Multimodal product promotion in the pharmaceutical industry across languages and cultures

The present study is designed to investigate scientific popularization through two main genres used in the pharmaceutical context: Patient Information Leaflets (PILs) and online video ads. It presents results from previous research focusing on PILs of three drug categories (i.e. over-the-counter [OTC] drugs, OTC drugs with medical supervision, and drugs requiring medical prescription) in English and Italian. It goes on to analyse commercials for the same drugs found on YouTube. The choice of starting from a written text (PIL) to study a multimodal text (video) derives from the desire to monitor the varying dynamics and nature of medical communication across languages and cultures, in particular when pharmaceutical industries commercialize their drugs to patients and to the general public. The linguistic (spoken, written and level/style of language) and visual (image, setting, product presence and positioning) aspects of pharmaceutical communication were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed using a corpus of videos collected ad-hoc and converging various analytical approaches into Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), as proposed in Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2001), O’Halloran (2004) and Kress (2010). The study reveals the significant role played by the web in instructing online users about good health practices through videos produced by pharmaceutical companies for TV advertising or for their own websites and posted by themselves and/or by laypeople on YouTube. In so doing, they circumvent the blanket advertising ban for prescription drugs applied in EU member States, and YouTube becomes a sort of bridge in the advertising process between the pharmaceutical company and the consumer, mainly in those countries where drugs requiring medical prescription cannot be advertised. In this new scenario, studies like this should be fostered in order to further investigate the multimodal discourse of drug information on the Internet across languages and cultures, and to assess the online sources that laypeople use to take informed decisions about their own health.