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

Ruinan Zhao

1Guangdong Polytechnic College
Corresponding author: Ruinan Zhao. Email: irenezhao22ruinan@163.com

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 estees, 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 2019 has brought detrimental impact on Chinese 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’.
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 visual images. 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.

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.

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

Table 1 Construction of Attitude

| Plural | Affect | Positive | Negative | Judgement | Positive | Negative | Appreciation | Positive | Negative |
|--------|--------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|--------------|----------|----------|
| visual images | 731 | 488 | 67 | 24 | 32 | 63 | 483 | 0 | 5 |
| language | 27 | 14 | 1 | 6 | 7 | 80 | 5 | 13 | 28 | 59 | 15 | 27 |
| total | 758 | 504 | 71 | 30 | 23 | 141 | 569 | 5 | 16 | 30 | 245 | 15 | 29 |

Figure 3 Distribution of attitude (language)

Figure 4 Distribution of attitude (visual images)

Figure 5 Visual representations of Covid-PSAs
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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author feels grateful for the opportunity and platform given by the ICLACE2021 so that the ideas and researches could be read by other scholars in this research area, and more importantly, the author could able to receive more advice and further suggestions from experts and other peers so that much more improvement and breakthroughs could be obtained. Also, special thanks are given to Guangdong Polytechnic College for the support and fund (project number 2019GKJSK009) so that the research could move so smoothly.

REFERENCES

[1] Bagozzi, R. P., & Moore, D. J. (1994). Public service advertisements: Emotions and empathy guide prosocial behavior. Journal of marketing, 58(1), 56-70.

[2] Chan, K., & Chang, H. C. (2013). Advertising to Chinese youth: A study of public service ads in Hong Kong. Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal.

[3] Dillard, J. P., & Peck, E. (2000). Affect and persuasion: Emotional responses to public service announcements. Communication Research, 27(4), 461-495.

[4] Feng, D., & O’Halloran, K. L. (2012). Representing emotive meaning in visual images: A social semiotic approach. Journal of Pragmatics, 44(14), 2067-2084.

[5] Feng, D. (2016). Promoting moral values through entertainment: a social semiotic analysis of the Spring Festival Gala on China Central Television. Critical Arts, 30(1), 87-101.

[6] Feng, W. D. (2017). Political advertising and public service advertisements. Social issue of advertising, 201-214.

[7] Forceville, C., Veale, T., & Feyaerts, K. (2010). Balloonics: The visuals of balloons in comics. The rise and reason of comics and graphic literature: Critical essays on the form, 56-73.

[8] Huang, C. R., Jing-Schmidt, Z., & Meisterernst, B. (Eds.). (2019). The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Applied Linguistics. Routledge.
[9] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2008). Metaphors we live by. University of Chicago press.

[10] Kress, G. and Van Leeuwen, T. (2001) Multimodal Discourse – The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication. London: Arnold.

[11] Landsberger, S. (2009). Harmony, Olympic Manners and Morals—Chinese Television and the 'New Propaganda' of Public Service Advertising. European Journal of East Asian Studies, 8(2), 331-355.

[12] Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). Language of evaluation: Appraisal in English. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

[13] Syvertsen, T. (2003). Challenges to public television in the era of convergence and commercialization. Television & New Media, 4(2), 155-175.

[14] Wong, W. S., & Cuklanz, L. M. (2000). The Myths of Chinese Images Revisited: Persuasive Strategies in Hong Kong Anti-Drug Public Service Announcements.

[15] Wu, H. B. (2013). Appraisal perspective on attitudinal analysis of public service advertising discourse. English Language and Literature Studies, 3(1), 55.

[16] Yu, M. H. M., Feng, D. W., & Unsworth, L. (2020). Infusing Pro-Environmental Values in Science Education: A Multimodal Analysis of Ecology Animations for Children. In Learning from Animations in Science Education (pp. 55-74). Springer, Cham.