Encountering Semiotic Misdirection in Covid-19 Etiquette Guides

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Abstract

This paper examines Global health misdirection unfolding at the semiotic level of Covid-19 related texts and images produced by the World Health Organisation. I argue that such public health materials, claiming neutrality and universal applicability, become multimodal etiquette guides that presume normal bodies and middle-class social environments. I give specific attention to how Covid-19-related materialities, affordances and emotive actants directly contribute to elite-making, stratification and strategic cultivation of shame and embarrassment with regard to Covid-19 etiquette. By tracing such an example of 'semiotic misdirection' in global health, I invite STS and adjacent communities to approach the circulation of public health materials as a semiotic practice that creates novel kinds of oddities and stratifications, and to consider the enactment of seemingly neutral and value-free public health rules as morally-charged etiquette.

Keywords: Covid, misdirection, etiquette, manners, affordances

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Covid crisis in 2019, the cultivation of safe and responsible behaviour has quickly become one of the key public health techniques for limiting viral transmission. On March 11, the WHO (2020) released the recommendation that

> social distancing and quarantine measures need to be implemented in a timely and thorough manner. Some of the measures that countries may consider adopting are: closures of schools and universities, implementation of remote working policies, minimizing the use of public transport in peak hours and deferment of nonessential travel.

Insofar as common 'dos and don'ts' — wash hands, wear masks, maintain distance— began to be incarnated in peoples' actions and attitudes they inevitably started activating new and puzzling kinds of etiquette (local rules of social acceptance and efficiency of interactions) and manners (forms of polite communication) in real-world contexts. For instance, in the first months of the pandemic, various elite newspapers and blogs began to recommend avoiding cash transactions, parties and social gatherings, keeping masks off the table, generously tipping delivery drivers, actively using knuckles for touching potentially contaminated surfaces and elbows for greetings instead

of palms and fingertips, as well as avoiding spitting, exercising outside and throwing away personal hygiene items. Clear and enunciated speech has been highlighted as an essential feature of effective communication while wearing masks, and eyebrows were suggested as mediators of emotional expressions (Woodend, 2020). Proper and improper facial hairstyles are discussed with regard to masks and respirators (Baker et al., 2020; CDC, 2020). Colour-coded wristbands—typically green, yellow and red—were suggested to signify the wearers' level of acceptable social distancing and preferred greeting practices (Baik, 2021; Levitz, 2021). Remarkably, this means that the WHO's statement (2020) on a "timely and thorough manner" of interventions has actually resulted in novel etiquette and manners tailored for nearly every imaginable social activity, bringing up a "tacit 'choreography' of everyday life" (Chao, 2020) in using everyday surfaces and infrastructures.

In this discussion paper, I employ semiotic reading Covid-19 etiquette rules and guides produced by the World Health Organization (WHO), that are meant to be used by everyone in the world, according to the official position of the organization. In doing so, I visualize the elite-making and stratifying dimensions of Covid-19 etiquette. Reflecting on STS notions of affordances and materialities, I argue that Covid-19 etiquette rules and guides produce misdirection at the semiotic level, signifying compliance as a matter of individual choice, and drawing attention away from chronic social issues and inequalities that are very present worldwide. By encountering such 'semiotic misdirection', I argue that distribution and circulation of public texts and images could be understood as a persuasive semiotic practice activating cascades of what Stark (2019) calls 'emotive actants', leading to a spectrum of moral and emotional manifestations in ordinary sociomaterial contexts. I invite STS scholars and adjacent academic communities to look for other signs of semiotic misdirection in the shared goal of disturbing a sustained imagination of global health as neutral and value-free practices.

Etiquette beyond casual romanticism

Before analysing Covid-19 etiquette it might be a good idea to start with a definition of etiquette. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2022), the term could be defined as "the rules indicating the proper and polite way to behave". In this definition of etiquette, the emphasis is placed on individual behaviours and rules that a person should follow. However, this definition is reductionist; it does not talk about social emotions as by-products of etiquette, and the fact, that etiquette if often a sign of divided environments.

Against this simplistic definition, series of sociological and anthropological works give etiquette a grim and problematic twist. For instance, according to sociology of manners pioneered by the German sociologist Elias, etiquette emerged in stratified societies around the globe, serving as a social technique for recognition and acceptance, that was directly linked to the social formation of elites and simultaneous cultivation of shame and embarrassment in targets deemed inferior (Coleman, 2013; Elias, 2000; Wouters, 2004). Etiquette, therefore, played a pivotal role in the formation and signification of social class, in which shame and disparagement were attached to the trope of a 'dirty, poor peasant', and, later to the 'worker'—as opposed to the refined and elegant behaviours attributed to the upper and middle-classes, whose gestures, food habits, accents and use of material objects were deemed superior. As the French sociologist Bourdieu (1986) summarised in the concept of 'habitus', such patterns allowed the maintenance of the status quo as the everyday signification of social difference was expanding in all directions through social institutions and upbringing. In a similar manner, etiquette directly contributed to essentialising gender and sexuality in social realities, primarily through numerous etiquette guides for ladies and gentlemen. Such guides casually constructed 'proper' women as sentimental, submissive, vulnerable and close to nature (Grosz, 1994), as opposed to cultured men, practicing gentlemanly masculinity (Pelden et al., 2019; Plumwood, 1993).

In continuing to disrupt the casual imagination of etiquette as something innocent and simple,

it is essential to mention that etiquette travelled with colonialism, framing sets of behaviours of whites as superior to that of the colonized and enslaved people, who had to behave according to a strict set of enforced rules to be judged as 'proper' (McClintock, 1995). For instance, in Southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe), racial etiquette included "deferring to whites, sitting on the floor of offices, coming when called, making way for whites on sidewalks, and appearing cheerful in the face of whites' demands for their time, labor, and approval" (Shutt, 2015: 51). In the USA, racial etiquette directly complemented the segregationist laws that "blacks must demonstrate their inferiority to whites by actions, words, and manners" (Davis, 2006).

Such instances cumulatively suggest that etiquette should be interpreted as a power practice embedded in continuums of inequalities, and that, by extension, Covid-19 etiquette is neither an innocent nor a romantic phenomenon, whose stratifying and elite-making dimensions should be unpacked.

A touch of magic: Rendering the proper body and world through simple rules

Etiquette and manners are directly connected to the sociomaterial world. However, the sociomaterial aspects of etiquette commonly remain implied behind the rules and norms, hinting at various 'affordances' (Davis and Chouinard, 2016; Hutchby, 2001) as ways in which systems and structures allow and restrict possibilities for certain behaviours. This vividly connects etiquette with the notion of body techniques as to how people "know how to use their bodies" in given contexts (Mauss, 1973: 70), and how bodies are manipulated through various practices of governance (Mol, 2003).

To illustrate affordances and sociomaterial features that are hidden in etiquette guides, let me refer to an example of Western table etiquette. To comply with this etiquette, a certain assemblage is needed: a table itself, chairs, cutlery, labour to put everything into its proper order, and food to be prepared and served. A person would be assumed to use two hands, in order to simul-

taneously hold a knife and a fork. Each of those elements in itself is a product of a sophisticated sociomaterial and bodily performance that is evident from investigations of material semiotics (Abrahamsson et al., 2015). The presence of cutlery on a table, for instance, is connected to several jointly connected processes: geological genesis of ore, systems of extraction of ore, the work of a blast furnace and casting to turn metal into the cutlery, adjoined with the industrial production and labour, and systems of produce distribution, as well as the purchasing power to obtain the given items. This backstage for etiquette is implied rather than spelled out. Each of those elements is an assemblage in itself that can be further traced as a network of events, raising a timely question for material semiotics: "When is it time to stop tracing those webs?" (Law, 2019: 4) Or, to provide another example: e-mail etiquette. It implies the presence of the internet, electricity, a mobile device or computer with the peripherals, an ability to input characters and perceive them, and other artefacts and actants of a sociomaterial network. In order to adequately implement etiquette and manners, all those elements of given infrastructures are supposed to be in place, allowing proper behaviours and certain possibilities of interaction to happen.

Tracking similar kinds of affordances and body embodiments with regard to Covid-19 etiquette and manners hints at a perplexing co-production. On the one hand, Covid-19 etiquette and manners help save countless lives by cultivating responsible public health behaviours. On the other hand, short and official statements presume the existence of those features of the body and sociomaterial settings needed to practice Covid-19 etiquette and manners. Following the idea that different practices with regard to Covid-19 render a multiplicity of ontological realities (Ashraf and Mol, 2020; Mol and Hardon, 2020), each of the rules could therefore be 'unpacked' to inquire into the implied bodily experiences and socioeconomic aspects needed to afford good Covid-19 etiquette.

Take, for instance, the core Covid-19 rules, actively pushed by the WHO:
- Wash hands with soap or alcohol scrub
- Wear masks

- Maintain at least a 1-metre distance between yourself and others
- Avoid crowded spaces and people who are sick
- Cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Self-isolate when sick

Here, bodies are characterized by a goal-oriented behaviour and performativity. First of all, it is implied that people have functional elbows to sneeze into, and healthy hands to wash. This etiquette rule is not achievable for many people: In 2017, 57.7 million people were living with limb amputation due to traumatic causes worldwide (McDonald et al., 2020). A rule to avoid touching eyes, nose, or mouth also implies the presence of these body parts as a default setting. To effectively avoid people in social contexts, people need to have functioning organs to gain information about surroundings. Globally, 36 million people are blind (Ackland et al., 2018), and 403 million people require rehabilitation to address hearing loss (Haile et al., 2021). Moreover, it has been suggested that the term 'social distancing' was historically employed to withdraw from addressing systemic inequity and the legacy of violence, as evident from how the term was applied for purposeful stigmatization with regard to race in the USA and class in the UK; more recently it gained prominence in the 1990s with blame-based narratives surrounding HIV positive people (Scherlis, 2020).

In order to wear masks, wash hands with soap, water or alcohol-based hand rub, people need to have access to such items, in terms of both access and purchasing power. Globally, two out of five people don't have access to basic handwashing facilities and therefore cannot easily wash their hands often (UNICEF, 2020). Approximately 10% of the world's population lives on less than US$1.90 a day, 25% live below the US$3.20 line and more than 40%—almost 3.3 billion people—live below the US$5.50 line (Sumner et al., 2020). This means that for more than half of people worldwide such compliance with 'simple' Covid-19 etiquette could be structurally compromised in terms of money alone.

A request to stay at home and self-isolate implies that people are not homeless or not at risk of eviction, that they have space for themselves large enough to be compartmentalized (i.e. the availability of separate rooms). Globally, 1.6 billion people live in inadequate housing conditions, with about 15 million forcefully evicted every year (United Nations, 2020). In the US, the most Covid-affected country as of June 2021, evictions disproportionately affect Black and Hispanic households who have been historically put in disadvantaged positions (Wedeen, 2021), thereby reinforcing the continuum of structural inequalities. Another implied specificity is the lack of income resultant for many if forced to stay at home; numerous precarious workers cannot work remotely due to labour settings, relying on their wage as the sole source of income with minimal, if any, social welfare support. For essential workers, the workplace commonly implies close contact as an unavoidable reality (Marinaccio et al., 2020). However, Covid-19 etiquette strategically cultivates positive social emotions around essential workers, romantically and sentimentally portraying them as self-sacrificing heroes (Vazquez, 2021).

As a result, the simplicity and laconic configuration of Covid-19 rules effectively misdirects attention away from 'real' people and their lifeworlds, and from the essential elements of a sociomaterial network that is needed to practice Covid-19 etiquette. This could be seen as yet another concern raised by medial anthropologists that how Global Health interventions tend to render 'contexts' as something stable and monotonous, wherein multiplicity and cultural specificity are subtly erased (Brives et al., 2016). This kind of misdirection vividly resonates with a concern that protocols—as strict and simple rules of conduct—render a romantic yet false imagination of a shared world in which everyone is connected, and from which the complexity and tensions are effectively screened out (Galloway, 2004). With a touch of protocol magic, the complexity of Covid-19 contexts shrinks into a simplified behavioural singularity where compliance with socially sanctioned 'dos and don'ts' is rendered as a matter of personal initiative in an unbounded and unobstructed space.

Reading 'Universal' Covid-19 etiquette guides

Where is a Covid-19 etiquette guide located? It seems that throughout vast material and digital landscapes, various elements of Covid-19 etiquette are being communicated through a heterogeneous network of signs and symbols: public warnings, street billboards, websites, TV, music, magazines, viral videos, memes, and information bulletins and beyond, together producing new moral meanings for bodies and social spaces. This might lead one to infer that in the context of Covid-19, the classic etiquette guide departs from the conventional medium of a booklet or book that a person might buy and study. Reflecting on this complexity, a conclusion could be made that multiple proliferating digital and printed materials, signs and warnings form intertextual and multimodal etiquette guides whose elements mutually reinforce and rely on each other. One way of theorizing ways in which seemingly neutral and value-free public health texts and images become morally charged etiquette guides, is to relate to the idea of 'emotive actants', defined by Stark as:

> the actants intensifying the experience and expression of human feelings, and [which] have an increasingly palpable influence within the contours of digitally mediated culture, politics, and social experience (Stark, 2019: 118)

Elaborating on this idea and linking it to the question of governmentality, Halwany and Bencze noted that emotive actants become especially prominent when emotions "are intentionally recruited to produce some sort of social/behavioural change" (Halwany and Bencze, 2022: 26). Emotive actants, therefore, highlight the interconnectedness between social, material and moral-emotional worlds, the interconnectedness that tends to escape from the formalized public health scope. This in turn means that signs of emotive actants as sociomaterial and emotional phenomena could be traced in intertextual Covid-19 etiquette guides, and for such an exercise it might be useful to relate to semiotic studies of advertisements and popular visual representa-

tions. First and foremost, images targeting wide and diverse audiences are fundamentally ideological and influencing practices: they dissolve implicit and explicit normativity in 'casual' texts and images, especially with regard to social class, race and gender (Callier, 2014; Correa, 2009; McIlwain, 2007). Semioticians draw attention to the fact that numerous everyday text-visual elements contain tightly coded values of neoliberalism as the dominant social, economic and cultural vector (Ledin and Machin, 2017; Magdi Fawzy, 2019; Rosen, 2019), including the tropes of 'flexibility', 'proactiveness','self-responsibilization', and 'minimalism', which people decode and react to. This semiotic concern resonates with observations of anthropologists studying sociality emotions, suggesting that the international response to Covid-19 accelerated the rapid emotionalization of everyday life:

> emotions are anchored in the concepts and logic of the global therapeutic habitus, the discourse of self-development and self-realisation, and bound up with a neoliberal emotional subjectivity. Cultivating, repairing, and managing the self through the interpretation and management of emotions becomes valued, even moral work, for both individuals and collectives (Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021: 3-4).

By extension, Global Health has been subjected to neoliberal influence. In the 1980s and 1990s neoliberal forces actively deterritorialized national health care systems around the globe, creating spaces and openings that were subsequently reterritorialized as the 'Global Health' that we see today (Sparke, 2020), emphasizing technocratic solutions and targeted and innovative action, alongside the reduction of economic costs and stimulated market competition (Holst, 2020). Significantly, major international actors such as the WHO actively transmit, transform and adapt neoliberal approaches to health and development, resulting in "a more heterogeneous global neoliberal regime" (Chorev, 2013), reflecting a wider process of ever-expanding neoliberal paternalism (Gane, 2021). As such, the WHO was criticized for reenforcing the ideology of the middle and upper classes (Navarro, 2007), declining occupational health support for workers (LaDou, 2020) and

maintaining status quo with regard to the systematic failure of privatized healthcare in managing the pandemic in low-and middle-income countries, including "hospital closures, furloughing of staff, refusals of treatment, and attempts to profit by gouging patients" (Williams, 2020: 181).

Given the magnitude of the pandemic and the international response, it is virtually impossible to analyse all elements of Covid-19 etiquette guides. However, it is possible to look into those images that claim universal applicability, such as those produced by the WHO which, by default, is supposed to speak to the entire world. To quote the WHO's mission statement published on the WHO website:

> We champion health and a better future for all. Dedicated to the well-being of all people and guided by science, the World Health Organization leads and champions global efforts to give everyone, everywhere an equal chance to live a healthy life (WHO, 2021).

According to the Similarweb tracking service, in September 2021 alone the WHO website was visited 53.77M times (Similarweb, 2021). The WHO website, therefore, is a good example of a multi-modal etiquette guide that, supposedly, is aimed at teaching all people on Earth on how to behave properly. In the following section, I employ a semiotic reading of Covid-19 etiquette guides presented on the WHO website, and discuss how these images semiotically communicate neoliberal ideas about normal social contexts and bodies, and how this meaning is subtly dissolved in the visuals. While the images presented below

form a small fraction of all images presented on the website, they nonetheless send a powerful message about space, care and body via cascades of emotional actants that could be semiotically encountered.

Consider the Covid-19 etiquette image pictured above, from the 'advice for the public' section of the website, rendering a default setting for a person diagnosed with Covid-19. This image establishes a connection with a reader by naming them 'you'. Everything around the dwelling is rendered as a monotonous, solid space in purple, with public health signs and warnings placed on it. Textually, the statement that a Covid-infected person ('you') has to stay in a separate room and away from others presupposes that people have access to rooms with windows, separate from others, and that frequent opening of windows is possible. Both statements are accompanied with bullet points, which generally add clarity and certainty to the statements. Visually, a default dwelling is rendered as a boxy, isometric projection; spacious and tidy. The isometric representation is a powerful technique for showing three-dimensional objects in two dimensions, enabling the above-mentioned flattening of the space. We observe the inside in a top-down manner: from above and through the hypothetical roof, signifying the governance or high powers that are observing people, reminiscent of how players control characters in management video games such as 'The Sims'. There is a window open inward, with arrows indicating airflow, presuming there is open space out there allowing the circulation to happen. Everything else is rendered as static. Two objects inside are red: the door and the

Figure 1. The WHO: Advice for the public, 2021.

t-shirt of a person diagnosed with Covid-19. The established connection between a t-shirt and a door hint at the 'isolation' and 'closedness' of the space and body. In the other room, a small group, probably a family, is well-dressed and organized as a social unit. The 'risk meter' in the left corner points to green, suggesting the social desirability of the entire image. The phrase 'know your risk, lower your risk' further suggests that management of Covid-19 is a question of knowledge and making informed and rational decisions, since 'not knowing your risk will increase your risk'.

Consider another etiquette image from WHO's advice for the public, representing behaviours as three main slider bars depicting location, proximity, and time, which are visually presented as separate and isolated entities. Each slider bar contains binary oppositions, indicating two options that are safe and unsafe, with 17 clearly demarcated positions that a two-dimensional grey slider could occupy. In sociomaterial contexts, slider bars are usually parts of mechanical devices: a person moves sliders with their hands so that

Figure 2. WHO: Advice for the public, 2021

a machine can produce a desired effect. This metaphor makes the implicit assertion that safer Covid-19 behaviours, presented here as dynamic and adjustable bars, are flexible choices to be made. The location ribbon renders two extremes: an empty grey room with a door; and an outdoor environment, signified by a cloud, a patch of grass, a mountain and a tree, without dwellings or visible human activity. This combination signifies a temporary escape from urban 'enclosed spaces', with their monotonous buildings, into romanticized nature, with 'open air spaces' untouched by humanity. This is perhaps a reflection of the trend among members of the middle class who began to actively work from 'green' areas since the beginning of the pandemic, and upper classes who self-isolated on yachts, private islands and other elite spaces. This escape in real-world contexts is a question of socioeconomic privilege, as lower-class people in urban contexts cannot easily afford to 'move' this slider leftwards. Similar patterns of escapism were studied, for instance, by semiotic analysis of SUV advertisements, showing the implicit ideology and constraints attached to the act of leaving behind the "petrified urban environments of postmodern capital" (Gunster, 2004: 27).

The second slider follows a similar trope: on the right there are six people—as grey as the sliders, the room and the mountains—standing without masks in close proximity to one another. Visually, the dense placement of people is not a product of the surrounding area. There are no visual elements that are pushing the people together, apart from the contrasting light blue and blue shapes that delineate three ribbons. On the left, two people are also in the exact same uncontested space, but wearing masks and keeping their distance. The third slider uses the metonymic representation of a 'digital timer' as 'time', whereby a safe choice is to have shorter time periods of spending time with others, ideally '00:00', as opposed to '59:00'. The maximum time represented is less than an hour, misdirecting attention

away from the fact that in densely-populated areas this timer would not be applicable at all, as close contact is an unavoidable and nearly permanent reality.

Finally, consider another collage from the WHO website, suggesting good etiquette while staying home: the #HealthyAtHome campaign.
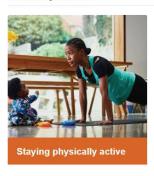
The campaign's focus on the hashtag implies that its audience would be digitally engaged with the programme, which subtly rules out roughly 40 percent of the world's total population that remains 'offline' (Johnson, 2021). In all images, none of the protagonists are meeting the gaze of the viewer, corresponding to the semiotic realization that Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) term the 'offer', establishing the semiotic illusion that represented participants act naturally in their everyday lives and are not influenced by a viewer.

In the first close-medium shot image, there is a clean, spacious room—probably a living room and kitchen—with a big window and shiny floor. The outside area is green and sunny. In a room a woman, wearing sports clothing, is exercising on a yoga mat, her face a picture of concentration. Next to her is a baby, dressed in colourful clothing, raising a hand toward the woman, trying to get her attention. The eye-level angle promotes the visual signalling of 'equality' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021) a viewer 'goes down' with the woman and her child instead of looking at them from above. The image renders a minimalist yet upper-middle-class setting—the elite space (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017) emphasizing the flexibility, and allowance for creative ways of self-caring and of staying healthy while in the lockdown that comes with a certain income bracket.

The second image represents healthy dieting. There is a large metal plate on the surface, with a rough hand, probably belonging to an old working-class person placed behind the plate, effectively rendering the first-person impression that the hand belongs to the viewer, or that the viewer is near the implied working-class person. On the plate there are bowls with rice, tea, a boiled egg, egg shells, and a plate with shredded greens and chopsticks. The high angle of the image again semiotically emphasizes the viewer's power, in this case over food and dishes. By portraying a set of simple and healthy food as a matter of readily available choice, the image powerfully misdirects attention away from the fact that that dieting has been a subject of social division in many global contexts wherein wealthier people usually have a better access to healthier foods, and from the alarming rates of global food insecurity more general. Rice and tea are a striking visual cue, requiring the cheap and tedious labour of millions of people mostly in South-East Asia. Approximately 144 million farmers produce rice, while 90% of them live near or below the poverty line, earning between US$2 to US$7 per day on average (Segal and Minh, 2019). According to a

#HealthyAtHome

Figure 3. Screenshot of the WHO #HealthyAtHome campaign, 2021.

study report on labour conditions on tea planta-tions in Bangladesh, more than 84% of surveyed workers stated that their income was insufficient to fulfil their family needs (Ahmmed and Hossain, 2016). In India, rations given by plantation estates to tea plantation workers are not sufficient to feed all the members of the worker's household, forcing people to buy additional food from nearby shops, despite the exhausting and low-paid labour (Rajbangshi and Nambiar, 2020). Before Covid-19, precarious labour conditions have already been a key reason behind high suicide rates among farmers. In India alone, more than 270,000 agri-cultural workers have committed suicide since 1995 (Stephenson, 2013), while pandemic-related bankruptcies and debts add another layer to the desperation (Singh, 2020).

The third image signifies healthy parenting through the image of a mother taking care of a child at home. The high angle signifies the viewer's power. There is a room with white tiles, which centres a woman who is sitting on the floor. Two bags are next to her—a red one with a strap, and a beige one with a top handle. The woman is directing her bodily attention to a basket with colourful, well-organized items, probably the groceries. A paper sheet with tight lettering is placed in front of her body. In the background there is a kid sitting on the floor who is about to open or close a box with colourful cubes, with some of them laying on the floor. It appears that they have just returned from the store, and a woman is verifying the purchases against the list, while the child is opening a new toy set. This depiction of the responsible mother actively providing a child with time, food and toys reflects the uncomfortable fact that in many contexts this form of caring is a luxury; there are widening class gaps that inevitably affect parental investments of money and time in children (Schneider et al., 2018). Moreover, dominant visions of responsible healthy parenting have "sought to impose middle-class mores on working-class parents"(Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014: 94) contrasting with the concern that neoliberal reforms of social services have "disproportionately rested upon mothers, often from racially and economically marked groups" (Craven, 2014: 9).

The fourth image depicts an urban landscape: glass, marble, tiles, asphalt and windows, with a focus on a warning sign suggesting quitting smoking. In doing so, the image does not represent 'home', but rather a post-industrial urban environment where a person is not supposed to smoke: "No smoking beyond this point". The sign helps portray smoking as an issue for a respon-sible consumer making bad choices, shrinking wider social, political and economic aspects of tobacco production and distribution. Given the fact that the campaign focuses on 'Healthy-AtHome' while the image represents office space, a link could be made coupling home and work. The disappearing boundary between home and work has been marked as another feature of the everyday neoliberal forces that pushes workers to be flexible "within and around work, and in and about employment" (Thomas et al., 2020: 3) and working from home during the pandemic has only accelerated this blurring.

The fifth and final image signifies mental health, as it depicts a person focused on an abstract acrylic painting mounted on an easel. The sense of intimacy is promoted by the close shot, and the participant's power is represented via the low angle (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The person is looking up closely and adding a brush stroke to a small area of the painting, suggesting a lot of time, energy and concentration was spent on this work. Behind the person there are well-thumbed books and small format drawings. This image powerfully renders a good mental health subject engaged with creative self-help, focus and mindfulness, while public health services are absent from the image. This depiction goes in unison with the contemporary trend of shrinking public mental health services, with health markets increasingly offering coping alternatives such as self-care and mindfulness, and advising people about their life-styles under the banner of 'emotional capitalism' (Illouz, 2007).

Taken together, a semiotic reading of Covid-19 etiquette guides published by the WHO suggest such textual-visual elements do not simply guide global communities for safe and responsible behaviour. They also act as defensive semiotic techniques to screen away public tensions from power structures (Hansson, 2018), and channel them directly onto people and their communi-ties. In doing so, the tightly encoded normativity

in analysed elements of Covid-19 etiquette guide direct attention toward:

(1) Being healthy being a matter of good personal health choices

(2) Infrastructures and bodily functions for affording good behaviours are in place and readily available to be practised as a matter of choice,

as well as tropes of 'creative adaptations', 'minimalism', 'individual responsibility' and 'self-care' with regard to Covid-19, while semiotically shifting attention away from the cycle of violence, precarity, and social anxiety, which, as numerous global health scholars have argued, exacerbated inequalities among the most marginalized people around the globe (Abimbola et al., 2021; Jones and Hameiri, 2021; Manderson et al., 2021; Sparke and Williams, 2021).

Toward semiotic misdirection in global health

Moving forward, this means that a surprisingly central role in the production of global health etiquette is played by the labour of graphic designers and networks of visual production, who are dealing with a catch-22 problem: simple texts and images are needed to send effective health messages globally, but these messages render simple realities. To take advantage and stand out, graphic design commonly draws on the advancements of semiotics and psychology (Jackson, 2008; Massironi, 2001; Ockerse and Van Dijk, 1984; Storkerson, 2010; Wagner, 2015) to grab attention and boost engagement. This aspect dovetails with the concern that misdirection, in general, "exploits many of our mind's limitations" (Kuhn et al., 2022: 18) to offer a persuasive story of how reality operates. First, it means that all carefully prepared global health texts and images, whether digital or printed, could be read as persuasive semiotic practices. Second, it suggests that these semiotic

practices in global health participate in misdirecting from something—from bodies, sociomaterial realities, people, concepts, institutions—and directing attention toward the 'frontstage' in the spotlight, which is set by the implicit and explicit political goals of power structures. This process could be understood as 'semiotic misdirection' unfolding at the level of global health related texts and images. As global public health and development nexuses have been promoting the socially responsible visual representation of people and their communities (Dolinar and Sitar, 2013; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005), another step could be acknowledging the semiotic misdirection in global public health texts and images. Moving forward, STS scholars, semioticians and adjacent communities could empirically study the phenomenon of semiotic misdirection in the shared commitment of disturbing a sustained imagination of Global Public Health as a politically neutral and value-free practice.

Acknowledgements

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