		Sustainability challenges and pledges	Encouraging audience participation.
		Educational and informative message	Texts that explain the environmental impact, informs sustainability practices, or provides information about a CSR initiative.
		Progress metrics	Visuals or texts that explain impact (e.g. carbon footprint reductions).
Cultural and ethical aspects	Visuals addressing inclusivity, cultural sustainability practices, or moral responsibility framing (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002; Peattie, 2001).	Inclusivity and diversity	Representation of different ethnicities, gender roles, body types
		Traditional vs. modern sustainability approaches	Use of indigenous knowledge, alternative practices.
		Moral responsibility framing	Positioning the brand as a hero, partner, or enabler of change.

Step 7: Ensuring trustworthiness. Although this is a student’s thesis, ensuring the credibility, reliability, and validity of the thematic analysis is essential to maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of the findings. Therefore, even though inter-coder reliability, which typically involves more than one researcher coding the data, was not applied in this thesis, various strategies were deployed to address the four key criteria: credibility, validity, transparency, and reflexivity.

Figure 4. *An example of Nature Imagery code*



Note. Sunday Riley [@sundayriley]. (2024). *Happy Earth Day from the skincare brand that cares as much about the planet as we do your skin!* 🌿... [Photo]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/C6EX35jNFam/?img_index=4

I used the memo and comment functions in MAXQDA to record and store any decisions made during the coding process to ensure the reliability of the analysis. These tools helped maintain a clear flow of thought and ensured that my interpretations of the data were consistent throughout the analysis. By writing down the memos, I was able to revisit my reasoning and clarify any uncertainty or ambiguity in the data. This also facilitated a more systematic coding process, as I could track my evolving understanding of the data. Additionally, I used MAXQDA’s Summary Grid feature to

systematically organize and categorize the codes and themes. To check for stability, I revisited the codes after a two-week gap, confirming that the decisions remained consistent over time. This allowed me to maintain a structured approach to coding, making it easier to assess the consistency of applying the codes across the data.

Additionally, the process of data triangulation by cross-checking my analysis with relevant literature was applied to enhance the validity of the findings. I examined the codes and themes emerging from the visual data with existing theories and frameworks in the fields of visual communication, CSR, and environmental sustainability. This comparison helped ensure that the themes identified were grounded in both the data and existing research, which is consistent with Maxwell's (2012) assertion that triangulation strengthens the validity of qualitative findings.

Regarding research transparency throughout the process, all the details of the coding and data analysis were documented using memo and comment tools in MAXQDA. In addition, a structured coding template showing both deductive and inductive codes, representations of themes and a few examples was created. This procedure will facilitate the replication of the analysis and provide a clear rationale for the decisions made at each stage of the research process.

Aside from that, as a way of practicing reflexivity, I documented my positionality (e.g., my initial skepticism about cosmetic brands' greenwashing claims) in memos and modified codes repeatedly to mitigate bias over time. Taking a two-week gap also helped me avoid preconceptions, which ensured themes emerged from the data. As a result, I ensured that the thematic analysis was both valid and reliable, providing a trustworthy foundation for my research conclusion.

5. Findings

The findings presented in this section are derived from a qualitative analysis of 166 visual documents (images and videos) posted by 30 participants on Instagram, coded and examined using MAXQDA software. Key trends in how brands visually convey environmental sustainability were found by means of code frequency analysis, which revealed the most and least recurring topics. Code co-occurrence analysis was also employed to investigate thematic links and find which codes often appeared together. These methodological approaches provide a structured basis for interpreting

the strategic meanings behind the current visual elements on social media, ultimately answering the study’s core research question.

5.1 Code frequencies

The purpose of performing a code frequency analysis was to identify the visual elements that brands associate most with environmental sustainability on Instagram, and which ones are least associated. By counting the frequency with which each code was applied across 166 visual materials, this method highlighted dominant themes commonly found in visual communication in CSR campaigns (Saldaña, 2021). Higher frequency counts indicate priorities in branding strategies. For example, whether brands focus more on the "Nature imagery" or "Calls to Action" element. Code frequencies are consistent with the principles of qualitative content analysis, as frequency indicates emphasis and potential intentional messaging (Krippendorff, 2018). Following are tables of the most and least popular themes (parent codes) and codes.

Table 3. *Frequency in themes (Parent codes)*

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Representation of environmental sustainability	155	93.4%
Brand and corporate identity	118	71.1%
Action-oriented messaging	108	65.1%
Emotional and symbolic appeals	50	30.1%
Cultural and ethical aspects	46	27,7%

Table 3 shows different levels of popularity among the main themes across the entire dataset through code frequency analysis. From the statistics, “Representation of environmental sustainability” code emerged as the most dominant one, appearing in 93.4% of the posts (n = 155). This was followed by “Brand and corporate identity” (71.1%, n = 118), and “Action-oriented messaging” (65.1%, n = 108), both of which appeared in over half of the dataset. In contrast, “Emotional and symbolic appeals” were identified in 30.1% of the posts (n = 50), while “Cultural and ethical aspects” appeared least frequently, present in only 27.7% of the dataset (n = 46).

The dominance of the theme “Representation of environmental sustainability” is further supported by the fact that three of the most frequently used visual codes, “Nature

imagery”, “Abstract nature symbolism”, and “Sustainability symbols” are part of this category, as shown in Table 4. Their appearance shows how frequent this theme shapes the way brands visually communicate their sustainability efforts. Nature, forests, trees or recycling symbols often appear continuously, occupying the majority of many images and videos through initial observation.

Table 4. *High frequency codes*

Code	Frequency	Percentage
Educational & informative message	90	54.2%
Branding elements	85	51.2%
Nature imagery	72	43.4%
Abstract nature symbolism	61	36.7%
Sustainability symbols	49	29.5%

Reviewing the high frequency codes in Table 4, “Nature imagery” appears in 43.4% of posts (n = 72), making it the most prominent in the entire dataset. Popular images are typically found in outdoor settings such as forests, fields, farms, oceans, and natural surfaces such as wood or stone. These images often serve as backgrounds or complementary scenes to product displays or text elements. The second most common within the same theme is the code “Abstract nature imagery,” which appears in 36.7% of posts (n = 61). It incorporates stylized images of leaves, waves, sunlight, or green bands, as in the example (Figure 5). These stylized nature images are often generated using graphics software and are added as part of the image composition as decoration, accents, or backgrounds. The third most visible code in this theme was “Sustainability symbols,” which appears in 29.5% of posts (n = 49) including familiar symbols such as recycling logos, eco-certification badges, and minimalist environmental icons. These are often placed near products or in the informational sections of posts (Figure 6). Apart from these high-frequency elements, the “Representation of environmental sustainability” theme also includes less frequently observed codes such as “Eco-friendly products,” “Ingredient sourcing,” and “Human-nature connection.” Although these elements are less frequently seen in the dataset, they still contribute to the overall visual component of the environmental sustainability narrative. For example, images coded as “Human-nature connection” (24.7%, n = 41) typically depict individuals immersed in or

interacting with nature, such as walking through the woods, caring for trees, or participating in outdoor activities. These images emphasize people’s connection and responsibility for nature. Similarly, the codes “Ingredient sourcing” (8.43%, n = 14) and “Eco-Friendly Products” (21.08%, n = 35) reflect posts that focus on the organic origin of ingredients (e.g. natural ingredients) or highlight the eco-friendly attributes of products (e.g. recyclable packaging). These elements work together to create a visual representation of environmental sustainability that audiences are easily able to recognize without reading the caption.

Figure 5. *An example of Abstract nature symbolism code*



Note. Badger Balm [@badgerbalm]. (2024). *How do B Corps measure impact?* [Photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DCZeD9-tlQJ/?img_index=6

Figure 6. *An example of Sustainability symbols code*



Note. Captain Blankenship [@badgerbalm]. (2024). *It's B Corp Month, and while being a B Corp is a huge accomplishment...* [Photo]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/C4OmB_9pCxo/?img_index=1

The second most frequently observed theme in the dataset was “Branding and corporate identity,” which appears in 71.1% of posts ($n = 118$), as shown in Table 3. Despite its popularity, only one code within this theme appeared with high frequency in Table 4: “Branding elements,” which is identified in 51.2% of posts ($n = 85$). This demonstrates that brand identity elements are present in most images and videos on Instagram. Elements that fall under this code are brand logos, consistent use of brand colors or fonts (Figure 7). Brand elements are often integrated into the overall image design, subtly incorporated into the background of nature-focused scenes, or placed in a prominent central location. In addition, two other codes within this theme, “Corporate responsibility visuals” (12.05%, $n = 20$) and “Consumer engagement” (1.2%, $n = 2$), are less common but still contribute to the overall expression of brand identity. The “Corporate responsibility visuals” code includes descriptions of environmental friendly corporate settings or manufacturing facilities surrounded by trees, solar panels, or eco-efficient infrastructure. These images express the brand’s proactive spirit of developing in a way that is consistent with sustainable development goals. Meanwhile, the “Consumer engagement” code, campaign hashtags, appear less frequently. These hashtags are often placed in the caption or as minimal text elements within the image, rather than as a central visual feature. Another notable observation within this theme concerns the depiction of people in CSR imagery. While influencer marketing is a

prominent feature of Instagram communications, the code “Influencer endorsement” appears only once in the dataset (Table 5), suggesting that brands rarely use celebrities in environmental messaging. Instead, imagery featuring stakeholders such as local community members, ecologists, farmers, executives, or employees is more common. These individuals are often depicted in either natural or in work settings, visually connecting brand values to environmental sustainability activities.

Figure 7. An example of Branding element code



Note. Badger Balm [@badgerbalm]. (2024). *Our new Badger baby* [Photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C56IjqIMtP3/?img_index=2

Featured in 65.1% of posts (n = 108), the “Action-Oriented Message” theme is the third most common in the dataset (see Table 3). Within this theme, the two codes “Educational and Informational Messages” and “Progress Metrics” stand out as the most frequently detected codes in the theme. Among the entire dataset, “Educational and Informational Messages” is especially the top most frequently observed code, identified in 54.2% of posts (n = 90). This code often refers to a short paragraph of text that provides brief information about an environmental protection campaign, introduces a new initiative, or introduces products’ eco-friendly features (Figure 8). The text often appears on a solid color background, a nature image background, or next to a product

image. The font is clean and minimalist to ensure that the message is readable. In many cases, the Instagram caption serves as a tool to further explain the short message written in the image. Additionally, the code “Progress metrics” in this study was the second most common code in the topic, appearing in 13.9% of posts (n = 23). “Progress metrics” code indicates numerical results or summarized relevant achievements of a particular campaign, such as the number of trees planted, reduction in plastic use, or milestones achieved. Results are presented through simple infographics, icons, or overlays that help to communicate the campaign’s impact in a concise and easy-to-understand manner.

Figure 8. *An example of Educational and informative messaging code*



Note. Davines [@davinesofficial]. (2024). *Sustainability Report 2023* [Photo]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C_vQY70tGbK/?img_index=3

In contrast to the above two codes, other codes within the “Action-Oriented Message” theme appear less frequently. Audience-driven call-to-action phrases (or “Call-to-action” codes) such as “Join us,” “Help now,” or “Explore more” are less common in this dataset. Instead, they are often included in captions or omitted entirely from CSR posts. Additionally, action-oriented images such as “Before and After Transformation” and “Sustainability Challenges” are among the least used elements in the entire dataset (see Table 5). Only a small number of posts feature visual

comparisons of the changes made by the campaign or present consumer-facing challenges to encourage persistence in engaging in sustainability efforts.

Table 3 reveals that the "Emotional and symbolic appeals" code accounts for 30.1% of posts, making it one of the least popular themes in the dataset. Observing this theme, it is apparent that brands tend to use images that evoke feelings of hope and optimism more often than images that suggest feelings of guilt and fear. Images associated with hope often bring positive emotions such as smiling people, beautiful nature or scenes of people taking care of the soil. In contrast, content depicting environmental degradation or urgent warnings, typical of fear-based appeals, is rare. Through observation, this allows the researcher to forecast a general trend in the choice of images in CSR campaigns of cosmetic companies, which is to use an uplifting and reassuring visual tone in CSR communications rather than a more critical or alarming tone.

Table 5. *Low frequency codes*

Code	Frequency	Percentage
Before & after transformations	2	1.2%
Consumer engagement	2	1.2%
Sustainability challenges/pledges	1	0.6%
Influencer endorsements	1	0.6%

Finally, the theme “Cultural and ethical aspects” is the least identified theme across the entire dataset, appearing in only 27.7% of posts (n = 46) (Table 3). In this theme, images are coded in relation to diversity and inclusion, particularly when they depict local people, community members, or individuals involved in remote and rural sustainability projects. The cultural context through clothing, settings, and local activities is included to add a sense of social depth to campaign stories. In addition, when brands demonstrate their involvement in environmental or social initiatives, few brands explicitly position themselves as pioneers, heroes, and changemakers in these images. Instead, messages tend to focus on collaboration or participation without overtly claiming leadership.

5.2 Code co-occurrence

In reality, a picture or video is made up of several different codes coexisting rather than one single code, therefore Guest et al. (2012) highlight the importance of running code co-occurrence analysis. This approach allows researchers to investigate how codes frequently appear together in the same visual material, hence more than basic frequency counts. By using semantic connections between codes, Guest et al., 2012 suggest that brands can build meaning in different visual layers. MAXQDA's matrix tools have been used to examine co-occurrence patterns to find statistically relevant code intersections (Gibbs, 2018). In this study, such analysis will provide information about strategic framing that single frequencies cannot provide by examining how companies combine visual components to create coherent stories (Guest et al., 2012; Gibbs, 2018). Table 6 below demonstrates the co-occurrence matrix and thematic network.

Table 6. *Highest code co-occurrences in the dataset (> 30 co-occurrences)*

Primary Code	Related Code	Co-Occurrence Frequency
Educational and informative message	Branding elements	45
Educational and informative message	Nature imagery	43
Educational and informative message	Stakeholder representation	32
Educational and informative message	Abstract nature symbolism	33
Stakeholder representation	Hope and optimism	32
Hope and optimism	Human-nature connection	32
Nature imagery	Hope and optimism	38
Nature imagery	Stakeholder representation	33

Primary Code	Related Code	Co-Occurrence Frequency
Nature imagery	Human-nature connection	35
Branding elements	Nature imagery	34
Branding elements	Abstract nature symbolism	35
Branding elements	Hope and optimism	32
Branding elements	Eco-friendly products	31
Traditional vs. modern approaches	Educational and informative message	31

Analysis of high-frequency code co-occurrences (threshold >30) reveals a network of tightly interconnected sustainability communication codes. The first cluster involves the code “Educational and informational message” emerging as the central node. It has particularly strong relationships with “Branding elements” (45 co-occurrences), “Nature imagery” (43 co-occurrences), “Stakeholder representation” (32 co-occurrences), “Abstract nature symbolism” (33 co-occurrences) and “Traditional vs. modern approaches” (31 co-occurrences). The second cluster spins around emotional appeals with the “Hope and Optimism” code associating with “Brand elements” (32 co-occurrences), “Human-nature connection” (32 co-occurrences), “Nature imagery” (38 co-occurrences), and “Stakeholder representation” (32 co-occurrences). In addition, another strong clusters are evidenced by the connections between “Nature imagery” and “Human-nature connection” (35 co-occurrences), “Stakeholder representation” (33 co-occurrences), as well as the ties with “Branding elements” (34 co-occurrences) and “Abstract nature symbols” (35 co-occurrences). Finally, product-focused messages emerge in the “Branding elements – Eco-friendly products” (31 co-occurrences) relationship. These clusters suggest an integrated communication strategy in which educational content, emotional appeals, and visual symbols continuously reinforce each other in sustainability stories.

Following are three main thematic groups in visual communication that the co-occurrence analysis already identified, including the (1) education-branding connection, (2) the emotional-symbolic core, and (3) the brand-product connection.

(1) Education-branding connection. “Educational and informational messages” is the code with the most associations with other codes such as “Brand elements” (45 co-occurrences), “Nature imagery” (43 co-occurrences), “Abstract nature symbols” (33 co-occurrences), “Stakeholder representations” (32 co-occurrences), and “Traditional vs. modern approaches” (31 co-occurrences). This aligns with the fact that “Educational and informational messages” is the most identified code across the dataset as shown above. It means that the majority of images and videos contain a short paragraph of text and are accompanied by a brand logo, nature images, and real people, indicating a dual focus on knowledge sharing and visual brand consistency. The code that appears separately is “Traditional vs. modern approaches” which is only connected to “Educational and informational messages” (31 co-occurrences), suggesting that the content of the messages, besides general information, often refers to traditional or modern approaches in the sustainability program.

(2) Emotional-symbolic core. A second cluster focuses on “Hope and optimism,” which is linked to “Nature imagery” (38 co-occurrences), “Human-nature connections” (32 co-occurrences), “Brand elements” (32 co-occurrences), and “Stakeholder representations” (32 co-occurrences). The co-occurrence of these codes suggests that companies place a strong emphasis on conveying positive emotions through nature images, real people interacting with the nature when talking about their environmental programs, thereby increasing brand affinity.

(3) Branding-product connection. The “Branding elements” code extends beyond educational content to form a third product-oriented subgroup with “Nature Images” (34 co-occurrences), “Environmentally Friendly Products” (31 co-occurrences), and “Abstract Nature Symbols” (35 co-occurrences), while maintaining its connection with “Hope and Optimism” (32 co-occurrences) and “Educational and Informational Messages” (45 co-occurrences). Nature-related elements are incorporated into the layout with products to highlight their eco-friendliness.

In general, these findings indicate popular visual codes used by B Corp certified cosmetic companies on Instagram. Common visual elements include sustainability

messages, brand logos, nature-related imagery, graphic images of nature, and sustainability icons. In addition, the analysis reveals three trends when brands communicate their environmental programs on social media, including education-branding connection, emotional-symbolic core, and brand-product connection.

6. Discussion

To answer the research question, the discussion will explain the meaning of visual elements using the four-level visual framing framework proposed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011). In this part, the denotative, stylistic-semiotic, connotative, and ideological dimensions of CSR imagery will be considered. Guided by the systematic framework, this section will interpret how B Corp-certified cosmetic brands visually construct sustainability narratives on Instagram.

6.1 Denotative level

The denotative nature of the visual analysis is about identifying the physical elements of the visual, serving as a foundation for further meaning analysis (Geise & Xu, 2024). The code frequency analysis in the previous section helped identify the distinct visual codes that certified cosmetics companies use to communicate environmental sustainability on Instagram. Sustainability messages, brand logos, nature-related images, abstract nature graphics, and sustainability symbols are most frequently utilized to construct their CSR stories. These results are also fully consistent with the existing literature on corporate sustainability communication and visual framing.

In Hansen's (2017) study of the use of imagery in environmental communication, he concludes that brands often use natural imagery as a metaphor to demonstrate their commitment to environmental protection. This is also true for cosmetic brands in this study where real images of nature or graphic nature images are frequently observed in images or videos. However, B Corp certified cosmetic brands also incorporate additional branding elements, such as logos, colors, or fonts into the visuals, unlike the general environmental protection campaigns researched by León et al. (2022). According to Schroeder (2006), brands use visual cues to connect abstract sustainability values to tangible brand identities. In general, brands are trying to move towards a "green branding" approach, where sustainable values become an important pillar of the development, to balance business ethics and commercial goals (Hartmann et al., 2005).

According to Parguel et al. (2011), brands also emphasize transparency by frequently incorporating educational and informational messages into the visuals. As explained in the findings section, these textual elements often introduce solutions, explain causes, highlight sustainability initiatives, or promote the product's eco-friendly attributes. This has been identified as an integral pillar of environmental communication to help audiences understand complex issues more easily and remember them better through visuals (Moser and Dilling, 2011). Interestingly, while educational content is the most common element, overt sustainability symbols (e.g. recycling logos, certification badges) are less commonly used. Hahn and Lülfs (2014) explain that this selective use is due to brands wanting to avoid visual clutter that could raise suspicions of greenwashing. Instead, certified B Corp brands appear to be moving toward producing more subtle, aesthetically pleasing content when communicating sustainability. According to Hartmann et al. (2005), abstract natural symbols evoke associations with environmental friendliness without feeling overly promotional.

The inclusion of brand elements in sustainability content, explained by Phillips et al. (2014), is to create visual consistency across posts. This is important for the purpose of increasing the credibility of stories and brand recognition. Weder et al. (2019) refer to this strategy as "narrative sustainability", in which recurring visual patterns simultaneously reinforce brand identity and environmental values.

However, the rare appearance of influencer endorsements (only 0.6% of posts) is particularly notable, as it differs from the usual marketing trend in the beauty industry (Phillips et al., 2014). This suggests that for commercial purposes and brand awareness, beauty influencers are key promoters, but when communicating about CSR campaigns, brands still prioritize the use of natural and intimate images to increase the content's authenticity.

6.2 Stylistic-semiotic level

This section will focus on discussing the design choices of image layout, subject focus, image tone, and multimodal integration, which is consistent with Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011)'s explanation of stylistic-semiotic level. Although this study does not include quantitative codes for stylistic elements, this section draws on the visual patterns observed across the entire dataset to qualitatively assess how B Corp certified cosmetic brands construct meaning through visual style.

One noticeable feature throughout the images and videos is the repeated use of shades of green or brown, coded as “Abstract nature symbols”. These colors visually reinforce environmental themes and foster a psychological connection to nature through color symbolism (Hansen, 2017; Lee et al., 2022). Sun and Wu (2023) also support this claim by stating that customers who prefer color green interact more frequently with nature and have a higher level of connection to nature, which then tend to purchase sustainable products. This also suggests that the intentional use of green in branding can subconsciously connect audiences with environmentally sustainable principles. On Instagram, where aesthetic consistency is essential to brand storytelling, this visual uniformity amplifies both thematic consistency and emotional resonance. Green is therefore not just a design choice but a non-verbal persuasion tool that instantly conveys sustainability (Sun and Wu, 2023).

In addition to products and the nature, brands often feature human figures including local communities, ecologists, activists, and CEOs in their Instagram content. These representations are believed to humanize sustainability efforts, create visual narratives that link the brand to environmental initiatives and enhance the authenticity (Fuentes, 2015; Kolling et al., 2021). Other research also supports the strategic inclusion of humans in environmental imagery, as the presence of human faces increases emotional engagement and public support for environmental causes (Campbell, 2018). Furthermore, depicting individuals helps audiences better understand abstract issues and places them in a tangible, real-world context (Monoyios et al., 2024). Overall, human-involved imagery can enhance community voices and promote inclusivity in communication. These benefits highlight the communicative power of human imagery in CSR imagery – enhancing credibility, relatability, and emotional resonance (Harris, 2017).

Combining text and images was another important stylistic strategy identified across the dataset, most commonly when presenting environmental projects, explaining causes, or communicating results. The benefits of this multimodal design choice are that it helps create a “Picture superior effect,” enhancing clarity, improving memorability, and boosting engagement, especially in visual environments like Instagram (PwC, 2017; Esposito, 2022). According to PwC research (2017), visuals are more likely to be remembered than text alone, making this strategy particularly effective for communicating sustainability messages. This image-text integration also helps

audiences quickly interpret the meaning and importance of CSR efforts, especially when combined with clear data or educational insights (Esposito, 2022). Beyond comprehension, it also supports strategic engagement because posts that integrate concise visual messages are more likely to attract attention and generate engagement as they are both aesthetically pleasing and informative (Quesenberry, 2014). In the context of CSR, this is essential to ensure that messages are not misinterpreted or perceived as superficial, thereby minimizing the risk of greenwashing (Weder et al., 2019). Through the integration of statistics and campaign general explanations into visual frames, brands increase transparency and engage audiences deeper (Esposito, 2022).

In terms of framing techniques, two main cinematic styles have been identified: close-up (CU) and wide-angle (WS) shots. While close-up shots focus on products, people, or natural elements, wide-angle shots are used to show the scale and context related to CSR campaigns (Pixflow, 2025). Close-up shots are utilized to capture joy, trust, or concern through facial expressions or small details (Pixflow, 2025). These shots adhere to aesthetic principles such as the rule of thirds, control lighting to enhance the emotional impact and attract attention (Kidd, 1998). In contrast, the purpose of using wide-angle shots is to frame environmental or social settings such as forests, oceans, or community spaces, which emphasize the scale and relevance of CSR campaigns. The alternating use of CU and WS shots creates a visual rhythm that enhances the depth of the story and maintains audiences' interest (Pixflow, 2025). The transitions between these shots follow continuity editing techniques, ensuring logical flow and visual consistency (Kidd, 1998).

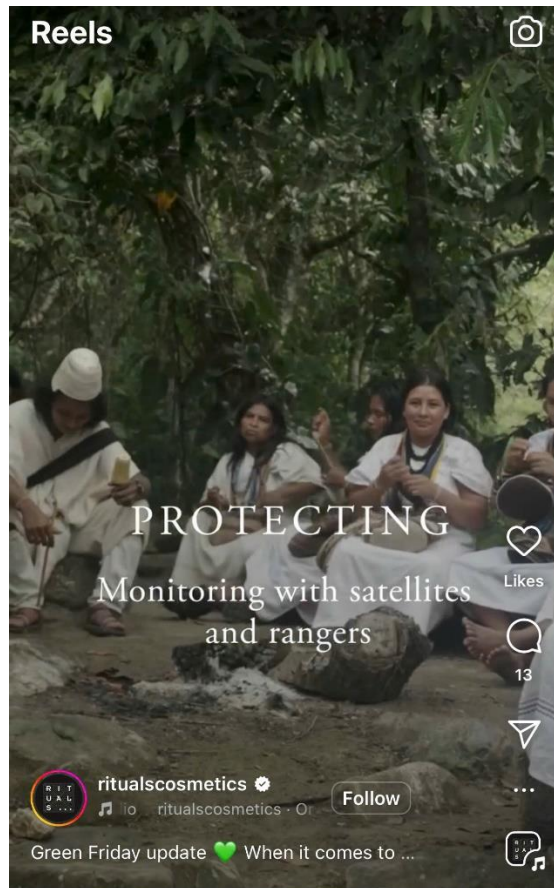
Most of the frames use natural lighting to maintain authenticity with minimal background noise and balanced audio, contributing to a polished final product that enhances positive emotions (Kidd, 1998). In addition, these production techniques are further supported by thoughtful editing practices. Editing strategies such as action cuts, pre-planned shot lists, and color correction contribute to its overall cohesion and storytelling effectiveness. As brands switch between intimate and expansive shots, they want to emphasize personal care and global responsibility (Pixflow, 2025).

An illustrative example of this framing style is presented in a video by the brand Rituals, shared on Instagram (Figure 9). The video combines natural landscapes and real people to communicate the spirit of an environmentally sustainable development project. Firstly, regarding the color tone, the dominant tone in the video is green,

reinforcing ecological themes. Secondly, wide-angle shots are employed to showcase expansive landscapes, framing nature as the central subject. These shots are interspersed with close-up shots of local people involved in the project, highlighting their role in environmental protection efforts. The alternation between wide and close-up shots creates a dynamic visual rhythm, placing human involvement in a larger nature context. Furthermore, natural light is used constantly, creating a sense of authenticity and reinforcing the genuine connection between people and their living habitat. Text overlays are added throughout the video to provide information and raise awareness of the project's goals, contributing to the educational function of the content. This combination of visual and textual elements illustrates how stylistic choices at the symbol level can be used to construct environmental narratives in an engaging and understandable way.

Together, these stylistic choices, including color symbolism, thematic focus, cinematography, and text-image combination, support each other to shape the visual communication of sustainability. They not only provide aesthetic appeals, but also structure emotional and cognitive interpretations, enhancing ethical values into the brand's visual identity.

Figure 9. *An example of Stylistic Semiotic Framing in Rituals' Environmental Campaign on Instagram*



Note. Rituals [@ritualscosmetics]. (2024). Green Friday update 🌿... [Video].
Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DC_jiUSvKB2/

6.3 Connotative Level

Images can convey more cultural values and meanings than their surface content, as Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) emphasized in their visual framing framework. At the connotative level, visual elements such as nature images, abstract natural symbols (e.g. leaves, water droplets), green and brown color tones are not only for an aesthetic purpose but they also act as metaphors of purity, ecological harmony and corporate ethics (Hansen, 2017). As Hansen and Machin (2013) refer to the cultural myths of “pristine nature” and “innocent landscapes”, these elements will “frame” the brand development orientation, building the brand in the direction that this brand is completely responsible for the environment. Similarly, Permatasari and Suryani (2023) argue that nature imagery serves a rhetorical function, evoking emotional responses and reinforcing perceptions of environmental legitimacy without the need for explanations.

Codes like “Progress metrics” and “Educational and informative messages” may sound direct and factual, but they also carry a symbolic meaning that contributes to the

brand's ethical positioning. When combined with minimal layouts, nature backgrounds, eco-themed icons, and clear typography, these elements suggest different values such as accountability, transparency, and science-based trustworthiness. Furthermore, textual-based elements are seen as a guarantee for brands rather than simply conveying information (Permatasari & Suryani, 2023). This helps brands increase their credibility because Hossain et al. (2019) point out that visual storytelling creates shared meaning structures that align with stakeholders' expectations of brands.

Visual frames featuring real people such as CEOs, local people, farmers, ecologists, or other stakeholders also have symbolic meaning. People in this context are not only participants, but also symbols of transparency, authenticity, and the brand's commitment for the environment. Images of people interacting with nature are meant to link brand values to ethical responsibility (Fuentes, 2015). Through their research on sustainable fashion branding, Milanesi et al. (2022) concluded that human-centered images are often used to create an aspirational ethical identity and foster emotional engagement. These images help reinforce a common sense of environmental purpose between the brand and the audience. Hossain et al. (2019) further explain that repetition of a visual element can simplify the issue, helping to convey complex environmental issues into easily understood and emotionally connected stories.

In general, visual environmental communication has always been a means of conveying hidden meanings through images, as Hansen and Machin (2013) mentioned. Through these, cosmetic brands can convey stories and connect deeply with consumers in terms of emotions and cultural resonance. CSR visuals become a tool to shape ethical stories, embedding sustainability not only as a message but also as a shared cultural value.

6.4 Ideological Level

According to Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011), within the visual framing framework, the ideological level refers to the hidden values or beliefs conveyed through visual representations. This level, which goes beyond the symbolic meaning, is part of a broader framework for analyzing how images, photographs, advertisements, and other visual media shape perceptions. Specifically, in this study, visuals reflect deeply implicit beliefs about corporate environmental and social responsibility. These values and beliefs play a role in guiding how audiences interpret what is right, legitimate, or

necessary (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011). Framing is a power exercise, which organizes everyday realities by connecting communication with cultural narratives, moral values, and social identities, as Nisbet and Newman (2015) argue.

As noted in the code co-occurrence analysis, visual codes that frequently appear together create trends in environmental sustainability communication. The first group, the education-branding connection, represents the implicit ideological stance that businesses should proactively communicate and educate the audience about environmental initiatives. This aligns with what van Beek et al. (2020) call “generated realities”, in which brands carefully select visual narratives to position themselves as sustainability advocates. The strategic emphasis on educational content (e.g., infographics, cause explanations, goal messages) combined with branding elements aligns with Nisbet and Newman’s (2015) “social progress” framework. By proactively communicating their message publicly, brands are perceived as the primary educators of environmental sustainability, instead of governments, NGOs, or communities (Cho et al., 2015). Based on the "social progress" framework, brands are the main driving force behind environmental solutions (Nisbet and Newman, 2015).

Regarding the second group, the emotional-symbolic core, the ideological framing revealed through the combination of “Hope and optimism” and other codes reflects a tendency to focus on emotional engagement and active participation. Rather than emphasizing urgency or risk, brands adopt uplifting imagery to emphasize that environmental sustainability investment is a rewarding and worthwhile journey. However, Hansen and Machin (2013) and Nisbet and Newman (2015) both warn that such frames, while emotionally appealing, can oversimplify complex issues and shift the burden of environmental action onto the individual rather than calling for collective action.

In the final “branding-product connection” cluster, the co-existence of sustainability imagery (e.g. nature imagery) with product-focused branding (e.g. logos) reinforces the ideology of “moral capitalism”. This ideology demonstrates that environmental protection should come from changes in consumers’ daily routines. Therefore, environmental goals are best achieved when brands can provide consumer-friendly initiatives (Schroeder, 2006; Milanesi et al., 2022). However, Hahn and Lülfs (2014) have criticized this as “soft” sustainability, brand-led change rather than systematic change or regulation. This is similar to Nisbet and Newman’s (2015) framing

of economic competitiveness, in which sustainability becomes a competitive advantage rather than a shared responsibility. As Schroeder (2006) and Milanesi et al. (2022) note, such framings reflect “moral capitalism,” an ideological stance that equates moral identity with shopping behavior.

Even though content creators do not realize the power of framing as ideological, van Beek et al. (2020) and Nisbet and Newman (2015) both assert that such framings strongly influence audience perceptions of environmental responsibility. CSR images in this sense not only educate or convince but also normalize a perspective in which sustainability is in line with branding, personal consumption, and business creativity. Ideological stories determine what actions are important, what voices are credible, and what sustainability should look like in the future.

7. Managerial implications

Through analysis and research, the findings of the study provide some practical insights into trends of social media content for brands and communication managers. First, visuals always carry symbolic meanings, influencing audiences’ perceptions (Hansen & Machin, 2013; van Beek et al., 2020). Therefore, visual framing must be carefully selected and brands must ensure the visual authenticity. In addition, visual aesthetics consistent with actual sustainability activities are helpful in reducing the risk of greenwashing and increasing brand trust (Weder et al., 2019). Second, while uplifting and emotionally appealing imagery (e.g., green landscapes, smiling individuals) enhances brand relevance, it must be balanced with transparent indicators of environmental performance, such as certifications or measurable results (Permatasari & Suryani, 2023; Hossain et al., 2019). Third, sustainability must be visually integrated into the brand identity. Consistent use of branding elements along with sustainability imagery helps enhance ethical positioning into the brand’s visual language (Schroeder, 2006; Hartmann et al., 2005). Fourth, including representations of people, such as local communities, ecologists, or ethical producers, can reinforce perceptions of authenticity and broaden the ethical appeal of CSR messages (Fuentes, 2015; Milanesi et al., 2022). Finally, on image-first platforms like Instagram, brands must remain aware of how visual narratives are circulated, reshaped, and reinterpreted by diverse audiences. Emotionally resonant but ideologically narrow images can be challenged or criticized in user-generated discourse. Hence, monitoring audience engagement and reception allows

brands to adjust their visual strategy and stay aligned with stakeholder expectations in real time (van Beek et al., 2020).

8. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses only on B Corp-certified cosmetics brands, so it is possible that visual strategies developed by companies with other certifications (e.g., ECOCERT, Leaping Bunny) are overlooked, limiting the scope of findings. Furthermore, the participating brands are heterogeneous in size and specialty (e.g., skin care, hair care), so the analysis captures broad industry trends rather than microtrends within sub-sectors. For example, hair care brands may emphasize different ingredient sourcing than skin care brands. And finally, the study examines the production of visual content rather than audience reception. Therefore, the study is unable to assess how consumers perceive or emotionally engage with sustainability-themed imagery (e.g. whether ‘Guilt appeals’-inspired content triggers action or skepticism). Future research could explore specific visual strategies across different types of certifications, conduct sub-industry analyses, or incorporate consumer surveys to bridge these gaps.

9. Conclusion

Applying Rodriguez and Dimitrova’s (2011) four-level visual framing framework, this study explains how B Corp-certified cosmetic brands visually communicate environmental sustainability on Instagram. The four levels, including the denotative, stylistic-semiotic, connotative, and ideological dimensions, highlight how visuals are not only surface-level representations but also intentionally constructed to align with the brand identity and values (Lee et al., 2022; Hansen & Machin, 2013). At the denotative level, the brand primarily uses nature imagery, educational text, and logos to convey sustainability themes. The stylistic-semiotic level reveals design techniques such as close-ups and panoramic shots, a green color palette, and natural lighting that reinforce trustworthiness and authenticity. At the connotative level, these symbolic elements such as leaves, water droplets, and community imagery become visual metaphors for purity, care, and moral unity. Finally, the ideological level suggests hidden beliefs surrounding brands’ position in the environmental protection landscape and moral capitalism when these visuals present sustainability as a consumer-friendly, market-driven solution, often minimizing the structural complexity of environmental

issues. Together, these findings contribute to the literature on CSR communication, visual framing, and sustainability branding by providing a systematic, layered explanation of how visual content functions on social media.

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Appendix

Data Set for Research Analysis

The full dataset used for analysis in this thesis can be accessed at the following link:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19IgHWoe5PbGjIKwXcyjGPdkNi3b6IxWz?usp=drive_link