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Context Culture in CDC's Health Alert: For All Travelers

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Abstract

The high number of covid-19 cases and the US's mortality rate encourage The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to socialize and promote prevention guidance to stop the spreading. One of the preventive measures is by issuing travel warnings. Scholars have noted that the linguistic and cultural concept conveys norms of behavior and values in society at a particular stage of its development. In brief, advertisements messages are influenced by communicators' cultural backgrounds and references. It means the signs in the CDC poster can show American values. To examine and explore those cultural values in CDC publication materials, the authors conducted a semiotic analysis on a poster entitled Health Alert: For All Travelers. The method used is Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic model. The study shows that the signs presented on the CDC poster are simple, use direct communication structures, and are equipped with universal meaning to understand the message conveyed easily. It indicates a representation of the dominant culture in the United States, the low-context culture with a high level of individualism values. Multidisciplinary research is needed to help create a universal communication model so that messages conveyed in advertisements can reach a wider audience.

Keywords: Advertisement, Context Theory, Saussure's Model, Semiotics Analysis

1. Introduction

Coronavirus 2 or SARS-CoV-2, also known as Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) disease, began to attract world attention in mid-February 2020 because of its rapid spread. Since then, Covid-19 has not only infected more than 219 million people in 191 territories but has also killed more than 4.55 million lives. Until the first week of September 2021, there were more than 40.7 million cases in the United States, in which more than 656 thousand people had died (Google News, 09/09/2021).

The high number of cases and the mortality rate encourage The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to continue socializing the latest developments and promote prevention efforts to stop the spreading. One of the CDC's preventive measures is by issuing several travel warnings. As of December 22, 2020, CDC has published

two travel warning videos in English and Spanish, as well as nine posters, one of which is translated into 35 languages.

Scholars have noted that advertising messages targeted at people from different parts of the world do not always travel, which increases the need for readjusting messages across the globe instead of standardizing them (Hornikx & Le Pair, 2017). Chomsky argues that language is always a cultural invention (Stewart & Strathern, 2017). According to Novikova et al., the linguistic and cultural concept conveys norms of behavior and values in society at a particular stage of its development. Moreover, they can be traced in the works and statements, media materials, and cultural texts (Novikova, et al., 2018).

Since language represents its users' culture, the advertising messages are influenced by the communicators' cultural backgrounds and references. In addition, it means the influence of American culture can be seen or is represented on the CDC's travel alert publication materials. Therefore, this study is aimed to explore cultural influence in the CDC travel alert poster.

1.1 Representation

Vera defines representation as a description of life depicted through a medium (Vera, 2015). According to Hall, representation is an essential part of how meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture (Hall, 2015). Representation means using language to say something meaningful or represent the world meaningfully to other people (Hall, *ibid*). Barker explained that representation is a social construction that requires the public to explore the formation of textual meanings and investigate how meaning is generated in various contexts (Vera, 2015). In brief, cultural representation is a constructed reality of the social world in which language is used to say something meaningful or represent the world meaningfully to others. Therefore, if the language is one of the cultural elements, composed of signs and use to represent the world, the sentence structure and words used in the CDC's travel warning publications represent the American culture. It means that the signs on the posters can show American values. So that, to examine and explore those cultural values in CDC publication materials, the authors conducted a semiotic analysis on a poster entitled Health Alert: For All Travelers. The method used is Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotic analysis model.

1.2 Theories of Culture

Traditionally, culture is defined as something that embodies the 'best that has been thought and said,' in society (Hall, 2015). However, in a more modern context, the culture refers to the widely distributed forms of popular intellectual, publishing, art, design, entertainment, or leisure-time and entertainment activities, which make up the everyday lives of the majority of 'ordinary people (Hall, *ibid*). Culture is continually changing, but it has embodied and expressed shared attitudes, meanings, and values. Culture is something that is liked and done by many people in a society, group, etc. (Roßmeier, 2019). Some experts argue that culture is a reflection of leaders (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2019). Based on their research results, it would take at least five years for a culture to change. After that, there will be cultural stagnation.

When we talk about culture, it will always involve elements of the culture itself. Cultural elements are divided into material and non-material (Barkan, 2019). Material culture is all the society's physical objects, including its tools and technology, clothing, eating utensils, and transportation means. Meanwhile, non-material culture is also known as a symbolic culture, which consists of the values, beliefs, symbols, and language that define a society. Nishimura, Nevgi, and Tella argue that people from different countries communicate differently due to cultural background and reference, often leading to misunderstandings (Seregina & Schouten, 2016). According to Hall's context theory, people from different cultures may respond differently to information (Hornikx & Le Pair, 2017). Hornikx and Le Pair explain that a person's cultural background affects how well they can comprehend complex messages and how well they value such messages (Hornikx & Le Pair, *ibid*).

Based on the explanation above, culture can be defined as beliefs, clothing, eating utensils, language, symbols, technology, transportation, and values shared, liked, and done by many people in a society or group. Along with the times, culture moves dynamically and continues to change. Therefore, cultural background and reference affect how people perceive information and how the information is constructed.

1.3 Theory of Signs

Peirce explained that all ways of thinking depend on the use of signs, every thought is a sign, and every act of reasoning consists of the interpretation of signs (Balsin, Jumaidin, & Masrul, 2018). Hall explains that semiotic are the study or "science of signs," and their general role is as vehicles of meaning in culture (Hall, 2015). Semiotics studies the production, transmission, and interpretation of meaning represented symbolically in signs and messages, primarily but not exclusively in the language (Mingers & Willcocks, 2017). According to Sobur, signs help humans communicate with each other, and a method to study signs is called semiotics (Sobur, 2017). Eco in Sobur distinguishes semiotics into two types, communication semiotics, and significance (Sobur, *ibid*).

Peirce argues that the doctrine of signs; compose language, communication systems, and other things related to the human mind (Sobur, 2017). It is because both verbal and nonverbal signs help humans to establish an understanding of reality. Thus, language is a fundamental communication system consisting of meaningful signs that are communicated based on relations. According to Grabarczyk, de Saussure's theory points out that semiotics should stick only to the signs and the concepts they express (Grabarczyk, 2019). Saussure then explains that the signifier is the sign itself, which often identifies with the sign's sound or an image. Meanwhile, the signified is the meaning of a word. It is understood as a concept or an idea in the language user's mind (Grabarczyk, *ibid*).

Another distinction of Saussure's model is the difference between langue or language and speech or parole. According to Littlejohn, language is a formal communication system that can be analyzed separately from its use in everyday life. At the same time, speech is the use of language to convey a specific purpose (Vera, 2015). Vera explained that Saussure's dyadic model is, in brief, the meaning of all the relationships between signifier and signified (Vera, 2015). Thus, because the relationship between signifier and signified is part of social convention, the signs that appear represent the culture in which they are used.

2. Method

Nauta emphasizes that semiotic analysis describes a target language's meaning and application (Sobur, 2017). Cultural analysts in sociology typically cite Ferdinand de Saussure's work to motivate a narrow theory of meaning (Stoltz, 2019). In other words, semiotic are an approach to explore how communicators use signs when saying something meaningful to others. Meanwhile, the meaning of those signs represents the culture of communicators. Saussure's semiotic model studies the relationship between signs (both text and image) and their meanings (Puspitasari, 2019). Saussure's model breaks the visual sign into two categories, namely denotation, and connotation. Both describe the relationship between signifier and signified, but each of them has a different meaning (Persada, 2020). Briefly, denotation is the literal meaning of a sign, while the connotation is an idea or feeling that a sign invokes in addition to its primary meaning. Then, each of them will be interconnected and explain the contextual meaning of the whole sign.

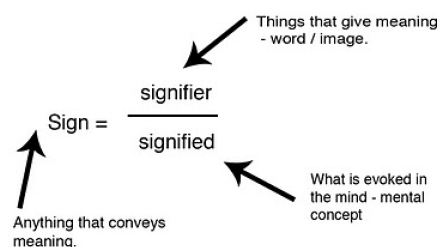


Figure 1: Ferdinand de Saussure Semiotic Model (1959)

Yin explains that unit analysis is a component that is essentially related to determining what is meant by a case in the research concerned (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Chambliss and Schutt argue that unit analysis is the things and behaviors that researchers want to study and understand (Hanel & Mehler, 2019). This study analyzes CDC's poster entitled Health Alert: For All Travelers, using Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotic analysis model. The research paradigm is constructivism, with a qualitative approach. The research material is the CDC's Health Alert poster that has been published on CDC's official website and social media.

3. Results

People from a low-context culture are expected to have more challenges comprehending complex messages and, consequently, to appreciate them less than people from a high-context culture (Hornikx & Le Pair, 2017). Hall's high-/low-context theory suggests that cultures differ in their preferences for indirect, implicit messages versus direct, explicit messages (Hornikx & Le Pair, *ibid*). In other words, most of the information in a high-context (HC) message is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, and very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. While a low context (LC) message is the opposite, i.e., the information is vested in the explicit code.

The Saussure semiotic analysis model principle is that language is a sign system composed of two parts, signifier and signified. A signifier is a medium form taken by a sign, such as sound, picture, or strokes that form words on a sheet. Meanwhile, signified is a concept and meaning (Vera, 2015). Therefore, to analyze the representation of American culture on the CDC poster entitled Health Alert: For All Travelers, the authors use the Saussure semiotic analysis model.

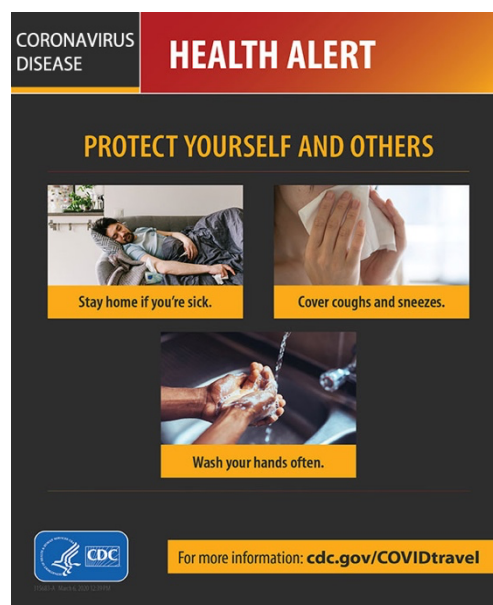


Figure 2: CDC's Health Alert (2020)

As seen in the picture, the poster content consists of a group of writings and images. If narrowed down, the poster is divided into nine parts, namely: CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (writing 1), HEALTH ALERT (writing 2), PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS (writing 3), picture of a man lying on a sofa + caption Stay home if you're sick (image 1), a cropped picture of human character covering part of his/her face with white object + caption Cover coughs and sneezes (image 2), picture of human hands with the palms on top of each other, covered by bubbles + caption Wash your hands often (image 3), picture of white symbols and letters on a blue background (image 4), For more information: [cdc.gov/COVIDtravel](https://www.cdc.gov/COVIDtravel) (writing 4), and series of numbers and letters (writing 5). To make it easier to understand, the authors created an analysis table as follows:

Table 1: Saussure's Semiotic Analysis Model

Signifier	Signified
CORONAVIRUS DISEASE	It is a statement regarding a new disease caused by a coronavirus.
HEALTH ALERT	It informs the public that the poster is a health warning.
PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS	The main message of the poster is an urge to protect oneself and others.
Picture of a man lying under a blanket on a sofa. The eyes are closed, and the man holds tissues in both of his hands. A cropped picture of human There's also a box of tissue under his arm. There is a caption "Stay home if you're sick" at the bottom of the picture.	The picture illustrates a sick man that is resting at home. The illustration is reinforced with a caption that advises readers not to leave the house when they are sick.
A cropped picture of a human character covering part of his/her face with white object + caption Cover coughs and sneezes.	The picture illustrates a human character who is covering his/her nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing. The illustration is reinforced with a caption containing suggestions to cover coughs and sneezes.
Picture of human hands with the palms on top of each other, covered by bubbles + caption Wash your hands often.	The picture illustrates a person washing their hands in a sink under running water. The caption suggests public to wash their hands frequently.
A picture of white symbols and letters on a blue background.	The image is the CDC logo.
For more information: cdc.gov/COVIDtravel .	It tells people how to obtain complete information, which is by visiting the CDC website.
A series of numbers and letters.	The writing informing the poster number and time of publication.

Based on figure 2 and table 1, it is known that the CDC poster is a health warning related to a new disease caused by the coronavirus, which is starting to become an epidemic in several areas. The main message of the poster is to advise all tourists to protect themselves by paying attention to three main things, namely:

- Pay attention to your health. If you are sick, it is advised to stay at home.
- When coughing and sneezing, it is advised to cover it with a tissue or handkerchief.
- All tourists are also advised to wash their hands frequently with soap under running water to stop spreading the virus.

By paying attention to and implementing those three things, the CDC believes that a person can protect himself and others. The public is advised to access the CDC website for complete information and the latest developments on the disease. The poster is intended for all travelers. It is known based on two clues. First, the website address is <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/images/health-alert-all-travelers-thmb.jpg>. Also, the poster's title on the official CDC website says Health Alert: For All Travelers.

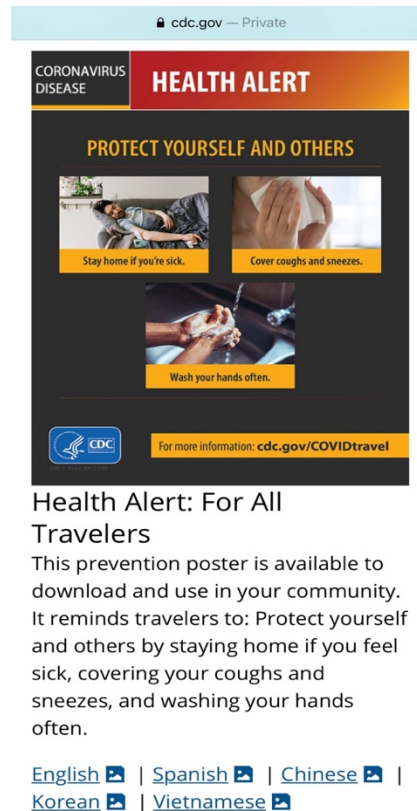


Figure 3: CDC's Health Alert: For All Travelers (2020)

Based on the authors' elaboration in the previous section, publication material such as a poster represents the communicator's culture. The poster that the authors analyzed was produced and published by the CDC. Since the CDC is an agency under the US Ministry of Health, it can be assumed that the culture represented on the poster is the dominant culture in the United States. Since sign has many cultural aspects, the authors limit the observed elements based on Hall's context culture theory.

4. Discussion

Based on Hall's theory, there are many main characteristics of communication within low context culture countries: information is available explicitly, direct communication, all important information is integrated into the conversation, the conversation is more direct, and messages are more straightforward to understand. Meanwhile, communication patterns in high context culture countries are the opposite, namely: implicit information; status, rank, and hierarchy are essential; disguised information; emotions are transmitted; consequently, the meaning of the message is more difficult to understand. In addition, some researchers argue that men generally tend to be more direct in communicating, while women's communication is more covert and emotional (Frank, Enkawa, & Schvaneveldt, 2015).

According to Prof. Geert Hofstede's annual report, in 2019, the United States scored 91/120 points on the individualism index (Hofstede, 2019). The result made the United States an individualistic country and occupied the top position of the 66 countries studied. In this study, the authors interpreted the signs on the CDC's poster and tried to examine them from the perspective of Hall's context culture theory. Based on poster observations, it is known that written information is conveyed in simple sentences and phrases. The written information and illustrations on the posters complement each other and convey the message directly, explicitly, and in a straightforward manner. Consequently, the message conveyed is easier to understand.

As stated by Hall, low context culture has a close relationship with masculinity. When viewed from the stereotypes of men and women in masculine cultures, the reasons for choosing the model in Figure 2 are very explicit and easy to understand. In the United States, men are often socialized to control and restrict their emotions, demonstrating toughness, assert independence, and avoiding perceived weakness or the appearance of being “feminine” (Bosson & Vandello, 2013). Therefore, some American men who are trapped in the existing stereotype believe that lying sick is a form of weakness.

The presence of tissue in the photo indicates that the man has a cold or flu. Although these two conditions are often underestimated, many men usually refuse to rest at home when they have them. Hammer and Good explain that it has been well documented that adherence to masculine norms can be both beneficial and maladaptive for men's health (Iwamoto, et al., 2018). Men who hold strong masculine views are often less willing to admit that they are sick, and some do not even want to go to the doctor until they are completely helpless.

Meanwhile, if seen from the man's physical characteristics in image 1, thick eyebrows, black hair, mustache, and beard are the physical characteristics of people of Asian descent. Thus, the authors suspect that the character provides clues to where the outbreak occurred, which is thought to have originated in China. The authors also assume that character selection may contain hidden messages aimed directly at tourists and Asian American residents to stay home when they are sick. These reasons are what the authors suspect as one of the considerations for choosing the character in Figure 2. However, the consideration could also be as simple as part of cultural representation purposely created by the CDC.

Meanwhile, the authors assume the extreme close-up image represents the female character because it fulfills several feminine stereotypes. First, the part of the skin that appears on the poster looks smoother than the characters in images 1 and 3, which show blood vessels that generally appear on male body parts. Furthermore, the fingers of the characters in image 2 are thinner. The shot also shows clean and a little long but well-groomed nails. Second, there is a hair silhouette on the character's right cheek, which the authors assume is part of bangs. Also, there is a dark accent on the right side of the character's neck, which indicates the character has long hair. Again, these things are generalizations of female physical characteristics.

The authors suspect that there are several reasons for choosing the extreme close-up shot. First, to reinforce one of the ethics of coughing and sneezing. Second, to maintain a commitment to gender representation and equality. However, at the same time, it also wants to hide the character's gender identity to avoid a feminine impression. Finally, as has been widely discussed in the mainstream media as well as social media, many parties consider that in recent years the United States has been hit by a crisis of inequality and intolerance (Bunyasi & Smith, 2019), also a crisis of identity and toxic masculinity (Farrell, 2019). On this basis, the authors suspected that the CDC seeks to convey a universal message widely accepted by the public and avoid rejection from certain parties.

The authors assume that the character in image 3 was also chosen based on several considerations—first, racial representation to suppress representational conflicts. Second, the character was selected to erase the stereotype that black men are strong and stronger than other men in general. The authors suspect that the character in image 3 is a man because it shows male physical characteristics, as the authors have previously explained. Meanwhile, the assumption that black men are more masculine than men of other races is a stereotype popularized in mass media, especially in various films and TV series genres. This has also been verified through a number of studies (Guarino, 2017). Thus, the authors suspect another message that the CDC wants to convey is that washing hands frequently applies to anyone; even black men will not escape from the virus outbreak.

Based on the explanation above, it is known that the signs on the poster are very simple and explicit. Also, the representation of masculinity concept is more dominant 2 to 1 to the feminine concept. The CDC also uses several other universal or simple signs and can be interpreted by the public. Those include the use of dark backgrounds as a representation of unfavorable conditions; red-orange accents indicate serious and crucial conditions; yellow accents represent warnings; white and plain background in pictures indicate cleanliness; sofa, cushions, and

kitchen sink represent house's interior; bolded capital letters are to emphasis certain information; and the CDC logo and website address indicate the poster's formality (official).

Another sign that explicitly represents a low context culture stereotype is the phrase “protect yourself and others.” One of the general characteristics of individualism is to prioritize oneself over others. Thus, the phrase "protect yourself" not only represents but also promotes the nature of individualism. When compared to countries with high levels of collectivity, the message will be entirely different. For example, an Indonesian Ministry of Health advertisement says, “*AYO! JAGA KELUARGA DAN BANGSA INDONESIA DENGAN MENCEGAH PENULARAN COVID-19,*” which means “COME ON! PROTECT INDONESIAN FAMILY AND NATION BY PREVENTING THE TRANSMISSION OF COVID-19.” This sentence represents the characteristics of a collectivist culture oriented towards togetherness and nation first.

The authors argue that the message produced and published by the Indonesian Ministry of Health is not accidental. Referring back to Prof. Geert Hofstede's individualism index, in 2019, the Indonesian individualism score was 14 out of 120, the same as Pakistan (Hofstede, 2019). The fact that Indonesia was in the bottom 6 indicates that Indonesia is one of the most collectivist countries, ranking 6th out of 66 countries. On this basis, Indonesian institutions will be more likely to produce messages with nationalism nuance compared to countries with a high level of individualism.

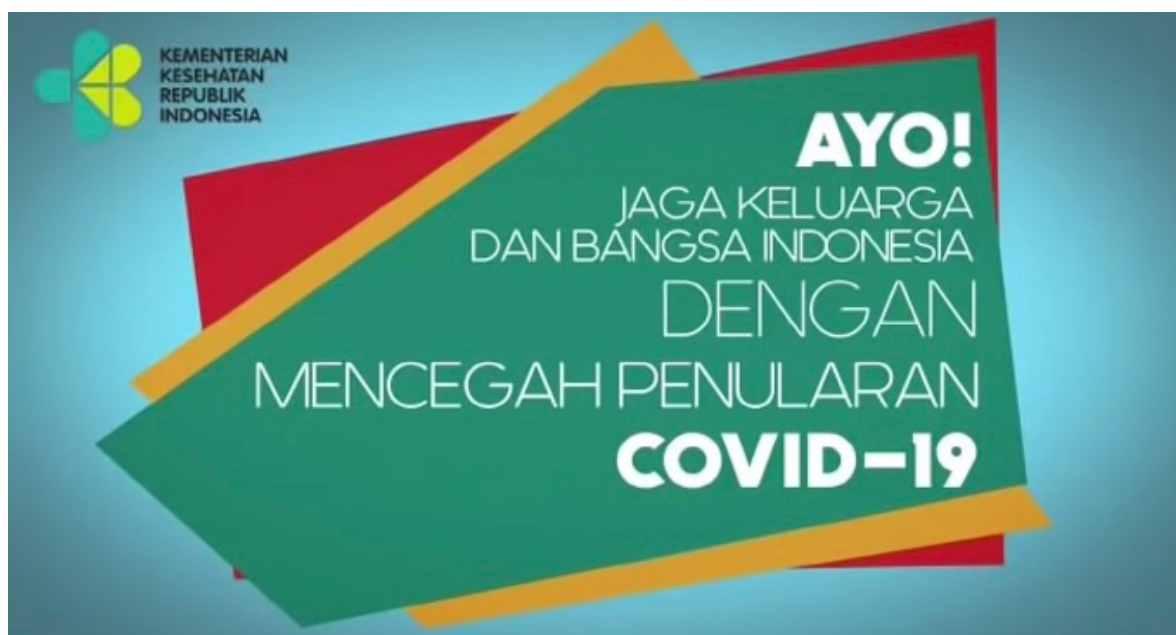


Figure 4: KEMKESRI Covid-19's Ads (2020)

In brief, the elements of the low context culture represented in the CDC poster are as follows:

Table 2: Low-context Culture Elements in CDC's Poster

Indicators	Signifiers
Explicit information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The information presented is clear, complete, and not confusing. • Images clarify the meaning of sentences. • Character representation considers the existing stereotypes. • The colors and setting of images carry universal meaning. • The individualism value is reflected in the

	phrase “protect yourself and others.”
Direct communication.	The sentences used are direct and simple.
Necessary information.	The information on the poster is only the important ones. It was selected and placed according to the proportions and needs.
Direct exchanges.	A poster is a visual medium so that communication is one-way, and there is no direct exchange. However, the authors argue that the availability of a website address that contains an explanation of the information on the poster and the latest development on the issue is the CDC's answer to the anticipated questions from the public who want to know more about the issue.
Readability.	The chosen phrases, colors, illustrations, and images' backgrounds complement each other so that the information conveyed becomes easier to understand.

Conclusion

Based on the results, it is known that the signs presented on the CDC poster entitled Health Alert: For All Travelers are arranged simple, using direct communication structures, and equipped with signs that have universal meanings so that the message conveyed is easily understood. These findings indicate a representation of the dominant culture in the United States, which is the low context culture with a high level of individualism values. Thus, it can be concluded that the signs chosen and presented in the posters are influenced by the communicator, the CDC's cultural background, and references.

The authors hope that the results of this study will motivate more academics to undertake similar research that examines the context of signs in advertisements with the culture in which these signs are published. Advertisements about Covid-19 can be a suitable object to explore representations of cultural contexts, given that governments around the world have issued similar publication materials. In addition, multidisciplinary research can help create a universal communication model so that messages conveyed in advertisements can reach a wider audience and are not limited to audiences in one country.

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