

# THE CULTURE CLASH AND THE SCARE: A MULTIMODAL STUDY OF COGNITIONS IN SELECTED COVID-19 PROPAGANDA

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## Abstract

This study investigates cognitions in selected Covid-19 propaganda. Aspects of Multimodal Theories used for the eleven purposefully selected medical discourse advertisements are: Dyer's (1982) Visual Communication Theory and Wierzbicka's (1996) Colour Theory. The advertisements were situated in the Nigeria's contexts of socio-cultural lifestyles of—*Aso ebi*, communal living, patronage of traditional eatery or relaxation spots and intimate lifestyles. Investigations reveals cultural clashes at different layers of cognitions against the COVID-19 safety protocols of social distancing. The fear and persuasive propaganda styles engaged revolve around death, sickness, danger, hunger, isolation and abandonment as typified by colours black, red, green, blue and white. The culture clash was situated in isolation, separation and abandonment of the culture of communal living, mutual habits, intimate relationship and freedom of association. However, there is a clear indication that a larger member of the public was scared rather than being sensitized about the importance of social distancing because of the cognition of depreciation spread around valued cultural lifestyles presented in the advertisements. This study confirms that people will in certain contexts neglect fear of death and take more risks in favour of communal life.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, cognition, colour scheme, context, multimodality and Propaganda

## Background to the study

The emergence of Corona virus in 2019 led to the biggest global health crisis recorded so far in human history. The speedy spread and instant deaths became a source of worry to the global community; hence, the immediate quarantine of people, especially those who already had contacts with infected persons, geographical lockdowns and economic meltdown were major occurrences. The reports of some patients with viral pneumonia in China caused by a related infection from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was fingered for being the most likely outlet for the disease, suspected to have originated from bats, mutated to infect humans and transmitted by droplets routed by humans. This virus, previously known as Wuhan virus, claimed millions of lives of the victims within its first few weeks worldwide, thereby, resulting in widespread scare and heightened agitations. Another news was that ongoing biological research at the Wuhan University led to the emergence of the virus, while another source linked the United States army troops for being responsible for dropping the virus at Wuhan, especially when participating at the military games in October 2019. All of these dashed the hope for cure.

Unfortunately, the virus called 'SAR-COV-2', popularly known as COVID-19, raised some uncertainties—about its spread, treatment and cure initially, until recently, when vaccines were created to protect humans from being infected by the deadly virus. The dependency on the media and the internet for information about increased death rates, particularly in the Western world, induced lots of fear, psychological stress, unscientific cure, unverified medicines endorsements by political powers, which have all proved to be harmful, permeated the air. Heavy dependency on media for news and medical interventions from the disease control centres created a new culture of survival, known as COVID-19 protocols such as regular hand washing, use of hand sanitizers, use of nose masks and social distancing.

Awar et al (2020) raise concerns about the multiple social, cultural, and economic issues arising from the media and several propagandas raised for COVID-19. They aver that the media, on a daily

basis, raised several virus preventive protocols that the audience were encouraged to adopt in order to boost their body immunity and as well as curtail the spread of the virus. These further increased dependency on the conventional media, the internet and other sources of healthcare information devices. Consequently, the global community relate and gather information about what obtains in other climes. The media also created increased awareness, widespread scare and doubts, arising from personal understandings of the events as they unfolded. These cognitions birthed a new normal way of living.

### **Review of related literature**

Studies in crises communication or media related discourses have established that not all segments of the society understand their official languages, either in spoken or written forms, in matters of crisis and on health-related issues. For instance, Lha (2020), O'Brien and Cadwell (2018) tested the level of comprehension of both rural and urban natives in Kenya on Ebola messages, a related deadly viral infection. Though Kenya is an English-speaking country, these scholars discovered, in their studies, that their participants understood texts translated to Kiswahili better than in the English language and had preference for the spoken mode over the written mode.

Similarly, Lha (2020) and Hopkyns (2020) reveal that texts messages on COVID-19 related issues excluded majority of the population. In the same vein, Maccullueh (2020) argues that ignoring the indigenous language of the people in favour of English or written texts can be counterproductive for spreading healthcare awareness propaganda and messages. This draws the researcher's attention to pictorial texts laced with few words to determine the effectiveness of such messages on the populace in a bid to examine the effectiveness of such messages by understanding how the advertiser's underlying intentions have been projected.

Reynold and Seeger (2005: 36) introduce another dimension in addition to the choice of language used in creating healthcare awareness or preventive measures. These scholars explain that "messages are more

effective when they are strategically matched with the audience's need, values, background, culture, and experiences." De Gruyter (2019) opines that for crisis and health communication to be effective, socio-cultural factors and cultural differences must be considered. Fairlead (2010) argues—that resistance to Ebola preventive initiatives in the Upper Guinea forest region, that included the prescription of isolation of the sick and safe burial procedures by limiting the number of family members who attended burials was very strong. Such negative cultural responses which lead to the failure of the advocacy in Upper Guinea informed our choice of data that are pictorial texts with few words but situated in cultural context of Nigerian. This was to test the ability of pictures to speak more than words (Makinde 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework: A Multimodal Orientation**

Language is a system of signs used as a tool in daily communication. Interpreting a sign is based on semiotics - a study of signs. This therefore takes cognisance of the fact that the interpretation of pictures, signs, symbols and colours are situated in the cultural contexts of the people. In Colour theory, Wierzbicka (1996) reveals that colours expose and perform unique functions in the society. For instance, the black colour is associated with power, elegance, formality, death and evil. A black colour in advertisements connects to death by linking corona virus with death. Green indicates sickness, cowardice and discord. Blue is used to describe health, healing, calmness, understanding and softness. In addition, blue represents both sky and sea. These are associated with open space, freedom, intuition, inspiration, sensitivity and confidence. White connotes safety, cleanliness, sterility, and protection.

Dyer's (1986) visual communication theory states that to successfully gain the attention of the customers, advertisements may include human characteristics with favourable qualities and value of the target audience. He states that 'in general, every human stereotype has attached characteristics that are widely known, by representing human figures within a media as the representation of certain stereotype

achievement and encouraging the audience to automatically associate with the stereotypes. Dyer (1982) classifies aspects of human figure within advertisements into three (3) major categories of appearance, manner and activities. Appearance is the aspect concerned with human figure such as age, gender, race, body, hair, size and looks. Manner extols values about eye contact, pose and looks while activities category espouses affairs that is done by the human figure, represented by touch, body movements and postural communications.

Winsavvy (2024) in line with other professionals, opines that advertising propaganda are hacks used by advertisers and marketers to influence customers and clients in making decisions that help push sales. This may as well assist in shaping the opinions of individuals to act in a predetermined way of buying the product, behaving in certain manner, or desisting from certain behaviour, depending on the attractions of the advertisements. There are different types of propagandas used in medical services advertising these are: persuasive appeals, name-calling, prejudice appeal, bandwagon, authority appeals, stereotyping and fear appeals among others. They all often use emotionally charged languages and images, that appeal to the audience's needs or wants to create a positive association with the product or service.

## **Methodology**

Several advertisements permeated the internet from the outset of COVID-19 to date. Among them were government sponsored advocacy, some by non-governmental agencies and others by concerned individuals. The purposefully eleven selected COVID-19 advertisements with #Epuka Corona# are individually sponsored. Hence, has wider reach and featured more regularly in posts done by youths. It's multi-ethnic acceptability within the period endeared these set of advertisements to the researcher: one -for his personal initiative, two-because of the related images and three - the settings which are based on the socio-cultural lifestyles of the Nigerians. A multimodal approach of colour theory by Wierzbicka (1996) and Dyer's (1986)

visual communication theory were adopted to investigate the COVID-19 advertisements for their meanings, effectiveness, and issues reflecting culture.

### Discussion of findings

After careful consideration of the data, the discussions of findings are done in line with, context of situation of the images, colour scheme, appearance, manner and activities of the icon featured.

### Context of the Advertisements

The cognition of the advertisements when situated in cultural context determines the meaning of the discourse, (Mey, 2010). The main cultural contexts are traditional and social interactions among the people. The first context of advertisements is espoused by the traditional *aso ebi*, notably used as a family uniform in social events and celebrations. The second context of advertisement is an apartment that houses a lot of families. The third context is a traditional restaurant known as 'mama puts or bukateria' where people sit together on long benches and eat on long tables without any form of discrimination. The fourth context of the advertisements is related to intimacy or love. Two lovers are presented in close-contact contexts, i.e., romance/affection, while the fifth context is signified by social interactions where people engage in sporting and recreational activities like playing football, camping and watching movies at a cinema. All the advertisements were propagating the COVID-19's safety protocols - social distancing, staying at home, avoidance of crowded places and sitting at a considerable distance from one another. These new ways of living negated the cultural value of traditional communal living. No wonder previous research on health communication recorded failure in the procedure because they negated the cultural beliefs of the Upper Guineans, (Fairlead, 2010).

## The Colour Scheme



Fig 1

The use of colours in the selected advertisements are very significant to the interpretation of meaning and functions of the advertisements. Image one (1) showed deserted urban streets filled with red and green virus. Globally, same colours have different meanings and interpretations depending on the cultural beliefs and religious doctrines of the people. Red is noted as symbolising danger and power in Africa, while it is popular in Chinese culture as symbolising luck, joy, excitement and happiness. If red is worn by Chinese brides, it is believed to ward off evil, whereas in the Americas and Europe, the most acceptable notion of red colour is love, passion and fire. India matches red colour with marriage in addition to its value of fear, wealth, purity and beauty. The red colour of the corona virus implied danger outside the home. The ball shaped object with spikes all around it, portrayed the intensity of the danger to Africans, and Nigerians in particular. The images of the ball floating on the street depicted its severity, and easy mode of spreading. This may however give other conflicting meanings in cultures where red signifies love, beauty, and purity.



Fig 2

The green colour of the virus in image two (2) may also be misrepresented in other cultures outside the cultural context of the advertiser. The underlying intention here is to educate global audience, since it is posted on the internet that the virus is airborne, visibly present everywhere and easily transmitted. This is also to reiterate that it is safer to stay indoors than to be in close contact with the virus outside the home. In many South American cultures and India, green symbolises death. This is agreeable with the intentions of the advertiser whereas, it clashes with most Asian and African cultures where green is synonymous with youthfulness, fertility, health, and prosperity. In ambience, colour green in Western cultures and traditional Chinese cultures stands for harmony, wealth, growth, good economy, cleanliness, and purity from contamination.

In contrast to the proposed safety tips in Image two (2), it elucidates the fact that hunger resides in the house. Staying indoors after a specific number of days will lead to depletion of food and other resources needed to stay alive. This clash of interest - hunger at home and staying indoor out of danger, undermines the advocacy of staying indoor from the deadly virus to a very great extent.





Fig 3



Fig 4

The two advertisements presented in Images Three and four (3 and 4), are situated in public eateries. The green and black colours are predominately used in these two pictures. Black is not the happiest of colours to be worn in most part of the world. For instance, in China and Africa, it symbolises, destruction, evil, cruelty, and sadness. In Africa, it is customary to wear black at funerals as this is associated death. In ambivalence, it is a sign of elegance, sophistication, a sign of masculinity, maturity and beauty. Colour Black, in the contexts of these images, is a colour of mourning and presence of death. It is connected to death by linking corona virus with death. The second, colour Green, means freshness, fertility, and multiplication in certain regions indexes sickness, cowardice and discord. Nearly every utensil, plates, cutleries and the food are coloured with a shade of glowing green - a symbol of the viral infection. The aims of the advertiser is to warn the masses about the deliberate negligence or noncompliance to the COVID-19 protocols of staying safe at home and maintaining social distances, which many flagrantly disobeyed. This disobedience promoted the spread, contamination and death by infected victims.

The advertisements exhibited how many unsuspecting passive carriers of the virus freely interacted and shared cups, plates etc. with others. As it is the norm, greetings and courtesy are part of the traditional life of the African people. Courtesy through hugging, hand shakes, passing of food items from one person to another extended the places covered by colour green thereby indicating the spread of the

disease. These advertisements have also clashed with vital cultural aspect of the sharing and communal living of the people thereby producing a negative effect.

The second dominant colour in Images 3 and 4 is black. Black in the context of these advertisements connoted death. All the buyers at the eatery wore colour black which signified mass death. Of interest in the advertisement is the gaze, which covers the hand, mouth, head and nostrils, the known passages of the virus. Finally the white plates used for serving the food which are meant to be clean were already contaminated by the unhygienic hands of the food vendors and the servers.



Fig 5



Fig 6

The next two advertisements are situated in the context of love, relationship and intimacy. The display of affection by couples are highly prohibited by the propaganda. The strict order of stay at home from public also played out in Images 5 and 6 like it did in the last two above. The male partner already had a green head and green hands. The implication here is that he was already infected actively or passively perhaps from his exposure outside of the house. Sharing affection even in the home under lockdown was also most definitely condemned by #Epuka, the script writer. This kind of fear appeal that prohibits communal living and sharing of intimacy will not work among humans because of our social nature. Image 5 and 6 also forbid mutual nature of extending courtesy among two lovers, such as is displayed when they aided each other to open car doors etc. The same philosophy of isolation and self-quarantine played here for the same reason. A

couple that lives together in the same apartment were denied some rights to intimacy which has negated the concept or primary intention of intimacy – an undeniable human nature.

More colour schemes from the above two images are white and blue. White according to Wierzbicka (1996) is the colour of peace, safety, cleanliness, sterility, and protection. The white car is already polluted by the green virus which the woman alighting at the back spreads. Cognition shows that all the parts of the car she has touched are already smeared with the virus. The same applies to the female counterpart of the couple, portrayed in intimate position at home. Her white already has a black stripe indicating she is already exposed to contracting the virus. The blue shirt wore by the man represent health, healing, calm, understanding and softness. In addition, blue represents both sky and sea. These are associated with open space, freedom, intuition, inspiration, sensitivity and confidence.



Fig 7

The same cognition applies to the *aso ebi*, the blue fabric with blue COVID-19, in the next advertisement. The blue colour of material spells freedom from the virus. It is also a projection of celebration after the war against the virus. It is the tradition of Nigerians to celebrate memorable occasions with pomp and pageantry, and lots of souvenirs for remembrance. The motivation for a fabric of this nature is celebration of life after the stressful lockdown and psychological trauma of COVID-19 deaths. However, the blue colour of the fabric prosed healing, good health and a return to normal life.



Fig. 8

Fig. 9

The last sets of 'Stay at home stop the spread' advertisements are targeted at audiences who will want a break away from the boredom created by lockdown. Relaxation, good exercises, picnicking and visits to the cinemas are major ways of unwinding. The green COVID-19 splashes all around the cinema hall.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

The green ball, the splash of green on the heads and clothes of the people who came together for mountain climbing or picnic on the hill are pointers to how unsafe it is to leave the comforts of the home. The inevitable touching, holding of hands, close contacts to take pictures as seen here are discouraged until the scourge has subsided.

### **Appearance, Manner and Activities**

The communication theory by Dyer (1983) advocates that in choosing stereotypes for advertisement or propaganda, the human elements must be representational. This means that the icon must present to the audience all the attributes that they desire to achieve or possess. Hence, the three main aspects he suggested are appearance of the human figure, manner of appearance and the activities. We examine these in turn.

A major percentage of the icons used in the data are young people whose age ranges from 13 years to 18 (playing football), the selected couple, those in group picture after picnic, the cinema hall and those at the restaurant are middle-aged adults, who can make decisions on their own without being forced for compliance. This is an indication that the advertisements are targeted at matured people who are responsible for their (in)actions.

Manner according to Dyer extols values about eye contacts, pose and looks. Gloomy looks permeated the advertisements where people in black lined up to be served at the eatery. The Black T-shirts, the enormous COVID-19 symbols floating freely at the eatery as well the looks on the people are reflections of the bad situations at hand. The melancholic look shows desperation, sorrow and perplexity perhaps because people have lost loved ones, reduced income or simply psychologically stressed. The second set of people wearing multicoloured dresses as against the black groups are happy showing pieces of the sumptuous meat. Their presentation is not as disturbing as those wearing black - the colour of death.

Another important icon in the cinema hall is Lagbaja, a contemporary Nigerian musician. The name Lagbaja in Yoruba context is a place holder name meaning somebody, anybody and everybody (Makinde, 2021). The name of the icon induced a scare that anyone could be affected by corona virus without restriction to age, gender or race. Hence, his appearance adds value to the advertisement as an endorser.

## Conclusion

This study has examined a stay at home propaganda ‘#Stay home stop the spread’. Investigation reveals that the intention of the advertiser is to further elucidate social distancing protocol of COVID-19. The context of advertisements are the homes and other social contexts of human activities. It is however important to note that a lot of contradictions manifested in the messages that presented the outside of the home as a risky and infested zone and at the same time portraying hunger and isolation for people as reward for staying at home. The clash has negated the intension that the advertiser has projected and may have accounted for the rise in the corona virus before the invention of the vaccines. This paper explains why many health care propaganda fail. The study will be useful to practisioners in field of health communication who may want to emprove persuasive and fear appeal as mean of propaganda. The level of cognition is a function of language and culture, where these clash, they become potential barriers to the perception of quality healthcare that the government proposes.

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