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VISUALIZING THE HIDDEN ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF FASHION: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL-MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In response to increasing environmental concerns regarding fashion waste, this study examines how digital campaign visuals construct and communicate environmental meanings through multimodal design. The data consist of four campaign visuals purposively selected from a single social media post published by the United Nations Environment Programme for the International Day of Zero Waste 2025. The visuals were selected based on their thematic relevance to fashion waste, multimodal richness, and representation of diverse visual strategies, including symbolic imagery, statistical emphasis, actional processes, and textual appeals. Drawing on the three metafunctions of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Kress and van Leeuwen's framework of visual social semiotics, this study analyzes how representational, interactive, and compositional meanings are realized in the campaign visuals. Using qualitative content analysis, the findings show that the visuals combine conceptual symbolism and actional representation to reveal the hidden environmental costs of fashion, such as pollution, water overuse, and carbon emissions. Most images adopt an observer-oriented perspective that positions viewers as reflective witnesses rather than direct participants, while selective use of close-up imagery and vivid colour strengthens emotional engagement and ethical awareness. Compositional strategies, including information value, salience, and contrast, are used to prioritize key environmental messages and guide interpretation. The study reveals how strategic visual design enhances the persuasive power of environmental campaigns and offers practical implications for environmental communicators and campaign designers seeking to address fashion waste through effective visual communication.

Keywords: Fashion waste, Metafunctions, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Visual social semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Recent environmental crises linked to textile production and disposal have intensified global concern over fashion waste. From overflowing landfills of discarded clothing to water contamination in textile-producing regions, the environmental consequences of fast fashion have become increasingly visible (Cuiffo et al., 2021; Lai & Chang, 2020). These incidents emphasize the urgent need for effective communication strategies that can translate complex environmental data into accessible and emotionally ringing messages for the public (Chen,

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2024). Within this context, visual environmental communication has emerged as a critical tool for shaping public awareness and influencing sustainable attitudes and behaviours.

Visual environmental communication is defined as the strategic use of images, layout, colour, typography, and visual symbolism to convey environmental messages and influence public perceptions of sustainability (Bannister et al., 2021; de Oliveira et al., 2023). Fashion waste refers to the environmental burden generated throughout the fashion production and consumption cycle, including textile disposal, excessive water consumption, chemical pollution from dyeing processes, and greenhouse gas emissions (Dhiwar & Bedarkar, 2024; Shamsuzzaman et al., 2025).

The fashion industry is widely recognized as one of the most environmentally damaging global industries. Recent estimates indicate that fashion contributes up to 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions and consumes hundreds of trillions of liters of water annually, much of which becomes contaminated through textile dyeing and finishing processes (Wagaw & Babu, 2023). Large volumes of discarded clothing are transported to landfills or informal dumping sites, often in developing regions, where they disrupt ecosystems and threaten biodiversity. Despite the magnitude of these impacts, fashion waste remains abstract or distant for many consumers, partly because its environmental costs are geographically displaced and visually obscured from everyday consumption practices.

The persuasive potential of visual communication lies in its ability to transcend linguistic boundaries and appeal directly to emotions, values, and cultural associations. In sustainability campaigns, visuals can condense complex scientific or ecological issues into accessible and emotionally echoing messages. Through careful use of imagery, campaigns can evoke urgency, guilt, hope, or solidarity more effectively than text alone. For instance, a single photograph of a polluted river or a landfill filled with discarded clothing can create a visceral impact that motivates reflection and action. In this regard, visual communication operates as a multimodal resource i.e., an integrated mode of meaning-making that combines image, text, layout, and design to enhance comprehension (Hafner, 2020; Weninger, 2020) and persuasion (Ahmed, 2024; Silvestri & Falk, 2023; Taylor & Leung, 2020). Understanding how these elements interact is critical for evaluating the effectiveness of environmental campaigns in this age where digital platforms favor concise, impactful visuals over lengthy textual explanations.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), pioneered by Halliday (1978), offers a foundation for understanding meaning-making beyond language (Elsanhoury et al., 2020). SFL identifies three core metafunctions i.e., ideational, interpersonal, and textual which have been extended by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) to visual social semiotics. This framework explains how images represent reality (representational meaning), establish relationships with viewers (interactive meaning), and organize visual elements for interpretive coherence (compositional meaning).

The representational metafunction focuses on participants, actions, and settings. Narrative images, for instance, are characterized by vectors indicating movement or gaze, signaling action or reaction (Guijarro & Sanz, 2008; Martínez Lirola, 2022). The interactive metafunction relates to how visuals engage viewers through gaze, angle, and social distance. For instance, a high angle may diminish the subject's power, while a close-up invites intimacy (Atma & Awad, 2023; Cao & Chen, 2014). The compositional metafunction concerns the layout of elements within the image such as the positioning of information (left/right, top/bottom), salience through contrast or size, and framing which guides how meaning is read and prioritized (Al-Ali & Hamzeh, 2024; Jung & Bae, 2023; Knoll & Fuzer, 2019).

The multimodal perspective is predominantly relevant to environmental campaign texts, where visuals and text often co-construct layered, persuasive meanings. However, while prior studies have explored picture books (Chen, 2021; Hermawan & Sukyadi, 2017), advertisements (da Silva & de Sousa, 2019), and (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Weninger, 2020; Xiong et al., 2022), relatively few have focused on how environmental messages are visually constructed in sustainability campaigns related to fashion waste. Despite the increasing importance of visuals in sustainability discourse, a critical research gap remains. There is

limited academic attention to the visual semiotics of anti-fashion waste campaigns within the global context of the International Day of Zero Waste. While prior research has investigated environmental messaging in policy documents, slogans, and consumer-facing texts (Bouvier, 2020; Mulderrig, 2017; Pekkanen & Penttilä, 2021), few studies have addressed how environmental concerns are communicated visually through image selection, layout, and gaze orientation in campaigns addressing fashion waste. This oversight is problematic because fast fashion is often perceived as a distant or abstract issue removed from everyday experience. Yet visual campaigns have the potential to make such issues tangible and emotive. Poorly designed visuals risk being ignored or misinterpreted, while well-designed images can spark reflection, engagement, and even action. These concerns call for a closer examination of how multimodal texts function as persuasive tools in environmental advocacy.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how visual messages are constructed in selected anti-fashion waste campaign materials. It analyzes four images from UN Environment Programme #BeatWastePollution campaign as part of the broader initiative supporting the International Day of Zero Waste 2025. Grounded in the three metafunctions of Systemic Functional Linguistics and visual social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), the study explores how environmental meaning is created and conveyed through visual structures. This research is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do representational strategies in environmental campaign visuals construct the relationship between fashion consumption and ecological degradation? (2) In what ways do interactive features in environmental visuals influence viewer engagement and perceived responsibility toward sustainable practices? (3) How is compositional design used to prioritize environmental messages and guide interpretation in visual sustainability campaigns?

This study provides a systematic account of how campaign visuals deploy narrative strategies, compositional cues, and visual engagement techniques to shape public interpretation. The analysis demonstrates how representational, interactive, and compositional meanings are combined to communicate the urgency and ethical dimensions of fashion-related waste.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how environmental meanings are constructed in fashion waste campaign visuals. Qualitative analysis was considered appropriate as the study focuses on interpreting visual and verbal semiotic resources rather than measuring audience responses or frequency patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis was grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics and visual social semiotics, drawing on Kress & van Leeuwen's (2021) grammar of visual design to examine how images function as meaning-making resources in environmental communication.

The data for this study consisted of four digital campaign visuals published by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as part of the #BeatWastePollution initiative supporting the International Day of Zero Waste 2025. The visuals were sourced from a single official post uploaded to the UNEP X (formerly Twitter) account on May 29, 2025. This post was selected because it explicitly addressed the environmental impacts of fashion waste and combined images, statistics, and campaign slogans in a coherent multimodal format. The unit of analysis was each individual campaign image, both visual and embedded textual elements.

The images were selected using purposive sampling to ensure analytical relevance and theoretical richness. The selection criteria included explicit thematic focus on fashion waste and its environmental consequences; inclusion of multimodal elements such as imagery, typography, numerical data, or slogans; representation of diverse visual strategies including symbolic representation, actional processes, statistical emphasis, and textual calls to action; and public accessibility and institutional credibility as part of an official global environmental campaign. These criteria confirmed that the selected visuals were representative of

contemporary environmental communication practices and suitable for metafunctional analysis.

Data analysis followed a systematic, three-stage procedure based on the metafunctional framework of visual social semiotics. First, each image was analyzed for representational meaning, focusing on the depiction of participants, actions, settings, and symbolic elements. This stage examined whether images employed narrative or conceptual structures and how fashion waste and environmental degradation were visually represented. Second, interactive meaning was analyzed by examining gaze, social distance, and angle to determine how viewers were positioned in relation to the depicted content and how responsibility, empathy, or detachment were visually constructed. Third, compositional meaning was analyzed by identifying information value (left–right, top–bottom, center–margin), salience (colour, contrast, size), and framing to understand how attention was directed and how key messages were prioritized.

Throughout the analysis, visual and verbal elements were interpreted simultaneously to capture their interdependent meaning-making functions. Analytical observations were recorded in structured tables to ensure consistency across images and to facilitate comparison of meta functional patterns. To enhance analytical accuracy, interpretations were grounded in established theoretical categories rather than subjective impressions, and all analytical claims were supported by specific visual evidence from the images.

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion derived from a multimodal discourse analysis of fashion waste campaign visuals, guided by the Grammar of Visual Design framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021). The analysis examines representational, interactive, and compositional meanings to explain how environmental messages are visually constructed and communicated. At the representational level, the analysis identifies how participants, actions, and symbolic elements depict fashion waste and its environmental impact through narrative and conceptual structures. At the interactive level, gaze, social distance, and viewing angle are examined to determine how viewers are positioned as observers or moral agents and how emotional engagement is shaped. At the compositional level, information value, salience, and framing are analyzed to explain how attention is directed and how key environmental messages are prioritized. This metafunctional analysis is applied consistently across all figures to identify recurring visual strategies and their communicative effects. By integrating findings with scholarly interpretation, this section highlights how visual strategies shape audience perception, ethical positioning, and the persuasive power of environmental campaigns.

Conceptual Representation of Environmental Degradation: "The Environmental Cost of Fashion"

The data (see figure 1) is presented as a visual post with the title "The environmental cost of fashion," which prominently features an image of a stork standing on a large pile of discarded clothing and waste under a cloudy sky. The image includes the text "International Day of Zero Waste 2025" and the "BEAT WASTE POLLUTION" logo.

Figure 1. "The Environmental Cost of Fashion" Visual

The visual analysis reveals how meaning is constructed through the image's representational, interactive, and compositional features. Representationally, the image lacks overt action or dynamic interaction; instead, it falls under the conceptual category which shows a static but powerful depiction of a vast pile of discarded clothes. This symbolizes the long-term, systemic consequences of fast fashion. The presence of a single stork amid the waste enhances the symbolic contrast between nature and consumer excess. The textures and colors of the garments (attributes) juxtapose harshly with the muted tones of the sky strengthening the ecological tension.

Table 1. Multimodal Analysis of "The Environmental Cost of Fashion"

Metafunctions	Realization	Meaning
Representational		
Narrative	No dynamic vector or visible human action. Focus is conceptual.	Static scene of waste and a stork= conceptual representation of environmental degradation.
Conceptual	Shows the cost of fashion through symbolic elements (textile waste + the stork).	Pile of colorful discarded clothes = unsustainable fashion; the stork = nature affected.
Attributes	Texture (clothes), color contrasts (natural sky vs. waste), the stork's posture.	Soft, bright clothes contrast with muted sky; the stork appears out of place.
Circumstances	Implied environmental context: landfill, pollution.	Clothing heap as setting = pollution source.
Interactive		
Gaze	No eye contact: viewers are passive observer.	The stork does not look at the viewer.
Social Distance	Long shot: viewer sees entire polluted scene from a distance.	Wide view creates emotional distance, urging reflection.
Angle (Viewpoint)	Eye-level: neutral viewpoint, encourages contemplation without power bias.	Viewer stands equal to the scene.
Facial Expression	Not applicable: No human faces.	—
Gesture & Posture	The stork's neutral stance amidst waste adds to the static, contemplative tone.	Motionless, the stork suggests quiet sadness or helplessness.
Compositional		
Information Value – Left vs. Right	Balanced; no strong directional layout.	Pile spreads horizontally, guiding eye to the stork and horizon.

– Top vs. Bottom	Top = ideal (sky + text); bottom = real (trash pile = environmental reality).	"Ideal" sky opposes the "real" polluted foreground.
– Centre vs. Margin	The stork is slightly off-center = focal point.	The stork = symbolic center of environmental impact.
Salience	High contrast between sky and colorful waste draws focus.	The text and the stork stand out most.
Framing	Fully framed image with visible borders: viewer is an outsider looking in.	Suggests objective reflection.

Representationally, the image conveys a conceptual rather than narrative meaning, as there is no dynamic vector or visible human action involved. Instead, the scene presents a static depiction of environmental degradation through symbolic elements. The pile of colorful discarded clothes represents the unsustainable nature of the fashion industry, while the solitary stork, standing amidst the waste, symbolizes the impact of human excess on nature.

Interactively, the image does not involve the viewer directly. There is no eye contact, no human figures, and no visible movement. The viewer assumes a passive observer role. The long shot distance creates a sense of detachment, encouraging reflective observation rather than emotional intimacy. The eye-level angle places the viewer on equal footing with the scene that promote a neutral, contemplative stance rather than invoking fear or urgency. This observer-oriented positioning aligns with studies suggesting that symbolic environmental imagery can communicate large-scale environmental issues without provoking defensive reactions (Jung & Bae, 2023; Knoll & Fuzer, 2019).

Compositionally, the image uses layout and contrast to deliver its message. The bottom half filled with textile waste represents the real environmental cost, while the top half with blue sky and impactful text stands for ideal values and hope for change. The stork serves as a salient focal point, subtly guiding attention while emphasizing the natural world's suffering. The image is framed to create a sense of distance and objectivity.

The image works as a powerful environmental critique by communicating the hidden costs of fashion through a quiet yet visually disturbing scene. The combination of symbolic content, passive viewer positioning, and strong visual contrasts climaxes the urgency of the issue.

Industrial Accountability and Statistical Persuasion: "Up to 8% of Global Emissions"

The data (see figure 2) is presented as a visual post featuring a large bulldozer actively moving or compressing a vast pile of mixed waste, under a muted sky. Overlaying the image is the text "Up to 8% of global emissions," to indicate a significant environmental impact. Below the main image, the text "International Day of Zero Waste 2025" and the "BEAT WASTE POLLUTION" logo are visible in connecting the visual to a specific environmental campaign.

Figure 2: The "Up to 8% of Global Emissions" Visual

The image uses actional representation through the bulldozer to suggest the active role of industry in waste and emissions. The viewer, positioned above the scene, is invited to critically reflect on the environmental impact. The central placement and bright green text “Up to 8%” immediately capture attention in conveying a striking fact about fashion’s contribution to global emissions. The chaotic texture of the waste and the machine’s rigidity emphasize the tension between consumption and control, all framed in a way that encourages distant but urgent reflection.

Table 2. Multimodal Analysis of "Up to 8% of Global Emissions"

Metafunction	Realization	Meaning
Representational		
Narrative	Shows implied action: machine processing waste.	Presence of bulldozer suggests ongoing industrial activity.
– Actional	Vector: Direction of bulldozer blade implies movement.	The bulldozer “doing” something to the waste (compressing, clearing).
Conceptual	Represents fashion waste's role in emissions.	The trash mass has become a symbol of global environmental damage.
Attributes	Texture: garbage is dense, colorful, chaotic. Machine = industrial, rigid.	The clash between soft waste and hard metal machinery.
Circumstances	Visual context: landfill and mechanical process.	Outdoor setting of waste management scene.
Interactive		
Gaze	No eye contact—viewer is observer.	Passive role for viewer; image does not “demand” interaction.
Social Distance	High-angle, long shot: viewer sees whole setting from above.	Suggests overview and detachment; judgmental or reflective stance.
Angle (Viewpoint)	Viewer looks down = sense of superiority, critique of the scene.	Encourages viewers to reflect on their role in the problem.
Facial Expression	No human presence.	—
Gesture & Posture	Machine's blade gesture implies cutting, breaking, flattening.	Suggests destruction and control over the waste.
Compositional		
– Left vs. Right	Machine on right = new (technological intervention).	Waste on left = existing problem; right = response or cause.
– Top vs. Bottom	Top = light, plastic waste (ideal message zone); bottom = dark, dense = real.	Pollution appears heavier at the bottom: symbolic of environmental burden.
– Centre vs. Margin	Central text = focal message: “Up to 8%...”	Draw attention immediately to the environmental statistic.
Salience	Bright green “8%” and yellow bulldozer contrast with dark background.	High visibility emphasizes urgency and key data.
Framing	Fully framed with borders and text overlays.	Viewer is placed outside, observing the problem analytically.

Representationally, the image employs an actional narrative through the presence of a bulldozer interacting with a dense pile of waste. Although the machine is static in the frame, its orientation and mechanical components imply movement and industrial action. This suggests human intervention in waste management, while the absence of human figures focuses the viewer’s attention on the scale of the problem and the machinery representing industry. The chaotic texture and colorful debris offer a stark contrast to the rigid structure of the machine which symbolizes the tension between mass consumption and industrial control.

Interactively, the viewer is positioned as a distant observer, looking down at the scene from a high-angle, long shot. This viewpoint places the viewer in a position of power and judgment, to encourage critical reflection on their role in the issue. The lack of gaze or human figures means there is no emotional demand as this is an “offer” image designed to present information rather than engage the viewer directly.

Compositionally, the image is carefully structured. The statistic “Up to 8%” is placed centrally and highlighted in bright green to draw immediate attention. The integration of numerical data enhances credibility and comprehension, supporting Tang’s (2023) assertion that statistics strengthen persuasive environmental communication. The bulldozer occupies the right-hand side symbolizing new or active forces, while the left side shows accumulated waste, representing the ongoing problem. The bottom-heavy design where dense trash dominates the lower part of the image contrasts with the lighter top which visually represents the “weight” of pollution. Framing the scene with text and visual borders reinforces the viewer’s role as an outside observer. By combining factual information with evocative imagery, the campaign achieves both rational appeal and emotional resonance.

Embodied Environmental Impact: "215 trillion Liters of Water Used Every Year"

The data (see figure 3) is presented as a visual post with the prominent text "215 trillion liters of water used every year." The image shows a close-up of dark-skinned hands squeezing a large mass of bright orange, dyed fabric with dyed water dripping down. The image includes the text "International Day of Zero Waste 2025" and the "BEAT WASTE POLLUTION" logo at the bottom.

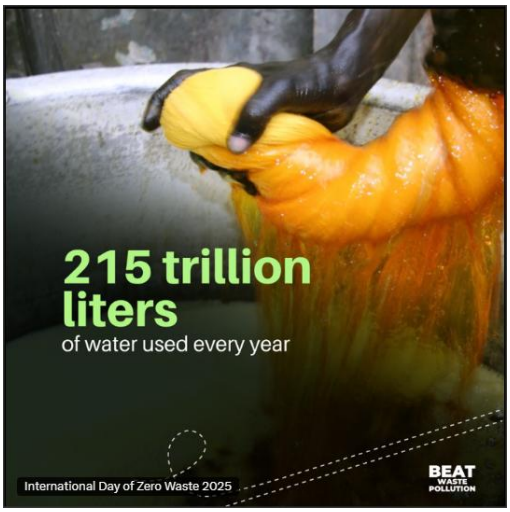

Figure 3. The "215 trillion Liters of Water Used Every Year" Visual

This image uses powerful visual symbolism and tactile imagery to convey the massive environmental cost of fashion, particularly water consumption. Representationally, it is grounded in a clear actional process, i.e., a pair of dark-skinned hands wrings vibrant orange fabric over a container, releasing colored water. The vector of movement is downward, symbolizing physical labor and the runoff of pollution. The viewer is shown a realistic moment from textile production.

Table 3. Multimodal Analysis of UNEP's "215 trillion Liters of Water Used Every Year" Visual

Metafunction	Realization	Meaning
Representational		
Narrative – Actional	Shows a clear action: squeezing dyed fabric into water. Vector: movement of hands and dripping dye indicates active process.	The motion of dye running off the fabric shows industrial processing. Hands wringing out fabric shows labor in textile production.
Conceptual	Highlights fashion’s hidden water cost through symbolic action.	The act represents the broader issue of water usage in the industry.
Attributes	Rich color (yellow/orange), strong contrast with dark hands and dye.	Color evokes intensity, labor, and pollution.

Circumstances	Set in an industrial or artisanal dyeing context.	Context shows the physical and material conditions of fashion production.
Interactive		
Gaze	No gaze directed at viewer = offer.	Viewer as passive observer.
Social Distance	Close-up = high intimacy, shows texture and action closely.	Viewer is visually “close” to the labor and water waste.
Angle (Viewpoint)	Eye-level angle = neutral relationship.	Equal footing encourages understanding and empathy.
Facial Expression	Not applicable.	-
Gesture & Posture	Gesture of wringing and squeezing = labor-intensive, repetitive work.	Suggests human cost in addition to environmental cost.
Compositional		
– Left vs. Right	Left = text (given); right = process image (new/visual explanation).	Left informs, right illustrates.
– Top vs. Bottom	Top = action (ideal), bottom = dirty water (real).	Represents disconnect between production and environmental reality.
– Centre vs. Margin	Hand and fabric near center = focal point.	Draws attention to act of dyeing.
Salience	Bright orange dye and bold green text contrast with muted background.	Highlights the scale and urgency of water usage.
Framing	Fully framed image: viewer is outside looking in.	Creates critical distance to reflect.

Representationally, the image uses a narrative structure to depict a clear action i.e., the wringing of dyed fabric, with colorful dye visibly running into water. This dynamic vector signifies an ongoing process that emphasizes the physical labor involved in textile production. The hands actively squeezing the fabric reflect human effort and industry, foregrounding the often-unseen labor behind fashion items. At the same time, the image holds a conceptual dimension by symbolizing the environmental cost of fashion on its intensive water usage through the very act of dyeing.

Interactively, the image uses a close-up shot, minimizing social distance and enhancing the viewer’s engagement. The absence of direct gaze or faces places the viewer in a passive observer role, but the intimate framing generates emotional resonance. The eye-level perspective creates a dynamic neutral power that invites empathy rather than confrontation. The eye-level angle creates an equal power relationship between the viewer and the representative participants. This finding aligns with Lim et al. (2022), who argue that visual proximity increases empathy and ethical awareness. The act of squeezing fabric becomes emblematic of human effort and environmental degradation, connecting labor and sustainability.

Compositionally, the image strategically separates verbal and visual information. On the left, the bright green typography stating “215 trillion liters” delivers the message bluntly, while on the right, the visual detail enacts it. The contrast of color and texture between the bright fabric, rich dye, and the metallic container ensures high salience, drawing the eye and reinforcing the central idea. The vertical arrangement further suggests a symbolic fall from ideal (production) to real (pollution).

Minimalist Ethical Appeal and Digital Activism: “Choose Wisely and Help #BeatWastePollution”

The data (see figure 4) is presented as a minimalist visual post featuring a solid dark green background. The central element is white text that reads "Choose wisely and help #BeatWastePollution". Below this main text, the phrase "International Day of Zero Waste 2025" is written in smaller white font, along with the "BEAT WASTE POLLUTION" logo. These visuals stress a call to action and personal responsibility in addressing waste pollution through a direct, text-based message.

Figure 4. The "Choose Wisely and Help #BeatWastePollution" Visual

This image conveys its environmental message entirely through symbolic means. Without any characters, settings, or action, the design relies on conceptual representation to prompt ethical reflection and action. The imperative statement “Choose wisely and help #BeatWastePollution” represents a direct appeal to viewers’ responsibility. The green background symbolizes sustainability and nature, enhancing the environmental theme.

Table 4. Multimodal analysis of "Choose Wisely and Help #BeatWastePollution" Visual

Metafunction	Realization	Meaning
Representational		
Narrative	No visible action or process—symbolic and conceptual image.	No characters or real-world objects; message conveyed through text.
Conceptual	Conveys ethical appeal or abstract idea.	“Choose wisely” symbolizes responsibility and conscious decision-making.
Attributes	Dark green background = nature, sustainability, responsibility.	The colour enhances environmental tone.
Circumstances	No physical setting	-
Interactive		
Gaze	No character gaze	Viewer receives the message passively (offer).
Social Distance	Close symbolic distance through use of second-person imperative.	“Choose wisely…” addresses the viewer directly.
Angle	Not applicable	-
Facial Expression	Not applicable.	-
Gesture & Posture	Nonvisible, but the wording suggests soft command.	“Help” = invitation to participate.
Compositional		
Information Value		
– Left vs. Right	Text slightly right-oriented = new/action-oriented information.	The hashtag implies digital engagement or future response.
– Top vs. Bottom	Message is placed lower = real/actionable.	Implies grounding the ideal into real behaviour.
– Centre vs. Margin	Text is centered = focal point.	Ensures reader's focus remains on the key message.
Salience	White bold text on a dark green background creates strong contrast.	“#BeatWastePollution” is the most visually striking element.
Framing	Clearly framed image with sharp edges = formal presentation.	Keeps viewer’s attention focused within the boundary.

While there are no interactive elements such as gaze or gesture, the second-person voice ("you") creates social proximity as if speaking directly to the viewer. Compositionally, the central placement of the message confirms it is the focus and the hashtag highlights the collective, digital activism component. The high contrast between white text and green background certifies salience in directing immediate attention to the core message. This supports Al-Ali and Hamzeh's (2024) argument that compositional salience and linguistic simplicity can function rhetorically in digital campaigns. This minimalist yet powerful image depends on clarity and typography to function as both a call to action and a moral reminder.

Synthesis of Multimodal Environmental Communication Strategies

The findings reveal that the fashion waste campaign employs a consistent set of semiotic strategies to visualize environmental degradation, position viewer engagement, and foreground urgent environmental facts. Across all figures, environmental meaning is constructed through a thoughtful combination of representational structures, controlled viewer positioning, and strong compositional salience. These strategies are noteworthy because they enable the campaign to communicate complex environmental impacts without direct accusation, thereby maintaining an informational and reflective tone while still conveying urgency.

At the representational level, the campaign alternates between conceptual symbolism and actional narratives to balance abstraction and concreteness. Figure 1 was selected as a representative example of conceptual representation because it frames fashion waste as a systemic environmental condition rather than an individual act. The absence of human participants and the use of a solitary animal positioned within textile waste symbolically externalize responsibility while emphasizing ecological harm. This method corresponds with prior studies indicating that symbolic environmental imagery can successfully convey extensive environmental issues without eliciting defensive reactions (Jung & Bae, 2023; Knoll & Fuzer, 2019). In contrast, Figure 3 was chosen to illustrate actional representation because it foregrounds human labour through visible bodily action. The close-up depiction of hands wringing dyed fabric visually links fashion production to water pollution, reducing the abstraction often associated with fashion waste. This contrast between Figures 1 and 3 highlights how representational choices influence whether environmental harm is perceived as distant or embodied.

Interactive meaning across the campaign reinforces this communicative balance. All figures consistently avoid direct gaze, positioning viewers in an "offer" relationship rather than a confrontational "demand." This choice is important because it frames environmental information as something to be considered rather than obeyed. However, Figure 3 departs from the overall pattern by employing close social distance and saturated colour resulting a critical example in the analysis. While the viewer is not directly addressed through gaze, the reduced visual distance intensifies emotional engagement. This conclusion aligns with Lim et al. (2022), who contend that visual proximity enhances moral awareness and empathy. Importantly, this does not contradict earlier findings on observer positioning but rather extends them by demonstrating how campaigns can selectively introduce affective intensity without abandoning an informational stance.

Figure 4 provides a contrasting case that strengthens the overall argument. It was selected not for its visual complexity but for its strategic minimalism. The absence of imagery shifts meaning-making entirely to compositional and linguistic resources. Central alignment, high colour contrast, and the imperative phrase "Choose wisely" transform the viewer from observer to decision-maker. This supports Al-Ali & Hamzeh's (2024) assertion that compositional salience and language simplicity may be employed rhetorically in digital campaigns. The inclusion of the hashtag "#BeatWastePollution" further situates the image within participatory social media discourse, reinforcing collective responsibility rather than individual blame.

Compositionally, all figures rely on salience, contrast, and information value to guide interpretation, but Figure 2 was selected to illustrate how data-driven visuals enhance

credibility. The embedding of the statistic “Up to 8% of global emissions” within the image foregrounds fashion waste as a quantifiable global issue. This finding is consistent with Tang (2023), who argues that integrating numerical data into visual texts increases comprehension and trust, especially for audiences unfamiliar with environmental science. The campaign’s integration of statistics with evocative imagery demonstrates how rational appeal and emotional resonance can function together rather than in opposition.

Taken together, these findings support existing multimodal environmental communication scholarship that emphasizes the interdependence of visual and verbal resources rather than their coexistence as separate modes (Al-Ali & Hamzeh, 2024; Jung & Bae, 2023). Rather than presenting contradictory evidence, the results extend prior research by showing how fashion waste campaigns adopt a hybrid visual strategy: combining symbolic distance, embodied labour, statistical evidence, and minimalist calls to action. This hybrid approach aligns with best practices in sustainability communication that emphasize both cognitive processing and affective engagement (Acampora et al., 2022; Byrnes et al., 2023).

Finally, the findings suggest an emerging relationship between visual distance and perceived responsibility. Distant, symbolic visuals such as Figure 1 encourage reflection but may risk abstraction, while intimate visuals such as Figure 3 foster empathy and ethical awareness. This pattern raises important implications for campaign design and points toward future research directions. Viewer-response studies combining eye-tracking and emotional self-report, as proposed by Liu et al. (2023) could empirically test how variations in visual distance influence engagement and behavioral intention in fashion waste communication.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how fashion waste campaign visuals construct environmental meaning using a Systemic Functional–Multimodal Discourse Analysis framework. The findings show that representational strategies link fashion consumption to environmental degradation through symbolic and actional imagery, interactive features position viewers as reflective observers rather than directly confronted actors, and compositional design prioritizes key messages through salience, layout, and framing. Several visual tactics emerge as particularly effective for campaign goals, i.e., symbolic representation of environmental harm, selective use of actional close-up imagery to reduce abstraction, controlled viewer positioning through the absence of direct gaze, integration of concise statistical data within visuals, and strong compositional salience using colour contrast and central alignment. Together, these strategies balance emotional engagement and reflective distance, enhancing persuasive impact without provoking resistance. Practitioners can apply these findings by combining symbolic and embodied visuals, embedding key statistics within images, and using minimalist, high-contrast designs suited to digital platforms. This study is limited by its focus on a small number of visuals from a single campaign and the absence of audience reception data. Future research could examine viewer responses across different cultural contexts or campaign types. This study contributes to environmental communication scholarship by representing how multimodal visual design plays a central role in shaping public understanding and ethical engagement with fashion waste.

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