

Semiotic analysis of zero waste campaigns on instagram

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Abstract - This study examines the symbolic construction of environmental messages in a zero waste campaign post published by Zero Waste Indonesia on Instagram dated March 12, 2026. The objective of this research is to analyze how meaning is produced and communicated through visual and textual elements in social media-based environmental campaigns. This study employs a qualitative research approach using semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes' framework, focusing on three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal that the analyzed content operates as a complex system of signs that constructs environmental meaning beyond its literal representation. At the denotative level, the post depicts the reality of waste accumulation and its management. At the connotative level, the content frames waste as a serious and potentially hazardous issue while highlighting the social dimension of environmental problems. At the level of myth, the message constructs an ideological narrative emphasizing collective responsibility, positioning audiences as both contributors to environmental degradation and agents of change. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that social media functions as a powerful platform for environmental communication by integrating visual storytelling and persuasive messaging. The findings suggest that zero waste campaign content not only informs but also influences audience perceptions, moral awareness, and attitudes toward sustainable behavior.

Keywords: semiotics, environmental communication, zero waste, social media, visual communication

1. Introduction

The increasing volume of waste has become a pressing environmental issue worldwide, including in Indonesia. Rapid population growth combined with high consumption patterns has significantly contributed to the rise of solid waste, particularly plastic waste that is difficult to decompose. This condition not only leads to environmental pollution but also poses serious ecological risks, especially for communities living near landfill areas (World Bank, 2018). Furthermore, plastic pollution has been identified as a major threat to global ecosystems, including marine environments (UNEP, 2021). Therefore, waste management has become a critical concern addressed through various environmental campaigns.

In the context of communication studies, social media has emerged as a strategic platform for disseminating environmental messages to the public. Platforms such as Instagram enable organizations and communities to deliver messages in a visual and persuasive manner, enhancing public awareness and engagement (Nasrullah, 2015). One of the movements actively utilizing social media is Zero Waste Indonesia, which promotes a low-waste lifestyle through educational content. These messages are not merely informative but also carry symbolic meanings that shape how audiences perceive environmental issues.

Within communication studies, media messages are not only understood at a literal level but also through signs and symbols that construct meaning. Semiotics provides a relevant approach to analyze how meaning is produced and communicated within media content. According to Roland



Barthes, signs operate at the levels of denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (associated meaning), which can further develop into myths representing dominant ideologies in society (Barthes, 1977). In addition, audience interpretation is influenced by social and cultural contexts, making meaning construction a dynamic process (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

Recent studies indicate that social media has become an important platform for promoting environmental awareness, particularly through zero-waste campaigns, eco-influencers, and sustainability-oriented digital movements. Many researchers argue that Instagram and TikTok effectively shape public awareness and encourage environmentally responsible behavior through visual storytelling, interactive communication, and lifestyle-based campaigns (Noviyanti et al., 2022; Alif et al., 2024; Zahara & Nurrahmi, 2024; Anggraeni & I., 2025).

Several studies emphasize the persuasive power of influencers and online communities in constructing eco-friendly identities and promoting sustainable consumption. Social media influencers often frame zero-waste lifestyles as modern, attractive, and achievable, especially among younger audiences. However, this strategy also risks turning sustainability into a form of consumer culture rather than genuine environmental activism (Lu, 2023; Tavman & Doğan, 2025; Spiteri, 2021).

Other researchers focus on the visual and semiotic dimensions of environmental campaigns. Environmental messages on Instagram are commonly delivered through symbols, aesthetic imagery, and emotionally engaging narratives that strengthen audience attention and interpretation. These studies demonstrate that visual rhetoric significantly contributes to environmental communication in digital spaces (Fitriani, 2025; Subrata & Febriana, 2024; Anialasalam et al., 2025; Smith, 2024).

Despite the positive role of social media campaigns, several studies critically highlight the problem of superficial sustainability discourse. Environmental campaigns may prioritize aesthetic presentation and branding over structural ecological solutions, leading to forms of greenwashing and performative activism. Sustainability messages are sometimes commodified to attract engagement rather than promote meaningful environmental transformation (Sailer et al., 2022; Smith, 2024; Lewis et al., 2025).

The growing use of social media has transformed environmental communication by providing organizations, activists, influencers, and communities with powerful platforms to promote sustainability and environmental awareness. Instagram, in particular, has emerged as a prominent medium for disseminating environmental messages, encouraging public participation, and shaping pro-environmental attitudes through visual storytelling and interactive communication (Subrata & Febriana, 2024; Alif et al., 2024). Studies demonstrate that environmental campaigns on Instagram can effectively educate audiences about waste management, sustainability practices, and ecological responsibility, especially when supported by engaging visual content and consistent messaging (Harahap & Adeni, 2024; Alifia et al., 2023).

Environmental influencers, often referred to as eco-influencers or greenfluencers, play an increasingly important role in popularizing sustainable lifestyles and environmental activism. Research shows that influencers use visual rhetoric, personal narratives, and lifestyle-oriented content to make sustainability more accessible and attractive to broader audiences (Lu, 2023; Anialasalam et al., 2025). Emerging visual narratives on Instagram frequently frame environmental responsibility as a desirable and achievable lifestyle, helping to mainstream sustainability discourses among younger generations (Cornelio et al., 2024a). Digital activism on social media has also developed into an influential form of environmental communication, enabling activists to mobilize support, raise awareness, and foster collective action around environmental issues (Cornelio et al., 2024b; Samanda, 2025; Shim, 2024).

Several studies highlight the effectiveness of Instagram-based environmental campaigns in influencing environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Campaigns related to food waste reduction, zero-waste movements, waste management, and environmental sustainability have been found to increase public awareness and encourage environmentally responsible actions (Maulidini & Sumarwan, 2022; Tavman & Doğan, 2025; Sabila & Yusuf, 2025). The influence of eco-influencers has also been associated with improvements in eco-literacy and environmental engagement among social media users (Abduh et al., 2025; Iqbal et al., 2025). Furthermore, environmental organizations such as Greenpeace and various sustainability-oriented institutions successfully employ Instagram to promote pro-environmental behavior through emotional appeals, awareness-building strategies, and persuasive communication (Rafa et al., 2025; Al-Hamdi & Sumarlan, 2026).



The visual nature of Instagram makes imagery a central component of sustainability communication. Research indicates that sustainable fashion brands, tourism organizations, and environmental campaigns frequently rely on carefully curated visual representations to communicate sustainability values and strengthen audience engagement (Milanesi et al., 2022; Kilipiri et al., 2023; De Sá Teles et al., 2025). Visual elements, symbolic cues, and aesthetic representations can enhance trust, emotional engagement, and message diffusion among users (Gurung et al., 2025). Similarly, both verbal and visual nudges have been shown to influence consumer decisions toward more sustainable choices (Roozen et al., 2021). The growing use of virtual influencers further demonstrates the evolving nature of environmental communication, where digital characters can effectively deliver sustainability messages and influence audience perceptions (Lan et al., 2024).

Despite these positive findings, the literature also raises important concerns regarding authenticity and credibility in sustainability communication. Several studies identify the prevalence of greenwashing, bluewashing, green blushing, and cause-related marketing practices that may exaggerate or misrepresent environmental commitments for promotional purposes (Sailer et al., 2022; Sultana et al., 2024). Critical discourse analyses reveal that sustainability narratives on social media are sometimes shaped more by branding objectives than genuine environmental advocacy (Rybalchenko, 2024; Riyantie et al., 2025). Research also suggests that idealized visual portrayals of nature and sustainability may oversimplify complex environmental problems, potentially limiting deeper public understanding of ecological challenges (Smith, 2024; Marcella-Hood, 2023).

Although existing studies provide substantial evidence regarding the effectiveness of Instagram as a platform for environmental communication, several limitations remain. Much of the literature focuses on content analysis, discourse analysis, or user perceptions, while fewer studies directly measure long-term behavioral changes resulting from environmental campaigns. In addition, many investigations are concentrated on specific campaigns, influencers, or geographical contexts, limiting the generalizability of findings. Future research should adopt longitudinal and experimental approaches to examine how environmental messages influence sustained behavioral change and explore the comparative effectiveness of different social media platforms, communication strategies, and influencer types in promoting environmental sustainability (Pittman & Li, 2025; Fagerholm et al., 2023; Komunikasi et al., 2023).

In addition, some studies demonstrate that digital campaigns can influence public attitudes toward waste management, food waste reduction, and recycling practices. Campaigns related to plastic reduction, food waste awareness, and e-waste recycling contribute to increasing environmental consciousness and encouraging community participation in sustainable practices (Maulidini & Sumarwan, 2022; Siswantini et al., 2023; Alifia et al., 2023; Febrianisa & Yasir, 2024).

Methodologically, most studies employ qualitative approaches such as semiotic analysis, thematic analysis, framing analysis, and narrative studies. While these approaches effectively explore meanings and representations, many studies remain descriptive and limited to specific social media platforms. Few studies examine long-term behavioral change or evaluate the actual environmental impact of digital campaigns. Therefore, future research should integrate quantitative methods, audience analysis, and interdisciplinary perspectives to better understand the relationship between online environmental communication and real-world ecological action.

An example of environmental campaign content that reflects such symbolic construction can be found in an Instagram post published by Zero Waste Indonesia on March 12, 2026. The post depicts a large accumulation of waste accompanied by the caption “Our waste can become a disaster for others.” This visual representation does not merely portray environmental conditions but also conveys a moral message regarding collective responsibility. The use of the words “our” and “others” indicates a constructed social distinction between those who contribute to the problem and those who are affected by it.

Despite the growing number of environmental campaigns on social media, limited studies have specifically examined how symbolic meanings are constructed within zero waste campaign content. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in zero waste campaign posts on social media using a semiotic approach. This analysis is expected to provide insights into how environmental messages are visually constructed and how such meanings may influence public awareness and attitudes toward waste management issues.



2. Method

2.1 Data Collection

This study employs a qualitative research approach using semiotic analysis to examine the construction of meaning in environmental campaign content. Qualitative methods are appropriate for this study as they allow for an in-depth interpretation of visual and textual elements, focusing on how meaning is produced and communicated rather than measured numerically (Creswell, 2014). The research specifically applies a semiotic framework to analyze how signs and symbols operate within digital media content.

The analytical framework used in this study is based on the semiotic theory proposed by Roland Barthes, which emphasizes the processes of meaning-making through signs. According to Barthes (1977), meaning is constructed at two levels: denotation, which refers to the literal or surface meaning of a sign, and connotation, which refers to the associated or cultural meanings embedded within it. These layers of meaning may further develop into myths, representing broader ideological narratives within society. This framework enables the researcher to uncover both explicit and implicit messages contained in the analyzed content.

The data for this study were collected through a documentation method by capturing and archiving a selected post from Instagram. The object of analysis is a visual post published by Zero Waste Indonesia on March 12, 2026. This post was purposively selected due to its strong visual representation and its relevance to environmental communication, particularly in promoting zero waste awareness.

The collected data include both visual elements (images) and textual components (captions and embedded text within the image). These elements serve as the primary data for semiotic analysis, as they function as signs that convey meaning within the context of environmental campaigns.

2.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study follows the semiotic approach developed by Roland Barthes. The analysis is conducted through several systematic steps.

First, the researcher identifies key visual and textual elements within the selected content. Second, the analysis is carried out at the denotative level to describe the literal meaning of the signs presented in the image. Third, the analysis moves to the connotative level to interpret the symbolic and cultural meanings associated with these signs. Finally, the study examines the level of myth to uncover the underlying ideologies and broader social meanings embedded in the content.

This step-by-step analysis allows for a comprehensive understanding of how environmental messages are constructed and communicated through social media. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the interpretation is grounded in established theoretical frameworks and conducted systematically to maintain consistency and coherence throughout the analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

This study analyzes a zero-waste campaign post published by Zero Waste Indonesia on Instagram dated March 12, 2026. The findings reveal that the content contains multiple layers of meaning, which can be systematically categorized into denotation, connotation, and myth, following the semiotic framework proposed by Roland Barthes.

At the denotative level, the visual explicitly presents a large accumulation of waste accompanied by workers who are directly engaged in handling garbage. The setting appears to be a landfill or waste management site, characterized by the presence of extensive piles of trash and individuals operating within that environment. The image reflects a real-world condition in which waste is physically managed by human labor. In addition, the textual message embedded in the image, "Our waste can become a disaster for others," clearly establishes a direct relationship between human behavior and its environmental consequences. At this level, the message functions descriptively, representing observable reality without deeper interpretation.



At the connotative level, however, the meaning extends beyond literal representation and begins to convey symbolic significance. The depiction of waste in a visually intense and seemingly hazardous environment suggests that waste is not merely an everyday byproduct but a serious and potentially catastrophic issue. The use of a monochromatic tone contributes to the creation of a somber and alarming atmosphere, reinforcing the perception of urgency. Furthermore, the presence of workers in such conditions symbolizes vulnerability and inequality, as it implies that certain groups are more exposed to the negative impacts of environmental degradation. This representation indicates that waste-related issues are not only ecological but also embedded within broader social contexts.

At the level of myth, the content constructs an ideological narrative concerning environmental responsibility and social awareness. The linguistic distinction between “our” and “others” creates a binary opposition that frames environmental problems as a shared responsibility while simultaneously highlighting the unequal distribution of their consequences. This narrative positions audiences as both contributors to the problem and potential agents of change. The myth constructed through this representation reflects a broader societal discourse in which environmental issues are linked to ethical considerations and collective accountability.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the analyzed content functions not merely as an informational message but as a complex system of signs that constructs meaning through visual and textual elements. This supports the semiotic perspective that media content operates at multiple levels of meaning, where signs are interpreted within cultural and ideological contexts (Roland Barthes, 1977; Daniel Chandler, 2017). In contemporary digital communication, these layered meanings become increasingly significant as audiences actively engage with visual content on social media platforms.

At the denotative level, the image represents the observable reality of waste accumulation and its management. However, as the analysis moves into the connotative level, it becomes evident that the content is designed to evoke emotional responses such as concern, empathy, and urgency. Recent studies highlight that visual-based environmental communication on social media plays a crucial role in shaping emotional engagement and public awareness, particularly when messages are framed in ways that emphasize risk and moral responsibility (Nabi et al., 2022). This indicates that the campaign content is strategically constructed to influence how audiences interpret environmental issues.

Furthermore, the portrayal of workers within the waste environment emphasizes the social dimension of environmental problems, suggesting that environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities. This finding aligns with recent research in environmental communication, which shows that media representations often highlight unequal environmental impacts as a way to build moral awareness and social responsibility (O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2021). In this context, the image does not simply depict waste but also communicates broader issues of environmental justice.

At the ideological level, the distinction between “our” and “others” reflects a moral framing that positions audiences as both contributors to environmental problems and as agents of change. This binary opposition functions as a persuasive communication strategy, encouraging self-reflection and behavioral change. Recent studies in digital environmental campaigns suggest that such moral framing is effective in promoting pro-environmental attitudes, particularly when audiences are encouraged to see themselves as part of the problem and the solution (Wang et al., 2023).

Moreover, the findings indicate that zero waste campaigns on social media are embedded within a broader discourse of sustainability and ethical consumption. The integration of visual storytelling and persuasive messaging reflects current trends in digital environmental communication, where content is designed not only to inform but also to influence values and lifestyle choices (Anderson, 2022). This demonstrates that social media platforms play a significant role in shaping public discourse on environmental issues by combining symbolic representation with emotional appeal.

Overall, the discussion highlights that the analyzed content operates as a form of symbolic communication that constructs meaning, conveys ideology, and encourages moral reflection. The



combination of visual imagery and textual messaging reinforces the urgency of environmental issues while simultaneously promoting collective responsibility. This confirms that social media-based environmental campaigns function as powerful tools in influencing public awareness and engagement in sustainability practices.

In addition, the findings of this study highlight the increasing importance of visual storytelling in digital environmental communication. Social media platforms such as Instagram prioritize visual content, making images a central medium for conveying complex environmental messages in a simplified yet impactful manner. Recent studies suggest that visual narratives are more effective in capturing audience attention and enhancing message retention, particularly when they evoke emotional responses and moral reflection (Highfield & Leaver, 2021). In this context, the analyzed content demonstrates how visual elements, combined with concise textual messages, can create a powerful communicative effect that transcends linguistic barriers and directly appeals to audience perception.

Furthermore, the role of social media in shaping environmental discourse cannot be separated from the dynamics of digital engagement and participatory culture. Environmental campaigns such as those conducted by Zero Waste Indonesia are not only designed to inform but also to encourage interaction, sharing, and collective awareness among users. This aligns with recent research indicating that social media campaigns can foster a sense of community and shared responsibility, which in turn strengthens pro-environmental behavior (Veltri & Atanasova, 2021). Therefore, the effectiveness of zero waste campaigns lies not only in the messages they convey but also in their ability to engage audiences in ongoing conversations about sustainability and environmental responsibility.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in a zero-waste campaign post published by Zero Waste Indonesia on Instagram dated March 12, 2026, using a semiotic approach based on Roland Barthes. The findings reveal that the content constructs meaning through multiple layers, including denotation, connotation, and myth, which together shape how environmental messages are communicated and understood.

At the denotative level, the content presents a direct representation of waste accumulation and its management. However, at the connotative level, the image conveys deeper meanings by framing waste as a serious and potentially dangerous issue, while also highlighting the social dimension of environmental problems. At the level of myth, the content constructs an ideological narrative that emphasizes collective responsibility, positioning audiences as both contributors to environmental degradation and as agents capable of driving change.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that environmental communication on social media is not merely informative but also persuasive and symbolic. The integration of visual and textual elements allows the message to evoke emotional responses, encourage moral reflection, and influence audience perceptions of environmental issues. This confirms that social media platforms play a significant role in shaping public awareness and promoting sustainable behavior through strategic communication practices.

Overall, this study concludes that zero waste campaign content functions as an effective medium for constructing environmental meaning and fostering social awareness. By utilizing symbolic representation and moral framing, such content is able to communicate complex environmental issues in a way that is accessible, engaging, and impactful for audiences.

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