THE VISUAL PROTEST REPERTOIRES AND THE PROTESTERS’ HEALTH IDENTITY: A BATTLEFIELD OF THE ANTI-NEW NORMAL MOVEMENT

Zhen Sun, Ph.D., Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology
Wei Luo, Ph.D., Department of Communication, Purdue University Fort Wayne
INTRODUCTION & CONTEXTS: ANTI-NEW NORMAL PROTESTS AROUND THE WORLD

- Over the past two years, many countries and regions have intermittently implemented new normal measures, which endorse practices such as masking up, social distancing, home quarantine, and vaccine passports, to curb a surge when a new wave of infection arrives.

- Since the early April of 2020, intensive or sporadic protests against the mandatory measures broke out in U.S., Britain, Canada, and Australia, just to name a few countries (Bogart, 2020; Taylor, 2020; The Associated Press, 2021). In U.S alone from April to early May 2020, in less than one month, there was an estimate of 245 rallies nationwide, with over 40,000 demonstrators involved (Zaidi, 2020). In July and August of 2021, there was another wave of the anti-vaccine demonstrations occurring in France, Canada, Germany, and Italy.

- The anti-new normal protesters are exposed to the constant risks of the deadly virus, as if oblivious to the scientific fact that they themselves are turning into super-spreaders of an intensifying plague.

- The individual protesting body, to wit, the body under the threat of coronavirus and the body restricted within the lockdown measures, has become the locus where various rival forces and desires encounter and compete with one another (Colebrook, 2003).
ANTI-NEW NORMAL PROTESTS (A GLANCE)
**Purpose & Focus**

- This study investigates the health identity of the anti-new normal protesters, who are the radical opponents of the COVID-19 health measures.

- It examines the visual protest repertoires used by the protesters in the two waves of anti-new normal demonstrations that occurred across North America, Europe, and Australia from April to August 2020 and from July to August 2021 respectively.

- The research begs these important questions: how the visual protest repertoires bespeak the protesters’ interpretations of the coronavirus and the mandatory protective measures; and as shown in their protest messages, how the protesters define their healthy identity and relate to a broader community.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HEALTH IDENTITY & COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

Heath and Health Identity:

- Health is not only an important component of our identity, but an expression of the identity (Hecht and Choi, 2012).

- Grabowski (2013a; 2013b; 2015) defines health identity as people’s observations, expectations, and interpretations of their own health, their knowledge about health, as well as the ways their health relates to and compares with the health of others.

- On the one hand, the construction of health identity is a dynamic process of observing and defining ourselves in ever changing contexts (Grabowski and Rasmussen, 2014). On the other hand, health identity emerges from the complex network of observations of communication among social members (Grabowski, 2013b).
Theoretical Framework: Health Identity & Communication Theory of Identity

Communication Theory of Identity:

Hecht and Choi (2012) develop the communication theory of identity, which views communication as an essential element of identity. They posit that identity is the product of the four-layered formation and management specifically including the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers.

- The personal layer: refers to one’s self-concept, self-cognition, and self-image.
- The enactment layer: conceptualizes identity as the expressed self through communication or performance.
- The relational layer: one’s identity is understood as being formed through not only social interactions with others but also the identification with specific social relationships.
- The communal layer: refers to how a particular group in a society constructs and shares an identity.
METHOD: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

- This study adopts a qualitative content analysis to examine the visual protest repertories in the waves of anti-new normal demonstrations from April to August 2020 and from July to August 2021.

- The research data consist the following: a) the pictures and videos of protests that were published or posted online during and after the protest events by mainstream news media (such as The New York Times, The Times); b) those by the local news media online (such as The Denver Post, The Seattle Times), and c) those on the popular social media platforms (such as twitter, Facebook, and YouTube).

- The process yielded 501 pictures for the first period and 193 pictures for the second period. Furthermore, different types of messages were extracted from the sample pictures. As a result, the study identified a total of 974 samples, including 887 distinct pieces of verbal texts, 58 visual images and/or symbols, and 29 body gestures, all of which constitute the textual data.
**Findings**

- The analysis yields 6 primary themes, all of which bespeak the anti-new normal protesters’ healthy identity in its complex web of tension-ridden relationships with conflicting social and political members.

- Specifically, these themes reveal the protesters’ self-definitions, which are characterized by two dimensions - their health beliefs (15.81%) and the perceived essentials in life (26.49%), their in-group identification (2.87%) and out-group identification (13.04%), their interpretations of COVID-19 (10.57%), and their interpretations of the new normal measures (31.21%). There are a total of 20 secondary themes identified under the primary themes.
DISCUSSION: THE PROTESTERS’ SELF-DEFINITIONS

- The protesters’ construction of personal health identity and self, above all, stems from their self-definitions of “essentials in life” and “health beliefs.”

- Notably, the sub-theme of “freedom and rights” emerges from such statements as “freedom makes their own risk assessments” and “my life is my own.” Some messages focus on constitutional rights (e.g., “say no to unconstitutional mandates”). Other messages claim God-given rights and Biblical teachings (e.g., “free to breathe God’s air”, “liberty is God-given no man made”, “God said: it is not good for man to be alone. Genesis 2:18”). A third subtheme “resuming the normal life” shows that the demonstrators demand to free the state or city (e.g., “unlock Ohio”, “end the lockdown”), resume work, unlock economy, and reopen school (e.g., “we need to work”, “I just want to go back to school”). They also request to resume the normal life activities, including personal grooming, recreations, and other personal and social tasks (e.g., “I want my hair curls”, “open our bars”, “fishing is distancing”, “planned parenthood is open”, and “we have the right of free exercise of religion and to peaceably assemble”)

- The protesters’ ways of self-identification clearly points to a reductionist approach to understand the biological, social, and political complex of which their bodies are a part and to interpret such a complex in light of a simplistic part-to-whole relation; they fail to realize the impossibility of a fixed identity and its given capacities in human social life.
DISCUSSION: THE IN-GROUP BELONGINGS VS. OUT-GROUP MEMBERS

- Whereas the protesters’ self-definitions divulge their failed attempts to fixate their health identity, the protest repertoires further shine light on these individuals’ group identification through their distinction between in-group belonging and out-group exclusion.

- The in-group members towards whom they explicitly express their care and support are divided into two groups – first, their family members and friends (e.g., “I want to play with my friends”, “My child was injured by vaccines”), and second, Trump and Trump supporters (only in the U.S.).

- Among the “out-group members” in the protesters’ classification, the most often blamed subjects are governments, governors, and politicians who implement strict Covid-19 rules. The new normal measures are accused of being tyrannical and devoid of democratic values. Therefore, those who advocate the measures are demonized as Nazis and Communists or metaphorized to the real virus.
In both the verbal and visual texts, the protesters appear to interpret the coronavirus in three ways: (In short, the coronavirus is never a health-threatening biological fact, but a horrifying political intrigue that somehow relates to communism)

- First, some of them completely refuse to believe that the existence of the coronavirus is a dangerous biological fact. (E.g. Protest slogans such as “shutdown is based on lies”; “COVID is no more deadly than seasonal flu”; and “virtual signaling” all point to the allegation that the virus is supposedly innocuous, as if the pandemic itself being a sensational lie.)

- Second, in order to support their argument that “COVID-19 is a lie”, some protesters not only refuse to trust the data provided by scientists and authorities, but also attempt to build their own “scientific” facts about the virus. (E.g. Their slogans spell out without any scientific evidence: “COVID-19 is a lie. Survival rate 99.8%. Death rate 0.013”.)

- Lastly, some other protesters create a conspiracy narrative about the outbreaks. (E.g. The texts express their belief that the pandemic is in fact a “plan-demic”, a new communist conspiracy or a mind-control plan.)
Figure 1: Posters depicting Macron as the coronavirus

Figure 2: Figure 2. Communism and the coronavirus
The final theme that emerges from the textual data imparts that the protesters generally complain about or oppose all the new normal measures, which are considered “more deadly than COVID-19.”

Many other protesters continue to live in their conspiracy theories with the belief that both the coronavirus vaccine and the health passport constitute an inhuman scheme by tyrannical politicians or “a big pharma botonic system” rather than the health protection measures. (E.g. some slogans read, “transhuman agenda”, “vaccine genocide”, and “health pass equal apartheid”, to name a few blatant messages)

Figure 3: “A tamed sheep”
CONCLUDING REMARKS

- This qualitative content analysis of the visual protest repertoires, which act upon the protesters’ health identity, discloses the protesters’ imaginations of the social surrounding, their expectations of life, and their underlying values and beliefs.

- In regard to physical health, the protesters take the human body as an individuated and self-contained system, isolated from a myriad of everyday associations. They prioritize the innate physical body, which is essentialized in that they view a static relationship between the physical body and the self as well as between the self and the others.

- How the protesters imagine themselves and how they relate to other people not only constitute their personal and communal health identity but also determine their health choices and behaviors.
IMPLICATIONS

This analysis brings to light that the health promotion targeting at those who resist the protective measures in the Covid-19 pandemic should at least focus on three key questions:

- how to tailor the intertwining medical and political discourses to better inform specific audiences who carry contradictory health identities;
- how to replace the individualistic approach to social life with the communal approach;
- how to reduce intergroup incompatibility and bias so as to build normal expectations of one another.