

CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN ANTI-BULLYING CAMPAIGN POSTERS: A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Bullying remains a persistent social problem that demands effective intervention to raise public awareness through anti-bullying campaigns. Visual media, particularly anti-bullying posters, are powerful tools to convey moral and emotional messages to foster empathy towards victims of bullying. This study aims to examine how empathy is constructed through visual and verbal elements in selected anti-bullying posters using a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) approach. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar framework, this research investigates representational, interpersonal and compositional meanings to uncover the strategies used to convey messages that encourage empathy. Data was collected through purposive sampling of three anti-bullying posters sourced from international campaigns. The findings show that empathy is built by representing the emotional state of the victim, utilising direct and indirect gaze to engage viewers. Textual components, such as slogans and captions, further strengthen the emotional connection by encouraging viewers to acknowledge and address bullying behaviour. This research contributes to the understanding of the construction of empathy in visual social campaigns and underscores the importance of multimodal resources in shaping public perceptions of bullying. The implications suggest that incorporating strong empathetic appeals in campaign design can increase audience engagement and promote more effective anti-bullying messages.

Kata kunci: multimodal discourse analysis, visual grammar, bullying, campaign poster.

ABSTRAK

Perundungan masih menjadi masalah sosial yang terus berlanjut dan membutuhkan intervensi yang efektif untuk meningkatkan kesadaran masyarakat melalui kampanye anti-penindasan. Media visual, khususnya poster anti-bullying, merupakan alat yang ampuh untuk menyampaikan pesan moral dan emosional untuk menumbuhkan empati terhadap korban bullying. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat bagaimana empati dikonstruksi melalui elemen visual dan verbal dalam poster-poster anti perundungan yang dipilih dengan menggunakan pendekatan Analisis Wacana Multimodal (MDA). Dengan menggunakan kerangka tata bahasa visual Kress dan van Leeuwen, penelitian ini menyelidiki makna representasional, interpersonal, dan komposisi untuk mengungkap strategi yang digunakan untuk menyampaikan pesan yang mendorong empati. Data dikumpulkan melalui pengambilan sampel purposif dari tiga poster anti-bullying yang bersumber dari kampanye internasional. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa empati dibangun dengan merepresentasikan kondisi emosional korban, memanfaatkan tatapan langsung dan tidak langsung untuk melibatkan pemirsa. Komponen tekstual, seperti slogan dan caption, semakin memperkuat hubungan emosional dengan mendorong pemirsa untuk mengakui dan mengatasi perilaku perundungan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman tentang konstruksi empati dalam kampanye sosial visual dan menggarisbawahi pentingnya sumber daya multimodal dalam membentuk persepsi publik tentang perundungan. Implikasinya menunjukkan bahwa

menggabungkan daya tarik empati yang kuat dalam desain kampanye dapat meningkatkan keterlibatan audiens dan mempromosikan pesan anti-bullying yang lebih efektif.

Keywords: *multimodal discourse analysis, visual grammar, bullying, poster kampanye.*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a type of social violence that is increasingly prevalent in various places, such as school environments, neighbourhoods, and workplaces. It creates a power gap between the perpetrator and the victim, whether verbally, physically, socially, or through cyberbullying, which can have a direct impact on the victim's mental health. The impact of bullying is not limited to immediate effects such as stress, fear and anxiety, but can extend to sustained psychological disorders. Victims of bullying show a higher probability of serious mental disorders such as chronic anxiety to major depression, along with decreased self-esteem and confidence. This will hinder their ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships with others. Continuous bullying can lead to structural and functional changes in the victim's brain, specifically in areas that play a vital role in the process of emotional control and stress response (Copeland et al., 2013).

A recent report from the World Health Organisation (WHO) shows that bullying and direct violence continue to occur steadily in 44 countries and regions. However, due to the increase in digital interactions worldwide, cyberbullying rates have soared since 2018. Around 11% of victims experienced direct bullying, while cyberbullying increased from 12% to 15% for males, and 13% to 16% for females. These numbers show the urgent need to stand up against bullying and violence, whenever and wherever it happens.

Social media has evolved into the main instrument used to voice this issue amidst technological advancements that emphasise visual communication. Anti-bullying campaigns are increasingly being promoted through digital posters on various media. These posters not only convey moral messages, but also serve as persuasive suggestions to foster empathy, and encourage attitude change towards the issue of bullying. However, of the many anti-bullying posters available, not all of them are able to communicate the message effectively. This is due to the lack of harmonisation between visual elements such as colours, images and layout and verbal elements such as text and slogans. Some even have the potential to cause misinterpretation due to the misalignment between the verbal and visual aspects.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) define multimodal as an approach that combines linguistic concepts with visual studies to explore the process of constructing and conveying meaning by involving the complexity of semiotic elements or signalling mechanisms that play a role in conveying messages in visual representations. semiotic elements or signalling mechanisms that play a role in conveying messages in visual representations. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) also emphasise the significance of visual elements in the communication process, and to achieve the effectiveness of existing communication, they must involve interaction and representation. Interaction involves the participation of various communication actors in optimally interpreting the message in a particular context. The interaction is complemented by various indicators or symbols

that facilitate the communication process, such as facial expressions, gestures, or intonation. In communication practice, representations must support the interaction to convey the intended meaning. Actors choose the most relevant, logical, and rooted form of representation to articulate their messages.

A number of studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of multimodal analysis in identifying semiotic strategies used in the delivery of messages in social campaign media. (Deng, 2023) examined the 2022 Asian Games poster and found the role of visual elements in shaping national identity through the use of cultural symbols. However, research conducted by (Belgrimet & Rabab'ah, 2021) on posters used in anti-women's violence campaigns found that facial expressions, shooting techniques, and colour choices were critical to establishing an emotional bond with the audience. Meanwhile, research conducted by (Firdausiyah & Syahreni, n.d.) highlighted the successful delivery of the moral message of the anti-bullying campaign on the @peacegenid Instagram platform which is determined by the harmony between visual and verbal elements.

However, the analysis of meaning construction in anti-bullying posters with a visual grammar approach has not been widely researched to date. Given the high number of bullying cases in schools and cyberspace, there is a need to demand an anti-bullying campaign that is effectively designed to mobilise public opinion and collective action. This research aims to fill this gap and contribute to the development of visual communication theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, this research will expand the understanding of multimodal discourse analysis, especially the application of visual grammar in social campaigns. From a practical perspective, the results of the analysis can be utilised by graphic designers, social activists, and educational institutions to design more communicative and impactful campaigns.

Referring to the background that has been described, this research focuses on analysing the construction of meaning in anti-bullying campaign posters using a multimodal approach and visual grammar theory developed by Kress and van Leeuwen. Visual strategies in the formation of anti-bullying messages on posters circulating on social media platforms will be revealed through the study of three main aspects: representational, interpersonal, and compositional.

METHOD

Descriptive qualitative methodology is the foundation of this research. The choice of this method is based on the research objective to dig deeper into how meaning is formed through visual and verbal elements on anti-bullying campaign posters on social media. As stated by Creswell (2014), qualitative methodology opens opportunities for researchers to explore social phenomena through the interpretation of symbols manifested in cultural products, one of which is digital posters. Meanwhile, the descriptive type is applied to describe and dissect the multimodal elements in the posters using the visual grammar theory proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

To collect the posters, hashtags such as #stopbullying, #bullyingprevention, and #antibullying, among others, were searched. According to the search results, three high-

quality posters that fulfilled the following requirements were selected as primary data: (1) incorporated multimodal elements (visual and textual elements), (2) explicitly showed opposition to bullying, and (3) thoroughly displayed verbal and visual aspects.

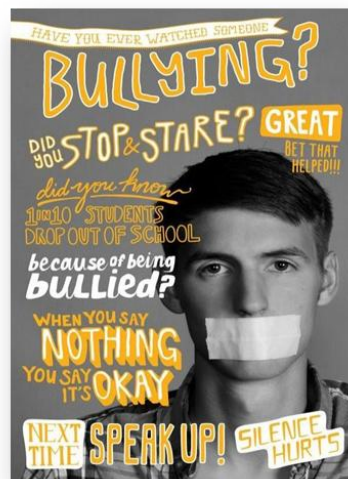
The data collection process was through digital documentation. Data was taken directly from open accounts on Instagram that included anti-bullying campaign hashtags, such as #stopbullying, #bullyingprevention, #antibullying. In addition, researchers also documented secondary information such as image descriptions, account users, uploading periods, and user engagement (number of likes and reviews) as references in understanding the interaction context of each visual element. The collected data was then analysed using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar theory, which consists of three visual metafunctions: (1) representational (what is depicted), (2) interpersonal (the interaction between the message maker and the audience), and (3) compositional (how the visual elements are organised). As part of the analysis process, visual elements such as character, subject, setting, viewing perspective, social distance, colour spectrum, font design, and composition are identified. Next, an interpretation is made of how these elements work together to create social meaning.

As such, this research method was designed to conduct a thorough analysis of the visual content found in anti-bullying campaign materials distributed on social platforms. In addition, this research is expected to assist in the development of studies that analyse multimodal discourse and apply more impactful visuals.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study examined three anti-bullying campaign posters obtained from various campaign hashtags on Instagram, such as #stopbullying, #bullyingprevention, #antibullying. The results and discussion are presented in this section. The Visual Grammar approach developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) was used to analyse this chapter. This approach allows researchers to explore the meaning of visual elements in multimodal texts through three main metafunctions: representational, interactive and compositional.

Each poster that was the subject of the study is discussed thoroughly. Particular emphasis is given to the way the text, visuals, colours, expressions, positioning of figures, and layout construct ideological and social messages about harassment. That posters were chosen as the visual data in this study is based on the fact that visual media have significant rhetorical power in shaping opinions, fostering empathy, and conveying moral messages effectively. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how visual strategies are used to frame the issue of bullying and influence public perceptions of perpetrators, witnesses and victims.



The representational aspect of this poster depicts the victim's silence as the psychological impact of bullying. The main character is a teenage boy with a flat facial expression but a look of sadness. His mouth is covered with tape, which depicts silence, helplessness, or even being forced to remain silent. This image conveys that victims of bullying often do not have the strength to speak up or testify. Surrounding the subject are various rhetorical sentences such as “Did you stop and stare?”, “Next time speak up!”, “silence hurts”, etc. In addition, additional text such as “1 in 10 students drop out” is a statistical representation that reinforces the social fact that bullying is not just a personal incident, but a collective phenomenon that has a wide impact.

The interpersonal aspect of this poster is established through the direct gaze of the protagonist looking straight at the audience. This creates a demand image, where the visual character “asks” for attention and engagement from the viewer. The straight gaze with a blank expression creates emotional tension and deep empathy. It is not an angry or sad gaze, but rather flat and stressful, implying a deep but hidden inner wound. Another interactive element is the use of the command word “SPEAK UP!” in large capital letters in white, yellow in contrast to the background. It is a direct call to action for the audience.

The use of orange colour used in the font reinforces the visual interactive aspect. Orange is an energetic and urgent colour, which psychologically stimulates attention and a sense of action. This colour also emphasises the urgency of the social message: keeping victims silent is a form of violence second only to bullying itself. The sentences surrounding the visual characters (moral questions) indirectly interrogate the audience. So that the audience is not just observers, but challenged to think about their role in the phenomenon of bullying.

Compositionally, this poster displays a very strategic structure. The main character is placed at the centre of attention, while the texts are arranged in a circle around the victim. This symbolises the psychological pressure coming from all directions. The use of white space is also significant. The background is clean and not too dense, which allows the protagonist and the verbal message to be very prominent (salience). That way, attention is not divided. The poster builds a narrative that when we witness an act of

bullying but choose to remain silent, it is not a form of neutrality, but a contribution to the victim's suffering. This is a campaign for upstanders, Silence equals consent to violence. The campaign structures visuals that are not only informative and educational, but also emotionally and morally persuasive.



The poster features an image of a girl as a representation of a victim of physical bullying with her face bruised in the eye and cheek area, but her facial expression is not angry or sad, but looks empty and depressed. The upright position of the victim's body but with a blank expression is a symbolic process, reflecting the helplessness of the victim. This symbolically shows that the victim is weak and has no power to voice her suffering. In addition, there is the writing of Pasal 76C and Pasal 80 UU No. 35 Tahun 2014 tentang Perlindungan Anak, which represents that perpetrators of violence against children can be subject to legal sanctions. the presence of the object of the article in this poster shifts the representational meaning from mere empathy for the victim to a legal appeal against the perpetrator. This poster combines visual and verbal representations to convey that bullying is a criminal offence.

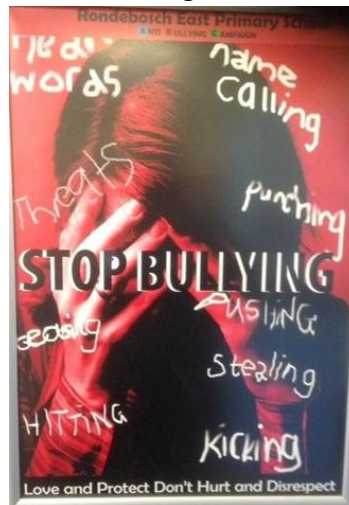
Interactively, this poster creates a strong emotional connection with the audience through the use of demand images. The victim's eyes stare directly at the audience, a form of demand gaze that creates an intersubjective relationship-the victim 'demands' attention, support, and action from the audience. The victim's gaze creates emotional tension and a sense of moral responsibility for the reader. The use of dark blue as a background colour gives a cold, formal and serious feel. This colour is often associated with safety and authority, and in this poster it serves to reinforce the legal message. The visual combination of physical injuries and legal text makes the message of this poster not only a moral appeal, but also a warning against bullying.

Compositionally, the poster organises visual and verbal elements in a vertically structured information structure:

Bottom: a picture of a girl as the centre of attention (real element).

Top part: quotation of the law, slogan, and image (ideal element).

The poster conveys the ideological message that bullying is a crime that has legal consequences, especially when committed against children



The poster features an image of a woman covering her face with both hands. This image contains a narrative process, specifically a reactional process, because the position of the body and hands shows emotional reactions, such as fear, shame, and hurt. This hidden expression illustrates the effects of bullying. This character is a representation of a victim for all victims of bullying. She conveys a sense of hopelessness and a desire to protect herself from verbal and physical attacks. Around the victim's body, there are abusive writings such as: "Threats", "Pushing", "Punching", "Kicking", "Stealing", "Hitting", "Ugly words", etc. These writings are a form of linguistic representation of the types of bullying. They become important elements that fill the visual space and reinforce the message that bullying is not only physical, but also verbal and psychological.

The visual interaction in this poster is more of an offer image rather than a demand image, as the characters do not look directly at the audience. The closed faces show that this poster is only meant to invite empathy. The audience is positioned as a passive witness to the victim's suffering. The large text "STOP BULLYING" in the middle of the poster, in black and capital letters, becomes the centre of visual attention (salient element) as a form of invitation, command or firm statement. The use of black creates a contrast against the bright red background, reinforcing the urgency of the message. Other text at the bottom: "Love and Protect. Don't Hurt and Disrespect" This sentence implies the social standard that women want, which is love and protection, not violence and disrespect. This poster is a verbal call to action. It has a strong and organised visual structure. This poster represents bullying which not only highlights physical violence such as "hitting" and "punching", but also verbal and emotional bullying such as "ugly words" and 'name calling'.

CONCLUSION

A strong construction of meaning regarding the impact, form and social responsibility of bullying practices is found in all three anti-bullying campaign posters through visual and textual elements. Through psychologically distressing visual representations, the first poster showcases the emotional aspects of bullying victims, and

suggests that mental and verbal abuse is also a form of physical and verbal abuse. The clear legal approach taken by the second poster by quoting articles in the Law, gives an ideological meaning that legal consequences will be received by the perpetrators of bullying because the act is a criminal act. The importance of active audience participation to prevent violence was emphasised in the third poster, emphasising the urgency of speaking up and providing protection to victims.

It was found that all posters used effective compositional strategies such as visual centrality, use of contrasting colours, top-middle-bottom information structure, and typographic and symbolic styles that support the campaign message. The posters also successfully utilised interactive meaning to create emotional closeness between the visuals and the audience, either through gaze, gesture, or direct invitation text. The findings show that anti-bullying visual campaigns not only have the function of conveying information, but also encouraging action and shaping collective awareness. The practical implication of this research is the importance of educational institutions, legal institutions, and social organisations to design campaign materials that are not only visually appealing, but also contain narrative power and representation of the values of protecting victims of bullying. Meanwhile, the academic implications of this research open up space for further exploration of the use of multimodal discourse analysis in visual campaigns, especially in the digital and social media context, by involving direct participation from the target audience as active subjects in the creation of meaning. Further research is also recommended to examine the effectiveness of posters in changing audience perceptions and behaviour towards bullying through quantitative approaches or experimental methods.

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