

Larissa D'Angelo / Stefania Consonni (eds.)

New Explorations in Digital Metadiscourse

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Larissa D'Angelo / Stefania Consonni
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New Explorations in Digital Metadiscourse

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MICHELA GIORDANO / MARIA ANTONIETTA MARONGIU

Metadiscourse, rhetoric and the pandemic: A verbal-visual analysis of public information posters¹

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic has had a radical effect on public-sphere communication in both traditional mainstream and new social media. The information on healthcare and risk prevention that has aimed to help people cope with ‘staying safe’ and contain the disease, has appeared in a number of different guises and forms. By employing various media channels, communication campaigns have used advertisements and posters designed to influence people’s behaviour and persuade communities to pay more attention to the rapid spread of the virus.

Here, we have used a multimodal perspective to analyse an *ad-hoc* corpus of 30 public information posters selected from English-speaking institutions and health care associations. The posters under scrutiny were published on the Internet during the first waves of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and the first months of 2021.²

¹ Though this chapter has been jointly planned, Michela Giordano is responsible for sections 3 and 4.2 and Maria Antonietta Marongiu is responsible for sections 2 and 4.1. Introduction and Conclusions are a shared effort.

² All attempts have been made to obtain permission to reproduce the posters in this research work. Some of them are covered by the license of Fair Use Law, which allows the use of copyrighted materials in certain contexts, such as educational or non-profit applications. Permission to reproduce some of the images was kindly granted by the relevant institutions, and in any case all sources are duly cited in this work. Unfortunately, some of the posters are no longer available on the web due to the ever-evolving developments of the

The aim was to look at how verbal communication and visual representation interact to frame a persuasive and influential informative act. The first step of this research involved identifying a number of Covid-19 topical themes commonly found in the media, ranging from social distancing and lockdown to the physical and psychological effects of quarantine, such as the sedentary lifestyle that has led to consequent weight gain. Other themes include the use of personal protective equipment, such as gloves and masks, the battles of the front-line workers and the health-care system along with aspects linked to community, togetherness and collective coping. All these themes have been used and manipulated in order to create new digital content by both the traditional and official producers and distributors of information and by the health care and scientific communities.

At one level, this study explores the multimodal character of inspirational ads, educational posters and fact sheets, by identifying their verbal-visual interplay and how the two parts might be interacting with one another. From this perspective, intertextuality is also taken into account at different levels within these genres, all of which are part of our corpus. On another level, metadiscursive features are examined through the lens of rhetoric in order to identify the linguistic devices that guide and orient the audience in the interpretation of the message. Certain linguistic aspects are used for effective communication rather than merely for ornamentation and embellishment of the texts. The multimodal discourse that merges visual and verbal elements contributes to the logical, credible and affective appeals which make posters and advertisements both persuasive and influential, as well as instructive and educational acts of communication.

This work is organised as follows: after this introductory section, part two presents the theoretical foundations of the study by discussing the concept of metadiscourse and how rhetorical appeals can be accomplished through the use of metadiscursive features. After introducing our corpus and the research methodology, we will provide a discussion of metadiscourse and of the rhetorical traits identified in

pandemic and to the shifting interest towards the vaccine issue on the part of institutions and health-care centres.

the posters under scrutiny. The last section concludes by summarizing our key findings.

2. Theoretical framework

In the field of discourse analysis, a number of definitions of the concept of metadiscourse have been formulated by scholars at different times. The approach considered in this study, often termed *interactive*, views metadiscourse as a form of interaction between the writer and the reader. Vande Kopple (1985, 2002) referred to metadiscourse as being the non-propositional subject matter level of discourse that writers use to help the reader to successfully relate to the topical material or propositional content provided. The classification made by Vande Kopple (1985: 87) between textual and interpersonal metadiscourse strategies was integrated into Hyland's interpersonal model of metadiscourse (2005a: 49; cfr. also Hyland 1998b, 2004, 2017). Writing is viewed as a social engagement where writers project themselves into their discourse and in so doing they reveal their attitudes and commitments. Crismore and Abdollehzadeh highlight that "[m]etadiscourse elements are rhetorical tools that make a text reader-friendly and as such enable the writer to reach the audience" (2010: 196). Metadiscourse strategies and conventions are language and culture bound, yet their functions can be classified within the boundaries of classical and modern rhetoric.

The research on metadiscourse has focused especially on English academic text production (Hyland 1998a, 2000; Hyland/Tse 2004; Swales 1990), although some research has also been devoted to the use of metadiscourse in business products, such as company annual reports (Hyland 1998b), corporate press releases (Liu/Zhang 2021), business letters (Xiaoqin 2017) and job postings (Fu 2012), to name but a few.

Research on the language of advertising has long identified and classified a number of discourse strategies that copywriters typically rely on, such as regular patterns of textual choices; foregrounding

strategies like alliteration, repetition of letters and sounds, assonance, language mixing and unpredictable spelling; rhetorical questions or commands, implicit comparison, ellipsis, substitution and shorter clauses; certain semantic relations such as homonymy, polysemy and ambiguity and other semantic associations; choice of specific language dialects or register; imitation of informal conversation; figurative language, especially metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy (Fuertes-Olivera / Velasco-Sacristán / Arribas-Baño / Samaniego Fernández 2001: 1295). According to Fuertes-Olivera et al., “these different discourse strategies seem to balance the referential, conative, and poetic functions of language” (2001: 1295).

In their investigation of metadiscourse markers in English and Persian medical texts, Gholami / Tajalli / Shokrpour (2014: 11) argue that “[m]etadiscourse contributes to the art of persuasion or rhetoric by the following: it promotes logical appeals when it explicitly links ideas and arguments; it implies credibility of the writer’s authority and competence; and it signals respect by acknowledging the reader’s viewpoint”.

In order to persuade readers, writers often use metadiscourse by resorting to rational, credible, and emotional appeals. Given that metadiscourse helps writers attract and engage readers, its use serves to achieve a persuasive goal. Since ancient times, the main categories of persuasion have been identified as *pathos* (affective appeals to the readers), *logos* (rational appeals linking the arguments), and *ethos* (related to the writer’s authority and competence) (Liu/Zhang 2021: 2).

In the field of textual and visual metadiscourse analysis, D’Angelo (2018) considers academic posters and applies two frameworks of analysis, i.e. Hyland’s theoretical approach to metadiscourse for the written text and Kress/Van Leeuwen’s (1996) for the description of the visual elements. Her analysis reveals that visual interactive resources play a fundamental role in poster design because they help readers understand the content and manage the flow of information, making an academic poster comprehensible to the audience. A similar dual approach is taken in this paper.

Although the studies mentioned here have added to our understanding and knowledge of metadiscourse, a systematic analysis of metadiscourse features utilized to enhance persuasion and influence

public opinion in Covid-19 information posters has not been conducted yet. Therefore, this study discusses the old concepts of rhetoric and how rhetorical appeals can be achieved by resorting to metadiscourse and visual interactive resources.

3. Corpus and methodology

This study considers a corpus of 30 public information posters in English, issued both by institutions and health care associations during the Covid 19 pandemic, to see how verbal communication and visual representation intermingle and interact to create a persuasive and convincing informative act. For this work, 15 inspirational ads, educational posters and fact sheets were selected from the original corpus and analysed qualitatively. A quantitative analysis of the verbal text through the most widely known and used concordance software was not feasible. Therefore, the metadiscourse markers and the rhetorical features found were checked and investigated in their verbal and visual context.

To start with, several themes were identified in digital products regarding the pandemic and many of these were also found in the posters considered. The general topical themes during the pandemic have been:

1. social distancing;
2. lockdown and quarantine;
3. difficulties in adjusting to closure;
4. sedentary lifestyle and overeating;
5. media and social network addiction;
6. certain product shortage and irrational stockpiling;
7. face masks, vaccines, and herd immunity;
8. reactions to restrictions;
9. front line workers and the health care system;
10. community, togetherness and collective coping.

At one level, this study has explored the multimodal character of products, by identifying their verbal-visual interplay and how the two parts might be interacting with one another (Kress/Van Leeuwen 1996, 1998, 2002). Type, size and colour seem to be fundamental features to consider, since they enhance legibility, help clarify parts of the discourse and the organization of the text, as highlighted by D'Angelo (2018), who considers the visual modality in academic posters as a visual interactive resource. The arrangement of verbal and visual information is also important since ideas and images are connected through repetition of texts and colours or shapes. However, the various semiotic codes can also act independently (Kress/Van Leeuwen 1996). The data can also be organised by means of graphic elements such as flowcharts, tables, and figures along with other images. However, it should be remembered that there are certain physical restrictions in the layout of a poster. In point of fact, they limit the amount of text displayed, assigning instead more value to the visual aid provided and to the interpretation thereof. In this sense, visuals acquire a powerful and highly effective interactive, metaphorical and metadiscursive value and significance. Both semiotic codes, visual and verbal, contribute to the meaning-making purposes (D'Angelo 2018) even in promotional or inspirational ads and posters such as the ones devoted to Covid-19.

Texts which are multimodally articulated with verbal and visual content are not only written but also “designed” (Kress/Van Leeuwen (1998: 187). Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that

[t]he semiotic modes in such texts can interrelate in different ways. Writing may remain dominant, with the visual fulfilling a ‘prosodic’ role of highlighting important points and emphasizing structural connections. But it may also diminish in importance, with the message articulated primarily in the visual mode, and the words serving as commentary and elaboration. Visually and verbally expressed meaning may be each other’s double and express the same meanings, or they may complement and extend each other, or even clash and contradict” (1998: 187).

Therefore, the interplay of the verbal and the visual should be adequately described and visually expressed meanings should be adequately analysed.

On the other level, metadiscursive features have been examined through the lens of rhetoric in order to identify the linguistic aspects that guide and direct the audience, signalling the presence of the author and calling attention to the message itself (Crismore 1989: 7). Certain linguistic aspects are used for effective communication rather than just for ornamentation (Crismore 1989; Conley 1983). “Metadiscourse pursues persuasive objectives” since it helps writers and speakers “to engage their audience, signal relationships, apprise readers of varying certainty and guide their understanding of a text” (Hyland 2005a: 63). The relationship between metadiscourse and rhetoric is scrutinized following two different lines of thought, both based on Classical Rhetoric. The first is the line developed by Conley (1983, in Crismore 1989), which examines figures of presence, figures of focus and figures of communion. Figures of presence, such as repetition, help make the discourse more vivid and memorable. Figures of focus are both verbal and visual metaphors, and figures of communion include allusions, intertextual references and questions which create a connection with the audience.

The second line of thought to consider is the relationship established by Hyland (2005a) between metadiscourse and the appeals of classical rhetoric, i.e. *Ethos*, *Pathos* and *Logos*. The ethical appeal is mostly used to convince an audience of the author’s authority, credibility and character, to show fairness and expertise on the subject matter. The emotional appeal is utilized to persuade an audience by invoking empathy, provoking curiosity, evoking sympathy, inspiring anger, and prompting action and reaction, through examples, stories of emotional events and their implied meanings. Finally, logical appeal is employed to convince an audience by means of logic or reason, by citing facts and statistics, historical and literal analogies, and certain authorities on a subject.

4. Discussion

4.1. Conley's rhetorician's perspective

The media plays a vital role in influencing citizens' attitudes and behaviours. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, linguistics has studied coronavirus-related discourse production from a variety of perspectives, mainly to investigate the relationship between the progress of the epidemic and its manifestation in discourse. This work presents a discussion on how visual and verbal messages and metaphors used in institutional and non-institutional posters about the Covid-19 pandemic interactively impact on the intended audience. Studies on metadiscourse are usually based on the assumption that both writer(s) and intended readers are members of the same community. Accordingly, the discourse produced can take on an interactional dimension, as the writer constructs it based on the interlocutors' knowledge and assumptions. A number of features also identified as typically used in advertising were found to occur in our corpus. In other words, these informative posters are created by using the structural features recurring in the promotional genre.

Following Conley (1983, cited by Crismore 1989: 83) metadiscourse in the posters under scrutiny will be examined from a rhetorician's perspective, focusing on figures of presence, figures of focus and figures of communion as explained in the methodology section. It will be argued that these figures of thought are rhetorical strategies mainly used to contribute to effective communication. Figures of presence include metadiscursive devices which help reinforce the content matter by intensifying the discourse, thereby making it more vibrant, powerful and striking. Figures of focus are both verbal and visual metaphors, or definitions (sometimes introduced by parenthetical phrases), which help guide the audience's interpretation. Figures of communion include allusions, intertextual references and questions which rely on the common ground shared with the intended audience in order to create a bond with them.

The first poster by the Rowan Cabarrus Community College, NC, USA in Fig. 1, displays the slogan *Help slow the spread of Covid-19* in a white banner on a Siena yellow background, followed by the headline *Stay Healthy* in bold dark blue letters. The degree of saturation of the background colour, which could be defined as intense, contributes to the affective meaning of the overall message (Kress/Van Leeuwen 2002).



Fig. 1 Rowan Cabarrus Community College, NC, USA. Retrieved from <<https://www.rccc.edu/coronavirus/>>.

The poster is then subdivided into three parts forming a triptych with the use of a three-part list with alliteration, namely the repetition of the sound *W* at the beginning of three subsequent verbs, *WEAR*, *WAIT* and *WASH*, in capital letters, reproducing the emphasis that would be provided by a loud voice in oral speech. The three verbs in question are in a bold type font and represent the beginning of three verb phrases written in a smaller font which employ imperatives as recommendations and suggestions to keep safe: *WEAR a cloth face covering*, *WAIT 6 feet apart. Avoid close contact*, *WASH your hands often or use hand sanitizers*. The combination of two rhetorical features such as the tricolon with a repetitive sound pattern, which represent figures of presence according to Conley (1983), makes the message

more memorable and persuasive. The imperatives, such as *HELP* and *Stay healthy* in the headline and slogan in the first part of the message and the others in the tricolon, aim to simultaneously give instructions and induce people to take some kind of action.

The same visual rhetorical strategy of a triptych is applied with the use of three imperatives in capital letters *WEAR*, *WAIT* and *WASH* in the poster in Fig. 2, by Fayetteville Police Department, NC, USA. Here, the three columns are introduced by an *if-clause*: *If you leave home, know your Ws!*, following the structure *if you X, then Y*, generally used in advertising to single out the right type of consumer or viewer. If you decide to leave home during the pandemic, you should know the three basic rules.



Fig. 2. Fayetteville Police Department, NC, USA. Retrieved from <<https://nextdoor.com/agencypost/nc/fayetteville/fayetteville-police-department/if-you-leave-home-know-your-ws-148017799/>>.

Similarly, the poster in Fig. 3 displays the imperative form *Remember the Three Ws!* with the use of three parallel directive constructions: *WEAR your face covering*, *WATCH your distance*, *WASH your hands*.

All these linguistic structures, the *if-clause* with the pronoun *you*, the possessive *your* and the imperatives in these posters, make direct appeals to the audience and can also be classified as engagement markers according to Hyland (2005a), who includes them among the interactional features of metadiscourse.



Fig. 3. Hillsboro Medical Center, OR, USA. Retrieved from <<https://tuality.org/health/coronavirus/>>.

The use of the second person pronoun *you*, the possessive *your* and of imperatives implies a higher degree of intimacy and familiarity in the context: “directly addressing the readers using second person pronouns (*you* and *your*) contributes to the interactive effect and narrows the distance between the writer and readers” (Liu/Zhang 2021). Furthermore, these pronouns provide an interlocutory effect implying a close and harmonious relationship with the readers. Additionally, imperatives or directives stimulate the readers’ participation in the text and instruct them to do something in a way suggested by the writer (Fu 2012). Besides, the iconic representations help the audience focus on the recommended actions.

Through the use of images, such as protective masks, hand sanitizers, human figures keeping distance, the posters’ producers focus on the actual themes at stake and allow the audience to concentrate on possible solutions and the right behaviours to adopt in order to avoid the spread of coronavirus. In these cases, images and texts are joined equally and reinforce one another, so their status is considered complementary (Martinec/Salway 2005). A whole image is related to a whole text and the image works as an expansion of the text itself. More precisely, according to Martinec/Salway (2005: 350) “when an image

and a text are related by enhancement, one qualifies the other circumstantially”.



Fig. 4. Iowa Department of Public Health, IO, USA. Retrieved from <<https://www.idph.iowa.gov/>>.

In the posters in Fig. 4 (Iowa Department of Public Health) and Fig. 5 (Nebraska Association Local Health Directors), repetition creates musicality and stimulates memory. The two posters appear to be in contrast with each other because of the imperatives in the headers *Remember the three Cs* in the former and *Avoid the three Cs* in the latter. However, they do maintain the same purpose. In the poster in Fig. 4, the instructions provided through the use of verb phrase parallelism *Cover your cough*, *Clean your hands*, *Contain germs*, are further explained by other short imperative statements in a smaller font. The poster in Fig. 5 instead uses alliterative noun phrases to list what to avoid to stay safe and stop the spread: *crowded places*, *close contact* and *confined spaces*. After the header and the visual triptych and tricolon, the Nebraska poster provides further information using the same visual and textual format and strategies of repetition and

reiteration through the use of catchy phrases with alliteration, directives, personal pronouns and possessives.

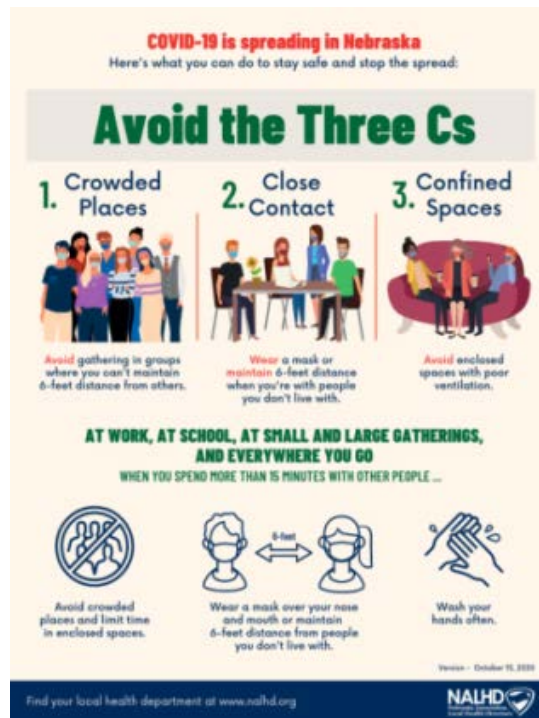


Fig. 5. Nebraska Association Local Health Directors, NB, USA. Retrieved from <<https://www.idph.iowa.gov/>>.

In the fact sheets in Fig. 6(a) and 6(b) produced by Scottish Canals, UK,³ the tricolon *Stay home, stay safe and save lives* again reproduces the same pattern with directives and alliteration. The information provided is distributed on two pages: on the first one, the column layout is used with images and on the second one the text is organized in bulleted lists introduced by the imperatives *Be safe, Be smart, Be kind*.

³ Permission to reproduce the posters in Figures 6(a) and 6(b) was granted by media@scottishcanals.co.uk on 21/04/2021.

Bulleted lists in this case represent examples of what Hyland defines as elements of schematic text structure (2005a: 51) and includes them among the frame markers, which have the function to explicitly order arguments in the text making discourse clearer to readers. We argue that frame markers can be easily included among the figures of presence since they reinforce the content matter by making it more authoritative. As occurs in the other posters, colours here add to the emotional and affective impact of the message.



Fig. 6(a) and 6(b). Produced by Scottish Canals, UK. Retrieved from <www.scottishcanals.co.uk>.

Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 are posters which have been chosen as examples of what Conley calls figures of focus, such as similes, metaphors, slogans. They both intertextually combine visual metaphors with well-known slogans alluding to the fight against coronavirus. Fig. 7 displays fists wearing protective gloves hitting and beating the virus molecules with spikes. The slogan recites as follows: *We will beat this virus. We can*

do it. Pastel colours in the poster reinforce the interactive character of the message expressing emotive ‘temperature’ as explained by Kress/Van Leeuwen (2002: 356). The scholars argue that “colour is also used to convey ‘interpersonal’ meaning. Just as language allows us to realize speech acts, so colour allows us to realize ‘colour acts’” (2002: 348).



Fig 7. [www.worksheetsplanet.com](https://www.worksheetsplanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Covid-Poster-for-Kids.jpg). Retrieved from <<https://www.worksheetsplanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Covid-Poster-for-Kids.jpg>>.



Fig. 8. Help Appeal, www.helpappeal.org.uk. Retrieved from <www.countyairambulancetrust.co.uk>.

The poster in Fig. 8, by Help Appeal,⁴ intertextually refers to the original wartime propaganda of Rosie the Riveter, produced by Howard

⁴ Permission to reproduce the poster was provided by Mr. Robert W. Bertram FRSA, Chief Executive, County Air Ambulance Trust, P.O. Box 999, Walsall WS2 7YX, UK, on 21/04/2021.

Miller in 1943 during World War II to boost female workers' morale. It recalls the original colours of the layout, including the original headline and body copy *We can do it!* but places the emphasis on the visual metaphor which represents a female nurse wearing a mask, gloves, scarf and uniform, in the same iconic posture mimicking the strong, muscular and well-built factory worker in the original poster (Giordano/Marongiu 2021). Through the use of the slogans *We can do it* and *Proud to support the NHS* the poster invites the audience to unite in the common struggle and, similarly to the poster in Fig. 7, it represents a call to action against the common enemy.

In their work about discourses of the National Health Service during Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic, Antosa and Demata (2021) deal with the question of war metaphors used during the pandemic and argue that "the representation of Covid-19 as an enemy threatening to invade the nation communicates a sense of concreteness and personal involvement in the dangers coming from the pandemic, seen as an outside enemy, and is meant to strike a chord among those readers who feel a degree of emotional attachment to their own nation" (2021: 58). Figures of communion, among which Conley includes allusions and rhetorical questions, help form a common bond with the audience. Texts structured into questions in general directly appeal to and involve the audience, since they simulate a friendly dialogue.

The two posters in Fig. 9 and Fig. 10 appear to differ in the age of the intended audience: the first one is directed to children and this is shown by the vivid colour contrast used in the images and as background to the text. The questions asked are *How does it spread?* and *How can I protect myself?* followed by the answers highlighted in different colours. Fu argues that "[o]ne of the ways a writer can enhance the interactive quality of the text is by formulating questions which might be posed by an imaginary readership (2012: 402). Then, four columns follow with four images of a child with the major signs and symptoms of Covid-19 such as *fever, cough, sore throat* and *hard to breathe*.

The poster in Fig. 10 (Department of Health and Environmental Control, SC, USA) is clearly addressed to adults since it shows a more sober layout with softer colours and scientific and detailed information to answer more formal and precise questions such

as *What is it?*, *How is it spread?*, *Who is at risk?*, *What are the symptoms?*, *How is it prevented?*. Each question is identified by a colour which is taken up by the corresponding answers and it is visually represented by a label and located in the layout of the poster so as to help the reader in the logical understanding of the information provided. Engaging markers such as questions are used to establish an informal and friendly atmosphere between the writer and the audience. Questions in particular are used to contribute to the development of the text and “play an important organizational role in unfolding the text” (Fu 2012: 409). In both posters in Fig. 9 and in Fig. 10, the text is structured and constructed with the reader’s needs in mind, as explained by Hyland (2005: 49) when referring to the interactive dimension of metadiscourse.

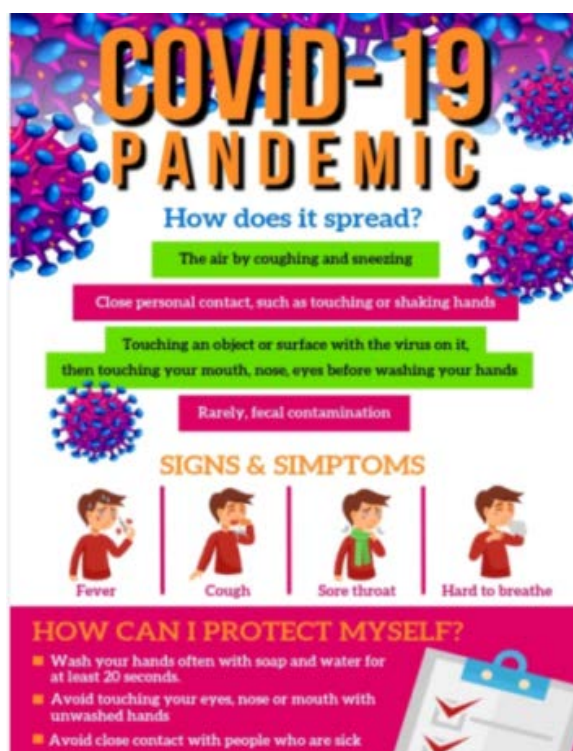


Fig. 9. From [www.postermywall.com](https://www.postermywall.com/index.php/art/template/75b43aefbb62e35d3889cffa11ef33a7/covid-19-pandemic-poster-design-template#.YdsqeFko8hd). Retrieved from <<https://www.postermywall.com/index.php/art/template/75b43aefbb62e35d3889cffa11ef33a7/covid-19-pandemic-poster-design-template#.YdsqeFko8hd>>.



Fig. 10. Department of Health and Environmental Control, SC, USA. Retrieved from <scdhec.gov/COVID19>.

4.2. *Ethos, pathos and logos*

The previous paragraph has followed Conley's line of thought regarding the three types of figures, of presence, communion and focus, based on classical rhetoric. Very similarly, Hyland (2005) refers to the three classical appeals of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* and shows their relationship with metadiscourse strategies used in a text. This paper endeavours to demonstrate how the classical appeals and metadiscourse also combine in visual products in which images, graphs, tables and text intertwine to form persuasive, convincing and credible artefacts.

Ethos is the appeal that aims to convince an audience of the speaker or writer's moral weight and force, credibility and character, to show knowledge and expertise on the subject matter. Pathos is used to persuade an audience by appealing to their emotions, to inspire sympathy, instigate anger, elicit action through examples, stories and events. And finally, logos appeals to logic to persuade an audience through the use of reason, by citing details and statistics, historical facts and literal analogies, and by quoting authorities and experts on a subject.

It should be noted that all features found and analysed in the various posters under scrutiny satisfy the appeals of classical rhetoric (Hyland 2005a: 63-86) in modern and fresh forms of persuasive and convincing discourse, which well adapts to the different and often contrasting sentiments of the pandemic period in 2020 and 2021. Following Hyland, it can be said that the metadiscourse items identified have distinct rhetorical effects but, as can be seen from the examples provided, and as shown in the first part of the discussion, many of them simultaneously perform more than one rhetorical and metadiscursive function (Hyland 2005a: 84).



Fig. 11. Alliance Medical, UK. Retrieved from <<https://www.alliancemedical.com/coronavirus>>, <<http://www.alliancemedical.co.uk>>.

The poster in Fig. 11 by Alliance Medical presents what can be deemed as an example of ethical appeal inasmuch as ethos is used “to present a competent, trustworthy, authoritative and honest persona” (Hyland 2005a: 78). The metadiscoursal aspects which most contribute to the ethical appeal are boosters, engagement markers, self-mentions, attitude markers and evidentials.

This poster displays the use of the self-mention strategy through the personal pronoun *we* and the possessive *our* to refer to the Alliance Medical organization, producer of the poster. After the header *Your wellbeing matters*, which addresses the audience directly, the body copy introduces the activities of the medical organization and recites as follows: “*Our scanning centres remain open and the safety and wellbeing of all our patients and staf [sic] remains our highest priority. We are continuing to make sure that we have measures in place to maintain the highest level of safety and care for our staf [sic], patients and visitors.*” The possessive *our* and the pronoun *we* allude to the medical centre’s professional authority and position in the field: they can construct an identity of an accountable and reliable actor by making themselves the agents of the introductory body copy (Liu/Zhang 2021). Self-mention markers significantly help to “build a positive personal and corporate image” (Xiaoqin 2017: 236). Then, nine square boxes follow with information about the medical centre itself. The first one again introduces the various measures put in place to protect staff and patients: “*We have introduced additional measures to make sure that we keep both our patients and staf [sic] safe*” which again exhibits the same use of self-mention strategies. Self-mention expressions are collocated with words that indicate responsibility and commitment, such as *measures*, *sure*, *safe*: the use of these frames conveys the endeavours of the medical centre and constructs a determined, confident and positive company ethos (Hyland 1998b; Liu/Zhang 2021).

Superlatives such as *highest* and adjectives such as *additional*, *safe*, *sure*, *appropriate*, *all*, and adverbs such as *actively* account for the use of boosters and attitude markers through which this medical centre ensures measures of the *highest* quality and considers the wellbeing of patients its *highest priority*. According to Xiaoqin (2017: 237) “(b)oosters allow the writer to present a credible image of authority,

decisiveness, and conviction”. The medical centre makes *sure* that they have *all* the measures in place in order to keep patients *safe*, such as the wearing of face masks, hand sanitizing stations, increasing times between patients, cleaning and decontamination, and screening for symptoms. *Appropriate* Personal Protective Equipment is worn at *all times*. Adjectives such as *appropriate* belong to the category of attitude markers which indicate the writer’s affective attitude to propositions conveying agreement and importance: writers express an evaluation, a position and “pull readers into a conspiracy of agreement so that it can often be difficult to dispute these judgements” (Hyland 2005b: 180). The use of commendatory or evaluative adjectives, in turn, reinforces the writer or speaker’s credibility and standing, contributing to the ethical character of discourse.

Attitude markers, self-mentions, engagement markers are the features used in the posters to empathize with the audience’s values and goals, to invite them to participate and respond, consider their attitude to the arguments and establish a relationship with them. Figures 12 from (a) to (f) show the Covid-19 campaign by www.canva.com. Word phrases such as *virtual hugs*, verb phrases such as *stand together* and *spread kindness* are significant to the audience personally and so the authors of the posters are addressing the audience’s situation directly, empathizing with their values and goals and directly inviting them to respond (Hyland 2005a: 81). Through the use of pastel colours and simple, almost childish drawings, this coronavirus poster campaign at once inspires simplicity and closeness by combining emotional words and rhyming phrases with vintage representations of the present reality such as people self-isolating in a tent, neighbours sharing baskets of sanitizers and vitamins, people hugging at a distance, the world transformed into a beating heart, and people sneezing into their sleeves to protect others. These illustrations evoke good sentiments such as intimacy, familiarity, closeness, kindness, solidarity, and collective coping against “the bugs”.

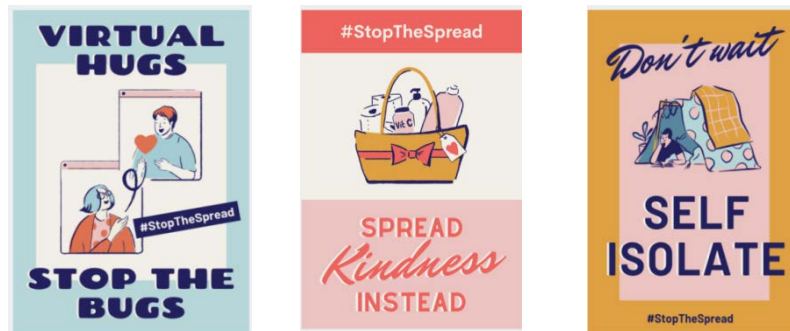


Fig. 12 (a), (b), (c). From www.canva.com. Retrieved from <<https://www.canva.com/posters/templates/coronavirus/>>.



Fig. 12 (d), (e), (f). From www.canva.com. Retrieved from <<https://www.canva.com/posters/templates/coronavirus/>>.

Childish rhyming language is used throughout the campaign to soften and mitigate the harsh reality: *Virtual hugs stop the bugs, Stop the spread, spread kindness instead, Don't wait, self isolate, Even though we are apart, you are in my heart, Stand together by not standing together, Cough and sneeze into your sleeve*, all of them sharing the same hashtag #StopTheSpread. Emotions such as social distance and togetherness at once appeal to the sense of community in the audience, by creating a common ground with the use of musicality and rhythm, through which affective appeals are channelled. As shown earlier in this paper, directives and engagement markers such as *you* are used for

pathos and make the audience a discourse participant. “*Reader pronouns* are perhaps the most explicit way that readers are brought into a discourse. *You* and *your* are actually the clearest way a writer can acknowledge the reader’s presence” (Hyland 2005b: 182).



Fig. 13. From [www.postermywall.com](https://www.postermywall.com/index.php/art/template/6e7a5fed77a2dd82b434547235a96f8c/coronavirus-covid-19-stay-home-post-design-template#.YfLCMvgo8hc). Retrieved from <<https://www.postermywall.com/index.php/art/template/6e7a5fed77a2dd82b434547235a96f8c/coronavirus-covid-19-stay-home-post-design-template#.YfLCMvgo8hc>>.

The poster in Fig. 13 produced by the website postermywall.com has an interactive dark background underneath which the molecule of the coronavirus moves under the lens of a microscope. The text in the foreground, in sharp colours such as white, green, orange and yellow presents the object of interest through a rhetorical question *Why stay*

home? The answers are provided through the use of percentages which introduce short explanations, such as *80% will be infected without knowing, showing mild or no symptoms at all, or 5% will have critical disease including respiratory failure and will need immediate and urgent assistance*. Explanations are supported by precise statistics which appeal to reason. Percentages and numbers, along with transitions, by which the authors connect elements in the poster, explain, orient and guide the audience. The choices writers/authors make to define problems, support claims, validate premises and state conclusions are crucial to ensuring that an audience will accept an argument (Hyland 2005a). All the percentages shown and explained in detail seem to support and to justify the final statement which asserts that *5% of a million people is 50,000 people. No health care system can stand these numbers!* Therefore, the final statement concludes that *By staying home you slow down Covid-19*. The poster aims at convincing the audience of the logical and reasonable necessity to avoid contacts in order to control the spread of the virus with the objective of reducing hospitalizations and thus of easing the workload for the health care system.

Similarly to the poster in Fig. 13, the poster in Fig. 14, produced by Ear Hygiene Clinic, Ferrymead, Christchurch in New Zealand, presents scientific data on typical symptoms of Covid-19. The most important ones such as fever, dry cough and fatigue are represented through the use of small iconic images. Percentages are shown through a bar graph. The reliability of the data presented is reinforced by the caption on the lower right-hand corner, which refers to the source of the information provided, i.e. the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019, and to the lab research on 55924 cases dating back to February 20, 2020. By showing reliable and supported facts, the poster makes “it easier for the audience to process information and have a better understanding of authors’ intention” (Zhang/Chen 2020: 159).

Evidentials are the attribution to a reliable source. Hyland explains that in academic writing, this source “refers to a community-based literature and provides important support for arguments. Evidentials distinguish *who* is responsible for a position and while this may contribute to a persuasive goal, it needs to be distinguished from the writer’s stance towards the view, which is coded as an interpersonal

feature” (2005a: 51-52). Fuertes-Olivera et al. add that “[e]videntials indicate a source of textual information which originates outside the current text. They establish intertextuality, thus helping copywriters to persuade consumers by associating their messages to other cultural artifacts” (2001: 1303).

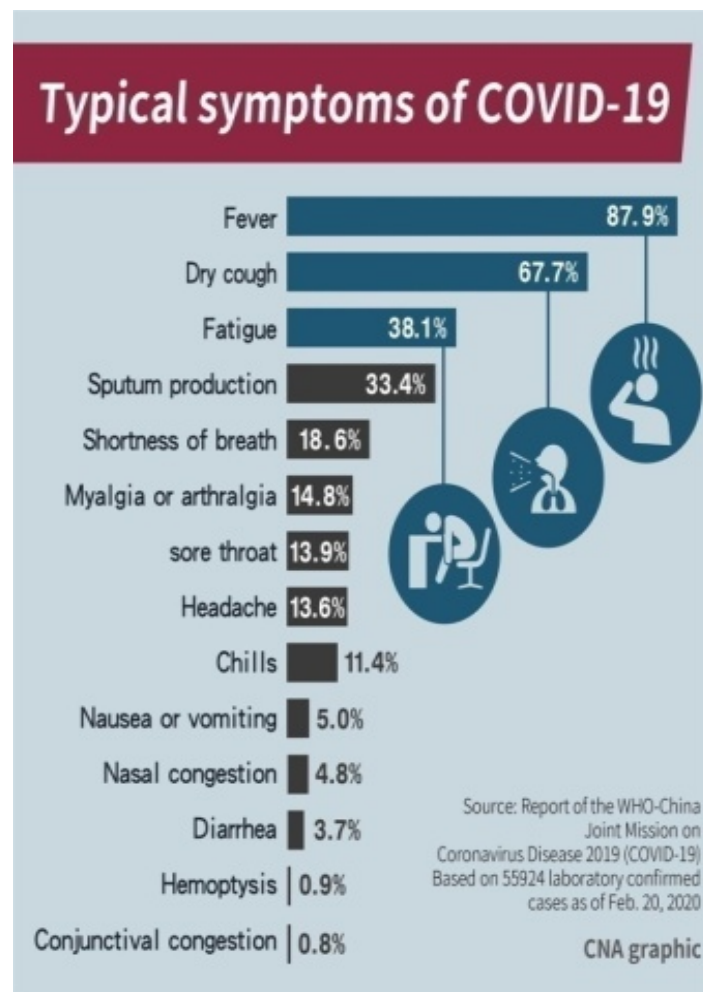


Fig. 14. Ear Hygiene Clinic, Ferrymead, Christchurch, New Zealand. Retrieved from <<https://ear.net.nz/assets/Docs/COVID-19-Symptoms.jpg>>.

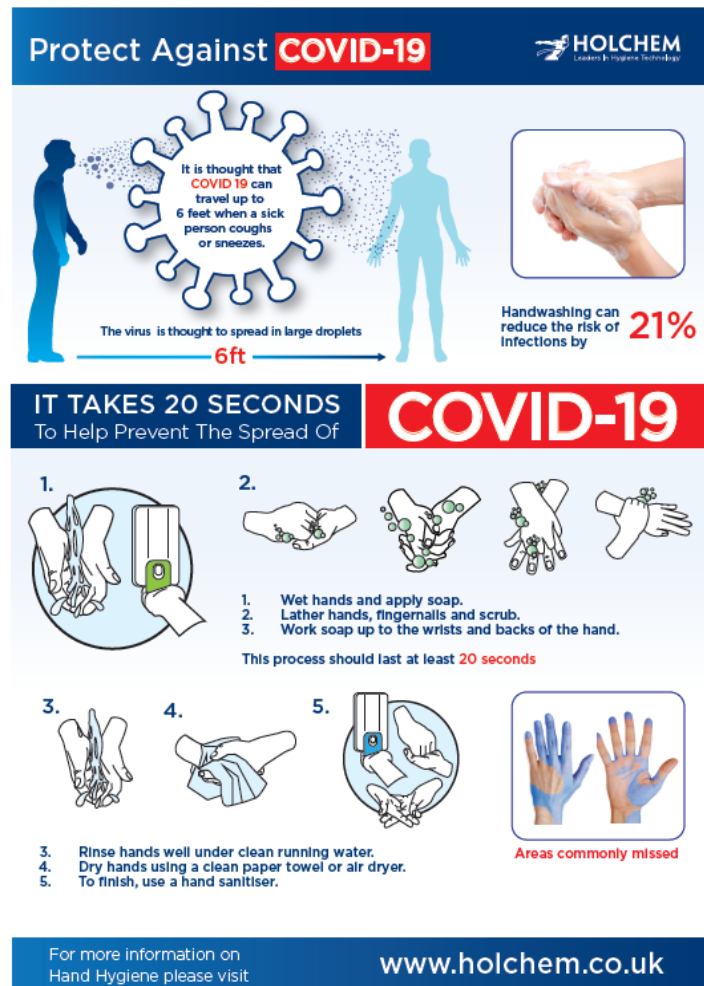


Fig. 15. www. holchem.co.uk. Retrieved from <www. holchem.co.uk>.

The poster in Fig. 15⁵ by holchem.co.uk is divided into two major sections. The top part is headed by a dark blue and red band indicating

⁵ Fig. 15. Permission to reproduce the poster was granted by Ms. Diane Harrison, Customer Care Representative, Holchem Laboratories Ltd, Gateway House,

the poster's goal, which is *Protect Against Covid-19*. In the middle, we find a second band, this time introducing the instructions on how to protect against Covid-19 which recites *IT TAKES 20 SECONDS To Help Prevent The Spread Of COVID-19*. Both sections present a mix of text, numerical data, drawings and photographs, which ultimately make the information provided more realistic, and organised in a logical sequence of numbered statements. In the section above, the text reads as follows: *The virus is thought to spread in large droplets. It is thought that Covid-19 can travel up to 6 feet when a sick person coughs or sneezes. Handwashing can reduce the risk of infections by 21%*. The passive verb forms "is thought to" and the impersonal "It is thought that", and the modal verb *can*, are typical examples of hedges, which "emphasize the subjectivity of a position by allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact [...]. Hedges therefore imply that a statement is based on the writer's plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge, indicating the degree of confidence it is prudent to attribute to it" (Hyland 2005a: 52). The willingness to open to alternative voices, in this particular context, however, functions as a reinforcement to the own standing position. The stance of the poster's producer is implicitly and reasonably sustained and reinforced by the apparent mitigation due to the use of hedges such as the ones found in the text. The logical, scientific, and wise suggestions to reduce the risk of infection are all present in the statistics, in the figures, in the numbered hints on how to wash hands, and the corresponding descriptive images.

In general, numbers, figures, percentages, statistics along with explanatory text in these last two posters serve to clarify and guide the audience through specific and scientific communication. Therefore, comparing and sequencing of data are critical to the posters' overall persuasive force by providing reassuring, concrete, solid and reliable information.

5. Conclusions

The study of 15 Covid-19 inspirational and educational posters and fact sheets, selected from a wider corpus, produced in English-speaking countries in 2020 and in the first months of 2021 has shown a very frequent use of stylistic features such as repetitions, alliterations, parallel constructions, rhyming patterns, intertextuality, reader-pronouns and self-mentions, attitude markers, hedges and boosters, all of which facilitate interpretation, understanding and retention, create positive associations, and ultimately, make information direct and effective. Immediacy of discourse is achieved through conditionals, imperatives or directives, questions, personal pronouns and engagement markers which make receivers potential participants in the interaction. Additionally, statistics and objective facts contribute to the precise and factual transmission of information, thus generating reliable and respectable communication.

The study illustrated how figures of presence, focus and communion are used, and how ethos, pathos and logos are achieved with interactive and interactional metadiscourse devices. They are all used strategically in order to impress upon and involve the audience. Discourse is more emotionally-loaded, objectives become clearer, more commonly shared and less ambiguous; the audience is directly involved so that poster producers' aims and intentions and consumers' expectations come together.

This study demonstrates that, as shown also by Hyland (2005a: 72) and Fuertes-Olivera et al. (2001), the best examples of the rhetorical role of metadiscourse are found in advertisements and slogans, where it is used to convey persuasive messages in the guise of an informative facade, and to create solidarity with observers, in order to secure both rhetorical and informative objectives.

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