

PERSUASION IN SOCIAL ADVERTISEMENT ABOUT DENGUE FEVER: A SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTIC APPROACH

**PERSUAÇÃO EM PROPAGANDA SOCIAL SOBRE DENGUE: UMA
ABORDAGEM DA LINGUÍSTICA SISTÊMICO-FUNCIONAL**

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Denise Maia Pereira¹

Fabíola de Jesus Soares Santana²

José Haroldo Bandeira Sousa³

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on aspects of social advertisements, that are part of a rich discursive genre evidenced by their increasingly common exposure on social media and require the use of varied semiotic resources to be fully understood. It sought to investigate how persuasion is employed in government social advertising about dengue fever on a social media outlet. To achieve this goal, this study investigates an evaluation between images and words in the persuasive process in the construction of meaning using Grammar of Visual Design and Systemic-Functional linguistics. Through an analysis of data collected from three social advertisements, the results were: in terms of ideational metafunction, the most used transitivity process was the material process; persuasion via seduction and persuasion via conviction were used in the corpora.

Keywords: Persuasion; Systemic-Functional Linguistics; Social advertisement.

RESUMO

Este trabalho relata aspectos de propagandas sociais, que são parte de um rico gênero discursivo evidenciado pela sua exposição cada vez mais comum em redes sociais e requer o uso de uma variedade semiótica de recursos para que sejam plenamente compreendidos. O estudo buscou investigar como a persuasão é empregada na publicidade governamental sobre a dengue em uma rede social. Para alcançar esse objetivo, este estudo investiga uma avaliação entre imagens e palavras no processo persuasivo de construção de significado utilizando a Gramática do Design Visual e a Linguística sistêmico Funcional. Através da análise de dados coletados de três anúncios em redes sociais, os resultados foram: em termos de metafunção ideacional, o processo transitivo mais utilizado foi o processo material; a persuasão por sedução e a persuasão por

convicção foram utilizadas nos corpora.

Palavras-chave: Persuasão; Linguística Sistêmico-Funcional; Propaganda Social.

1. INTRODUCTION

Situated at the intersection of information and manipulation, advertising frequently relies on implicit forms of communication to shape meanings and influence audiences. The increasing prominence and communicative potential of multimodal texts in contemporary media, driven by advances in information and communication technologies, have significantly transformed communicative practices. In this context, the interplay between verbal and visual modes has become increasingly complex, producing meanings through multiple and interconnected semiotic resources. Images, colors, illustrations, and other non-verbal elements no longer function merely as support for written language; rather, they actively participate in meaning-making. Their pervasive presence in contemporary culture therefore requires specific, critical, and context-sensitive approaches to interpretation.

The use of social networks has increased exponentially and so has advertising on them, especially on the most used social network in Brazil, Instagram. It is used by almost ninety percent of the country's internet users, and almost seventy percent of them say they use social media to keep up to date. In this context, social advertisements are part of a rich discursive genre evidenced by their increasingly common exposure on social media and require the use of varied semiotic resources to be fully understood. The use of multimodal texts, such as social advertising in online contexts, can have enormous impacts on persuasion, particularly in worlds of color

and screens like ours. Advertising itself has the basic aim of influencing people's behavior (Pinho, 2001), and social advertising aims to convince individuals to change their attitude towards a dramatic problem of social relevance or to modify a well-established behavior towards socially responsible conduct (Viganò, 2011).

Advertising, due to its persuasive nature and its ability to capture readers' attention, can motivate audiences effectively (Wojdyski; Evans, 2016). In addition, advertisements are useful for capturing attention, responding to cognitive needs, and ultimately bringing about changes in behavior (MCALISTER et. al., 2016). In many ads, the persuasive function can be strategically hidden (Santaella, 2021).

As Kress (2010, p. 133) says, "writing, previously the canonical mode par excellence, is giving way to the image, constituting what has been called multimodality". Images and writing have their own specific potential, in other words, their own capacity to create meaning. On one hand, the image is supported by the logical arrangement of space; language, on the other hand, is based on the logical sequence of time and contains words, sentences, etc. Given the difference in representation, each mode is used to achieve a specific semiotic goal (Kress, 2010).

Previous studies have explored how social media has been used to inform about dengue viral infection (Miola; Marques, 2020), (Moreira; Pinheiro, 2015) and (Aiello; Renson; Zivich, 2020), for example. We found that none of them analyzed the covert forms of the government's social advertisements on dengue fever using persuasion and ideational metafunctions, as well as analyzing images through Grammar of Visual Design (Kress; Van Leeuwen, 2006).

This study sought to investigate how persuasion is employed in government social advertising about dengue fever on a social media outlet - Instagram. To achieve this goal, this study investigates an evaluation between images and words in the persuasive process in the construction of meaning using Grammar of Visual Design (GVD) (Kress; Van Leeuwen, 2006) and Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004).

2. CONTEXTUALIZATION

Since Systemic-Functional Linguistics seeks to relate linguistic structures to the social context in which they are produced, it is important to contextualize this study. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), dengue has become a growing public health concern, with approximately four billion people in more than one hundred countries identified as being at risk of infection. In Brazil, in the first three months of 2024, there was more than two million confirmed cases of dengue infection and almost a thousand dengue-related deaths. This was more than half of the cases confirmed in 2023, which was almost twenty percent higher than in 2022, according to the Brazilian health authorities. Even though a marked reduction in the number of cases was observed in 2026 (Soares, 2026), dengue is still a serious problem in the country.

In 2024, Brazil became the first country in the world to offer the dengue vaccine in its public health system. Social advertisements from the government urging the vaccination campaign and information about dengue appeared on official government Instagram profiles, such as the official profile of the Federal Government, the official profile of a state, Maranhão, and the official

profile of a city hall, São Luís, which were the ones analyzed in this study and more details about them will be in the 'method' section.

In a socio-historical panorama, as an example to consider, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a context of a shortage of vaccines and medicines, the government of the state of Maranhão followed the WHO's recommendations, even though these recommendations were not followed or disseminated by the former president of Brazil. The far-right ex-president's pseudo-arguments contributed to the disqualification of vaccines, to hesitant individuals refusing them and to adding distrust to both the origin of vaccines and political-ideological factors (Peixoto; Leal; Marques, 2023). This misinformative discourse has defamed vaccination, as well as devastating other types of immunization throughout the country (Recuero; Volcam; Jorge, 2022). In a study on political ideology (Barberia; Rosa, 2021), it is stated that the likelihood of willingness to be vaccinated is accentuated among the population that identifies itself on the left of the political-ideological scale, while this willingness falls among individuals on the right of the political-ideological axis.

Thus, since several states in Brazil, including Maranhão, have declared a health emergency, as rising global temperatures and a season of heavy rainfall have brought outbreaks of tropical diseases, such as arboviruses like dengue, which is transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, this study aims to investigate how persuasion is employed in the government's social advertisement about dengue on social media.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Systemic-Functional Linguistics is a theoretical methodological study proposed by Halliday (1985), which was later developed by key figures in this field, including Christian Matthiessen, James Martin and Ruqaiya Hasan. There are four premises underlying SFL: language use is functional; its function is the construction of meanings; therefore, its purpose is semantic; meanings are directly influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged; and, finally, the process of language use is semiotic (Eggins, 2004). In order to classify the types and meanings generated by social actors, SFL conceives of language as the expression of three metafunctions, which act simultaneously: ideational, interpersonal and textual.

The ideational metafunction is related to meaning, which concerns the way external reality is represented in the text, the content of the message and refers to the function of language to describe human activities or experiences. One of the main components of the ideational metafunction is transitivity. The transitivity of verbs is an important semantic system for expressing the ideational function and includes six processes: material process - indicates physical action in the real world; behavioral process - a hybrid process that is mainly a mixture of a material and mental process; mental process - represents the processes of cognition, affect and perception; existential process - represented by an empty "there" in the subject position to indicate the processes of existence; relational - expresses possession, equivalence, attributes; and verbal - represents the process of communication.

Transitivity (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004) also deals with the encoding by language users of their experiences of the world in which they live and is interested in the semantic power relations of

who does what to whom. From this perspective, Fowler (1991) suggests that transitivity analysis can offer insights into the writer's perceptions of actions, events, situations, as well as the ways in which the reader's interpretation is oriented in a particular direction. Ultimately, it allows us to see how linguistic structures construct specific ideologies (Fairclough, 2001).

The interpersonal metafunction, for the social relation of enaction, is a function by which speakers participate in speech events, make comments, and take on communication roles (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004). It is the metafunction that is considered as a piece of interaction between the speaker and the listener. In this metafunction, a clause is analyzed in terms of mood and residue. Mood can be identified as the grammatical structure that makes the interactional movement in the dialogue. Modality can be defined as the grammar of explicit comment, how people express their degree of commitment to the truth of the propositions they utter, and their views on the desirability or otherwise of the situation referred to (Fowler, 1991).

The textual metafunction (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004) is realized through thematic structure - including the theme and patterns of thematic progression - information structure - given and new units of information - and cohesion, which includes reference, conjunction, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion. This metafunction is language-oriented and is realized in the theme.

Multimodality is conceived as the use of varied semiotic modes and their combinations in a sociocultural domain that results in a semiotic event or product (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006). Thus, a multimodal text is one that integrates more than one mode of

semiotic representation and uses more than one language modality or more than one system of signs or symbols (semiosis) in its composition. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose the Theory of Multimodality, based on SFL (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004).

The authors (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006) propose three metafunctions: the representational, parallel to the ideational, works to show how the image conveys aspects of the natural world and shows the ways in which participants, events and their associated circumstances are realized (Bezerra, 2011); the interactional, parallel to the interpersonal, works to show how an image engages with the viewer, for the relationship between represented and interactive participants; and the compositional, parallel to the textual, works to show how the elements of an image are organized or reproduced to achieve its intentions and effects.

The authors (Kress; van Leeuwen, 2006) state that the integration of different semiotic modes is the result of a comprehensive code whose rules and meanings provide the multimodal text with the logic of its integration. Thus, verbal, and visual structures are not options for representing the same thing, as each has its own rules and codes for doing so.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain that there are three major systems for analyzing the meaning of visual communication in the relationship between producers and viewers of an image, such as: contact, the action of the image on the viewer, offering visual information; social distance, through which the viewer is invited to come closer to the participants represented (intimate social distance), kept at a distance (social distance) or placed at a distance (impersonal distance) (Macken-Horarik, 2004); and attitude, which is

realized by the perspectives, which are divided into a vertical dimension, which represent power differentials between the viewer and what is seen, as a relationship of power of the viewer; and a horizontal dimension, through which the participants are presented in a frontal and oblique way (Macken-Horarik, 2004).

A basic consideration for SFL is the interrelationship between language and context, so that understanding a text cannot be achieved solely from grammatical and lexical constructions. Context plays a fundamental role in the construction of discursive organization, involving the notions of genre and register. SFL approaches register in terms of three variables or parameters: field, which covers the socially recognized action in which the participants are involved; (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004) tenor, which concerns the relationships between the speaker and the audience, including the type of interaction and the level of formality in the linguistic act; mode, which is the medium through which communication takes place and which covers the selection of options in textual systems and the selection of cohesive patterns (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004). The analysis of the situational context aims to avoid subjectivism in the analysis (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004).

Language means interaction and its use reveals the relationships that people wish to establish, it is governed by intention and is essentially argumentative. In this context, persuasion tends to be implicit and to avoid the attitudinal language normally associated with interpersonal meaning, depending above all on the system of shared rules (Evans, 2017). Persuasion can be achieved (Lim; Childs, 2020) through conviction - which involves presenting a series of argumentative steps, through a logical process of accepting a form of reasoning - or seduction - which implies emotional involvement -

or a combination of the two. Another aspect that can be identified in persuasive texts is based on repetition. Repetition can focus the reader's attention on a particular subject and therefore act to persuade the interlocutor of the topic he or she wishes to address or delve into (Ramezani; Shokouhyar, 2020).

Since all the corpora analyzed had emojis, a brief explanation of these graphic representations is necessary. With the constant improvement of text messaging technology and social networks, visual resources have been developed to encourage the communication process and it is in this context that emojis emerge, which are pictograms that can represent feelings, ideas, or events (Evans, 2017). This type of image in online communication is effective in engaging and capturing the message, increasing the liveliness of the content (Lim; Childs, 2020), contributing to the visual aesthetics and attractiveness of social networks (Ramezani; Shokouhyar, 2020). In addition, emojis in online communication tend to positively increase the reader's effect, which can increase the intention to purchase what is being offered (Das; Wiener; Kareklas, 2019), such as the intention of government social advertisements.

4. METHODOLOGY

Based on ALE and GVD, this study addressed the following research questions: how is persuasion carried out in the government's social advertisement on dengue?; what processes related to transitivity were used?; Were emojis used in persuasion? To answer these questions, data was collected by searching Instagram on three official government accounts (one for the municipality - São Luís Health Department -, one for the state - Maranhão Health Department - and one for the Ministry of Health of Brazil). A social

advertisement was chosen from each of these accounts. After collecting the data, the social advertisements were named '01 advertisement', '02 advertisements' and '03 advertisements', to facilitate analysis. The processes of transitivity, content, field, mode, contact, social distance, attitude, and the use of emojis were analyzed.

5. RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As already mentioned, the research in this paper includes three government social advertisements on dengue fever. Two of them focus on vaccination against dengue, and the other focuses on information about dengue. These are the three advertisements:



Figure 1: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DY7Eik3FfmW/?igsh=MmIZzlejlkZThy>

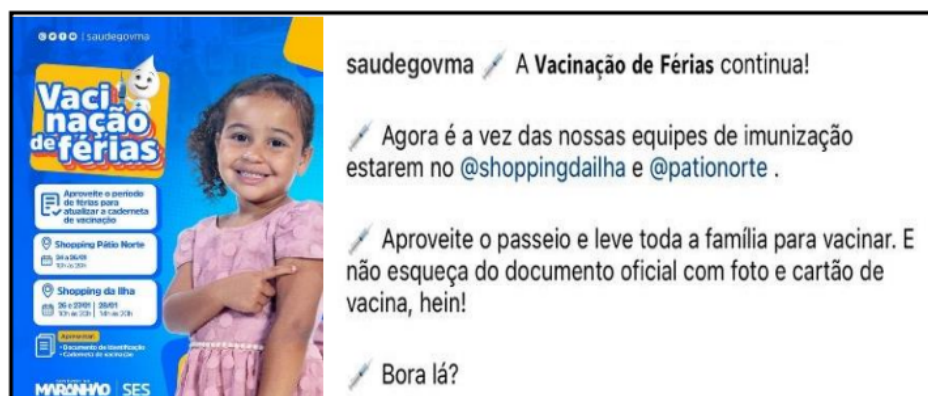


Figure 2: https://www.instagram.com/p/DVGUvk_DgrK/?igsh=MV2dnFwd2x2eDFzNg



Figure 3: <https://www.instagram.com/DY7ldfPNdy/?igsh=Z3pwZXBkcZhuZXdl>

The government's first social advertisement, called "01 ad", was published on the official Instagram account of the municipality of São Luís. The article deals with vaccination against dengue for children aged ten and eleven. The content suggests a health worker, by the blue glove pointing to the gauze on the child's arm, who has just been vaccinated. It also features a child representing the age group, ten and eleven, who is supposed to be vaccinated at the time the social ad was published. This suggests a close relationship with the reader. His manner suggests the use of very simple vocabulary, colloquialism, and aims to inform the adult audience to get their children vaccinated. This ad corresponds to close social distancing, even though the child's eyes are at a vertical angle, not looking at the reader, but at the place where she was vaccinated against dengue.

The government's second social advertisement, called "02 ad", was published on the official Instagram account of the state of Maranhão. The article talks about the free dengue vaccination for children offered by the government. The content suggests a child who represents the age group being vaccinated at the time the social advertisement was published, suggesting a close relationship. The manner suggests an easy vocabulary, using colloquialisms. The contact produced by the gaze, by the girl looking directly at the

audience/reader, establishes an imaginary relationship with them (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004). The girl is at a close social distance, as well as representing most of the Brazilian population, blacks and browns. It is inferred that, by touching her arm with her index finger, she is showing that she has been vaccinated/will be vaccinated. She is positioned on the horizontal line segment that makes a frontal angle with the reader, which allows for interactivity, and is at the same level as the reader. It is inferred that, by smiling, she is suggesting involvement.

The government's third social advertisement, called "03 ad", was published on the Ministry of Health's official Instagram account. The pitch is about the first doses of dengue vaccine that would be distributed to endemic Brazilian cities. The content shows a man, representing Brazilian public health endemic agents, and suggests a close relationship between the ad and the reader. The style uses formal language. The man representing the health agents is placed on the horizontal line segment that makes a frontal angle with the reader, which allows for interactivity, and is also at the same level as the reader. He has an affable smile, which can demonstrate a close relationship with the reader, as well as representing most of the Brazilian population, blacks and browns. The man and his words are in contrast with the blurred background, showing a predominance of information that denotes that he, representing all public health agents, is important in the fight against dengue, as well as the written text, which, basically in yellow, has the main important information, such as when vaccination will begin. It is understood that the non-verbal representation of a man dressed as a health agent together with the verbal text work to persuade social advertisement.

The analysis of the ideational metafunction examines how the advertisements represent experiences, actions, participants and circumstances through language. In the transitivity system, this representation is realized by different process types, particularly material, behavioral and relational processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The three advertisements contain 42 verbal processes: 31 material processes, six behavioral processes and five relational processes. Material processes therefore account for 73.8% of the occurrences, behavioral processes for 14.3%, and relational processes for 11.9%. This distribution demonstrates that the advertisements primarily represent dengue prevention and vaccination as forms of concrete social action.

Material processes are predominant in all three advertisements. Ad 01 contains nine material processes, Ad 02 contains fifteen, and Ad 03 contains seven, resulting in 31 occurrences. Material clauses represent actions and events in the physical or social world, typically answering the question “What did the participant do?” They usually involve an actor, who performs the action, and may also include a goal, which is affected by the process. In clauses such as “Take your child to be vaccinated” and “Get vaccinated against dengue”, the actor is the reader, grammatically omitted but recoverable from the imperative form. The processes “take” and “get vaccinated” represent concrete actions expected from parents, guardians or other members of the target audience. “Your child” functions as the goal or affected participant in the first example, while “against dengue” specifies the target of the preventive action in the second. The use of the imperative mood intensifies the directive character of these clauses. The advertisements do not merely describe vaccination; they instruct readers to perform actions. This combination of material processes and imperative constructions

helps transform public health information into a call for participation.

Material processes are also used to represent government activity. In “The government provides free dengue vaccination”, the government functions as the actor, “provides” is the material process, and “free dengue vaccination” is the goal. In “The first doses will be distributed to endemic cities”, the use of the passive voice foregrounds the vaccine doses and their destination, while the governmental Actor remains implicit. Although the grammatical constructions are different, both clauses portray public authorities as agents responsible for organizing and implementing vaccination. The predominance of material processes is therefore connected to two complementary systems of responsibility: the government acts by providing, distributing and organizing vaccination; and the population acts by taking children to vaccination centers, receiving the vaccine and eliminating mosquito breeding sites. Consequently, the ideational meaning constructs dengue prevention as a shared activity involving institutional action and public participation.

Behavioral processes represent physiological or psychological behavior, occupying an intermediate area between material and mental processes. They should not simply be defined as a mixture of material and mental processes. The six behavioral processes identified in the corpus should be presented through their actual verbal clauses. For example, if the caption instructs the reader to “pay attention to the vaccination schedule”, the behavioral process represents an expected form of attentiveness. If a clause states that a participant “looks at the vaccination site” or “smiles after being vaccinated”, it represents an outward manifestation of perception or emotion.

It is essential, however, to distinguish verbal and visual evidence. The fact that the girl in Ad 02 looks directly at the viewer or that the health worker in Ad 03 smiles is part of the visual analysis. These actions can only be counted as verbal behavioral processes if they are also linguistically realized in the written text. Otherwise, they should be discussed as visual behavioral processes or reactional processes within the analysis of representational meaning. Behavioral processes may contribute to persuasion by humanizing the participants. Actions such as smiling, looking and paying attention connect institutional information with embodied human experience. Nevertheless, this interpretation must be supported by the exact clause in which each behavioral process occurs.

The five relational processes characterize or identify participants. Relational attributive clauses assign qualities to a carrier, as in “Vaccination is free”, in which “vaccination” is the carrier and “free” is the Attribute. Similarly, “The vaccine is safe” attributes safety to the vaccine. These constructions are persuasive because they present accessibility, safety and protection as inherent characteristics of the vaccination program. Once relational identifying clauses establish the identity of a participant, an example would be “Children aged ten and eleven are the target audience”, in which one participant is identified in relation to another. Such clauses delimit who is eligible for vaccination and reduce possible uncertainty among parents and guardians. Although relational processes occur less frequently than material processes, they play an important argumentative role. While material clauses tell readers and public authorities what to do, relational clauses define who should participate and characterize the vaccine or vaccination program positively.

The advertisements' persuasive force results from the interaction of the three process types. Material processes construct vaccination and dengue prevention as necessary actions; relational processes characterize the vaccine, the public service and the target audience; and behavioral processes represent embodied responses, attention and engagement. The predominance of material processes does not merely indicate the presence of physical actions. It constructs a discourse of mobilization. Readers are positioned as potential actors, while children, vaccines and mosquito breeding sites are represented as goals or affected participants. At the same time, governmental institutions are represented as actors responsible for providing vaccines, distributing doses and coordinating public-health measures. This configuration supports the interpretation that the advertisements seek to persuade through both public responsibility and individual action.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how verbal and visual semiotic resources contribute to meaning making and persuasion in three Brazilian government social advertisements concerning dengue vaccination and prevention. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly the transitivity system proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), and on principles of multimodal analysis, the research demonstrated that the advertisements combine language, images, gaze, social distance, color, and emojis to inform the population and encourage preventive action.

The verbal analysis identified 42 processes: 31 material processes (73.8%), six behavioral processes (14.3%) and five relational processes (11.9%). The predominance of material processes shows that dengue

prevention is primarily represented as a field of concrete action. Through processes related to vaccinating, taking children to vaccination centers, distributing doses, protecting the population and combating the mosquito, the advertisements construct both governmental institutions and citizens as active participants.

Although less frequent, behavioral and relational processes also perform relevant functions. Behavioral processes contribute to the representation of human responses, attention and engagement, while relational processes identify the target population and attribute positive characteristics to vaccination, such as accessibility, protection and reliability. The interaction among these process types allows the advertisements not only to tell readers what actions should be performed but also to define who should participate and why vaccination should be regarded as necessary.

The visual findings complement the verbal analysis. The representation of children, health workers and individuals whose physical characteristics resemble those of a considerable portion of the local population contributes to identification and proximity. Direct gaze, frontal angles, eye-level positioning, smiles and close social distance help construct an imagined interpersonal relationship between represented participants and viewers. The advertisements thus reduce the perceived distance between governmental institutions and the population, presenting vaccination as a familiar, accessible and socially shared practice.

Emojis also participate in the construction of ideational and persuasive meanings. The syringe, mosquito, red cross, notebook, flexed arm, boy and girl emojis reinforce information already expressed verbally, identify vaccination-related actions and highlight

practical instructions. In the sequence composed of a syringe, a red cross and a mosquito, for example, the emojis form a visually condensed representation of “vaccination against dengue”. Their meanings depend on their relationship with the surrounding verbal text; therefore, they operate as complementary semiotic resources that increase salience, accessibility and attractiveness.

The findings further indicate that the advertisements employ persuasion through both seduction and conviction. Persuasion through seduction is produced by smiling participants, direct gaze, close visual distance, colorful composition and representations of children and health workers. Persuasion through conviction is supported by dates, numbers, eligibility criteria and references to health authorities and scientific organizations. Rather than functioning separately, these persuasive modes reinforce one another: emotional proximity attracts the viewer, while institutional and information lends authority to the message.

It can therefore be said that verbal and visual communication worked together to persuade readers and that explicit and implicit persuasion was used. It is understood that this study has some limitations, since other concepts, such as the use of colors, could be analyzed in further studies, according to ESL and GVD.

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¹ Doutora em Linguística Aplicada e Estudos da Linguagem pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo – PUC-SP. Professora Adjunta da Universidade Estadual do Maranhão – UEMA. E-mail: [acesse o artigo original para visualizar o e-mail](#)

² Doutora em Letras pela Universidade federal de Pernambuco – UFPE. Professora Associada da Universidade estadual do Maranhão. E-mail: [acesse o artigo original para visualizar o e-mail](#)

³ Doutor em Linguística pela Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ. Professor Associado da Universidade Estadual do Maranhão – UEMA. E-mail: [acesse o artigo original para visualizar o e-mail](#)

