

Chinese Online Celebrities' Discursive Strategies of Promoting Domestic Products: Online Posters as Multimodal Ensembles

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Received: April 2, 2024 Accepted: May 31, 2024 Online Published: June 23, 2024

doi:10.5539/ijel.v14n4p11 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v14n4p11>

Abstract

Although Chinese online celebrities have received much scholarly attention, scant studies pay attention to the crucial role they play in promoting the emerging “buy national” in China. This study investigates the multimodal discourse conveyed in a collection of advertising posters designed by online celebrities to promote Chinese domestic products (known as *guohuo* in China). Through a social semiotic lens, it provides a multimodal analysis of how online posters employ visual imaginary and textual messages for commercial purposes within the rising consumer nationalistic context. Drawing upon a dataset of 20 online posters, the analysis reveals a set of semiotic resources including color, image, typography, layout and non-linguistic gesture and gaze. These modes are employed collectively to orchestrate the national script and produce the authoritative representatives that convert the online posters into a kind of national multimodal ensemble. The study highlights the extensive spread of online posters and provides new insights for analyzing the visibility of online celebrities in the growing wave of “buy national” in China.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, Chinese online celebrity, domestic products

1. Introduction

There is a cohort of people in China obtaining huge fame and popularity online with a massive following base, called *wanghong*, equivalent to online celebrities. Especially with the expansion of the e-commerce livestreaming industry, Chinese online celebrities are commonly recognized the “consumer opinion leaders” (Xu, Yu, & Song, 2018). Top online celebrities, represented by Li Jiaqi and Viya, achieve massive following through promoting products online with highly personalized sales skills which also help them take the high spot among the online celebrity pyramids. They also play a leading role in the new wave of Chinese “buy national” online. As reported by incubator company Beauty One, Li Jiaqi’s livestreaming features over 1,600 domestic brands, with a total sales volume of more than 200 million yuan in 2022. Chinese online celebrities, acting as the “responsible advertisers”, spare their efforts to promote the state-initiated “buy national” trend. The online celebrity ecology has become a marketplace for selling nationalism (Lee & Abidin, 2022). In this study, we will adopt a multimodal perspective to investigate how domestic products are promoted or supported by a specific group of online practitioners—online celebrities and how they produce online posters under dual commercial and nationalist agendas.

Online posters, as a prominent means of communication, are commonly deployed by online celebrities to effectively engage with their followers, establish their self-brand, and achieve their commercial purposes (Sifaki & Papadopoulou, 2015). It is typically used as a preview for an e-commerce livestreaming to advertise a specific event and exhibit a particular collection. To enhance the dissemination of information, online posters are often strategically and synchronously positioned across different platforms. This kind of discourse, multimodal in nature, deploys a variety of social symbolic resources, including images, colors, and typography and beyond, to collaboratively generate meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This type of online content is characterised by its rich connotations, distinctive language, straightforward delivery as well as its ability to create a powerful visual impression. It is highly effective in rapidly conveying information to the viewers, capturing their attention, stimulating their desire to watch the forthcoming livestreaming and ultimately achieving the goal of commercial persuasion.

Based on Kress’s (2010) framework of multimodality, this study takes the livestreaming posters as an example to examine the cultural implications and social meaning produced by online celebrities (specifically livestreamers) and how they deploy multimodal discursive strategies to make national meanings, identity construction and elicit

consumption (Machin, 2013). These collected posters contain a set of semiotic resources including color, image, typography, layout, non-linguistic gesture and gaze which cooperate, complement and reinforce the communication of visual significance. Before turning to the analysis, we first review the literature concerning the rising online celebrity phenomenon in China and Chinese domestic products. Then we probe into the online posters under a multimodal theoretical framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chinese Online Celebrities and Domestic Products

Chinese online celebrities are more known as *wanghong* which is an abbreviation for Chinese pinyin term *wangluo hongren*, literally meaning “red on the Internet” (Abidin, 2018). Since the mid-2010s, the definition of *wanghong* has changed significantly and become a compound term referring to both online practitioners and the *wanghong* economy (Craig, Lin, & Cunningham, 2021). The new meaning implies the new business model—traffic monetization—achieved through converting online followers into money (Craig et al., 2021). Among various kinds of online celebrities, livestreamers, especially e-commerce livestreamers, have exhibited great commercial value due to their huge influence over traditional celebrities on consumers’ behaviors (Ma, 2021). As Cunningham, Craig and Lv (2019) mentioned, Chinese livestreamers guide consumers to integrated e-commerce platforms, thus driving the growth of China’s evolving consumer culture.

Chinese domestic products, also known as *guohuo*, refer to the domestic products or brands homegrown in China (Gerth, 2003). It is not a new term but revived when its antonym—foreign products/brands entered China after the opening in 1979. Despite its long existence, *guohuo* has been synonymous with low-quality and cheapness (Yang, 2015). However, the trend of domestic products, also known as *guochao* (China chic), was ignited by Xinjiang cotton issues in March 2021. A series of statements about the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region’s forced labor from Western brands provoked outrage among Chinese consumers and led to a radical anti-western brands campaign sweeping across the whole country and on social media. Led by the state media, Chinese social media users boycott H&M and many other international clothing brands. Meanwhile, *guohuo* returns to the public as a counterattack to the West (Gerth, 2011).

All along, Chinese government cooperated with online celebrities to maintain the governance. For instance, online celebrities spread the government’s nationalist stories of successfully handling the COVID-19 pandemic on social media (Schneider, 2021). Online celebrities also work within the national agenda and promote domestic products, circulating domestic brands around collective memory and nostalgia (Carah & Louw, 2016). In this new trend of online “buy national,” Chinese online celebrities, e-commerce livestreamers in particular, stand at the forefront of the trend and take the responsibility to promote the rising domestic products to their followers and consumers.

2.2 Online Poster: A Multimodal Perspective

The diversity of digital communication platforms has transformed how online celebrities create and distribute content. Online posters are one kind of content commonly produced and widely displayed in online public space as their traditional counterparts put up in offline public space (Zhang & Chan, 2017). Existing studies extensively investigate online posters in educational, political, public health and commercial settings. This visual form is commonly employed to obtain public awareness and engage online viewers in specific activities. For instance, Tay (2017) discussed online motivational posters are strategically placed to encourage relevant positive decisions or behaviors. Lee and Campbell (2016) examined how online political posters facilitate the expansion of voter outreach for political parties. In a recent public health study, Al-Subhi (2024) accessed 60 online COVID-19 posters to unveil the application of interactional metadiscourse and meaning-making in public health crisis. Some others have also shown that online posters are useful means for distributing information and engaging in communication. Research by FD’Angelo (2016) showed that online academic posters (or e-posters) significantly enhance communication and interaction between presenters and audiences with new features, such as QR codes and hyperlinks. However, limited attention has been paid to online posters in the realm of commercial-oriented livestreaming despite the frequent usage of posters as an online branding strategy. Previous studies have also neglected to explore the role of poster producers—online celebrities—who are leading content creators in current digital communication platforms. This study aims to provide insights into these research gaps.

Drawn on the theoretical perspective of social semiotics, this study adopts multimodal discourse analysis as the analytical tool to examine both linguistic and visual elements contained in online posters and take them into account of the situated cultural and social context (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Mayr & Machin, 2012). The central theoretical concept in this approach is *discourse* which can be conceptualized as a form of “script” that encompasses identities, ideas, values, and attitudes within a specific social context (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). The script will be produced by the social actors’ communicative intentions to manipulate and recontextualize social

practices in their favor (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). *Multimodality* is another key notion that depicts a multimodal “ensemble”, usually in the form of material product, orchestrated through various semiotic resources (Kress, 2010, p. 162). It recognises that different semiotic resources can coexist (such as writing inserted in the image, speech with gesture) and thereby need to be understood as an integrated whole (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O’Halloran, 2016). As a kind of online artifact, online posters contain a richer use of semiotic resources and can be seen as a multimodal ensemble that is composed of “a plurality of signs in different modes into a particular configuration” (Kress, 2010, p. 162). It conveys meanings that are shaped by “social and economic factors” (Kress, 2010, p. 19). By using both language and other semiotic resources, online celebrities produce online posters with national discourse to serve their persuasive appeals of “buy national” and self-branding. As such, social semiotics is interested in describing the available choices social actors use to communicate and shape the nation and how domestic products are represented.

3. Methods and Data

3.1 Data Collection

This study focuses on the online posters published by popular Chinese livestreamers concerning the theme of “guohuo” (domestic products). As a part of a larger Chinese domestic products project, current dataset (see Table 1) consists of 20 posters and was drawn from nine online celebrities’ social media accounts across platforms with which they launched the posters as a preview of the e-commerce livestreaming. The advertised guohuo-themed livestreamings take place in four leading livestreaming platforms—Douyin, Kuaishou, Tmall and Taobao, covering the leading e-commerce livestreaming platforms in China. The posters collected in the dataset were published during the period May 2020 to May 2022. This two-year timeframe has reflected the exponential growth of e-commerce livestreaming and the rise of new consumer culture influenced by COVID-19 in China (Abidin, Lee, Barbetta, & Miao, 2020; Ma, 2021).

Table 1. Dataset of online posters

No.	Online Celebrity	Date	Poster Theme	Platform
1	Viya	2020.05.11	2021 China Brand Day Special	Taobao. Live
2	Viya	2020.07.09	Viya’s Inviting China Tour	Taobao. Live
3	Viya	2021.05.10	Luminous Guohuo	Taobao. Live
4	Viya	2021.06.03	Red Culture Creativity Special	Taobao. Live
5	Zhang Mofan	2020.09.26	The 3rd Zhang Mofan Guohuo Festival	Douyin
6	Zhang Mofan	2021.09.25	The 5th Zhang Mofan Guohuo Festival	Douyin
7	Zhang Mofan	2022.05.20	The 6th Zhang Mofan Guohuo Festival	Douyin
8	Luo Yonghao	2021.06.12	Meet New China Chic	Douyin
9	Lieer Baobei	2021.03.28	Treasure of Hometown	Taobao. Live
10	Lieer Baobei	2021.01.20	Lieer Guohuo Festival	Taobao. Live
11	Li Jiaqi	2020.05.10	Guohuo is Chic	Taobao. Live
12	Li Jiaqi	2021.04.07	Non-profit E-commerce Live for Hubei Province	Taobao. Live
13	Li Jiaqi	2021.05.10	Good Products of China Chic	Taobao. Live
14	Li Jiaqi	2021.05.15	Fall in Love with China Style	Taobao. Live
15	Xue Li	2021.03.25	Prop up Chinese Cotton	Taobao. Live
16	Xue Li	2020.06.11	People’s Creativity from Courteous Xueli	Taobao. Live
17	Zhen Jie	2021.09.29	Golden Autumn: Go Kuaishou Grab People’s Guohuo	Kuaishou
18	Dan dan	2021.10.17	National Treasure Guohuo Special	Kuaishou
19	Yuda Gongzi	2021.03.20	Spring Tide: Golden Autumn: Go Kuaishou Grab People’s Guohuo	Kuaishou
20	Da Shao	2020.09.23	Xtep China-created Live	Kuaishou

3.2 Data Analysis

Guided by the multimodal discourse analysis, the analysis unpacks how the intricate visual resources in posters are used to realize discourse. Here is to elucidate the intricacies of how the *script* is conveyed and how various modes work together as different communicative roles (Mayr & Machin, 2012). We look at the color, iconography, typography and beyond as a multimodal ensemble (Norris, 2004) and how social actors (online celebrities here) are represented in the posters (Mayr & Machin, 2012). Livestreamers exercise discursive agency in their selection of semiotic resources that can strategically reflect their intended meaning. Several representative posters are illustrated to demonstrate the key findings, yet not all posters are analyzed in detail considering the recurrence of characteristics.

4. Analysis

The analysis identifies that the national multimodal “ensemble” in the online posters has been produced with two steps: (1) orchestrating the national scripts and (2) producing the authoritative representative.

4.1 Orchestrating the National Script

The national script is composed of a set of Chinese-characterized semiotic resources: the Chinese color, the traditional Chinese image and the Chinese typography. In the collected posters, over half ($n = 12$) of the online posters adopt *red* as the predominant tint. The color red is widely regarded as the representative color of China (Kim, 2011). It is endowed with tradition, good luck, fortune and authority. More importantly, red is the symbol of China as it is the base color of China’s national five-star red flag. In Figure 1(a), top live streamer Li Jiaqi and his guest host Huo Zun (a Chinese-style singer) are presented to promote a livestreaming under the name of *Fall in love with Chinese style*, highlighting the theme of “domestic products” with a red base. Some other online celebrities (e.g., Xue Li in Figure 3) produce posters set in white but deploy red as the font color to achieve a prominent Chinese theme. Another stream of color choice lies in the pale or neutral colors that may invoke the “oriental” message of tranquility and harmony in traditional Chinese ink-wash paintings (Tsui, 2013). In Figure 1(b), the poster of Zhang Mofan adopts *white* as the predominant color depicting an imagined classic martial woman in Chinese culture. In general, using the colors of Chineseness is a multimodal discursive strategy for reaching *salience* as to give ranking in relation to the promoted national meanings (Mayr & Machin, 2012) and creating the national script in posters (Chow, 1998). They appear in various modes (fonts, background, cloth, icons, etc.) but form a visual unity with a sense of nation.



Figure 1(a). Li Jiaqi’s online poster (left); Figure 1(b). Zhang Mofan’s online poster (right)

The multimodal script also sources inspiration from traditional Chinese images. In Figure 2, top livestreamer Viya (right) and her guest Zhu Guangquan (left, a Chinese widely-known host of Chinese Central Television, CCTV thereafter) stand in the center surrounded by two fairy cranes (*xianhe*). Fairy crane refers to red crown crane frequently appearing in online posters. It is a peculiar species of bird in Chinese culture, implying longevity, dignity and immortality. Fairy cranes commonly appear in ancient paintings along with pines, which are also included in the poster. Another similar element is the *reishi* mushroom (*lingzhi*), which is a rare mushroom used in traditional Chinese medicine. And it is said to revive the dead and realize immortality. Other typical Chinese symbols

represented in the posters include Chinese national flower (peony), ancient shanshui (mountain and waters) paintings and traditional architecture (forbidden city-like roof). These traditional symbols, repeatedly appearing in the collected online posters, create the mystery of the Orient and national meaning exclusively to Chinese viewers. It works as part of orchestrating a typical national script that can gain rapid recognition from a broad of online viewers and straight linkage with the promotion theme.



Figure 2. Viya's online poster

From the perspective of multimodal analysis, typography represents a mode involving font, size, position, spacing, style, etc. All written documents have typographic grammar and qualities that connote certain meanings (Stöckl, 2005). In the collected online posters, Chinese calligraphy is commonly adopted as the font, as presented in Figure 1(a) and 1(b). Both the left and right posters give prominence to the livestreaming themes in front of flowing Chinese calligraphy: *Fall in love with China trend* 爱上中國風 on the left and *Zhang Mofan Guohuo Festival* 张沫凡国货节 on the right. Especially in the left poster, the Chinese-style font “中國風 (Chinese trend)” is further facilitated by traditional Chinese characters to realize the cultural Chineseness. There are a variety of typographic styles that can coordinate with other Chinese modes to make the national script. For instance, typographic grammar also manifests in Chinese Scheme for Chinese Phonetic Alphabet (Pinyin) in Figure 3: ài guó qīng nián. Placing above the nationalist self-label—patriotic youth 爱国青年, the Chinese-exclusive pinyin marks can be easily read by the viewers and cooperate with other typographic modes to underscore the meanings of the corresponding Chinese characters.

4.2 Producing the Authoritative Representative

During the process of making a multimodal ensemble, online celebrities are presented and produced as the protagonists who are responsible for promoting the “buy national”. Layout conveys meanings about the social relations and the actions of those engaged in communication (Kress, 2010). In the dataset, online celebrities are always placed in the center of the posters and occupy a large space that aims to produce their roles of authoritative representatives in promoting domestic products (van Leeuwen, 2008). As Kress (2010) pointed out, the layout can “orient” the viewers to the meaningful implications of the posters—here is the inherent linkage between online celebrities and buy national activities (p. 92). In addition to the online celebrities, the frequent presence of invited livestreamers consisting of hosts from the national television broadcaster CCTV, Chinese-style singers and medalists. In the dataset, half of the online posters ($n = 10$) contain this group of people and represent them as authoritative representatives who can collectively produce multimodal ensembles with online celebrities. More

than half of the collected livestreamings ($n = 11$) are co-partnered by official media outlets at both national and provincial levels. This coincides with previous research suggesting that online celebrities act as Chinese government collaborators to make national scripts on social media (Schneider, 2021).



Figure 3. Xueli's online poster

In addition to the prominent layout, non-linguistic gestures, such as gesture, gaze and facial expressions have also been employed as important means of the authoritative representatives' meaning-making. In Figure 2, Viya, as the principal livestreamer offers her hands, expressing her warm welcome to the viewers. The invited livestreamer Zhu Guangquan, however, has his arms crossed with a slight smile, seemingly distancing himself from the viewers. To accurately understand the meaning implied in this gesture and facial expression, it is required to situate the poster in the context: the cooperative e-commerce livestreaming supported by the central government and state-run media (CCTV) further legitimizes the authoritative roles of online celebrities in selling for the nation. Zhu's image is in line with his persona as a famous host from official media and thus portrayed with authority and solemnity. The presence of authoritative representatives also indicates that selling domestic products via livestreaming, primarily is a state-led activity that is always operated within the national agenda. Viewers, thus, can easily receive the meaning delivered through the posters and recognise online celebrities as legitimized sellers of domestic products. Similarly, in Figure 3, another top livestreamer Xue Li is the protagonist in the poster who is staring ahead with a calm and solemn facial expression (gaze). This poster was designed in the context of the Chinese government's protest against international accusations about its labour problems in Xinjiang. Her facial expression and gaze coincide with China's defensive attitudes towards the Xinjiang cotton issues and strong determination to prosper domestic products. This echoes her identity portrayed as patriotic youth as indicated in the red Chinese characters—爱国青年 (patriotic youth)—on her simple T-shirt. Here, the identity of patriotic youth representative is represented and deployed to legitimize her online activity of promoting domestic products. It is also worth noting that the handwritten red signature on the lower left corner serves to reassure her attitude and identity. In this way, the meaning conveyed by one mode (color) interacts with that of others (typography) co-create a multimodal ensemble that aims at demonstrating the moral model of online celebrities in supporting the nation (Mahy, Winarnita, & Herriman, 2022). This instance shows the attempt of online celebrities to exert influence in the realms of consumption (Abidin, Lee, Barbeta, & Miao, 2020).

5. Conclusion

This study examined the semiotic resources deployed by Chinese online celebrities to construct multimodal ensembles for promoting domestic products. We discuss a selection of online posters designed to promote domestic products and draw on tools from multimodal discourse analysis.

The findings indicate that none of the components of the online posters are arbitrary or meaningless. Instead, different kinds of modes are particularly combined and designed to make meanings and construct a discourse of guohuo. Guohuo is produced by a socially organized set of semiotic resources of Chinese meaning, including color,

traditional Chinese images and typography. Online celebrities employ modality choices as an opportunity to create a sense of community around the ambience of the posters. Thus, all of the abovementioned modes would co-create a sense of Chineseness, inviting identification with viewers who share the same sentiment and opinion. This coincides with what Zappavigna proposed — semiotic resources create an “ambient affiliation” with which viewers could “recognize identities and align with others into communities of shared values” (2014, p. 209). In addition, online celebrities, as the leading actors, convey meanings through visual and textual means in the posters (Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022). They exercise discursive agency in their selection of semiotic resources that can strategically reflect their attitudes toward the controversies of nationalist events. Through layout and non-linguistic modes, they demonstrate their authoritative roles as the representative of promoting domestic products and moral representatives of patriotic youth. To sum up, this study promotes the understanding of how online posters are produced and presented as multimodal artifacts in the digital public space. It also reveals that the multimodality of online posters provides online celebrities with a variety of semiotic resources at their disposal, thereby dramatically changing the meaning-making processes of online practitioners (Veum & Undrum, 2018).

As a preliminary attempt, this study has some limitations that need to be clearly stated and used as a direction for future research. First, we focused on only 20 posters and included only livestreamers. These choices dictate the limitations of the data in revealing the role of online celebrities in promoting “buying national” online. Secondly, livestreaming posters, as static online content, contain fewer multimodal semiotic resources than the short videos or livestreaming that are currently receiving more attention. Online posters therefore have limited information that can be conveyed to viewers. Finally, we only focused on the content created by the online celebrities taking no consideration of the responses and perceptions of the online viewers, thus could not be informed about the effectiveness of the social interactions. Future research could use the above points as a starting point for further exploration.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors’ contributions

Y. W confirms full accountability for the following tasks: conceptualizing and designing the study, collecting and analyzing the data, interpreting the results, and preparing the publication.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal’s policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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