

Semiotic Analysis of Persuasion Elements in Lung Cancer and Colorectal Cancer Posters

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Abstract: *The study examines the persuasion elements of the textual and visual contents of lung cancer and colorectal cancer posters. Aristotle's (1954) rhetorical appeals and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) social semiotic visual analysis were employed for analysing posters produced by the National Cancer Institute, Malaysia Ministry of Health, and NGOs. Results show that a focus on the location of cancer, symptoms, risk factors, and screening methods. Textual content analysis identified 143 rhetorical appeals with a predominant focus on logos (79.7%), emphasising factual information about cancer risks, signs, and treatment. Ethos elements (14.7%) are present in seven posters, primarily in the form of the official logo of the organisation and source credits to enhance the credibility of the poster. The study revealed the sparing use of pathos (5.6%), which was found in only two posters, in the form of questions to get the audience to think about their own risk. The social semiotic visual analysis highlighted the similarity of the posters in representing the cancer site, risk factors and signs using visuals and text. The lung cancer and colorectal cancer posters are also similar in the compositional dimension in terms of the use of clipart and diagrams. As for the interactive dimension, the posters engage the audience through close-up views of the cancer site and long and medium shot of human figures. The paper concludes with principles for the message design of the health posters based on rhetorical appeal and social semiotic visual frameworks.*

Keywords: Lung Cancer, Colorectal Cancer, Posters, Persuasion, Rhetorical Appeal, Social Semiotic Analysis

1. Introduction

Researchers have explored the use of persuasive strategies using Aristotle's (1954) rhetorical appeal in pamphlets on cancers (Ting, Ungau, & Jerome, 2020), airport banners on infectious diseases (Ting & Jerome, 2017), and protocols (Swastika & Aji, 2023), advertisements (Hamzah et al., 2019; Harisma et al., 2022), and public service announcement videos (Rumahorbo & Mutiaz, 2023). The studies show the prominent use of logos and ethos. Logos appeal refers to persuasion using logic and reasoning, while the ethos appeal shows the credibility of the information or communicator to heighten the audience's sense of trust (Aristotle, 1954). The pathos or emotional appeal was less used. These studies showed that health materials are usually designed to persuade by building up the knowledge of the audience and gaining their trust in the information.

However, persuasion is achieved not only textual means, but also via visual content. The meanings embedded in signs and symbols can be unravelled using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) social semiotic visual analysis framework. Semiotics was first introduced by Roland Barthes in 1964 and further developed by scholars like Chandler (2007). Semiotic analysis focuses on the collaborative interaction of signs and images which form a sign system in various media format like magazine and posters (Mohd Noor Be, 2023). Social semiotics studies on COVID-19 materials revealed complex layers of meaning in messages (Asogwa, 2021; Farahdina & Suhandoko, 2023; Kadim & Abbas, 2022). In Nigeria, Asogwa (2021) revealed that images (including colours) in posters on Lassa fever and COVID-19 were designed to evoke a sense of urgency and responsibility, and trigger actions in adhering to health risk prevention methods. In Malaysia, Kadim and Abbas's (2022) analysis showed that COVID-19 cartoons and posters were used to convey not only instructions on preventing disease transmission, but also political and social messages to unify Malaysians in the concerted fight to contain the virus spread. Another study by Farahdina and Suhandoko (2023) on COVID-19 posters posted in the Instagram of World Health Organization (WHO) found that they contained messages on instructions and prohibitions. However, there was an uneven utilisation of different modes in these posters, whereby certain designs incorporated small visual elements that may challenge audience's comprehension of the main message, and some posters had excessive lengthy words that can hinder viewers' information retention (Farahdina & Suhandoko, 2023).

Other than infectious diseases like COVID-19, research on how persuasion is achieved in posters on diseases like cancers is lacking. Cancer is a disease whereby the prognostic outcomes can be improved through early detection and treatment, and health materials to create awareness is important. In Malaysia, colorectal cancer and lung cancer rank number two (11,256 cases) and three (15,515 cases) in 2012-2016 respectively (Ab Manan et al., 2019). The studies reviewed above investigated either how persuasion is achieved through textual elements or visual elements. In fact, only Ting et al. (2020) examined rhetorical appeals in cancer posters and found a strong logical appeal but they did not analyse images. Thus far, there are no studies that examines how textual and visual elements are integrated for persuasive impact.

The study examines the persuasion elements of the textual and visual contents of lung cancer and colorectal cancer posters in terms of rhetorical appeals and social semiotic meanings.

2. Methodology

The data for the descriptive study were nine lung cancer (n=4) and colorectal cancer posters (n=5) identified through an exhaustive search of the websites of the Ministry of Health Malaysia, National Cancer Institute, and Facebook. Posters that were selected were either in Malay or English, and posters in other languages were excluded.

The data analysis for persuasion in the textual elements was based on Aristotle's (1954) framework of three rhetorical appeals, namely, logos, pathos and ethos (Table 1). An example of the logos appeal is "*Perokok adalah 15-25 kali ganda berisiko berbanding bukan perokok*" (Smokers are 15-25 times at risk compared to non-smokers). The frequencies were tabulated to compute the percentages of reliance on logos, pathos, or ethos appeals.