

A Social Semiotic Analysis of Covid-19 Public Service Advertisements in China

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ABSTRACT

Covid-PSA (Covid Public Service Advertisement) is considered as a crucial medium for crisis communication between governments and the public. This study aims to contribute to communication and media studies by introducing a social semiotic analysis of the emotions expressed in Chinese Covid-PSAs. Our analysis of 21 PSAs shows that they use both the language and visual images to represent Judgement for educating people to observe the social sanctions and esteems, Appreciation for expressing Chinese attitude and Chinese identity, affect for confidence building and emotional touch. The attitude pattern also manifests employment of different communicative strategies.

Keywords: social semiotic, analysis, Covid-PSA, China

1. INTRODUCTION

Public Service Advertisement (PSA) is a special form of media governance, with a set of political interventions into market to ensure that broadcasters produce programs which are beneficial and valuable to the society as a whole (Syvertsen, 2003).

The outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 has brought detrimental impact on Chinese people physically and psychologically. After the outbreak of the pandemic, CCTV released Covid-PSAs/Posters via 400,000 digital screens in 80 cities, reaching over 100 million audience everyday from the Covid-outbreak till Feb. 6th (People's Daily, 2020).

In spite of the significance and breadth of PSAs, to our knowledge, there are few studies from the linguistic perspectives, in particular from multimodality. Studies of PSAs in China are mainly from perspectives of metaphor and metonymy, mood and modality, attitudinal analysis, interactive meaning and social semiotics.

2. RESEARCH INTO PSAS

Preceding research on PSAs could be classified into audience research, persuasion theory, multimodal analysis, development of PSAs, content analysis and communication strategy.

Research on PSAs reveals that the most frequently

researched topic of PSAs were anti-drug, environment and HIV/AIDS, and most of them were focusing on the effectiveness of emotion on public's awareness or behaviors. The linguistic or visual analysis of PSAs was not given due attention.

Addressing the need to understand PSAs in China, this analysis is guided by the four questions below:

- (1) What Attitudes are constructed in the Covid-PSAs in China? what is the pattern?
- (2) How are the Attitudes constructed? Is it through language or visual images, or both?
- (3) What are the communicative purposes/functions of these Attitudes?
- (4) What does the pattern reveal about the speaker/society/culture in China?

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Our framework is essentially based on Martin and White's (2005) [12] attitude framework, a system which involves regions of affect (emotion), judgement (ethics) and appreciation (aesthetics). The attitude system by Martin and White (2005) [12] could be illustrated in Figure 1. Affect is the emotive dimension of meaning and it is dealing with positive and negative feelings. Judgement is our attitudes towards people and their behavior. Appreciation deals with evaluations of 'things'.

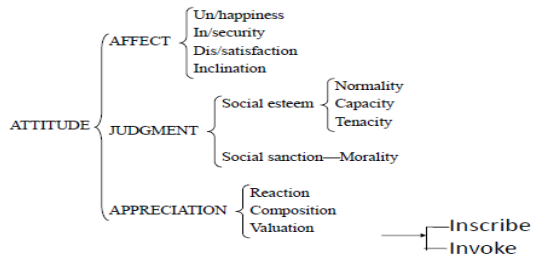


Figure 1 Attitude System (Martin and White, 2005)

For this study, based on Kress and van Leeuwen’s *Visual Grammar* (1996) and the framework (with some changes) proposed by Feng (2016) [5], Yu, Feng & Unsworth (2020) [18], we also come up with a framework to analyze the construction of attitude through multimodal resources, as illustrated in Figure 2.

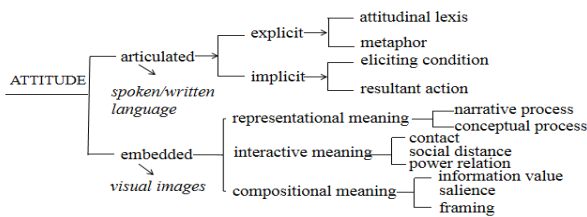


Figure 2 Multimodal realization of attitude

4. DATA AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Our data is composed of 21 Chinese Covid-PSAs (more than 1 hour in total), mainly collected from *CCTV*, *Hubei TV*, *Hunan TV*, *Wenming Website*, and *Gong Yi* channel. We collect the language data and visual image data separately. For the language, we transcribe them manually and for the visual images, we use the PR software to export the images and we select them manually (because many images overlapped).

Figure 3 presents the overall distribution of attitude in language, while Figure 4 shows the overall distribution of attitude in language. From the two figures, the most prominent type of attitude is judgement (842 instances), then is appreciation (577 instances) and affect (460 instances). Table 1 summarizes the construction of attitude, and it can be inferred that attitude is mostly constructed positively and implicitly.

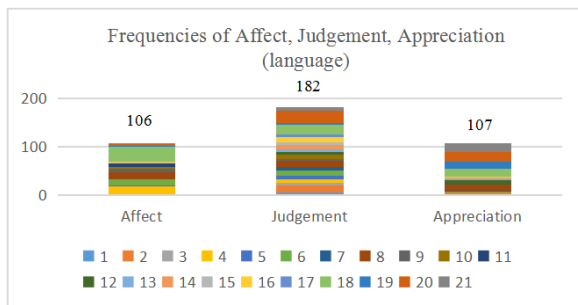


Figure 3 Distribution of attitude (language)

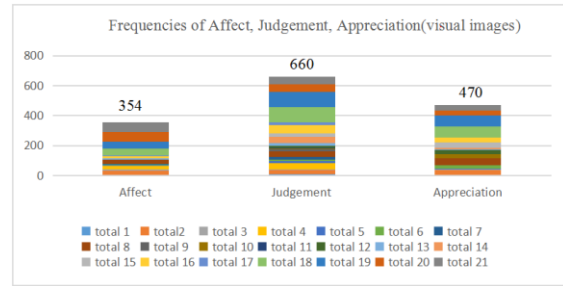


Figure 4 Distribution of attitude (visual images)

Table 1 Construction of Attitude

PSAs	Affect				Judgement				Appreciation			
	Positive		Negative		Positive		Negative		Positive		Negative	
	Explicit	Implicit	Explicit	Implicit	Explicit	Implicit	Explicit	Implicit	Explicit	Implicit	Explicit	Implicit
visual images	169	67	24	32	63	481	0	5	33	206	0	212
language	55	44	1	6	78	88	5	11	26	39	15	27
total	224	111	25	38	141	569	5	16	59	245	15	239

Judgement is the most frequently constructed type of attitude. The most noticeable feature of judgement is that most instances are positive (710 out of 731 instances) and implicit (585 out of 731 instances). The second most frequently constructed type of attitude is appreciation, whose most salient feature is that they are more positively (304 out of 558 instances) and implicitly (484 out of 558 instances) represented. Pattern of affect, the least represented attitude, is quite different from the other two types in that the remarkable use of positive instances are more constructed explicitly (249 instances) rather than implicitly (149 instances). As shown in Figure 5, the most frequently represented human-visual images are doctors and nurses (29% of the total images), ordinary people occupy 14%, workers and soldiers & police account for 7% respectively.

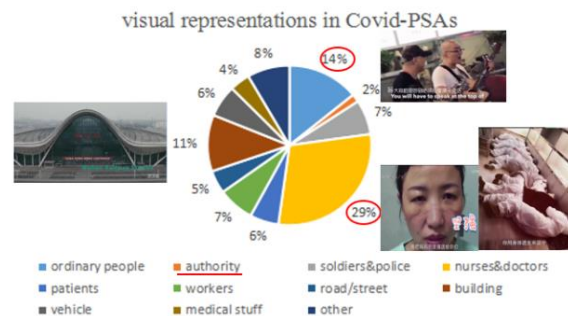


Figure 5 Visual representations of Covid-PSAs

Judgement is the our attitude towards people (Martin & White, 2005) [12], and it could be constructed either through articulation or embedding. Many metaphors are used to articulate judgement which are good ways of encoding abstract concepts or meanings (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008) [9]. For example, metaphors of ‘white angel, health guardian, the most beautiful counter-marching people (*zuimei nixingzhe* in Chinese), soldier, warrior, hero and dare-to-die corps (*gansidui* in

Chinese)' to are employed articulate explicit judgement towards doctors and nurses.

Appreciation appears less frequently than Judgement in Chinese Covid-PSAs (107 language instances and 470 visual images). A close analysis of the instances shows that positive valuations are used to highlight the Chinese attitude (resilience, tolerance, balance/equilibrium, harmony) and Chinese identity (growing nation power, prosperity, unity, 'people-oriented principle') and negative valuations mainly function to present the detrimental harm and depression that Covid-19 has brought to the Chinese people.

Affect appears least frequently among the three, and it is expressed more positively (335 instances) than negatively (63 instances). In most instances, affect is constructed in response to changing situations of the epidemic and relationships between people such as doctor-patient, parent-child, friends or couples. Also, metaphor is used to represent affect. Emotion is not only constructed by conventionalized signals (Forceville et al., 2010) [7], but also by stylized versions of bodily behaviors like facial expression, body posture and touch (Feng & O'Halloran, 2012). According to Feng and O'Halloran (2012) [4], facial expression of happiness and sadness are differently represented.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this final section, we will first summarize our major findings and discuss them from the perspective of Chinese cultural context. Our attitudinal analysis showed that the construction of attitude mainly relies on judgement to highlight the social esteem and social sanction of the Chinese society in which concepts of holism, norm of balanced harmony (Huang, 2019) [8], and entirety (Chang, 1987; Wang & Zeng, 2005) are advocated.

Overall, the Chinese Covid-PSAs are positively constructed to build people's confidence in fighting against the virus, to educate people to be grateful and united, to brand a good image of China globally. Chinese Covid-PSA is also a way of crisis communication in face of public health disease, and they use affect theory to manipulate the public's emotion, face theory to maintain the image of China and report more positively to the public (by reporting few patients), cooperation theory to address what the audience need (they need more emotional support and confidence, therefore, broadcasters report more content of social values instead of protective guidance or instruction).

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The choices of semiotic resources in the PSAs make the meaning-making and message conveyed persuasive

and especially the positive and negative emotions play a significant role in evoking the audience' behavioral and spiritual attitudes. Therefore, it's worthwhile to research deeper in the Attitude pattern represented in the PSAs so as to discover strategies of emotional manipulation and persuasion.

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