



# A Narrative and Emotion Appeal Study of Social Care PSAs in China

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## Abstract

In the context of the digital age, special groups are increasingly appearing in the public's view, and the cause of caring for special groups is also getting more and more attention. For social care-themed PSAs to effectively convey advertising messages and guide viewers' consciousness and behavior, enhancing advertising content and emotional appeal is crucial. Based on narrative theory and the research of many scholars on storytelling and emotional appeal, this study analyzes five social care-themed public service advertisements that have won awards in the past years between 2018 and 2022 using case analysis. It analyzes the narrative elements of these excellent public service advertisements, including nine aspects: theme, characters, environment, conflict, plot, narrative time, narrative perspective, visual elements, auditory elements, and the emotional appeal of these excellent public service advertisements. In addition to the emotional appeal of these excellent PSAs, the study conducted an in-depth analysis and research. The study found that social care PSAs use true stories to highlight social issues, featuring helpers or those in need of help and reflecting their status. These ads symbolically portrayed the environment, used different conflicts, and employed linear or fragmented storylines. They strategically condense and repeat the narrative to reinforce the main points. Perspectives vary to convey emotions and events realistically. Visuals and sounds strive for realism to emphasize themes and emotions. PSAs use positive and negative emotional appeals to resonate and influence behavior.

**Keywords:** PSA, Social Care, Narrative, Storytelling, Emotional Appeal

## Introduction

With the development of new media in the digital era, the types, themes, forms of expression, and channels of communication of advertisements in various countries have become increasingly diversified. The advertising industry has ushered in new development opportunities, while serious challenges have ensued. As an advertising audience in the new media era, mobile Internet life has largely changed people's mode of receiving and disseminating information. Unlike the one-way indoctrination communication and propaganda of newspapers and TV in the traditional media era, new media can give audiences tailor-made information pushed through data analysis, and the information retrieval through the Internet platform is also more flexible and active. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

The effectiveness and coverage of advertisements and their impact depend more and more on people's personal preferences and interest in the content. According to a report by China Youth Net reporter Zhang Yayun 2022, China's PSAs accounted for 44.5% of the total number of national TV ads broadcast in 2021. The report also mentioned that in recent years, PSAs have gained increasing public attention and presented a large number of excellent works to viewers with the joint participation of the government and multiple forces from all walks of life. The trend of diversification of the main bodies of public service has also made it possible for the creation and attention of PSAs to cover more detailed and differentiated areas and many specific groups in all corners of society. The report of the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012 puts forward socialist core values at the national, social, and individual levels. In the process of practicing socialist core values, public service announcements (PSAs) play their unique social influence. PSAs with the theme of social care actively promote the creation of an equal and harmonious social environment for all citizens at the social level. Bai Yanjun, deputy director of the Life Channel of Beijing Radio and Television Station, said in the forum of the PSA conference that the core demand of public welfare activities is to trigger the public's emotional resonance if they want to have good enough communication power and influence. As the subject of social care PSAs is a specific group of people who need attention, the importance of personal stories and group portraits is self-evident in the creation of this type of PSA. How to tell the stories of these people and spread their voices to all walks of life is an urgent research breakthrough course for PSA creators. The significance of this study of narrative and emotional appeal in social care PSAs is that by analyzing the storytelling elements, narrative techniques, and the types of emotional appeals that can trigger public empathy and concern in excellent PSAs, we can provide information for the creation of more meaningful, targeted, and effective PSA campaigns, as well as provide a certain degree of support for the solution of social problems of marginalized people. (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974)

It is hoped that this study will add a new perspective to the broadening of PSA thematic research, trigger advertising practitioners and scholars to pay attention to social care and PSA storytelling and contribute to the development of PSAs in China.

## Objectives

1. To study the narrative elements of Chinese social care-themed PSAs.
2. To study the emotional appeal in the narrative of Chinese social care-themed PSAs.

## Literature Reviews

### *Public Service Advertisement (PSA)*

Synthesizing the connotation of the term "public welfare" and the concepts and definitions of public service announcements (PSAs) by previous authors (Yang & Li, 2019). A

broader definition of public service announcements (PSAs) as a kind of advertising activity that does not directly aim at profit-making, but draws the public's attention to a social issue in various forms, cultivates and educates the public's public awareness and humanistic spirit, and promotes the establishment and formation of a good social climate. They believe that the core components of PSAs are text, image, and sound. Text is most predominantly presented in video-based advertisements as subtitles; images include all visual images, which are composed of major graphics, light colors, and background elements; and sound is divided into human voice, audio, and music (Yang & Li, 2019). Emotional appeal is also emphasized as the most common appeal mode of public service announcements (PSAs), which generates emotional resonance by mobilizing people's emotional feelings and meets the audience's various psychological needs to trigger the audience's cognitive understanding of the content of the advertisement, enhancement of attitudes, and discussion of the dissemination of the behavior. Social care, assistance, and other actions of PSAs often use emotional appeals to let the audience understand and feel the information object and care for it emotionally and in action.

### ***Social care***

Concerning the concept and definition of social care (Guo & Wang, 2011) believe that social care refers to people-centered, reflecting humanistic care should be more inclined toward the weak and disadvantaged groups of social care (Yang & Li, 2013). define social care as the individual's concern, attention, concern, and relationship with the social reality, social things, and human social behavior, as well as conscious social integration endowed with emotion to the society. And relationships, as well as conscious social integration that is emotionally endowed to the society. According to the social care system for disadvantaged groups includes material and living care, spiritual and cultural care and humanistic care are all social care (Zhang, 2002).

### ***Narrative***

Richardson (2000) Summarizing Gennett's minimalism defines narrative in the broadest sense, he considers the telling of any active event with a state-shifting transition to be a narrative; the five parts of a narrative structure are plot, setting, conflict, denouement, and character (Hu, 2004). Plot types are classified into linear and non-linear based on the organizing principle of the plot. Linear and non-linear are two types of narrative structure discussed linear refers to the timeline or timeline. Narratologists have also examined how the narrative point of view affects the audience's understanding and emotional engagement with the storytelling PSA (Bal, 2003). Points out that the point of view can be anchored in the characters within the story, or it can be outside the story, which is the difference between in-focus and out-of-focus on this basis (Hu, 2004). Further distinguishes between exo-focused and non-focused, the difference between the two is that the non-focused type can look inside the characters while describing the objective facts from the outside (Hart, 2012). Classifies the different types of point of view as first-person point of view, second-person point of view, and third-person point of view. Regarding narrative time, according to Genette, narrative consists of two time sequences: the time of the story being told, i.e., referential time, and the time the narrative lasts, i.e., energetic time. The study of narrative time includes three aspects: chronology, temporal distance, and temporal frequency. Chronology is the relationship between the order in which events develop in natural time and the order in which they are narrated in the narrative text. Time distance examines the relationship between story time and the length of narrative time. Chrono-frequency is also the relationship between the repetition of the narrative.

### ***Storytelling***

McKee (2018) state that narratives can be viewed as bland, boring, and repetitive descriptions of events, whereas stories are value-laden and layered. Stories are defined as a

series of conflict-driven, dynamically progressive events that trigger meaningful change in the life of a mission. Public Service Announcement (PSA) storytelling often includes a combination of elements to effectively communicate a message and engage an audience. While specific elements may vary depending on the goals and creative approach of the PSA, some common elements in PSA storytelling include theme, characters, environmental context, conflict or problem, and plot. Representing the theme in terms of a master idea, which consists of two components, value and cause, that express the core meaning of the story. Summarizes three different character theories within narratology: identity theory, action theory, and symbol theory, in which Grimes' concept of "action element" proposes three modes of action consisting of six two-opposed action elements: subject and object, sender and receiver, helper and antagonist Hu, (2004). Categorizes the setting into three types based on its function in the structure and its relationship to the plot and characters: symbolic, neutral, and ironic (Hart, 2012). Referring to conflict or calling it a dilemma is part of the roots of the story (McKee, 2014). Categories conflict as internal, personal, and extra-personal. The definition of the plot first appeared in Aristotle (2006) Poetics, where he defined plot as the organization and arrangement of events and actions (Hart, 2012). explains the narrative arc that describes the ebb and flow of a storyline, and he argues that the narrative arc of a more complete story usually involves five stages: exposition, rising action, crisis, climax, and falling action.

### ***Emotional appeal***

Lee (1939) summarized the definitions of emotional appeal by different scholars. Aristotle defined the concept of emotional appeal as a means of oral expression or persuasion by critics. Analyst Hudson, on the other hand, sees emotional appeal as a critical tool. Hepburn believes that mobilizing emotions to evoke desires or needs is an emotional appeal. Aristotle (2006). Listed 14 kinds of emotions that are opposite to each other, defined each of these emotions, elaborated the reasons why each emotion is triggered, analyzed the different audience groups that different emotions will affect, and provided a theoretical framework for how speakers can use emotional appeals to enhance their influence.

## **Methodology**

This paper takes Chinese storytelling social care public service announcements (PSAs) as the object of study, and takes advertising and narratology theories as the theoretical basis to study the narrative characteristics and emotional appeal of Chinese storytelling social care PSAs. From the award-winning PSAs of the last five China International Advertising Festivals (CIAF and IAIWARDS), one film and TV PSA each conforming to the storytelling narrative and with the theme of social care is selected, and these PSAs are used as the cases for this study. Through the case study method, film-pulling method, and literature research method, the case study advertisements were carefully watched, film-pulling forms were made, the audio-visual language of the case study advertisements was observed, and the narrative elements and emotional appeals contained in the case study advertisements were interpreted through the research methodologies and results of the scholars in the related fields.

## **Result**

### ***Essential Elements of storytelling, social care PSA narratives***

#### **1) Theme**

The five case PSAs all focus on a particular social problem in need of support for the group, "Happiness" tells the story of post-surgical rehabilitation and growth of Dexi, a child with cleft lip and palate. 1 Yuan" tells the story of a group of people working together to help

their brother, a left-behind child in a mountain village. 58 Points," tells the story of Xiao chuan, a child in a poor mountainous area where education is underdeveloped. Run, lamb!" tells the story of Bayin's family, who live in the grassland where technology and information are backward under the national policy of poverty alleviation. Mobile Home" tells the story of two trucker families in which the trucker's wife is fortunate enough to accompany her husband on the road.

## 2) Characters

Characters in case advertisements include the subject who seeks help, the supporters who provide help, and the antagonists who represent social barriers. The physical appearance of the characters in the case advertisements tends to match the target group's socio-economic status and worrying physical condition in reality. The case advertisements all use different scenes to provide a more comprehensive representation, with several advertisements showing close-ups of the characters' faces showing different emotions such as hesitation, sadness, and worry. The scenes showing the interaction of the characters' movements explain the characters' relationships and drive the narrative.

## 3) Environments

The environments related to the characters' lives are most often represented as symbolic environments in the case of advertisements, such as a room full of awards and a stuffy, cramped, but cozy cab, all of which show the character's personality traits. Several of the advertisements also express an emotional atmosphere through some natural environment depictions.

4) Conflict issues cover social challenges and internal struggles related to poverty, health care, education, and other social resource differentiation or lack of security in the social infrastructure, environmental challenges, as well as disagreements and conflicts, tensions between characters, and moral dilemmas faced by the characters themselves. Sometimes characters even face both external and internal conflicts.

## 5) Plot

The narrative structures of "Happiness," "1 Yuan," and "Run, lamb!" all follow the conventional linear narratives that are common to the stories. Although there are flashbacks and interludes in "58 Points", the temporal progression of the main plot of the story still follows a linear chronological sequence. "Mobile Home" is a micro-documentary with a non-linear narrative structure that blurs the temporal continuity of events and ignores the causal links of the plot, while breaking the conventional narrative arc by combining fragments of events and interviews without causal links according to the thematic needs. The other four advertisements have more complete and progressive narrative arcs.

## 6) Narrative Timing

Chronology has been shown in the narrative structure. In terms of temporal spacing, these advertisements usually use omission and summarization to highlight the key points and omit meaningless details to achieve the effect of condensing the narrative, and at the same time, utilize other changes in temporal spacing to influence the emotional arc to highlight the character development. In terms of time-frequency, the advertisements make strategic repetitions to emphasize key event information or symbolic elements to reinforce core ideas or concepts, and use different changes in narrative frequency to ensure narrative flexibility and control of narrative pacing.

## 7) Narrative Perspectives

The case study advertisements use the first-person in-focus perspective, the third-person out-of-focus perspective, and the unfocused perspective to reveal the characters' experiences and emotions from multiple perspectives to enhance the storytelling effect. They use the first-person internal perspective to externalize the inner world of the character to show

the character's thoughts and motives in order to provide an emotionally resonant viewing experience, the third-person perspective to objectively present the events through the external perspective, and the unfocused perspective to comprehensively tell the story to explore the causes and consequences as well as the character's psychology.

#### 8) Visual elements

These social care-themed PSAs visually restore the real situation and enhance the visual effect while reflecting the emotional connotation and displaying effective messages. In terms of color and light, the PSAs enhance the authenticity of the story by giving preference to natural light sources or ambient light sources. The changes in light and color tones reflect the changes in the characters' emotional journey. Text and graphics are characterized by thematic relevance, cultural symbolism, and narrative enhancement.

#### 9) Auditory elements

The case advertisements counter the identity and cultural background of the story characters through lisping children's voices, local dialects or accents, and ethnic languages in the performance of human voices, and also increase the sense of immersion and cultural authenticity of the story through local languages. The sound emphasizes the sense of reality and immersion, and they use various sounds in nature and the environment as well as the sound of the characters' movements to enhance the realism of the scene and expand the narrative effect of the space outside the screen, evoking emotions and creating an atmosphere to match the narrative of the screen. The music design is synchronized with the emotional journey of the characters, through the lyrics or rhythm and melodic changes to match the mood changes to create an atmosphere that accentuates the scene and emotions.

#### ***Emotional appeals of storytelling, Social Care PSAs narratives***

Positive emotional appeals are particularly prominent in these social care PSAs. The advertisements appeal to sympathy by presenting scenes of suffering faced by the characters, to affection by highlighting the love and care between parents, children, and brothers in the family, to warmth by depicting kind and generous gestures between strangers or people with no intimate relationship, to humor by adding light-hearted and joyful moments, and to love by recounting the intimate and romantic love between the characters. In addition, the negative emotional appeals appearing in advertisements are mainly fear appeals, which appeal to the audience's fear by presenting tense scenes of dangerous conflicts.

## **Discussion**

Consistent with previous narrative research on storytelling advertisements, this study focuses on the important role of storytelling skills and emotional engagement in advertising narratives and explores the narrative elements or narrative strategies of public service announcements (PSAs). Since this paper specializes in social care-themed PSAs, it has some differences from other PSA narrative and emotional appeal studies (Yinet al., 2020). It is believed that the conflict and resolution inserted in the story are to evoke positive attitudes. When characters face obstacles and conflicts but remain hopeful and determined to successfully solve the problems, it can inspire viewers to feel motivated and believe in their ability to overcome difficulties. Or when characters face obstacles and conflicts but remain hopeful and determined to successfully solve the problems, these stories can inspire viewers to feel motivated and believe in their ability to overcome difficulties as well and emotional connection from consumers it can evoke the audience to feel the same emotions as the characters, whether it be love, happiness, sadness, excitement, sympathy, hope or anger.

Whereas the conflict issues focused on and portrayed in social care-themed public service announcements (PSAs) have a more important purpose and reason for informed social engagement in addition to building empathic understanding (Chen, 2017). It is believed that the

change and reconstruction of time in the advertisement story is realized by flexibly arranging the time of the story text and the time of the narration so that the advertisement achieves outstanding artistic effect. The social care theme PSAs also focus on the important role of emphasizing the core concepts through narrative time-frequency to strengthen the concepts expressed in the advertisements; the use of emotional appeals in PSAs has some differences due to the different themes of the advertisements. The use of different types of emotional appeals is closely related to the different persuasive purposes that advertisements want to achieve. The core idea of social care-themed PSAs is to get more social attention for the special groups in the advertisements and to create a universal affinity through these emotional appeals which are more common in human experience, to make some of the more remote and abstract social issues related to special groups more humanized. In storytelling, stories are analyzed both chronologically, which is the presentation of events in the story in the order that they actually happened, from the beginning, middle, and end, without any significant switching or skipping over time. There is also non-linear storytelling, which is the presentation of events in the story in alternating chronological order. Various techniques may be used, such as flashbacks, telling the story ahead, or cutting to scenes that take place at different times.

### **New knowledge**

The study found that social care-themed PSAs convey specific social issues that need support by showing real stories of specific special groups. The characters in these advertisements function as objects of help, supporters, and social barriers, and the appearance of the characters reflects their physical condition and social status as fully as possible. The advertisements utilize different character scenarios to show the characters' actions, depict the environmental atmosphere, and convey emotions. The environment is mainly used as a symbolic narrative element in these advertisements to support narrative development. Conflict in social care PSAs is characterized by the diversity of conflict, including both internal conflicts, external conflicts, individual and systemic struggles (Deutsch, 1973). The plots of the advertisements usually use a linear narrative structure to present a close-to-life storyline, while some use a fragmented non-linear structure that ensures thematic coherence to tell the experiences of the characters. Narrative time is designed to condense the narrative by utilizing different narrative distances, and the frequency of single to repeated narratives is strategically used to reinforce the core idea and control the pace of the narrative. The ads use a first-person internal perspective, a third-person external perspective, and an unfocused vision to subjectively display the character's feelings and objectively restore the cause and effect of the event. The visual and auditory elements of these PSAs are often designed in a documentary style that pursues a sense of realism and immersion in light, sound, and vocals, with text and graphics emphasizing the relevance of the theme and humanistic emotions, and color and music design focusing on the distribution and emotional journey of the characters. Social care theme PSA highlights the use of positive emotional appeals in line with the pursuit of human consciousness, and some ads also show negative emotional appeals, but no matter what kind of emotional appeal is aimed at triggering empathy and guiding the audience's behavioral attitudes.

#### **Essential Elements of Social Care PSA Narratives**

##### **1) Theme**

Happiness: Through the story of Dexi, we called attention to children with cleft lip and palate and popularized the concept of post-operative rehabilitation for children with cleft lip and palate.

1 Yuan: Through the story of two left-behind children, we call on everyone to do good deeds to help the left-behind children.

58 Points: Through Xiaochuan's story, we call for support and attention to the issue of children's education in China's educationally underdeveloped areas.

Run and Lamb: Through the story of the Bayin Family, it shows the country's care and help for people of all ethnic groups and poor groups in all regions of the country.

Mobile Home: By showing the daily life of Mr. and Mrs. Zhang Li and Mr. and Mrs. Hu Dongqin, we appeal to the society to pay attention to the wives of trucks as well as the families of truck drivers

## 2) Characters

Happiness: Role Function: The subject faces the antagonist acquires the object with the assistance of the helper. Appearance: Character clothing highlights identity character traits economic status. The main character's appearance is unhealthy. Character Scenes: Close-ups, extreme close-ups, medium shots and a few long shots.

1 Yuan: Role Function: The subject faces the antagonist to obtain with the assistance of the helper. Appearance: The character dresses externally to emphasize identity characteristics and economic status. Character Scenes: Medium, Close-ups, extreme close-ups and a few panoramas.

58 Points: Role Function: The subject faces the antagonist to obtain the object with the assistance of the helper. Appearance: The character dresses externally to emphasize identity characteristics and economic status. Character Scenes: Close-ups, extreme close-ups and medium shot.

Run and Lamb: Role Function: The subject faces the antagonist acquires the object with the assistance of the helper. Appearance: The character dresses appearance to highlight the identity character traits. Character Scenes: Close-ups and medium shot.

Mobile Home: Role Function: The subject spontaneously seeks to obtain the object with the face of the antagonist. Appearance: The character dresses in a way that emphasizes his or her identity and state of life. Character Scenes: Medium close-ups, extreme close-ups, full and long shot.

## 3) Setting

Happiness, 1 Yuan, 58 Points, Run and Lamb and Mobile Home: Symbolic environments predominate.

## 4) Conflict Issues

Happiness, 1 Yuan and 58 Points: Personal conflict, extra-personal conflict and internal conflict.

Run and Lamb, Mobile Home: Extra-personal conflict and internal conflict.

## 5) Plot

Happiness, 1 Yuan and 58 Points: Conventional linear narrative with a full narrative arc.

Run and Lamb and Mobile Home: A linear narrative containing partial flashbacks and interludes with a full narrative arc.

## 6) Narrative Timing

Happiness, 1 Yuan and 58 Points: Time-spacing: omission, summary. Time-frequency: non-repeating event, single narrative; repeating event narrative.

Run and Lamb: Time-spacing: omission, summary, scene. Time-frequency: Single narrative of non-repeated events, repeated event narratives, repeated narratives.

Mobile Home: Time-spacing: omission, scene. Time-frequency: Single narrative with non-repetitive events.

## 7) Narrative Perspectives

Happiness: Inward-focused perspective, first view.

1 Yuan: Out-of-focus third-person view.



58 Points: Unfocused third-person view.

Run and Lamb: Out-of-focus third-person perspective interspersed with first-person perspective.

Mobile Home: First-person narration aided by third-person camera perspective.

8) Visual Elements

Happiness: Color light highlights changes in emotional tone; Text graphics express the main idea of the story.

1 Yuan: Natural realistic light effects, color and light highlight the emotional tone change; Text graphics emphasize brand symbols, echoing the main theme of the study.

58 Points: Color light highlight changes in emotional tone; Typography with symbolic metaphors that fit the theme.

Run and Lamb: Natural light effects realistic lighting effects, color highlighting emotional tone changes; Typography with symbolic metaphors that fit the theme.

Mobile Home: Documentary color lighting effects; Typography that matches the effect of the image and highlight the theme.

9) Auditory Elements

Happiness: Vocals; Inarticulate children's monologues, dialect dialogues. Sound; Realistic sound that unifies sound and picture. Music; Music that emphasizes the emotional atmosphere.

1 Yuan: Vocals; No dialog to highlight visual attention. Sound; Realistic sound. Music; Songs that relate to the theme and emotion of the short film.

58 Points: Vocals; Dialect dialog, Mandarin narration. Sound; Realistic sound with unified sound and picture. Music; Music that emphasizes different emotional atmospheres.

Run and Lamb: Vocals; Mandarin dialog and Mongolian language. Sound; Natural realistic ambient sound. Music; Music that emphasizes different emotional atmospheres.

Mobile Home: Vocals; Dialect narration, Mandarin narration. Sound; Ambient sound that emphasizes realism. Music; Music that emphasizes different emotional atmospheres.

10) Positive Emotional Appeals

Happiness: Sympathy appeals and affinity appeals.

1 Yuan: Warmth appeals and affectionate appeals.

58 Points: Humor appeals, warmth appeals and sympathy appeals .

Run and Lamb: Warmth appeals, humor appeals and affectionate appeals.

Mobile Home: Sympathy appeals and love appeals.

11) Negative Emotional Appeals

Happiness: Fear-based appeal.

## Acknowledgments

Based on this paper, the analysis of narrative elements and emotional appeal of social care-themed PSAs provides some suggestions for the future creation of social care-themed PSAs. According to the study's conclusion, the analysis of narrative elements and emotional appeal of social care-themed PSAs can be applied to different themed PSAs or related fields in future research.

1. Regarding narrative and emotional design, future PSAs should focus on narrative structure, perspective selection, character and environment portrayal, integration of audio-visual elements, good use of positive emotions to inspire viewers to take action, and reasonable use of negative emotions to trigger reflection.

2. To expand other themes, the research framework can be applied to different themes of PSAs, such as environmental protection and traffic safety, to analyze the differences and effects of narrative elements and emotional appeals.

3. Regarding digital innovation, we can explore combining technology with narrative and emotional appeal in new media forms such as VR to enhance audience experience and participation.

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