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## The role of multi-modal posters in curbing COVID-19 in Ghana

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**Abstract**

This study sought to investigate how the application of multimodality in COVID-19 related posters contributed to the prevention and control of the spread of the disease in Ghana. Using random sampling technique, twenty participants were interviewed on COVID-19 related posters taken from hospital environments, church premises, secondary schools and university campuses, notice boards and doors of offices, their responses were analysed and discussed. It was revealed that the colours, images, inscriptions, and the nature of the letters (the use of lowercase and uppercase letters) contributed greatly in creating meaning and understanding about the disease, its effects and its preventive measures. Depending on what the poster was intended to achieve, a particular multimodal technique tried to project some information as more crucial in the awareness creation about the disease. Again, the study revealed that, posters involving multimodal communication acted as reinforcers, reminders, prompters and checkers on people in observing the COVID-19 safety protocols. Applying multiplicity of codes in one communication channel (poster) ensured social activities, exploration of cultural, social, and societal contents and topics, and the development of social relationships which occurs through various communication channels, ranging from linguistic to visual performative expression. Thus, the study confirmed the view that multimodal and semiotic resources have great impact on representing or constructing reality through artistic practices and addressing social meanings and representations that go beyond speech.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Ghana, multimodality, posters, semiotic resources



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## Public Interest Statement

In the era of COVID-19, multimodal posters had been an instrumental tool through which most of the health information and awareness creation were channelled. A critical analysis of COVID-19 related posters showed that, the posters served as reinforcers, reminders, prompters and checkers on people in observing the COVID-19 safety protocols thereby contributing to the prevention and spread of the virus.

### 1.0 Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the world caused fear, panic and uncertainties among people. These uncertainties kept increasing as many variants of the virus kept showing up. Ghana experienced four waves of the outbreak. Aside the borders that were closed in Ghana and the COVID-19 protocols-handwashing, the wearing of face mask and social distancing that were instituted, the Ghana Health Service (GHS) through the media fought the disease unrelentingly. The GHS sent in advertisements through the print (daily newsstudies), electronic, online and social media platforms to create awareness on measures to control the further spread of COVID-19. These adverts were designed well enough for people to see or hear and to make sense out of it. Even though COVID-19 adverts on TV, radio and the social media helped to control the disease due to their wide audience, poster was another communicative channel that tremendously contributed to the control of the disease due to its closeness, clarity, definiteness and precision coupled with the multiple modes that were applied in its design. This study shows how the multi-modes on posters drew attention to the general and the particular messages COVID-19 posters tried to convey as they showed different potential for meaning making like speech does.

### 1.1 Research Objective

The general objective of this study was to find out how COVID-19 related posters contributed to the prevention and control of the spread of the disease in Ghana. Specifically, the study sought to find out the role of multimodality in COVID-19 related posters, the sense that people make out of these multi-modes in posters and the communicative effect of multimodal COVID-19 related posters.

### 2.0 Literature Review

This section discussed some works that relate to the topic under discussion.

#### 2.1. *Coronavirus in Ghana*

Coronavirus begun as an epidemic in Wuhan, China, before spreading to other parts of the country. The outbreak of the disease was confirmed by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 12 January, 2020. WHO revealed that a novel Coronavirus was the cause of a respiratory illness in a cluster of people in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The disease was named COVID-19 and the pathogen (an RNA virus) identified as SARS-Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), (Adom et al. 2020; Kenu et. al. 2020). The spread transcended beyond the borders of China and gained roots in other countries in the world therefore becoming a pandemic (Velavan et. al. 2020, p. 278). Basically, the virus spread through contact with small droplets produced from coughing, sneezing, or talking by an infected person. While some individuals may remain asymptomatic, the most common symptoms in clinical cases included, acute respiratory discomfort, cough, fatigue and fever. "A patient's inability to treat this over 3 to 5 days may have resulted in complications which included pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome" Kenu et al. (2020, p. 1).

The first two cases of COVID-19 in Ghana were confirmed on 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2020. These cases were all recorded from foreign visit into the country but the disease quickly spread through the country and by 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2020, the country had already recorded over 7000 active cases and 34 deaths. The most threatening and scary part of this pandemic era in Ghana in the year 2020 were the issues of asymptomatic cases the state recorded in considerable numbers. The rise in the spread of the virus called for the reinforcement of the COVID-19 protocols. The wearing of face mask, the washing of hands and social distancing became mandatory and intensified. Other preventive measures were lockdown, reduction of numbers at public gatherings, ban on weddings, funerals, parties, closure of borders etc. The raising of billboards, hoisting of banners and posting of posters were intensified to create awareness about the disease. Later, there was introduction of vaccine and ever since, "Ghana has observed a decline in the number of confirmed cases from 25<sup>th</sup> April 2020 although enhanced surveillance is still ongoing", Kenu et. al. (2020). This assertion shows that the measures that were put in place might have contributed to the control and spread of the virus in Ghana. Kenu et. al. (2020) reiterated that, "these gains, however, need to be sustained and built on in our response efforts to end the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana". In response to this, offices, shops, hospitals, educational institutions did not give up on the campaign against COVID-19. The most resorted to strategy was the use COVID-19 related poster.

## **2.2. Multimodality and Poster**

A mode is a social semiotic resource for communication. This could be movements, a gaze, speech, colours, font or any semiotic resource capable of carrying information (Kress, 2013). A mode allows a shared socio-cultural knowledge about the semiotic resource. This means, the mode is a communicative tool used within a social or a cultural context. The inter-semiotic relationship a text demonstrates shows how rich that text is. If a semiotic resource could communicate meaning with regard to a social context, then that semiotic resource could be labelled as a mode. According to Elleström (2010, p.14), multimodality "combines the simultaneous usage of text, image, sound etc". Kress (2013) shows that a particular mode could have subdivisions which could also be expressed as multimodal. For instance, a text could have bold, italics, various font types for the purpose of enhancing meaning and precision in communication. Multimodality, could be applied to any facet of social life that would require knowledge consumption or knowledge production.

According to Jewitt (2013), the concept of multimodality shows that verbal communication is not the only means by which knowledge could be consumed or produced. Multimodality draws three assumptions: one, communication is a concatenation of modes; two, by cohesion, these multiplicities of modes contribute to one meaning and purpose; and third, multimodality is a social framework that seeks to draw its meaning from within the socio-cultural ambience of that particular text. Kress (2011) asserted that, one characteristics of a multimodal text is coherence. That is, modes within a multimodal text should be in harmony with each other to achieve the desired communicative goals. The coherence of semiotic resources is crucial to meaning-making (Halliday & Hassan 1976; Van Leeuwen 2005; Bezemer & Kress 2008; Kress & Bezemer 2009). However, Kress (2013, p.136) indicated that the principle of coherence differs from a society to society. Again, irrespective of the fact that coherence matters very much in meaning making, societies and cultures also govern how the coherence should accurately be employed to achieve communicative functions. The notion of coherence therefore means that the meaning of modes joined together in a multimodal text to achieve a purpose.

Multimodality has been applied in many areas. For instance, Kress (2013) looked at multimodality as a crucial tool in the classroom for pedagogy. In discussing this, he made an analogy of multimodality in the operating theatre and described the position of the lead surgeon, the learner and the auxiliary nurse as a multimodal ambience. In this case the lead surgeon had a closer proximal contact than his accompanies. Further, Kress (2013) by his theatre image pointed out that communication could also be multimodal by gaze, pointing of figures, passing a surgical instrument, stretching to touch an instrument etc. Even aside speech, there are various actions by which information could be conveyed as media. He further added that, for a plausible goal, multimodality cannot be neglected. It is obvious to affirm that knowledge enhancement is the end result of communication and signs are meaningful in a social setting. Therefore, without the ambience of social interaction this meaning would be void and irrelevant.

Further, the concept of multimodality stresses on the fact that communication can have a concatenation of sub-layers which are connected for cohesion and meaning-making. Jewitt (2013, p.145) applied this to classroom studies and demonstrated how multimodal classrooms have become. In her analysis, the use of overhead projector to teach a poem on the board whilst the teacher makes a polycentric gaze put such a communicative event in a multimodal picture.

Unlike Elleström (2010) who blended text, images and sounds as a multimodal phenomenon, Kress (2013) considered multimodality as different modes of communications coming into play for communicative purposes. However, these modes could also have sub-channels that are unique and meaningful in its special ways within a social context. For instance, written texts may have colours of headings, photos with different sizes, font types and font sizes etc. This study paid attention to poster with its sub-divisions to create a multimodal phenomenon as a means of conveying a message. The study focused on COVID-19 related posters used in Ghana. A poster is said to be a temporary promotion of an idea, product, or event put up in a public space for mass consumption. Typically, posters include both graphic elements and text. A poster may be either wholly graphical or wholly text and they are designed to be both eye-catching and informative. The COVID-19 related posters used in this study has multiple modes which cohered to convey the intended message. These posters were posted on walls, notice boards, on office doors, in public transports, hospital environments, church premisses, shops and supermarkets and other public spaces.

#### **4.0. Research designs and method**

Data for this study was taken from places in the Central and Greater Accra Regions of Ghana. Specific data sites were: the premises of Wesley Methodist Society (Bremam Asikuma), Our Lady of Grace Catholic Hospital (Bremam Asikuma), Bremam Asikuma Senior High School, Social Security and National Insurance Trust office (Bremam Asikuma), University of Education, Winneba (Ajumako Campus) and Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital in the Greater Accra Region. These areas were public spaces which a lot of people used. Permission was sought from authorities in these institutions before pictures of the posters were taken. Additionally, twenty participants were interviewed about the sense they make from the posters that were collected. These participants were randomly sampled and the interview was face to face. The participants included teachers, students, health workers, patients, pensioners, teacher and the general public. The responses gathered were analysed to reveal how the posters have helped in the prevention and control of the spread of the virus within the country. The following section discusses the findings

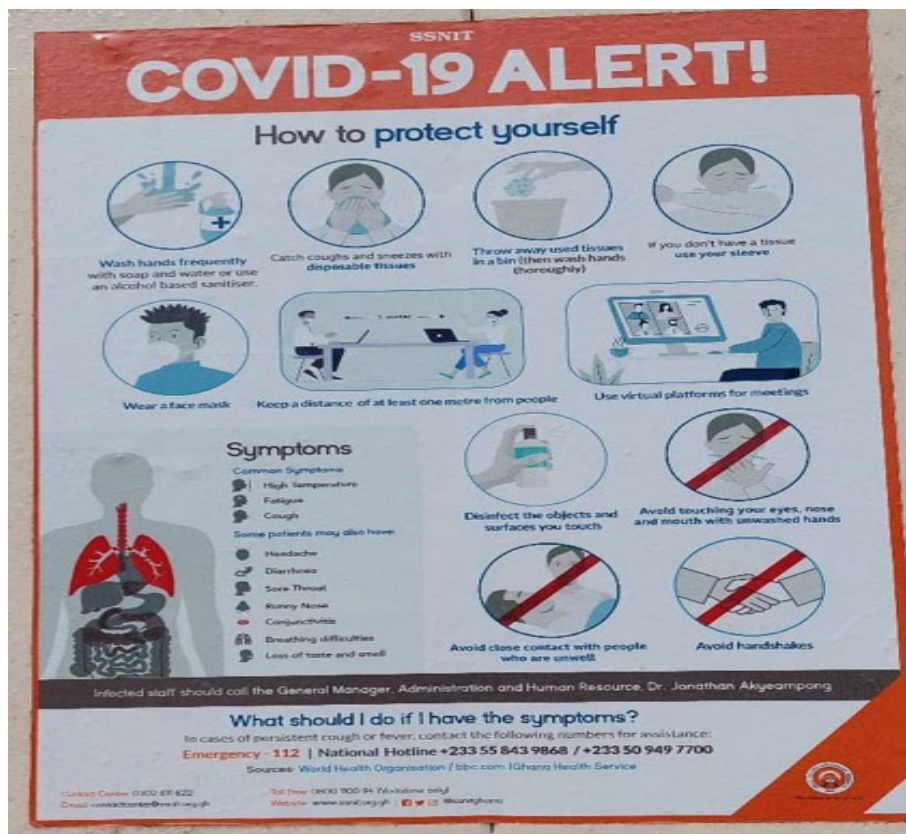


## 5.0. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the impact of COVID-19 related posters on the control of the spread of the virus.

### 5.1. Poster as an awareness creation strategy

Fig. 1 Various measures that could minimize the spread



Source: Social Security and National Insurance Trust office, Breman Asikuma

The ubiquitous influence of poster put a lot of people on the alert. Some of the participants disclosed that when the media broke the news about the presence of the VIRUS in the country, they did not believe it until they saw posters about the virus in every nook and cranny of the country which got them alarmed. In fig. 1. for instance, the caption 'COVID-19 ALERT!' is boldly written in uppercase with an exclamation mark by it. This implies that the message under discussion is the COVID-19 awareness. The exclamation sign is also used to communicate severity of a situation, aside its exclamatory role. For instance, in optimality theory, exclamation sign is used to label a more severe violation of a constraint, hence it is called fatal violation (Kager, 1999). The use of the exclamation sign showed that the disease was very severe.

Again, there is a third caption- 'How to protect yourself'. This third caption is divided into two with colour effect. The phrase 'How to' is written in black colour whilst the remaining clause 'protect yourself' is written with blue colour. It was perceived that the clause with the blue colour was a mode that drew readers' attention to how they could protect themselves from contracting the virus. Thus, the idea of protection against the virus was made clear here. Beneath the third caption are four images in circles. The first image in the circle is water flowing into two palms in adjacency. The second image shows somebody sneezing. The other image has a substance being dropped in a bin. The fourth image is of somebody

sneezing with the arm closer to the nose and mouth. All these images are accompanied by texts below them. The texts are not as conspicuous as the images; perhaps for the reason that images are more attractive. Again, many people in this social context who cannot read would be able to relate to some extent. This made the posters relevant to all people.

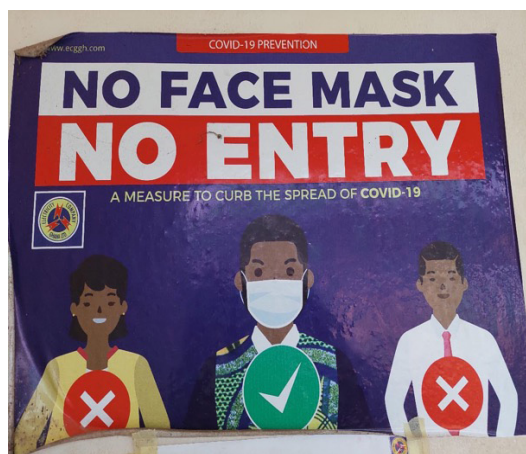
Furthermore, there are three other images on the poster. The first image looks like a young boy who is wearing a facemask. The second one shows two people with their laptops seated at the extreme edges of their table. The third image shows another person with a desktop accompanied by the text 'use virtual platforms for meetings.' These three images indirectly educated people on what to do to avoid contracting the virus.

There is yet another image showing the human digestive system. There is a part of the image which is reddened from the throat down to the trachea, bronchus and the bronchioles. The reddened portion stresses where the virus is believed to settle first and multiplies before the affected person shows symptoms. The label 'symptoms' is in cohesion with the parts of the digestive system especially in the thoracic cavity where it has been reddened. In addition, the symptoms of the virus are listed in adjacency to the image of the digestive system to reiterate the point made by the image.

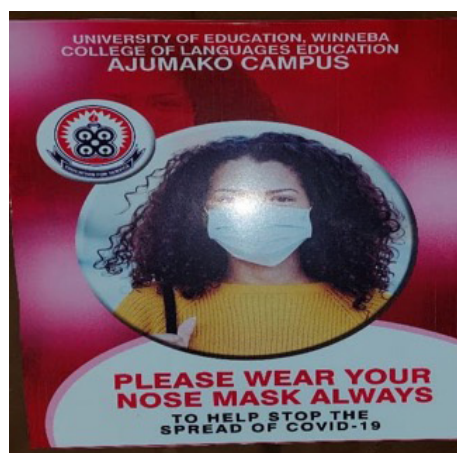
Finally, the poster discouraged people from touching their eyes, nose and mouth when they feel uncomfortable as these were the channels through which the virus entered the body. There are images showing someone sneezing, shaking hands and somebody by a sick person. These images have been crossed to show that such actions should not be practiced. The poster goes ahead to educate people about what to do when they suspect a COVID case. This information is written down the poster and it is not as conspicuous as the top one discussed. This is because that was not the focus of the poster. However, the poster still provided information on what to do should there be a COVID attack.

## 5.2. Poster as reinforcers, reminders and prompters on the wearing of face mask

Fig 2. Education on the wearing of facemask Fig 2.1. Education on the wearing of facemask



Electricity Company of Ghana



University of Education, Winneba Ajumako Campus

In fig. 2. we find that the wearing of the facemask was the principal focus in the poster. Among the three images, only one is in facemask, the remaining two are not in facemask. The middle image with the facemask has a facemask nicely worn; hence it is marked correct with a tick (✓) on a green background. The colour green signifies goodness. The remaining two images have no facemask; hence they are labelled incorrect (×) with colour red at the background. The colour red represents danger and the incorrect sign shows that it is unacceptable not to

wear facemask at a social gathering. Both figs. 2 and 2.1. emphasises the mandatory wearing of the facemask. As a result, it makes the image of a young girl wearing the facemask so visible and prominent in the poster. At a distance, the title of the poster is not as prominent as the image of the young girl with a facemask in poster 2.1. Again, the text beneath the image is subdivided into different colours and font sizes. The first part of the sentence has an increased font size with colour red, whilst the second part has a smaller font size with usual (default) font colour (black). Obviously, the first part in uppercase is made so to be in cohesion with the image on the top. As a matter of fact, the uppercase font size beneath the poster intended to communicate to the public to wear facemask always for safety's sake. As many as were prompted to put on mask and they did, prevented the spread of the virus.

### 5.3. Posters educate on the preventive measures

Fig. 3.0. Covid poster on mask-wearing



Source: Our Lady Grace Hospital, Breman Asikuma School

Fig. 3.1. Covid poster on preventive measures



Source: Breman Asikuma Senior High School

Figure 3.1 gives a complete education on the prevention of the disease through the protocols. There is an image of the microscopic virus at the extreme top right corner of the poster. So, just by seeing this gives a hint about the purpose of the poster. COVID-19 is boldened with colour red and violet in this caption for emphasis. Beneath the main caption is a sub-caption "PREVENTION MEASURES" and ways by which we could prevent the virus are itemized. We see a picture showing how to wash hands with soap under running water. Beneath the handwashing is the inscription "HAND HYGIENE" and a note on how to practise hand hygiene. Also, there are bullets with cautions. Beside each caution is an image demonstrating the message in the caution. In this case, viewers who were not literate could even consume the information on the poster. Some participant revealed that, the saved themselves from many infections, not only from the corona virus.

Again, we see the inscription 'SOCIAL DISTANCING' in uppercase for emphasis. Social distancing is being demonstrated with the images, where two people are waving each

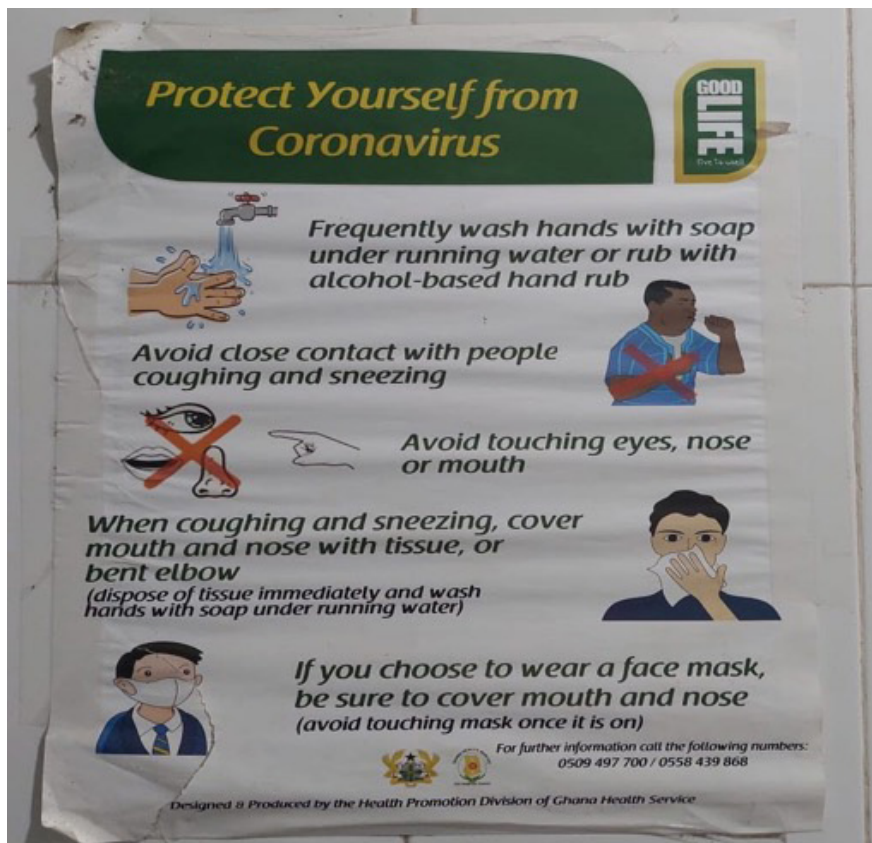


other. We also see three persons being separated with a measuring arrow in-between them. This image communicated social distancing as one of the measures we could use to control the spread of the virus. Certainly, when people obeyed and stayed apart, Ghana had seen a massive decline in the spread of the virus.

Fig. 3.1 shows an image of a head with a mask on and the inscription 'no mask, no entry'. Participants revealed that, anytime they were entering an office or a public place and they saw this, they were quick to put on their mask if they did not have it on. This suggested that, the posters acted as reinforcement and reminders. In most cases, the colours that were used to write the 'no mask, no entry' are in red'. In Ghana, the colour red signifies danger (Mensah, 2018). The text is also written in upper case letters which signifies seriousness. Thus, when people see posters with this inscription, they are reminded of how dangerous the disease is and quickly, they put on their mask. As many people put on their mask, they helped to prevent the virus from spreading. This was because if people had their mask on and there were droplets from infested persons, it was difficult for them to spread it because everybody had protection.

#### 5.4. Posters as prompters to ensuring personal hygiene

Fig 4. Covid poster on personal hygiene



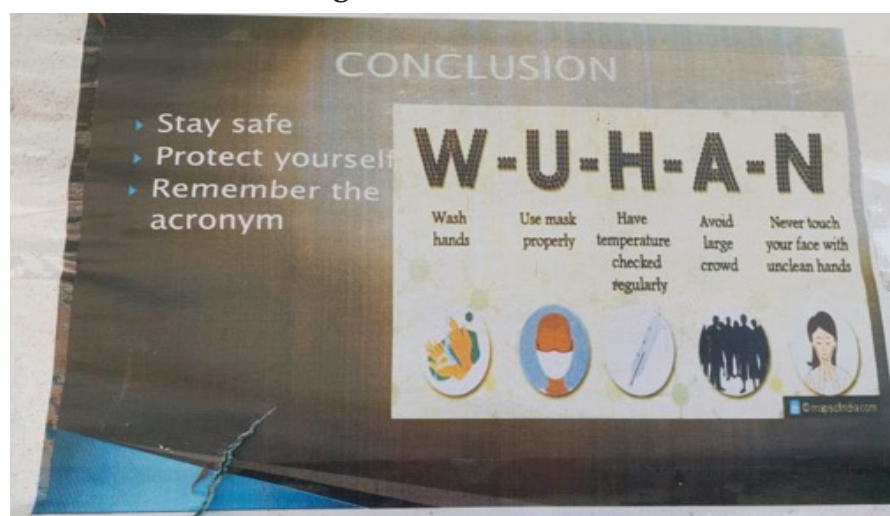
Source: Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital, Accra

Personal hygiene is seen to be one antidote to many viral diseases. The study revealed that, posters served as a constant reminder for people to practise personal hygiene. The above poster for instance, has image of hands being washed under running water. This indicates that it is good to wash hands under running water regularly. When we wash hands always, the risk of contracting infections through the hand is reduced. The poster also shows the correct posture to assume when coughing. The poster teaches that we sneeze or cough into



tissues and dispose them off but not into the palm. This is shown by an image of someone with a handkerchief or tissue covering the nose and the mouth. Should we sneeze in the palm and it happens and we get into contact with the virus, the temptation of touching the nose, eyes and mouth is high since these body parts are the sure ways through which the virus enters the body. We are therefore entreated to avoid touching these facial organs. This was an indication that the campaign against the spread of COVID-19 banned certain routine behaviours of people such as the touching of the facial organs which hitherto could cause them infections. Due to the severity and the lethal nature of the pandemic, strict measures were needed to hinder its spread, and posters were very well used to do just that. In this poster, COVID-19 titles and its preventive measures are not in obscurity. They are boldened to buttress the campaign against the spread of the virus.

### 5.5. Posters as encouragement to end the virus



Source: Wesley Methodist Society, Breman Asikuma

In as much as this poster reminded people of the safety protocols, it also educated them on the root of the virus and encouraged them to end the spread of the virus. The Chinese state, Wuhan, is acronymised under the caption 'CONCLUSION'. COVID-19 is believed to have come from Wuhan, China. By captioning the poster 'CONCLUSION', we are reminded of where the virus comes from and what we can do to end it. The **W**ashing of hands, the **U**se of facemasks, the **H**aving of temperature checked regularly, **A**voiding of large crowd, and **N**ever touch your face with unclean hand form the acronym WUHAN. It could be understood that, the conclusion of all the messages of the posters was one-we should do everything possible to end the virus. Among all the posters we have discussed, fig. 5 is different in the sense that, there was no mention of COVID-19 in it but it was able to fulfil its purpose of encouraging people to end the spread of the virus. The artistic way of employing multi-modes helped to convey the message vividly.

### 6.0 Conclusion

The study showed that poster was one of the strategies that was used effectively to control and prevent COVID-19 in Ghana. This was done through the application of multimodality. These multi-modes such as text, colours, images, different fonts, interjection were in a beautiful cohesion to convey the message the posters wanted to put across; making people aware of the disease and the danger it posed, guiding them to wear facemask appropriately,

reiterating the importance of obeying the safety protocols and due to the ubiquitous nature of posters, constantly acting as reminder for people. The study affirmed that irrespective of many modes a multimodal text may have, all the modes employed are done in cohesion to build a definite communicative purpose. The use of multimodality as a communicative strategy helps cushion the communicative goal to reach the target.

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### **Conflicts of interest**

There was no conflict of interest declared by the authors.

### **Author Biographies**

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### **Authorship and level of contribution**

**Raymond Amoakwah** conceived the research idea and contributed to the design of the study. He also contributed to the data collection, the drafting of the study, editing, proof reading as well as the general preparation of the manuscript. **Catherine Eku Mensah** contributed to the conception of the topic, data interpretation and analysis. She also played a major role in the general preparation of the manuscript prior to submission and publication.

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