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Art, Activism, and the SDGs: A Discourse Analysis of Sustainability Themes in Contemporary Visual Culture

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This study examines the intersection of art, activism, and sustainability through a discourse analysis of contemporary visual culture in relation to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates cultural studies, eco-criticism, and visual discourse theory, the research investigates how sustainability themes are constructed, communicated, and contested within artistic practices. Using a qualitative methodology based on secondary data, including artworks, exhibition materials, and scholarly literature, the study identifies key discursive patterns such as representations of environmental crisis, narratives of resilience and regeneration, intersections with social justice, and participatory modes of engagement. The findings reveal that contemporary visual culture functions as a critical platform for translating complex sustainability issues into accessible and emotionally resonant forms, while also challenging dominant institutional narratives. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of artistic practices in fostering public engagement, critical reflection, and collective imagination. By situating visual culture within broader socio-political and environmental contexts, this research contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship and underscores the transformative potential of art in advancing sustainability discourse aligned with the SDGs.

Keywords: sustainability, visual culture, art activism, discourse analysis, Sustainable Development Goals, eco-criticism, contemporary art.

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1. Introduction

The escalating environmental and social crises of the twenty-first century have intensified global attention toward sustainability as both an ethical imperative and a practical framework for development. Climate change, biodiversity loss, economic inequality, and resource depletion are no longer isolated issues but interconnected challenges requiring interdisciplinary responses (United Nations, 2015). In this context, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive and globally recognised framework for addressing these complex challenges. Comprising 17 goals and 169 targets, the SDGs aim to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and social inclusion, emphasising the need for collaborative and transformative action across sectors.

While policy discourse and scientific research have traditionally dominated sustainability debates, there is a growing recognition of the role of culture and the arts in shaping public understanding and engagement. Art, particularly contemporary visual culture, has emerged as a critical site for interpreting, communicating, and contesting sustainability narratives (Demos, 2016; Kagan, 2011). Artists increasingly engage with themes such as climate change, ecological degradation, social justice, and global inequality, producing works that resonate with the objectives of the SDGs. These artistic practices do not merely illustrate sustainability issues; they actively participate in constructing meanings,

influencing perceptions, and mobilising action.

Visual culture, broadly defined as the array of visual practices and representations that shape how people see and understand the world, plays a pivotal role in mediating sustainability discourse (Mirzoeff, 2015). Images, installations, digital media, and public artworks serve as powerful communicative tools that can simplify complex scientific data, evoke emotional responses, and foster critical reflection. Unlike textual or technical forms of communication, visual representations have the capacity to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, making sustainability issues more accessible to diverse audiences (Hansen & Machin, 2013). This communicative power is particularly significant in an era characterised by rapid digital dissemination and visual saturation.

At the intersection of art and activism lies the concept of “artivism,” where artistic practices are explicitly oriented toward social and political change (Sandlin et al., 2010). Artivism challenges traditional distinctions between aesthetic expression and political engagement, positioning artists as active participants in public discourse. In the context of sustainability, artivism encompasses a wide range of practices, from environmental installations and community-based projects to digital campaigns and participatory performances. These practices often align with the SDGs by addressing issues such as climate action (Goal 13), sustainable cities (Goal 11), and reduced inequalities (Goal 10), while also critiquing

the limitations and contradictions of institutional frameworks.

Despite the increasing visibility of sustainability-themed art, there remains a need for systematic analysis of how these themes are represented and communicated within contemporary visual culture. Existing research has explored the role of art in environmental awareness and social activism, yet there is limited scholarship examining the discursive dimensions of these practices in relation to the SDGs. Discourse analysis offers a valuable methodological approach for addressing this gap, as it focuses on how meaning is constructed through language, imagery, and representation (Fairclough, 2013; Rose, 2016). By analysing visual and textual elements, discourse analysis can reveal the underlying ideologies, power relations, and cultural assumptions embedded in artistic practices.

This study aims to investigate the intersection of art, activism, and sustainability through a discourse analysis of contemporary visual culture. Specifically, it examines how sustainability themes aligned with the SDGs are constructed, communicated, and contested within artistic practices. The research is guided by three primary questions: How are sustainability themes represented in contemporary visual culture? What discursive strategies do artists employ to engage with SDG-related issues? And how do these visual discourses influence public understanding and activism?

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from cultural studies, eco-criticism, and visual discourse theory. By situating

artistic practices within broader socio-political and environmental contexts, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of sustainability communication. Furthermore, it highlights the potential of visual culture as a transformative medium that can complement policy and scientific efforts.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the study has practical implications for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners. Understanding how sustainability is represented in visual culture can inform strategies for public engagement, education, and advocacy. As the global community continues to pursue the SDGs, the role of art and visual culture in shaping sustainable futures becomes increasingly important.

In summary, this study positions contemporary visual culture as a dynamic and influential domain in sustainability discourse. By examining the interplay between art, activism, and the SDGs, it seeks to uncover the ways in which artistic practices contribute to the construction of sustainable imaginaries and the mobilisation of collective action.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between art and activism has evolved significantly over the past decades, reflecting broader socio-political transformations and the increasing urgency of global challenges. Art activism, or “artivism,” represents a mode of practice in which artistic expression is explicitly linked to social and political engagement (Sandlin et

al., 2010). This approach challenges the traditional notion of art as an autonomous and apolitical domain, emphasising its potential as a tool for critical inquiry and transformative action.

Contemporary art activism often addresses issues such as environmental degradation, human rights, and economic inequality, aligning closely with the objectives of the SDGs. According to Thompson (2012), socially engaged art creates participatory spaces that encourage dialogue, collaboration, and community involvement. These practices blur the boundaries between artist and audience, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and collective agency.

Demos (2016) argues that contemporary artists increasingly adopt ecological perspectives, using their work to critique the environmental consequences of globalisation and industrialisation. Through installations, performances, and multimedia projects, artists highlight the interconnectedness of ecological and social systems, challenging dominant narratives that prioritise economic growth over environmental sustainability. This critical engagement positions art as a site of resistance and alternative knowledge production.

2.1 Visual Culture and Environmental Communication

Visual culture plays a central role in shaping public perceptions of environmental issues. As Mirzoeff (2015) notes, the way people “see” the world is mediated by cultural and technological frameworks that influence interpretation and meaning-making. In the context of sustainability, visual

representations can significantly impact how individuals understand and respond to environmental challenges.

Research in environmental communication emphasises the importance of imagery in conveying complex scientific information. Hansen and Machin (2013) argue that visual media can simplify abstract concepts, making them more accessible and relatable to non-expert audiences. For example, photographs of melting glaciers or polluted landscapes can evoke emotional responses that motivate behavioural change.

However, the effectiveness of visual communication is not without limitations. O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) caution that overly negative or fear-based imagery may lead to disengagement rather than action. Instead, they advocate for balanced representations that combine awareness of risks with positive visions of sustainable futures. This perspective underscores the importance of narrative framing in visual culture, where the choice of imagery and symbolism can influence public attitudes and behaviours.

2.2 Sustainability and the Role of the Arts

The integration of sustainability into artistic practice reflects a broader shift toward interdisciplinary approaches to global challenges. Kagan (2011) conceptualises sustainability as a cultural paradigm that requires not only technological and economic solutions but also changes in values, attitudes, and behaviours. In this context, the arts play a crucial role in fostering cultural transformation.

Kagan and Kirchberg (2016) highlight the potential of artistic practices to contribute to sustainability by promoting creativity, critical thinking, and social innovation. Through collaborative and participatory approaches, artists can engage communities in exploring sustainable alternatives and envisioning future possibilities. These practices align with the SDGs' emphasis on inclusive and participatory development.

Moreover, the arts can serve as a bridge between scientific knowledge and public understanding. By translating complex data into experiential and aesthetic forms, artists make sustainability issues more tangible and emotionally resonant. This capacity to connect cognitive and affective dimensions distinguishes artistic approaches from traditional forms of communication.

2.3 The Sustainable Development Goals and Cultural Engagement

The SDGs provide a comprehensive framework for addressing global challenges, yet their implementation depends on widespread public awareness and engagement. While much of the discourse around the SDGs focuses on policy and governance, there is increasing recognition of the role of culture in achieving these goals (United Nations, 2015).

Cultural institutions, including museums, galleries, and creative industries, have begun to incorporate the SDGs into their programming and initiatives. According to UNESCO (2017), culture is both an enabler and a driver of sustainable development, influencing how individuals and communities perceive and respond to global

challenges. Artistic practices can thus play a significant role in promoting the values and objectives of the SDGs.

However, some scholars critique the SDGs for their reliance on top-down approaches and standardised frameworks. From this perspective, artistic practices offer alternative ways of engaging with sustainability that are more context-specific and inclusive. By highlighting local experiences and marginalised voices, artists can challenge dominant narratives and contribute to more equitable and diverse forms of sustainability discourse.

2.4 Discourse Analysis in Visual and Cultural Studies

Discourse analysis provides a theoretical and methodological framework for examining how meaning is constructed through language and representation. Fairclough (2013) defines discourse as a form of social practice that shapes and is shaped by power relations and ideological structures. In visual and cultural studies, discourse analysis extends beyond textual analysis to include images, symbols, and visual practices.

Rose (2016) emphasises the importance of considering both the production and reception of visual images, as well as the social and institutional contexts in which they are situated. This approach enables researchers to uncover the implicit assumptions and values embedded in visual representations.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) further develop this perspective by analysing the grammar of visual design, focusing on how elements such as composition, colour, and

perspective contribute to meaning-making. Their work highlights the systematic nature of visual communication, demonstrating that images are not neutral but constructed according to specific cultural conventions.

In the context of sustainability, discourse analysis can reveal how different narratives compete and interact within visual culture. For example, representations of environmental crisis may emphasise urgency and risk, while images of sustainable futures may promote optimism and innovation. By examining these discursive patterns, researchers can gain insights into the dynamics of sustainability communication.

2.6 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research on art, sustainability, and visual culture, several gaps remain. First, there is limited integration of these fields within a unified analytical framework. While studies have examined art activism and environmental communication separately, fewer have explored their intersection in relation to the SDGs.

Second, existing research often focuses on individual case studies or specific artistic practices, rather than broader discursive patterns. A discourse analytical approach can address this limitation by identifying recurring themes and narratives across diverse contexts.

Finally, there is a need for more critical engagement with the ideological dimensions of sustainability discourse. While the SDGs provide a valuable framework, they also reflect particular assumptions and priorities that may not fully capture the complexity of global challenges. Artistic practices offer a

unique perspective for examining and challenging these assumptions.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates cultural studies, eco-criticism, and visual discourse theory to analyse how sustainability themes are constructed and communicated within contemporary visual culture. These theoretical perspectives collectively provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the complex relationships between art, activism, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

3.1 Cultural Studies and Representation

Cultural studies offer a critical foundation for examining how meanings are produced, circulated, and contested within society. Central to this perspective is the concept of representation, which refers to the processes through which cultural texts, including visual artworks, construct and convey meaning (Hall, 1997). Rather than viewing art as a neutral or purely aesthetic practice, cultural studies emphasise its role in shaping social realities and ideological frameworks.

Hall (1997) argues that representation is inherently political, as it involves the selection, organisation, and interpretation of signs within specific cultural contexts. In the case of sustainability, visual representations of environmental degradation, social inequality, or ecological resilience are not merely descriptive but actively contribute to the construction of public understanding. These representations can reinforce dominant

narratives or challenge existing power structures, depending on how they are framed and interpreted.

Furthermore, cultural studies highlight the role of audiences in meaning-making. Meaning is not fixed but negotiated through the interaction between the artwork and its viewers (Storey, 2018). This perspective is particularly relevant for analysing participatory and interactive art practices, where audiences are actively involved in the production and interpretation of meaning. In the context of the SDGs, such practices can foster critical engagement and collective reflection on sustainability issues.

3.2 Eco-Criticism and Environmental Ethics

Eco-criticism provides a theoretical framework for examining the relationship between culture and the environment, with a particular focus on how ecological issues are represented in artistic and cultural texts (Buell, 2005). This perspective emphasises the ethical and political dimensions of sustainability, highlighting the interconnectedness of human and non-human systems.

Buell (2005) identifies several key themes in eco-critical analysis, including the representation of nature, the critique of anthropocentrism, and the exploration of alternative ecological imaginaries. In contemporary visual culture, these themes are often manifested through artworks that challenge dominant narratives of progress and development, exposing the environmental costs of industrialisation and globalisation (Demos, 2016).

Eco-criticism also engages with the concept of environmental justice, which addresses the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens across different social groups (Nixon, 2011). Many contemporary artists incorporate this perspective into their work, highlighting issues such as resource exploitation, displacement, and climate vulnerability. By foregrounding these concerns, visual culture contributes to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of sustainability.

In addition, eco-criticism emphasises the role of imagination in shaping environmental futures. Artistic practices can create alternative visions of sustainability that challenge prevailing assumptions and inspire new ways of thinking (Kagan, 2011). These imaginative possibilities are essential for addressing the complex and uncertain nature of global environmental challenges.

3.3 Visual Discourse Theory

Visual discourse theory extends the principles of discourse analysis to the realm of visual communication, focusing on how images function as systems of meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This approach is particularly relevant for analysing contemporary visual culture, where images play a central role in shaping public perception and discourse.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose that visual elements such as composition, colour, perspective, and framing operate according to specific semiotic principles. These elements influence how viewers interpret images and construct meaning. For example, the use of perspective can create a sense of

distance or intimacy, while colour can evoke particular emotions or associations.

Rose (2016) further emphasises the importance of considering the social and institutional contexts in which images are produced and consumed. Visual discourse is not only about the content of images but also about the practices and structures that shape their creation and circulation. This includes factors such as the role of galleries, museums, media platforms, and funding institutions.

In the context of sustainability, visual discourse theory enables the analysis of how different narratives are constructed and communicated through artistic practices. For instance, images of environmental crisis may emphasise urgency and risk, while representations of sustainable futures may highlight innovation and hope. By examining these discursive patterns, researchers can identify the underlying ideologies and power relations that shape sustainability discourse.

3.4 Integrative Framework

The integration of cultural studies, eco-criticism, and visual discourse theory provides a robust analytical framework for this study. Cultural studies offer insights into the socio-political dimensions of representation, eco-criticism foregrounds environmental ethics and justice, and visual discourse theory provides tools for analysing the formal and semiotic aspects of images.

Together, these perspectives enable a comprehensive analysis of how contemporary visual culture engages with the SDGs. They highlight the role of art as a site of ideological negotiation, where competing narratives of sustainability are constructed,

contested, and reimagined. This integrative approach also underscores the importance of interdisciplinary research in addressing complex global challenges.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in discourse analysis to examine sustainability themes in contemporary visual culture. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for exploring complex social and cultural phenomena, as they allow for in-depth interpretation of meanings, experiences, and representations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this research, discourse analysis is used to investigate how sustainability narratives aligned with the SDGs are constructed and communicated through visual and textual materials.

The study adopts an interpretive approach, recognising that meaning is socially constructed and context-dependent. Rather than seeking objective or universal truths, the research aims to understand how different actors-artists, institutions, and audiences-produce and interpret sustainability discourse within specific cultural contexts.

4.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The research is based on secondary data, which includes a diverse range of visual and textual materials. Secondary data are appropriate for this study because they provide access to a wide array of existing artworks, exhibitions, and critical analyses, enabling a comprehensive examination of

contemporary visual culture (Johnston, 2017).

The data corpus consists of the following sources:

- Academic journal articles and books on art, sustainability, and visual culture
- Exhibition catalogues and curatorial statements from major art institutions
- Digital archives and online platforms showcasing contemporary artworks
- Media reviews, interviews, and artist statements

The selection criteria were guided by relevance to sustainability and alignment with the SDGs. Specifically, the study focused on artworks and projects that explicitly address themes such as climate change, environmental degradation, social justice, and sustainable development. Additionally, the selection aimed to include diverse forms of visual culture, including installations, photography, digital media, and public art.

4.2 Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis follows a systematic process of thematic and discursive interpretation. The first stage involves familiarisation with the data, including close reading of texts and detailed observation of visual materials. This step allows for the identification of initial patterns and themes related to sustainability.

The second stage involves coding the data according to thematic categories. These categories include environmental crisis, social justice, resilience, participation, and critique of institutional frameworks. Coding

is an iterative process, with categories refined and expanded as new insights emerge (Saldaña, 2016).

The third stage involves discourse analysis, focusing on how meaning is constructed through visual and textual elements. This includes examining the use of symbols, metaphors, and narratives, as well as the formal characteristics of images such as composition, colour, and perspective. The analysis also considers the broader social and institutional contexts in which the artworks are produced and interpreted (Fairclough, 2013; Rose, 2016).

4.3 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Ensuring the credibility and reliability of qualitative research is essential for producing valid and meaningful findings. This study employs several strategies to enhance trustworthiness, including triangulation, reflexivity, and transparency.

Triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources and analytical perspectives to corroborate findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By integrating visual materials, textual analyses, and theoretical frameworks, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability discourse.

Reflexivity refers to the researcher's awareness of their own assumptions, biases, and positionality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, reflexivity is maintained through critical self-reflection and acknowledgement of the interpretive nature of discourse analysis.

Transparency is achieved by clearly documenting the research process, including

data selection, coding procedures, and analytical strategies. This allows for the replication and evaluation of the study by other researchers.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

As the study is based on secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. However, ethical considerations remain important, particularly in relation to the use and interpretation of visual materials.

The research adheres to principles of academic integrity and proper citation, ensuring that all sources are accurately referenced (Mannan & Farhana, 2026). Additionally, the analysis respects the intellectual property rights of artists and institutions, using publicly available materials and avoiding misrepresentation.

4.5 Limitations of the Methodology

While the qualitative, secondary-data-based approach provides valuable insights, it also has certain limitations. First, the reliance on existing materials may limit the scope of analysis, as it excludes unpublished or inaccessible works. Second, the interpretive nature of discourse analysis means that findings are influenced by the researcher's perspective, which may introduce subjectivity.

Despite these limitations, the methodology is well-suited to the aims of the study. By focusing on the discursive dimensions of visual culture, it provides a nuanced understanding of how sustainability themes are constructed and communicated.

5. Findings and Analysis

The discourse analysis of contemporary visual culture reveals a complex and multifaceted engagement with sustainability themes aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Across the selected corpus of artworks, exhibitions, and visual media, several recurring discursive patterns emerge. These include representations of environmental crisis, narratives of resilience and hope, intersections with social justice, participatory and relational practices, and critical reflections on institutional sustainability frameworks. Together, these themes illustrate how contemporary visual culture functions as a dynamic site for constructing and contesting sustainability discourse.

5.1 Visualising Environmental Crisis and Ecological Urgency

One of the most prominent discursive formations identified in the analysis is the visualisation of the environmental crisis. Contemporary artists frequently employ imagery that foregrounds ecological degradation, including melting glaciers, deforestation, polluted oceans, and endangered species. These representations align closely with SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), emphasising the urgency of addressing environmental challenges.

From a discourse analytical perspective, these images function as powerful signifiers of crisis, often utilising dramatic scale, stark contrasts, and immersive environments to evoke emotional responses. Demos (2016) argues that such aesthetic strategies are

designed to confront viewers with the material realities of environmental destruction, transforming abstract scientific data into tangible experiences. For example, large-scale installations that simulate rising sea levels or disappearing ecosystems create a sense of immediacy, encouraging viewers to engage with the issue on an affective level.

However, the analysis also reveals tensions within this discursive approach. While representations of crisis can raise awareness, they may also risk inducing feelings of helplessness or disengagement if not accompanied by pathways for action (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). This highlights the importance of narrative framing in visual culture, where the balance between urgency and agency plays a crucial role in shaping audience responses.

5.2 Constructing Narratives of Hope, Resilience, and Regeneration

In contrast to the dominant imagery of environmental crisis, many artists adopt alternative discursive strategies that emphasise hope, resilience, and regeneration. These narratives align with SDGs such as SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), focusing on solutions-oriented approaches and positive futures.

The analysis indicates that these works often employ symbolic and metaphorical representations to envision sustainable alternatives. For instance, artworks depicting urban gardens, renewable energy systems, or community-driven initiatives highlight the potential for collective action and innovation.

According to Kagan (2011), such representations contribute to the development of “sustainability imaginaries,” which enable individuals and communities to conceptualise and aspire toward more sustainable ways of living.

From a visual discourse perspective, these narratives are constructed through the use of vibrant colours, harmonious compositions, and participatory elements that invite viewer engagement. The emphasis on regeneration and renewal contrasts with the bleak imagery of environmental degradation, offering a more balanced and constructive approach to sustainability communication.

Importantly, these representations also function as forms of resistance against dominant narratives that frame sustainability as a purely technical or economic issue. By foregrounding human creativity and community agency, artists challenge the notion that solutions must be driven solely by institutions or experts.

5.3 Intersections of Environmental and Social Justice

A significant finding of the analysis is the strong intersection between environmental sustainability and social justice within contemporary visual culture. Many artworks address issues such as inequality, displacement, labour exploitation, and access to resources, highlighting the interconnected nature of ecological and social challenges. These themes resonate with SDGs such as SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Eco-critical perspectives emphasise that environmental issues are not experienced

uniformly but are shaped by social, economic, and political factors (Nixon, 2011). This is reflected in artistic practices that foreground the experiences of marginalised communities, often highlighting the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations.

The discourse analysis reveals that these works frequently employ documentary-style imagery, narrative storytelling, and community collaboration to amplify underrepresented voices. For example, visual projects that document the effects of climate change on indigenous communities or urban populations in precarious conditions serve to challenge dominant narratives that overlook these perspectives.

Moreover, these representations often critique the structural inequalities embedded within global systems of production and consumption. By linking environmental degradation to issues such as colonialism, capitalism, and globalisation, artists provide a more holistic and critical understanding of sustainability.

5.4 Participatory and Relational Aesthetics in Sustainability Practices

Another key theme identified in the analysis is the prevalence of participatory and relational practices within sustainability-oriented art. These approaches involve the active engagement of audiences in the creation, interpretation, or dissemination of artworks, aligning with the participatory ethos of the SDGs.

Participatory artworks often take the form of community-based projects, workshops, or interactive installations that encourage collaboration and dialogue. According to Thompson (2012), such practices create “living forms” of art that extend beyond traditional exhibition spaces, fostering social interaction and collective learning.

From a discourse analytical perspective, participatory practices shift the focus from representation to process. Rather than presenting fixed meanings, these artworks create open-ended spaces for negotiation and co-creation. This aligns with the principles of cultural studies, which emphasise the role of audiences in meaning-making (Hall, 1997).

The analysis suggests that participatory approaches are particularly effective in promoting sustainability awareness and engagement. By involving audiences directly, these practices foster a sense of ownership and responsibility, transforming viewers into active participants in sustainability discourse.

5.5 Critique of Institutional Sustainability Narratives

While many artworks align with the goals and values of the SDGs, the analysis also reveals a critical engagement with institutional sustainability narratives. Some artists question the effectiveness of policy-driven approaches, highlighting contradictions and limitations within global sustainability frameworks.

This critical perspective is often expressed through irony, satire, or subversive imagery that challenges dominant discourses. For example, artworks that juxtapose corporate

sustainability branding with images of environmental destruction expose the gap between rhetoric and reality.

Fairclough's (2013) concept of discourse as a site of power and ideology is particularly relevant here. Institutional narratives of sustainability often reflect specific interests and priorities, which may not fully address the complexities of global challenges. Artistic practices provide a space for questioning and reimagining these narratives, offering alternative perspectives that are more inclusive and context-specific.

5.6 Digital Visual Culture and Networked Activism

The analysis also highlights the growing importance of digital platforms in disseminating sustainability-related visual content. Social media, online exhibitions, and digital campaigns enable artists to reach global audiences and engage in networked forms of activism.

Digital visual culture is characterised by its immediacy, accessibility, and interactivity. Images and videos can be rapidly shared, remixed, and circulated, creating dynamic and evolving discourses. According to Mirzoeff (2015), this networked environment transforms the way visual culture operates, enabling new forms of participation and engagement.

However, the digital context also introduces challenges, including issues of commodification, oversaturation, and the potential for superficial engagement. The analysis suggests that while digital platforms offer valuable opportunities for sustainability

communication, they also require critical consideration of their limitations.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the significant role of contemporary visual culture in shaping sustainability discourse, particularly in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By integrating insights from cultural studies, eco-criticism, and visual discourse theory, the discussion provides a deeper interpretation of how artistic practices contribute to the construction, dissemination, and contestation of sustainability narratives.

6.1 Visual Culture as a Mediating Force in Sustainability Communication

One of the central insights of this study is that visual culture functions as a mediating force between complex sustainability issues and public understanding. Unlike scientific reports or policy documents, which often rely on technical language and abstract data, visual artworks translate these complexities into accessible and emotionally resonant forms.

Hansen and Machin (2013) emphasise that visual communication has the capacity to bridge the gap between knowledge and perception, making it a crucial tool for sustainability advocacy. The findings support this view, demonstrating that contemporary artists use a range of aesthetic strategies to engage audiences and facilitate understanding.

However, the effectiveness of visual communication depends on the balance between emotional engagement and critical reflection. As noted by O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009), overly negative representations may lead to disengagement, while overly optimistic narratives may obscure the severity of environmental challenges. The diversity of discursive strategies identified in the analysis reflects an ongoing negotiation between these competing imperatives.

6.2 Art as a Site of Ideological Negotiation

The study highlights the role of art as a site of ideological negotiation, where competing narratives of sustainability are constructed and contested. From a cultural studies perspective, this process involves the interplay of power, representation, and meaning (Hall, 1997).

Institutional frameworks such as the SDGs promote a unified vision of sustainable development, emphasising global cooperation and measurable targets. While this framework provides a valuable foundation for action, it also reflects specific assumptions about development, progress, and governance. Artistic practices engage critically with these assumptions, offering alternative perspectives that challenge dominant paradigms.

For example, artworks that highlight environmental injustice or critique corporate practices reveal the limitations of top-down approaches to sustainability. These practices align with eco-critical perspectives that

emphasise the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches (Nixon, 2011).

6.3 The Role of Affect and Imagination in Sustainability Engagement

Another important dimension of the discussion is the role of affect and imagination in sustainability discourse. Visual culture engages audiences not only cognitively but also emotionally, creating experiences that can inspire empathy, concern, and motivation.

Kagan (2011) argues that sustainability requires a cultural transformation that involves changes in values and worldviews. Artistic practices contribute to this transformation by fostering imaginative engagement with alternative futures. The narratives of hope and resilience identified in the findings illustrate how art can inspire positive action and collective responsibility.

At the same time, the emotional impact of visual representations must be carefully considered. The tension between fear and hope reflects broader challenges in sustainability communication, where the goal is to motivate action without inducing despair.

6.4 Participatory Practices and Democratic Engagement

The prominence of participatory and relational practices in the findings underscores the importance of democratic engagement in sustainability discourse. By involving audiences in the creation and interpretation of artworks, these practices

challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge and authority.

From a methodological perspective, participatory art aligns with the principles of qualitative and interpretive research, emphasising the co-construction of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of sustainability, this approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility and collective agency.

However, the effectiveness of participatory practices depends on their inclusivity and accessibility. While many projects aim to engage diverse audiences, there is a risk that participation may be limited to specific groups or contexts. Future research could explore how participatory art can be scaled and adapted to reach broader audiences.

6.5 Digital Platforms and the Transformation of Visual Discourse

The increasing prominence of digital platforms represents a significant shift in the dynamics of visual culture. As noted in the findings, digital media enable new forms of dissemination and engagement, allowing artists to reach global audiences and participate in networked activism.

Mirzoeff (2015) describes this transformation as a shift toward a more decentralised and participatory visual culture, where traditional boundaries between producers and consumers are blurred. This has important implications for sustainability discourse, as it enables more diverse voices and perspectives to be included.

At the same time, the digital context introduces new challenges, including issues of attention, credibility, and

commodification. The rapid circulation of images can lead to superficial engagement, while the commercialisation of digital platforms may influence the content and visibility of sustainability-related artworks.

6.6 Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings and analysis of this study have several implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, the integration of cultural studies, eco-criticism, and visual discourse theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing sustainability in visual culture. This interdisciplinary approach can be further explored in future research to address emerging challenges and contexts.

Practically, the study highlights the potential of art and visual culture as tools for sustainability communication and advocacy. Policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners can leverage these insights to develop more effective strategies for public engagement.

At the same time, the study emphasises the importance of critical reflection and inclusivity in sustainability discourse. Artistic practices can play a key role in amplifying marginalised voices and challenging dominant narratives, contributing to a more equitable and holistic approach to sustainable development.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the complex relationship between art, activism, and sustainability through a discourse analysis of

contemporary visual culture aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By examining a wide range of visual and textual materials, the research has demonstrated that contemporary artistic practices play a significant role in shaping, communicating, and critically engaging with sustainability discourse.

The findings reveal that visual culture operates as a powerful medium for translating abstract and complex sustainability issues into accessible and emotionally compelling forms. Through representations of environmental crisis, artists draw attention to the urgency of ecological challenges, while narratives of hope and resilience offer alternative visions of sustainable futures. These dual strategies highlight the importance of balancing awareness with agency in sustainability communication, ensuring that audiences are not only informed but also motivated to act.

A key contribution of this study lies in its identification of the strong intersection between environmental and social justice within contemporary visual culture. Artistic practices frequently foreground issues of inequality, marginalisation, and environmental injustice, emphasising the interconnected nature of global challenges. This perspective aligns with broader critiques of sustainability frameworks that call for more inclusive and equitable approaches.

Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of participatory and relational practices in fostering democratic engagement with sustainability issues. By involving audiences in the creation and interpretation of artworks, these practices challenge

traditional hierarchies of knowledge and promote collective responsibility. At the same time, the critical engagement of artists with institutional sustainability narratives underscores the role of art as a site of ideological negotiation, where dominant discourses are questioned, and alternative perspectives are articulated.

The increasing prominence of digital platforms has also transformed the dynamics of visual culture, enabling new forms of dissemination and networked activism. While these developments offer valuable opportunities for expanding the reach of sustainability discourse, they also introduce challenges related to commodification, oversaturation, and superficial engagement.

In conclusion, this study affirms that contemporary visual culture is not merely a reflective domain but an active and influential participant in sustainability discourse. By integrating aesthetic, emotional, and participatory dimensions, artistic practices contribute to the development of more nuanced and inclusive understandings of sustainability. Future research could further explore the impact of specific artistic interventions on public behaviour and policy, as well as the role of visual culture in diverse cultural and geographical contexts. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of how art can contribute to the realisation of the SDGs and the broader pursuit of sustainable futures.

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