


Chapter 2

Multimodal Representation of Hygiene Practices in Nigeria Under the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Disease outbreaks do not only create health challenges; they also potentially affect public health communication. To complement the efforts of medical and health workers, health communication professionals often try to design semiotic resources to advance the goal of health and medical practice. This chapter, therefore, explores the various semiotic resources created with the aid of digital technologies and deployed by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control across digital platforms to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory to 12 NCDC images sourced online, the chapter demonstrates that the semiotic resources shared by the NCDC on hygiene practices to fight COVID-19 have the potential of broadening the scope of interpretation, meaning, and understanding of COVID-19, health problems, and medical practices on account of the texts' representational, interactional, and compositional structures, thereby helping in building a vibrant healthcare system in Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The need to maintain good health is not new to humankind. For centuries, people have practiced good health by keeping their environments clean, sometimes with the aid of disinfectants, regular cleaning of infected surfaces, hand washing, bathing and isolating infected persons. The recent outbreak of Coronavirus disease also called “Covid-19” raises the need to practice an improved hygiene culture as a way of dealing with the pandemic and associated diseases. In many societies, governments and other critical stakeholders have led massive campaigns and awareness programs to fight the disease. Nigeria is not left behind.

However, the outbreak of infectious diseases generally does not only create medical and health challenges in a city or country, it also creates new linguistic and communication problems for health and medical practitioners. This is because social and cultural differences, such as level of a society’s educational attainment, religious beliefs, exposure, personal lifestyles, and psychological perceptions, among others, affect the way people understand health issues (World Health Organization, 1982; Hernandez & Blazer, 2006; Alves & Oliveira, 2018), as well as how they view and interpret health messages (Mateus, Santos, & Mari, 2005). Conservative adherence to sacred texts, culture or traditions may prevent some people from taking certain drugs, undergoing medical procedures, observing health guidelines, protocols or hygiene practices set out to deal with infectious diseases.

The resistance to new medical and health communication may be exacerbated by the modes and media of the messages. Messages which should be visually represented may only be linguistically represented; those that should be linguistically represented may only be visually represented; and, yet, those which should be co-deployed with multiple semiotic resources may utilize only a single modality of representation and, in all these cases, the affordances of the modes and media play a significant role in broadening or narrowing the scope of interpretation of the messages. To achieve a viable communicative result and improved public health objectives, health and medical communication practitioners often seek novel ways to design messages with “a distinctive ‘look and feel’” (Walker, 2019, p.1) to convey the nature, prevention, and treatment of the diseases.

In times past, much information about Nigeria’s public health, such as hygiene and sanitation, was circulated by the use of town criers, gongs, flutes and animal horns (Nwosu, 2013; Aghadiuno and Onyekweodiri, 2019. Nwosu (2013) notes that, in traditional African society, the primary indigenous modes and media of public communication used to share information and bring about development generally to the people include: idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, symbology, signals, objectifications, color schemes, music, extra-mundane communication and symbolic displays. These indigenous modes of communication or cultural artefacts,

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