

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of False Healthcare Product Advertising

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Abstract: *As the aging population continues to grow, the healthcare product industry is rapidly expanding, which has also led to the proliferation of numerous false medical products. Blindly purchasing and using these counterfeit products poses a serious risk to the medical and economic health of the elderly. Therefore, the identification of these false healthcare product advertisements is of paramount importance. This paper, based on the multimodal critical discourse analysis theoretical framework, analyses a false healthcare product advertisement through two modalities, text, and visuals, to explore the pragmatic strategies used to induce elderly consumers. The results reveal that from the textual perspective, the false advertisement employs personal and narrative strategies to construct an authoritative identity of 'fake traditional Chinese medicine' and establish an emotional connection with the elderly audience to encourage purchases. Additionally, the absence of emotional support for the elderly and their trust in various television information sources are contributing factors to their susceptibility to deception. From the visual perspective, the video advertisement uses techniques such as eye contact, framing, eye-level perspective, and high modality to bridge the gap between the audience and the speaker while enhancing empathy and trust, ultimately achieving the goal of inducing elderly consumers.*

Keywords: *Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis; Healthcare Product Advertising; False Promotion; Aging Population*

1. Introduction

As the aging population continues to grow, the healthcare product market is rapidly expanding. Alongside this industry's rapid development, a significant number of false healthcare products are also entering the market. Due to factors such as decreased discernment among the elderly, the blind use and purchase of healthcare products by the elderly are on the rise. False healthcare product advertising not only endangers the development of the entire healthcare product industry but also poses a threat to the healthcare of the elderly, resulting in substantial economic losses for them. Therefore, the identification of the characteristics of these false healthcare product advertisements is crucial. This paper, based on the theoretical framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis, will analyze a healthcare product advertisement - "Flatulence Plaster from the Miao Ethnic Group" - to identify the features of false healthcare product advertising and examine its pragmatic strategies for inducing elderly consumer behavior.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis Research

Multimodal discourse analysis refers to the phenomenon of communication using various senses such as auditory, visual, and tactile modalities, employing multiple means and symbol systems like language, images, sound, and gestures. Early discourse studies primarily centered around the text. However, as media diversified, so did the ways people communicate through media, non-textual modalities like images and sound have become integral to the construction of meaning.

Systemic functional linguistics posits that "language is a social semiotic," indicating that other semiotic systems, like language, also serve to convey meaning. Within systemic functional linguistics, Halliday categorizes texts into three layers of analysis: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Building on this, Kress and Van Leeuwen expanded discourse analysis from language analysis to multimodal

discourse analysis, encompassing visual elements, sound, and other modalities^[1]. They established a visual grammar theory for analyzing imagery, used to examine representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. Kress and Van Leeuwen's analytical framework has found widespread application in multimodal discourse analysis, including studies in print media, children's literature, textbooks, advertising, three-dimensional spaces, and web analysis^[2]. Additionally, in accordance with Norman Fairclough, the founder of the critical discourse analysis school, critical discourse analysis aims to unpack the construction of power and ideology in discourse, as well as the role of discourse in constructing identities, social relations, knowledge systems, beliefs, and so on^[3]. In essence, critical discourse analysis seeks to reveal the relationship between language use, ideology, and power. Thus, combining critical discourse analysis with multimodal discourse analysis enhances the latter's theoretical depth, transforming the traditional two-dimensional static analytical model into a three-dimensional dynamic model, which aids in promoting critical comprehension of video media by audiences^[4]. Presently, research on multimodal critical discourse analysis, both in theory and application, is abundant. On the theoretical front, D. Zhang and K. Zhang have developed a comprehensive framework for multimodal critical (positive) discourse analysis based on existing discourse analysis models^[5]. On the application front, both domestic and international researchers have produced studies guided by this theory, focusing on news reports and advertising discourse^{[6][7][8]}. Therefore, this theory can serve as the theoretical foundation for guiding research on healthcare product advertisements and holds significant relevance.

2.2. Research on Healthcare Products for the Elderly

Current research on healthcare products for the elderly primarily focuses on three aspects: First, exploring the factors influencing the consumption behavior of elderly individuals regarding healthcare products^[9]. Second, it analyzes relevant cases of healthcare product fraud^[10]. Some scholars have also studied false advertising in the healthcare product industry from the perspective of legal and regulatory soundness^[11]. However, no scholars have analyzed the discourse within false healthcare product advertisements from a linguistic perspective.

Therefore, this paper will employ the theoretical framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis to examine false healthcare product advertisements targeting the elderly, thereby revealing the pragmatic strategies employed in these advertisements and working toward the goal of preventing false healthcare product promotion.

3. Research Content

The video corpus selected for this study is a healthcare product advertisement titled "Flatulence Plaster from the Miao Ethnic Group" which aired on a certain TV station in 2014. In this advertisement, a self-proclaimed "Miao medicine heir" and fraudulent traditional Chinese medicine practitioner, Liu xx, has been appearing on various major TV channels since 2014. She falsely presents herself as an expert from Peking University, the fifth-generation successor of Mongolian medicine, and a traditional family doctor, endorsing various counterfeit medicines and healthcare products. This has had a profoundly negative impact on both elderly consumers and the traditional Chinese medicine industry. To explore the pragmatic strategies employed in this false healthcare product advertisement, this paper will analyze the advertisement from the perspectives of multimodal critical discourse analysis, examining both the textual and video modalities. The video has a total duration of 20 minutes and 13 seconds, and the transcribed text comprises 5,358 words for analysis.

3.1. Textual Modality Analysis

In conducting textual modality analysis, this study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis framework, which includes the analysis of text, discursive practice, and social practice.

3.1.1. Textual Dimension

First, we conduct an analysis in the textual discourse dimension. Textual discourse analysis primarily focuses on two aspects: person reference factors and narrative strategy factors.

Regarding person reference factors, since "Miao medicine," "Miao remedy," and "cough relief" are the central emphases of this healthcare product, throughout the product introduction phase, the host and the live audience repeatedly employ personal reference language such as "Miao medicine heir,"

"Successor to the Art of Treating Cough with Miao Medicine Acupuncture," and "Deputy Director of the Eastern Cough Research Institute" to address this "fake traditional Chinese medicine practitioner." Additionally, modifiers like "prominent," "expert team," "over forty years of medical practice," "proficiency in Chinese herbal medicine pharmacology," and "proficient in using the ancestral Miao remedy for cough relief" are used to enhance the authoritative identity construction of this "fake traditional Chinese medicine practitioner." These modifiers serve to craft a false image of an elderly professor with years of medical experience and expertise in Miao medicine for cough relief.

Regarding narrative strategy factors, this false advertisement employs numerous emotional and associative narrative strategies to deepen the emotional connection of elderly viewers and create a reliable, authoritative, and rare product image. Concerning emotional narrative strategies, throughout the prelude, middle, and concluding phases of the product introduction, three patients share their painful experiences of suffering from cough relief ailments. As follows:

Patient One: *"My throat always feels like there's phlegm stuck in it, and I cough incessantly, unable to stop. Sometimes I cough so much that I can't catch my breath, and there are nights I wake up several times... Do you think it's worth enduring this suffering day in and day out? I'm suffering, and it's affecting others. Sometimes, I think I'd be better off dead."*

Patient Two: *"Every time I take a step or make any movement, it feels like I've run out of breath. The worst part is that I sometimes wet myself when I cough... I often think about opening up my chest to see what's really going on with my lungs. But the surgery costs eighteen thousand. Where can I find eighteen thousand? If the surgery doesn't go well, I won't be able to get off the operating table. So, I keep taking medication to expand my airways and breathing oxygen to survive day by day."*

Patient Three: *"My grandson calls me a 'sick ghost.' Now, I start wheezing as soon as I move, and I do everything, eat, drink, urinate, and defecate, all in bed."*

Patient Three's Wife: *"As soon as I lie down to sleep at night, he starts wheezing, coughing up phlegm in large quantities. I'm sleep-deprived from all the tossing and turning at night. Over these past few years, I've gone from 150 pounds down to 110, and my blood pressure is high every day. Sometimes, I can't help but complain to him. I say, 'When will you finally finish me off? Then you can rest easy.'"*

These three patients, through recounting their painful experiences, convey concepts of "suffering," "inconvenience in daily life," "financial burden," "being a burden to family," and even "death" to the audience. They aim to resonate with the elderly viewers and deepen their emotional connection. By doing so, they emotionally induce elderly individuals to make payment decisions.

Regarding associative narrative strategies, the product introduction section introduces historical stories, such as the legendary tale of "Emperor Zhu Youjian of the Ming Dynasty inviting a Miao medicine master as the imperial tutor to treat cough relief." By incorporating historical events and employing associative strategies, elderly viewers are encouraged to form a set of conceptual metaphors, such as "imperial tutor's medication" corresponding to "authority" and "the Ming Dynasty era" corresponding to "long history." Ultimately, this strategy is used to establish a reliable, authoritative, and rare product image.

3.1.2. Discursive Practice Dimension

In the discursive practice dimension, the producers of the text employ strategies such as person reference and narrative tactics to establish an authoritative image and emotional connection with elderly viewers, ultimately inducing consumption. Due to the emotional heuristic decision-making, which tends to engage in risk-averse behavior when the scope of gain is reduced and risk-seeking behavior when the scope of loss is increased^[12]. Therefore, in situations of emotional connection, the elderly demographic is more likely to make risky payments, increasing the likelihood of falling victim to deception. Additionally, this false advertisement utilizes various major television channels as an indirect communication channel to promote counterfeit healthcare products to the elderly population, enhancing the credibility of the information source.

3.1.3. Social Practice Dimension

In the social practice dimension, as a distinct demographic in society, the elderly experience significant physical and cognitive decline. As their bodily functions gradually diminish, many chronic illnesses begin to affect their daily lives. Consequently, some elderly individuals excessively worry about their healthcare, fearing that they may become burdensome to their families and children. Simultaneously, with changes in their social roles and reduced social interaction after retiring from work, many elderly

individuals experience a significant decrease in social activities and interaction with friends and family. Their children may not live nearby, and this is particularly pronounced for elderly individuals living alone in empty nests, making them susceptible to feelings of loneliness and abandonment. In this context of emotional deficit, elderly individuals are more likely to make impulsive consumption decisions when emotionally induced.

3.2. Visual Modality Analysis

In conducting the visual modality analysis, this study employs the visual grammar framework created by Kress and Van Leeuwen. Visual grammar is a way of encoding social behavior and interaction within images, studying the meaningful composition of elements such as participants, events, and locations in images. It views images as social symbols and draws upon the three major language functions of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning from systemic functional linguistics. This framework establishes the recontextualization meaning, interaction meaning, and composition meaning of visual symbols [13]. Among these, interaction meaning most effectively reflects the interaction between participants in the video, including the audience. Therefore, this study utilizes the framework of interaction meaning within the visual grammar, analyzing aspects such as contact, social distance, perspective, and modality.

3.2.1. Contact

Contact refers to the visual exchange of gazes between video participants and viewers and can be categorized into "soliciting" and "offering" contact based on whether there is eye contact. The primary participants in the video are the host, the "fake traditional Chinese doctor," and the three patient actors. The "fake traditional Chinese doctor" consistently maintains eye contact with the host and patients while not engaging in eye contact with the audience. The primary purpose here is to provide the audience with specific product information, as shown in Figure 1. When the patients recount their painful experiences, they interact visually with the audience to elicit sympathy and empathy from the viewers, as depicted in Figure 2. The host also employs visual interaction with the audience when presenting product purchase information to solicit purchase intent from the viewers, as illustrated in Figure 3.



Figure 1: Product introduction

Figure 2: Patient narration



Figure 3: Purchase information

3.2.2. Social Distance

Social distance refers to the distance between video participants and viewers. Throughout the video, the speakers present their heads and shoulders during their speeches, using a close-up perspective. This indicates an intimate relationship between the speaker and the audience in front of the television. The speaker hopes that the listeners will trust them and accept their propositions, emphasizing the central position of the speaker. Additionally, as shown in Figure 4, the live audience in the video is captured using long shots, reinforcing their subordinate position within the video. This emphasizes the authority of the speaker, affecting the viewers in front of the television, who consider the speaker as the central figure and themselves as subordinate. This enhances the speaker's credibility and deepens the trust and

recognition of the audience toward the speaker.



Figure 4: Visual distance

3.2.3. Perspective

Perspective refers to the attitudes that viewers hold toward the participants in the video. The video's filming consistently maintains a frontal perspective, indicating an equal relationship between video participants and viewers. On one hand, this approach brings the two parties closer together, and on the other hand, the eye-level perspective allows the audience in front of the television to better identify with the viewers when listening to the patients' narratives.

3.2.4. Modality

Modality reflects the realism and credibility of the world presented in the video. The entire advertisement features high color saturation and a high level of modality, making it more attention-grabbing for the viewers. The main color tones in the video are red, yellow, and blue. When summarizing the product's function and efficacy, the video imagery uses an image of the "Emperor's Decree" as the background which is shown in Figure 5. This image predominantly features red and yellow tones, creating a sense of grandeur and brilliance, reinforcing the concepts of "orthodoxy" and "authority" in the viewer's mind.



Figure 5: Emperor's Decree

3.3. Integration of Modalities

From the analysis results, it is evident that the textual and visual modalities are indispensable and complement each other in constructing meaning. For instance, when the patients narrate their tragic experiences, they maintain direct eye contact with the camera while using a close-up perspective. This greatly enhances the audience's sense of involvement and strengthens the emotional connection between the viewers and the speaker from both textual and visual perspectives. Simultaneously, when summarizing the product's function and efficacy, the textual content constructs an authoritative identity through the use of a person reference strategy, and the video imagery complements it with high-saturation color tones, presenting an overall impression of "authority" to the audience.

4. Conclusion

This paper utilizes the multimodal critical discourse analysis framework to analyze a false advertisement named "Flatulence Plaster from the Miao Ethnic Group." The analysis reveals that from the textual perspective, the false advertisement employs personal reference and narrative strategies to construct the authoritative identity of the "fake traditional Chinese doctor" and establish an emotional connection with the elderly audience, ultimately inducing them to make purchases. Additionally, the emotional deficit among elderly individuals and their trust in information sources from major TV channels contribute to the susceptibility of the elderly population to deception. From the visual perspective, the video advertisement employs strategies such as eye contact, depth of field, eye-level

perspective, and high modality to bridge the gap between the audience and the speaker while enhancing the viewers' empathy and trust, ultimately achieving the goal of inducing the elderly audience to make purchases.

The research results concerning false healthcare product advertising suggest that such advertisements primarily gain the trust of the elderly by constructing authoritative identities and strengthening emotional connections to sell false healthcare products. Therefore, to reduce the risk of the elderly falling victim to deception, society as a whole should pay timely attention to the psychological well-being of the elderly, increase their level of attention to the elderly population, and alleviate the sense of loneliness caused by a lack of emotional support. Only then can we effectively prevent the elderly from falling into the "emotional trap" of healthcare and medical products.

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