

Ideational Metafunction and Proximization Theory: Semiotics of the Fear of Covid-19

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Abstract

The study highlights the discursive representation of fear in the images used in news, articles, and blogs on Covid-19. Various dimensions of the impact of fear on tourism, trade, health, industry, and technology, etc. have been pinpointed by studying the ideational signs in relation to the proximization strategies used in the images. Ideational metafunction suggested by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) has been applied to 80 images taken from 80 news articles or blogs to highlight the patterns of Covid-19 fear and its impact. Besides, Cap's (2017) understanding of spatio-temporal and axiological proximization strategies for the construction of fear in health discourse also inform the analysis. The results not only show how fear is linked to the display of human values and evils but also bring to light how various ideational choices of signs serve as rhetorical proximization strategies in the construal of disease as an imminent danger and apocalyptic hazard. The study has implications for multimodality, medical semiotics, sociology, and the 'discourse of fear'.

Keywords: Covid-19, Discourse of Fear, Ideational Metafunction, Proximization Theory, Medical Semiotics

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Introduction

Due to Covid-19, people have been struggling with digital threats and fears of death, loss of relatives, catching the disease, shortage of resources and medical facilities, and economic breakdown, etc. Furthermore, fear, depression, anxiety, insomnia, anger, and isolation caused by the pandemic have led to the risk of another pandemic of a mental health crisis (Torales et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2020), partially caused by misinformation or lack of science-based evidence and information (Pulido, et al., 2020) on social media.

Altheide (2002), reflecting on such crises in society proposes that fear under such circumstances is creatively used as a tool to control through the employment of a discourse of fear. Extending the debate on the construction of fear in health discourse, Cap (2017) suggests three proximization strategies stating that the proximization arrangement of health discourse through strategies of threat construction “involves a concerted interplay of construals of the enemy entity, its ability to produce quick impact, and the (destructive) effects of that impact” (p. 35). Firstly, the disease is described as a negative, alien, foreign or antagonistic entity, approaching or invading the bodies of the victims through discursive strategies; and such a description of the disease is called spatial proximization. Metaphor of war is used for combating the disease. Huge and heavy metaphors are used, timeframe and continuity are highlighted to show urgency, and the extremely disastrous impact of the disease is highlighted in the discourse. Secondly, “temporal proximization” is a forced construal of the envisaged conflict as not only imminent but also momentous, historic and thus needing immediate response and unique preventive measures” (Cap, 2017, p. 17). In health discourse, it is constructed by showing how quickly the disease is affecting (Cap, 2017, p. 35) or spreading. Proximization suggests that disease is getting close both spatially and temporally.

Thirdly, “axiological proximization” involves the clash of values between the disease as an invader and the masses as victims. In health discourse, it is constructed through the magnitude of the detrimental effects of the disease. For example, if a disease is represented as affecting the whole world, men and women, kids and elderly, and diverse walks of life, axiological proximization has been employed. The present study applies these concepts on proximization to the images on Covid-19 to understand the visual representation of the fear of disease.

The notion of ‘sign’ serves as the starting point of social semiotics. Signs are elements in which the ‘signifier’ (a material ‘form’) and the ‘signified’ (a ‘meaning’) are combined. Applying Halliday’s (1978) concepts of ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions to the study of visual design of images, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggested a socio-semiotic approach to study the visual signs related to a context. In the present study, ideational metafunction as explained by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) has been studied by pinpointing ideational patterns of background, “locative circumstance” or setting, “possessive attributes” of the “interactive participants” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 90). “Ideational metafunction deals with ‘what is’ in an image, and is realized through the setting, background, foreground, processes, relations between interactive participants in the image and symbolic value of

various lines, shapes and curves” pertinent to a context or culture (Riaz, 2019, p. 5).

The purpose of the study is to explore if and how ideational signs have been employed in relation to proximization strategies to construct fear of the disease in the images used in news articles and blogs on Covid-19. The analysis sheds light on the semiotic construction of the fear of disease and how three proximization strategies i.e., the “construal of disease as an enemy” or imminent danger, its “impact speed” and “impact consequences” (Cap, 2017, pp. 34-37) have been employed in this regard.

Research Question

1. How have ideational signs and proximization strategies been employed for the representation of fear in the visual discourse on Covid-19?

Semiotic or multimodal studies have been carried out on disease, its impact, strategies to influence the consumers regarding medicine or medical tools, and the identity construction of patients. Ho (2019), for instance, compared the use of metaphors in breast and lung cancer awareness advertisements to examine the identity construction of patients. Mulderrig (2017) studied the multimodal use of nudge tactics in social marketing to emotionally influence people to adopt a healthier lifestyle to deal with obesity in the UK. Harvey and Brookes (2019) studied the stock images on dementia to assess cognitive decline in patients. Hunt (2015) studied the multimodal representation of diabetes on Facebook pages. Brookes and Harvey (2015) analyzed threat and fear strategies in public health promotion discourse. Matias (2020) analyzed the regulation of physiological and psychological needs during quarantine caused by the Covid-19 crisis. However, the present study is different because it examines the representation of fear in Covid-19 digital discourse to analyze the impact of fear and its visual depiction.

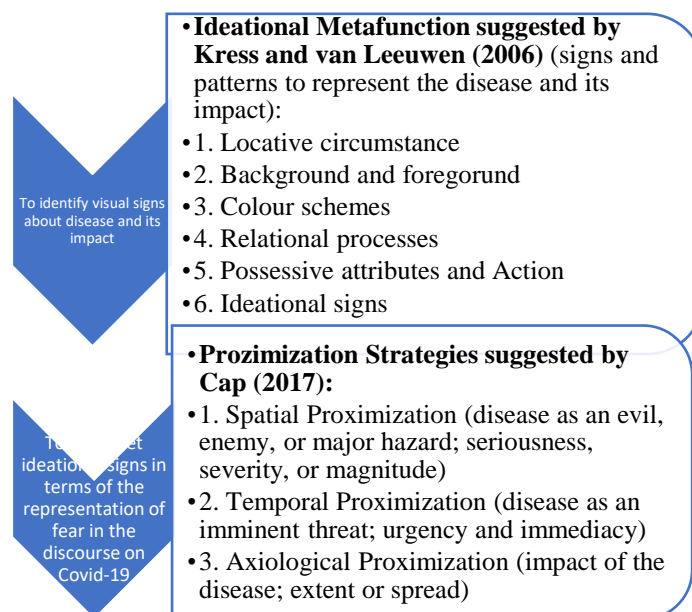
The study helps understand the ideational grammar of the visual design of images on Covid-19 holistically, extends the debate on the semiotics of disease, and highlights the impact of the fear of disease on multiple domains of life. It helps understand and expand the semantic or semiotic field of fear. As fear shapes perspective (Allen, 2020), understanding fear of the disease and its impact comprehensively may also help the policymakers, health workers, and people in general to take better preventive measures. Understanding semiotics of fear in the discourse on Covid-19 is important because through construction of heightened fear of a disease, not only big pharma is benefitted but a misinformed construction can also cause financial loss, hassle and suffering to people. As proximization theory deals with textual metaphors and choices; so, combining the proximization theory suggested by Cap (2017) to understand the discourse of fear with the ideational metafunction suggested by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to study the grammar of visual design in the present study is innovative.

Methods:

The study is qualitative in nature and 80 images (See Appendix 1) from 80 articles and blogs on Covid-19 published between February 16, 2020, to May 6, 2020, have been purposively selected based on the following criteria:

1. The article must be on Covid-19 and the title of the article should contain words like Covid-19, coronavirus, or virus.
2. The title of the article must contain the word fear/s.
3. First/top image has been considered.
4. Pictures of politicians, bloggers, media figures, and UN personnel making speeches have not been considered to focus on signs concerning disease and themes than personalities.
5. Following the criteria mentioned above, 110 articles had initially been selected. Later, various similar images representing the same issues such as misuse of technology by scammers, changes in the stock market, pets, big pharma, spraying the spaces, paramedical staff standing in hospitals, cancellation of events, suspension of visas, depression, and shutting down of cities had been excluded to devise a diverse semiotic field of fear of the disease. Excluding images on the same signs and themes could help include diverse signs.
6. Collage consisting of 6-12 images have been prepared and displayed in Appendix 1 along with figure numbers (1-80).
7. Data has been analyzed based on the use of ideational metafunction in images, as suggested by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), and spatio-temporal proximization strategies for the construction of fear in health discourse as suggested by Cap (2017) (See Figure 1 for the conceptual framework and Introduction for the details of the frameworks) to not only highlight the socio-semiotic potential of signs have been employed for fear of Covid-19 but also to pinpoint how the severity of the disease or its fear has been highlighted. The titles of the articles or blogs have helped contextualize the images better. Due to the limitations of space and word limit, every image has neither been randomly selected, nor individually illustrated and analyzed.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework adapted to study the semiotics of fear in the images on Covid-19



Findings and Discussion:

Table 1 presents the findings in the form of ideational signs and patterns of Covid-19 fear illustrated in the images (See Appendix 1):

Table 1: *Ideational signs, symbols and processes in the images on COVID-19 Fear*

Ideational Metafunction	Signs used in the images on COVID-19 Fear
Locative Circumstance	Locative circumstance is both indoor and outdoor. Setting shows holy places, rooms, roads, hospital rooms and corridors, hotels, grocery stores, airports, stock markets, twin towers, beach, jail, borders, tents, railway stations, forest, graveyard, cricket stadium, park
Background	Plain or saturated grey or brown background People, buildings, wards, bars, closed doors or windows as background Dark clouded sky (Figure. 41, 50)
Colour schemes	Red and grey colours have been used: red coronavirus, yellow corona (4, 36), darkness, black umbrella (48), white, green or blue protective gear, black, blue, white, and green masks, brown earth and brown and grey buildings, red cross, red text of signposts (30, 76)

Possessive Attributes related to disposition: Facial Expressions / Body Language (Action)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empty gazes, worried expressions (26) 2. Body language of depression: An upset woman staring outside(3), heads down (6), alienation (29, 33), hands on stooped forehead (6), half faces, shifting gazes, people in groups but not looking at one another, people stranded on airports and roads, walking in opposite direction, waiting in queues or groups (45, 79), crossed arms (76), hiding faces with hands, a woman lying on bed with her head down (72), many men lying down aimlessly (45)
Appearance as a possessive attribute	Loose hair of women, both tidy and untidy appearance, people wearing masks, people having South and East Asian, African, European origin
Ideational signs related to health and safety	Open envelope with a notification surrounded by coronavirus, injections, kits, medicine, washing hands, security check, workers spraying around, digital images of people passing through security check, emergency service on Whatsapp (25), everyone wearing a mask (37), cigarettes, home remedies and herbal items (42, 54, 58)
Ideational signs related to business and economy	Business: Black/faceless hackers and phishers (2), poor kids selling masks on footpaths, a masked statue with eyes closed (12), disposable spoons, newspapers, closed hotels (24), numerous locked cars parked together (27), foreigners exiting (35), trollies and empty store shelves (39, 40) , closed shops (43) closed beach (41), fruit, poultry and vegetable market (57, 58), assets and stock markets (47, 50), weapons, cricket
Ideational signs related to psychology and mental health	Bars, lonely women, empty streets, empty wards, lonely women gazing out of windows etc. Closed doors(3, 59), hands on closed windows, (7), people stuck in circles (20, 78), people waiting and watching, women standing behind closed windows (14, 67), men standing behind or in front of iron bars, quarantine and empty wards (21, 63), stress caused to people suffering from other fatal diseases (33)
Ideational signs related to xenophobia	Three images illustrate fear and stigma: a Chinese woman holding a placard which displays: 'I am not a virus' (1), maltreatment of African people in China. (35), a man holding a placard that reinforces 'Welcome Home. You are not #' (32)
Ideational signs related to loss	Hand of a dead body (51), digging a grave, lonely women, a python named CORONA coiling a man (49), death angels (73), body language of people, lockdown in Kashmir still continues (56), closed shops, doors, airports etc., and downfall of economy, abuse of female rights (67, 78)
Ideational signs related to human values	Fear has been linked to fortitude, humanity, and support etc.: spraying, injecting, three paramedics hugging or counseling (31, 34) , pigeons and other birds flying, meditation, distributing food (53), corona burgers by a chef (60), people offering prayers at holy mosques (19) and Kaaba, white flowers, butterflies painted on window (46), playing with pets (Fig. 44), burying, open and empty cage swaying in the air with a bird drawn on the top (71), prisoners released from jails (15), men helping or

counselling children (5, 62), positive impact on wild life (52), doctor holding hand of a patient (80).

Table 1 shows the signs, symbols, patterns, and processes related to Covid-19 fear. The impact of fear can be observed in various domains such as health, business, economy, technology, mental health, and emotional support, etc. Closure of business and tourism has been highlighted. Besides, issues concerning technology, privacy, hacking, fishing, the dark web, and the use of digital tools such as mobiles have also been illustrated. Depression, alienation, anxiety and sadness, emptiness are recurrent themes. Signs related to freedom, aspiration of freedom, frustration, and sadness caused by closure and quarantine are also perceptible. Display of affection, support, concern, goodwill, and perseverance can also be observed in relation to fear of the pandemic. Insufficiency of resources such as food, medicine, ventilators, and items related to hygiene is another important theme.

Straight iron bars, circles, and square windows ideationally represent restrictions and hazards. "Circles" connote that people are stuck in the misery caused by a "natural" calamity, while "square" shapes as ideational choices connote the man-made restrictions or social limitations of quarantine in "a world that we have made ourselves" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 53-55). Similarly, "straight" iron bars connote "rule of law" or "law and order" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 46-55; Riaz & Rafi, 2019, p. 131). These signs signify that it is crucial for people to quarantine themselves. Signs related to financial loss as well as the loss of life to show a global impact of the virus can also be seen. Grey and brown background represent lifelessness and complexity as well as stability. Brown is colour of the earth and it connotes stability. Grey, however, is a neutral colour which is often associated with a lack of clarity, loss of vitality, gloom, and depression. Black, blue, green, white, and red connote gloom, hope, support, peace, and danger, respectively in this context. The diversity of locative circumstance shows the global and multifarious impact of the pandemic. Similarly, the appearance and clothing choices of people as well as their disposition or facial features also show the diversity of class and race. Body language and facial expressions communicate lethargy, sadness, alienation, and suffering on a large scale.

Considering the proximization theory and spatio-temporal strategies used for the legitimization of the discourse of fear suggested by Cap (2017), symbols depict Covid-19 as an enemy and imminent threat. Visual signs such as python (49), restrictions imposed on performing Hajj or Umrah in Mecca, death angels (Fig. 73), grave, dead bodies, closed windows, empty spaces, protective gears, dark clouded sky, coronavirus covering the entire frame (42, 48), a mask larger than piles of coins (50), a large number of parked cars, vulnerable people including old and young women and children, people

crying together, depressed and lonely women stuck and aloof in rooms (3, 29), men helplessly standing behind the bars (13, 19,), large numbers of foreigners, prisoners or refugees (15, 45), and action (See 'Body Language' in Table 1), due to their size, severity or magnitude, show extremity of the threat and connote how debilitating, awe-inspiring, grave and critical the situation is and how helpless people are under Covid-19 fears. Such semiotic signs given in Table 1, due to their size and seriousness, spatially suggest Covid-19 as an "inherently evil", "active", and "potent" entity causing havoc to vulnerable victims (Cap, 2017, p. 36). Alienated people show that the pandemic as a massive threat is spatially intruding and interfering with their lives.

Secondly, the signs enlisted in Table 1 also show the temporal construal of the Covid-19 fears, because the ideational signs connote closure, blockage, helplessness, loss and gloom, thus highlighting the immediacy and urgency of mobilization to control the situation and set people free safely. People waiting, spraying the entire space in the frame, digging grave, launching emergency call service on WhatsApp (25), and holding placards show the "unbounded" nature and "continuity" or "impact speed" of the "imminent" and "momentous" threat (Cap, 2017, p. 36). The theme that emerges from the employment of these signs involves time and suggests that every second is crucial because, it is a situation of "public health emergency" (Auranzeb et al., 2020, p. 281). The disease is spreading speedily, therefore, immediate action to prevent and isolate is required.

Thirdly, "construal of impact consequences" can also be observed in the use of "maximally consequential" (Cap, 2017, p. 36) ideational signs involving "both men and women" and the "world" involving various races and ethnicities, as well as various fields of life such as health, business, technology, transport, and security depict the "potentially massive toll it could take if unstopped" (Cap, 2017, p. 37). Signs and symbols (Table 1) such as animals, men, women, children, diverse settings including holy places, war-stricken areas, jails, beaches and parks, and coronavirus covering the entire frame construct the fearsome impact of Covid-19 as widespread, "huge and heavy" (Cap, 2017, p. 37).

Findings suggest that the visual representation of the fear of Covid-19 exhibits themes such as fatalities, mental health crisis (Choi et al., 2020), technological crises, excessive and innovative use of technology, lockdown, detention, deportation, isolation (Banerjee and Rai, 2020), and loss to the business, tourism, transport, stock exchange, and cricket, etc. (Miller, 2020), and shortage of food and health facilities (Vincent & Creteur, 2020). Millions are suffering from the disease. Heightened fear, trauma, depression, and domestic violence have also been reported (Miller, 2020). Besides, while the world has experienced a rapid adaptation to digital systems of communication and changes in "digital communication strategies, digital educational initiatives and digital patient management solutions" (Robbins et al., 2020, p. 1) for service provision, invasion of privacy, and financial loss caused by digital malware, phishing, and hacking have also been on the rise. Moreover, "with international air travel rapidly slowing as a result of the crisis, and many countries imposing travel bans, closing borders, or introducing quarantine

periods, international and domestic tourism declined precipitously over a period of weeks” (Gossling et al., 2020, p. 2). Miller (2020) also noted that triggered by a fear of lack of food and other items, people stocked stuff which led to the replenishment of supermarket shelves.

Visual signs and their signified related to the spatio-temporal and axiological proximization of Covid-19 suggest that Covid-19 has not only called into question the existing assumptions concerning health practices and psychological and physiological needs of human beings (Matias et al., 2020), but also put the world in a ‘new normal’ scenario of war with the disease due to lockdown, restrictions on freedom, a huge number of fatalities (Zinn, 2020) and overwhelming shortage of health facilities (Vincent & Creteur, 2020). It has not only crumbled the concepts of wealth, relationships, education, and safety but also left the world numb and traumatized (Czarnocki & Larue, 2020). However, the images also reveal positive human values which show the positive human potential and support system in a situation of the imminent threat of disease. Appropriate public health interventions, screening, treatment can reduce the number of infections and deaths (Bruns et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Studying the semiotic field of fear in relation to disease suggests that fear entails isolation, closure, loss, helplessness, and emptiness in the visual discourse on Covid-19. Fear is linked to isolation, but digital invasion of privacy is also a major concern while use of digital technology is also on rise. Besides, ideationally, dearth of resources including food, ventilators, masks, wealth, water, grocery items is also linked to fear of the disease. It is also associated with quarantine and freedom simultaneously. However, not everything about fear is negative because people can be seen helping and supporting one another. The discourse of fear may not only be used for the legitimization of vested interests of companies, policy makers, politicians and big pharma for the promotion of medicine or political gains but also to strengthen human values such as compassion and willingness to support. What makes the Covid-19 visual discourse a discourse of fear is the spatio-temporal proximization of the disease through construction of the disease as an implacable enemy, immediate threat, and maximally consequential. However, such construction is not rooted in some promotional ideologies, just like it is done in case of advertisements of medicine and medical tools (Brookes & Harvey, 2015), but to convey the severity and situation as experienced by people.

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