

A Visual Study of Sustainability Messaging and Practice in the Packaging Design of Cosmetic Brands: The Body Shop and Forest Essentials

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Abstract

In the context of growing ecological awareness and consumer demand for environmentally responsible products, packaging design has emerged as a critical platform for sustainability messaging. This research investigates how sustainability is visually communicated and practiced through packaging design by two leading cosmetic brands: The Body Shop and Forest Essentials. Drawing on principles of eco-design, semiotics, and branding strategies, this study aims to decode the aesthetic and material choices used to frame environmental responsibility. By applying qualitative content analysis on selected packaging samples and associated communication material, the paper identifies how graphic design elements such as typography, colour, imagery, and materials convey brand values aligned with ecological awareness. While The Body Shop leverages activist messaging and recycled material choices, Forest Essentials integrates traditional Indian ethos with sustainability as luxury. The findings reveal how both brands merge visual aesthetics with ethical sustainability practices, while also underscoring a need for more transparent communication around material sourcing, packaging impact, and product lifecycle. The study contributes to design discourse by critically evaluating the semiotic layers of sustainable packaging and suggests pathways for more inclusive and measurable eco-design practices.

Keywords: Sustainable Packaging, Visual Communication, Eco-design, Branding, The Body Shop, Forest Essentials, Packaging Design, Content Analysis

1. Introduction

In an era of climate change, brands are increasingly focusing on to signify environmental consciousness. Packaging becomes physical evidence where sustainability is claimed and communicated. This research explores the visual and material strategies used by two prominent skincare and beauty brands, The Body Shop and Forest Essentials; in packaging design to communicate sustainability messaging.

The Body Shop, with its roots in ethical consumerism, and Forest Essentials, a luxury Ayurvedic brand from India, present two contrasting yet complementary case studies. Both use packaging not just as a wrapper but as a narrative space to promote eco-conscious values. This study unpacks their design decisions, aesthetic motifs, and communicative practices, aiming to understand how sustainability is framed and differentiated across cultural and market contexts.

2. Background

2.1 The Role of Packaging in Sustainability

Packaging plays a pivotal role in shaping the environmental impact of consumer goods and is widely recognised as one of the largest contributors to global plastic pollution. With the increasing demand for sustainable practices, packaging has evolved from being a mere container to a communicative tool that reflects a brand's environmental ethics.

Research by Lindh et al. (2016) highlights that packaging is not only a functional necessity but also a key element of how consumers perceive the sustainability of a product. The visual and material elements of packaging such as its recyclability, biodegradability, or minimalism directly influence consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions. A package that looks and feels environmentally friendly is often assumed to be less harmful, even if its actual environmental impact is marginal.

According to Steenis et al. (2017), eco-packaging incorporates multiple environmentally responsible strategies. These include the use of biodegradable or compostable materials (like bamboo, sugarcane pulp, or mushroom-based alternatives), reduced ink coverage to facilitate recyclability, and modular designs that minimise material usage while improving stackability and transportation efficiency. Some designs also embrace refillable formats or encourage upcycling, thereby extending the lifecycle of the packaging itself.

However, sustainability in packaging is not confined to material and structural considerations. It also functions as a strategic branding tool, especially in the age of green consumerism. Brands often design packaging to visually communicate environmental values using natural textures, earthy colour palettes, minimal design, and clear messaging like "100% recyclable" or "cruelty-free." This signals ethical responsibility and appeals to eco-conscious consumers, even when the actual environmental benefit may be minimal (a phenomenon often critiqued as "greenwashing").

Thus, packaging operates at the intersection of functionality, perception, and communication making it not just a container, but a symbolic and performative element of sustainable branding. In this way, sustainability is not merely a technical specification, but a constructed narrative one that combines material choices with visual cues to shape consumer understanding and ethical decision-making.

2.2 Visual Communication and Branding

Visual design plays an important role in how people see and connect with a brand. Things like colour, font style, pictures, and shapes help customers quickly understand what a brand stands for (Henderson et al., 2003). In sustainability branding, earthy colours like green and brown, images of plants or nature, and packaging that looks or feels recycled are often used to show that the brand cares about the environment (White et al., 2019).

These design elements act like symbols. For example, a leaf icon or rough paper texture can suggest natural and eco-friendly values (Barthes, 1972). Simple fonts can make a brand seem honest and modern, while fancy writing styles might show tradition and care. How the packaging feels like rough recycled paper or smooth glass can also send a message about quality and trust. Overall, these design choices help build a brand image and make it easier for people to trust eco-friendly products.

2.3 Greenwashing vs Authentic Messaging

Many researchers have pointed out that some brands pretend to be eco-friendly without making real efforts to help the environment (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This is known as greenwashing, when brands use misleading words or visuals to make their products appear more environmentally friendly than they truly are. Because of this, consumers now expect more honesty and clear information about what makes a

product sustainable. It is not enough to just use recycled materials; brands must also explain their actions in a truthful way.

Real sustainability means both doing and saying the right thing. Brands must show they are truly eco-conscious not just through nice packaging or nature-themed designs, but through actual practices. This creates trust and helps consumers feel confident in their choices.

2.4 Brand Overview

A. The Body Shop, founded in 1976 in the UK by Anita Roddick, is a pioneer in ethical beauty and sustainability. Built on principles of engagement, fair trade, and environmental justice, the brand is known for its strong commitment to cruelty-free products and social causes. The company integrates sustainability into its packaging through initiatives like 100% post-consumer recycled (PCR) plastics, refill stations, and Community Fair Trade recycled plastic sourcing—notably partnering with waste pickers in India.

B. Forest Essentials is an Indian luxury Ayurvedic skincare brand founded in the year 2000. The brand blends traditional Indian wellness practices with modern luxury aesthetics, promoting natural ingredients, artisanal processes, and ecological responsibility. Forest Essentials positions itself as a luxurious yet eco-conscious brand that highlights Indian heritage through its product storytelling, ingredient sourcing, and visually decorative packaging style.

2.4 Research Objectives

- To understand how sustainability is visually communicated through packaging design by the cosmetic brands: The Body Shop and Forest Essentials.
- To decode the visual elements (colours, fonts, graphics, layout) used in their packaging to communicate environmental values.
- To compare the material and design strategies used by both brands in the context of sustainable branding and consumer perception.

2.5 Research Questions

1. How do The Body Shop and Forest Essentials visually communicate sustainability through packaging?
2. What sustainable practices are employed in the material production of their packaging?
3. How do cultural and branding narratives influence sustainability messaging in these two brands?

2.6 Research Gaps Identified

Previous studies have focused extensively on Western brands' use of sustainable packaging but lack cross-cultural analysis involving Indian luxury beauty brands. There is also limited visual semiotic analysis in existing sustainability literature, which this study addresses. The intersection of cultural semiotics and environmental communication in design remains under-researched. There is a lack of empirical studies on how consumers interpret visual sustainability cues in packaging. Few scholarly works examine the authenticity gap between design messaging and actual brand practices.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This is a qualitative, comparative case study using visual content analysis and secondary material review. It combines visual semiotics, material analysis, and brand narrative mapping.

3.2 Data Collection

- **Primary Data:** Packaging visuals and physical packaging from recent product lines of The Body Shop and Forest Essentials (2022–2024).

- **Secondary Data:** Brand reports, marketing campaigns, official websites, and sustainability declarations.

3.4 Analytical Framework:

a. Semiotic Analysis (Barthes, 1972)

Semiotic analysis, as developed by Roland Barthes, explores how signs and symbols convey meaning beyond their literal interpretation. In the context of packaging design, it helps decode visual elements such as colours, icons, typography, and imagery to understand how they communicate sustainability values and brand identity.

b. Eco-Design Principles (Crul & Diehl, 2006)

Eco-design principles advocate for the integration of environmental considerations into every stage of product design. According to Crul and Diehl, sustainable packaging should minimize environmental impact through material selection, energy efficiency, recyclability, and end of life management. This framework is used to assess the ecological soundness of The Body Shop and Forest Essentials' packaging strategies.

c. Sustainability Messaging Framework (Peattie & Crane, 2005)

Peattie and Crane's framework focuses on the credibility and effectiveness of sustainability communication. It emphasises the importance of transparency, consistency, relevance, and stakeholder engagement in green messaging. This approach evaluates how well the brands' packaging communicates their sustainability commitments and whether the messaging aligns with actual environmental practices.

4. Analysis

The two cosmetic brands are analysed comparatively based on packaging visuals, material use, graphic elements, language, and embedded cultural narratives. It is guided by the analytical framework.

4.1 Semiotic Analysis

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, helps decode how packaging design communicates meaning through visuals and textual content.

A. The Body Shop: The brand adopts a universal visual language rooted in naturalism and ethical consciousness. The signs positioned in the designs include:

- **Nature Imagery:** Fruits, leaves, seeds, and flora motifs dominate their packaging. These signify purity, organic origin, and nature-centrism.
- **Colour Symbolism:** Earthy tones like brown, green, and off-white dominate their product ranges. Green implies sustainability and harmony; brown conveys a connection to the earth; off-white evokes minimalism and natural purity.
- **Typography as a Signifier:** The use of sans-serif fonts, often bold and capitalised, suggests transparency, strength, and ethical resolve. The typography is direct and utilitarian reflecting the brand's commitment to activism.
- **Language and Textual Messaging:** Phrases such as "100% recycled packaging," "refill me," or "ethical sourcing" signal environmental stewardship. These are not just informative but also function as performative signs of ethical responsibility.
- **Structural Form:** The physical design of refill stations and pump bottles creates signs of longevity and user participation. The form becomes a sign of circularity and anti-waste culture.

B. Forest Essentials: Forest Essentials embeds Indian aesthetic traditions within its packaging design. Its semiotic palette is rich in cultural signifiers that merge luxury with eco-spirituality.

- **Iconography and Motifs:** Traditional miniature-style floral patterns, temple-inspired line art, and references to Ayurveda mark the packaging as distinctly Indian. These signs evoke a sense of heritage, ritual purity, and timeless wisdom.
- **Colour Symbolism:** Deep hues such as indigo, maroon, saffron, and gold dominate, denoting luxury, sanctity, and nature's bounty. Gold accents reinforce exclusivity, while saffron signals purity and spiritual transcendence.
- **Typography and Script:** Serif fonts, calligraphic styles, and occasional use of Sanskrit-inspired letterforms evoke traditional knowledge and ancient wellness systems.
- **Language and Narrative:** Terms like “cold-pressed,” “vedic formulations,” and “ritual purity” function as mythological signs of authenticity and rootedness.
- **Material Choices as Signifiers:** The use of glass bottles, fabric sachets, and hand-bound gift boxes serve as signs of refinement, care, and permanence. These signify the brand's emphasis on tactility, tradition, and sustainability.

4.2 Eco-Design Principles

This section evaluates how the two brands implement the principles of eco-design, including material recyclability, durability, design for disassembly, and circularity.

A. The Body Shop

- **Material Transparency:** The Body Shop publicly shares sourcing information and packaging material data. PET plastics (Polyethylene Terephthalate is a type of plastic widely used in packaging, especially for cosmetic products) and aluminium packaging are widely used, with up to 75% post-consumer recycled content in many products.
- **Refill & Reuse System:** A key eco-design principle, the refill station model, is being scaled globally. These are designed to reduce plastic waste and consumer dependency on single-use formats.
- **Standardised Forms and Labelling:** Simplified shapes, standardized bottle dimensions, and recyclable label adhesives indicate planning for disassembly and recycling efficiency.
- **Design for Circular Economy:** Modular packaging and “return, refill, repeat” schemes indicate embedded circular thinking. These practices align with principles advocated in LCA (Life Cycle Assessment) studies and Cradle-to-Cradle frameworks.
- **Packaging Material & Reduction:** The brand has reduced overall packaging volume across SKUs (stock keeping units), eliminated excess boxes, and replaced plastic film with paper-based seals.

B. Forest Essentials

- **Material Tactility and Recyclability:** Glass bottles dominate product packaging, offering visual appeal and recyclability. Boxes are made from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified handmade paper and cotton fabrics. Though not refillable, these materials prolong shelf-life and facilitate secondary use.
- **Design for Durability:** Forest Essentials packages are built to last promoting reuse as decor, storage, or gifting. This aligns with the eco-design principle of emotional durability where design creates lasting attachment and reduces disposal.
- **Waste-conscious Luxury:** Despite premium placement, Forest Essentials avoids plastic laminates and non-biodegradable foil stamping. Instead, it uses biodegradable gold ink and screen printing on its gift boxes.

- **Craft-based Packaging:** Incorporation of hand-bound labels and wooden closures reflects a low-impact artisanal ethos. While this limits mass recyclability, it supports small-scale ecological craft industries.

4.3 Sustainability Messaging Framework

The **Sustainability Messaging Framework** analyses how brands embed values of sustainability in their messaging architecture through tone, narrative, brand storytelling, and visual cohesion.

A. The Body Shop

- **Messaging Tone:** Assertive and transparent. Statements such as “We source ethically and sustainably” or “Forever against animal testing” reinforce corporate accountability and advocacy.
- **Visual Consistency:** The use of pictographic icons (e.g., recycling symbol, cruelty-free logos, and vegan tags) enhances message recall. These symbols form part of a “visual language” that cues ethical consumption.
- **Messaging Placement:** Sustainability claims are placed front-of-pack (FOP) and side panels, reinforcing their visibility and commitment.
- **Campaign Integration:** The brand’s broader visual campaigns (e.g., “Self Love Uprising,” “Nature’s Refill”) maintain strong alignment with package messaging, establishing consistency between product and promotion.

B. Forest Essentials: Storytelling and Cultural Narratives

- **Messaging Tone:** Philosophical, slow, and immersive. Packaging texts often begin with Ayurvedic stories or ritual instructions, drawing the user into a sensory journey.
- **Narrative Anchoring:** Sustainability is communicated as a way of life rather than a corporate policy. For example, text like “Inspired by the Ayurvedic principle of Ritu Charya (seasonal adaptation)” frames sustainability within a cultural cosmology.
- **Visual and Linguistic Integration:** Packaging design, illustration, and typography echo the story told in the text, creating a multisensory experience of harmony and sustainability.
- **Minimal Claims, Maximum Experience:** Forest Essentials avoids excessive eco-labels, relying instead on the cultural code of trust built through visual refinement and rooted storytelling.

Table 1. Tabular representation of comparative analysis based on analytical framework

| ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK | THE BODY SHOP | FOREST ESSENTIAL |
|--|---|--|
| SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS Visual Signs and Symbolic Language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global Semiotics • Nature Imagery • Earthy Tones • Bold Sans-Serif Typography • Phrases like 100% recycled packaging • Refill Bottles and stations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Semiotics • Traditional Indian Motifs • Deep Hues • Serif, calligraphic style Typography • Terms like ‘Cold pressed’ ‘vedic formulations’ • Glass Bottles and Fabric Sachets |
| ECO-DESIGN PRINCIPLES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material Transparency • Refill and Reuse system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material Tactility and Recyclability • Design for durability |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Material Strategy and Design Ethics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardised forms and Labelling • Design for circular economy • Packaging material reduction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Craft based packaging • Waste conscious luxury |
| SUSTAINABILITY MESSAGING FRAMEWORK Linguistic and visual positioning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activist Voice • Corporate transparency • Visual Consistency • Messaging Placement • Campaign Integration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory Luxury Model • Storytelling, cultural narratives • Narrative anchoring • Aesthetic Minimalism rooted in Indian Culture |

Table 2. Tabular representation of comparative insights for packaging design elements

| COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FOR PACKAGING DESIGN ELEMENTS | | |
|--|---|---|
| Aspect | The Body Shop | Forest Essentials |
| Brand Philosophy | Activist, Ethical, Global | Cultural, Ayurvedic, Luxurious |
| Material Use | Recycled plastic, Aluminium, Kraft paper and FSC-certified paperboard | PET & Glass Bottles, Handmade paper, biodegradable cartons, and recyclable air-filled paper pouches |
| Typography | Bold Sans-serif | Elegant Serif and Script |
| Colour Palette | Earthy Greens, Browns | Jewel Tones, Gold |
| Imagery | Minimalist, Icons, Activist visuals | Ornamental, Floral, Mythological |
| Consumer Base | Gen Z, Millennial, Ethical consumers | Rich, Tradition-valuing consumers |
| Sustainability Narrative | Transparent, Activist, Universal | Subtle, Cultural, Ritualistic |

4.4 Conclusion of Analysis

The comparative content analysis reveals two distinct visual and strategic approaches to sustainability:

- The Body Shop adopts a systemic, activist-oriented model, where sustainability is both a design principle and a communicative strategy, made visible through visual clarity, modular systems, and activist tone.
- Forest Essentials employs a sensory-luxury model, where sustainability is implied in heritage, tactility, and long-term emotional design.

Both brands succeed in integrating sustainability into their packaging, but they do so by leveraging different frameworks of visual culture, material practice, and branding logic global versus indigenous, activist versus experiential, transparent versus subtle and poetic.

4.5 Cultural Context and Sustainability Framing

The Body Shop operates in a multicultural, global context and uses a universal activist visual language. Its sustainability framing is overt, aligning with Western eco-activism movements. In contrast, Forest Essentials localizes its messaging through Indian traditions, rituals, and aesthetics. Sustainability is interwoven into the cultural narrative of Ayurveda, creating a spiritual as well as environmental resonance.

The Body Shop and Forest Essentials exemplify two distinct paradigms of sustainability messaging in packaging design. While The Body Shop embraces a universal, activist approach grounded in ethical transparency and modern minimalist aesthetics, Forest Essentials weaves sustainability into the fabric of Indian cultural identity, Ayurvedic wisdom, and luxury craftsmanship. Both brands effectively use visual and material design elements to communicate their ecological values, though they differ in tone, audience, and narrative structure. These contrasting models provide a fertile ground for content analysis aimed at understanding how cultural context and brand philosophy shape visual sustainability strategies in the beauty industry. This brand overview offers the foundation for a more detailed content analysis focusing on poster campaigns, packaging visuals, and consumer interpretations in future stages of research.

5. Results

5.1 Consistency in Sustainability Communication: Both brands effectively utilise sustainability into their packaging design, but through distinct narrative frameworks. The Body Shop communicates sustainability specifically using a global, activist tone reflected in bold headlines, eco-friendly labels, and calls-to-action on packaging. Forest Essentials, in contrast, utilises sustainability into a culturally rich narrative, using symbolic design rooted in Ayurveda and Indian tradition. Despite different storytelling approaches, both brands consistently align their packaging aesthetics with their sustainability philosophies, creating consistent and coherent brand narratives.

5.2 Divergent Visual Communication Styles: The Body Shop mostly follows high-contrast colours (greens, browns, white), bold sans-serif fonts, and minimalist layouts to directly communicate environmental values. Iconography such as recycling symbols and leaves are paired with activist slogans like “Forever Against Animal Testing.” In contrast, Forest Essentials uses rich jewel tones, gold accents, and serif or calligraphic fonts to suggest purity, tradition, and luxury. Visual cues like floral patterns and mythological motifs subtly indicate ecological mindfulness without evident messaging. This decoding reveals that while both brands use colour, typography, and layout to indicate sustainability, their stylistic executions are culturally and emotionally different.

5.3 Material Innovation and Strategic Framing: The Body Shop prioritises material recyclability and reuse, with packaging made from post-consumer recycled plastics and aluminium. Their initiatives like “Return, Recycle, Repeat” and refill stations reinforce their image as a progressive, environmentally responsible brand. Forest Essentials, conversely, emphasizes biodegradable and artisan-crafted materials like glass jars, handmade paper, and silk-thread closures designed to appeal to eco-luxury sensibilities. The Body Shop’s material strategy targets mass environmental engagement, while Forest Essentials frames sustainability as a heritage-driven, premium lifestyle. Both approaches are effective in influencing consumer perception within their respective market segments.

6. Discussion

This research confirms that sustainability messaging in packaging is not just about materials but about narrative and culture. While The Body Shop aligns with global eco-activism, Forest Essentials blends sustainability with Indian luxury and Ayurveda. Each design decision, from font choice to imagery, contributes to a larger ideological message. The Body Shop may appeal more to environmentally vocal youth, while Forest Essentials resonates with eco-conscious luxury consumers. These insights reflect how sustainability is embedded in broader brand worldviews.

7. Conclusion

Packaging is a critical site for visualising sustainability. The Body Shop and Forest Essentials, though operating in different cultural backgrounds, both exemplify how packaging design functions as eco-communication. The research reveals how visual language, material practice, and brand values link to shape consumer perception of sustainability.

This study adds to academic discourse by offering a cross-cultural design perspective and by highlighting the interplay of sustainability, aesthetics, and consumer engagement in packaging

8. Future Implications

This approach to analysing visual sustainability can be applied to other industries beyond cosmetics, such as fashion, food, and electronics. Future research can build on this framework by integrating user-centric testing, such as consumer perception studies, to assess how visual elements influence trust and engagement with sustainability claims. Additionally, integrating lifecycle visibility, for example, information on carbon footprint or disposal instructions into packaging design could enhance the credibility and transparency of sustainability messaging. Finally, inclusive design should ensure that sustainable packaging balances visual sophistication with accessibility, making it understandable and usable for diverse consumer groups.

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