

A Social Semiotic Study of Color in Covid-19's American Pictorial Story

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ABSTRACT

The study is to investigate the social semiotics of colors employed by Natalie Tjota in her pictorial story "Berry Bunny Learns about Covid-19" which is taken from the internet website of the New York City School Library System. That is achieved by following Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). It aims at discovering the effect of color on human behavior. Besides, it tests the impact of colors on mood and emotions. In accordance with these aims, it is hypothesizes that colors can play an important role in conveying information, creating certain moods, and even influencing the decisions people make. The findings of the analysis validate the hypotheses of the study.

Keywords

Social semiotics, Semiotics, Colors, Covid-19, Pictorial story

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Introduction

Etymologically speaking, the term "semiotics" stems from the Greek root "seme", as in semeiotikos, which means an interpreter of signs. Semiotics is a science that focuses on the interpretation of signs and how these signs work (Coble and Jansz, 1999:4).

Semiotics is the field that studies the life of signs within society. It would be a part of social psychology and hence of general psychology. It is termed semiology (from Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology, in turn, would elucidate what constitutes signs and what laws govern them. Since science does not exist yet, no one can say what it would be, but it has a right to exist, a place staked out in advance (Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran, 2016:17). Besides, Saussure clarified that the study of signs can be divided into two branches: the synchronic and the diachronic. The former refers to the study of signs at present and the latter to the analysis of how signs change in form and meaning over time (Beasley and Danesi, 2002:26).

Semiotics is concerned with the study of sign systems. There are no big differences between semiology and semiotics. The former emerged from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the latter is associated with the work of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who gave it the name "semiotics" (Lyons, 1978:96). Eco defines semiotics as "everything that can be taken as a sign" (1976:7).

It is devoted to the study not only of what individuals refer to as "signs" in everyday communication, instead, it involves anything which "stands for" something else. However, contemporary semioticians do not study signs in isolation. For them, sign is a part of semiotic "sign – systems" (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are formed and how reality is represented. Besides, signs can take different forms such as images, sounds, words, gestures, and objects (Chandler, 2007:2).

Social Semiotics

Social semiotics is a term used to represent an analytic tradition that derives from the works of the linguist Michael Halliday's Language as Social Semiotic (1976) and cultural theorists Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress' Social Semiotics (1988). It is used to refer to several approaches which associate semiotic range with social dimensions. In turn, such approaches can be used to analyse the full range of signifying systems and practices that establish all forms of culture (Bal, 1991:73).

Social semiotics is a synthesis of several modern approaches which aim to study the social meaning and social action. The most common one is semiotics. Semiotics aims to study our social resources that can be used to communicate meanings. It was established as part of the effort to find a scientific basis for linguistics. It is used to study all systems of signs and symbols

(including gestures, pictures, even hairstyles) and how such systems can be used to communicate meanings. Linguistics covers one special case of language and so is part of semiotics. The name "social semiotics" is used to recognize the new synthetic theory from more traditional approaches to semiotics which is termed formal semiotics. In turn, formal semiotics is primarily interested in the systematic study of the systems of signs themselves. Social semiotics includes formal semiotics and goes on to ask how individuals use signs to create the life of a community. Social semiotics is not new in trying to unite the study of human behavior, specially meaning-making behavior (speaking, writing, reasoning, drawing, gesturing, etc.), with the study of society. There is a long tradition of doing this in cultural anthropology and ethnography. Although many anthropologists and ethnographers have taken the role of language too much for granted, they have still made great contributions to the study of symbols and symbolic actions (Lemke, 1990:183).

Social semiotics is the study of the social dimensions of meaning, and the power of human processes of signification and interpretation (known as semiosis) in shaping individuals and societies. Social semiotics focuses on social meaning-making practices of all types, whether visual, verbal, or aural (Thibault, 1991:54). These different systems for meaning-making or possible "channels" (e.g. speech, writing, images) are known as semiotic modes (or semiotic registers). Semiotic modes can include visual, verbal, written, gestural, and musical resources for communication. They also include various "multimodal" ensembles of any of these modes (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001:80).

Color

Color is a form of non-verbal communication. It is mainly related to an effect. It appears to be the first thing the viewers notice. It is used to represent people, places, and things. It is also used to denote classes of people as well as more general ideas (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006:229). Many people have quite a strong sense of the meanings of colors. They could easily articulate what such meanings are. According to Scollon and Scollon (2003: 91),

visual images can convey cultural values and stereotypes. For instance, cultures have different high modality colors and colors may have political, social, or even commercial indexical values.

The colors that are utilized in this pictorial story have specific denotations. White is the color of purity, innocence, wholeness and completion. Red is the most emotional intense color. It is associated with excitement, passion, and action. It is one of the most visible colors in the color spectrum. Its ability to instantly grab people's attention is the reason why it is often used to warn people of impending danger (Birren, 1989: 128). Blue is rated as the best color for promoting calm. It can also express feelings of sadness (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002: 2-32).

Yellow is the color of success, achievement and triumph. It is associated with abundance and prosperity, luxury, prestige and sophisticated value and elegance. It is the color of optimism, a completing color that conveys youthful and fresh energy. It stimulates the left side of the brain, helping with clear thinking and quick decision making. Green is the color of balance and growth. It is an emotionally positive color, giving viewers the ability to love and nurture themselves and others unconditionally. Black denotes strength and authority. It is considered to be a very formal, elegant, and prestigious colour (Web Source 1).

Pink is regarded as the colour of femininity since it is a color of the strongly emotive, unconditional love and nurturing. Grey is classified as a color of brightness which is a scale running from a maximum number of different degrees of brightness (ibid).

Methodology

In the light of the theoretical review presented in the previous sections, the analysis of colors is going to be carried out through a qualitative analysis following Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* concerning the colors utilized in the following pictorial story. The qualitative research method focuses on descriptive and explanatory results obtained from the collected data.

Data Analysis

Berry Bunny Learns about Covid-19 by Natalie Tjota

Picture 1



Most of the viewers have quite a strong sense of the meanings of colors. Brown is the predominant color in this image. The foreground of the room and the walls of the hospital are colored by brown. It would be considered as pure color. It creates feelings of loneliness and isolation. It is used to convey the feelings of sadness due to the spread of a new virus. Other colors are blue, red and green. The background of the image is colored by blue. Blue color meaning ties closely to the sea and the sky. It signifies the feelings of calm, trust and harmony. It reflects the reliability of the newscast. Red is the color of the sofa at the middle of the living room. It is the most emotional intense color. It is associated with excitement, passion and action. It is one of the most visible colors in the color spectrum. Its ability to instantly grab people's attention is the reason why it is often used to warn people of impending danger. The writer uses it as an accent color to signify that the virus is dangerous. So, it is necessary to stay home. Green is also employed in this image. It represents the color of the circular carpet under the sofa and the journalist's dress. It is a naturalistic color. It represent nature. It denotes purity, health, peace, rest and security. It is utilized to clarify that staying home puts people in the safe side and reduce the spread of coronavirus disease.

Picture 2



Blue, brown, black, white and red are the primary colors in this image. Blue represents the color of the background. It signifies sadness and depression. It is used to reflect the feelings of sadness due to the spread of an unknown virus. It is associated with intellect, ideas and searching minds. Berry Bunny wants to learn more about the new virus. He used the computer to search more information about it. The foreground of the picture is brown for de saturating. It is considered as a pure color. It can seem dull, boring, perhaps even depressing and uninspiring. Black and white refer to the absence of color. They represent the colors of the computer. They also refer to brightness. Black, that surrounds the computer's screen, denotes strength and authority of coronavirus disease. Red is the color of coronavirus disease. It is the warmest and most dynamic of the colors. It triggers opposing emotions. It is often associated with energy, danger, strength and power. So, it attracts attention more than any other.

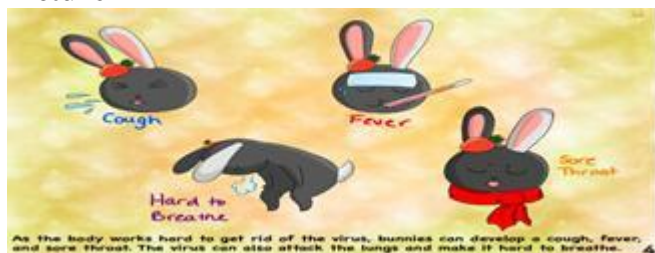
Picture 3



The background color is a mixture of blue, green and yellow. Blue and green are cool colors. They are naturalistic colors. They represent nature. They are more calm and relaxed than warm colors. They are associated with hope, secure, purity and health. Yellow is also utilized in this picture. It surrounds the Berry Bunny. It signifies caution, danger and physical illness. The writer introduces these three mixed colors to clarify that people are exposed to catch the virus if they break one of the protective measures. Social distancing, wearing face masks, hand washing, covering one's mouth when sneezing or coughing and disinfecting surfaces are the most important ways to prevent the spread of the virus. Other colors are pink, red and grey. Red and pink represent the colors of the respiratory tract and

coronavirus as it enters the Berry Bunny's lungs. They represent violent and aggressive. The virus can infect the upper or lower part of your respiratory tract. It travels down the airways. So, it is necessary to be aware of it. Grey is the color of Berry Bunny. It is associated with boring, sadness, depression, lifeless, loneliness and isolation.

Picture 4



Most of the viewers have quite a strong sense of the meanings of colour. The background color is a mixture of orange and green. Orange denotes caution, danger and physical illness. Green is a cool color that symbolizes nature and the natural world. It surrounds the Berry Bunnies. It represents purity, health and freshness. The producer introduces these two mixed colors to signify that people are at risk of catching the virus if they break one of the protective measures. Hence, people should adhere to the recommendations of the Ministry of Health to avoid any unnecessary consequences. Other colors are red and grey. Red is the color of strawberries and Berry Bunny's wrap who suffering from sore throat. It is the warmest and most dynamic of the colors. It triggers opposing emotions. It is often associated with energy, danger, strength and power. It attracts attention more than any other. Grey is the color of Berry Bunnies. It is associated with boring, sadness, depression, lifeless, loneliness and isolation.

Picture 5



Color is a powerful communication tool and can be used to signal action, influence mood and even influence physiological reactions. Blue and green are naturalistic colors. They represent the color of the background. These colors are often described as calm, but can also call to mind feelings of sadness or indifference. The producer uses these two mixed colors to reflect the feelings of sadness due to the spread of coronavirus disease. Brown is the color of the foreground. It can create feelings of loneliness, sadness and isolation. Red is also employed in this picture. It is the color of strawberry and the pot. It is an accent color to stimulate people to be aware of the virus. Hence, it is necessary to stay home to avoid any unnecessary consequences. Black, that surrounds the Berry Bunny, denotes sadness and anger.

Picture 6



Blue, green, yellow, red, brown and grey are the primary colors in this image. Blue is the color of the sky. It is a naturalistic color. It represents nature. It is associated with hope and secure. Green under the feet of Berry Bunnies suggests the grass and indicates the setting. It denotes recreational areas, contemplation, justice as well as hope. Yellow is the color of the house on the left side of the picture. It stands for caution, illness and danger. Red is used to represent the color of the virus and the house on the right side of the picture. It is the warmest and most dynamic of the colors. It triggers opposing emotions. It is often associated with energy, danger, strength and power. It attracts attention more than any other. The producer uses it as an accent color to stimulate people to stay home and practice social distancing. The virus spreads mainly when an infected person is in close contact with another person. It leaves an infected person as they breathe, cough, sneeze, or speak and enters another person via their mouth, nose, or eyes. So, it is necessary to stay home and

practice social distancing to help stop the virus from spreading and making other Bunnies sick. Brown and grey are the colors of Berry Bunnies. They can create feelings of loneliness, sadness and isolation.

Picture 7



Color is more than a visual experience. It is also a psychological one that can radically affect mood and emotion. It is a classic form of communication. The background color is a mixture of blue, green and yellow. Blue and green are cool colors. They are naturalistic colors. They represent nature. They are more calm and relaxed than warm colors. They denote purity, secure, hope and health. Yellow is also utilized in this picture. It represents the 6 feet distance that is found between the represented participants. It signifies caution, danger and physical illness. The virus spreads mainly among people who are in close contact with others. The producer uses it as an accent color to stimulate people to stay home and practice social distancing. Hence, it is important to stay at least 6 feet away from others to avoid catching the virus. Other colors are grey and brown. They are the colors of Berry Bunnies. They can create feelings of loneliness, sadness and isolation.

Picture 8



There are six colors utilized in this image. Blue is the predominant color in this image. It is the color of the background, the water and the sky in the outside world. It is a naturalistic color. It represents nature. It is more calm and relaxed

than warm colors. It denotes purity, secure, hope and health. Green is the color of food, Kleenex's box and the grass. It stands for health and purity. Yellow is also employed in this image. It is the color of the foreground and the wastepaper basket. It stands for caution. It can indicate illness and danger. The producer tries to show that the virus can easily spread from one person to the next via hands. Henceforth, it is necessary to wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Brown and grey are also utilized in this image. They represent the colors of Berry Bunnies. They both create feelings of loneliness, sadness and isolation.

Picture 9



Brown, green and grey are the primary colors in this picture. It is divided into two equally sized and vertically located frames attached to each other. The central color of the left side is brown. It represents the color of the background and the Berry Bunny. It can create feelings of loneliness, sadness and isolation. It is a color connected to life, growth and the color of the earth. The producer tries to clarify that there are lots of ways to communicate with others during the spread of coronavirus disease. On the right side, green is the color of the background. It is a naturalistic color. It represents nature. It denotes purity, secure, hope and health. The Bunny on the right side is colored by grey. It also creates the feelings of loneliness and sadness. Consequently, grey and brown are employed to reflect the features of sadness and isolation due to the spread of this deadly virus.

Picture 10



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The background color is a mixture of yellow and green. Yellow is associated with the sun. It stands for caution. It is the brightest color of the visible spectrum. It is the most noticeable of all colors by the human eye. It can indicate illness and danger. The producer tries to convey a message that doctors, nurses and therapists are at higher risk of contracting the virus since they work closely with patients. So, they are at an increased risk of falling ill. Green, that surrounds Berry Bunnies, is a naturalistic color. It represents nature. It is the color of balance and harmony. It can evoke powerful emotions. It reflects the spirit of cooperation between the medical staff to find a treatment to eliminate the virus. Other colors are white, pink and blue. White is the color of the doctor's dress. It represents purity, innocence and cleanliness. Pink represents the color of the nurse's dress. It is a sign of hope. It is a positive color inspiring warm and comforting feelings, a sense that everything will be okay. Blue is the color of sky, ocean, sleep and twilight. It is the color of the therapist's dress. It denotes stability, harmony, peace and calm.

Discussion of Results

Color is more than a visual experience. It is a classic form of communication. There are commonly noted psychological effects of color as it relates to three main categories: warm, cool, and neutral. Red, yellow, orange, blue, green, pink, brown, grey, and white are the colors employed in this pictorial story. Colors in the red area of the spectrum are known as warm colors. They are red, yellow, and orange. These warm colors can spark a variety of emotions ranging from feelings of warmth and comfort to anger and hostility. They are utilized to warn the viewers of impending danger. They are accent colors to stimulate people to be aware of the coronavirus pandemic. This virus mainly spreads when an infected person is in close contact with another person. It leaves an infected person as they breathe, cough, sneeze, or speak and enters another person via their mouth, nose, or eyes. It may also spread via contaminated surfaces. Therefore, it is always a good practice to wear a face mask, wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, avoid touching eyes,

nose, or mouth with unwashed hands, and stay at home. Colors on the blue side of the spectrum are known as cool colors. They are blue, green, and pink. These colors are usually calming and soothing, but can also express sadness or indifference. They create feelings of loneliness and isolation. They are employed to convey the feelings of sadness due to the spread of this virus. They also stand for hope. They are positive colors inspiring warm and comforting feelings, a sense that everything will be okay.

Finally, neutral colors are brown, grey, and white. Both brown and grey can appear to be boring, unattractive, dull, simple, and uninteresting. As opposed to black, white usually has a positive connotation. It can represent a successful beginning, faith, and purity. It is associated with hospitals, doctors, and sterility. It shows goodness, cleanliness, and humility.

Conclusions

According to the discussion and the obtained results, the following conclusions are reached:

1. Color is a powerful and important communication tool. Using color effectively in all kinds of imagery is a great tool to enhance non-verbal or written communication. It adds meaning to communication as it vitalizes the visual message, delivering an instant impression that is universally understood, or anywhere you want to draw people's attention. It also can be used to denote specific people, places, things, classes of people, and more general ideas.
2. The way different colors can affect emotions depends largely on a color's brightness, shade, tone and whether it is a cool or warm color. Red, yellow, and orange are next to each other on the spectrum and are all warm colors. They often evoke feelings of happiness, optimism, and energy. However, they can also have an attention grabbing effect and signal danger or make people take action. Red can also increase a person's appetite. Cool colors include green, blue, pink, and purple. They are usually calming and soothing but can also express sadness.
3. Color can be used to influence physiological reactions. It influences perceptions that are not

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obvious. They have qualities that can cause certain emotions in people. For example, warm colors are generally used as stimulants. They are employed by Natalie Tjota in her pictorial story to stimulate people to be aware of the coronavirus pandemic. It is a new kind of virus that causes problems with breathing. It is not the same as the one that causes the common cold. It travels from one person to the next very easily. People can get infected through the coughs or sneezes of an infected person. They can also get infected by touching an object or surface that has the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or eyes. Hence, there are many protective measures people must follow to stay healthy. On the other hand, cool colors often spark feelings of calmness as well as sadness. So, they are utilized to reflect the feelings of sadness due to the spread of this new virus.

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