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Transparency and Trust: How Cosmetic Brands Communicate Cruelty-Free Commitments

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Abstract: This article examines how cosmetics brands construct and communicate cruelty-free commitments. Cruelty-free narratives are strategically evaluated, emotionalized, and morally framed in corporate and promotional discourse, as brands use multiple resources to signal ethical responsibility, evoke empathy, and align consumers with cruelty-free values. The study focuses on the discursive strategies through which brands position themselves as ethically responsible actors in competitive markets. A qualitative, analytical approach informed by framing theory, was adopted to investigate how specific communicative choices are made to legitimize cruelty-free identities and influence consumer interpretation contributing to broader discussions on ethical consumerism and trust building in brand communication.

Keywords: cruelty-free, ethical branding, framing theory, websites, transparency.

1. Introduction: corporate communication and Corporate Social Responsibility

Digital marketing provides the broader context in which brand communication operates, characterized by interactive, participatory, and data-driven environments. Websites and social media operate in an integrated and mutually reinforcing manner within digital marketing (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick 2019), each fulfilling distinct yet complementary roles that contribute to a cohesive and impactful brand presence. While websites typically serve as centralized hubs for structured, in-depth information and formal brand representation, social media platforms enable dynamic, interactive, and real-time engagement with audiences. Together, they enhance visibility, strengthen brand consistency, and support more effective communication strategies across multiple interactions.

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Digital platforms have transformed traditional one-way communication[i] into dialogic exchanges, enabling brands to engage directly with consumers and co-create value (see Kotler 2017). A comprehensive understanding of corporate communication is therefore essential in an information-driven economy, where the ability to manage meaning, reputation, and stakeholder perceptions is critical.

In this context, corporate communication plays a central role in shaping organizational identity and stakeholder relationships. Joep Cornelissen (2023) conceptualizes corporate communication as a strategic management resource through which organizations can build and sustain competitive advantage, integrating internal and external messaging to inform, lead, motivate, and influence both internal audiences, such as employees, and external stakeholders, including customers, investors, and the broader public.[ii]

Corporate communication is central to the construction and negotiation of both corporate identity and corporate image. Corporate identity refers to how an organization defines and presents itself, encompassing its core values, mission, and ethical principles (Joep Cornelissen, 2023). In contrast, corporate image reflects how these organizational self-definitions are perceived and interpreted by external stakeholders, including consumers, investors, and the general public (Fombrun 1996). In this sense, communication becomes central to shaping culture, corporate goals, and managing relationships with key stakeholders. Trust and transparency are critical foundations underpinning effective corporate communication. Trust is often built through the perceived credibility, consistency, and openness of organizational messages. According to Fombrun (1996), corporate reputation, and by extension trust, is shaped by stakeholders' cumulative perceptions of organizational behavior and communication. Transparency, in this sense, involves the disclosure of relevant, accurate, and accessible information, which can mitigate skepticism and enhance legitimacy, particularly in contexts where consumers are increasingly critical of corporate claims.

Closely related to the concept of trust is that of ethical branding, which refers to the integration of moral values, such as fairness, responsibility, and sustainability, into brand identity and positioning. Cowe and Williams (2000) emphasize the importance of understanding the types of corporate behavior that consumers expect and value. Building on this perspective, Brunk (2010) provides a consumer-centered framework for exploring the origins of perceived corporate ethicality, or Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE). Brunk identifies multiple dimensions through which corporate actions are evaluated, including impacts on consumers, employees, the environment, overseas communities, the local economy, and the broader business community. This taxonomy highlights the need for corporations to consider diverse stakeholder perspectives in shaping ethical and responsible practices. From a strategic perspective, ethical branding emerges as a critical mechanism for expressing corporate social responsibility (CSR), emphasizing not only compliance with societal norms and regulations but also the promotion of values that reflect concern for

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societal welfare, environmental sustainability, and responsible business conduct (Brunk, 2010).

Corporate sustainability communication extends these concerns by focusing specifically on how organizations communicate their environmental and social responsibilities. It involves the strategic use of language and media to convey environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices and CSR initiatives. It is not only a tool for reporting or marketing but also a discursive practice through which organizations construct ethical identities, build trust with stakeholders, and legitimize their operations.

The sustainable and green marketing perspective is particularly relevant in a multi-platform environment where websites, social media, packaging, and advertising must align to reinforce a unified narrative. This multi-channel perspective is aligned with the concept of integrated communication as outlined by Joep Cornelissen (2023), who emphasizes the strategic coordination of messages across diverse platforms to ensure consistency, coherence, and a unified corporate narrative.

The aim of this article is to provide a meaningful perspective on how various cosmetics brands communicate their cruelty-free commitments, primarily by analyzing official sources such as their brand websites. Furthermore, the article considers the role of social media platforms in shaping and amplifying these communications, offering a broader understanding of how brands convey ethical stances. In doing so, the study explores the coherence of messaging across different platforms, and the ways in which these messages may address users and prospective consumers. This approach aims to provide insights into the dynamics between brand transparency, ethical positioning, and audience perception in the cosmetics industry.

2. Theoretical and methodological background

Ethical marketing recognizes the ethical expectations of consumers and the significance of ethical behavior in brand positioning (Crane & Matten, 2016). Cause-related marketing, on the other hand, involves partnerships between businesses and non-profit organizations to support social and environmental causes. These partnerships resonate with consumers who seek products that align with their values (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988) (Marimuthu *et al*. 2023, 45).

Today, more companies engage in CSR initiatives; nevertheless, the effectiveness of these strategies is closely tied to perceptions of authenticity. Third-party certifications and transparent practices are essential for reinforcing authenticity and maintaining consumer loyalty (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011).[iii]

This study aims to investigate how external communication to prospective customers leverage ethical issues, such as cruelty-free commitments. The analysis employs a qualitative approach, combining linguistic and multimodal analysis, and focuses on how meaning, credibility, and ethical positioning are constructed (see Fairclough 2003). This perspective is complemented by Framing Theory which posits that issues can be presented from multiple perspectives, and that the way they are framed influences how audiences interpret them (Goffman 1974; Entman-1991; 2004;

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Nelson and Oxley 1999). A central assumption of framing theory is that any issue can be interpreted from multiple perspectives and linked to different values or considerations. Social reality is never communicated neutrally; rather, communicators selectively foreground certain aspects of an issue while backgrounding others. In this sense, frames can be understood as organizing principles or interpretive schemas that structure both the production and interpretation of discourse. In this sense, frames can be seen as organizing principles or interpretive schemas that structure how information is presented and understood. As organizing principles, frames guide audiences toward particular definitions of problems, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and suggested remedies.

Building on Goffman's (1974) notion of frames as cognitive structures that organize experience, Entman (1993, 2004) conceptualizes framing as a process of selection and salience through which specific elements of reality are made more prominent in communication. Drawing on Entman's framework, this study identifies frames in relation to specific communicative contexts surrounding cruelty-free branding. Among the five ways of framing news stories identified by Entman in his study of U.S. news media (1991), 'morality' and 'responsibility' appear to be particularly relevant for this analysis. In this respect, framing theory is used to examine how specific aspects of cruelty-free communication are selectively emphasized or backgrounded. Drawing on Entman (1993), attention is paid to how discourse defines ethical problems (e.g., animal testing), attributes responsibility (to industries, brands, or consumers), articulates moral evaluations (e.g., compassion, responsibility, sustainability), and proposes solutions (e.g., purchasing cruelty-free products). These dimensions are treated as recurring frames or "scripts" (Entman 2004) that structure ethical communication and guide audience interpretation. Within this framework, the notion of "scripts" is understood as related but distinct from that of frames. While frames provide broader interpretive structures that shape how issues are understood, scripts refer to more recurrent and recognizable communicative patterns that guide expectations about appropriate ethical attitudes and consumer behaviors. In this sense, recurring cruelty-free narratives can be interpreted as ethical scripts embedded within broader framing strategies (Entman 2004).

To apply this framework, the linguistic analysis includes the following key analytical categories:

- lexical choices, such as the use of terms like "cruelty-free", "ethical", "clean", and their connotative functions;
- evaluative and affective language, such as the use of adjectives and emotional appeals that frame cruelty-free practices as moral or compassionate;
- intertextuality, through references to third-party certifications, regulatory frameworks, and shared ethical narratives across platforms.

This linguistic analysis is complemented by a multimodal perspective, which considers how meaning is constructed not only through words but also through visual and graphic elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Different modes (Kress, 2017), such as images, color palettes, typography, layout, and symbols are analyzed in

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conjunction with textual components to understand how they reinforce claims of ethical responsibility. Among non-verbal semiotic resources are:

- certification logos and symbols (e.g., bunny icons);
- color schemes, typography, and imagery associated with nature, care, and purity;
- visual–verbal alignment between images and textual claims.

This multimodal perspective enables an assessment of how visual cues reinforce, amplify, or compensate for linguistic ambiguity in cruelty-free claims.

The corpus for this study is designed to capture the diversity of communicative practices through which cruelty-free claims are articulated in the cosmetics industry. Official brand websites serve as primary sources of formalized corporate communication. These materials typically convey a type of discourse, where cruelty-free claims are embedded within broader ethical policies, certifications, and corporate social responsibility narratives. The language used in these contexts tends to be standardized, carefully controlled, and aligned with legal and regulatory expectations. Therefore, these sources are particularly relevant for examining how brands construct legitimacy, authority, and compliance through explicit statements, policy descriptions, and references to third-party certifications.

The notion of "cruelty-free" is not uniformly regulated at a global level, resulting in significant variation in how such claims are defined, verified, and communicated across markets. In this context, some brands rely on external validation through recognized certification bodies, such as Leaping Bunny or PETA, which provide standardized criteria and independent assessment processes. Others adopt a self-declarative approach, asserting their cruelty-free status without third-party verification, thereby placing greater interpretive responsibility on consumers. Accordingly, the brands included in this study were selected solely on the basis of holding such certifications, excluding self-declared cruelty-free claims. This choice ensures a more reliable corpus and allows for a more robust analysis of how verified cruelty-free commitments are discursively constructed and communicated across different brands.

For the analysis of cruelty-free communication on brand websites, five cosmetics brands were selected: *Too Faced, Essence, e.l.f. Cosmetics, NYX,* and *Yepoda*. These popular cruelty-free brands were chosen to provide a sample of different market positions, branding strategies, and approaches to communicating ethical commitments.

- *Too Faced* is a long-established cruelty-free brand that has built its identity around playful and colorful branding while consistently emphasizing strong anti-animal-testing messaging. Its inclusion allows the analysis to examine how established brands leverage both ethical and emotional appeals to reinforce consumer loyalty.
- *NYX* is a globally recognized brand known for professional-quality makeup at an accessible price point. Including NYX allows the study to explore how a

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mainstream, professional-focused brand integrates cruelty-free messaging within a highly competitive, aspirational market context.

- *Essence* is an affordable, widely distributed brand with certified cruelty-free status. It emphasizes accessibility alongside ethical claims, making it a relevant example of how mass-market brands communicate cruelty-free commitments to a broad and price-sensitive audience.
- *e.l.f. Cosmetics* is another budget-friendly brand with certified cruelty-free status. It highlights inclusivity and ethical responsibility, offering insight into how affordable brands balance ethical messaging with product positioning.
- Finally, *Yepoda* represents a newer, niche brand explicitly centered on sustainability and cruelty-free principles. Its communication is particularly rich in ethical framing, multimodal elements, and lifestyle-oriented discourse, making it an ideal case to analyze how emerging brands construct moral and environmental narratives alongside product promotion.

Together, these brands provide a diverse set of examples for understanding how cruelty-free claims are linguistically, visually, and strategically constructed across different types of cosmetic companies, from legacy brands to emerging ethical startups.

The selection of brand websites was guided by their explicit and visible engagement with cruelty-free communication. In particular, brands were included if their online platforms contained clear references to cruelty-free claims, statements about animal testing, broader ethical positioning, or the use of recognizable certification logos. This criterion ensured that the analysis focused on cases where ethical discourse is not marginal but is a central component of brand communication. The analysis was conducted within the same 2026-time frame, to ensure both comparability across brands and relevance to current industry practices. By focusing on contemporary materials, the study captures how cruelty-free messaging is currently articulated within digital environments, reflecting current promotional strategies, design conventions, and consumer expectations.

A final part of this study considers the role of multiple channels - namely in-store retailing, product packaging, and in particular social media - as part of a broader communicative process. This choice reflects the understanding that cruelty-free communication is not confined to a single context but is instead constructed across a range of interconnected touchpoints, each characterized by specific discursive conventions, audiences, and communicative purposes.

3. Analyzing cruelty-free communication

The notion of *cruelty-free* has evolved from a simple product descriptor into a complex ethical and discursive construct. According to Collins Dictionary, the term is defined in British English as referring to a cosmetic or other product "developed without being tested on animals." [iv] While this definition provides a clear and concise

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baseline, it captures only the technical dimension of the concept, leaving aside its broader ethical and cultural implications.

As mentioned, the discourse surrounding cruelty-free practices is reinforced through institutional mechanisms of verification and trust-building where cruelty-free logos function as semiotic markers of credibility in the marketplace. These symbols play a crucial role in mediating the relationship between producers and consumers, offering assurances of transparency while shaping consumer perception and ethical decision-making. These organizations demonstrate how the movement toward cruelty-free products has gained relevance reflecting increasing public concern for animal welfare and signaling a rejection of practices perceived as ethically outdated. [v] From this perspective, cruelty-free is not just a descriptive label but a claim that communicates a brand's commitment to humane and responsible production processes. Cruelty-free operates not only as a technical standard but also as a communicative and ideological resource. It is embedded in a broader discourse that intertwines ethics, regulation, consumer awareness, and branding, contributing to the construction of meaning in contemporary markets.

Cruelty-free certifications are key tools for communicating a brand's ethical stance, combining third-party verification, logos, and regulatory compliance. Organizations and programs such as PETA, Leaping Bunny (CCIC), and Choose Cruelty-Free (CCF) audit brands to ensure that neither finished products nor ingredients are tested on animals. Their logos provide immediate visual cues on packaging, websites, and advertisements, helping consumers quickly identify verified cruelty-free products. These certifications also interact with legal frameworks, which vary by country. In Europe, cruelty-free standards for cosmetics are governed primarily by Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009[vi], which prohibits the testing of finished cosmetic products and cosmetic ingredients on animals. This ban applies across all EU member states, making Europe one of the strictest markets in the world for animal welfare in cosmetics. Additionally, the regulation forbids the marketing of cosmetics that have been tested on animals, even if the testing occurred outside the EU. For brands selling in Europe, compliance with this regulation is mandatory, and cruelty-free certifications reinforce transparency and trust with consumers. By adhering to specific regulations and obtaining certification, brands can credibly market themselves as cruelty-free, ensuring both legal compliance and consumer trust. Logos function not only as marketing signals but also as assurances of regulatory and ethical alignment in the global beauty market. In this way, communication strategies operate at the intersection of corporate and marketing communication. While marketing communication focuses on promoting products and driving sales, corporate communication addresses the organization as a whole - its values, credibility, and long-term relationships. Cruelty-free claims often sit precisely at this intersection, functioning both as promotional tools and as expressions of corporate identity.

From a linguistic perspective, corporate communication can be understood as a form of institutional discourse in which power, ideology, and persuasion are actively negotiated. It is a space where organizations construct ethical identities and

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manage accountability, particularly through CSR narratives. These narratives often rely on evaluative language, moral positioning, and legitimacy-building strategies, all of which contribute to shaping how audiences perceive a brand's ethical commitments.

3.1. Cruelty-Free Messaging on Official Brand Websites

The present analysis focuses on official brand websites, which represent primary and highly controlled spaces for the articulation of cruelty-free communication and the construction of ethical identity. Discourse on official websites is characterized by the use of slogan-like constructions, selective emphasis, and strategic lexical choices in the presentation of cruelty-free claims. Through these features, specific ethical attributes are foregrounded, guiding consumer interpretation by means of framing techniques and rhetorical devices. Thus, websites do not simply convey information but actively shape how cruelty-free practices are understood and evaluated.

The analysis examines homepages and key sections such as "About Us" pages, sustainability areas, FAQs, and animal-testing policy statements. These sections provide insight into how brands narrate their values, justify their practices, and build credibility, offering a rich corpus for examining the linguistic and discursive strategies underlying cruelty-free communication.

3.1.1. Too Faced

Cruelty-free communication can be understood as the strategic selection and amplification of ethical meanings. In the case of Too Faced official website[vii], cruelty-free messaging is presented not merely as regulatory or ethical compliance, but as a core element of brand identity, embedded across textual, visual, and emotional dimensions. The brand constructs a coherent narrative in which animal welfare is intertwined with values of kindness, empowerment, and self-expression. The statement *"*Dedicated To Cruelty Free Beauty" on the homepage functions as a high-salience frame, positioned at the entry point of the user experience. Its prominence transforms cruelty-free from a background attribute into a primary interpretative lens through which the brand can be perceived.

Linguistically, the use of "dedicated" conveys commitment and permanence, reinforcing trust and ethical consistency. Instead of technical or regulatory language, the phrase adopts a simple, declarative structure, making the message accessible and emotionally resonant.

While browsing the website, the user encounters slogans such as "Glow With Kindness" and "Kindness Is The World's Best Kept Beauty Secret", which indicate a shift toward affective framing. Here, cruelty-free is not explicitly mentioned but is implicitly embedded within the broader semantic field of *kindness*, *care*, and *love*.

This represents a way of reframing: instead of focusing on the absence of harm (no animal testing), the brand emphasizes the presence of positive values. Linguistically, abstract nouns such as "kindness" and "love" generalize the message, making it relevant beyond the specific issue of animal welfare.

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Multimodally, such slogans are often paired with soft color palettes, glowing skin imagery, and warm lighting, reinforcing the semantic association between ethical behavior and aesthetic radiance. This creates a symbolic link between inner values and outer beauty, serving as a powerful persuasive mechanism. Too Faced's cruelty-free communication operates through multimodal synergy, using emotive and inclusive language ("forever and always," "kindness is always a good look"), animal-related wordplay ("furever"), playful packaging, pastel tones, and aesthetics that evoke softness and care. These modes interact to produce a coherent system, in which cruelty-free is not just stated but felt and experienced. The brand avoids technical jargon (e.g., regulatory references or supply chain details), favoring emotional accessibility over informational depth.

From a framing theory perspective, Too Faced exemplifies how brands selectively highlight certain aspects of reality while omitting others. Communication here strongly emphasizes kindness and positivity, personal empowerment, and emotional connection.

Too Faced communication strongly emphasizes a positive and emotionally engaging tone, structured through a combination of:

- Kindness framing (compassion, care, and ethical sensitivity)
- Positivity framing (optimistic tone, reassuring and uplifting messaging)
- Empowerment framing (personal agency, encouraging conscious choices)
- Emotional connection framing (building closeness and identification with consumers)

At the same time, it downplays complexity, including certification processes, regulatory frameworks, and global inconsistencies in animal testing laws. The website adopts a tone of lightness in contrast to the ethical burden carried by environmentally conscious individuals, perhaps seeking to offer users a sense of hope and emotional relief.

Too Faced's communication demonstrates how cruelty-free messaging can be transformed into a holistic brand story. By framing cruelty-free within discourses of kindness, empowerment, and joy, the brand shifts the focus from ethical obligation to aspirational identity. Cruelty-free becomes not just a claim, but a lifestyle signifier.

3.1.2. Essence

Essence[viii] constructs cruelty-free messaging as both an ethical commitment and a legally grounded practice. Unlike more lifestyle-oriented brands, Essence combines emotional appeals with regulatory discourse, embedding cruelty-free claims within references to European law, safety standards, and transparency. This results in a hybrid communication strategy that frames cruelty-free not only as a moral value but also as a normative industry standard.

A key linguistic feature in Essence's communication is the use of strong emphasis and negation, as seen in statements such as "Testing is important, but NEVER on animals" and "Test on animals? Never!". The capitalization of "NEVER"

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functions as a visual intensifier, reinforcing the message across both verbal and graphic dimensions. Additionally, the repeated use of absolute temporal expressions like “never has and never will” and “since the very beginning” constructs a frame of continuity and reliability, suggesting that cruelty-free is not a recent adaptation but an inherent brand value. Negation also plays a central role in the “Clean Beauty” section: phrases like “not only value what is inside, but also WHAT IS NOT included” shift attention to absence as a positive attribute, aligning cruelty-free messaging with broader “free-from” narratives (e.g., parabens, microplastics, PEGs). This creates a purity frame, where ethical and health-related concerns converge.

A distinctive element of Essence’s strategy is its explicit reference to European regulatory frameworks, particularly the EU ban on animal testing for cosmetics. By stating that its practices are “in accordance with EU law”, the brand activates a legitimization frame, grounding its ethical claims in institutional authority. This differs from purely emotional or symbolic communication: cruelty-free is presented not only as a moral choice but also as a legal baseline, acknowledging that cruelty-free is not an absolute condition but a regulated and context-dependent reality. For example, the brand explicitly admits that some ingredients may have been tested on animals for non-cosmetic purposes, thus partially deconstructing the idealized cruelty-free narrative.

Beyond regulation, Essence also employs an empowerment frame, particularly in statements like “We believe that we all have the power to make the world a better place” and “PINK & PROUD”. Here, cruelty-free consumption is framed as an individual ethical action, aligning personal choices with broader social impact.

The slogan “beauty without cruelty” functions as a discursive anchor, linking the brand to a wider ethical movement while maintaining accessibility. Unlike Too Faced’s “kindness” framing, Essence connects cruelty-free more explicitly to responsibility and informed decision-making.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Essence’s communication is its reflexive transparency. The brand openly acknowledges limitations, such as:

a. the impossibility of guaranteeing that no ingredient has ever been tested on animals globally;
b. the overlap between cosmetic and pharmaceutical ingredient testing;
c. regulatory differences across international markets.

This approach introduces a meta-communication layer, where the brand not only communicates cruelty-free values but also explains the conditions under which these values operate.

Essence’s cruelty-free communication exemplifies a hybrid framing strategy, combining:

- Ethical framing (animal welfare, “no-go,” emotional appeals)
- Regulatory framing (EU law, safety standards, compliance)
- Transparency framing (detailed explanations, acknowledgment of complexity)

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– Empowerment framing (consumer agency, “make the world better”)

Through this integration, cruelty-free is constructed not only as a moral identity marker but also as a regulated, informed, and shared responsibility.

The multimodal and linguistic strategies reinforce this dual positioning, making essence’s communication particularly effective in building trust through both clarity and credibility.

Essence’s communication operates through a multimodal integration of the verbal mode, using explanatory, didactic, and assertive language, and non-verbal mode\, featuring clean layouts and bold typography (e.g., “100% free from animal testing”). The use of “100%” claims and repeated headings (e.g., “Free from animal testing – since the very beginning”) provides visual clarity and immediacy, while extended textual explanations offer depth and transparency. At the same time, emotional elements are present. Expressions such as “It’s an absolute no-go for us!” and “We love beauty, but we love animals too!” introduce a colloquial and affective tone, softening the otherwise technical discourse. This creates a balance between credibility and relatability.

3.1.3. e.l.f Cosmetics

E.l.f. Cosmetics constructs cruelty-free messaging as part of a broader activist and corporate responsibility narrative. Unlike brands that emphasize solely emotional appeal or regulatory compliance e.l.f. incorporates cruelty-free communication within a multi-layered ethical ecosystem, including sustainability, clean beauty, and social impact. This results in a framing strategy where cruelty-free is positioned not just as a product attribute, but as evidence of ethical commitment.

On the homepage, labels such as “vegan,” “cruelty free,” “e.l.f. clean,” and “fair trade certified” function as multimodal signifiers, visually operating as badges or icons that create an immediate ethical index that consumers can recognize at a glance.

e.l.f.’s communication demonstrates a strong multimodal integration using certification logos, badges, and clean design in a mix of informal and formal (certification descriptions) language. Certification logos function as semiotic anchors, providing immediate recognition and trust, while extended textual explanations add depth and legitimacy. This dual-layer approach ensures both quick comprehension and detailed verification. Verbal and non-verbal components cooperate in a structured environment, with clearly segmented sections (Cares, Sustainability, Cruelty-Free) guiding user navigation.

From the linguistic perspective, these labels are minimalist and declarative, relying on widely understood ethical keywords rather than extended explanations. Multimodally, their placement and repetition create a frame where cruelty-free is not isolated but part of a network of values, reinforcing the perception of the brand as holistically responsible.

In the slogan “it’s time for e.l.f.ing change*”,* the manipulation of the brand name (“e.l.f.ing”) maintains brand identity while signaling transformational intent. This

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slogan frames the company as an agent of change, extending cruelty-free values beyond cosmetics into social and environmental domains.

References to the impact report and statements such as “Check out the impact we made in 2024 in our community, with our board, and for our planet” activate a corporate accountability frame. Here, cruelty-free is embedded within measurable outcomes and institutional reporting, enhancing credibility through transparency and quantification.

A pillar of e.l.f.’s communication is its emphasis on double certification by recognized organizations, namely PETA and Leaping Bunny. The phrase “we are double certified cruelty-free!” employs numerical emphasis (“double”) to strengthen credibility.

Unlike many brands, e.l.f. provides detailed explanatory content about these certifications, including:

- verification processes
- supplier compliance requirements
- annual recommitment obligations
- restrictions on selling in markets where animal testing may be required [ix]

This strategy represents a knowledge-based framing, where the brand not only claims ethical status but also educates consumers about certification systems, as shown by interrogative headings (*“WHAT THE E.L.F. DOES IT ALL MEAN?”*), making complex information accessible.

E.l.f. extends its cruelty-free messaging beyond products into organizational practices and culture. Statements such as “we partner with organizations that protect animals” and references to collaborations with influencers and charities construct a networked ethical script, positioning the brand within a broader ecosystem of activism.

The introduction of policies like “Pawternity Leave”, which offers employees paid time off to care for newly adopted pets, adds a human-centered and affective dimension. Linguistically, the playful neologism “pawternity” reinforces the brand voice while symbolically linking animal welfare to everyday life.

From a framing theory perspective, e.l.f. combines multiple frames:

- Activist framing: positioning the brand as an agent of change
- Transparency framing: providing detailed explanations of certifications and practices
- Corporate responsibility framing: integrating cruelty-free principles within sustainability and impact reporting
- Lifestyle framing: using playful language and an inclusive tone

Compared to other brands, e.l.f. offers a relatively comprehensive and structured narrative, reducing ambiguity around its claims. e.l.f. exemplifies a systemic approach to cruelty-free communication, reinforcing ethical claims through certifications, corporate practices, and measurable impact. Through multimodal and linguistic strategies, the brand constructs cruelty-free as:

- verified (through certifications)

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- explained (through educational content)
- extended (through corporate culture and partnerships)
- activated (through calls for change and impact reporting)

In framing theory terms, moves beyond simple ethical positioning to create a comprehensive interpretative framework, encouraging consumers to see cruelty-free not just as a feature, but as part of a broader commitment to ethical transformation in the beauty industry.

3.1.4. NYX

NYX Professional Makeup[x] constructs cruelty-free messaging as part of an inclusive, activist, and authenticity-driven narrative. Instead of isolating animal welfare as a standalone ethical claim, the brand incorporates it into a framework that includes diversity, transparency, and professional performance. This approach creates a holistic ethical identity, with cruelty-free as one element of a wider "positive change" discourse.

A key multimodal feature is the clickable cruelty-free logo at the bottom of the homepage, which directs users to the "About Us and Cruelty-Free" section. The presence of multiple logos - such as *cruelty-free, vegan, and pro formulas* - creates a visual cluster of ethical and benefit-related claims. These logos allow users to quickly decode the brand's values through recognizable visual markers. The coexistence of ethical (cruelty-free, vegan) and technical (pro formulas) labels reflects a dual framing strategy, balancing morality and product efficacy.

NYX's slogan, "Welcome to the Bright Side", and mission statement, "we pledge to be on the right (or should we say BRIGHT) side of positive change", rely on wordplay and capitalization. The repetition of "bright" - visually emphasized in uppercase - creates a semantic and graphic reinforcement, linking positivity, ethics, and brand identity. This represents a positivity frame, where cruelty-free is implicitly associated with optimism, progress, and "rightness". Unlike more direct ethical claims, the brand uses metaphorical language to position cruelty-free as part of a broader moral alignment.

The statement "100% Cruelty Free since our founding in 1999" employs absolute quantification ("100%") and temporal continuity, reinforcing credibility and long-term commitment. The addition of "PETA Certified since 2015" introduces a verification layer, combining emotional appeal with institutional legitimacy.

NYX integrates cruelty-free messaging within a cluster of aligned values, including "Vegan formulas" (absence of animal-derived ingredients), "No retouching" (authenticity and transparency), and "Proud diversity" (inclusivity and social justice).

Similarly to e.l.f. Cosmetics, NYX also relies on a networked ethical script in which different ethical values mutually reinforce one another. For example, "No retouching – what you see is what you get" extends the idea of honesty from visual representation to product claims, indirectly strengthening trust in cruelty-free statements.

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Similarly, the brand's support for organizations situates cruelty-free within a broader activist and inclusive discourse, aligning animal welfare with human rights and representation.

NYX's communication demonstrates strong multimodal integration. The communication strategy combines several complementary elements to create a strong and engaging message. From a visual non-verbal perspective, it relies on bold typography, high-contrast design, and easily recognizable logos, all of which capture attention and reinforce brand identity. The use of capitalization ("NEVER," "PRO," "BRIGHT") acts as an intensifier, drawing attention to key values. The layout of the "About Us and Cruelty-Free" section allows users to navigate ethical, technical, and social dimensions of the brand.

This integration ensures that cruelty-free messaging is both immediately visible and contextually embedded, enhancing its persuasive impact.

The verbal style is energetic and informal, making use of catchy, slogan-driven language that resonates with the audience and enhances memorability.

Structurally, the content is organized into clearly segmented sections, each designed to highlight specific brand commitments, making the message both accessible and impactful.

From a framing theory perspective, NYX employs a combination of:

- Positivity framing: associating cruelty-free with optimism and "the bright side"
- Authenticity framing: emphasizing transparency through "no retouching"
- Inclusivity framing: linking ethical beauty to diversity and representation
- Performance framing: balancing ethics with "pro formulas" and product quality

However, as with other brands, this approach involves selective emphasis. While communication highlights commitment and certification, it does not extensively address regulatory complexities or global supply chain challenges. The result is a streamlined and aspirational narrative designed to resonate emotionally and visually.

NYX Professional Makeup constructs cruelty-free messaging as part of a broader ethos of positivity, authenticity, and inclusivity. Through multimodal and linguistic strategies, the brand frames cruelty-free as:

- Morally "bright" (aligned with positive change)
- Authentic (supported by transparency claims)
- Inclusive (connected to diversity and representation)
- Performative (coexisting with professional product quality)

In terms of framing theory, this approach transforms cruelty-free from a single ethical claim into a node within a wider value system, shaping how consumers interpret both the brand and their own participation in ethical consumption.

3.1.5. Yepoda

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Across its homepage and informational sections, Yepoda[xi] does not simply present product features, but actively shapes an ethical discourse in which sustainability, animal welfare, and personal care are tightly interconnected.

From a framing theory perspective, Yepoda's communication is structured around a set of recurring frames that guide interpretation:

- Best practices and performance framing: for example listing absent harmful substances, such as microplastics, silicones, synthetic fragrances, formaldehyde, and others.
- Transparency framing: certifications and labels such as "PETA approved" and "Zero Plastic Inside". Yepoda positions itself as part of a corrective movement.
- Ethical and environment protection framing: statements such as "Beauty should never come at the expense of the Earth" elevate consumption to an ethical choice.
- Empowerment framing: extending responsibility to consumers through phrases like "Choosing Yepoda means… supporting a beauty brand that puts the planet first" and "Sustainability starts with being 1% better."

The claim that sustainability has been "at the core" of the brand "from day one" further strengthens this moral positioning, suggesting authenticity and long-term commitment rather than opportunistic branding.

From a multimodal perspective, Yepoda's website reinforces these frames through the interplay of visual and textual elements. The use of clean layouts, soft color palettes, and minimalist design aligns with the idea of "clean beauty," visually echoing the absence of harmful ingredients. Certification badges such as "PETA approved" and "Zero Plastic Inside" function as highly recognizable visual markers of credibility, allowing users to quickly identify the brand's ethical commitments. The segmentation of content into sections like "Our Philosophy" and subsections such as "Clean K-Beauty Innovations", and "Our Formulas" provides clear structural organization, guiding users through different aspects of the brand narrative while maintaining coherence.

Linguistically, Yepoda's discourse combines clarity, repetition, and inclusivity. The repeated use of negation ("no microplastics," "no silicones," etc.) creates a memorable pattern that emphasizes purity and safety. At the same time, the language is accessible and engaging, avoiding overly technical jargon while still conveying expertise. Moreover, the discourse blends ethical appeal with lifestyle aspiration. Yepoda does not frame cruelty-free consumption as a sacrifice but as an enhancement - both for the individual ("the best quality products") and for the collective ("supporting a brand that puts the planet first"). This dual positioning is crucial in making the message persuasive and appealing to a broad audience.

Overall, Yepoda's cruelty-free communication is highly strategic and consistent. Through framing, it defines the problem, assigns responsibility, invokes moral values, and offers both products and consumer choices as solutions. Through multimodal design, it ensures that these messages are immediately visible and

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coherent. Through linguistic choices, it creates an engaging and trustworthy voice. Together, these elements construct a discourse in which ethical consumption is not only desirable, but also accessible and empowering.

4. Findings discussion

In the contemporary beauty market, brands strategically frame animal welfare and ethical practices as core values. They select specific aspects of reality, such as “no animal testing”, “ethical beauty”, or “vegan formulas”, to shape consumer perception. Through ethical framing, cruelty-free claims are presented as moral choices that appeal to consumer values and identity. Transparency framing emphasizes certifications, logos, and supply chain disclosures to build trust, while lifestyle framing situates cruelty-free products within broader narratives of modern, conscious consumption. Visual elements, including certification logos and minimalist packaging, act as cognitive shortcuts, making ethical claims immediately recognizable.

However, framing theory also highlights that brands may simplify or selectively present information, creating a constructed reality. In this sense, cruelty-free communication functions not merely as an ethical statement but as a strategic construction of meaning, designed to influence how consumers interpret brand responsibility. Frames act as strategic devices that shape how issues are defined, interpreted, and acted upon. In the context of cruelty-free branding, frames do more than describe; they actively construct a particular reality for consumers, emphasizing selected aspects of ethical beauty while downplaying others. Drawing on Entman (1993, 2004), frames are categorized according to four key functions:

- Problem frames: identify the issues or challenges that require attention. In cruelty-free discourse, the problem is often presented as the harm caused by animal testing, the use of toxic or environmentally damaging ingredients, and unsustainable industry practices. Brands differ in how explicitly they make these concerns visible. For example, Yepoda foregrounds the potential harms of conventional cosmetics through the repeated negation of certain ingredients (microplastics, silicones), constructing traditional products as problematic and positioning itself as a safer alternative. NYX, by contrast, frames the problem more implicitly, contrasting authentic, unretouched representation with the artificiality of heavily edited imagery, subtly linking ethical product practices to broader values of honesty and inclusivity.
- Causal frames: attribute responsibility for the problem or its resolution. In the wider beauty context, responsibility may lie with the industry, individual suppliers, or gaps in regulation. Yepoda clearly blame the conventional beauty sector, presenting itself as part of a corrective movement that addresses systemic shortcomings. NYX adopts a shared-responsibility approach, positioning both brands and consumers as active agents capable of ethical decision-making. By linking product choices to inclusivity and

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activism, NYX frames ethical consumption as both a personal and collective endeavor.

- Moral frames: evaluate issues in terms of right and wrong, invoking ethical standards, values, or social norms. Cruelty-free messaging commonly draws on moral imperatives such as animal welfare, sustainability, transparency, and corporate responsibility. Yepoda emphasizes the ethical dimension explicitly, with statements like "Beauty should never come at the expense of the Earth," elevating consumption to a morally consequential act. NYX uses more figurative language ("Welcome to the Bright Side"), associating ethical beauty with optimism, positivity, and progress, embedding moral evaluation within aspirational and emotive messaging.
- Solution frames: propose remedies or actionable responses to the identified problems. Brands use this frame to communicate practical measures that translate ethical commitment into consumer choice. In the cruelty-free landscape, solutions include certified formulas, vegan ingredients, sustainable packaging, and guidance for informed purchasing. Yepoda reinforces this through PETA certification and zero-plastic initiatives while actively inviting consumers to participate in ethical action. NYX integrates solutions within a broader narrative that combines ethical practice with social inclusivity, demonstrating that responsible consumption can advance performance, diversity, and social change simultaneously.

Nevertheless, applying Framing Theory reveals that cruelty-free messaging is not a fixed or uniform concept, but a flexible communicative construct shaped by each brand's identity, audience, and strategic positioning. While all five brands (Too Faced, Essence, e.l.f. Cosmetics, NYX Professional Makeup, and Yepoda) claim to be cruelty-free, they differ in how this claim is framed, visualized, and linguistically constructed.

Too Faced situates cruelty-free messaging within a playful, affective, and identity-driven narrative. Expressions such as "cruelty free furever" and "Glow with Kindness" illustrate the brand's use of colloquial and emotive language, wordplay, and symbolic references to animals. Visual aesthetics are soft and aspirational, reinforcing a sense of fun and personal empowerment. In this context, cruelty-free is framed less as a technical or regulatory standard and more as a lifestyle choice embedded in kindness, self-expression, and the broader discourse of beauty and enjoyment.

Essence, in contrast, foregrounds clarity, legality, and education. Its communication emphasizes explicit references to EU regulations, detailed explanations of animal-testing laws, and strong negation through absolute statements such as "NEVER." Here, cruelty-free is framed as a regulated norm and informed practice rather than an aspirational identity. The brand also introduces reflexivity, acknowledging the limitations and complexities of global supply chains and

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ingredient sourcing. This approach fosters trust and positions the brand as credible and knowledgeable, though it is less emotionally engaging than lifestyle-oriented messaging.

E.l.f. situates cruelty-free within a broader ethical ecosystem that combines corporate responsibility with social activism. The brand emphasizes certification (e.g., PETA, Leaping Bunny), publishes measurable impact reports, and extends ethical principles into corporate culture, including initiatives such as "pawternity leave." Through this strategy, cruelty-free is embedded in a systemic ethical narrative that connects sustainability, fairness, and social impact. E.l.f. balances educational content with playful language, creating a frame that is both credible and accessible. Among the five brands, this represents the most institutionalized and comprehensive ethical framing.

NYX integrates cruelty-free claims into a broader discourse of positivity, inclusivity, and authenticity. Metaphorical language, such as "Bright Side," combines with value clustering - including cruelty-free, vegan, no retouching, and diversity - to reinforce a progressive ethical identity. Strong visual and textual emphasis, including capitalization and strategic use of logos, supports both attention and memorability. In this frame, cruelty-free is presented as a component of aspirational identity and social engagement, emphasizing emotional resonance, inclusivity, and alignment with broader positive change rather than detailed procedural or regulatory explanations.

Yepoda positions cruelty-free as part of a tightly interwoven discourse of sustainability, personal care, and animal welfare. The homepage repeatedly highlights harmful practices to be avoided, and responsibility is attributed to the wider beauty industry, with Yepoda presenting itself as a corrective force. Statements like "Beauty should never come at the expense of the Earth", link everyday consumption to ethical choices. In this context, Yepoda also incorporates empowerment frames, positioning the consumer as an active participant in ethical and sustainable practices.

Different communicative strategies pave the way for exploring various scripts that capture additional dimensions which are central to contemporary ethical branding. Empowerment or agency frames emphasize the consumer's role in ethical action, encouraging individuals to see their choices as impactful (e.g., Yepoda). Authenticity frames stress honesty and alignment between claims and practices, as seen in NYX's "No Retouching" policy, which links product transparency to trust. Positivity and optimism frames associate ethical behavior with aspirational identity, exemplified by NYX's "Bright Side," while performance or quality frames balance ethical claims with product efficacy, reminding consumers that responsibility need not compromise results, as reflected in NYX's "Pro Formulas."

Common multimodal strategies can be identified across the different websites (e.g., logos, certification labels, and dedicated sections) as well as shared linguistic patterns (e.g., absolutes ("100%", "never", and temporal framing "since the beginning). However, the depth and transparency of these strategies vary. Too Faced, for example, relies on emotional appeal with minimal informational detail; Essence

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emphasizes detailed, regulatory-focused explanations; e.l.f. combines institutional credibility with strong visual reinforcement.

Divergence is also evident in register and tone: Too Faced and NYX favor emotive, identity-driven language, while Essence, for example, employs more technical language. Through different combinations of multimodal and linguistic strategies, each brand shapes how consumers:

- understand cruelty-free (as law, value, or lifestyle)
- relate to it emotionally
- integrate it into their consumption choices

Overall, both multimodal and linguistic strategies interact to frame cruelty-free messaging in ways that align with each brand's identity, audience, and communicative goals. All five brands selectively highlight some aspects of cruelty-free practices while minimizing others. This demonstrates that cruelty-free communication is not simply about stating an ethical fact, but about constructing a meaningful narrative around it. In the context of framing theory, cruelty-free messaging serves as a powerful example of how corporate communication actively shapes ethical consumption, guiding not only what consumers buy, but also how they interpret responsibility, trust, and identity in the beauty industry.

5. Beyond websites: social media and small brands

Cruelty-free communication has become a central aspect of how brands present themselves, referring not only to the absence of animal testing in the production process, but also to the way this ethical commitment is communicated. Through carefully constructed messages, brands frame their practices as responsible, transparent, and aligned with evolving consumer values.

The promotion and presentation of a product are closely linked to packaging, which uses visual and graphic elements, such as certification logos (e.g., cruelty-free symbols), color schemes, typography, and spatial organization, that contribute to communicating ethical claims quickly and effectively at the point of sale. Packaging often includes reassuring language (e.g., "not tested on animals" and "100% vegan") and may provide additional explanations to enhance trust and credibility. Its analysis therefore allows to explore how ethical commitments are condensed into immediate, recognizable cues, often relying on visual shorthand and implicit signals to convey trustworthiness and ethical positioning. Beyond logos, brands frequently include short texts emphasizing values such as respect for animals, sustainability, and transparency. In this context, framing reinforces the moral dimension of consumption by presenting the purchase itself as part of the solution.

In-store retailing represents a key stage in expressing the cruelty-free or vegan nature of products. Communication on shelves plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perception at the point of purchase. Products rely on visual cues, such as certification logos (e.g., leaping bunny symbols), minimalist or "clean" design, and natural color palettes, to signal ethical standards immediately. These elements define the product as part of a "cruelty-free" category and appeal to consumers' sense of

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responsibility and compassion. As a result, the shelf becomes a site of rapid, intuitive decision-making, where ethical messaging must be clear and instantly recognizable. Shelf displays, product placement, and visual merchandising reinforce cruelty-free positioning through quick, intuitive signals that guide consumer choices in time-constrained environments.

In contrast, social media platforms such as Instagram capture more informal, interactive, and affective modes of communication. In these environments, brands tend to adopt a conversational tone, engage directly with users, and foster a sense of community and authenticity. Social media adds an interactive and dynamic dimension to cruelty-free communication. Platforms such as Instagram allow brands to engage directly with audiences, respond to questions, and incorporate user-generated content. This informal style helps humanize brands and strengthen their ethical positioning, while also requiring consistency and transparency, as audiences are quick to challenge perceived inconsistencies or instances of "greenwashing."

However, explicit cruelty-free messaging is not always frequent on social media, where posts often focus on other aspects of makeup rather than ethical claims. Nevertheless, well-known brands typically make their stance on cruelty-free practices and environmental responsibility immediately visible in the bio sections of their Instagram pages. For instance, Essence highlights "NO animal testing", [xii] while e.l.f. emphasizes its values with "clean, vegan, cruelty-free, Fair Trade certified". [xiii] NYX similarly states: "Always cruelty-free", [xiv] and Too Faced communicates its commitment in a more playful tone: "We're a serious makeup brand that knows how to have fun. Too Faced is a cruelty-free brand, always has been, always will be". [xv] Yepoda underscores its ethical positioning by referencing clean beauty, sustainability, and third-party certifications, specifying: "Clean K-Beauty Innovations. No compromises for your skin or our planet. Certified B Corp™. PETA-approved".[xvi]

As conscious consumerism redefines the beauty sector, small and local companies also play an important role, leveraging platforms like Instagram to champion cruelty-free practices. Through authenticity, innovation, and direct engagement, small brands are becoming powerful advocates for change. One of their greatest strengths lies in their agility. Unlike large corporations bound by complex supply chains and layers of bureaucracy, small businesses can quickly adapt to new information, technologies, and ethical standards. This flexibility allows them to adopt cruelty-free practices more efficiently, such as switching to alternative testing methods or sourcing ingredients from ethical suppliers.

On Instagram, this agility is visible in real time. Brands can document their transitions, share behind-the-scenes decisions, and educate their audience about why certain changes matter. This openness not only demonstrates innovation but also invites consumers to be part of the journey, creating a sense of shared purpose.

In a saturated market, standing out is essential, and a commitment to cruelty-free practices provides a meaningful way to do so. Small brands often position themselves as ethical alternatives to mainstream products, appealing to consumers who prioritize values alongside quality. Instagram serves as a powerful storytelling tool in this

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regard. Through curated visuals, informative captions, and consistent messaging, small companies can communicate their cruelty-free ethos clearly and attract a loyal, like-minded audience. This differentiation is not just about marketing; it becomes a core identity that shapes brand perception and consumer trust.

Transparency is a cornerstone of the cruelty-free movement, and small businesses are uniquely positioned to deliver it. With fewer intermediaries, they often maintain closer relationships with suppliers and have greater oversight of their production processes. This allows them to provide detailed insights into sourcing, formulation, and testing practices.

Social media amplifies this transparency. Instagram features such as Stories, live videos, and Direct Messages (DM) enable brands to interact directly with their audience, answer questions, and address concerns. This level of openness fosters trust, turning customers into advocates who feel confident in the brand's ethical commitments.

Beyond their own operations, small companies play a crucial role in shaping broader industry norms. By publicly committing to cruelty-free standards, they contribute to a growing cultural expectation that products should not involve animal testing. Instagram acts as a platform for advocacy, where brands can share educational content, collaborate with influencers, and participate in global conversations about ethics and sustainability. Even with smaller following, these companies can create meaningful impact by engaging deeply with their communities and encouraging conscious consumption.

Credibility is essential in the cruelty-free space, and many small companies strengthen their claims by working with recognized certification bodies. These organizations provide verification and help standardize what "cruelty-free" means, reducing confusion for consumers. For small brands, obtaining certification is both a challenge and an opportunity. While it may require investment and rigorous compliance, it also enhances legitimacy and builds consumer confidence. On Instagram, certification logos, educational posts, and partnership announcements help communicate this credibility clearly and effectively.

What sets small cruelty-free brands apart on Instagram is their ability to build genuine communities. Unlike large corporations, they often respond personally to comments, share user-generated content, and highlight customer stories. This two-way communication transforms social media from a marketing channel into a collaborative space. Consumers are no longer passive buyers; they become participants in a shared mission. They support brands not just for their products, but for their values and transparency. In this way, Instagram becomes more than a platform; it becomes a catalyst for ethical change driven by small but impactful voices.

By aligning visual design, language, and structure, brands construct a persuasive discourse that not only informs consumers but also shapes their moral and emotional engagement. They define the ethical problem, attribute responsibility, appeal to shared values, and offer consumption as a meaningful response.

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6. Conclusions

Cruelty-free positioning emerges as a dynamic communicative process, shaped by the interaction between institutional claims, commercial strategies, and audience engagement. From an ethical and methodological standpoint, this study focused exclusively on publicly available promotional materials. It did not assess the factual accuracy of cruelty-free claims but examined their linguistic construction and communicative function.

Regarding transparency, the findings show that cruelty-free communication operates across three main dimensions: certifications, traceability, and corporate reporting. Brands such as e.l.f. Cosmetics and Essence emphasize third-party certifications (e.g., PETA and Leaping Bunny) as external validation mechanisms that act as trust proxies, helping to reduce information asymmetry between companies and consumers. However, transparency extends beyond the use of logos. It also involves traceability, namely the ability to track ingredients, suppliers, and testing practices throughout the supply chain. Essence, in particular, distinguishes itself by explicitly referencing regulatory frameworks, thereby acknowledging the limits of absolute cruelty-free claims.

Corporate reports introduce a third layer of transparency. The language used in these documents tends to be formal, data-driven, and future-oriented, emphasizing measurable outcomes and commitments. This contrasts with website and marketing language, which is often simplified and affective, revealing a strategic adaptation of discourse depending on audience and purpose.

Notwithstanding, transparency is not uniform across brands. While some adopt a more informational and regulatory approach, others rely on symbolic and emotional forms of communication, conveying ethical commitment through tone, values, and identity rather than detailed explanation. From a framing perspective, what is included or excluded in communication plays a crucial role in determining whether a message is perceived as credible or superficial. More comprehensive approaches tend to acknowledge limitations and contextual factors, whereas simplified strategies often rely on absolute claims and emotionally charged language.

Ethical claims are closely connected to the concepts of “credibility”, “authentic communication”, and “ethical washing”. Ethical washing does not necessarily involve false claims, but rather selective disclosure and strategic simplification. Brands may emphasize positive ethical attributes while omitting complexities, shaping a coherent and appealing narrative. In this sense, cruelty-free communication necessarily relies on trust, as most consumers lack technical expertise or access to information needed to independently verify such claims. Unlike product quality, which can be directly experienced and evaluated, cruelty-free status remains largely intangible. Consumers cannot personally assess supply chains, testing procedures, or regulatory compliance; instead, they must rely on brand statements and product certifications. For this reason, cruelty-free messaging functions as a trust-based mechanism. Labels, logos, and brand declarations act as proxies for credibility, guiding consumer judgment in the

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absence of direct evidence. Certifications from third-party organizations, in particular, play a crucial role in mediating this trust, as they are perceived to offer independent validation of ethical claims.

Trust, therefore, emerges not as an objective outcome of information, but as a perception shaped by communicative choices. In this context, the consumer plays the role of an active interpreter of meaning. Cruelty-free messages are not simply transmitted and passively received; rather, they are encoded by brands and decoded by audiences (see Hall 1980) in different ways depending on social background, values, and prior knowledge. As a result, the same message may generate dominant readings (acceptance of the intended ethical claim), negotiated readings (partial acceptance combined with skepticism), or oppositional readings (rejection of the claim, for example, in cases of perceived greenwashing). This perspective highlights that the effectiveness of cruelty-free communication ultimately depends not only on how messages are constructed, but also on how they are interpreted.

This study demonstrated that cruelty-free communication is not just about disclosing ethical practices, but about framing them in ways that are meaningful, accessible, and persuasive. Through linguistic choices, visual design, and multimodal strategies, brands actively shape how consumers interpret ethical claims, evaluate credibility, and develop trust. The core tension between authenticity and simplification, information and emotion, and transparency and persuasion lies at the heart of contemporary ethical branding. Ultimately, trust arises not only from what brands do, but also from how effectively they communicate and frame their actions.

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