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A symbolic–visual advertising framework for engaging China’s generation Z in sustainable consumption

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In response to intensifying global environmental concerns, sustainable consumption has become a critical agenda in both academic inquiry and advertising practice. While advertising plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer values and behaviours, conventional green campaigns often struggle to resonate with Generation Z—particularly within China’s hybrid economy and digital-native media ecosystem. This study conducts a thematic and cross-case analysis of three representative campaigns from China—Ant Forest, FOTILE’s Letters to the Earth, and CAFA’s Buy the Hell Out—to identify key mechanisms for designing culturally resonant sustainable consumption advertising. The findings reveal three core communicative strategies: symbolic encoding, visual immersion, and participatory orchestration. Grounded in theories of symbolic consumption, visual narrative, and participatory culture, this study proposes a tri-dimensional SCA-SVP framework. This model integrates (1) culturally embedded sustainability knowledge to strengthen symbolic identity; (2) immersive, mobile-native visual storytelling to evoke emotional resonance, and (3) subcultural expression and peer co-creation to foster behavioural transformation. The SCA-SVP framework offers actionable guidance for advertisers, designers, and sustainability communicators seeking to translate environmental messages into symbolic meaning, affective engagement, and social relevance. It contributes to bridging value-based sustainability communication and Gen Z’s evolving symbolic ecosystems in China. Future research may expand this model by incorporating generative AI, immersive environments, and platform-specific dynamics to enhance the adaptability and scalability of symbolic sustainability strategies.

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Introduction

Sustainable consumption is a core element of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the face of escalating environmental challenges, including climate change and resource depletion, both governments and industries are seeking strategies to encourage more responsible consumption behaviours (Li et al. 2022). Advertising, as a powerful tool for shaping consumer perceptions, plays a dual role: it may either perpetuate materialistic lifestyles or serve as a catalyst for sustainability (Gilbert et al. 2021; Liu and Zhu 2022). The concept of sustainable consumption advertising (SCA) thus emerges at the intersection of persuasive marketing and public interest communication, aligning brand strategies with ecological responsibility (Kelleci and Yıldız 2021).

In China, the promotion of sustainable lifestyles has been elevated to a national strategic objective. However, current sustainable advertising practices—especially those framed as Public Service Announcements (PSAs)—are often characterised by simplistic rational appeals or emotionally generic slogans that fail to meaningfully engage digital-native audiences (Chan and Cheng 2009; Cheng 2022). Generation Z consumers (born 1995–2010), whose values are shaped by participatory media culture, sub-cultural affiliations, and hybrid identities, demonstrate a paradox: while environmentally aware, they rarely translate such attitudes into consistent sustainable behaviours (Gu et al. 2024; Yang and Chen 2022). This gap calls for advertising strategies that go beyond mere information delivery toward symbolic meaning-making that aligns with Gen Z's cultural codes and peer-based values (Sheng and Yue 2022).

Unlike traditional sustainability advertising that prioritises product rationality or CSR transparency, symbolic advertising embeds sustainability into desirable lifestyles, identity narratives, and culturally resonant media experiences (Lu 2022; Yang 2020). Prior research emphasises the need to move away from Western-centric models towards culturally situated frameworks that reflect China's unique policy–market hybrid and digital collectivism (Li 2022; Zhu 2020). Yet few studies have systematically explored how symbolic advertising design elements—such as visual metaphors, cultural narratives, or subcultural cues—function in the context of sustainability promotion among China's Gen Z.

This study addresses this gap by proposing a strategic advertising design framework that conceptualises SCA as symbolic advertising—positioning sustainability as a culturally coded, emotionally resonant, and socially endorsed value system for Chinese Gen Z consumers. Drawing upon symbolic consumption theory, visual narrative theory, and participatory culture theory, this study analyses three representative Chinese SCA campaigns to identify core design mechanisms. This phase forms part of a larger doctoral project and contributes both theoretically—by reinterpreting SCA through a symbolic-visual lens—and practically by offering actionable insights for advertisers aiming to engage youth audiences in meaningful behavioural change.

This article forms part of a multi-phase research project on sustainability communication with China's Generation Z. While the current study focuses on advertising campaign analysis, it builds upon insights from a prior survey study that explored Gen Z's symbolic, visual, and participatory media preferences. These earlier findings contributed to the development of the conceptual framework used herein.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Defining sustainable consumption advertising (SCA). We hold the view that the concept of sustainable consumption advertising (SCA) is conceptualised as an integrated communication strategy aimed at bridging the gap between consumers' pro-

sustainability attitudes and their actual purchasing behaviours (Hua et al. 2020). Whether it is a commercial advertisement or a public welfare advertisement in which a brand participates, advertising often prioritises short-term economic gains, inadvertently reinforcing materialistic values (Ye and Zhang 2018). In contrast, SCA leverages symbolic consumption, cultural narratives, and digital engagement to align sustainability messages with consumer identities (Yang 2020). This approach ensures that sustainability is not merely portrayed as an individual responsibility but is embedded within the formation of social identity. While traditional sustainable advertising models typically rely on rational appeals, corporate transparency, and eco-labelling strategies, China's unique socio-economic and cultural environment necessitates a different approach (Rahman et al. 2023). Cultural symbols, participatory digital platforms, and collective identity construction reflect China's distinctive policy–market hybrid economy, where state interventions and consumer activism interact to shape sustainability narratives (Li et al. 2022).

However, as green advertising becomes increasingly mainstream, it also faces critical scrutiny. Research in both Western and Chinese contexts has highlighted the paradoxical nature of sustainability communication: while promoting ecological values, such campaigns may inadvertently reinforce consumerism or instrumentalise ethics for brand legitimacy. Eco-label trust deficits and perceived lack of CSR transparency often trigger scepticism among young audiences, undermining the persuasive intent of green messages. As such, effective SCA design must go beyond rational signalling to foster authenticity, cultural relevance, and symbolic depth.

China's Generation Z: digital natives and cultural custodians.

China's Generation Z plays a pivotal role in driving sustainability and catalysing digital engagement (Xie and Wang 2022). Unlike previous generations who passively received advertisements, Gen Z actively interacts with marketing through gamified participation, social validation, and influencer-driven storytelling (Yang and Chen 2022). They exhibit a preference for interactive, personalised, and visually immersive content, necessitating a departure from traditional SCA approaches. To effectively engage this demographic, SCA must incorporate participatory digital strategies, including gamification, influencer storytelling, and user-generated content (Ren 2022). Digital platforms enhance information retention and consumer agency, positioning sustainability as a socially expected lifestyle choice rather than a corporate-imposed duty (Kadic et al. 2019). Moreover, peer validation mechanisms on social media play a crucial role in reinforcing eco-friendly behaviours and embedding sustainability within identity formation (He 2022). However, Gen Z is also highly sceptical of commercialised sustainability narratives, often rejecting corporate greenwashing efforts (Zhu 2020). Therefore, SCA must embed sustainability within culturally authentic identity markers to establish legitimacy and perceived value (Yang 2020). Future research may also explore how SCA strategies navigate the growing consumer scrutiny around greenwashing and superficial engagement, particularly in algorithmically driven content ecosystems (Lim et al. 2022). Ensuring communicative transparency and value consistency remains a challenge for campaigns operating within attention-fragmented media environments. The role of perceived authenticity and trust in shaping pro-environmental consumer responses has also been increasingly emphasised in recent SCA research (Kumar et al. 2021). This further underscores the value of participatory co-creation and narrative transparency as critical

design considerations, especially when targeting sceptical or oversaturated audiences.

Sustainable consumption advertising in the Chinese context.

Prior studies on sustainable consumption advertising are largely grounded in Western paradigms, which emphasise individual agency, brand-led CSR initiatives, and product-centred rational appeals (UNEP et al. 2017). However, these approaches may overlook the collectivist values, symbolic nationalism, and state-market interpenetration that characterise the Chinese media environment. This calls for a culturally adaptive framework capable of bridging global design principles with local narrative logics.

Despite extensive research on sustainable advertising, much of it remains Western-centric, overlooking the unique dynamics of China's hybrid economy (UNEP et al. 2017). This study addresses this gap by proposing the reconceptualization of sustainability as a participatory ecosystem. Unlike Western SCA models that emphasise individual responsibility and corporate transparency, China's advertising landscape is shaped by state-driven environmental policies and digital collectivism (Li et al. 2022). This policy-market hybrid structure fosters participatory digital ecosystems, making it possible for sustainable consumption to become a collective cultural norm. Symbolic consumption, driven by social identity rather than functional needs, plays a central role in shaping young consumers' perceptions of sustainability (Sheng and Yue 2022). China's unique cultural and political milieu offers an opportunity for symbolic advertising to link environmental behaviours with national identity, social belonging, and collective responsibility, thereby enhancing consumer well-being. Our studies indicate that Chinese sustainability campaigns are most persuasive when they incorporate cultural symbols, heritage narratives, and collective action messages. Digital peer influence and social networks amplify these sustainability messages, particularly among Gen Z audiences who actively engage in social media-driven sustainability discussions. Successful sustainability initiatives should position sustainability as both a moral obligation and a socially expected behaviour, reinforcing cultural identity while leveraging digital engagement mechanisms (Gu et al. 2024).

Theoretical proposition and conceptual framework. Building upon the preceding literature, this study proposes that effective sustainable consumption advertising (SCA) for China's Generation Z should integrate symbolic communication, visual storytelling, and participatory interaction to activate identity-based engagement and promote behavioural change. Specifically, the conceptual foundation of this study rests on a multi-dimensional theoretical model comprising three interrelated perspectives: symbolic consumption, visual narrative, and participatory culture.

First, drawing from symbolic consumption theory (Baudrillard 1998; Nwankwo 1973), consumption is understood not merely as functional, but as a symbolic act that expresses identity, status, and subcultural affiliation. In the Chinese context, this is particularly relevant for Gen Z, whose purchasing behaviour is often shaped by symbolic values encoded in aesthetic, ideological, or cultural forms (Guo and Xiang 2015; Yang 2022). SCA, when reframed as symbolic advertising, can embed sustainability within desirable lifestyles and identity narratives that resonate with youth subcultures. However, recent studies caution that symbolic saturation may also foster aesthetic fatigue and reduce behavioural commitment unless linked to authentic cultural signifiers (Zhuang 2019; Luo 2020). This reveals that when symbolic or visual appeals are perceived as hollow, performative, or disconnected from cultural authenticity, they may induce "green

fatigue" and scepticism rather than behavioural reinforcement. The present framework addresses this by emphasising culturally grounded and identity-relevant symbolism over generic visual tropes.

Second, informed by visual narrative theory and cultural semiotics (Barthes 1979; De Burgh and Brace 2008), this study views sustainable messaging as a culturally coded form of communication. Visual metaphors, aesthetic codes, and inter-textual references enable abstract ecological concepts to be translated into affective and culturally resonant messages. This symbolic dimension aligns with recent work on cultural branding and consumer meaning-making, where sustainability is not merely adopted as a rational value but embedded within lifestyle signifiers and aspirational codes (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). These insights shaped the symbolic layer of the proposed framework, particularly in regard to identity signaling among Gen Z. In SCA, visual narratives serve to anchor sustainability in culturally specific imagery and emotional storytelling, thereby enhancing narrative immersion. In addition to narrative clarity, Liu (2021) argues that visual irony and semiotic inversion can re-engage young audiences by disrupting formulaic "green" aesthetics, while Liang (2022) highlights how subcultural parody and visual estrangement foster critical reflection rather than passive reception. These perspectives reinforce the visual dimension of this study's framework, which positions aesthetic disruption and subcultural strategies as catalysts for interpretive engagement among Gen Z audiences.

Third, this framework incorporates participatory culture theory (Carpentier 2011), which emphasises the shift from passive message reception to interactive meaning-making. For China's digitally native Gen Z, engagement is shaped by social media logic, user-generated content, and co-creation. Embedding participatory mechanisms into SCA—such as gamification, social sharing, or subcultural collaboration—can catalyse peer-led diffusion and behavioural reinforcement. This view aligns with empirical work showing that Chinese youth respond positively to participatory campaigns that empower self-expression, rather than passive reception, especially when co-creation opportunities are embedded into platform design (Zhang and Xu 2020).

As shown in Fig. 1, these three perspectives—symbolic, visual, and participatory—are synthesised into a conceptual model that positions SCA as a form of culturally embedded symbolic

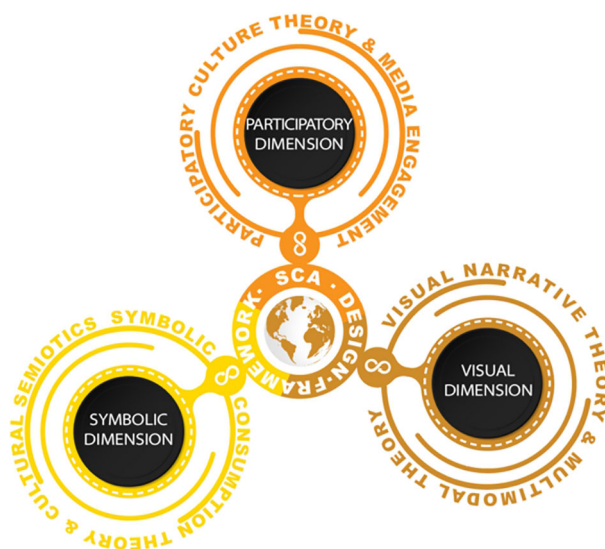


Fig. 1 The SCA-SVP theoretical design framework.

Table 1 Standardised template for SCA material collection.		
Attribute	Operational description	Theoretical dimension
Campaign title	Official name of the sustainable consumption advertising (SCA) campaign	—
Organisational actor	Entity responsible for the campaign: platform, corporate brand, or educational institution	—
Launch period	Year of campaign launch and duration of primary activity	—
Sustainability focus	Environmental or behavioural aspect addressed (e.g., low-carbon lifestyle, anti-consumerism)	—
Target audience	Demographics and psychographics of Gen Z consumers targeted by the campaign	—
Media channels	Media platforms used for dissemination (e.g., WeChat, Taobao, TV, exhibitions)	Participatory
Core message	Main persuasive claim or sustainability theme conveyed	Participatory
Visual strategy	Key visual metaphors, colour schemes, design aesthetics, and visual tone	Visual
Symbolic representation	Use of cultural/subcultural/ideological symbols and metaphors that resonate with Gen Z identity	Symbolic
Digital engagement types	Modes of interactivity: gamification, influencer involvement, co-creation, hashtag use, etc.	Participatory
User participation metrics	Indicators of reach and resonance, such as UGC volume, social shares, likes, comments, and virality	Participatory
Awards and recognition	Industry credibility: received national/international recognition, awards, or media citations	—
Additional notes	Researcher observations, unique cultural features, controversies, or limitations relevant to the campaign	—

advertising. The theoretical proposition emerging from this model is as follows:

Sustainable consumption advertising that integrates symbolic representation, immersive visual storytelling, and participatory engagement is more likely to resonate with China’s Generation Z, strengthen identity alignment, and encourage pro-environmental behavioural change.

This theoretical lens informs the case selection, thematic coding, and comparative analysis undertaken in the following sections. It also establishes the conceptual foundation for the SCA–SVP framework proposed in this study, contributing to a more culturally grounded and design-oriented understanding of sustainability communication.

In addition to the literature synthesis, prior empirical work provided further conceptual grounding. Insights from an earlier survey phase—conducted as part of the author’s doctoral research—helped inform the formulation of the conceptual propositions. Although the present article does not detail those quantitative findings, selected results from that phase contributed to the refinement of Gen Z–specific themes and value orientations that underpin the current framework. These include patterns such as heightened sensitivity to cultural identity, preferences for digital co-creation, and a stronger response to emotionally resonant rather than didactic messaging—insights that directly shaped the symbolic and participatory dimensions of the SVP model.

Methods

This study represents one phase of a broader doctoral research project on sustainable consumption advertising (SCA) for China’s Generation Z. The larger project combined a large-scale survey (*n* = 414) with a multi-case qualitative analysis. While the quantitative results are reporting in a separate Scopus-indexed publication, this paper focuses on the qualitative phase. Some insights presented—such as symbolic preferences and engagement trends—are informed by the earlier survey but are not directly analysed here. Guided by these preliminary findings and theoretical constructs, this study develops the Symbolic–Visual–Participatory (SVP) framework to capture the core mechanisms of Gen Z–oriented SCA.

Case selection and sampling criteria. Three campaigns were purposively selected to ensure diversity in institutional origin, media form, and engagement strategy:

1. Ant Forest (Alipay/Alibaba): A platform-based, gamified initiative jointly led by government and corporate actors, with mass ecological participation.
2. Letters to the Earth (FOTILE): FOTILE’s “Love Letter to the Earth”: A brand-led, emotion-driven, cross-media storytelling campaign blending corporate values with public environmental messaging.
3. Buy the Hell Out (Central Academy of Fine Arts): A student-driven, subversive artistic critique of consumerism, circulated virally across youth-led digital platforms.

These cases offer contrasting yet complementary perspectives in SCA design, ranging from top-down mobilization to grassroots provocation. Their diversity enables the extraction of transferable design principles for Gen Z audiences.

Data collection and sources. A multi-source qualitative strategy was adopted. Primary materials included advertising artefacts (videos, slogans, visuals), official communications (campaign websites, press releases, award entries), and digital media content (social media posts, influencer endorsements, user comments). Additionally, user-generated content (UGC)—such as memes, remixes, and parody responses—captured how audiences engaged with or reinterpreted campaign messages.

All data were documented using a standardised template (see Table 1), facilitating consistency and comparability. Detailed documentation for each case is available in Supplementary File.

To enhance analytical transparency, the study incorporated dual coding, structured case logs, and triangulation with previously published Gen Z survey data. While the case number is limited, the methodological depth supports valid pattern extraction.

Data analysis and coding procedure. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2012) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The process involved familiarisation, open coding, theme generation, refinement, and mapping. A combined deductive–inductive strategy was employed:

Deductively: theoretical constructs (e.g., symbolic consumption, visual narrative, participatory culture) informed initial coding categories.

Inductively: campaign-specific patterns—such as gamification, subcultural motifs, and emotional tonality—refined emergent themes.

Each campaign was first coded by the lead author, then reviewed by an independent collaborator (PhD research

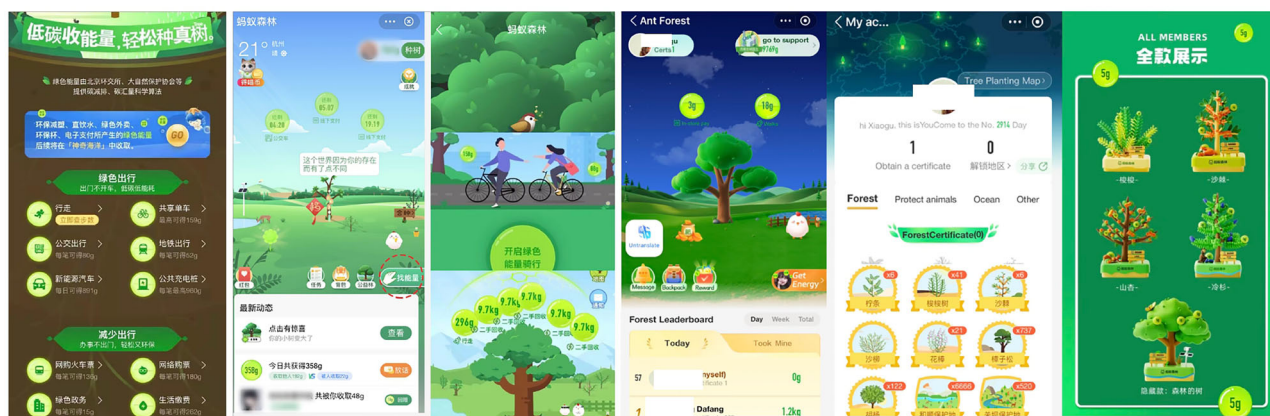


Fig. 2 The Ant Forest app interface (source: Ant Forest app and website).

associate). Coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved by consensus, ensuring intersubjective agreement. Given the limited sample size ($n = 3$), depth and contextual validity were prioritised over statistical inter-coder metrics. Themes were finally synthesised via cross-case analysis, leading to the construction of the tri-dimensional SCA–SVP framework.

While this study offers a robust qualitative analysis of design strategies, empirical validation of Gen Z audience reception remains beyond its present scope. Future research may incorporate reception studies, such as user interviews or audience analytics, to test the effectiveness and applicability of the proposed framework.

Results

This section applies the Symbolic–Visual–Participatory (SCA–SVP) framework to critically examine how three Chinese sustainable consumption advertising (SCA) campaigns—Ant Forest, Letters to the Earth, and Buy the Hell Out—construct sustainability through symbolic encoding, visual narration, and participatory engagement. Rather than describing campaign features, the analysis interrogates how sustainability is reconstituted as a culturally coded, emotionally resonant, and socially endorsed identity practice within China’s Gen Z media ecology. By unpacking the symbolic meanings, narrative structures, and interactive dynamics embedded in each case, the analysis reveals both the persuasive potential and structural limitations of symbolic advertising in translating pro-environmental values into behavioural norms. The discussion proceeds case by case, culminating in a cross-case synthesis that refines the theoretical implications of the SCA–SVP model.

Ant Forest. Ant Forest, launched by Alipay in partnership with public institutions, is a gamified digital campaign that rewards low-carbon behaviours—such as walking or digital payments—with “green energy” points. These accumulate to grow virtual trees linked to real-world reforestation projects. As a hybrid model combining state objectives and platform design, Ant Forest reframes ecological engagement within the symbolic and behavioural logics of mobile participation. Through symbolic tokens, emotionally immersive visuals, and seamless technological integration, the campaign embeds sustainability into the digital routines of China’s Generation Z.

Motivating through gamification. Ant Forest converts everyday actions into green points, which users invest in virtual saplings. These saplings, once matured, translate into real-world trees planted in arid areas. As seen in Fig. 2, this gamified interface

visualises progress and embeds ecological contribution into a logic of personal achievement.

Leaderboards, rewards, and growth animations foster routine engagement. Gamification here functions as a behavioural scaffold (Kadic-Magljajic et al. 2019), sustaining action through feedback loops rather than deep ecological reflection. While such mechanisms successfully promote micro-behaviours, they also risk reducing sustainability to reward-seeking tasks. The quantification of environmental effort may shift ecological responsibility from collective ethics to individualised self-optimisation. As noted by Jahari et al. (2022), when users disengage or novelty fades, behaviour may not persist—raising questions about long-term attitudinal change.

In essence, Ant Forest demonstrates how sustainability can be encoded as a digital habit. Yet its logic of symbolic scoring and behavioural compliance may prioritise performative engagement over ecological consciousness, offering convenience without ideological depth.

Networked belonging and symbolic identity. Ant Forest fosters social collaboration through functions like “co-planting,” green energy sharing, and symbolic partnerships. These peer-based features, illustrated in Fig. 3, generate what Carpentier (2011) terms “minimalist participation”: low-effort, high-visibility actions that produce a sense of inclusion.

Badges, status updates, and achievement display act as semiotic signals of eco-consciousness. Within Gen Z’s symbolic economy (Sheng and Yue 2022), such visual tokens reinforce identity expression through performative sustainability. Doing good becomes a visible act—circulated, validated, and socially ranked.

However, symbolic participation may not imply ideological alignment. As Yang (2020) cautions, peer validation may incentivise surface-level engagement, where users perform sustainability for recognition rather than conviction. The gamified ecosystem encourages eco-branding, yet risks detaching users from deeper ethical motivations.

In this context, Ant Forest transforms ecological action into social capital. While this successfully aligns with Gen Z’s identity-driven logic, it may blur the line between genuine commitment and stylised virtue signalling.

Visual metaphors and emotive sustainability framing. Central to Ant Forest’s design is its emotionally resonant visual metaphor: the growth of a virtual tree symbolising the user’s environmental impact. As shown in Fig. 4, green energy points animate the tree’s lifecycle, visually linking digital habits with ecological regeneration.



Fig. 3 Ant Forest app's social features (source: Ant Forest app and website).

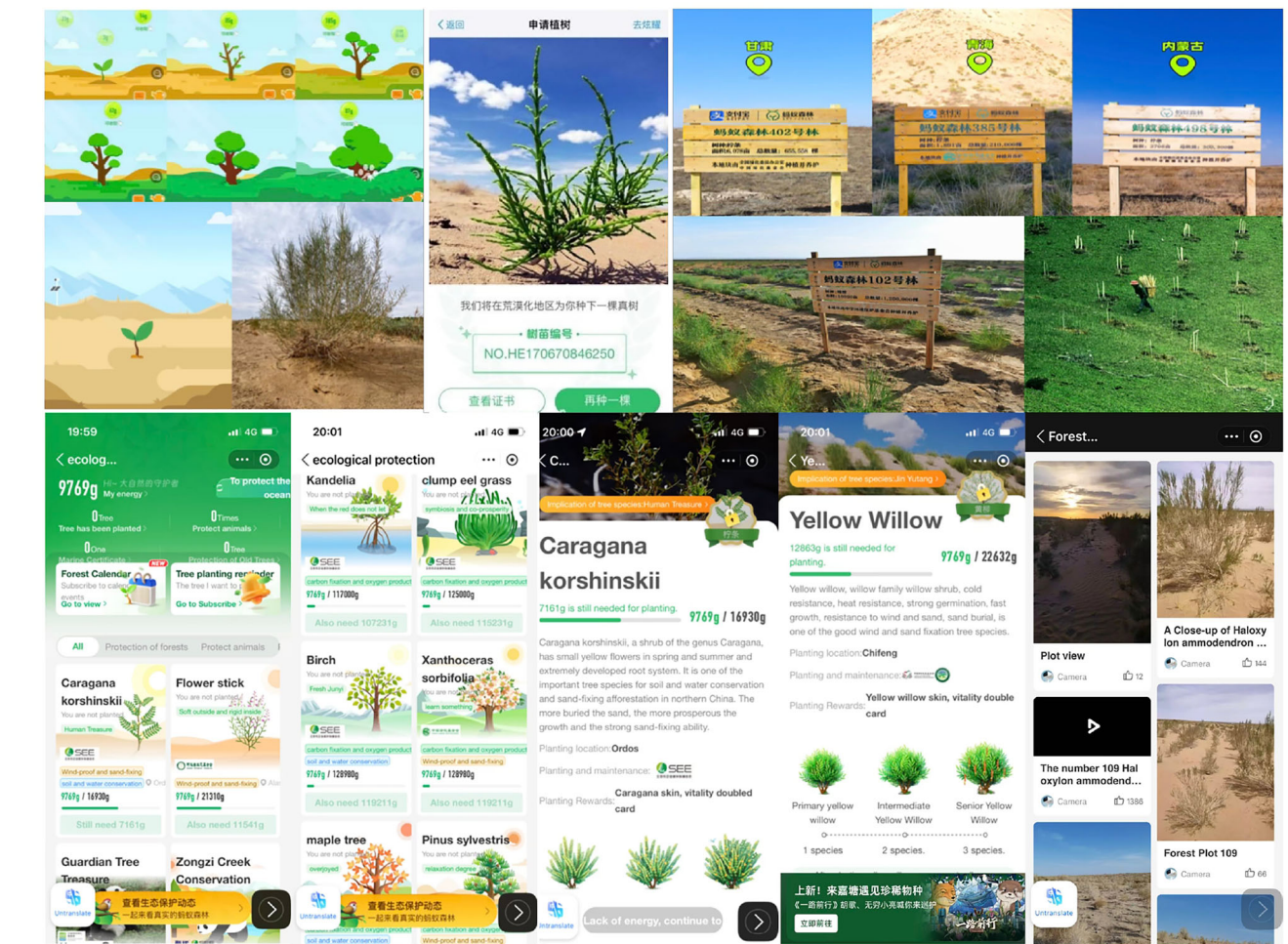


Fig. 4 Educational infographics in Ant Forest (source: Ant Forest app).

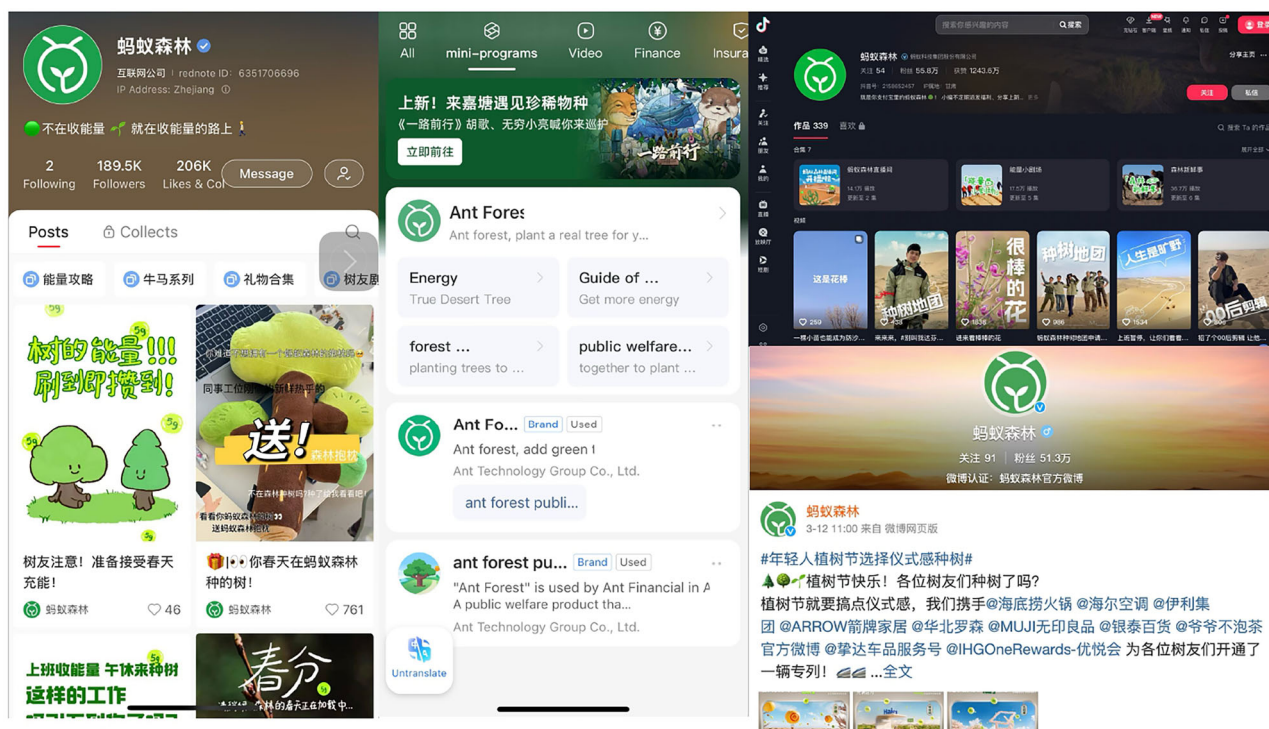


Fig. 5 Technological integration and platform synergy.

Drawing on Barthes' (1979) semiotics, the tree operates as a mythologised signifier—encoding sustainability as personal growth and moral achievement. Culturally, the tree symbol draws from Chinese notions of moral cultivation, reinforcing resonance among young users.

Emotionally, this visual arc—from seedling to forest—offers users a narrative of impact, gratification, and redemption (Rahman et al. 2023). Yet such visual condensation can oversimplify complex ecological systems. The cheerful aesthetic risks producing a hyper-personalised, optimistic image of sustainability that obscures systemic challenges (Li 2022).

The metaphor, though powerful, thus functions within a bounded emotional space—where users feel they “make a difference” without confronting broader structural conditions. It succeeds in translating abstract values into intuitive visuals, but may ultimately substitute satisfaction for critical engagement.

Systemic integration and participatory infrastructure. Unlike traditional awareness campaigns, Ant Forest embeds sustainability into the operational fabric of digital life. By linking e-payments, ride-sharing, and step counters to automatic green energy generation, the system requires little active input. This “frictionless” model is depicted in Fig. 5.

This backgrounded participation reflects what Trindade (2019) calls “deep mediatization”. Sustainability becomes ambient—an automated by-product of digital activity rather than a deliberate ethical stance. While this boosts reach and lowers barriers, it may dilute agency.

Cross-sector collaborations further extend the platform's scope—including corporate offsets and government reforestation partnerships. Yet these partnerships centralise control and algorithmically define what counts as sustainable. As UNEP et al. (2017) note, such configurations enhance scale but may also depoliticise engagement.

Thus, while Ant Forest amplifies engagement, it simultaneously enacts a technocratic model of sustainability—where users

participate within pre-scripted boundaries, and values are mediated through scores, badges, and interfaces. The risk is not apathy, but algorithmic domestication.

Summary. The Ant Forest campaign demonstrates how sustainability can be transformed into a digitally mediated identity performance through a combination of symbolic cues, immersive storytelling, and participatory platform mechanics. Through gamified metaphors, peer-based recognition, and emotionally charged visuals, the campaign repositions ecological behaviour as a form of social display and cultural belonging.

This case reveals how a sustainability initiative can engage digital-native audiences by embedding environmental actions into daily media rituals, translating ecological participation into visual and symbolic artefacts that are emotionally rewarding and publicly recognisable.

However, the campaign also highlights the limitations of this strategy. Its success hinges on symbolic motivation and habitual engagement, yet risks reducing ecological action to a sequence of automated gestures shaped by platform incentives. The highly curated and optimistic aesthetics may obscure the systemic dimensions of environmental degradation, reinforcing superficial participation over critical reflexivity.

In sum, Ant Forest exemplifies both the potential and the paradox of digital sustainability campaigns: it mobilises wide engagement, yet leaves open questions about the depth, continuity, and ideological clarity of that engagement.

Letters to the Earth. In contrast to the platform-centric mechanics of Ant Forest, the Letters to the Earth campaign by FOTILE adopts a narrative-centric approach, weaving sustainability into emotionally resonant, culturally anchored storytelling. Rather than gamifying action, the campaign evokes intergenerational memory, heritage values, and affective identification to position sustainability as an ethical and aesthetic commitment rooted in Chinese cultural imaginaries.

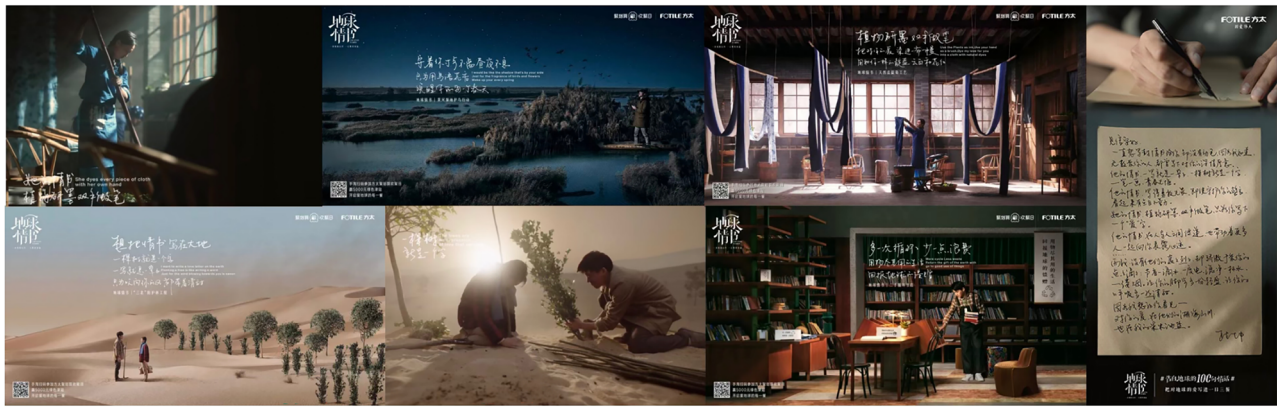


Fig. 6 Authentic storytelling and emotional engagement.

Leveraging emotionally intimate narratives, ecological technologies, influencer credibility, and cross-brand alliances, the campaign constructs a multi-layered symbolic field where environmental responsibility becomes a mode of cultural belonging. Through this lens, sustainability is not merely promoted as a behaviour, but performed as a culturally valued moral orientation.

The following analysis dissects four key mechanisms—emotive storytelling, technological naturalisation, peer validation, and brand synergy—to examine how the campaign activates symbolic and visual strategies in alignment with the SCA–SVP framework. Particular attention is given to the integration of cultural codes, heritage metaphors, and authenticity discourses in producing an affect-driven model of sustainable consumption advertising.

Affective narratives and cultural anchoring. At the core of *Letters to the Earth* lies a narrative strategy that embeds sustainability within affect-laden, culturally grounded stories. Rather than positioning sustainability as a behavioural instruction or digital task, the campaign constructs it as an inherited ethical orientation—deeply tied to place, memory, and intergenerational continuity. Drawing from motifs such as reforestation in the Three-North Shelterbelt, wetland conservation, and traditional craft revival, the campaign deploys emotionally charged micro-narratives that locate ecological care within familiar cultural topographies. As shown in Fig. 6, visual materials—such as handwritten letters, intimate voice-overs, and cinematic portrayals of rural landscapes—are mobilised to evoke a sense of belonging and moral duty.

This narrative modality resonates with Barthesian (Barthes 1979) semiotics in its use of culturally pre-coded signs—family, soil, rivers, and ancestors—as symbolic anchors through which abstract environmental concerns are rendered immediate and personal. The letter as a communicative form itself signifies sincerity, memory, and intimacy, offering a stark contrast to the fast-paced, quantifiable engagement seen in platform-based models like Ant Forest. In this context, storytelling functions not merely as a rhetorical device but as a moral infrastructure, constructing sustainability as a matter of *renqing* (human sentiment) and cultural inheritance.

From a visual narrative theory perspective (De Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan 2008), the campaign’s emotive aesthetic—soft colour palettes, close-up textures, and slow pacing—facilitates narrative immersion, allowing viewers to inhabit the temporal and emotional worlds of ecological protagonists. Unlike didactic PSAs or commercial ads, *Letters to the Earth* avoids overt persuasion; instead, it invites reflective empathy and affective resonance, aligning sustainable action with moral sensibility rather than consumer rationality.

Yet this narrative intimacy also invites critical scrutiny. As Rahman et al. (2023) caution, culturally embedded emotional appeals can essentialise identity and moralise consumption in ways that obscure structural causes of environmental harm. By locating sustainability within nostalgic and idealised rural imaginaries, the campaign risks aestheticizing ecological discourse and displacing urgency with sentimentality. Moreover, the emphasis on inherited virtue may alienate urban Gen Z viewers less connected to such cultural symbols, thereby limiting cross-demographic reach. This aestheticization may reflect a middle-class nostalgia that distances younger urban viewers from the lived realities of ecological crisis.

Nevertheless, *Letters to the Earth* exemplifies how affective storytelling—when grounded in cultural semiotics—can expand the symbolic repertoire of sustainability communication. Through carefully crafted visual metaphors and emotionally saturated narratives, the campaign constructs a symbolic terrain where ecological care is not only communicated but culturally naturalised.

Technological naturalisation and everyday ethics. While *Letters to the Earth* foregrounds cultural narrative, it simultaneously integrates ecological technology as a visual and symbolic device for reinforcing sustainable values in everyday life. The campaign showcases FOTILE’s environmentally conscious appliances—high-efficiency hoods, water-saving dishwashers, and energy-optimised gas hobs—not merely as products but as mediators of ethical consumption. These technologies are framed not in technical terms but as enablers of ecological care within the domestic sphere. As illustrated in Fig. 7, their presentation within narrative vignettes—set in family kitchens, rural households, and natural landscapes—imbues them with moral valence and cultural resonance.

This integration aligns with what Kelleci and Yıldız (2021) describe as “value-aligned product semiotics”, whereby sustainable features are embedded in design narratives that symbolically link technical performance to broader ecological commitments. Here, the visual framing of appliances transcends utilitarian messaging: clean air, water, and energy efficiency become semiotic stand-ins for intergenerational protection, maternal care, and respect for nature. The product becomes a moral object, encoded with social responsibility.

From a symbolic consumption perspective (Baudrillard 1998), such technological objects are no longer valued purely for use—they serve as cultural texts through which ethical identity is performed. In *Letters to the Earth*, the appliance is re-signified as an ethical interface, mediating the relationship between consumer subjectivity and planetary stewardship. Sustainability is thus not



Fig. 7 Integration of ecological technology.

merely a policy directive but a tangible, habitual practice—ritualised through consumption.

However, this naturalisation of technology within moral discourse also merits scrutiny. As Veronica (2016) cautions, the seamless alignment of brand, ethics, and ecology may risk depoliticising sustainability, transforming structural challenges into solvable design problems. The campaign’s aestheticisation of green innovation may obscure the environmental externalities of production, the class-based accessibility of such technologies, or the technocratic framing of ecological responsibility. In this context, the symbolic coupling of ecological ethics with premium appliances may inadvertently reinforce socio-economic exclusions.

This symbolic coupling of ethics and technology echoes broader global trends in green consumerism, where sustainability becomes a design aesthetic rather than a systemic imperative (UNEP et al. 2017). Letters to the Earth offers a compelling example of how environmental technologies can be semiotically repositioned—not as isolated innovations but as embodied moral agents. Through visual storytelling and symbolic alignment, the campaign positions ecological design as a culturally legitimate and emotionally desirable expression of everyday ethics.

Mediated credibility and peer legitimacy. A central component of Letters to the Earth lies in its mobilisation of mediated credibility—anchored in the public persona of actor Chen Kun, whose involvement functions as a symbolic bridge between brand advocacy and civic trust. As a long-time environmental ambassador and social welfare advocate, Chen’s handwritten letter—widely circulated on Weibo and WeChat—lends the campaign an aura of authenticity and emotional sincerity. His public image, built around introspection and moral clarity, reinforces the message that sustainability is not only aspirational but personal. As shown in Fig. 8, the visualisation of Chen’s “letter to the earth” reconfigures a celebrity endorsement into a performative act of ethical self-disclosure.

This strategy aligns with He’s (2022) observation that China’s Generation Z places high value on emotional congruence and perceived authenticity in their interaction with public figures.

Unlike conventional influencer marketing that leverages attention economies, Letters to the Earth constructs a parasocial intimacy, where the spokesperson is not merely promoting a product, but participating in a collective moral gesture. In this sense, mediated credibility becomes a distributed affective resource—transferring trust from the figure to the message and its associated brand.

More broadly, this participatory logic extends into peer circulation. The campaign encourages users to share their own “letters to the earth” via WeChat moments, branded hashtags, and co-creation platforms. This strategy taps into what Carpentier (2011) terms “structured participation”, where participation is invited within controlled parameters to simulate grassroots engagement. User-generated content and emotional testimony function not only as expressions of individual concern but as legitimacy signals within peer networks—normalising sustainability as a socially desirable discourse.

Yet this model of mediated participation is not without its contradictions. While the campaign avoids overt commercialism, it remains embedded in a highly curated affective economy, where authenticity is manufactured, and emotional capital becomes a strategic asset. The fusion of celebrity virtue and brand voice may obscure the institutional interests shaping sustainability discourse. As Zhu (2020) notes, youth audiences increasingly resist corporate greenwashing, especially when sustainability is framed as moral theatre devoid of structural accountability.

Nevertheless, Letters to the Earth demonstrates how mediated trust and emotional contagion can serve as gateways to participatory sustainability culture. By leveraging affective credibility and peer validation, the campaign repositions sustainability from abstract value to shared social practice—symbolically affirmed, emotionally circulated, and collectively performed. While this emotional intimacy fosters engagement, it also imposes normative models of ecological virtue through carefully curated celebrity personae—blurring the boundary between ethical advocacy and image branding.

Cross-brand affiliation and distributed advocacy. In addition to its emotive narratives and mediated credibility, Letters to the Earth

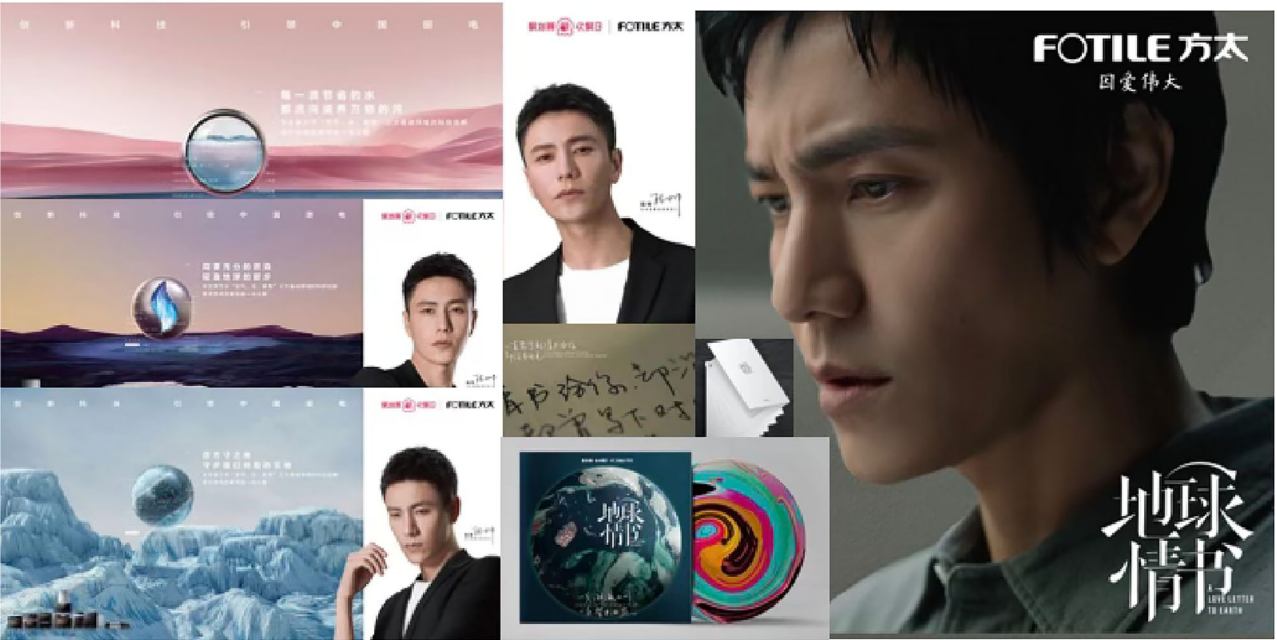


Fig. 8 Influencer advocacy and conscious consumption.



Fig. 9 Collaborative promotion and brand synergy.

leverages extensive cross-brand collaboration as a mechanism for scaling sustainability discourse and constructing distributed advocacy networks. By partnering with over 50 national brands across diverse sectors—from cultural institutions to consumer goods—FOTILE curated a collective campaign under the unified theme of “100 Love Letters to the Earth”, generating more than 200 million views and widespread social media interaction. As visualised in Fig. 9, these collaborative outputs shared consistent symbolic motifs—handwritten letters, earth-toned palettes, and emotionally introspective visuals—establishing visual and ideological coherence across the ecosystem.

From a symbolic communication perspective, such brand affiliation operates as a form of semiotic alignment, wherein sustainability becomes a shared narrative currency among brands seeking cultural legitimacy. Rather than promoting isolated corporate responsibility, the campaign constructs a meta-narrative of ecological solidarity—dispersed across logos, formats,

and audiences, yet unified by an affective and moral frame. This reflects what Sesini et al. (2020) term “networked sustainability meaning-making”, where diverse actors collectively author and circulate environmental values to reinforce normative consensus.

This distributed advocacy model also embodies participatory logic at the institutional level. Each collaborating brand effectively functions as a symbolic relay, amplifying campaign visibility while reaffirming sustainability as a cross-sectoral imperative. Such alignment lends credibility to the message and extends its reach into new cultural domains—education, publishing, and design—beyond FOTILE’s original market. The strategy mirrors Jenkins’ (Arning 2009) notion of “spreadable media”, wherein meaning is co-produced and disseminated through collaborative affiliations, not merely top-down broadcasting.

However, the institutionalisation of shared advocacy also invites critical interrogation. While the campaign avoids overt commercial competition, its reliance on brand synergy may lead

to a dilution of ideological depth, transforming sustainability into a stylistic consensus rather than a contested ethic. Moreover, as consumers grow increasingly attuned to performative sustainability, the symbolic capital generated by cross-brand alignment must be matched by demonstrable structural commitments—otherwise, the campaign risks being interpreted as affective branding masked as collective responsibility. Moreover, in an ecosystem dominated by state–market entanglements, such campaigns may risk privileging ideologically safe narratives, while sidelining more radical critiques of environmental justice.

Even so, Letters to the Earth offers a notable case of how sustainable consumption advertising can evolve beyond individual brand storytelling into a networked cultural event. Through symbolic coherence and participatory affiliation, the campaign constructs an expansive, emotionally saturated semiotic field—where environmental values are socially shared, visually codified, and institutionally endorsed.

Summary. Letters to the Earth reconfigures sustainable consumption as a culturally embedded narrative practice—mobilising affective storytelling, symbolic coherence, and mediated participation to construct a collective moral imagination. By aligning sustainability with renqing, domestic virtue, and emotionally credible advocacy, the campaign builds a symbolic ecology that normalises ecological care as cultural belonging. However, this emotionally harmonious structure also aestheticises environmentalism, potentially masking deeper systemic contradictions. As a semiotically rich yet ideologically managed campaign, Letters to the Earth reveals how sustainable advertising can function more as cultural affirmation than critical disruption.

Buy the Hell Out. Buy the Hell Out, created by students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), critiques the contradiction between consumerism and ecological messaging. As a reaction against formulaic sustainability campaigns, this initiative appropriates meme culture, counter-advertising language, and visual shock tactics to provoke reflection.

Symbolic encoding is marked by deliberate subversion. The slogan “Buy the Hell Out” mimics promotional commands while sarcastically condemning excessive consumption. The campaign recycles commercial symbols—shopping bags, QR codes, and sale graphics—but distorts them to expose contradictions in green marketing.

Visual immersion is achieved through collage, fragmentation, and anti-aesthetic choices that disrupt viewer expectations. Many posters use over-saturation, visual noise, and juxtaposition to amplify discomfort. Instead of smooth narratives, the campaign deploys visual friction, forcing audiences to pause and decode meaning.

On participatory orchestration, although the campaign lacks a digital infrastructure like Ant Forest, its viral spread across Weibo and Xiaohongshu demonstrates grassroots interactivity. Users shared reinterpretations, added commentary, and debated its provocations, turning it into a dialogic platform rather than a static PSA. However, its impact remains mostly discursive—raising awareness but with limited behaviour conversion.

This case illustrates the limits and potentials of symbolic resistance in youth-driven green advertising: while it disrupts dominant narratives, it may risk aesthetic fatigue or alienation without actionable alternatives.

Symbolic inversion and anti-consumerist provocation. At the heart of Buy the Hell Out lies a symbolic inversion strategy that subverts the cultural logics of consumption through deliberate absurdity. By offering strands of human hair—packaged, labelled,

and sold for RMB 0.1 on Taobao—the designers transform bodily waste into a commercial artefact, collapsing the boundary between commodity and critique. This act reframes the logic of value not as use or status, but as symbolic absurdity, thereby exposing the arbitrariness and constructedness of consumer desire.

This design gesture aligns with what Baudrillard (1998) terms “sign-value critique”: the deliberate inflation or disruption of symbolic codes to reveal the ideological operations of consumption itself. The hair, stripped of any intrinsic worth, becomes a metonym for surplus, excess, and identity commodification. Each item—labelled with a serial number and production date—parodies industrial rationality while mimicking the aesthetic of high-end branding. As visualised in Fig. 10, the material artefact serves as both product and polemic, inviting audiences to reflect on the spectacle of sustainability and the absurd lengths to which symbolic consumption extends.

Rather than resolving contradictions between ecological ethics and consumer practice, Buy the Hell Out foregrounds them. Its irony is not playful but epistemic: it functions as what Barthes (1979) would call a “counter-myth”—a secondary sign system that deconstructs the ideological naturalisation of green consumerism. In doing so, it destabilises the optimistic aesthetics of mainstream sustainable advertising, opting instead for visual discomfort and conceptual disturbance.

Importantly, the project also challenges the moral authority typically claimed by SCA initiatives. It refrains from offering solutions, instead amplifying discomfort and interpretive ambiguity. This refusal to persuade—combined with its refusal to beautify—creates a space of critical reflexivity. By rejecting resolution, it forces the viewer to confront the complicity of symbolic systems in sustaining ecological and ideological harm.

In essence, Buy the Hell Out functions not as a persuasive communication, but as a symbolic interruption. Its anti-consumerist provocation reframes sustainability as a question, not an answer—reclaiming the semiotic terrain of advertising as a site for critical engagement rather than behavioural compliance. Rather than offering constructive alternatives, the project enacts symbolic destruction—deconstructing the affective consensus of green branding by staging unsolvable contradiction.

Aesthetic minimalism and visual estrangement. In sharp contrast to the emotional richness and visual harmony of mainstream sustainable advertising, Buy the Hell Out adopts an aesthetic of deliberate restraint and estrangement. Its design language—monochromatic tones, sparse composition, and clinical typography—rejects ornamental appeal in favour of conceptual tension. Product images are stark and affectless: single strands of hair, neatly sealed in transparent bags, marked only by serial numbers and dates. As shown in Fig. 11, this minimalist presentation strips the visual field of narrative cues, confronting viewers with a visual vacuum that resists interpretation.

This mode of aesthetic minimalism serves not as stylistic preference but as a strategic disruption of advertising’s affective infrastructure. According to Veronica (2016), the dominant function of advertising imagery is to seduce, soothe, or affirm—deploying beauty and coherence to naturalise ideological content. Buy the Hell Out reverses this principle: its refusal of visual gratification produces what Brechtian aesthetics would call “alienation effects”, prompting audiences to step back from emotional identification and instead reflect critically on what is being presented—and what is not.

The visual estrangement deployed here also resists the spectacularisation of sustainability. Unlike campaigns that use lush nature scenes, smiling families, or digital metaphors of progress, Buy the Hell Out avoids environmental iconography

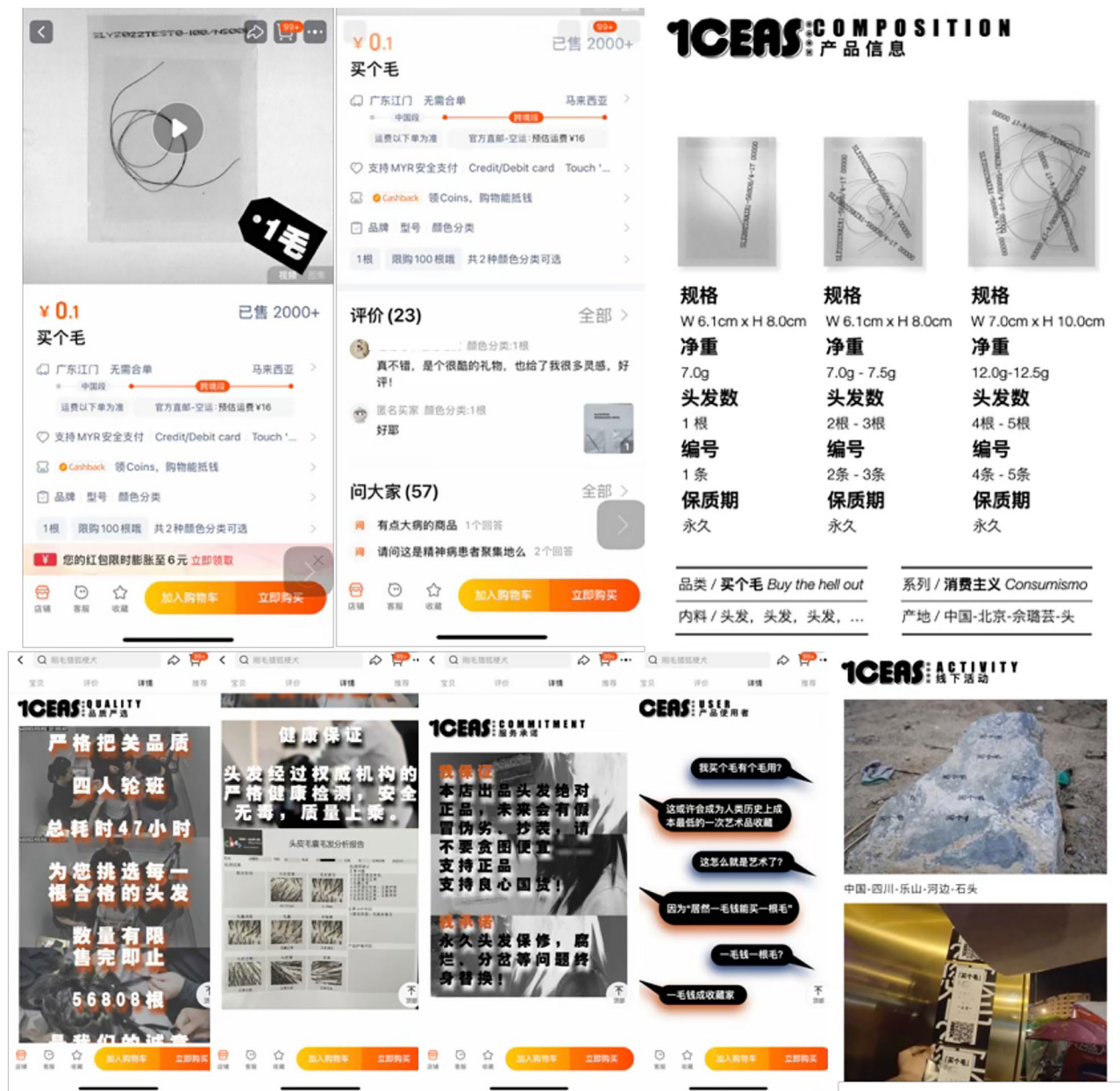


Fig. 10 Symbolic narrative and critique of consumerism.

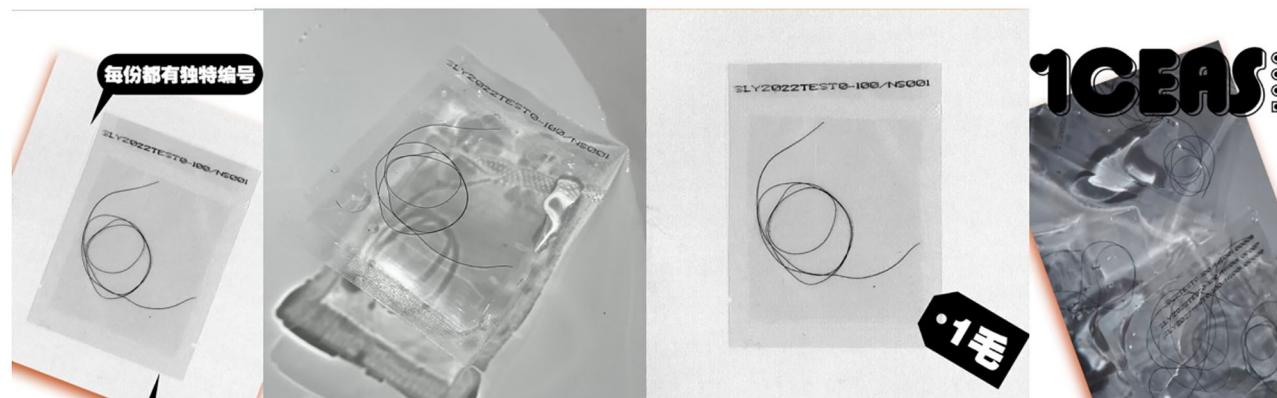


Fig. 11 Minimalist visual aesthetics.



Fig. 12 New media amplification and peer advocacy.

altogether. There are no trees, no rivers, no appeals to the future. Instead, the viewer is faced with a banal yet unsettling object—human hair as commodity—devoid of narrative comfort or visual optimism. This semiotic inversion aligns with what Arning (2009) describes as a strategy of ironic critique, in which kitsch aesthetics and symbolic dissonance are deployed not to clarify meaning, but to provoke discomfort, reflexivity, and a re-evaluation of consumerist norms.

Yet this strategy also entails communicative risk. The project's aesthetic opacity and visual coldness may alienate viewers unfamiliar with its critical codes, limiting its interpretive accessibility. Its resistance to visual pleasure may be misread as indifference or nihilism rather than critique. But herein lies its radical proposition: by undermining advertising's seductive logic, Buy the Hell Out opens up a space for alternative visualities—ones that invite discomfort, provoke ambiguity, and re-politicise the act of looking.

In sum, the project's minimalist design is not merely a visual style, but a refusal—of spectacle, of persuasion, of resolution. It exemplifies how aesthetic subtraction can operate as a critical tactic in sustainability discourse, unsettling the smooth visual grammar of green consumerism and making space for estranged reflection. This inversion of visual norms positions Buy the Hell Out not merely outside the dominant aesthetic order, but against it—turning absence into effect and estrangement into critique.

Peer circulation and platform subversion. While Buy the Hell Out originated as an experimental design project within an academic setting, its influence was amplified through peer circulation and viral traction on Chinese social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu, WeChat, and Taobao. The project's symbolic ambiguity and visual rupture attracted attention not through institutional dissemination, but via user-generated content (UGC), commentary threads, and participatory reinterpretation. As shown in Fig. 12, reposts often included ironic captions, meme overlays, or aesthetic remixes, extending the campaign's meaning beyond its original form into a subcultural vernacular of critique and play.

This circulation model exemplifies what Jenkins (2016) describes as “spreadable media”—where audiences do not passively consume but actively recontextualise, fragment, and

reframe content within their own networks. In contrast to traditional sustainable advertising campaigns that tightly manage message framing and brand alignment, Buy the Hell Out embraces semantic instability and platform remixability. Rather than resisting appropriation, it leverages it—turning its symbolic strangeness into a participatory catalyst for interpretive engagement.

Importantly, this circulation operates within—and against—the architecture of mainstream e-commerce and social media platforms. By inserting critique into Taobao's marketplace interface, the campaign exploits the visual and rhetorical conventions of online retail to stage its conceptual inversion. Product descriptions mimic standard commercial language; item listings generate algorithmic visibility; aesthetic minimalism echoes boutique design brands. Yet all of this is deployed ironically, subverting platform expectations from within.

This strategy resonates with Carpentier's (2011) notion of “maximalist participation”, where users are not merely interactive but politically engaged in reconfiguring symbolic orders. Through sharing, mocking, remixing, or even purchasing the hair products, participants enact a form of tactical disruption that both critiques and exploits the very platforms it inhabits. Participation here is not instrumental (e.g., tree planting, leaderboard climbing), but reflexive and dissent-oriented.

However, platform subversion is not without limitations. As Zhu (2020) notes, Gen Z audiences are simultaneously resistant to and dependent on digital systems, and subversive content may be rapidly commodified or neutralised through algorithmic absorption. The irony of Buy the Hell Out—once stripped of its critical context—risks becoming an aestheticised quirk, assimilated into the same consumer spectacle it seeks to critique.

Nonetheless, the project demonstrates how peer-driven participation can expand the symbolic terrain of sustainable discourse through irony, appropriation, and tactical intervention. It signals a shift from structured behavioural campaigns to decentralised, culturally coded critiques—where sustainability is neither instructed nor incentivised, but subversively circulated and collectively renegotiated. Yet the more subversive its message, the faster it risks being aesthetically absorbed—caught between tactical intervention and algorithmic domestication.



Fig. 13 Intellectual engagement and philosophical reflection.

Philosophical discomfort and cognitive reflexivity. Unlike conventional sustainability campaigns that aim to inspire hope, evoke empathy, or motivate behavioural change, Buy the Hell Out deliberately suspends emotional resolution and narrative closure. The campaign invites philosophical discomfort by staging a provocation that refuses interpretation on moral or functional terms. Its designers describe their intention as “creating public misunderstanding to provoke deeper questioning”—a formulation that foregrounds opacity as method and unease as message. As seen in Fig. 13, the visual frame offers no guiding metaphors, no explanatory slogans, and no path to redemption—only repetition, fragmentation, and absurdity.

This strategy exemplifies what Hua et al. (2020) identify as cognitive engagement—a communication mode that resists affective saturation in favour of intellectual stimulation. By withholding emotional gratification and narrative coherence, the project prompts audiences to interrogate their own assumptions about value, waste, authenticity, and ecological ethics. In doing so, it repositions sustainability not as a behaviour to adopt, but as a semiotic system to critique.

Moreover, the philosophical abstraction of Buy the Hell Out operates within the aesthetic tradition of *détournement*: the radical reconfiguration of symbolic materials to disrupt ideological narratives. Through its minimalist artefact—the commodified hair—the campaign forces viewers to confront the absurd logics of commodification itself. Rather than mobilising guilt, hope, or virtue, it confronts the viewer with ambiguity, inviting not action but reflection.

This reflexive stance marks a departure from the persuasive imperatives that dominate sustainable consumption advertising. As Jahari et al. (2022) note, most SCA frameworks assume that sustainability communication must be affectively engaging and action-oriented. Buy the Hell Out subverts this assumption by foregrounding meaninglessness, discomfort, and irony—not as communicative failures, but as philosophical devices to re-politicise the symbolic infrastructure of consumption.

Nevertheless, such cognitive opacity poses clear limits to reach and legibility. The project’s intellectual density and aesthetic austerity may exclude less media-literate or subculturally attuned audiences, raising questions about accessibility, elitism, and cultural capital. Its refusal to persuade is also a refusal to

universalise—a strength in ideological critique, but a limitation in broad social mobilisation.

Still, as a counterpoint to emotionally saturated, institutionally scripted forms of SCA, Buy the Hell Out provides a rare example of symbolic reflexivity and conceptual resistance. It challenges not only what sustainable advertising shows, but how it makes us think—and who gets to decide what sustainability means. This strength in critical provocation may also be its limit: intellectual density, while generative for subcultural critique, may hinder broader discursive adoption or civic mobilisation.

Summary. Buy the Hell Out reimagines sustainable advertising not as a vehicle for behavioural alignment, but as a space of rupture, irony, and reflexive dissent. Unlike the emotionally immersive or culturally grounded strategies of the other cases, it operates through visual estrangement, symbolic provocation, and semiotic resistance.

Rather than advancing harmonious narratives, it dismantles them—turning discomfort into a message and ambiguity into an ethic. While this aesthetic and philosophical opacity may limit mainstream adoption, its value lies in expanding the expressive boundaries of sustainability discourse, highlighting not what should be done—but what cannot be ignored.

While the campaign generated substantial online visibility, the precise scope of user participation remains difficult to quantify due to data limitations. Thus, claims regarding its participatory impact are presented with interpretive caution and acknowledged as a limitation. Future studies may incorporate digital ethnography or platform analytics to validate these observations.

Discussion

The Symbolic-Visual-Participatory (SVP) framework. This section consolidates the conceptual core of this study: the Symbolic-Visual-Participatory (SVP) framework for designing sustainable consumption advertising (SCA) targeted at China’s Generation Z. Synthesised through iterative engagement with theoretical models, empirical observations, and campaign-level analysis, this tri-dimensional framework captures the multifaceted ways in which sustainability can be symbolically

Table 2 Case-based mapping to the SCA-SVP framework.

Case	Thematic code (Keyword)	Sub-mechanism	SCA-SVP dimension
Ant Forest	Green leaderboard	Behavioural activation	Participatory orchestration
Ant Forest	Interface animation	Mobile-native visualisation	Visual immersion
Ant Forest	Energy icon animations	Interface metaphor	Visual immersion
FOTILE	Handwritten letters	Heritage symbolism	Symbolic encoding
FOTILE	Emotional voiceover	Emotional storytelling	Visual immersion
FOTILE	Ancestral care imagery	Cultural resonance	Symbolic encoding
FOTILE	Co-branded advocacy	Collaborative advocacy	Participatory orchestration
CAFA	Minimalist visual form	Minimalist critique	Visual immersion
CAFA	Symbolic recontextualization	Subcultural repositioning	Symbolic encoding
CAFA	Fragmented storytelling	Visual estrangement	Visual immersion

constructed, visually mediated, and socially enacted within Gen Z’s communicative ecology.

Table 2 provides a cross-case mapping matrix that aligns specific tactics from the three analysed campaigns—Ant Forest, Letters to the Earth, and Buy the Hell Out—with the SVP framework’s core dimensions. Each tactic is coded thematically and situated according to its communicative function, offering a comparative view of how diverse strategies contribute to symbolic encoding, visual immersion, or participatory orchestration.

This matrix foregrounds the diversity of tactics used by each campaign while clarifying their conceptual alignment. Symbolic Encoding refers to the mobilisation of culturally saturated signs—ranging from heritage idioms to ironic memes—that embed environmental meaning within Gen Z’s value systems. Visual Immersion encompasses aesthetic and narrative strategies, including mobile-native visual flows, metaphorical continuity, and intentional visual estrangement, that shape affective and cognitive response. Participatory Orchestration involves gamified structures, influencer engagement, co-creation tools, and peer-to-peer circulation that transform symbolic understanding into interactive and socialised practices.

The triadic logic of symbolic, visual, and participatory communication is further consolidated in the proposed SCA-SVP framework. This model visually synthesises the cross-case thematic findings into a layered communicative structure, highlighting both the overarching dimensions and their underlying mechanisms (see Fig. 14).

This mapping reveals that effective SCA campaigns are not defined by a single mode of engagement, but by the orchestration of multiple dimensions—semiotic, aesthetic, and interactive—that resonate with Gen Z’s values, emotions, and behaviours. The diversity of strategies also highlights the operational flexibility of the SVP model, allowing for both direct persuasion and critical provocation.

Figure 14 illustrates the finalised SVP framework. It adopts a concentric structure: the inner ring defines three interdependent communicative dimensions, while the outer segments represent nine sub-mechanisms distilled from cross-case thematic analysis, including heritage symbolism, interface metaphors, emotional storytelling, and digital co-creation.

Each dimension plays a distinct role in shaping how sustainability is framed and experienced. Symbolic Encoding anchors the message within cultural narratives and identity constructs; Visual Immersion translates symbolic meaning into emotionally charged and cognitively accessible experiences; Participatory Orchestration activates these meanings in the social sphere through interaction, peer diffusion, and community enactment.

The SVP framework aligns with and extends key conceptual traditions in advertising and media theory. Symbolic Encoding is informed by symbolic consumption and visual culture studies



Fig. 14 SCA-SVP three-dimensional framework.

(Baudrillard 1998; Schroeder and Zwick 2004), which theorise the performative role of signs in constructing values and identities. Visual Immersion builds on semiotic and aesthetic approaches to image-based meaning-making (Barthes 1979), highlighting how visual estrangement and metaphor shape audience affect and cognition. Participatory Orchestration draws from participatory culture theory (Jenkins 2016; Carpentier 2011), emphasising Gen Z’s preference for co-creation, gamification, and performative digital rituals in engaging with sustainability discourse.

Importantly, the SVP framework does not prescribe a fixed sequence or formula. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interplay among dimensions, allowing campaign designers to tailor emphasis based on audience profile, platform ecology, and communicative intent. For instance, Buy the Hell Out privileges symbolic disruption and visual estrangement to provoke reflexivity, whereas Ant Forest relies on gamified interactivity and emotional cues to embed sustainability into digital routines. Letters to the Earth integrates cultural nostalgia with visual empathy to promote value alignment.

It is important to note that the symbolic and visual dimensions are not mutually exclusive categories but analytical lenses. Most campaign elements—such as visual metaphors or cultural imagery—operate across multiple dimensions simultaneously. This interpretive flexibility enhances the framework’s adaptability to real-world design contexts.

By synthesising these modalities, the SVP framework offers a coherent yet adaptable design blueprint—one that bridges theoretical foundations and applied practice. It enables researchers, advertisers, and sustainability communicators to critically analyse, strategically design, and reflexively evaluate sustainability messages within and beyond the Chinese Gen Z context.

Framework implications and practical mechanism. The SCA–SVP framework—synthesised from symbolic, visual, and participatory strategies across three emblematic campaigns—offers not only a theoretical lens but a practice-oriented model for designing culturally responsive sustainability communication targeting Chinese Generation Z. It functions as a conceptual scaffold and a diagnostic tool to guide both the creation and evaluation of sustainable consumption advertising (SCA).

This section translates the abstract framework into practical strategies, articulating how each of the three dimensions—Symbolic Encoding, Visual Immersion, and Participatory Orchestration—can be operationalised through communicative mechanisms that align with Gen Z's aesthetic values, media habits, and identity logics.

1. **Symbolic Encoding:** This dimension reconstructs sustainability through culturally saturated semiotic systems. It embeds environmental meaning within the vernacular of Gen Z's symbolic ecosystem—memes, idioms, heritage imagery, and subcultural references. Rather than external prescriptions, sustainability becomes internalized as social currency and identity performance. Heritage Symbolism (e.g., FOTILE's ancestral themes) invokes cultural continuity. Cultural Resonance aligns with generational value systems and national ethos. Subcultural Repositioning (e.g., CAFA's satirical kitsch) embeds critique within youth-driven visual slang. These mechanisms enable symbolic convergence between environmental ethics and Gen Z's social expression, thereby enhancing message relatability and virality.
2. **Visual Immersion:** Beyond aesthetics, this dimension governs how messages are emotionally and cognitively received. Drawing on visual narrative theory and affective design, it shapes how sustainability is felt, processed, and remembered. Interface Metaphors (e.g., Ant Forest's game UI) render abstract impact tangible. Emotional Storytelling activates empathy and prosocial affect through humanized narratives and sonic cues. Visual Estrangement (e.g., Buy the Hell Out's anti-design) provokes interpretive rupture, catalyzing critical reflection. Together, these visual strategies transform sustainability from a rational proposition into a visceral, emotionally charged experience—enhancing narrative salience and mnemonic retention.
3. **Participatory Orchestration:** This dimension repositions audiences from passive receivers to co-creators. It recognises that for Gen Z, interaction equals attention—and that behavioural activation is often driven by gamified systems and social co-performance. Behavioural Activation (e.g., Ant Forest's green leaderboard) gamifies ecological action. Collaborative Advocacy (e.g., FOTILE's brand–user co-endorsed narratives) fosters trust and alignment. Digital Co-Creation (e.g., CAFA's viral remix culture) decentralises narrative control and multiplies symbolic reach.

Together, these mechanisms embed sustainability into everyday social rituals—transforming it from a value proposition into a

lived, visible, and collectively enacted practice. The SCA–SVP framework is best suited to digitally native, symbolically expressive, and culturally embedded campaigns—those aiming not merely to inform, but to transform sustainability into a lived, shareable, and identity-consistent experience. Specifically, it provides:

A design blueprint for communicators and advertisers to craft emotionally resonant, semiotically rich, and interaction-ready campaigns.

An evaluation rubric for auditing existing SCA campaigns across three dimensions and nine sub-mechanisms.

A strategy compass for aligning campaign goals with Gen Z's expectations of authenticity, subcultural fluency, and participatory value.

However, its application may be constrained in institutional contexts prioritising didactic instruction or one-way messaging. In such cases, symbolic and visual strategies may still provide an entry point for enhancing audience engagement, even if participatory features are limited.

Future research. This study introduced the SCA–SVP framework to conceptualise how sustainable consumption advertising (SCA) can engage China's Generation Z through symbolic encoding, visual immersion, and participatory orchestration. Future research could further extend the framework along several directions. First, audience reception studies—such as interviews, ethnographic observation, or longitudinal tracking—can evaluate how Gen Z interprets and responds to symbolic–visual strategies across different media formats and life contexts.

Second, cross-cultural validation may test the framework's adaptability to other cultural settings or generational cohorts, thereby assessing its generalisability and refining its symbolic and participatory mechanisms in context-sensitive ways.

Third, the growing influence of AI-generated content, algorithmic recommendation systems, and immersive platforms (e.g., AR/VR) opens new questions for the symbolic and visual dimensions of sustainability communication. Future studies could explore how generative technologies reshape the aesthetic and participatory dynamics outlined in the SVP model.

Fourth, the framework could be operationalised in applied contexts—as a creative planning tool, campaign diagnostic rubric, or pedagogical model. Collaborations between researchers, designers, and sustainability practitioners could help adapt the SVP framework for real-world evaluation and co-design processes. The SVP framework is currently undergoing copyright registration as part of a doctoral innovation output, further supporting its applicability in both scholarly and professional domains.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the evolving landscape of sustainable advertising by offering a culturally responsive, design-oriented framework rooted in both theoretical construction and empirical observation. The SCA–SVP model offers a foundation for further comparative, interdisciplinary, and practice-driven inquiry into how sustainability messages can become emotionally resonant, socially co-produced, and symbolically embedded in the everyday lives of Generation Z.

Data availability

This study uses publicly available campaign artefacts and publicly visible platform engagement information. Source documentation and collection details are provided in Supplementary File 1 (Data Documentation and Source Inventory), and the codebook and coding protocol are provided in Supplementary File 2 (Codebook). No proprietary datasets or personal data were collected.

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Author contributions

YG: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing; Project administration. RCM: Supervision; Methodology; Writing – review and editing. EP: Formal analysis (independent coding); Validation (coding reconciliation and consensus checking); Methodology (codebook refinement); Writing – review and editing. YF: Formal analysis (co-coding support); Validation (cross-checking coded excerpts and theme consistency); Writing – review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it did not involve recruitment of human participants, intervention, or collection of private personal data. The analysis is based on publicly available campaign materials and publicly accessible online content.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not required because the study did not involve direct interaction with individuals and did not collect identifiable private information. Where online engagement traces (e.g., likes, shares, comments) or illustrative user comments were referenced, they were drawn from publicly accessible posts/comments, and were presented in an anonymised form with no attempt to identify individuals.

Additional information

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