

Critical Action-implicative Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Covid-19 Awareness Campaigns on Pakistani Media

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Abstract

With the spread of Covid-19, many rumors, conspiracy theories, and discourse of fear came into existence. The mainstream media was one of the main sources to educate the masses against such idiosyncrasies and made them save themselves from the disease and its other harmful impacts. In line with this, the study aims at examining Covid-19 awareness campaigns on Pakistani TV channels critically. To evaluate the appropriateness of 24 campaigns/commercials, which were selected through a purposive sampling, a critical multimodal discourse analysis of the campaigns was carried out, using Systemic Functional Grammar proposed by Halliday (2013) (for linguistic resources) along with Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar (for non-linguistic resources). The analysis of campaigns revealed that a few campaigns (e.g., the campaigns of SAMAA TV, PTV, and ISPR) contain socio-semiotic resources (e.g., language, signs, sound, color, picture, animation, actions, etc.) that were more appropriate socio-psychically for Pakistani context, but most campaigns (e.g., the campaigns of Geo TV, ARY, etc.) lack the action-implicative discourse. The study suggests that TV campaigns be culturally and psychologically fit to the context and be action-implicative.

Keywords: Critical multimodal discourse analysis; Action implicative discourse; Covid-19 awareness campaigns; Ideal discourse.

1. Introduction

Media plays an important role in spreading information especially which is not directly to the public access, and, therefore, it is one of the main sources of constructing public beliefs and attitudes (Happer & Philo, 2013). Although the dissemination of misinformation is also linked to mainstream media (Tsfati, at al., 2020), the spread of fake news on social media is faster, deeper, and farther (Vosoughi, at al. 2018). With the outbreak of Covid-19, many misinformation and discourse of fear have been floated through on all sorts of media (Rafi, 2020), which directly has influenced the people's attitude and their mental health (Ahmad & Murad, 2020). However, the same media can be used to educate the masses against any unexpected disaster like Covid-19 and it can reduce the risk of life-threatening crises (Ghassabi & Zare-Farashbandi,

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2015). However, as Latif et al. (2020) have pointed out, the role of media during the pandemic in Pakistan remained disappointing as the reporting was frightful and media talks were without medical experts.

At the beginning of coronavirus spread, China imposed a strict lockdown in its city Wuhan on January 23 and finally was able to reopen it on April 8, after 10 weeks. Aylward, a WHO epidemiologist, discussing his findings in China, says that such an aggressive response of china has led to save hindered of thousand people in China (as cited in Kupferschmidt & Cohen, 2020); however, some experts (e.g., Gostin, et al., 2020) are reluctant to advise applying the similar measures in other countries, especially, underdeveloped like India and Pakistan. In such countries, due to various factors (e.g., poverty, illiteracy, overpopulation, etc.), lockdown strategy did not help largely in flattening the curve. On one hand, people may suffer great hunger, and, on the other hand, they may get infected with the novel virus. As it has been estimated in a report by Oxfam, more people can die of hunger than that of the disease (Oxfam International, 2020).

Therefore, there is a need to search for the alternative solutions for these countries to save the life of people from both hunger and Covid-19. For instance, as proposed by some experts (e.g., Ghaffar et al., 2021) people may be allowed to work with certain SOPs (standard operating procedure). This might be be a suitable solution for underdeveloped countries, where unemployment is at a very larger scale. However, on other side, people are not very careful about following SOPs and are not ready to consider coronavirus any serious issue (Noreen, et al., 2020). An appalling number of people in Pakistan believe that there is no coronavirus, and government shows a large number of infections and deaths to get aid from international donor agencies (Khan, 2020). Such perilous situation demands the spread of correct information and proper guidelines to the masses, and a very efficient role of media because, owing to the inherent ability of media to reach a large number of people, it has become an extensive source of education and has an extreme impact on societies (Preeti, 2014).

1.1 Problem Statement

It has been observed that Pakistani media played, to some extent, a positive role but with many shortcomings. Similarly, almost all TV channels broadcast awareness campaigns against Covid-19, and many commercials were transmitted in form awareness campaigns, perhaps, in this way the broadcaster could make more synchronized with the ongoing situation. However, Latif, at al. (2020), in their study, highlight that Pakistani electronic media created panic and stress among the general public of Pakistan. Similarly, a journalist, Tarar (2020), in her special article to Gulf News, claims that Pakistani media politicise coronavirus while saying not to politicise Covid-19. Hence, we have tried to do a critical action-implicative multimodal discourse analysis (CAIMDA) of the media awareness campaigns and some commercials against coronavirus pandemic broadcast by mainstream Pakistani media TV channels.

The analysis not only points out the inappropriateness of the campaigns but also highlights the positive information spread by the media.

1.2 Research Questions

More specifically, this study has addressed the following questions:

How has language along with different multimodal modes been employed by the Covid-19 campaign broadcaster?

- a) How has Covid-19 presented through various semiotic resources in Covid-19 campaigns?
- b) How far semiotic resources used in campaigns were socio-culturally and cognitively appropriate to Pakistani context?

2. Review of the Literature

Multimodal discourse either on mainstream media or social media has become an essential feature of modern-day world (Royce & Bowcher, 2013). Therefore, propagation of different ideas including advertisement is also very common feature of multimedia discourse. According to Beasley and Danesi (2010) persuasion in the ads and commercials is created using various techniques. Moreover, Asemah and Edegoh (2013) argue that ads and commercials are sponsored non-personal information, whose purpose is to persuade people towards buying of a product or doing any specific activity. A considerable work on discourse and manipulation (de Saussure & Schulz, 2005; O'halloran, 2003; van Dijk, 2006a) is available, which is one of key objectives of critical discourse analysis. Information dissemination is being carried out through a multimodal where not only text is involved but many other elements such as colour, background scene, famous personalities, etc. are used to highlight to put more persuasion in the message (Evans & Petty 2003). Hence, the focus in multimodal discourse analysis, as discussed by Royce and Bowcher (2013), is the interpretation of systemic organization of semiotic resources (pp. 1-89). Different semiotic resources present different kind of modality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013).

Thus, researchers interpret and highlight these semiotic resources using the multimodal discourse producers. Many multimodal discourse studies (e.g., Aleem et al., 2021; Rabbani & Anwar, 2020; Yaseen & Shah, 2020) have also been done in Pakistani context. Ren (2021) has recently studied the videos on coronavirus highlighting how the pandemic has been multi-framed through different resources, multimodal devices, language, and dominant narrators. Similarly, Gulzar et al., (2021) has done a multimodal discourse analysis of visual messages of public awareness in India and Pakistan, highlighting how fear was spread in one country and motivational messages in the other. Likewise, some other studies (Akbar et al., 2021; Aazam et al., 2020; Riaz et al., 2021; Sattar et al., 2020) also reveal the representation of Covid-19 either in media discourse or in the other public messages which raised both fear and awareness.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Craig (2015) discusses that AIDA, as the name suggests, is a discourse analysis that focuses on implications for how people should behave and act in their real life (p. 5). Similarly, Tracy (2004) adds that AIDA attempts to suggest strategies and develop ideals of a practice to enable the practice' participants to behave more carefully and thoughtfully. On one hand, AIDA is a mixture of conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis, etc.; on the other hand, it shares many traits of grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995). AIDA is like critical discourse analysis (CDA) because it highlights the problems and unfairness in the existing discourses or communicative practices. It is different from CDA because it is more complex or, we can say, messier than normative pragmatics and critical discourse analysis (Tracy, 2004). It is complicated as it draws on identifying the practice's situated ideals.

Keeping in view the objectives of this research, the researchers have applied a critical action-implicative multimodal discourse analysis approach to the study. As the name, AIDA suggests, the study uses critical discourse analysis to analyse the communication problems in the Covid-19 awareness campaigns on mainstream Pakistani media, using Visual Grammar proposed by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), which is based on the seminal work of Michael Halliday (1978), 'Language as social semiotic'. Describing the framework for multimodal analysis, Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) point out three meta-semiotic functions of the images i.e., representational, interpersonal, and compositional. In this study, considering these metafunctions, persuasion techniques in campaigns were analysed.

For data collection, a list containing 18 YouTube and 6 Facebook videos broadcast on mainstream media, was compiled through a purposive search with the words and phrases related to coronavirus campaigns or messages. The videos included public awareness messages (e.g., government public service messages, WHO and UNICEF messages, awareness messages by TV channels) and some other TV commercials having awareness messages (e.g., Careem, Surf Excel, etc.).

4. Data Analysis

In line with the notions of AIDA, the analysis was done at two levels: (a) CDA of the commercial/campaigns to analyse their inappropriateness, and (b) PDA (positive discourse analysis) of the campaigns that can be considered as ideals.

4.1 Identifying the Problem: CDA of the Commercials/Campaigns

4.1.1 Representation of Covid-19

Out of three meta-functions of Systemic-Functional Grammar, the ideational function is similar to representational function in visual grammar. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe the relationship between viewers and actors, things, settings as representational function. When a viewer sees an image, it inspires their imagination. With the spread of Covid-19, a wave of fear and

uncertainty has reached its crest, and mostly this has happened because of the frequently changing nature of Covid-19 and exaggerated talks on mainstream media and social media. This can also be observed that, in awareness campaigns and the commercials related to coronavirus, the representation of Covid-19 is fear-arousing. However, this is more obvious in the ads of companies which sell hygienic material (e.g. Dettol, LUX, Safeguard, etc.). In some of the ads this fearful representation depicted through linguistic resources, and, in the others, this is done through visuals. For instance, an ad of Dettol says:

'koi shak nahi keh yeh jang he, or yeh jang hum hamesha ki trah mil kar laren ge, achi aadaten apna ke, apny haton, apni zameen or gharon ko saf rakh k. Yeh jang hamery piyaron ko mehfooz rakhny k lye he. Dettol: Covid-19 ke khilaf muasir'

(No doubt, this is a war, and, as always, we will fight this war together, by adopting good habits, by cleansing our hands, our grounds, and homes. This war is to save our dear ones. Dettol: useful against Covid-19.)

The speaker of the ad uses the metaphor of war for coronavirus and tries to create a state of emergency. In another ad of LUX soap, doctors as participants, depiction of a state of emergency, gloomy background music, mask covered faces, eyes filled with tears, etc. all presents a horrific picture of Covid-19 to the viewers. Such representations often put negative influence on the people's mind, and they may suffer from mental illness, which has happened at a larger scale during the peak days of pandemic (Rajkumar (2020).

4.1.2 Lack of Proper Semiotic Resources

Van Dijk (2006) argues that sometimes, in discursive practices, lack of proper knowledge of the issue becomes the cause of manipulation of interlocutors (p. 361). Many campaigns/videos which are claimed to be presented as Covid-19 campaigns lack proper semiotic resources, which people use in interpreting, producing, objects, and communicative events, which is also a semiotic production (van Leeuwen, 2004, pp. 2-25). For example, the most watched news channel in Pakistan (Nayatel, 2020), Geo News, has broadcast some videos about coronavirus. The participants in these videos are the characters from an animated movie 'The Donkey King' by Geo Films. Although the ideas presented in the videos are for the people of all ages, but, as 'The Donkey King', is supposedly a movie for the kids, apparently it seems that the videos are only for the children's interest. For instance, the participants of most videos are 'Jan Mangu', the hero, and some other characters of the film, 'The Donkey King', which may attract only children rather than mature people who are more prone to the disease. Despite the slogan of Geo News against coronavirus, 'Darna nahi, larna he' (fight instead of being afraid of), (See Figure 1.) the videos lack many rich and deep semiotic resources for the viewers especially who are more at risk for the disease since age and Covid-19

hospitalization and death are directly proportional (Covid-19 and Your Health, 2020). Similarly, ARY, another famous Pakistani news channel, starts a campaign ‘Pakistani Tujhy Slam’ (Pakistani, greetings to you) to pay tribute to doctors and soldiers fighting on the front line with coronavirus pandemic (See Figure 2). As this campaign is for doctors and soldiers to acknowledge their services, despite some of its symbolic significance, it does not have any idea for a common person to save himself from the disease.



Figure 1
Geo News coronavirus awareness campaign, ‘Darna nahi, Larna he



Figure 2
ARY News campaign, ‘Pakistani Tujhy Salam’ encourage the frontline soldiers.

Same is the case with the other videos/campaigns produced by commercial companies e.g. Dettol, Lifebuoy, Peek Freans Sooper, Tapal Tea, etc. and other organisations e.g. UNICEF and WHO. The videos/campaigns contain many socio-cultural and socio-psychological gaps in them, which have also been discussed below.

4.1.3 Socio-cultural and Cognitive Aspects

As van Dijk discusses that there is less agreement on the importance of studying ‘environment’ of the discourse, for instance, social, cultural, political, institutional, and consequences that are also called its ‘context’, the same is with ‘the cognition of the participants’. However, the cognitions and discourses based on those cognitions need to be discussed considering many social and cultural aspects (van Dijk, 2006). Although a few campaigns broadcast on Pakistani TV channels (e.g. the campaigns of PTV and Careem) contain such psychological and socio-cultural aspects, but most of the campaigns are devoid of these elements. For example, a campaign on PTV discusses the matter of hugging, handshake, during Covid-19 in the following way (also shown in Figure 3. [a]).

Participants A, B, and C, who think like many others in Pakistan (socio-cultural and cognitive aspect):

- A. ‘*Hath milana to hamari rawat ka hisa he*’ (handshake is the part of our culture)
- B. ‘*Galy na milna to hmary culture key khilaf he, yeh to hmari rawayat chura rhy hn*’ (Not to hug is against our culture; they are enforcing us to abandon our traditions)

- C. *'Logon ne esy hi baten bnai hue hn, humen kuch nahi ho ga'* (nothing will happen to us; these (things about coronavirus) are mere rumours)
- D. Reply to them by a participant D: *'Yeh jo aap keh rhy hen yeh na bahadri he or na mardangi, yeh srf khud gharzi he. Is waba se bachny ke lye har trah ki ehthiat karni chahye, agr salam krna ho to dil se karen'* (What you are saying is neither bravery nor manliness; this is selfishness. We should do every care to save ourselves from this disease. If one has to greet, one should do it from one's heart instead of a handshake.)



Figure 3. [a] PTV Covid-19 awareness campaign

The campaign not only possesses socio-cultural elements (for example, handshake is the part of our culture) but addresses psychological aspects (nothing will happen to us; these (things about coronavirus) are mere rumours) as well. As discussed above, many people in Pakistan believe that coronavirus is not a reality, and doctors and the government exaggerate the number of coronavirus cases to get aid from international organisations. In addition, the answer to the objections raised by participants A, B, and C has also presented in an effective way. First, the participant is a middle-aged lady, apparently, the mother of the sons, participant A, B and C. In Pakistan, it is a common culture that people respect elderly people and obeys them. Second, she uses culturally rooted metaphors of 'bravery' and 'manliness' to convince the other participants to follow coronavirus SOPs, as this is also common in some people that if they avoid handshake, they may be considered cowardly. In addition to this culturally enriched message, the campaign contains further instructions, for example, washing hands, using tissue or elbow during sneezing or coughing, etc. to save oneself from coronavirus as shown in Figure 3. [b].



Figure 3. [b] PTV Covid-19 awareness campaign

Another such example is a commercial of Careem, a subsidiary of Uber in Pakistan. Out of two commercial's participants, one is a driver and the other is a passenger. Even though the attitude of most of Pakistanis towards coronavirus is similar, those who are less educated are more reckless towards it. This idea has also been depicted in the commercial.

Passenger (sarcastically): '*Aap mujy bary hi aqal mand lagty hn, aap pori dunya ki rah darpok nahi hen jo mask or galoves pehn ke ghoom rhi he*' (You seem very intelligent to me; you are fearful not like others who are wearing mask everywhere.)

Driver: '*Yeh carona sharona kuch bhi nahi h, sir. Yeh sazish he hamry khilaf, aap to janty hi hn ge... hum ne to aaj tk koi corona dekha hi nahi he...*' (This corona shorona is nothing, sir; this is a conspiracy against us...)

The campaign addresses the issues of conspiracy theories and careless attitude of the people towards the disease. Therefore, it can be assumed that such campaigns will be ideal ones.

However, unlike these campaigns (e.g. PTV and Careem), many campaigns lack the socially and culturally befitting information and precautions against coronavirus. Additionally, most of the campaigns ignore focusing on psychology of the people. As discussed above, the focus of some campaigns is to present coronavirus as a deadly disease without targeting the psyche of the people and cultural facets of the society. Such an ineffectiveness of these campaigns can be observed that none of them has used Punjabi language which is the most widely spoken language of Pakistan (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2011), nor many address the type of Covid-19 patients, and practical measures against the disease. Similarly, the major focus of many campaigns against coronavirus is on staying at home rather than work with precautionary measures; this perspective has been discussed in the next session.

4.1.4 Coronavirus and Poverty

A report of Oxfam International (2020) reveals that more people can die of hunger than of coronavirus, and Pakistan is one of those countries where this estimation might be true. A negative growth of 0.38% has been observed in GDP of Pakistan first time after 68 years (News Desk, 2020). All this demands the strategies not only against coronavirus but also against poverty. As Prime Minister Imran Kahn has indicated, at the very early stage of the lockdown, that the government is afraid of if the government prolongs the lockdown, people will die of hunger (ARY, 202). However, the media campaigns do not address the issue of hunger during Covid-19 rather most of them have a focus on 'stay at home, stay safe'. For example, a campaign/commercial, whose length is 1:19 minute and the participants are Pakistani TV drama actors, very emphatically convey the very popular idea of staying at home.

However, only a few campaigns discuss how to work with precautions against coronavirus. In contrary to the idea of working during coronavirus, the idea of staying at home was promoted, and, resultantly, such campaigns not

only confused the people but also horrify them going out for work. This confusion and fear can be observed from the attitude of the people. For instance, there is no commercial or campaigns depicts the sufferings of daily wagers is in Pakistan, which implies that a little discussion about poverty takes place on media. Therefore, most of the participants of the campaigns are not any daily wager or a poor man who is struggling for his survival during the pandemic rather most of them or actors or models. Such an impression of media suggests that ‘public service messages’ have nothing to do with a common man. The problems discussed on TV are that of elite or upper class; therefore, language is sometime English and no use local languages, messages are in form of a show rather than straight and simple information, participants are models wearing western dress and even sometimes they are foreigners. Hence, in the light of this analysis, the ineffectiveness of Covid-19 awareness campaigns might be estimated.

5. Addressing the Problem

According to Tracy (2004) AIDA is an approach that also takes normative stance (p. 315). Therefore, this study attempts to address the issue through suggestions of some ideal campaigns and intervention.

5.1 Ideals and Positive Campaigns

A brief overview of all the videos shows that some broadcasters/organisations e.g. PTV News, SAMAA TV, ISPR, and Careem have presented the campaign videos in a more context relevant ways.

PTV News, a state-owned news channel, broadcast the video of the President of Pakistan, Dr. Arif-ur-Rehman Alvi (also a dentist by profession) in which he provides some information about and precautions against coronavirus in a ‘narrative process’ (Motta-Roth & Nascimento, 2009). His ‘representation’ of coronavirus is not as horrifying as that of many others’. His way of advising the people may be more appropriate, shown in Figure 4, as he suggests a number of ways to each other form coronavirus during coughing and sneezing.

Figure 4.

President Arif Alvi is advising the public against coronavirus

[a]

[b]

[c]



Most people in Pakistan are not very habitual of using tissue paper, and, hence, it can be more useful to tell them alternative ways. Moreover, the President also discusses, ‘preshani ki bat bat nahi he, panic hony ki bat nahi he, is me 98% log survive kar jaty hn,’ ‘No need to be worried and feel panic, 98% people can survive coronavirus.’ Interestingly, this video was broadcast on February 28 when coronavirus just started spreading in Pakistan, and now when Pakistan has 283,487 confirmed cases of Covid-19, the death ratio from Covid-19 is exactly 98%, as of August 8. In addition to the use of Urdu language in his coronavirus awareness campaign, the President has used everyday language to maintain the ‘compositionality’ of the discourse. The other example of the sharing of useful messages about Covid-19 are some videos broadcast by SAMAA TV (see Figure 5).

Figure 5.

Basic information about the spread of COVID-19 by SAMAA TV



The information shared in the videos is a kind of step by step guideline about coronavirus. To highlight the significance of the message, language has been combined with various colours and signs. By using different shades of red colour from ‘halki’ (mildly) symptomatic patient to ‘intehai nazuk’ (very critically) symptomatic patient in all [a], [b], and [c], the designer has used the symbolic significance of red colour along with signs, for example, in Figure 5 [b], there is sign of warning with very critical patient. The language is not only simple but also very concise as the audience is usually not the habitual of reading in videos. The audio runs with all other modes including signs, written text, actions, etc., and it creates very helpful semiotic resources for the viewers. The representational meaning has also been embodied in the context or environment. The video was broadcast on March 31 when there were only 134 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the country; therefore, it can be said that the campaign has been launched at an appropriate time, keeping in view the upcoming situation because of Covid-19, which has already happened in China. Hence, the conceptual meanings have been conveyed through displaying various modes including text, animated participants, colour, foregrounding to develop a sense of measurement among the viewers against coronavirus. Here, foregrounding means that the viewers are not far from the represented object, image, participant, animated setting, etc. (Guo & Feng, 2017).

There are some other videos which not only contain guidelines for precautions against coronavirus but also guides how to work during pandemic. In accordance with the poor economic conditions of the country, it is important to help the people work while observing SOPs provided by the experts and the government. Some examples of this are videos release by ISPR and Careem. Although the message has been presented through action and a motivational song has been played in background, still the video has some good socio-semiotic elements to teach the audience. However, there are only very few such videos that motivate people to work during pandemic with precautions.

Despite some deficiencies, for example, the speed of some videos is fast, the animated images of some objects do not belong to the region, etc., the videos discussed designed for action implication. However, there are only a few awareness campaigns that have such effective semiotic resources for the audience to get a clearer idea of coronavirus and measures against it.

6. Conclusion

One of the key purposes of a research is the betterment of the society, and the role of a researcher becomes more crucial when the society suffers any extraordinary circumstances. Coronavirus proved disastrous to the whole world, which urged both biological researchers and social scientists to save the society. Therefore, drawing on the idea of social change and observing the less effective role of media, the study figures out the irrelevancy of many coronavirus awareness campaigns and also highlights the ones that are effective. Findings reveal that most of the campaigns that were not for any commercial purpose seem to be similar in many ways to that which were for commercial purposes. Many of them are not socially, culturally, and psychologically fit to Pakistani context. There are a few one which, according to the researchers, address the issue in a proper way. The study suggests media focus on 'discourse environment', for example, language, culture, religion, economic conditions, etc. more closely while designing anything to teach the masses.

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