

Linguistics Initiative

ISSN 2775-3719

Volume 5, Number 2, (2025)

<https://doi.org/10.53696/27753719.52334>

Published by *Pusat Studi Bahasa dan Publikasi Ilmiah*

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Digital greenwashing and gendered eco-branding: A critical discourse analysis of AI-driven beauty marketing

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Abstract

This study examines the gendered aspects of green branding in the beauty industry, focusing on two global brands: The Body Shop and Garnier. Analyzing advertisements from 2021 to 2025, the research applies Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how each brand uses language, imagery, and discourse to construct eco-friendly messages. The findings reveal that both brands position women as central figures in sustainability narratives, using gendered visuals and language to reinforce environmental responsibility. The Body Shop emphasizes empowerment and community-driven initiatives, targeting an inclusive and socially conscious audience, while Garnier employs a more conventional approach, aligning eco-friendliness with traditional beauty norms. The study highlights the ways these brands intertwine gender and green marketing, contributing to the broader discourse on gendered eco-consumerism and greenwashing. The findings also suggest implications for future research in understanding the role of gender in shaping consumer responses to green marketing in emerging markets such as Indonesia.

Keywords

CDA, greenwashing, eco-branding

Introduction

The beauty industry has undergone significant transformation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the global health crisis initially disrupted supply chains and reduced consumer spending, the sector quickly adapted by shifting toward digital platforms, enhancing e-commerce capabilities, and embracing virtual try-on technologies (Statista, 2022). Post-2020, consumer interest in skincare, self-care, and wellness surged, giving rise to numerous indie beauty brands and increasing demand for personalized, sustainable, and ethically sourced products (Kayla Villena, 2021). This period of reinvention not only revitalized existing brands but also created space for new players to enter the market with innovative business models and branding strategies.

In Indonesia, the beauty industry has shown remarkable resilience and growth following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a notable increase in consumer spending on skincare and personal care products. With a female population exceeding 141.8 million and increasing public awareness of self-care, Indonesia holds significant potential to emerge as a key player in the industry (Kemenperin, 2025). This surge reflects not only a rising interest in self-care but also a shift in consumer preference toward sustainable and ethically branded products—an area where brands like Garnier and The Body Shop have gained significant traction. Both brands are well-known in Indonesia for promoting eco-conscious values through campaigns such as Garnier's "Green Beauty" initiative and The Body Shop's "Forever Against Animal Testing," which resonate particularly with women, who dominate the skincare consumer base. These gendered marketing strategies emphasize empowerment, wellness, and ethical responsibility, making them central figures in the discussion of green branding within Indonesia's beauty landscape.

In recent years, the intersection between environmental discourse and gender representation in corporate branding has become an increasingly strategic site for ideological meaning-making. As (Nurriel, Deardra, 2021) has discovered the case of a brand namely Re.juve's green branding on Instagram illustrates how environmental discourse is intertwined with gender representation, where ecofeminist values are selectively incorporated while stereotypical gender narratives persist revealing how corporate branding becomes a strategic site for ideological meaning-making at the intersection of sustainability and gender. Green branding, particularly in the beauty and personal care industries, is no longer confined to sustainability claims; it is often intertwined with aspirational identities that are gendered, emotive, and culturally resonant. Companies such as The Body Shop and Garnier (under L'Oréal Group) have cultivated eco-conscious personas through multimodal campaigns that foreground ethical sourcing, natural ingredients, and empowerment rhetoric often aimed at female consumers. However, beneath these polished narratives lies a growing concern: to what extent are these brands authentically committed to sustainability, and how do their gendered messages contribute to or obscure the risks of greenwashing?

This study conducts a comparative critical discourse analysis (CDA) of gender representation within green branding strategies employed by The Body Shop and Garnier from 2021-2025. Employing a longitudinal and multimodal approach, the research explores how visual, textual, and thematic elements construct eco-friendly and

gendered subjectivities, with attention to shifts in tone, strategy, and transparency over time. While The Body Shop has long positioned itself as a pioneer of ethical beauty, Garnier represents a more recent adopter of sustainability discourse under the broader corporate umbrella of L'Oréal raising important questions about the depth and sincerity of their branding evolution.

The rapid digitalization of the fashion and beauty industries accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed how sustainability and ethical values are constructed and communicated. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and official brand websites now serve as central arenas for green branding, often incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance engagement and credibility. Recent studies highlight the use of AI-driven technologies including algorithmic content curation, generative storytelling, and virtual influencers to craft persuasive environmental narratives (Mesjar et al., 2023). These AI-mediated strategies do not merely support marketing functions but actively shape the ideological framing of sustainability and gender representation. As such, digital content on these platforms becomes a legitimate site for critical inquiry. This study examines how AI-influenced visual and textual materials in green beauty marketing sourced from Instagram posts, YouTube advertisements, and brand websites construct discourses of environmentalism and gender, while potentially masking greenwashing practices.

Previous studies on green branding in the beauty industry have predominantly centered around consumer behavior, particularly focusing on green purchase intention, environmental attitudes, and the effectiveness of green marketing strategies ((Zahra & Soebiantoro, 2025); (Amalia et al., 2021)). Others have applied discourse analysis to explore the linguistic features of advertisements, aiming to reveal persuasive techniques or ideological messages embedded in green brand narratives (Ling & Xie, 2024). However, these studies often overlook the nuanced role of gender in shaping and reflecting corporate green discourses, especially in visual and textual materials. My research addresses this gap by critically analyzing how gender is positioned and represented in the multimodal communication of The Body Shop and Garnier's green campaigns in Indonesia. By examining both visual and verbal elements, this study highlights how environmental messaging is intertwined with gendered ideologies, offering a deeper understanding of how eco-conscious branding may reinforce or challenge existing gender norms.

The central objective is to critically evaluate how gender and environmental discourse intersect in corporate green branding, and how these intersections shift across time and context. By applying frameworks from Critical Discourse Analysis ((Fairclough, 1995); (Kress, Gunther & Leewen, Theo van, 2006)) Multimodal Discourse Analysis, and green marketing critique ((Delmas & Burbano, 2011); (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015)), the study seeks to uncover the ideological work embedded in brand storytelling. In doing so, it interrogates the blurry line between authentic sustainability and performative greenwashing, particularly as it manifests through gendered appeals in contemporary consumer culture.

This study offers a novel contribution by critically analyzing how gendered discourse and green marketing intersect in AI-driven beauty advertisements, using Fairclough's three-

dimensional CDA model. Unlike previous studies that often treat greenwashing and gender as separate phenomena, this research demonstrates how eco-branding strategies simultaneously construct femininity and environmental responsibility, particularly in emerging markets. The comparative focus on The Body Shop and Garnier from 2021–2023 further provides updated insights into how global brands frame sustainability narratives in the digital age.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing particularly on (Fairclough, 1995) three-dimensional framework and enriched with feminist and intersectional discourse theories (Michelle Lazar, 2005). The primary aim is to investigate how gendered meanings are constructed, reinforced, or contested within green branding discourses promoted by The Body Shop and Garnier. These two brands are selected for their global visibility, commitment to sustainability messaging, and distinct gender-oriented marketing styles. While both engage in eco-conscious branding, their approaches to gender representation vary, The Body Shop often frames its identity around ethical activism and inclusivity, whereas Garnier leans toward mainstream beauty ideals within the green consumerism framework.

The study will use purposive sampling to collect a multimodal dataset from each brand, including Instagram posts, YouTube video advertisements, official website content, and product packaging imagery published between 2021 - 2025. The use of Instagram captions, YouTube video advertisements, and official website content has been recognized in recent studies as valid data sources for qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Putri & Hidayat, 2022). These digital platforms offer rich multimodal discursive elements such as text, visuals, layout, and narrative framing that reflect broader ideological constructions embedded in corporate communication. As demonstrated in prior ecofeminist and branding discourse studies, such platforms serve not only as marketing tools but also as strategic spaces where language, image, and ideology converge, making them highly relevant for CDA.

The selection of The Body Shop and Garnier as focal brands in this study is grounded in both strategic relevance and research continuity. These two brands represent contrasting yet interconnected approaches to green branding within the global beauty industry. The Body Shop has long positioned itself as an ethical pioneer with strong environmental and feminist values, while Garnier, has more recently embraced sustainability narratives backed by AI-driven marketing strategies. This study extends the findings of my previous research, which revealed notable differences in how both brands construct their eco-identities through multimodal texts (Sinaga & Tarigan, 2025). Building upon those insights, the current research investigates how digital greenwashing and gendered eco-branding are discursively realized in the era of AI-powered beauty marketing.

Recent scholarship confirms that digital content on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube advertisements, and official brand websites frequently involves AI-mediated

creation or curation including algorithmic selection, generative storytelling, and virtual influencer content (Haque et al., 2024). Such AI-influenced materials embody ideological discourse about sustainability and gender, making them legitimate and rich sources for qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis.

The texts will be analyzed using a three-level CDA approach: textual analysis (language and visual elements), discursive practice (production and consumption contexts), and social practice (ideological and cultural implications). To deepen the visual dimension of the analysis, (Kress, Gunther & Leewen, Theo van, 2006) visual grammar framework will be applied, focusing on representational, interpersonal, and compositional meanings. This enables a systematic decoding of how visual modes (e.g., gaze, framing, salience, color) contribute to the construction of gender and environmental values. An intersectional lens will further guide the interpretation, revealing how gender is co-articulated with other social categories such as race, class, and age, and how these are embedded in green branding strategies.

The analysis follows (Fairclough, 1995) three-dimensional CDA model, which enables a critical reading of both textual and visual elements in the selected green branding materials. The first stage examines the linguistic and visual features (e.g., word choice, imagery, layout). The second considers how these texts are distributed and interpreted through digital platforms like Instagram or websites. Finally, the third level situates these texts within broader social practices, particularly focusing on how environmental responsibility and gender roles are ideologically constructed within Indonesian consumer culture.

To evaluate the authenticity of these green claims, the study draws on greenwashing frameworks (Delmas & Burbano, 2011); (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015), focusing on discursive inconsistencies, exaggerated claims, and absence of measurable environmental outcomes. The analysis is interpretive and critical, aiming to reveal how branding strategies not only reflect but also shape public perceptions of gender roles and environmental responsibility. The comparative nature of the study foregrounds how two brands under distinct corporate histories but overlapping markets navigate the terrain between ethical branding and performative sustainability.

Results

This study applies (Fairclough, 1995) three-dimensional CDA model to reveal how green branding messages produced by The Body Shop and Garnier not only promote environmental responsibility but also construct gendered identities within Indonesia's beauty market.

Table 1. Comparative Data on Digital Greenwashing Strategies by The Body Shop and Garnier

Brand	Platform	Green Branding Elements	Gender Representation	Key Discursive Strategies	Year
The Body Shop	Instagram, Youtube, Website	"Ethically sourced," "vegan," forest backgrounds, natural ingredients, sustainability slogans, earthy color palette	Feminine faces, ethnic diversity, nurturing tone, empowered and natural-looking women	Personalization, ethos, empowerment discourse, high visual modality, inclusive identity	2021-2025
Garnier		"Eco-friendly formula," recycling icon, "Green Beauty" initiative, biodegradable formula, plant-based imagery, green palette	Light-skinned female model, conventional beauty norms, subtle makeup, smiling and caring expressions	Scientific authority, personalization, myth of purity, appeal to eco-conscious femininity	2022-2025

Textual Features and Green Branding

Across all samples, both brands consistently employ eco-lexicon such as "ethically sourced," "vegan," "biodegradable," and "eco-friendly." These keywords are accompanied by natural imagery—forests, plants, and clean packaging design—which visually reinforce their environmental claims. For instance, The Body Shop's use of terms like "Community Fair Trade" and Garnier's "Green Beauty initiative" establish an ethos of sustainability. These textual and visual features are not merely informative but work to shape the products as ethical choices—supporting Fairclough's textual dimension, where language and visuals enact social values.

Table 2. Textual data

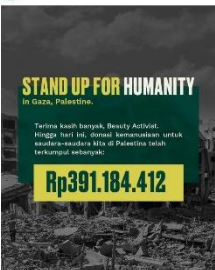
The Body Shop	Garnier
	
Source: YouTube the body shop (2022)	Source: YouTube Garnier (2022)

The Body Shop	Garnier
	
Source: thebodyshop.co.id	Source: garnier.co.id

Discursive Practice: Branding and Consumption

The analyzed advertisements appear primarily on Instagram and corporate websites, targeting digitally literate consumers, especially women. This reflects the discursive practice of green branding as not only promoting products but also inviting consumers to identify themselves with sustainability. The personalization strategy, “your skin,” “care for the planet with us”, suggests that environmentalism is an individual, feminized responsibility. Consumption becomes a moral act, where buying skincare is framed as activism.

Table 3. Discursive Data

The Body Shop	Garnier
 STAND UP FOR HUMANITY in Gaza, Palestine Thank you, Beauty Activists. As of today, our total donation collected to help our brothers and sisters in Palestine through the Humanity Fund has reached: Rp 391,184,412 Source: Instagram the body shop Indonesia (2023).	OUR COMMITMENTS  SOURCING LEBIH RAMAH  FORMULA LEBIH ALAMI  LEBIH BANYAK ENERGI TERBARUKAN  LEBIH BANYAK BAHAN BAKU RAMAH LINGKUNGAN More responsible sourcing, more natural formulas, increased use of renewal energy, more environmentally friendly raw materials Website: garnier.co.id (2025)

Social Practice and Gendered Ideologies

At the social level, the visuals repeatedly reinforce traditional feminine aesthetics: young women with glowing skin, soft lighting, and nurturing body language. The Body Shop tends to use more inclusive images (e.g., natural-looking women, ethnic diversity), whereas Garnier often aligns with mainstream beauty ideals (e.g., light-skinned, conventionally attractive models). While both brands claim eco-consciousness, their campaigns subtly embed gendered expectations, linking beauty, care, and environmental responsibility with femininity. This aligns with critiques of gendered greenwashing, where women are positioned as the primary caretakers of both their bodies and the planet.

Table 4. Social Data

The Body Shop	Garnier
 Create happiness and balance with #TheBodyShopIndo // #TBSGreenRamadan Together, Happy, Balanced Source: YouTube the body shop Indonesia (2023)	 1X Swipe: Cleanse Pollution Dust and Dull Skin with Garnier Micellar Cleansing Water Vitamin C1- FRESH & BRIGHT Source: YouTube Garnier shop Indonesia (2024)
 Have you planned your make-up look for Lebaran? Get 50% off on selected make-up products! Source: Instagram the body shop Indonesia (2025)	 GIVEAWAY ALERT! Get instantly bright & smooth skin — FREE! Source: Instagram Garnier Indonesia (2025)

Discussion

Gendered Green Branding in the Beauty Industry

The analysis of The Body Shop and Garnier reveals that green branding in the beauty industry is deeply intertwined with gendered marketing strategies. Skincare advertisements targeted at women often use emotive, descriptive language and visually harmonious elements to create experiential and emotionally resonant narratives. This gendered approach reinforces traditional roles and expectations in the beauty industry, suggesting a strategic effort to appeal to women through emotional and aesthetic appeals rather than functional ones (Deng, 2024). The use of eco-friendly claims and gendered visual narratives in these ads positions women not only as primary consumers but also as stewards of the environment. This invites women to feel responsible to the nature because they are emotionally targeted. This approach aligns with (Bayaah Ahmad, 2018) that the beauty industry frequently targets women with sustainability narratives, blending environmentalism with the growing trend of ethical consumerism. Women are a major consumer group in the beauty industry, and their purchase intention toward natural beauty products is significantly influenced by health and environmental consciousness. Marketers are encouraged to emphasize sustainability and product safety to align with women's attitudes and drive buying behavior. The idea that women are responsible for the well-being of both nature and family (as seen in Garnier's messaging) is a clear reflection of eco-feminist concerns, which argue that women's roles in society are often tied to nature and care.

The Body Shop leans into this discourse of empowerment, positioning sustainability not just as a product feature but as a moral imperative that resonates with feminist ideals. This supports the view of (Simon-Kumar, 2025), who argue that sustainability in advertising can empower women by framing eco-consumerism as both a personal and collective responsibility. Garnier, while also promoting sustainability, employs a more mainstream approach to femininity, focusing on beauty norms and appealing to women's desire for personal care and purity (Khoo, 2019).

Greenwashing and Brand Authenticity

The differentiation between the two brands also touches on the authenticity of their green claims. (Dewi & Tarina, 2024) highlight how brands like Garnier often fall into the greenwashing trap by overemphasizing product purity and environmental claims without providing concrete evidence. While Garnier uses scientific authority in its claims (e.g., "dermatologically tested" and "eco-friendly formulas"), these terms can obscure the actual environmental impact of the product's lifecycle. On the other hand, The Body Shop emphasizes community trade and ethical sourcing, which align more closely with authentic green marketing (Peattie & Crane, 2005), creating a narrative of corporate social responsibility that attempts to bridge the gap between product marketing and environmental activism.

Implications for Sustainable Marketing in Indonesia

This study has significant implications for green marketing in Indonesia, where beauty consumption is on the rise among younger, environmentally conscious consumers. As eco-consumerism becomes more popular, brands must be transparent and authentic in their sustainability claims to maintain consumer trust. Greenwashing refers to a type of green campaign in which companies attempt to promote a green brand image by presenting their business activities as environmentally friendly. However, in reality, these businesses might engage in genuinely eco-friendly practices during their production processes (Dewi & Tarina, 2024). Furthermore, as gender plays a central role in these campaigns, companies should consider more inclusive and intersectional marketing strategies that reflect the diverse social and environmental concerns of their consumers.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study focuses on the green branding strategies of The Body Shop and Garnier, it is limited to two global brands in the Indonesian market. Future research could extend this study to local Indonesian beauty brands and explore how local cultural and gender dynamics influence green branding in the region. Additionally, more research could explore the consumer response to these gendered green marketing strategies, especially among younger audiences who are becoming more skeptical of greenwashing.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight how gendered green discourses are strategically constructed through multimodal elements in social media and website branding. While these platforms were initially approached as sites of discourse production, a deeper reflection reveals that they are also shaped by underlying digital infrastructures, including algorithmic curation and AI-enhanced marketing tools. The visibility and repetition of certain eco-gendered narratives, such as associating green products with feminine care, purity, or ethical responsibility may be amplified by platform algorithms that prioritize engagement-driven content. Moreover, the increasing use of AI in automating captions, tailoring recommendations, or selecting influencer partnerships suggests that gendered green branding is not only a communicative act but also a computational one. These dynamics open new ethical and critical questions about the role of artificial intelligence in reproducing consumer ideologies and shaping environmental perceptions in digital spaces.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on green branding and gendered marketing by demonstrating how beauty brands like The Body Shop and Garnier construct environmental responsibility through gendered narratives. The findings show that while both brands use eco-friendly claims to appeal to consumers, they also position women as environmental stewards—reinforcing both traditional gender roles and feminine responsibility for nature. Future research could explore how local Indonesian

brands approach these issues and whether greenwashing continues to be a challenge in this rapidly growing market.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to the Department of Business Administration, Politeknik Negeri Kupang, for the academic support and research facilities that made this study possible. Special thanks are extended to colleagues and supervisors whose constructive suggestions and encouragement significantly contributed to the refinement of this article. The authors also acknowledge the foundational work of scholars in the fields of critical discourse analysis, green branding, and gender studies, which served as the theoretical framework of this research.

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