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Covid-19 and Media Representation: A Multimodal Study of Positive Discourse in Pakistani Television Commercials

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Abstract

The present study seeks to highlight the role of mainstream media in the dissemination of positive discourse, creating awareness among the masses with regard to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Pakistan. Media discourse plays a significant role in promoting ideology at a larger scale due to its vast viewership across the country. These ideological narratives are implicitly employed by the advertisers through several multiple resource systems. Electronic media has the power to (re)frame the ideology of a larger audience via significant visual/linguistic content and paves the way for social change through viable social institutions. The study follows the theoretical stance of Multimodal Text Analysis propounded by [Kress and Leeuwen \(2006\)](#). The data is comprised of some popular television commercials which are broadcast on the most viewed channels during the peak time viewership in the Pakistani context. The purposive sampling technique has been employed for the data collection process, including only those commercials that largely reflect COVID-19 patterns. The study finds that the commercials present layers of meanings via several orders of signification where the representation has been aimed at creating awareness to a greater extent among the general public so that they can take essential precautions and help to fight against the pandemic.

Key Words: COVID-19, Media Discourse, Multimodality, Positive Discourse

Introduction

The significance of media in the present era is a non-negligible fact, and it directly influences our lives. [Cashmore \(2005\)](#) is of the view that the power of media has made researchers realize its lasting effects on our thoughts, feelings and emotions and the way masses perceive the world through media narratives. Therefore, there has been a great tendency for the last few decades in researches conducted under the supposition that media has got a strong power in framing beliefs ([Wykes & Gunter 2005](#)). We live in a technology driven world where every single day, media presents innovative symbols, images and signs, and these signs influence us by framing our taste accordingly.

Advertising can be defined as a paid medium through which organizations convey their messages

as well as promote their product ([McNair, 2003](#)). Television advertising is a medium that has got deep penetration into our socio-cultural life, and it has also become one of the critical subject matters in linguistics, media and gender studies research. Televised content has broadened the horizon where hundreds of television channels are simultaneously working, which are owned by private sector organizations. It has developed competition in Pakistani electronic media. This content emphasizes real-life issues, and it also realistically depicts the social life due to which it has increasingly become a matter of critical research ([Bignell, 2004](#)).

The covid-19 pandemic shook the whole world with its long-lasting impacts in all the spheres of life. Since its outbreak, the pandemic has been painted in

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different words and images to reflect different ideas revolving around it. Countries around the world started campaigns using different media, i.e., print, electronic and social media. Besides, different multinational companies also went through a paradigm shift and aligned their messages with that of the pandemic situation. Many brands like detergents and hand wash products also added the component of the Coronavirus and regular washing of hands to fight against Corona, besides promoting social distancing. In the current study, the representation of COVID-19 in the Pakistani context has been analyzed by using the multimodal analysis method.

Research Questions

- Q1:** How do Pakistani Electronic Media represent the Covid-19 narrative in Television Commercials?
- Q2:** What are multimodal resource systems employed for constructing effective narratives to create awareness among people through electronic media commercials?

Statement of the Problem

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, many people across the globe have fallen victim to this deadly disease. At the same time, the governing agencies have instrumentally propagated awareness among people in order to overcome this fatal disease by utilizing multiple resources. In this regard, media played a pivotal role in making people realize the intensity and severity of the matter. Keeping in mind the role of media, the current study seeks to highlight how and to what extent mainstream Pakistani media has been successful in sensitizing people to follow all sop's pertaining to the said disease. It also attempts to explore several multimodal strategies being employed by the adverts for the effectiveness of content.

Significance of the Study

The study provides an in-depth analysis of several resources utilized by the adverts for the construction of the Covid-19 awareness narrative. The academic contribution of the study lies in its use of an exhaustive multimodal tool that has been

operationalized for gaining deeper insight into the televised content. Moreover, it also entails social significance as the underlying ideology serves collective benefit.

Delimitations

The study is delimited to television commercials and focuses on some of the most viewed television channels. Moreover, the timeframe for collection of the data spans over 03 months only (December 2020 –February 2021).

Literature Review

This part of the paper provides an exhaustive discussion on the main variables related to the study at hand. Firstly, it sheds light on the prevalent covid-19 fatal disease, which has spread all over the world and brought massive destruction in terms of a death rate. Secondly, the connection between the Covid-19 pandemic and media has been brought into consideration as to how media plays its role in terms of disseminating information, resultantly developing consciousness among the audience. Lastly, it explains the theoretical aspect of the study that helps the researcher analyze the data at large.

Daily reporting related to Covid-19 cases has made this issue a serious topic of discussion in all spheres of human interaction. This fatal disease, which started in Wuhan (China), damaged human beings globally. Like many other platforms, media played a vital role in disseminating information and protective measures to

Theoretical base of the current banks upon the theory of multimodality propounded by [Kress and Leeuwen \(2006\)](#). Multimodality or multimodal is a theory of application being employed on verbal/visual communication. Basically, it emerged from Halladiyan concept of social semiotics ([Halliday, 1978](#)), which was further explicated by [Kress and Leeuwen \(2006\)](#) in terms of visual grammar. It provides an exhaustive model for examining genres discourse, such as film, digital media, social media, advertising, animations and some other new types of media. Since multimodal texts are replete with visual/verbal signs and modality markers, therefore, it is important to explain these signs.

According to Jewitt (2009), mode/sign is a socially defined resource system, and the interpretation/meanings of such modes are deeply rooted within that culture. These modes are employed in text in different ways, for instance, gesture, facial expression, color, speech, image, writing and speech etc.

Research Methodology

The current study is qualitative in nature as it doesn't comprise any statistical data. It seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the media's stance in propagating the Covid-19 narrative among the audience. Moreover, the study also follows a descriptive-exploratory design within the qualitative paradigm. There are sub-methods in the qualitative approach; for instance, Discourse Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis and Semiotics (Polkinghorne, 1983). In the same manner, a multimodal tool has been employed to gain deeper insights into the data.

Data Collection

In order to gather data, the researcher properly observed the contents related to Covid-19 being advertised on mainstream media. For the said purpose, it was really hard to manage and observe all television channels; therefore, specific times and channels were selected for the collection of the data. According to PEMRA (2019) rating of the TV channels, 4 most viewed channels were selected, and these channels were observed during the prime viewership time, that is, 8 PM to 9 PM. The most viewed TV channels are Geo, Express, Hum and ARY. During this time, 4 channels were observed, and the frequency of all the commercials was also taken into account. The most repeated commercials were taken

into consideration for the analysis purpose. A purposive sampling technique was employed for the selection of the commercials. In total, 5 commercials have been screened, and their selection relied upon the frequency of occurrence during prime time viewership.

Theoretical framework & Method of Analysis

The present study follows the theoretical approach of multimodality proposed by [Kress & Leeuwen \(2006\)](#) and Jewitt (2009). The method to be used for the analysis of the collected data is that of Multimodal Analysis, specifically the Social Semiotic Multimodality as referred to by Jewitt (2009). Most of the traditional analysis relied on identifying linguistics signs and then analyzing them to derive the intended or deeper meaning. However, as time passed, communication gained popularity and developed further as a field; multimodality also developed, and so did the idea of modes. According to [Kress and Leeuwen \(2006\)](#), multimodal analysis allows the researcher to deconstruct the text in a deeper way through several semiotic resource systems. These resource systems include Visual signs, verbal, aural and moving images, gaze and distance & closeness to camera etc. They also highlighted the importance of analyzing these resource systems since they produce and convey meaning, especially in relation to each other.

Data Presentation & Analysis

The data for the current study comprises 5 commercials that are selected on account of their higher frequency of occurrence as compared to the other commercials.

Lifebuoy Hand wash



Figure A:



Figure B:

The tag line of the television commercial (TVC) of Lifebuoy that is “Don’t be afraid! We’ll pump, rub and choo the virus” is very significant. Secondly the other tagline that says “*Laray*(fights with)Virus *aur*

Bacteria *Se*” is also important in terms of important signs and symbols. Some important signs and symbols given in the tvc as evident from the pictures include:

Table 1.

Signs	Symbols
Virus	Virus trapped inside the bubble of lifebuoy
Pump	Red coloured stamp with highlighted virus
Afraid	
Rub	
Bacteria	
Fight	

The connotative meanings generated by the text are all contextualized, given the wave of the pandemic. The virus here is very significant as it stands for the incumbent COVID-19 infectious and lethal virus. Given the context, there are some important binaries that may be highlighted with reference to the above-mentioned signs. An important binary for the virus that is lethal and deadly is that of life and lifebuoy as a lifesaver. Afraid has a noteworthy binary opposite in the form of being brave in the face of the pandemic. Similarly, another vital binary opposite is that of the fight, which is opposed by the idea of giving up or not standing up against the situation of the pandemic.

The symbols used in the tvc are also quite pivotal as on one side they are reinforcing the fight against the Coronavirus as the virus is shown as entrapped in the bubble of lifebuoy. On the other side, the red colour is reinforcing the use of lifebuoy to fight the disease.

Finally, the ideology that is being projected through the use of the verbal and visual modes indicate that lifebuoy liquid hand wash is the ultimate solution and protection against the corona virus. Moreover, it indicates that it can effectively fight against the virus to defeat it.

Quarantine the Corona

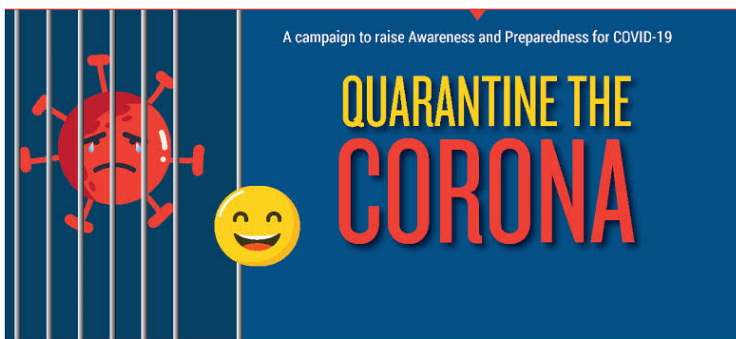


Figure C:

The important signs and symbols in this advertisement for awareness campaign are given as follows:

Table 2.

Signs	Symbols
Quarantine	COVID-19 virus crying
Corona	The virus behind the bars

Awareness	Red colour
Preparedness	Yellow colour
Campaign	Yellow emoticon smiling

This image has a very important implied meaning that is in order to fight against the Coronavirus; social distancing must be practised; hence if someone contacts COVID-19, he or she must go into quarantine so that the virus will not be able to spread to other people in that community. Some important binaries are that of Quarantine against Crowded places; Corona against healthy people; fight against loss especially of that lives, campaign against the idea of standing still and doing nothing; the idea of awareness against ignorance. Last but not least, yellow color against red colour binary is very important.

With reference to the symbols used in the poster for the awareness campaign against COVID-19, it is evident that the red colour is associated with the

Coronavirus, and it stands for danger, as well as something to be avoided. On the flip side, Yellow stands for life and liveliness. Additionally, the bars that have sort of imprisoned the virus have important symbolic significance as these bars stand for the awareness and preparedness of the people against the virus. The precautions can make the virus sad and bring back health and vitality to life. Moreover, the expressions given to both the shapes again refer to the weakness of the virus through quarantine as it is seen crying while the yellow emoticon is lively and in good shape that indicates lives can be saved by practising quarantine and other such precautionary measures. Hence, the ideology conveyed through this image is that of taking effective safety measures to battle the virus that can only be controlled through quarantine and other such precautionary measure

COVID-19 Vaccine

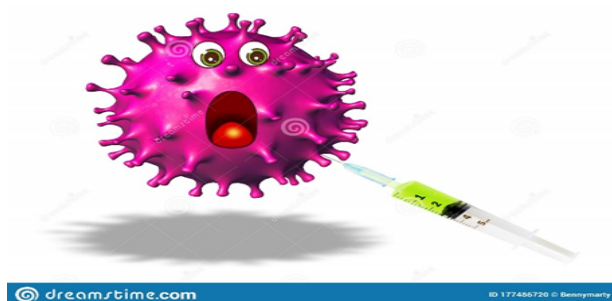


Figure D:

Another very insightful illustration of COVID-19 is given above. The figure conveys a very strong message,

despite the fact that linguistics signs are not present here. The important symbols used in the figure are:

Table 3.

Signs	Symbols
	Injection
	Afraid and weakened COVID-19 virus

Here injection stands for vaccination which has the potential to weaken the severity of the virus, as evident from the expressions of the Coronavirus shown in the picture. It is also aimed at raising awareness among the masses regarding COVID-19

vaccination as a solution to halt the havoc caused by the Coronavirus. The image also implies that besides the precautions, the virus can be curbed through the use of vaccines. The most important binary in this image is that of vaccine injection versus the virus

itself. The vaccine serves as an antidote for the virus. The ideology that is being reflected through such a representation is that the vaccine is very effective

against the Coronavirus, and people must get their dose on their turn in order to protect themselves and weaken the virus.

Woman Punching the Coronavirus



Figure E:

This image is another reflection of how different modes other than linguistics signs are used to create and communicate meaning effectively. In this regard, there are some symbols that are quite predominant

in the picture. Similarly, kinesics is also playing a pivotal role as a symbol in conveying the targeted meaning. Important symbols include:

Table 4.

Signs	Symbols
	Mask
	Punching the virus, body posture, eye movement (Kinesics)
	Expressions of the virus
	Expressions of the woman
	Yellow gloves

Face masks have become inevitable since the beginning of the pandemic, so the inclusion of a face mask in the image implies that for an effective fight, a person must be equipped with such things as a mask. Moreover, the punching of the Coronavirus and the strong posture and body language of the woman in the image shows that with precautions, the person is stronger rather than the COVID-19 virus. Similarly, the expressions of the Coronavirus and its replicated viruses show clear signs of disappointment and weakness as they are being beaten by the woman who is well equipped to fight the virus. The yellow coloured gloves again stand for life and vitality, as well as better immunity. The major binaries in this

figure are red coloured virus versus yellow coloured immunity, mask versus no mask, and strong kinesics versus weak body language. The overall ideology being projected through the image is that a stronger immunity and proper following of SOPs can help beat the Coronavirus.

Donkey King Song

The song made by the famous Pakistani animated movie 'Donkey King' 'Darna nahi hmein laarna hai' (Don't be afraid, we have to fight) also has multiple signs and symbols that are very vital to the representation of COVID-19. The important signs and symbols include:

Table 5.

Signs	Symbols
Social Distance	White bold letters
Stay Home	Actual distance shown through animation
Fight	Closing of the door
Fear/Afraid	



Figure F:

The whole song implies that there is no need to be afraid as it is not the solution. All the people must unite and cooperate in fighting against the deadly virus. As discussed above, some binaries in the ad are fear versus fight, social distance versus social contact; stay home in opposition to going out. The opposition to be discerned in the symbols include white which stands for peace and health in opposition, to black or red, which stands for death and disease. Another important symbol is that of a friendly smile on the face of Mangu, who is the Donkey King, as he closes the door to stress staying home policy emphasized by the government as well. The smile here is in direct opposition to the fear due to the Coronavirus as people often perceived being scared and locked in the

houses. However, Mangu is closing the door in a happy mood which implies that he is going to fight the virus in this way, and he is not really afraid of the virus. In fact, he cares for the people of his community and his country. The ad is implying a very different meaning and is trying to shift the perspective as well. Hence, the ideology that emerges from the use of different modes is that despite being apart and despite the closure of the doors, people are still united in their fight against COVID-19. The only way to defeat the virus is to maintain social distancing and by staying home, which does not mean that people are afraid of Coronavirus, but it means that they are all prepared to fight with it.



Figure G:

Conclusion

As evident from the analysis, COVID-19 has been represented directly and indirectly by using different modes like that of text, visuals including expressions and kinesics. This representation has far-reaching consequences as it is done for the purpose of engaging the public at large, including children, adults and even older people. The use of colours, especially red, yellow and white, is very significant as it is enhancing the overall representation of the COVID-19 and its related ideas. Likewise, the choice of words is very significant as most of the time the words like fear, fight, quarantine and social distancing are used. These words play a very significant role in the representation of the Coronavirus. The representation of COVID-19 is mostly aimed at creating awareness among the masses that are not very learned regarding

Coronavirus and its preventive measures. All the images and advertisements are projecting the ideology that Coronavirus is a lethal virus, but it can be controlled through proper precautions and following Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Moreover, all the ads and images have a very user-friendly and reader-friendly interface where language is simple and images are self-explanatory, which adds to the component of awareness. All the data reflects that it's a virus that must be fought against and not to be afraid of as a disciplined routine of washing hands, wearing a mask and keeping social distance can help avoid it. Similarly, there is awareness regarding vaccination, as well as evident from the analysis that vaccines can weaken the virus and make it effective eventually. This is a very important part of awareness as there have been many conspiracy theories revolving around the issue of COVID-19 vaccination.

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