

ANIMAL IMAGERY AS SEMIOTIC TOOL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION IN FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how animal imagery functions as a semiotic tool for environmental communication in fashion photography. Against the backdrop of biodiversity loss, visual culture plays a crucial role in raising public awareness. Integrating semiotics, environmental communication, and fashion studies, this research develops a three-tiered analytical framework encompassing visual form, semiotic metaphor, and contextual intertextuality to conduct an in-depth analysis of three representative cases: Vogue Italia's "Animal Issue" (2021), Zhong Ling's Heat Wave (2022), and Arno Elias & Cara Delevingne's I'M NOT A TROPHY (2016). The findings reveal that through strategies such as "anthropomorphic connection," "fusional alienation," and "symbolic bearing," animal imagery constructs multi-layered ecological metaphors, evoking a spectrum of affective responses from empathy to moral reflection. However, within commercial contexts, its ecological signification risks "semiotic drift" into mere consumerist symbols. Therefore, effective environmental communication depends on striking a balance along the spectrum from "aesthetic infiltration" to "critical positioning," and on constructing a robust ecological "strong sign" through narrative anchoring, formal innovation, and contextual consistency. This study not only provides a systematic analytical tool for understanding the ecological rhetoric of fashion imagery but also offers evidence-based strategic insights for sustainable fashion communication. This paper is a substantially extended and revised version of our prior conference paper presented at [ICSSMT, 2025].

Keywords: Fashion Photography; Animal Imagery; Environmental Communication; Semiotics; Ecological Awareness

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The intensifying global ecological crisis, marked by a reported nearly 70% average decline in wildlife populations over the past fifty years (Almond et al., 2022), underscores the urgent need for effective environmental communication. In this context, visual culture and art have become pivotal mediums. They translate ecological issues into sensory and affective experiences, using the symbolic power of images to foster emotional resonance and ethical reflection on the human-nature relationship.

Fashion photography represents a particularly potent interdisciplinary medium for this purpose. It merges artistry, commercial appeal, and mass media reach, creating a bridge between aesthetics, consumer culture, and public discourse. Its artistic quality ensures visual impact and engagement, as seen on platforms like Instagram (Aina, 2022), while its commercial nature guarantees wide dissemination.

Furthermore, its cross-media capacity allows ecological messages to be amplified through tailored strategies on social and new media platforms (Lee et al., 2024).

Within fashion photography, animal imagery often transcends mere decoration to function symbolically and metaphorically. As Mangano and Marrone (2018) suggest, animal representations are culturally constructed and re-symbolized. These constructions can visualize the tension between endangered species and consumer culture, provoking critical reflection on environmental issues (Mäekivi & Maran, 2016).

Despite its potential, little research has systematically examined how fashion photography uses animal imagery to mediate ecological meaning. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing animal imagery as a semiotic tool for environmental communication in fashion photography, thereby offering new interdisciplinary perspectives on visual culture's response to ecological crises.

Literature Review

2.1 Semiotics, Visual Communication, and Animal Imagery

Semiotics and visual communication theories provide a foundational framework for analyzing how animal imagery generates meaning in fashion photography. Heath (1977) emphasizes that images interact with cultural codes to shape viewers' perception of reality. Barthes' (1993) concepts of *studium* and *punctum* further help explain the cognitive and emotional responses evoked by photographic composition. These theories are particularly relevant to animal imagery, which often carries layered cultural and emotional symbolism beyond its literal representation (Mäekivi & Maran, 2016; Mangano & Marrone, 2018). Together, these perspectives establish a semiotic basis for interpreting animal symbols in visual culture.

2.2 Environmental Communication, Fashion, and Visual Persuasion Mechanisms

While often viewed as an accomplice to consumerism, fashion photography possesses the semiotic complexity to also function as a medium for environmental critique and consciousness-raising (Entwistle, 2023). At the intersection of commerce and art, the deployment of animal imagery reveals a significant tension: it can be reduced to a mere decorative trope stimulating consumption, or it can be strategically encoded to become a "meaningful image" conveying ecological concerns (Schroeder, 2002).

The success of this strategic encoding largely depends on the employment of visual persuasion mechanisms. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, fashion imagery of high aesthetic quality typically operates on audiences via the "peripheral route"—persuading viewers through emotional impact, aesthetic appeal, and heuristic cues rather than complex environmental arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Anthropomorphic animal gazes, juxtapositions of harmonious or destructive natural scenes, can swiftly evoke empathy, pity, or awe in viewers, thereby establishing an affective connection to environmental issues. This is one of the core visual strategies of sustainable fashion communication: translating abstract ecological ethics (e.g., biodiversity conservation, anti-fur) into perceptible, resonant personal emotional experiences.

However, this reliance on aesthetics and emotion entails inherent risks. When animal imagery is integrated into brand narratives, it may undergo "semiotic drift"—where the image's ecological

signification is stripped away, leaving behind only its aesthetic and identity-signifying value, potentially even used for “greenwashing” (Mehta, 2024). Consequently, a key research question emerges: how can animal imagery maintain the clarity and criticality of its environmental referent within the semiotic structure (signifier, signified, referent) of specific fashion photographs, without slipping into empty romanticization or commodification.

2.3 Research Gap and Positioning of This Study

While existing research touches upon the fields of fashion semiotics, environmental communication, and visual persuasion, there is a lack of an integrative analytical framework to systematically examine the specific operational mechanisms, effects, and inherent contradictions of animal imagery as a tool for environmental communication in fashion photography. More specifically, most studies remain at the level of textual analysis or critical theory, lacking empirical evidence from the audience end to verify the actual communicative effects of such imagery (e.g., whether it genuinely enhances environmental awareness or merely reinforces the brand's aesthetic image).

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining semiotic analysis and a controlled experiment, we will conduct an in-depth analysis of the semiotic structure (how the signifier points to the ecological signified) of animal imagery in selected fashion photographs and empirically test the actual impact of such imagery on audiences' environmental attitudes and brand perceptions. This endeavor will not only deepen the understanding of fashion media's efficacy in environmental communication but also provide evidence-based guidance on visual strategies for creators and brands.

OBJECTIVES

3.1 Research Aim

This study aims to investigate how animal imagery in fashion photography functions as a semiotic tool for environmental communication, and how it can enhance public awareness and engagement with ecological issues.

3.2 Research Question

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What semiotic meanings are conveyed through animal imagery in fashion photography?
- 2) How does such imagery shape audience perceptions and attitudes toward environmental protection?
- 3) What distinctive role does fashion photography play in environmental communication compared to other visual media?

Answering these questions will not only advance theoretical understanding of visual environmental communication but also provide practical guidance for developing effective sustainable fashion communication strategies.

Research Hypothesis

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Animal imagery in fashion photography reinforces the symbolic significance of ecological conservation.

H2: Emotional resonance evoked by such imagery positively enhances environmental awareness among audiences.

H3: The aesthetic and commercial nature of fashion photography can enhance, rather than diminish, its effectiveness in environmental communication.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework combining semiotics, environmental communication, and fashion studies to analyze how animal imagery in fashion photography functions as environmental communication.

5.1 Semiotic Theory

Semiotics provides the foundational tools for decoding how animal imagery generates meaning. Drawing on Saussure's (1959) concept of the signifier and signified, and Barthes' (1977) notion of myth and cultural connotation, we analyze animal representations as signs that carry culturally specific meanings. Peirce's (1934) classification of symbols, indices, and icons further helps interpret how animal imagery functions in fashion contexts— not only as aesthetic icons but also as symbolic carriers of ecological values.

5.2 Environmental Communication Theory

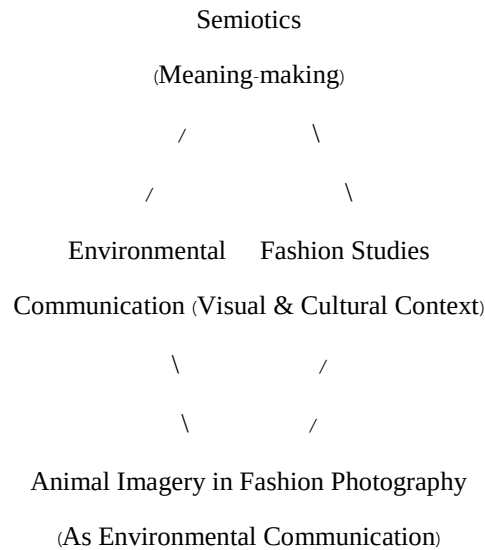
Environmental communication theory (Pezzullo & Cox, 2025) shifts the focus from mere information transmission to the role of symbolism, emotion, and narrative in shaping public engagement with ecological issues. This perspective allows us to examine how fashion photography—through visual storytelling and affective appeal— can foster environmental awareness and motivate public reflection on human-nature relationships.

5.3 Fashion Studies and Visual Culture

Fashion studies contextualize fashion photography as a socio-cultural practice. As Entwistle (2023) and Barnard (2020) note, fashion imagery conveys identity, desire, and social norms. Within this framework, animal imagery is not merely decorative but operates as a visual rhetoric that intersects with consumer culture and sustainability discourses.

5.4 Integrated Analytical Framework

As illustrated in the diagram below, the three theoretical perspectives form a cohesive lens through which animal imagery can be systematically analyzed: semiotics decodes its layered meanings, environmental communication theory evaluates its ecological messaging, and fashion studies situates it within visual and commercial culture.



This integrated approach enables a nuanced understanding of how animal symbols in fashion media can serve as powerful vehicles for sustainability communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-layered visual and semiotic analysis to systematically deconstruct the signifying mechanisms of animal imagery as a tool for environmental communication in fashion photography. The methodology integrates semiotic theory, visual grammar, and contextual analysis, forming a progressive three-tiered analytical framework to ensure depth and systematic rigor.

6.1 Research Methods: A Visual and Semiotic Analytical Framework

6.1.1 Case Selection

To explore the multiple functions of animal imagery in depth, this study selects three representative fashion photography series as analytical objects based on the principles of “timeliness,” “influence,” and “diversity of approaches”: (1) Vogue Italia’s “Animal Issue” (2021), which represents mainstream narrative strategies of employing animal imagery in high-fashion media; (2) artist Zhong Ling’s Heat Wave series (2022), which uses digital compositing to visually merge human and animal forms; and (3) Arno Elias and Cara Delevingne’s I’M NOT A TROPHY (2016), a project that clearly demonstrates the social activist 倾向 of animal imagery in a fashion context. These three cases exhibit different visual strategies—anthropomorphism, metaphorical synthesis, and symbolic projection, respectively—forming a diverse analytical sample.

6.1.2 A Three-Tiered Visual and Semiotic Analytical Framework

To move beyond mere descriptive analysis of images, this study constructs and applies a three-tiered analytical framework progressing from form to context for the systematic decoding of the selected cases.

- Tier 1: Visual Composition and Expressive Analysis. This tier focuses on the “signifier” level of the image—its material form and sensory properties. The analysis, based on fundamental principles of visual design, examines:

- Composition and Visual Focus: The spatial placement and proportion of animals within the frame and their compositional relationship with human models to identify how the image directs the viewer’s attention.

- Lighting and Color: The nature of lighting (e.g., natural vs. dramatic artificial light), the symbolic use of color palette (e.g., warm tones suggesting harmony vs. cold or contrasting tones suggesting conflict or crisis), and how color shapes the overall mood.

- Texture and Tactile Contrast: The juxtaposition, contrast, or fusion between the textures of animal fur, natural environments, and fashion fabrics, exploring the sensory associations they evoke.

- The purpose of this tier is to reveal the work’s most immediate aesthetic appeal and emotional tone, which forms the basis of its visual persuasion.

- Tier 2: Semiotic and Narrative Structure Analysis. This is the core tier of analysis, aiming to uncover the deeper “signified” and the process of meaning construction. We integrate Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory (Barthes, 1977) and Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006):

- Metaphor and Symbolism: Analyzing how the animal image transcends its biological referent to carry specific cultural and social metaphors (e.g., as a symbol of “victimhood,” “wildness,” or a metaphor for “ecological interconnectedness”).

- Interactive Meaning: Interpreting the emotional and power relations the image attempts to establish (e.g., evoking empathy, creating alienation, or prompting moral scrutiny) by analyzing the “gaze” relationship between the animal (or its representation) and the viewer, the “social distance” portrayed, and the perspective.

- Narrative vs. Conceptual: Determining whether the image presents a narrative “action moment” or expresses a static “concept.” Analyzing the role the animal plays as an “actor,” “goal,” or “setting” to understand its narrative logic.

- Tier 3: Intertextuality and Discursive Field Analysis. This tier situates the image within its sociocultural context of production, dissemination, and reception, examining the generation, negotiation, and potential controversy of its meaning. The analysis includes:

- Internal Intertextuality: The positioning of the work within the photographer’s stylistic lineage, the brand’s seasonal theme, or the magazine’s special issue.

- External Intertextuality: The dialogue and references between the work and broader environmental discourses, social movements, artistic trends, or contemporary media events.

- Context of Dissemination and Reception: Examining the nature of the publication platform (high-end art magazine, brand advertisement, social media), accompanying texts (titles, captions, hashtags), its intended audience, and potential diverse interpretations to assess its communicative intent and actual discursive effect.



Figure 1 :Vogue Italia January 2021 The Animal Issue

Source: Heji Shin, 2021



Figure 2 : Heat Wave

Source: Zhong Lin, 2022



Figure 3 : I'M NOT A TROPHY

Source: Arno Elias and Cara Delevingne, 2016



Figure 4 : NEVER ENOUGH

Source: Zhong Lin, 2025



Figure 5 : Saving the Forest with Fire

Source: Abbott, Mathew, 2022

6.2 Data Analysis and Synthesis

This study will sequentially apply the above three-tiered framework to conduct an in-depth interpretation of the three cases. First, a detailed tier-by-tier analysis will be performed within each case. Subsequently, a cross-case comparative analysis will be conducted to identify the similarities and differences in the formal, signifiatory, and contextual effects of different visual strategies (e.g., the anthropomorphism in Vogue Italia, the synthetic metaphor in Zhong Ling's work, the activist projection in Elias's work). Finally, all analytical findings will be synthesized to distill the common patterns, core tensions, and conditions for effectiveness in the operation of animal imagery for environmental communication in fashion photography.

6.3 Limitations

The analysis of this study is primarily based on a semiotic interpretation of the visual texts and their contexts, with conclusions drawn from theory-driven qualitative analysis. While this method can deeply reveal the mechanisms of meaning production, it does not directly measure the actual reception and psychological responses of the audience. Future research could employ empirical methods such as audience interviews, focus groups, or eye-tracking to complement and verify the textual analysis conclusions of this study.

Research Has Found

7.1 Multilayered Analysis Revealing Mechanisms of Signification

Based on the three-tiered analytical framework, this study finds that the three cases successfully construct animal imagery as multi-layered symbols for environmental communication through different visual strategies, albeit with distinct pathways of meaning generation and focal points of effect.

7.1.1 Tier 1 Findings: Formal Strategies Establish the Emotional Tone

- Vogue Italia "Animal Issue": Employing classic portrait photography lighting and composition, animals are often placed on the same visual plane as models, with soft lighting and high color saturation. This visual grammar of "high fashion" domesticates wildlife into a familiar aesthetic framework, reducing alienation and establishing an initial emotional tone of elegance and symbiosis, which may, however, weaken the sense of ecological crisis represented by their "wildness."

- Zhong Ling's Heat Wave: The use of digital compositing creates unnatural lighting and texture fusion; the form itself conveys a sense of discord and mutation. Colors often straddle the boundary between realism and surrealism. This formal "disharmony" directly visualizes the invisible impact of climate change, establishing a tone of warning and unease.

- I'M NOT A TROPHY: The projection of animal imagery onto the human body is central, with "superimposition" and "transparency" as key formal features. This strategy blurs the physical boundary between human and animal, creating a direct, corporeal metaphor. The strong contrast in lighting emphasizes contours, resulting in a formal language full of tension and declarative force, establishing a tone of protest and action.

7.1.2 Tier 2 Findings: Construction of Core Metaphor and Interactive Meaning

The core metaphor of Vogue Italia is “Anthropomorphic Connection.” Animals are presented as “portrait subjects” with personality and emotion, “interacting” with models through gaze or posture. This strategy invites the audience to understand ecological interconnectedness through emotional identification. Its persuasive path is “to evoke the desire for protection through beauty and empathy.”

The core metaphor of Heat Wave is “Fusional Alienation.” The digital synthesis of human and animal forms into one creates not a simple juxtaposition but a new, vulnerable hybrid species. Its deeper meaning points to the fact that in the climate crisis, the fates of “us” and “them” are inextricably bound together, facing transformation and threat collectively. Its interactive meaning is to make the viewer gaze at this “alienated” self-image, prompting reflection.

The core metaphor of I'M NOT A TROPHY is “Symbolic Bearing.” The human body becomes a “living canvas” displaying the plight of animals. This is not symbiosis but bearing and exposure. The model's posture (e.g., curled up, direct gaze) combined with the projection of an endangered animal constructs a narrative of “victimhood/accusation.” Its interactive meaning is the strongest, establishing a relationship of moral interrogation of the viewer through the model's direct gaze.

7.1.3 Tier 3 Findings: How Context Assigns and Negotiates Meaning

In the fashion magazine context of Vogue Italia, its environmental message is negotiated alongside luxury advertisements. Some audiences may primarily receive its aesthetic value, leading to the “semiotic drift” of its ecological referent. However, its “high-end” context also lends prestige and attention to the issue.

Heat Wave is disseminated in art galleries and social media. Its “art” label allows for bolder metaphors and critique, with audiences inclined towards symbolic interpretation. Dissemination on social media allows its “mutated” images to quickly become visual memes representing climate anxiety, with meaning reinforced through sharing.

I'M NOT A TROPHY is tightly bound to a specific advocacy campaign (anti-hunting), giving it the strongest activist context. In exhibitions and campaign reports, the image's meaning is firmly anchored to a specific environmental cause, presenting the lowest risk of “semiotic drift”, though its reach may be limited to already-engaged groups.

7.2 Comparative Perspective: Strategic Efficacy and Tensions

Through cross-case comparison, this study finds:

1. The Trade-off between Aesthetics and Critique: Case 1 (high aesthetics) is the most accessible for widespread dissemination, but its ecological message is most susceptible to dilution; Case 3 (high critique) has the clearest message but may “deter” fashion audiences seeking pure aesthetics; Case 2 (artistic metaphor) strikes a balance between the two.

2. Differences in Emotional Triggering Mechanisms: Case 1 triggers “yearning” and “tender empathy”; Case 2 triggers “unease” and “reflection”; Case 3 triggers “guilt” and “indignation.” Different emotions guide different behavioral intentions (e.g., support vs. protest).

3. The Spectrum of Commercial Compatibility: From Case 1 to Case 3, the visual strategies show decreasing compatibility with mainstream commercial fashion and increasing affinity with activism and critical art. This reveals a fundamental tension fashion photography faces in environmental communication: Should it "infiltrate" the commercial system to gradually change it, or stand outside the system to critique it?

DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings, this chapter further explores the core tensions and effective pathways for animal imagery in fashion photography as a tool for environmental communication.

8.1 The Efficacy Spectrum of Visual Strategies and Core Tensions

A comparative analysis reveals a strategic spectrum ranging from "aesthetic infiltration" to "critical positioning." The "anthropomorphic connection" strategy employed by Vogue Italia leverages existing fashion discourse to introduce ecological themes with low confrontation, yet risks diluting the environmental message through aesthetic absorption, potentially leading to "greenwashing" accusations. In contrast, the "symbolic bearing" strategy of I'M NOT A TROPHY excels in its clear moral stance and call to action, though its audience reach may be more limited. Zhong Ling's Heat Wave, utilizing an "artistic metaphor" strategy, occupies the middle of this spectrum. Through formal innovation (digital fusion), it visualizes the ecological crisis itself, sparking critical reflection while maintaining aesthetic autonomy, thus serving as a model for balancing commercial communication with ecological critique.

8.2 Theoretical Implications and Practical Strategies: Constructing the "Strong Sign"

This study deepens the understanding of the original hypotheses: the ecological symbolic meaning of animal imagery (H1) is not automatic but is an active construct resulting from strategic visual encoding and contextual anchoring; otherwise, it risks sliding into a mere consumerist symbol. Furthermore, the research distinguishes the varying utilities of "aesthetic appeal": when aesthetic form serves to construct a deep ecological metaphor (e.g., "fusional alienation"), it can effectively provoke reflective emotions (H2) and enhance communicative efficacy (H3). If it remains merely surface-level decoration, its role in promoting environmental awareness is limited.

Therefore, to prevent "semiotic drift," the key practice lies in constructing the "strong sign." This requires: 1) Narrative Anchoring: Closely tying the imagery to specific, transparent environmental narratives or actions; 2) Formal Innovation: Making the visual form itself a direct metaphor for the ecological issue, reducing the space for meaning to be stripped away; 3) Contextual Consistency: Ensuring that the radical expression of the imagery matches the brand's overall sustainable practices, thereby maintaining the credibility of the communication.



Figure 6 : YEAR OF THE TIGER

Source: Angelopenetta, 2022



Figure 7 : Dolce & Gabbana 2026 Spring/Summer Menswear Show

Source: Dolce & Gabbana, 2025

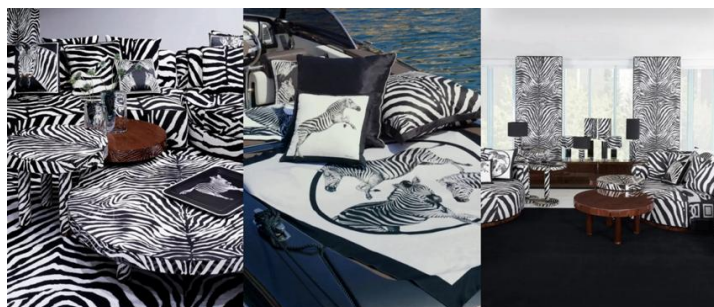


Figure 8 : Dolce & Gabbana Home Collection

Source: Dolce & Gabbana, 2021

CONCLUSION

9.1 Summary of Findings

By constructing an integrative visual and semiotic analytical framework, this study systematically reveals the multifaceted mechanisms of animal imagery as a tool for environmental communication in fashion photography. The core conclusion is that its communicative efficacy is highly dependent on the specific visual strategy employed ("anthropomorphic connection," "fusional alienation," "symbolic bearing") and its specific context, forming an efficacy spectrum that involves a trade-off between "aesthetic infiltration" and "critical positioning." Successful environmental communication relies on constructing a stable ecological "strong sign" through narrative anchoring, formal innovation, and contextual consistency.

9.2 Limitations and Future Directions

This study is based on qualitative case analysis; the generalizability of its conclusions awaits testing with a larger sample, and it lacks direct measurement of the actual reception effects on the audience. Future research could proceed in three main directions: 1) Employing audience-centered methods like eye-tracking combined with interviews to empirically test the attention-guiding and emotion-eliciting effects of different visual strategies; 2) Conducting cross-cultural comparative studies to examine the fluidity of meaning of the same animal symbol in different contexts; 3) Exploring the novel communicative potential and ethical challenges presented by AIGC-generated surreal animal imagery.

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