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Code and Messages Interpretation on COVID-19 Street Banner: Social Semiotics

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Abstract--COVID-19 Street banner is one of various ways and medias used for communicating and informing about the virus that contain of whether invitation, prohibition, or strategies to reduce the spread of Corona virus outbreak to society. Based on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, this study revealed to the general understanding of the COVID-19 banners and how this media contribute to the overcoming of the pandemic spreading. In order to examine and explain the interpretations and influences of this media associated with the awareness and information on how to reduce the COVID-19 outbreak through the images and verbal signs of the banner, this present work analyzed COVID-19 street banner that circulated on the street and building around Medan to Binjai about COVID-19. The study employed the theories of social semiotics by using Barthes theory with descriptive visual study design approach to reveal the code and message of the banner. The result showed that those banners conveyed the similar message that doing the health protocols are able to reduce the spreading of the virus and they have special effect on society. Government ministry and various organizations worked together to educate and encourage society about COVID-19 through street banners as their communicative strategy.

Keywords---banner, code, COVID-19, message, semiotics.

Introduction

Started the quarter of 2020, people all around the world will remember that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken over our whole lives (Hussein & Aljamili, 2020). This virus is crossing the international boundaries and affecting many people (Octarensa & Aras, 2020). Based on the latest data carried out by covid19.go.id /peta-sebaran-covid19 that there are many as 4.195.958 confirmed, 52.447 (1.2%) active cases, 4.002.706 recovered (95.4%) and 140.805 died (3.4%). Every country decided to close the school, university, airport, even the place of worship, start work from home, cancel events such as concerts, sport tournament and games (Hussein & Aljamili, 2020). Since then, man on earth were forced into quarantine time to prevent the virus outbreak.

Indonesia started the quarantine time since March 2019 when the virus had infected people day by day. Since then both government and non-government parties are worked together to socialize the accurate information of COVID-19 throughout the country by having various approaches in order to meet the publics' needs. One of the approaches that used to spread the current information or education about COVID-19 is the advertisement in form of banner that put in the public or strategic place in the streets or the buildings. This COVID-19 banner become one of the strategy to handle the outbreak of this virus among the society that can reach and remind people about the pandemic outbreak every time they see it (Rinartha et al., 2018). Mostly, this banner explain the danger of the virus, way of preventing the virus outbreak, and the penalty for the breaking of the health protocol. This form of advertisement enable people to put it on the street or in front of the building so people are able to learn and aware of the pandemic situation. Besides this media can help to reduce the fear, uncertainty and any other negative psychological effects felt by the society especially young people (Fisher et al., 2021) as the impact of the overloaded and misinformation about COVID-19 among the society (Yang et al., 2021). It cannot be denied that since this pandemic covered the whole world, it leads various issues such as misinformation, rumours, prevention, and the theory of conspiracy about the beginning of this pandemic among the people brought damaging effect on society (Radwan et al., 2020). In this situation this kind of advertisement become an important tools to deliver the real information and block the rumours.

The COVID-19 banners use both verbal and visual form of signs to deliver the messages to the society as the reader. Those verbal and visual sign carried their own meaning that need to be interpret by the reader in order to get the message. For recent society, to understand the meaning requires an analysis of both the verbal and visual text since these two have potential on affor dancing the meaning (Guijarro, 2011). On the world of language we have semiotics as the study of those signs and its meaning. This study teach human how to interpret the sign, symbols, and things around us and how each of that symbols, signs, and things carried their own meaning (Hussein & Aljamili, 2020; Trisnayanti et al., 2021). Thus the verbal and visual forms on the banner can be studied, analyzed, and interpreted through this semiotics study and perspective that would lead people to their hidden message or meaning related to the information of COVID-19 virus outbreak.

There are some gaps in this research. Firstly, there are so many banners put in different locations as the guide for running the health protocol, but in reality, society often breaks the protocol. Secondly, the relationship between theory and society or culture. Semiotic is the study of signs that explains the signs' meaning (Masreng et al., 2017). In reality, society often ignores the signs that convey the information related to COVID-19. Thirdly is the research gap. It is the differences between the study and the purpose of the research that this research is to find the meaning of the COVID-19 banner by using a multimodal approach. What distinguish this study is that this will discuss the semiotic interpretation conveyed by the COVID-19 banner, as well as the realization of semiotic interpretation in producing the banner's meaning and how these banner give an impact for society in Medan related to the awareness of the virus spreading.

Literature

Originally from the Greek word, *semesion*, semiotics has been known as the study of signs and its existence in social life (Yakin & Totu, 2014; Chandler, 2002). As the study of signs and symbols, semiotics made us realize that this world we live in is full of sign and we need to learn those signs and codes the way they organized in order to have an understanding (Chandler, 2007). This field explained of how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. It is concerned of how signs and symbols can convey and deliver the meaning that helps people gather more information and communicate more efficiently through the signs around them. In relation with that, the readers need to combine between their ability in language and prior experiences in negating and constructing the meaning from what they read or see in written and visual form (Kabuto, 2014).

There are many principles and main point of semiotics analysis based on different experts. Ferdinand de Saussure categorized semiotics as something which is really exist in mind that has two sides of signified that refers to the concept or physical symbols and signifier that refers to the associative meaning of the symbols that related each other (Er, 2013; Ibrahim & Sulaiman, 2020). Another expert, Roland Barthes developed the semiotics as a tools in analyzing the advertisements (Kauppinen-Räsänen & Jauffret, 2018). The he used four level of meaning called signs, denotation, connotation and myth. Signs is the form of text and visual form; denotation have the same level with signifier in Saussure terms is the reality or fact that can be seen by the eyes objectively; connotation refers to interpretation derives from signifier or conotation that requires an insight related to someone experience; while myths is an assumption or interpretation related to human life and world problem (Isnaniah & Agustina, 2020; Nugraha et al., 2008). Barthes approach is more complete since it has a broad sense including language visual (Nugraha et al., 2008).

Since the outbreak of this pandemic, all authorized parties around the nation whether government and non-government have been working to socialize the information and educate people about the COVID-19 in various ways (Trisnayanti et al., 2021). In achieving this aims those parties combined public relations and other strategic communications. The combination of public relation and communication strategic have many purposes such as persuading society on their

government policy, campaigning the health issues, developing public relation, developing support for particular policies, etc. (Botan & Soto, 1998). The issues in interpreting the communication are trapped in symbols and signs that are used as the main basis of the communication (Ibrahim & Sulaiman, 2020).

Advertisement that basically consist of verbal and visual signs is often used to represent something or convey the message to the intended audience (Sarnoto & Hayatina, 2021). Mostly, advertisements is used for an intended audience as a tools of influence, manipulation or persuasion to represent and convey the meaning of something (Er, 2013; Trisnayanti et al., 2021), and lead the audience to act on the advertised problems (Km & Subratha, 2021). This is why the audiences of advertisements require semiotics. This study about the symbols and signs and its use to deliver the implied meaning will help them understand the signs and the communication ways in order to understand the social meaning (Hartmann & Vosseveld, 2013).

Started March, 2019 the victims of COVID-19 has been grown day by day in Indonesia, government along with the ministry, non-government parties, and other companies have to made more efforts to break the chain of virus spreading in form of educative media that can be easily found around society (Sulatra & Eka Pratiwi, 2020). Advertisement in the form of banner has been chosen as one of the media to deliver the information of COVID-19 outbreak to the society. Generally, banner of COVID-19 tells the related information of COVID-19 whether it is the explanation, prohibition, health protocols, warning, etc. The existence of these banners around the street and public buildings are expected to reduce and minimize the virus outbreak (Kalinichenko et al., 2021).

Since the COVID-19 banner consist of visual and verbal forms, the insight of semiotics can be an important tools to analyzed and decoded the COVID banner that will help people to understand and interpret the information of COVID-19 that is contained in the banner through the signs around it (Asyari, 2017). This is important since it is crucial to give an accurate information to the society about the pandemic to reduce the fear and anxiety but at the same time increase the awareness of the society on this condition (Cheng et al., 2021).

Method

In this study, researchers used qualitative design research with visual study design. The development of semiotics has become the groundwork for the deployment of visual study that includes various domain study such as pictures, painting, photographs, printed advertisements, etc. (Nugraha & Haq, 2021). To accomplish the research objective, researchers collected data by taking photos of banners found in various places related to the COVID-19 virus. After the researcher got the banner data, they conducted a data analysis using the theory of semiotics by Rolland Barthes. This was to explore and understand the purpose or meaning carried by the banner with various designs or visuals on it.

Discussion



Figure 1. A banner that put in front of one of the public building about the prevention of COVID-19

There are several verbal signs on that such as “Let us use masker”. It is printed on the largest font to catch people attention. This is the calling for the society not to forget use mask in this situation. Next verbal sign is “Your mask protects me, and my mask protects you”. This means the banner persuade the use of the mask is not only for the user but also for people around safety the people to always use the mask to avoid the break out of corona virus. Besides that, there are some other verbal signs that conveyed by the banner such as “washing hand” and “physical distancing”. This means as this is the public places people need to protect themselves by doing those. Handwashing and physical distancing are simple ways to protect ourself and other people from COVID-19. For the visual sign, it can be seen there is a picture of a girl with a mask printed big enough on that banner. This sign is to emphasize that it is so important to use mask especially in the crowded place to prevent the virus spreading.


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| <p>Signifier:</p>  | <p>Signified:</p> <p>The health protocols with a picture of a girl using mask properly</p> |
| <p>Mode:</p> <p>The appeal of doing the health protocols with using mask as the focus of banner</p> | <p>Messages:</p> <p>Doing the health protocols especially using mask is the most important things to do in the public area to prevent the virus outbreak.</p> |



Figure 2. Contained of only one verbal sign called “Always use mask, when (you) go out”

This banner reminds the society that the first simple things to do to stop the spreading of the virus is by using mask where ever you are especially when you have to go out. The visual sign of this banner is the picture of a couple use mask. This sign is to help people get the message easily without reading the verbal sign. This images also reminds us that everyone (man or women, boy or girl) should use mask. The focus of this message is that people have to use mask every time they go out of house. This message is important since the spreading of this virus is mostly happened when people have their activities on outside of their house.

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| <p>Signifier:</p>  | <p>Signed:</p> <p>A billboard in the street with a couple using mask</p> |
| <p>Mode:</p> <p>The information for people to use mask every time when they go out.</p> | <p>Messages:</p> <p>The banner that contain of an suggestion to remind the people to use mask in doing outside activities.</p> |



Figure 3. About the health protocol for the visitors safetyplaced in front of the entrance of Rahmat Gallery Museum

This banner consist many verbal signs. Those verbal signs are the six steps of health protocol such as “Checking the body temperature”, “washing hands”, “using hands sanitizer”, “using mask”, “physical distancing”, and “social distancing”. This banner give a clear description about what the visitors should do when they come to the gallery. This steps were applying when there were visitors come to this building. It is clearly stated that before go in to the gallery, visitors need to do those steps. Beside the verbal sign, this banner also provided the visual sign which is the picture of the six health protocols. This sign are making to emphasize the verbal sign of the banner. This six steps of health protocols are important to be done in this gallery since as an indoor place, this gallery usually has so many visitors and can be potentially spread virus among the visitors once they ignore these protocols. As we know that government asked to close the public places and started to lockdown the country in order to prevent the crowded. This gallery was closed due to the regulation but still they use the bannet to encourage people to keep doing those health protocols as the form of support in overcoming the pandemic especially in Medan.


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| <p>Signifier:</p>  | <p>Signified:</p> <p>A banner that contain of six steps that must be done before enter the building</p> |
| <p>Mode:</p> <p>The steps should be followed by the visitors of the gallery before doing the activities inside the building.</p> | <p>Messages:</p> <p>This banner provide an important information for the visitors of the gallery and the people around the building related to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> |



Figure 4. The banner placed in the front of the hotel

In this banner, there are three verbal and visual signs related to the standard of COVID-19 spreading prevention around this hotel. They are (1) using mask, (2) physical distancing, and (3) washing hands regularly complete with the images of each verbal sign. This hotel put these 3 prevention standards as their message in the first place because they are very basic action in prevent the spreading of the virus in hotel. It is expected that there will be no quests or employee of the hotel infected with the corona virus by applying this three things. Therefore it can help the government to stop and prevent the virus spreading among Medan society.


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| <p>Signifier:</p>  | <p>Signified:</p> <p>A banner that contain of COVID-19 prevention standard</p> |
| <p>Mode:</p> <p>The information of COVID-19 prevention standard such as using mask, physical distancing, and washing hands.</p> | <p>Messages:</p> <p>This banner inform the visitors of the hotel to do these to prevent the virus spreading.</p> |



Figure 5. Located in front of the police office

This banner brings two verbal signs. They are “People must wear mask” and “Never put off your mask when you meet people”. The message conveyed by this billboard is that people have to use mask and never remove the mask when they meet others. As the very basic way of prevention the COVID-19 virus, this sign is always appear in almost all the banner or advertisement related to COVID-19. This indicate that the using of mask is such a crucial things to do to overcome this pandemic situation. Wearing mask means that you protect not only yourself but also people around you. In terms of visual sign, the banner put the number one person in Indonesia, Joko Widodo, the president of Indonesia as the sign to convey the meaning of the banner. Related to the situation of pandemic in

Indonesia is getting worst recently, this message is a firm call to avoid the spreading of the virus that the President of Indonesian Republic wearing mask is put on this billboard. This sign also reminds people that we need to pay attention on the use of mask properly. We need to make sure that the mask covers our nose and mouth and tie it securely so it will fully function on us to protect us from the virus. Another visual sign on this banner is it also included some images important institutions and ministries in Indonesia such as KPCPEN, ministry of health, ministry of communication and information, and Indonesia police institution. By placing the image of number one person in Indonesia and supported by some prominent institutions and ministries that strongly related to the prevention of COVID-19 virus outbreak, it is confirmed that the messages of this billboard is firmly action to be done. Then the background of the banner is made like the color of our flag (red and white). This visual sign will remain us that the whole land of Indonesia is still facing the same condition to stop the spreading of the virus. So it is intended that society will gather as one to face and fight this situation. This is the calling for the all Indonesian to do meaning carried by this banner.

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| <p>Signifier:</p>  | <p>Signed:</p> <p>A banner contain of using mask warning with a picture of the president of Indonesia</p> |
| <p>Mode:</p> <p>The using mask warning from the government/ministry collaborated with some institutions</p> | <p>Messages:</p> <p>This banner is a direct reminder from the government represented by the president to society for always using mask everywhere.</p> |



Figure 6. The banner located in front of the private bank located in front of the main street


There are some verbal signs on this banner. The first one is “The future is in your hand”. This sign brought the meaning of this pandemic will cause the severe damage on human population if we choose to ignore those prevention steps. This means that we ourselves that can protect the future of our nation. When we seriously doing the complete health protocols it means we save the nation. Then another verbal sign here is “washing hands; using soap regularly”. This means to persuade people that one of the steps that we can take to save our nation is by doing this activity regularly. The washing hands activity is another important things in preventing the spreading of the COVID-19 virus. As the social creation we can stop our interaction with other people. This direct interaction will be the easiest way to spread the virus. But when we wash our hands regularly with an appropriate procedures such as using soap and washing for at least 20 minutes, it might help us to cut the chain of virus outbreak. In terms of visual sign, it has the image of washing hands printed bigger on the right side. It helps the people to get deeper meaning of the banner. The message convey in this banner is focus on washing hands with the soap regularly as the main prevention of the spreading of the corona virus since we touch things and people firstly with our hands. The touching of our hands has become a media to spread the virus quickly. The simple act of this health protocol has considered as the most important things to do that it can save our future

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| <p>Signifier:</p>  | <p>Signed:</p> <p>A picture of washing hands for in Bank area</p> |
| <p>Code:</p> <p>The appeal of washing hands with soap regularly in pandemic situation</p> | <p>Messages:</p> <p>This banner is a reminder for people to wash hands regularly as one of the way to keep and protect the future.</p> |



Figure 7. The banner placed in the public building located in front of major crossroad in Medan

This place is so strategic passed by people every day. The way of conveying messages of this banner is quite different from the previous data. The previous data focus on the prevention of COVID-19 outbreak through the pictures, symbols, and instructions of the health protocols, but this banner doesn't consist of any of the health protocols to convey its messages. The verbal sign of his banner stated "if you are able to read this message, it means corona virus is still lurking on you. Go home soon!!!". This sign that corona virus is still around us that why the authorized party put this banner as the reminder for the people. People still need to avoid the unnecessary contact with other and keep the distance each other. It is suggest that if we have finished doing all of our activities, it will be better if we home directly to minimize the interaction with other that can help to minimize the spreading of the virus. The visual sign of this banner is showed through the picture of the virus. They put eyes on the picture to show their intention by saying that the virus are still had an eyes on us if we ignore those warning. The messages conveyed by this banner is still to prevent the corona virus spreading. Those words on the banner have an implicit meaning of the health protocol itself. The statement of "Go home soon" is an implicit order to do the physical and social distancing that include in the health protocol on the prevention of corona virus.

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| <p>Signifier:</p>  | <p>Signified:</p> <p>A picture of COVID-19 virus/germs in a public building</p> |
| <p>Code:</p> <p>The explanation of COVID-19 through the picture of the virus</p> | <p>Messages:</p> <p>This banner is a reminder for people that COVID-19 virus is still around us, therefore go home as soon as they finish the activities to minimize the spreading of the virus.</p> |

Conclusion

The pandemic Of COVID-19 virus has attack the whole world and become the trending topic for the society in this world. This situation has forced the government to have an intentional communication with the society to share this condition. The communication that had been done cannot be separated with the use of symbol and sign as the tools to convey the meaning of the intention. In reality those words, symbols and signs that we use in our communication or interaction whether it is direct or indirect ways have no certain and definite

meaning. Human is the determinant of the meaning for those by giving it to them. Since advertisement in the form of banners that used to inform and increase the awareness of society about COVID-19 virus are consist of verbal and visual sign in deliver the meaning, then it is needed to understand those signs in order to get the meaning that included in the banner. In this study, semiotics is used to reveal the meaning of each banner that have chosen. Mostly the COVID-19 banner told about the information on how to stop the virus outbreak by applying the complete procedures health protocols. Thus those COVID-19 banners brings and convey the same meaning that make us realize the Corona virus is real and it still around us. Those banner try to encourage society that we can stop the spreading of the corona virus by doing the health protocol wherever we are. The use of semiotics on this study give people an insight of how the meaning of COVID-19 banners successfully delivered to an intended people. We can see this through the situation of pandemic in Medan were gradually getting better showed by the infected patient that decrease day by day.

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