

Semiotic Analysis of the Role of Covid-19 Prevention Protocol in “L.A. Bold: New Normal” 2020 Cigarette Advertisement

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the year 2020, several commercial advertisements started to display portrayals of Covid-19 Prevention Protocol. Various media show depiction of people doing their own activities while wearing masks or face shields, appliances which are part of the protocol meant to decrease the spread rate of Covid-19. Some advertisements mention the protocol subtly, while others present it as their major content. One of the advertisements that presents Covid-19 Prevention Protocol palpably is “L.A. Bold: New Normal” cigarette advertisement. This case provides an interesting aspect to analyze, for it is a public secret that cigarette products have harmful health consequences if consumed, while on the other hand, Covid-19 Prevention Protocol intends to engage public on maintaining their health. In the topic of community resilience and well-being, it is important to understand the reason behind cigarette advertisements’ tendency to include Covid-19 prevention protocol, for the prevention protocol is related to community well-being while advertisements can always be accessed freely by public so that they are close to the community itself. This research aims on figuring out the role of Covid-19 Prevention Protocol portrayed by “L.A. Bold: New Normal” cigarette advertisement through semiotic perspective. The research method is qualitative, by applying Roland Barthes’ semiology theory and Gillian Dyer’s visual communication theory. The data for this research was collected through observation and literature study. Through Barthes’ semiology theory and Dyer’s visual communication theory, this research found that Covid-19 prevention protocol was presented in “L.A. Bold: New Normal” as a representation of a lifestyle, which negates the healthcare significance.

Keywords: *Semiotic, Cigarette advertisement, Covid-19 prevention protocol, Covid-19, Public health.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance to the continuous growth of market, advertisements presented by various media are also becoming more diverse. According to Gillian Dyer, although its’ primary function is to introduce a wide range of consumer goods to the public, advertising has become more involved in the manipulation of social values and attitudes, and less concerned with the communication of essential information about goods and services [1]. In Indonesia, this involvement of advertisements in manipulating social values and attitude can be seen clearly within cigarette advertisements that, due to the prohibition for commercial advertisement to display any form of cigarette under the constitution UU No. 32 Tahun 2002 tentang Penyiaran, do not display the products, but instead manipulate the way public

perceives cigarettes by displaying traits to be associated by the audience with the related cigarette products.

Cigarette advertisements rely on signs to deliver their message to the viewers, which can also be found in other advertisements. This research analyzes “L.A. Bold: New Normal” cigarette advertisement as a case study by implementing Roland Barthes’ semiology theory and Gillian Dyer’s visual communication theory. The focus of this research is emphasized on discovering the role of COVID-19 prevention protocol that is present in the advertisement.

2. THEORIES USED

2.1 Roland Barthes' *Semiology Theory*

Semiology is a science about sign. Signs are everywhere: a word is a sign, and likewise are gestures, traffic lights, flags, and so on [2]. A sign was formed by the signifier; in the form of any concept or object behind the signified, and the signified; the image that is related to the said signifier. According to Roland Barthes, any object that exists is a signifier [3]. It is almost impossible to discover an object that is not a signifier, for every utensil has similarity or relation to other objects. Further on, Barthes formulated a semiological scheme that includes connotative and denotative elements.

1. Signifier (penanda)	2. Signified (petanda)
3. Denotative Sign (tanda denotatif)	
4. Connotative Signifier (penanda konotatif)	5. Connotative Signified (petanda konotatif)
6. Connotative sign (tanda konotatif)	

Figure 1 Roland Barthes' semiological scheme

Within the scheme, it can be seen that a denotative sign (3) is composed of signifier (1) and signified (2). However, at the same time a denotative sign is also a connotative signifier (4) [4]. Connotative signifier then, alongside connotative signified (5), constructs a connotative sign (6). According to Barthes' concept, a connotative sign doesn't only have additional meanings, but also contains the two parts of denotative sign that is underlying its' existence. In this research, Barthes' theory was used to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings behind "L.A. Bold: New Normal" cigarette advertisement.

2.2 Gillian Dyer's *Visual Communication Theory*

Gillian Dyer believes that to successfully gain customer's attention, advertisements may include human characters who will represent favorable qualities and therefore dramatize the value of the products [1]. In general, every human stereotype has attached characteristics that are widely known. By presenting human figures within a media as the representation of certain stereotypes, advertisements encourage the audience to automatically associate the said stereotypes' characteristics with the figure that is present.

Gillian Dyer has classified aspects of human figures within advertisements into three major categories; appearance, manner, and activity.

1. Appearance is every aspect concerning objective visual of the human figure that is presented. This category consists of age, gender, national and racial, hair, body, size, and looks.

2. Manner consists of expression, eye contact, pose, and clothes.

3. Activity consists of the affairs that is done by the human figures that is presents, such as touch, body movement, and positional communication.

Aside from human figures, visual elements whose existence play an important role in shaping how the audience perceives an advertisement are props and settings. In this research, Dyer's visual communication theory was used side by side with Barthes' semiology theory.

3. COVID-19 PREVENTION PROTOCOL IN CIGARETTE ADVERTISEMENTS

3.1 COVID-19 and The Prevention Protocol

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) [5]. Coronaviruses can be transmitted between both animals and people. According to the timeline in World Health Organization (WHO)'s official website, COVID-19 was identified in Wuhan at the end of 2019 and started spreading off China at the beginning of 2020. COVID-19 spread globally in a rapid rate and on 14th April 2020, WHO has reported that there are at least more than a million COVID-19 cases all around the globe.

On 6th April 2020, WHO published a temporary guide on usage of mask titled "Advice of the Use of Mask in the Context of COVID-19". The content of this document includes community settings, home care, health care settings, and mask management in regards of the pandemic [6]. The guide was then updated on 5th June with the same title. The updated document recommends people during the COVID-19 pandemic to avoid crowded spaces, maintain physical distance, perform hand hygiene frequently, use respiratory hygiene, and refrain from touching their mouth, nose, and eyes [7].

3.2 Health Risks within Cigarette Products

According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's official website, smoking causes cancer, heart disease, stroke, lung diseases, diabetes, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Secondhand smoke

exposure contributes to approximately 41,000 deaths among nonsmoking adults and 400 deaths in infants each year [8]. Most of these diseases caused by cigarette are related to respiratory problems.

In 2003, the Republic of Indonesia Government published “Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 19 Tahun 2003 tentang Pengamanan Rokok bagi Kesehatan”, conveying regulations related to cigarette products. It was stated that every cigarette product’s packaging must include texts of health risk warning in a label that is easy to see and read. Article 8 section 1 stated that the health risk warning in each label must be in the form of writing, and article 8 chapter 2 stated that the writing as intended in chapter 1 is “smoking can cause cancer, heart attack, impotence, and pregnancy and fetus issues” [9].

According to an Elsevier journal in 2021, available evidence suggests that smoking is associated with increased severity of disease and mortality in hospitalized COVID-19 patients, since smoking is detrimental to the immune response within the respiratory system that can cause smokers to become more prone to infectious pathogens [10].

3.3 COVID-19 Prevention Protocol within Cigarette Advertisements Phenomenon

Throughout 2020, occurred a phenomenon where several cigarette advertisements started presenting COVID-19 prevention protocol. These are the examples of some cigarette advertisement in the form of videos that showed COVID-19 prevention protocol.



Figure 2 A Mild advertisement: Kecil Buat Lo, Besar Buat Semua; maintaining distance version (2020). This advertisement brought up the topic of physical distancing protocol. Source: screen shots from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_qttAqeKXc

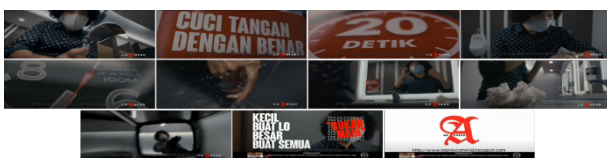


Figure 3 A Mild advertisement: Kecil Buat Lo, Besar Buat Semua; washing hands version (2020). This advertisement is about washing hands for at least twenty seconds. Source: screen shots from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnKV4uSHy4Y>



Figure 4 A Mild advertisement: Bukan Main Terus Maju (2020), about doing activities while also maintaining social distancing. Source: screen shots from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flz1wWSD-UA>

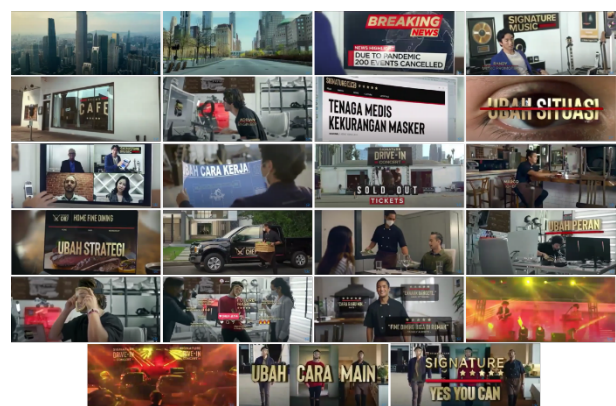


Figure 5 GG Signature advertisement: Ubah Cara Main (2020). This advertisement brought up the topic of finding alternative to current pandemic situation without breaking the prevention protocol. Source: screen shots from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0ISf127tt4>

4. “L.A. BOLD: NEW NORMAL” (2020)

4.1. First Scene

Denotative signifier: The human figure is a man aged ranging around 25-30 years old. His whole body, except for his eyes that are shown through his helmet shield, is covered in black clothing. He gazed up in the end of the scene. His body is leaning forward as he does maneuver with his bike. Video takes are short and taken from different perspectives. The props are a motorcycle and the rain. The setting is an empty highway. The sky was gray and then, the rain falls.

Denotative signified: A motorbike maneuver in an empty highway while the weather is cloudy.

Connotative signified: The character’s age range can be associated with freedom and youth spirit. His male gender implies masculinity. His all-black clothing implies mystery, His upward gaze can mean that he is thinking about what will happen next. The bike can be

associated to wild spirit. The falling raindrops add motion to the ad. The gray sky tenses up the atmosphere.

Meaning: This first scene acts as an intro that invites the audience to anticipate the next scene. This is based on the mysterious way the character is portrayed and how he gazed up as if he's anticipating something, while the bike, the rainfall, and the video takes move in swift motions.



Figure 6 First scene of “L.A. Bold New Normal” (2020) cigarette Advertisement. Source: screen shots from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ky2TeJggwM>

4.2. Second Scene

Denotative signifier: The same male character. His expression is focused on the interaction between his hand and the raindrops. He wears a black jacket that is zipped halfway up. He touched the raindrops with his bare hands and the water drips from his fingertips. In the second video take, the raindrops are floating up instead of falling down. The props are those raindrops and the text ‘wash your hand’. The setting is pitch black.

Denotative signified: Washing hands using raindrops.

Connotative signified: The half zipped jacket renders the audience curious and intensifies the mystery. The way the water touches the character’s bare hands and how it drips through his fingers intensifies sensuality. The raindrops’ motion is unusual and it is puzzling.

Meaning: This unusual portrayal of rain maintained the impression of mystery from previous scene. The text ‘wash your hands’ explains the context for this scene. However, the method of hand washing portrayed wasn’t exactly the method supported by the prevailing protocol, showing that the main aim of this advertisement isn’t to explain COVID-19 prevention protocol. The impression of mystery that was continued in this scene intensified the viewer’s anticipation for the next scenes.



Figure 7 Second scene of “L.A. Bold New Normal” (2020) cigarette Advertisement. Source: screen shots from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ky2TeJggwM>

4.3. Third Scene

Denotative signifier: The same character. The video was taken from a rear view angle, showing that the character has a sturdy build and that his shoulders are broad. He walks away from the camera through a path of darkness surrounded by curtains of raindrops. The prop is the raindrops. The setting is the pitch black background and rainfalls.

Denotative signified: A man walks through a path that is surrounded by curtains of raindrop.

Connotative Signified: The character’s sturdy figure and walking style denote masculinity. Rear view takes implies authority on the character, as if he’s leading the way for the audience to follow.

Meaning: This scene is the peak of the audience’s curiosity, anticipating for what will be revealed in the end of the path. The character is presented as someone with control. In this scene, the ad has moved past the washing hands prevention protocol, which renders the raindrops irrelevant.

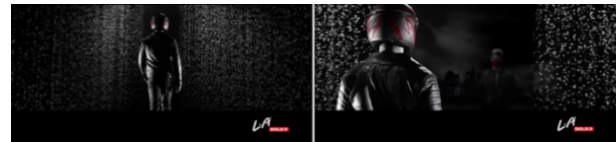


Figure 8 Third scene of “L.A. Bold New Normal” (2020) cigarette Advertisement. Source: screen shots from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ky2TeJggwM>

4.4. Fourth Scene

Denotative signifier: The same character. His gaze is friendly. His hair is short and neat. He takes off his helmet, revealing that under his helmet, he’s wearing a bright red mask. The props are his helmet, the red mask, and a text saying ‘wear a mask’. The setting is darkness and rainfall.

Denotative signified: A man takes off his helmet to reveal that he’s wearing a mask under it.

Connotative Signified: The neat hairstyle of the character portray what is ideal in society. His friendly gaze is inviting. How he takes off his helmet is a revealing gesture, showing the mask under his mysterious helmet.

Meaning: This scene is the answer to the audience’s curiosity, the scene that dispels impressions of mystery. However, if the mask is presented without the explaining text, it won’t be enough for the audience to associate this scene with Covid-19 prevention protocol, since it was usual for riders to wear masks even long before the pandemic.



Figure 9 Fourth scene of “L.A. Bold New Normal” (2020) cigarette Advertisement. Source: screen shots from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ky2TeJggwM>

4.5. Fifth Scene

Denotative signifier: The human figures are five characters with similar ages ranging around 20-35 years old, one of them is the character from previous scenes. Each characters are male. They all have short black hair. Their clothing is black and they each use a red mask on their faces. All of the characters’ attentions are directed toward the main character when he joins in. The props are the motorcycles beside each characters, masks, and the text ‘social distancing’. The setting is a wide city space with tall buildings around it.

Denotative signified: Five men are hanging out while also keeping distance between each other.

Connotative Signified: The presence of five characters in one video take is enough to imply a crowd. The characters’ age range can be associated with youth spirit. Male gender is masculine. How the other four characters’ focus is directed toward the main character shows that he is superior compared to them. The similar clothing and masks emphasize a close relationship between them.

Meaning: The main character is ideal because he also has friends who respect him. The four characters also serve as a comparison that emphasize the main character’s superiority.

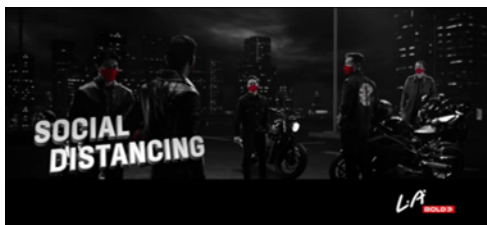


Figure 10 Fifth scene of “L.A. Bold New Normal” (2020) cigarette Advertisement. Source: screen shots from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ky2TeJggwM>

4.6. Sixth Scene

Denotative signifier: The same main character, while the other four are in the background. His expression is

focused with a slight frown. He looks straight at the camera. His body is sturdy. He’s clasping his black helmet in his left arm. He walks sturdily but also casually away from the other characters, toward the camera. The props are his helmet, his mask, an L.A. Bold logo, and a ‘welcome to the bold new normal’ text. The setting is a wide city space with tall buildings around it.

Denotative signified: A closing of an advertisement which includes the brand logo and a supporting text.

Connotative Signified: The character’s appearance is macho, intense, and serious. His focused expression and straight stare to the camera bring forward superiority toward the audience, and so does his clasping helmet gesture. His casual walking style is inviting. The way he walks away from the other characters and toward the camera shows that the audience is what matters. The text ‘welcome to the bold new normal’ is an invitation and a greeting. The way the buildings surround them implies that the five characters are important.

Meaning: This is the scene where the audience start to associate the whole scenes with the cigarette brand. The text ‘welcome to the bold new normal’ is an explanation for the whole ad and it has a significant role in interpreting the ad. The character is also a representation of L.A. Bold brand, indirectly implying that the brand is masculine, wild, focused, friendly, and neat.

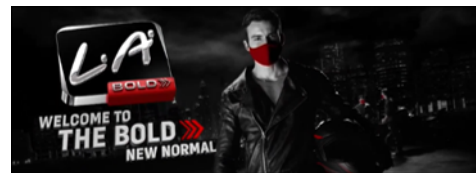


Figure 11 Sixth scene of “L.A. Bold New Normal” (2020) cigarette Advertisement. Source: screen shots from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ky2TeJggwM>

5. VISUAL NARRATION

Each scene in “L.A. Bold: New Normal” cigarette advertisement serves its’ own role. Those roles are as following; first scene is the introduction meant to engage the audience in anticipating the next scenes by bringing forward impressions of masculinity and mystery, second scene intensifies the impression of mystery and the audience’s anticipation, third scene as the peak of the audience’s anticipation, fourth scene and fifth scene is the answer to the anticipation that has been built up while bringing forward impressions of superiority and masculinity, and the final scene serves as the persuasive resolution.

The main character was presented as the representation of the brand in the form of an ideal masculine and superior man. The audience was positioned as a guest

who followed the main character to his destination. There are no elements within the advertisement that reminds the audience to a cigarette product. When the audience watches the ad, they first associate masculinity, superiority, and sensuality within the advertisement to the L.A. Bold brand before associating them to the cigarettes as the product produced by the brand.

Although the context of “L.A. Bold: New Normal” cigarette advertisement is about COVID-19 prevention protocol and new normal, the advertisement didn’t present the prevention protocol as a health regulation. This conclusion was taken based on how the advertisement presented prevention protocol in a way that is inappropriate to the prevailing protocol, so it appears as if the protocol is presented only as a big theme. The advertisement has a more urgent intention to present an interesting and ideal character than to present appropriate COVID-19 prevention protocol. Some of the protocol portrayed in the advertisement weren’t enough for the viewers to understand that the scenes relate to COVID-19 prevention protocol, so the only relevant explanation is the texts in the end of some scenes. If the entire texts were removed from the video, the advertisement would still make sense, but instead of COVID-19 prevention protocol, the narration would be about a man who rides his motor bike to meet some friends and he interacts with the rain on his way.

The explanation for why COVID-19 prevention protocol is present in “L.A. Bold: New Normal” can be traced to the text ‘welcome to the bold new normal’ in the sixth scene. New normal is a term commonly used to explain the new way of living for the community affected by COVID-19 pandemic, indicated by the requirement to obey COVID-19 prevention protocol. The sentence ‘welcome to the bold new normal’ is a phrase of greeting, similar to phrases that are meant to greet people who have come to a new area or times. This means that the advertisement saw new normal as a new area for public to come to, perhaps a new lifestyle, instead of a protocol meant to prevent a pandemic.

Even though the term new normal came from public healthcare field, the context of health and public well-being has been entirely removed from the advertisement. Instead, the advertisement only took a small part from the big theme COVID-19, specifically the new normal lifestyle. The viewers then associate new normal portrayed in the advertisement with a lifestyle instead of a healthcare protocol. The protocols presented in the advertisement, such as ‘wash your hands’ protocol, were there as a representation of the new normal lifestyle and not as a reminder for the viewers to take good care of their health during the pandemic.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Due to the considerable amount of COVID-19 prevention protocol’s appearance in cigarette advertisements, it seems as if this phenomenon has become a new image for cigarette advertisements. At a glance, COVID-19 prevention protocol and cigarette products do contradict each other. While the prevention protocol aims to decrease the spread rate of pandemic for public health, cigarette products can induce health complications, notably are complications related to lungs.

As can be seen in the case study of “L.A. Bold: New Normal” cigarette advertisement, the advertisement was able to bring up the two contradicting aspects in harmony by adjusting the denotative and connotative signifier and signified that is present within. The portrayal of COVID-19 prevention protocol that is presented is not a representation of the prevention protocol itself, but instead is a representation of the new normal lifestyle that negates its’ healthcare significance.

There is no special relation between the portrayal of COVID-19 prevention protocol in cigarette advertisement phenomenon and the cigarette products they produce. For example, those portrayals of prevention protocol within cigarette advertisements are not intended to fabricate the fact that cigarette isn’t good for public health. Instead, the reason why it happens is simply because new normal is a new lifestyle that advertisements in general, not only cigarette advertisements, can respond to.

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