

# A COMMUNICATIVE ACT STUDY TO SUPPORT HEALTH COMMUNICATION RESEARCH ON TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*The study in this paper seeks to examine the application of a communicative act study to investigate health messages about, for example, preventing disease and healthy living, on television advertisements. In interacting with those media including their content, audiences of the television program may perform “actions” such as looking at more closely to visual elements they see, paying more attention to audio element they hear, and paying more attention to visual and audio elements after pressing or touching any button of television devices. This is important to investigate as we often depend on those kinds of media of communication to disseminate and to get messages in relation to health. The use of those media for that purpose relates to recent discussions in mass media and communication in terms of, for example, how the media can help us to maintain ideas of positive effect of the media content on their audiences, more importantly how the media can motivate the audience to do something intended by “senders” of the message. A communicative act study, which focuses on people’s “performances of action”, might help us to examine possibilities of audiences’ “performances of action” since when the audiences interact with the media there might be “actions” which result from their understanding of the media including the media content. The study in this paper can expand investigations of relationship of the media and their audience in terms of using a communicative act study, as a supporting approach, in health communication research which can then contribute to the discussions of mass media and communication in terms of television advertisement about health issues.*

Keywords: communicative act, health communication, interaction, television advertisement

## INTRODUCTION

When people watch a television program indicating a health promotion program including disease control and prevention, emergency preparedness and response, injury and violence prevention, environmental health, and workplace safety and health [4], there might be some actions done by the audiences, for example, paying more attention to elements they see or hear on the television and changing volume or color scheme by using supporting tools of the television devices. These audiences’ performances of action play an important role in determining effectiveness of the intention of the health communication program. However, there is still small number of research about communicative aspects in health communication.

Previous research with regard to health communication has focused on, for example, relationships between information management and people’s behavior [7], issues of social

change including political, economic, and environmental issues [1], and multiple discourses in health communication including public health, medical interaction, and self-management [4]. Those researches do not concern how people do some actions and why in relation to content of health promotion texts, as totality of the health communication program in television, including the television devices.

To investigate people performance of actions, there is a need for an approach which concerned with how people do something when interacting with something, and why. A communicative act study concerns this matter and may be useful for that investigation. Thus, the study that this paper draws on examines *a possibility of the application of a communicative act study to investigate television advertisement about health, and why*.

To answer that question, this paper presents a brief of previous research in relation to health communication followed by a communicative act study and a possibility of its application in health communication of television advertisements. For the purpose of the investigation, this paper uses some examples of the health promotion program from Indonesian television advertisements in 2011 randomly.

### **Health communication**

Health communication includes the art and technique of informing, influencing, and motivating individual, institutional, and public audiences about important health issues [4]. When communication is emphasized in health communication, it becomes evident that communication behavior is important in health communication research and practice as communication behavior contributes to vital health outcomes [4].

To achieve the goal of communication in health promotion programs, for example in television advertisements, as these media are the concern of the study in this paper, visual and audio elements of the program as well the television devices play an important role. Audiences of the program interact with those elements and the devices and may do something after seeing or hearing the visual/audio elements. The audiences may also use the devices after interacting with those visual/audio elements. In other words, the elements and the devices may motivate the audiences to do something.

Exploring such actions from the audiences of the health promotion programs relates to the importance of communication behavior in health communication leading to achieving the goal of communication. This relates to a statement [4] that sometimes communication behavior directs positive health behavior. In addition, at other times, it contributes to behavior with negative health outcomes. A communicative act study may become important in that process as this study is concerned with performing actions in relation to certain elements or tools that people interact with.

### **Communicative act**

As in [5], a communicative act study, derived from speech act theory, is useful to investigate

user multimedia interaction in a way that such approach contributes to investigate users' performance of actions since when interacting with the multimedia text and its related tools, there are actions which result from the users' understanding of the text and the tools. In communicative acts performance of actions from people is the result of their interaction with something. For example, in speaking a language a hearer may do something such as open a door after a speaker asks him/her to do so. Another example is the sentence '*This room is hot*' can be interpreted as a statement or a command. As a statement that sentence means an announcement about the situation of the room, whereas as a command, it may refer to a request from the speaker to the hearer to open the window or switch on the air conditioning. This concept may be useful to be applied in examining interactions between audiences and television program particularly health promotion program as the concern of this paper.

Referring to a communicative act study, we can see that the health communication program on the television, comprising visual and audio elements and related tools of the television devices as the speaker and the audience as the hearer. As in [5], in a process of communication a speaker's utterance can be understood by hearers (we can say this is a communicative act) because the communicative act in this communication activity are relevant to them. In addition to relevance in communicative acts, mutual understanding also plays an important role in communication action [2]. Communication action refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of *interpretation* refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus [8]. The important thing in mutual understanding is the attitudes of the people involved in the communication, since they may be able to establish and understand the communication, in addition to the ability to utter and write sentences [2].

In order to achieve successful communication, as in [3], there is a set of preconditions for the performance of speech acts: *propositional content*, *preparatory conditions*, *sincerity conditions*, and *essential conditions*. *Propositional content* indicates features of the semantic content of the utterance. *Preparatory conditions* show the necessary contextual features. *Sincerity conditions* specify the speaker's wants and beliefs. *Essential conditions* refer to the convention by which the utterance is to count as something expressed in the proposition. For the purpose of the study in this paper, 'stating' was chosen as an example of a representative act and 'requesting' as a directive act because these two kinds of acts emerge from the television advertisement text studied.

The television devices represent information for the audiences about accessing the television advertisement material and these are seen as a 'statement'. The audience see the devices and may use them, especially if they have previous knowledge or experience of the functions of the devices. The eyelines from the image and the sound from the text indicate 'requesting' since we can see that these elements 'ask' the users to look at the image and pay attention to parts/sections after hearing the sounds. The audiences' understanding about this is influenced by their knowledge/experience about something relating to these elements/objects.

## Application of a communicative study

When interacting with the television advertisements, the audiences interact with all elements from the text and the television devices more or less simultaneously. This may be similar to user multimedia interactions. As in [5], there are possible understandings that emerged in the user multimedia interaction, which are legibility of the word elements, evaluating the usefulness of still and moving images, relationships between the images and the users, saliency of the visual elements, the role of supported elements, understanding the composition, and understanding the multimedia tools. In the study of this paper those understandings are taken to investigate the application of a communicative act study in health communication promotion text on television.

This paper only provides an example of image (in a form of still images) from each chosen text for the example of analysis. In the examples of television advertisement below about hand washing some of the images in the text may relate to the audiences, for example the faces of the children in Fig. 1 and 2. This relation is an 'imaginary relation', as 'demand' images symbolically demand something from the viewers. The concept of communicative act helps us to explain this relationship between the images and the audiences, and why the audiences may afford such meaning to this relationship. In this relationship the audiences are 'motivated' to see the eyelines of the depicted image since we can say that the image itself forms a 'relation' to the audiences, and 'asks' them to look at it. Facial expressions (looking at the viewers in Fig. 1 and 2) and gestures (raising her hand in Fig. 1) within the images and over the texts also support this relation. The children's eyelines in the examples provided may invite us to be closer to the image to understand a process of understanding about the importance of hand washing before starting several activities such as eating. The eyelines form a 'relation' between the object seen in the text to the audiences as a 'direct address'.



Fig. 1. Health communication: hand washing (1), 14 Feb 2012.  
Source: < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lLawasACHm8>>



Fig. 2. Health communication: hand washing (1), 14 Feb 2012.  
Source: < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cGQb0DjBq4>>

So, the children's eyelines in this text 'want' us to look more closely at them to understand the process depicted by this image. We can say that people in the images 'talk' and 'ask' us to perform such an 'action'. This image is designed to get the audiences to understand the importance of hand washing. These kinds of images are seen as representing 'speech acts' in the form of a visual element. In this context the persons who 'speak' to the audiences through these images are the children. Thus, the children, through these images, 'invite' an action from the audiences.

If the audiences perform their 'action', which is looking at the images more closely, this means both the children and the audiences took part successfully in developing preconditions (*propositional content, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and essential conditions*) before this 'action' which causes the relation between these kinds of images and the audiences [3]. In terms of *propositional content*, the image implies seeing the audiences through its eyelines. The audiences may recognise this because it is similar to their experience in face-to-face communication. When the audiences see the image in the text, they may bring this 'social norm' and their previous visual experience into this interaction [6]. So, this precondition is about features of the image which can invite viewers to have a 'close relation' to it. The *preparatory condition* can explain the importance of such a feature in this interaction, in that the eyelines which look directly at the audiences are common, in particular when the person who talks with us wants us to do something. In the television advertisement text this kind of image was provided (by the designer of the text) to give an example of an image which can create a 'close relation' to the audience. The *sincerity condition* came from the belief that someone who wants us to do something usually looks at us through the children's eyelines. The designer provided the 'demand' image since it can make the audiences pay more attention to it. So, this precondition is about the designer's wants and beliefs in this interaction. Finally, the *essential condition* explains the convention that such an image can be used to express a 'close relation' to viewers which is common in face-to-face communication when someone looks directly at us. So, the precondition in the interaction between these kinds of images and the audiences is that the audiences relate their experience in seeing this image to their experience of communicating with people face-to-face, which is supported by the designer who provided the image.

When the audience use the television devices and its related tools, for example remote control and speaker, to access the content of the health communication text, this can also be seen as performance of actions. The devices/tools can be seen as the speaker and the audiences can be seen as the hearer of this communication event. The audiences may change the volume they hear or the colour scheme they see from the text with regard to their preference. When they use and see the television devices, the devices motivate them to use the devices. 'Performing the action' implies that they have understood the meaning of the devices which they use.

## CONCLUSION

The usefulness of a communicative act study in the health communication research in the context of television advertisement can broaden such research which frequently applies quantitative measurement. In other words, the communicative act study in this application can be seen as an alternative method of analysis to examine communicative aspects particularly audiences' performances of action when they interact with the health communication text.

Although a communicative act study, as an approach, is useful, it has limitations of subjectivity of analysis in determining acts and preconditions. This limitation can be overcome by providing research instruments which identify acts and preconditions from audiences' performance of actions, involving focus groups to elucidate audiences' understandings of these aspects and interviews with the designers of the health communication text.

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