



The effectiveness of climate crisis representation in the 'Save the Arctic' campaign through a linguistic semiotics approach

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Abstract

Climate change is an urgent global issue with significant impacts on the survival of the earth, one of which can be seen in the environmental crisis in the Arctic region. Rising global temperatures, melting ice, and the exploitation of natural resources have triggered various environmental movements, including Greenpeace's 'Save the Arctic' campaign. This campaign employs visual and linguistic strategies to create a persuasive and ideological representation of the climate crisis. This study aims to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign from an environmental communication perspective using a linguistic semiotic approach. The research method used is qualitative, involving an analysis of campaign materials such as posters, slogans, videos, and Greenpeace's social media content. Data is analysed by identifying linguistic and visual signs and interpreting the ideological constructions behind the campaign messages. The findings reveal that Greenpeace's campaign successfully attracts global attention through emotional symbols and critical narratives, but still faces challenges in reaching sceptical groups and limitations in achieving concrete policy impacts. These findings provide important insights into the effectiveness of climate crisis representation in environmental campaigns and their contribution to shaping public awareness.

Keywords

climate change, environmental campaigns, Greenpeace, linguistic semiotics, environmental communication, Save the Arctic

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most pressing global issues that needs to be addressed. The melting of ice in the Arctic, rising sea levels, and increasing global temperatures are clear evidence of the climate crisis facing the world (Clayton, 2020). This situation has led to the emergence of various environmental organisations competing to raise public awareness, one of which is Greenpeace through its 'Save the Arctic' campaign (Hanscomb, 2024).

The Arctic is a region located in the northern hemisphere, specifically in the Arctic Ocean. The Arctic is currently under public scrutiny alongside the issue of global warming, as it plays a significant role in how the Earth will fare due to global warming (McPhee, 2024). Although the Arctic is a frozen and remote environment, its unique climate serves as an early indicator of global climate change and a driver of weather patterns worldwide (McQueen, 2021). In addition to the threat of climate change, the Arctic region is currently facing the threat of oil and gas drilling by several global companies. Industrial activities carried out by countries such as the United States, Russia, Canada, Norway, and Denmark are causing environmental damage in their quest to control 40% of the world's energy reserves, namely the oil and gas reserves stored within the Arctic region (Rowat, 2024).

This situation has sparked public concern to protect the Arctic region by taking action to demand that oil companies cease their drilling activities. Non-state actors from various parts of the world have also protested, leading to the emergence of the International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) in the field of the environment, namely Greenpeace (She, 2023).

Greenpeace launched the 'Save the Arctic' campaign in 2012 to protect the Arctic from fishing and oil drilling companies. The campaign employed various media, including visuals, slogans, videos, and symbolic actions, to clearly convey the urgency of saving the Arctic region. These representations were not only informative but also emphasised persuasive and emotional aspects. In this context, linguistic and semiotic studies play a role in analysing and examining how campaign messages are constructed and then interpreted by the general public.

Linguistically, the Greenpeace campaign relies on word choice, sentence structure, and language style to form a critical narrative. Additionally, visually, the campaign features symbols such as polar bears, melting ice, and cool colours as markers of the ecological crisis. This campaign representation does not merely convey information but shapes an ideological discourse that influences how the public understands the climate crisis (Hanscomb, 2024).

While effectively raising global awareness of the issue, Greenpeace's diverse campaign tactics also successfully attract members of the public from various backgrounds. However, the campaign also has several shortcomings that may hinder the achievement of its objectives. Therefore, this paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the Greenpeace Save the Arctic campaign from an Environmental Communication

perspective using a linguistic semiotic approach to obtain an objective evaluation of the campaign's implementation.

Research Question

How effective is the representation of the climate crisis in the 'Save the Arctic' campaign through a linguistic semiotic approach?

Research Objective

To examine and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the Greenpeace Save the Arctic campaign from an environmental communication perspective.

Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a linguistic semiotic analysis approach based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs. Saussure (1983) defines linguistic signs as a unity between the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical form or sound image of a sign, while the signified is the concept or meaning referred to. In Saussure's words, 'the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image'. In this study, the signifier includes visual elements such as images of polar bears, melting ice and cold colours, as well as linguistic elements such as campaign slogans and specific diction. The signified refers to the concept of climate crisis, the urgency of environmental protection, and the ideology of Arctic preservation that Greenpeace aims to establish through its Save the Arctic campaign (Hanscomb, 2024).

Data was collected through documentation of campaign materials, including posters, videos, slogans, and Greenpeace social media content, as well as secondary sources such as scientific articles and related news reports. The analysis process involved identifying the signifiers in the campaign materials, both visual and linguistic. Determination of signifiers associated with each signifier. Analysis of the relationship between signifiers to find their denotative and connotative meanings. Evaluation of the effectiveness of climate crisis representation based on Saussure's linguistic semiotic theory framework. This approach was chosen because Saussure's theory is able to reveal how signs are formed and organised to produce meanings that influence public perception of the climate crisis in the Arctic.

Results

The results of this study were obtained from an analysis of various Save the Arctic campaign materials published by Greenpeace during the period January–December 2023. The data analysed included various types of media with different text modes, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Types and Media of Campaigns Analysed

Media Type	Text Mode	Brief Description
Campaign Posters	Visual	Digital posters featuring polar bears, melting ice and slogans
Campaign Videos on Youtube	Multimodal	1-3 minute videos with verbal narration and visual illustrations
Instagram Post	Visual/Text	Photo and infographic posts with text captions
Official Campaign Slogans	Text	Slogans such as Save the Arctic and Protect the Polar Bear
Articles on the Greenpeace Website	Text/Visual	Articles with persuasive narratives and photos documenting the action

Key Findings and Analysis Based on Saussure's Theory

Holistic Scope of Issues

The campaign combines environmental, social, cultural, economic, and normative issues. The issue of melting ice is not only seen as an ecological problem, but also related to the survival of indigenous peoples and biodiversity. Within the framework of signifiant (signifier) and signifié (signified), the word 'Arctic' functions as a geographical signifier, but its signified is expanded to symbolise a multidimensional crisis. This arbitrary relationship is reinforced by text and visuals that link melting ice to human and animal suffering, forming a more complex collective meaning.

Visual and Verbal Framing Techniques

Greenpeace highlights threats to polar bears, indigenous communities, and the dangers of oil drilling through a combination of photos, videos, and text. The visual of a polar bear (signifiant) signifies the existence of the species, but its signified shifts to represent the climate crisis as a whole. This shift in meaning demonstrates the process of signification, which allows a single symbol to address broader issues through emotional connotations.

Effectiveness of Emotional and Rational Strategies

The campaign combines an emotional approach (sympathy for animals and indigenous communities) with rational data (facts about melting ice and economic impacts). The multimodal mode (text, visuals, audio) allows interaction between visual signifiers (images of cracking ice) and verbal signifiers (scientific data), making the signified more robust and difficult to break down, thereby reinforcing the meaning in the audience's minds.

The Potential Backlash Effect of Visualisation

Some materials, such as images of brown-furred polar bears or the video A Homeless Polar Bear in London, trigger manipulative perceptions and excessive fear. Visual

signifiers that are too extreme can shift the signified from urgency for action to scepticism about the message. The signifier-signified relationship becomes fragile when the audience interprets the signifier negatively.

Narrative Simplification and the Risk of Narrative Fallacy

Portraying oil companies as the sole culprits ignores the contribution of public consumption behaviour. When the signifier 'oil company' is singled out as the symbol of the crisis, the signified becomes reductionist. This limits the possibility of forming a more inclusive and collaborative meaning in efforts to resolve the problem.

Discussion

Strengths

The Save the Arctic campaign not only covers environmental issue, but also embraces various other dimensions, including social, cultural, and economic. In the article entitled "Arctic", Greenpeace provides details about arctic conditions, threats from oil drilling and unsustainable fishing companies, as well as an invitation to support the establishment of the Arctic sanctuary and the use of renewable energy. Apart from discussing the ecological aspect that the arctic ice is melting, in this article, Greenpeace highlights various dimensions, including the cultural and economic aspects of the indigenous community that their cultures and means of subsistence are in danger due to Arctic changes (Greenpeace, no date, para. 5). It also covers the biodiversity dimension, including Polar bears, plankton, whales, fish, and seabirds that depend on the Arctic ecosystem. According to Chris Rose, this multidimensional campaign technique is also included in one of the ideal campaign principles. Rose asserts that it must be able to deal with both the counter-intuitive (from science, for instance) and the intuitive and personal (from psychology and culture, for example) (Rose, 2010, p. 11).

Greenpeace swiftly selected some of this information to stand out, making the message conveyed easier to remember. This method, categorized as framing, involves choosing some facts to emphasize in messages (Robert Entman, 1993 as quoted in Franks, Hanscomb, & Johnston, 2018, p. 108). Instead of focusing on one single angle, Greenpeace also applies a variety of frames so that, as stated by Franks, Hanscomb, & Johnston (2018, page. 108), this can expand the audience to include people with different values and sensitivities, such as ecocentric or biocentric ones, or it can strengthen an argument by offering several arguments in favor of a cause. Greenpeace dissects the Arctic issue by including its ecological aspects, its people (Indigenous community), and its animals (polar bears, whales, and other animals). These multidimensional aspects can also touch audiences' basic human values, especially those categorized by Schwartz as tradition and universalism values. Tradition value is the acceptance, respect, and adherence to the values and customs of one's culture or religion (Schwartz, 2012, p. 6). Information about Indigenous communities' cultures loyal to the Arctic region can trigger sympathy for people who feel this specific group tradition is threatened. Meanwhile, Universalism values include tolerance, respect, understanding, and

safeguarding all people's and the environment's well-being (Schwartz, 2012, p. 7). The description of the ecosystem and affected wildlife provided by Greenpeace in its campaign can appeal to this value.

Apart from its multidimensional reach, the Save the Arctic campaign has been implemented massively and simultaneously in various countries worldwide, including the UK, USA, Nordic countries, Russia, New Zealand, Turkey, Spain, Austria, and others. This collaborative involvement shows that Greenpeace first "assembled the forces and mechanisms" before launching the movement in 2012, which Rose categorized in level 2 of the actions that campaigners must carry out after identifying what must be done, what would influence that change, and how to accomplish it at level 1 (Rose, 2017, p. 9). Another strategy that Greenpeace also strategically caught the momentum. The Save the Arctic campaign was launched in June 2012, utilizing the momentous occasion of Brazil's UN Rio+20 sustainable development summit. With more than 100 original supporters worldwide, the conference included more than 100 well-known people, including actors, authors, directors, musicians, and business executives (McCarthy, 2012, para. 2). By taking advantage of this moment, Greenpeace was able to immediately gain widespread attention throughout the world so that the audience would immediately recognize the subsequent execution of this campaign. In addition to the right momentum, in 2013, 28 Greenpeace activists accompanied by two journalists, known as the Arctic 30, set sail to the Prirazlomnaya oil platform in the Pechora Sea to peacefully protest against Gazprom's operations. There are no references that specifically explain whether the presence of these two journalists was invited intentionally by Greenpeace. However, this campaign appeals to the activist and journalist's experiential mind, allowing them to "learn directly from experience and see the world in concrete, images and stories" (Epstein, 1998, p.71; 2014, as quoted in Hanscomb, 2024, week 4). Even though the Arctic 30 members were jailed for two months in Russia (Greenpeace International, 2018, para. 1), this event showcased that the Save the Arctic campaign had reached the realm of experiential-based movements.

Greenpeace also maximizes its connections to reach more audiences and gain more support. Hundreds of celebrities have teamed up with Greenpeace International to advocate for an international Arctic sanctuary (Watts and Macalister, 2012, para. 1). The involvement of these celebrities enabled this campaign to have "authority power" in this regard is "referent power" (Hanscomb, 2024, week 1) in which the celebrities are usually adored by the public so that they are influential in gaining public's support in this campaign. However, a study revealed that despite the celebrity coverage, only about 27 articles in the UK national media covered Greenpeace's Save the Arctic Campaign (Alison, 2013, p. 346). Nevertheless, when compared with other campaigns researched by Anderson (Climate Siren), Save the Arctic exposure is still superior, even though the earlier campaign only used less officially endorsed celebrities (2013, p. 346).

Greenpeace also carried out a campaign by releasing a petition as "political engagement" (Hanscomb, 2024, week 1) for the public. The idea of this initiative was to gather at least one million people to sign a global petition to support the protection of the Arctic area (Watts and Macalister, 2012, para. 14). Surprisingly, as of 2019, the number of individuals signing the petition exceeded the target to be nearly 9 million people supporting the

petition (Greenpeace USA, 2019, para. 6). In this way, the public felt involved and moved to exercise their political rights, so it is no wonder its support was significant. This petition could also make people think that many have participated in this action (judging from the accumulation of signatories displayed). They were also be moved to follow the norm because people thought it was important. This phenomenon is known as pre conformity (Spakman & Walton, 2017 quoted in Sevillano and Olivos, 2019, p. 186). To maximize reach to diverse audiences, Greenpeace maximizes the use of social media, one of which is Facebook. A study by She in 2023 showed a correlation between the Save the Arctic petition and Greenpeace's messages on Facebook about this campaign and the support they received. The Greenpeace counter-accounts show its switching capacity in involving various stakeholder groups and boosting the campaign issue's global visibility (She, 2023, p. 408).

Apart from the momentum, strategy, and referent power, the biggest strength of Greenpeace's Save the Arctic Campaign should be its ability to provoke a conversation in society. As Rose (2017, p. 11) specifies in the principles for a good campaign, it must present a viable, appealing, and believable means of creating a novel and "additional difference". In order to halt production and send a message to the world that the Arctic was not for business, the Arctic 30 occupied a Russian oil rig as part of the Save the Arctic campaign (Rowat, 2014, para. 4). Unfortunately, Russian soldiers came from the sky and pointed a gun at them; This scene was then broadcast in 6 parts by the BBC with the very intriguing title *On Thin Ice: Putin v Greenpeace*, which starts on Sunday (McPhee, 2024, para. 3&8). One activist even admitted that he felt like he was in a James Bond movie scene when it happened (McPhee, 2024, para. 18). This incident certainly made this campaign attract more public attention because it is also relevant and associated with popular culture in society.



Fig 1. Greenpeace's Arctic Sunrise Ship (image source: the conversation.com)

Besides its difference from campaigns in general, this campaign is also communicable and communicates its agenda through action, image, and information to create a story. "Be communicable" is also one of the campaign principles proposed by Chris Rose. He states that a campaign that can communicate verbally and visually has strong emotional resonance, becoming a shortcut to help audiences understand the message (Rose, 2017, p. 11). Greenpeace headed for Russia's oil platform in the Pechora Sea in a ship painted and named "Arctic Sunrise". The walls of this ship are painted green and decorated with rainbow colors, and a white bird flies upwards. The Arctic Sunrise is an effective form of visual language, as explained by Rose (2017, p. 154), which involves creating a visual reflection of a strong element that influences people's reactions. This visualization provides a mental shortcut to understanding the campaign's objectives and mission at a glance. However, it is a shame that the "Arctic Sunrise" label is very small and not visible from a distance, unlike the "Greenpeace" label, which is written in large font.

Save the Arctic campaign also has a very strong moral legitimacy. This moral legitimacy is also one of the principles of an ideal campaign where it is necessary to change society, but that should not occur (Rose, 2017, p. 11). In this campaign, Greenpeace advocates a strong campaign proposition that contains a comprehensive campaign proposition that is formulated as RASPB (Hanscomb, 2024, week 10), which is identified as follows:

Responsible parties: The international law, Arctic Council, oil and fishing companies

Action : Direct action (oil platform occupation, protest and demonstration), public awareness (petition), legal advocacy, and collaboration with multisectors (including celebrities).

Solution : Making the Arctic a sanctuary area

Problem : Oil drilling and unsustainable fishing

Benefit : Wildlife and Indigenous community

The Save the Arctic campaign also has a very clear binary opposition, namely the conflict between nature and exploitation, and what is more interesting is that this campaign is often covered by the media (including Greenpeace's publication) with the title "Putin vs. Greenpeace". This title was used in an article published by the Guardian highlighting the arrest of 28 Greenpeace activists and two journalists by Russian authorities (Seale, 2024, para. 1). The existence of strong binary opposition in the news surrounding the Arctic Campaign makes this issue have news values or newsworthy (Hanscomb, 2024, week 8). Newsworthiness is defined as the story's capacity to draw in audiences (Cox, 2010, p.160, quoted in Hanscomb, 2024, week 8). Apart from having clear conflict or binary opposition, the news about the Save the Arctic campaign also explains the effects of oil drilling in this region. A press release published by Greenpeace USA with the title "Protect the Arctic" describes the catastrophic consequences for humans, animals, and the ecosystem (Greenpeace USA, no date, para. 5). The impacts explained in the story are also one component that makes it newsworthy since they have major ramifications or a more global impact than just minor ones (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 43). The progress

and the achievements are also covered by Greenpeace in its "Arctic" article. In the last two paragraphs, Greenpeace says that they have succeeded in getting several large companies to stop their activities in Arctic waters and then closes with an invitation to continue voicing this campaign and start switching to renewable energy to protect the Arctic in the long term (Greenpeace, no date, para. 10 & 11). This direct invitation is categorized as a prescriptive/injunctive norm, namely telling the public what they must do (Cialdini, 2003, p. 105 Sevillano & Olivos, 2019, p. 183). Furthermore, Sevillano and Olivos (2019, p. 184) also stated that the application of prescriptive norms combined with success indicators will increase the effectiveness of the message conveyed. This call to "Save the Arctic" can also appeal to the audiences' sense of moral duty as a form of normative value that they have. Normative emphasizes the appropriateness of actions, making individuals sensitive to their perceived obligations to do the right thing (Steg et al., 2014, p. 104).

Weaknesses

Several forms of execution of the Save the Arctic campaign can have a "boomerang effect" (Hanscomb, 2024, week 3). This effect can happen when an environmental campaign's message looks fake, damaging the communicating organization's reputation and making it more difficult for it to use other engagement strategies (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009, p. 363). Greenpeace Turkey published an image of a polar bear with some of its fur turning brown among the melting ice:



Fig 2. Polar bear with fur turning brown (Image Source: Greenpeace Turkey, n.d.)

Even though the message to be conveyed is how critical the Arctic situation is with melting ice and the threat to the polar bear's habitat, some people may consider this

campaign manipulative because, scientifically, the polar bear's fur will not turn brown like a land bear. This perception could damage Greenpeace's reputation and raise trust issues in other Save the Arctic campaigns.

Greenpeace International released a video on YouTube entitled "A Homeless Polar Bear in London," a film of a polar bear walking into human-based areas (Greenpeace International, 2012). The polar bear appeared to be looking for food among piles of rubbish and gas stations but found nothing to eat. The video ends with an invitation to join the Save the Arctic Movement. Even though this video's initial goal was good, this video can generate unintended responses. The unintended response referred to here is the reaction from the audience that does not match Greenpeace's initial expectations. Instead of sympathizing with polar bears, their responses could become denial and apathy (Moser and Dilling, 2011, p. 165, quoted in Hanscomb, 2024, week 3). When seeing a polar bear, the first emotion someone watching this video will most likely feel is fear of seeing the animal figure approaching them. This visualization becomes a dilemma because even though this video is able to steal the public's attention, this does not necessarily encourage action from them (Mosser & Dilling, p. 164; see also O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009, p. 373). Coping strategies can include behavioral strategies in addition to cognitive and emotional ones, even though individuals dealing with the threat of climate change focus on how well they regulate their emotional responses (Clayton, 2020, p. 4). People who are afraid of watching this video will likely avoid everything related to this campaign and activate the mute/skip feature as a form of coping carried out by individuals.

Using fear in this campaign will have a limited impact and make it difficult to survive long term. O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole also conveyed that if stories of catastrophe and devastation are not validated in a reasonable amount of time, the persistent use of fear appeals can reduce the issue's salience (2009, p. 362). Therefore, it is important to balance fear and hope so that this problem can be resolved, but if you only rely on your own home, people will also relax too much and not feel the need to participate (McQueen, 2018, p. 9) immediately. This is also relevant to what Hamilton and Kasser (2009, p. 7) suggest: not to eliminate negative emotions but to assist people in managing their fears so that their causes are fairly and effectively addressed. For this reason, it is best to include a hopeful message that the Arctic and polar bears can be saved through a more thorough visualization in the context of Greenpeace's Save the Arctic campaign video.

A dissertation by Harper (2014) found that Greenpeace's Save the Arctic campaign used images to oversimplify the issue. It used a hero narrative (Greenpeace and Puppy Bear), which led the campaign to be a safe rebellion. According to Harper, Greenpeace oversimplifies the issue by blaming several large corporations (often Shell and Gazprom) as suspects even though people's high oil consumption is no less important (2014, p. 58 - 59). This oversimplification can be categorized as Narrative fallacy, the need to believe in the predictability and significance of the world (Hanscomb, 2024, week 3). Narrative fallacy is a form of heuristics that can become a barrier to environmental behavioral change (Franks, Hanscomb, & Johnston, 2018, p. 106). When the public oversimplifies the issue brought by the Save the Arctic Campaign, they will forget the essence of the real

issue, namely how to maintain a natural balance with a sustainable lifestyle so that climate change can be controlled and oil demand decreases.

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Fig. 3. Greenpeace protest at Russian Embassy in Switzerland
(image source: Greenpeace media)

Another downside of Greenpeace's Save the Arctic campaign is the overbranding of their organization's name. Likewise, with the label on the ship "Arctic Sunrise" where the label "Greenpeace" is much more prominent, in their direct protests, Greenpeace also tends to position them as the main actor in this campaign. In a protest in front of the Russian embassy in Switzerland, the Greenpeace team carried a sign that read "Free our activists" carried by a big polar bear doll. Even though it is true that the members of the Arctic 30 who were arrested are associated with Greenpeace, this outline carries the message that this is about their agenda, not that of the wider community. Greenpeace's visuals depict their organization as the voice of humanity and the voice of the natural world (Harper, 2014, p. 57). Greenpeace must be careful in bringing this protest imagery because, except for those who consider themselves activists or have the potential to become activists, protest imagery usually alienates everyone (Hanscomb, 2024, week 4). By carrying too much of the narrative that this campaign is about Greenpeace, the general public will see this as a particular group alienated from society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Save the Arctic campaign has many strengths, including having a multidimensional issue, using various types of framing, having a comprehensive strategy, and being different and easy to remember because it has a powerful story resulting from a combination of action, images, and information. However, there are several weaknesses of this campaign, namely that some of the publications use fear to attract attention, issue oversimplification, and a tendency to emphasize the branding of the Greenpeace organization which can reduce the impact of the message itself. Although this campaign succeeded in attracting the attention of many people, there is room to improve its effectiveness so that the message of this campaign can be better conveyed.

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