Visualizing Pandemic Issues: A Semiotic Study of Contemporary Arab Media Cartoons on COVID-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 is one of the vilest plagues that has altered the course of human history despondently. The world has confronted many issues that needed to be scrutinized in order to deliver an enhanced resolution. The present study focuses on the ways Arab media (newspapers) has presented the pandemic issues in the form of cartoons. These issues provide a gist to what the world needs to focus on during such gloomy times. The study uses a semiotic theory lens to analyze the selected cartoons from the two popular Middle Eastern newspapers. An insight into the newspaper's cartoons reveals that the corona pandemic has gravely affected the world from many perspectives. The major issues exposed are the regular interruption of normal human-life activities, the nippy collapse of the world economies, the glum miseries of the working class, the duple downfall of the terror-struck countries, the unfair hold of the COVID-19 vaccine, the capitalistic issues with vaccine supply, and the deplorable botch of the world advancement. The findings reveal how caricatures become a social discourse when a cartoonist focuses on social and political realities around him.

Keywords: COVID-19; cartoons; newspapers; semiotics; pandemic issues

1. Introduction

Pandemics are dark chapters in the history of human evolvement that not only obstruct the growth of civilization but also bring catastrophic bearings to it. Unfortunately, the earth has faced such crises often. Most recently, the pandemic known as COVID-19 has shaken the world upside down. Alabi (2020) narrates that the Corona pandemic is one of the worst crises faced by the world in the present century. From the health sector to academia and from air travel to the economy, the world has confronted both commotion and demotion. Joubert and Wasserman (2020) proclaim that biological disasters like COVID-19 have always negative effects not only on the current status quo of the human life cycle but persist for a long time in the future as well.

From January 2020 till now, the media all over the world has narrated the pandemic event in various versions including the images. In fact, images are a more direct way of expression that gets the attention of the audience much quicker than the traditional way (i.e., writing). Besides various categories of visuals that are used by media, cartoons are of momentous importance as they are more attention grabbers. Fairrington (2009) comments that cartoons are more than just

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caricatured representations to make people laugh rather they represent the reality to make people think. In this regard, cartoonish representation of pandemic crisis can illustrate the bitter realities of human survival through such events.

The present study aims to analyze the visual representation of contemporary pandemic crisis i.e., COVID-19. Few studies in this regard have been conducted focusing on cartoons in South African (Joubert & Wasserman, 2020), English (Llamas, 2021), Philippines (Imperial, 2020), and Nigerian media (Alabi, 2020; Tunde & Bello, 2021). However, the present study focuses on Arab media (newspapers) for cartoonish representation of the COVID-19 related issues. For the said purpose, twelve cartoons from two leading Middle Eastern newspapers i.e., Arab News and Gulf News have been randomly selected and studied by using the semiotic theoretic lens. The cartoons often reflect social scenarios as intended by the cartoonists, so their roles become important. It is equally important to understand the schemas of a cartoonist while reflecting social, political realities, etc.

As mentioned above, the cartoons selected in the present study are from Arab News and Gulf News. Arab News is a leading newspaper that is published in Saudi Arabia with some of the region's best editorial cartoonists (Tashkandi, 2020). The cartoons selected in the present study from Arab News are caricatures by Amjad Rasmi. According to him, he presents true reality in the ways he perceives it and for him, cartoons pave his ways to reflect what is happening around him (Amjad Rasmi as quoted in Tashkandi (2020). The other set of cartoons is selected from Gulf News published in UAE. The cartoonist Adam is popular for his description of world issues in caricatured format. Adam believes that issues can be best presented in graphical formats as they are the attention catchers. It is worth noting that cartoonists are more interested in presenting the social discourse in caricatured format. However, it is the interest of the researcher to choose a framework of analysis i.e., semiotics in the present study. Semiotics provides a lens to interpret the meanings provided as visual signs and theorize the context as relevant to interpretation (Hodge, Hodge, & Kress, 1988). While studying signs related to society, semiotics helps to scrutinize cartoons both as social discourse and social semiotics.

The purpose is to understand the pandemic-related issues and concerns highlighted by the newspaper cartoons. They further would help to comprehend the contagion calamities related to health as well as the other complications caused in various fields of life.

The main objectives of the study are:

- To analyze COVID-19 related cartoons in the selected Arab Media (newspapers) through a semiotic lens
- To examine the issues highlighted in the selected cartoons
- To develop a theoretical understanding of pandemic crisis as visually represented by the selected cartoons

For this purpose, the research aimed to answer the following question:

Q. What are the major pandemic issues highlighted by Arab media (Arab News & Gulf News) cartoons during COVID-19?

2.   Literature Review

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the related concepts and theoretical framework. The first major concept of the present study is about cartoons as an important media channel.

2.1   Cartoons

Nowadays, information can now be communicated not only through words but also through images. Since people can express meaning through images, they are also a form of one-way communication. The fact that the cartoons are in the form of images it is easier for the readers to grasp the meanings and researchers also benefit from knowing about the events portrayed in those cartoons (Hasanah & Hidayat, 2020). Cartoons are a source of amusement, laughter, and social observations on important aspects of reality (Mateus, 2016). As an imitation or a pictorial parody, cartoons sharpen the public view of a current or topical subject, event, political or social trend by using caricature, analogy, and comical juxtaposition. A caricature is an almost

unavoidable component of any cartoon. The cartoon is based on extensive knowledge of the subject, just as the caricature is for an audience that is familiar with the original. Reading through cartoons of a particular period undoubtedly helps in recalling key events of that period (Onakpa, 2014). Cartoonists make a concentrated attempt to represent society by using cartoons to inform people about current events in society (Tyumbu, 2018).

A caricaturist depicts situations in an unconventional manner, rather than relying on typical media symbolic language. Newspapers and magazines are used as a platform to depict significant social and political events and government policies using satiric caricature. Such real-life or fictional depictions represent certain ways of thinking and acting. A single caricature may express a variety of complex, powerful, and compelling messages about a political or social issue by constructing a persuasive invitation to readers (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020). Given the above arguments, cartoons/caricatures as prominent features of various media outlets have been the focus of researchers (e.g. ADETOLA and ABIOYE (2020); Bhattacharya (2019); Hussain and Benqian (2016); Ibrahim (2014); Lawate (2012); Mateus (2016); Onakpa (2014) over the past years. However, the current study using the semiotic approach of analysis focuses on cartoons/caricatures which represented the COVID-19 pandemic in Arab News and Gulf News.

2.2   The COVID 19 Pandemic

The Coronavirus has submerged the whole universe in a sense of hopelessness, anxiety, depression, and fear. It has brought the whole nations, wealthy and poor, industrialized and developing, together to face a single 'invisible' rival: the pandemic. The results, according to the UN, are circumstances that haven't been seen since the horrific conditions of World War II, which resulted in a large number of casualties. The usual progression of life has changed and adjusting to various new policies has become a tenacious demand, for instance, curfews and limited or banned mass motilities. These circumstances managed to change the long-held paradigm pace of life on a regular basis (Hussein & Aljamili, 2020). The COVID-19 epidemic spread across China in early December, starting in Wuhan, China's 7th most populated region, and then to an increasing number of countries. This acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus causes an extremely transferable viral infection (Di Gennaro et al., 2020). As of May 20, 2021, WHO had received reports of 164,409,804 confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide, with 3,409,220 deaths. A total of 1,407,945,776 vaccine doses had been administered as of May 17, 2021 (https://covid19.who.int/).

COVID-19 affected every aspect of life, from personal interactions to international relations, industrial legislation to institutional activities, all over the world. As societies tried to protect themselves by enforcing strict controls on human movement and contacts, the disease continued to decimate families, upended governments, smashed economies, and ripped apart social structures. Along with the outburst of the pandemic, print and electronic media created awareness and spread information around the world. Since its outbreak, the disease has caused uncertainty, instability, and social disorder through which journalists, politicians, economists, and academics have been viewing the world and building an image of societies during and post-Corona virus world crisis. In COVID-19 affected countries, newspapers presented a chaotic discourse through articles written in large-circulation newspapers that discussed terror. Journalists used COVID-19 to report stories about everyday life, politics, the economy, sports, showbiz, fitness, and other topics (Aazam, Baig, Azam, & Azam, 2020). Likewise, researchers around to globe also investigated COVID-19 representations (e.g., Alkhresheh (2020); Dynel (2021); Eka Pratiwi and Sulatra (2020); Flexer (2020); Hussein and Aljamili (2020); Isnaniah and Agustina (2020); Leone (2021); Martikainen and Sakki (2021); Octarensa and Aras (2020); Purwaningrum, Saifullah, and Sudana (2021); Robingah (2020); Sattar, Yasin, Saqlain, and Arslan (2020); Trisnayanti, Pratiwi, and Candra (2021). This study analyses Arab News and Gulf News caricature on COVID-19 pandemic by relying on the theory of semiotic.

2.3   Semiotics

Semiotics is based on the concept of sign which can be defined as any decipherable entity. In fact, "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (Peirce (1931) as cited in Lekies and Whitworth (2011). Mendoza (2016) defines a sign as anything in the form of a word(s), image(s), gesture(s), voice(s), or even though(s) that can be interpreted for not only its surface meaning but often also with internally linked worldviews or ideological strands. According to Lee and Goguen

(2003), the concept of sign can be traced back to Saussure theory where signs are further divided into signifier and signified In this standpoint, the study of signs is focused on the connection between object and its meaning (i.e. connections within sign). Later, semiotics term was coined by Pierce (1839-1914) as a field of knowledge devoted to the study of signs (as quoted in Chandler (2007). In Pierce's perspective, the study of signs is more devoted to the study of the connection between a sign and its subject (Imperial, 2020). Barthes (1967) elaborated the concept of a sign as anything from images to words and gestures to musical notes. As stated above, signs often carry meanings beyond surface levels. Thus, Barthes (1967) further added the dimensions of connotative and denotative meanings in order to interpret the sign. The present study mainly uses Barthe's theoretical dimensions of semiotics (1967 & 1977) in order to interpret the selected cartoons.

Barthes (1967) elucidates that the purpose of semiology is to explore the deep unifying elements of the discourse that are not just presented in the form of words but incorporate various modes (from image to gesture) to convey meanings. Barthes (1967, 1977) divides a sign into verbal and non-verbal signs where verbal is related to the linguistic component (text often accompanying the image) and non-verbal is related to the visual image. Barthes (1977) advanced the theoretical grounds by adding linguistic meaning (connotative and denotative) to the interpretation of signs. According to this model, system of signification is classified in to three aspects: non-coded iconic message, coded iconic message and the linguistic message. The linguistic message is the text that accompanies a graphic for further clarification of the image and is often seen in newspaper photos and commercials. It is most often used in cartoons and comic strips. It appears that the linguistics message, today, at the level of mass communications "is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon" (Barthes, 1977).

Focusing on the visual objects, Barthes (1967, 1977) presents the levels of connotative and denotative meanings. The coded iconic message is symbolic meaning (connoted image).Barthes (1977) argued that connotation is preferably cultural; its signs include "gestures, attitudes, expressions, colors or effects, endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practice of a certain society: the link between signifier and signified remains…" (p. 27). A connoted message is the manner through which "the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it" (p. 17). Denotative meanings (Barthes, 1967, 1977) refer to the basic meanings of the visuals or the way they are presented to the audience. On the other hand, connotative meanings provide an in-depth understanding of a visual in relation to the context (physical, literary, ideological, social, etc.). The non-coded iconic message refers to the literal meaning of a sign (denoted image). To Barthes (1977), the denoted message is "which is the analogy on itself" (p. 17). The literal message has only relational characteristics rather than substantial and the distinction between two types of messages (literal and symbolic) is operational. The denoted message "naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation" (p. 42). Thus, denotative meanings are literal whereas connotative meanings are interpretations based on contextual relevance. According to Barthes (1967, 1977), the linguistic and visual signs together can be interpreted to understand what is often conveyed in the media imageries. As mentioned above, semiotics is the most preferable way of interpreting cartoons used by various researchers. A few of these studies are described below.

2.4 *Previous Studies*

Semiotic analysis studies have considered cartoons/caricatures as images that convey meanings and act as a silent means of communication. To cite some, Hasanah and Hidayat (2020) conducted a semiotic analysis of Anies' cartoons on his first 100 days as Jakarta's governor. The study categorized the sign into symbols, indexes, and icons using Pierce's typology of signs. It was concluded that the aspiration of Indonesians towards Anies' government was conveyed through cartoons, which had powerful meanings. Mohamed Ahmed (2020) conducted a semiotic analysis to investigate how the caricature represented the 2018 presidential Egyptian elections. He analyzed the symbols used through the art of the caricature, major themes and ideas, and language and non-language semiotic indicators. The study argued that caricatures conveyed subtle messages, by using gestures, signs, and visual expressions of images, which may not be communicated through words. Using Pierce's theory of semiotics,

Tyumbu (2018) also presented how to interpret and gain meanings into cartoons and understand them in a better way. It also presented the semiotic used in cartooning and

contributed to the study of verbal and non-verbal codes, such as cartoons, as essential communication mediums. It was revealed that messages are decoded from cartoons. Another study by Al-Momani, Badarneh, and Migdadi (2017) conducted a semiotic analysis of political cartoons in Jordan drawn during the parliamentary election campaigns in 2007, 2010, and 2013. Derived from Barthes' perception, it was argued that humor created through cartoons conveyed strong messages that necessitate an investigation of the relations between various cartoon signs, as well as their social and ideological implications.

Some recent studies (Alkhresheh, 2020; Flexer, 2020; Leone, 2021; Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Robingah, 2020) also investigated the COVID-19 pandemic representations and related messages from different perspectives. To cite a few, Octarensa and Aras (2020) used the semiotic analysis method with the constructivist paradigm to examine a video titled "COVID-19" released by the World Health Organization. The study suggested that semiotic analysis can uncover the "significance meaning" concerning the sign in the video campaign. Trisnayanti et al. (2021) also used the semiotic theories proposed by Saussure (1983) and Barthes (1977). It was argued that both verbal and non-verbal (visual) signs in the COVID-19 advertisement "Stay Home Save Live" had hidden messages like preventing the spread of the pandemic.

In another study, Eka Pratiwi and Sulatra (2020) used the theories of semiotic (Barthes, 1998) and ideology (Storey, 2010). The purpose was to examine verbal and visual signs in COVID-19 advertisements and highlight the ideologies conveyed via those advertisements such as being responsible, cooperative, etc. Sattar et al. (2020) conducted a semiological discourse analysis of editorial cartoons on COVID 19. It was argued that semiotic discourses in print media play an instrumental role to work out certain ideologies. The study concluded that the newspapers shared different aspects relating to COVID-19 such as SOPs, economy, etc. Using Kress and Leeuween's approach of social semiotics, Hussein and Aljamili (2020) focused on how Jordanian social media contributed to overcoming anxiety burdens caused by the pandemic and offering relief. It analyzed semiotic patterns in caricatures and memes representing COVID-19 in social media and how the grim mood caused by COVID can be softened by humor.

Likewise, some researchers also focused on COVID-19 memes in social media and messages they conveyed (Dynel, 2021; Isnaniah & Agustina, 2020; Purwaningrum et al., 2021). In a rare study in the Saudi Arabian context, Al-Ghamdi and Albawardi (2020) following a socio-semiotic approach (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) examined the COVID-19 discourse in social media posts. It argued that COVID-19 discourse in Saudi Arabia enacted diverse thematic discourses and voices relevant to cultural semiotics, local speech community, integrated national identity, and social norms. Al-Ghamdi and Albawardi's study bears no similarity with the current study which focuses on how a mainstream daily newspaper published in English, Arab News, which also attracts non-Arab expatriates caricatured the COVID-19 pandemic.

As seen, despite the existing literature on semiotic analysis of cartoons on the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a dearth of studies on how the Arab media, particularly, some of the leading daily newspapers published in English caricatured the pandemic and its related aspects. This study investigates the Arab News and Gulf News caricatured the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus COVID-19 pandemic provides the contextual background of the study and is briefly discussed in the next paragraphs.

3.   Research Method

This qualitative study, based on content analysis, investigated how Arab Media (*Arab News* & *Gulf News*) caricatured the COVID-19 pandemic. Semiotics, or the science of signs, has played a critical role in understanding cartoons. As the cartoonist employs many semiotic codes, cartoons are best interpreted through the semiotic framework (Tyumbu, 2018). The semiotic theory is primarily grounded on ideas of Saussure (1983) related to signs and Peirce (1958) concept of sign connection with context (as cited in Al-Momani et al. (2017). However, Barthes (1968 &1977) refined the theoretical grounds by adding linguistic meaning (connotative and denotative) to the interpretation of signs. Following the lines, this study adopts Barthes' model (see e.g. Al-Momani et al. (2017); Eka Pratiwi and Sulatra (2020); Trisnayanti et al. (2021) in which the system of signification is classified into three aspects: non-coded iconic message, coded iconic message, and linguistic message. The non-coded iconic message refers to the literal meaning of the sign (denoted image), whereas the coded iconic message is symbolic meaning (connoted image). The linguistic message is the text that accompanies a graphic for further clarification of the image.

The cartoons (data) are collected from two mainstream Middle Eastern newspapers published in English: namely *Arab News* in Saudi Arabia and *Gulf News* in the United Arab Emirates. The readership of both the dailies consists of locals and expatriates residing in the two Arab countries. A total of 12 cartoons were selected randomly (six from each newspaper) highlighting the issues linked to the COVID-19 pandemic starting from late 2020. The time span is set to the most recent ones from late 2020 to date. The content of each cartoon was first individually analyzed in accordance with the selected theoretical framework. Further, the findings were collectively discussed focusing on issues provided by the data analysis stage.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings for each selected cartoon. The contextual background of all the cartoons is related to the COVID-19 situation.

Figure 1. Cartoon *1 (Source: Gulf News)*

The first cartoon (Figure 1) represents the main issue faced by the common public during the pandemic i.e. lockdown or closure of life activities. The Table 1 presents the data:

Table 1. Cartoon 1 analysis

Linguistic Meaning	The tags pasted on the door carry the captions "open" and "closed". They clarify the main concept of the cartoon that how frequently the door of activities gets opened and closed.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Human	A man with a head as Earth planet	The human is representing the entire World	The whole world is in constant turmoil caused by COVID-19 where life activities are closed and opened unexpectedly and randomly.
Door	A closed door with some tags	The closed-door is represents the closure of human activities	

Figure 2. *Cartoon 2 (*Source: Gulf News)

The second cartoon (Figure 2) almost represents the same idea of world closure including the festivities that are social occasions to bring people together. Table 2 presents the analysis:

Table 2. *Cartoon 2 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	The first title is "the festive lights", whereas the second title is "Corona". The linguistic message provided is that festive activities are disrupted by Corona.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Light Post	A post displaying lights which are often used as decoration during festivities and social gatherings is cut	The lighted post is representing the light of festivities.	Different types of festivities and celebration events are canceled or interrupted during lockdowns/curfews and social distances.
Wires and plug	Electricity circuit providing light to the lamp post	The wires and plugs are represented as the connections and sources that provide fun and make the festivals colorful.	
Scissor	A scissor cuts the electricity wires	COVID-19 is the reason for preventing celebrations and gatherings.	

Figure 3. *Cartoon 3* (Source: Gulf News)

Figure 3 presents another relevant issue connected with corona i.e. emergence of new strains and variants connected with corona including the new variants. Table 3 presents the analysis.

Table 3. *Cartoon 3 analysis*

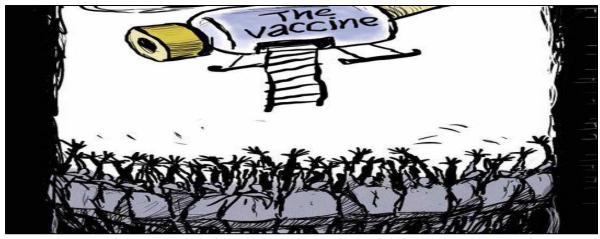| Linguistic Meaning	The only caption provided is "Corona strains" representing novel versions of Coronavirus in multiple forms, the message is about impending variants generated by the pandemic.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Human	A man with the world as the head part	The man is representing the entire world	The world is working hard to fight the pandemic, but the contagious virus is strong, and resistant, and is fast spreading.
Bird	An egg-laying heavy-sized bird	The coronavirus is presented as a huge angry bird that is laying multiple eggs.	
Eggs	A lot of eggs, some are broken whereas fresh ones are laid	The rapid increase of eggs represents an uncontrollable spread of COVID-19 strains.	
Hammer	A huge heavy metal tool to break heavy objects	The world is working hard to curb contagious COVID 19 but there is a warning that it is unlikely to predict that it might be treated or controlled.	

Figure 4. *Cartoon 4* (Source Gulf News)

The next cartoon (Figure 4) represents the issue of vaccines- the only solution so far the world has against the coronavirus. Table 4 presents the analysis.

Table 4. *Cartoon 4 analysis*

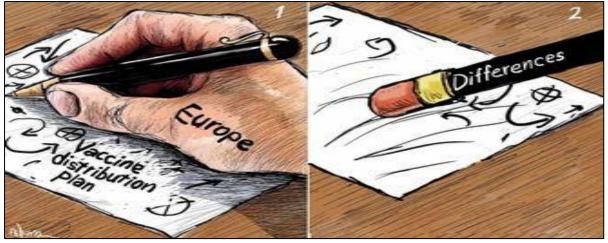| Linguistic Meaning	The only linguistic message provided as a caption is "The vaccine" to make the reader understand what the cartoon is about.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Helicopter/ Bottle	The vaccine medicine bottle for medical use is presented as an image of a helicopter flying above the people.	The COVID-19 vaccine is beyond the reach of a huge-waiting population, indicating inaccessibility of vaccine in most cases.	The image conveys the meaning that a huge population of the world urgently needs a vaccine, but it is not in the reach of everyone. Moreover, little access is provided to the vaccine.
People	A huge crowd of people gathered to collect	A lot of people represent the whole world population desperately waiting for their vaccine.	
ladder	A small ladder hanging from the helicopter body	With a small ladder, only a few people can get access to the most desired and badly needed vaccine.	

Figure 5. *Cartoon 5* (Source: Gulf News)

The next cartoon in Figure 5 also presents an important issue related to the distribution of vaccines for corona. Table 5 presents the analysis.

Table 5. *Cartoon 5 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	The image carries some important captions to clarify the content. The first caption is "Europe" which elucidates that Europe has something to do with the vaccine, apparently a European hand is involved in it. The second title is "Vaccine distribution plan" which is provided to the reader to understand that the image is about this plan-making. The last caption is "Differences" which is an important linguistic content to clarify what is the reason behind the erasure of the plan-making.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Hand	A hand in writing gesture holding a pen	The caption on hand clarifies that Europe has the authority to write the main vaccine distribution plan for the whole world.	The whole image represents a very important issue related to the COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan which is fully controlled by the European stakeholders. They have the prerogative to add or delete anyone from the plan.
pen	A pen that is used for writing	The pen is used to show the activity of drawing plans by the European authorities, using their discretion distributing vaccines.	
Paper	The paper on which a plan is written	The paper represents the whole plan or schema for vaccine distribution around the world and is penned down by European stakeholders.	
Eraser	The backside of the pencil is used as an eraser to remove certain items from the writing list concerning the vaccine distribution plan.	Eraser represents the deletion activity of the plan makers that is based on the differences, meaning that some countries in the world may not receive the vaccine.	

Figure 6. *Cartoon 6* (Source: Gulf News)

Figure 6 presents the issues faced by terror-struck countries like Iraq along with the Corona. The situation has worsened because of the pandemic in such countries. Table 6 presents the analysis.

Table 6. *Cartoon 6 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	Each pendulum in the figure is named: Terror, Iraq, and Corona respectively. The linguistic message makes it clear to the reader what the cartoonist wants to clarify. Iraq is hit by both the terror as well as the Corona.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
pendulums	There are three pendulums in oscillation simultaneously, hitting each other.	The first pendulum represents terrorism issues that have struck countries like Iraq (shown as a pendulum in middle). On the other side is the corona pandemic that is also hitting hard the represented country.	Countries like Iraq which are already badly affected by terrorism are now under dual attack. On one side is terrorism and on the other side is the corona. Such countries are in a more dangerous situation, as caricatured by the Gulf News.

Figure 7. *Cartoon 7* (Source: Arab News)

The next cartoon (Figure 7) highlights the economic crisis faced by the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 7 presents the analysis.

Table 7. *Cartoon 7 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	The two captions are provided "workers" and "economy" to make it clear for the readers what the cartoon is about.		
Sign	Connotative meaning	Denotative meaning	Interpretation
Three human figures	There are three human figures dressed in different ways: one is finely dressed with Corona as head part, the second in a ragged suit with patches, and the third one in a labor dress looks scared.	Corona has severely affected the economy and now both are ready to eat (to negatively impact) the working class and deny it or even it's right to have basic necessities, relying on Corona for its prosperity.	This cartoon clarifies an important issue related to pandemics i.e. the economic crisis. Corona has caused a devastating blow to world economies which in turn had severe impacts on the working class in particular and deprived them of bread and better
Fork and knife	Fork and knife as the setting of dining table are presented.	Fork and knife in ready position represent that they are ready to do the job.	

Plate with table and chair	A plate with served food depicts a dining place.	The Working-class is a soft target of both the economy as well as COVID-19.	rights.
Suits	The economy in a ragged suit whereas corona head figure in a good suit	The economy in rags and patches represents the decline of the economy whereas Corona is in good condition means the pandemic is fast expanding and destroying world economies.	

Figure 8. *Cartoon 8* (Source: Arab Media)

The next cartoon in Figure 8 again represents the issues linked to the economy during the COVID-19 as analyzed and presented in the table below (Table 8).

Table 8. *Cartoon 8 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	The only linguistic caption provided is "Economic situation"		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Human	A human figure with the world as head	The world is fighting against a monstrous animal and most importantly has suffered through the economic disaster.	The Corona has caused the world some serious damages including the disastrous effect on the economic situation, development, growth, and prosperity.
Animal	An animal figure with coronavirus as head	The Coronavirus as something evil attacks the human world.	
Face	A gloomy and tired face	The world has been portrayed as helpless, weak, and impotent in the fight against Corona.	
Arrow	A red arrow is pointed towards a human and Corona	Again, the indication is how the pandemic ruthlessly disrupted economic activities across the globe.	

Figure 9. *Cartoon 9* (Source: Arab News)

Figure 9 represents the issue related to COVID-19 vaccine supply, its control as well as a limitation as shown in Table 9.

Table 9. *Cartoon 9 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	The two captions "WHO" and "vaccine" highlight the main issue presented here as of the vaccine in the hands of WHO.		
Sign	Connotative meaning	Denotative meaning	Interpretation
A human figure	A human figure sitting on the top of a hill, holding a floaty.	The individual figure represents World Health Organization (WHO) as the only hope for survival in the pandemic sea.	In a chaotic situation created by the pandemic outbreak, more and more people are suffering, and WHO has been shown as their only hope for survival. On the other hand, WHO also has the limited number of Corona vaccine doses and is unable to decide who to cater to first.
Floaty (an inflatable object)	Lifesaving kit used for swimming.	The floaty represents vaccine controlled by WHO as the solution to the COVID-19 pandemic but limited in number.	
Hill	Hill in the middle of the sea.	The hill either represents a high-hope place for pandemic-stricken people to possibly get the vaccine or a place for a vaccine that seems inaccessible.	
Hands	A huge crowd is shown through their hands raised to get help while drowning.	The hands raised for help in fact represent a huge number of helpless populations seriously struck by Corona, the only solution for dying nations is a vaccine and they are portrayed as at the mercy of WHO.	
sea	All the people are getting drowned in a big sea.	The sea represents the never-ending pandemic that is drowning (killing) the world population.	

Figure 10. *Cartoon 1*0 (Source: Arab News)

Figure 10 represents the purchase of COVID vaccine where rich countries are leading the line, the table (Table 10) explains the message delivered by the cartoon.

Table 10. *Cartoon 10 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	The first caption is "Corona Vaccine" on the signboard that provides direction to the viewer of what people are waiting for in a queue. The second caption "The Poor Countries" is used to make it clearer who would fall behind in the waiting line for receiving the vaccine, i.e., obviously countries with less capital.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Signboard	Signboard showing the direction for Corona vaccine	The signboard, in fact, represents the most wanted vaccine as the only remedy for Corona.	The cartoon conveys the idea that vaccine distribution among rich and poor countries is prioritized by the amount of capital they own. The rich countries that can pay cash or afford would get the vaccine earlier whereas the poor countries have to wait for a long time.
People	People queuing for vaccine	People signify the world countries from the rich to the poor standing in line accordingly. The rich countries with more money are in the front whereas the poor countries stand in the back.	
Cash/ Dollar bags	People holding dollar bags of different sizes in their hands	The size of the cash in the bag represents the amount of capital the rich and poor countries possess. People at the end of the queue with little or no money/cash are the poorest countries, the last ones to receive the vaccine.	

Figure 11. *Cartoon 11* (Source: Arab News)

The cartoon in Figure 11 depicts the world's progress/fight against Corona and its failure to defeat or overcome the pandemic (see Table 11).

Table 11. *Cartoon 11 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	The image is self-representative thus, no linguistic caption is provided.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Figure 1	The first big human figure carries the world as head The second small figure carries a coronavirus as head	The first human figure symbolizes the defeat of the whole mighty world at the hands of Corona with no more determination to fight/curb the disastrous pandemic.	This cartoon exposes the failure of the so-called human progress in the hands of a small virus, Corona. All the technology has failed to cope up with a small invisible virus. The issue highlighted is that world needs to identify the right direction to overcome the pandemic and restore normalcy.
Figure 2	The second small figure carries Coronavirus refusing to withdraw	The second figure depicts the Corona pandemic which becomes irrepressible and resistant against all human endeavors to cure it.	
Techno devices and arms	The world is shown equipped with a variety of modern arms and technological devices	The message communicated is that the modern world that is fully equipped with the latest technology, nuclear arms/missiles of destructions, satellites, and scientific rockets has been paralyzed by Corona and thus stands helpless despite these advancements.	
bandages	The world figure has some bandages on the body	The earth (the whole world) is badly affected by the pandemic.	
Red gloves	Corona figure is wearing boxing gloves, red in color	Corona has defeated the world and badly struck the nations causing deaths and infections.	

Figure 12. *Cartoon 12* (Source: Arab News)

Figure 12 also conveys the message that the world with all of its advanced technology and progress has failed to defeat an armless virus. Table 12 presents the analysis.

Table 12. *Cartoon 12 analysis*

Linguistic Meaning	No linguistic caption is provided.		
Sign	**Connotative meaning**	**Denotative meaning**	**Interpretation**
Figure 1	The first apparently surrendering figure carries the world as its head.	The first figure represents the human world which has failed to resist the COVID-19 pandemic and instead falls easy prey to it.	This cartoonish illustration reflects that the world has failed regardless of its immense progress in the field of science and technology. A small virus has conquered the world and has forced it to adapt to new circumstances and change its course of leading a normal or usual life.
Figure 2	Figure 2 has a deadly Coronavirus face and dressed as a pirate attacks the ship and targets a human.	The second figure in the cartoon represents, again, the way a lethal virus is chasing the world population and has driven it to the verge of death/collapse.	
Arms and devices	The human figure with the world as the face is fully equipped with arms and modern gadgets.	The world is shown as fully equipped with all kinds of technology including weapons that have been defeated and failed by the armless Corona.	
Ship	The two figures are on a ship.	The corona has dragged the world to the edge of danger with its untiring chase.	
Sea	The ship is in the sea.	The sea represents the catastrophic end of the pandemic, which is pushing humans towards this unwanted state of affairs.	

5. Discussion

This section presents an overall commentary on the major findings. First of all, the background of all the above cartoons, taken from Arab media (*Arab News* and *Gulf News*), is COVID-19. Interestingly, problems illustrated by Arab media are quite contemporary and analogous to the ones encountered by the rest of the world – clarifying that the Corona pandemic is basically a universal issue. Moreover, the issues are presented with the world as an image/figure in the majority of the cartoons – focusing on the world at the collective level. There are few images where a specific location is mentioned, i.e. Europe (again representing all the western world) and Iraq (representing the countries in terrorism crisis). However, the majority of the pandemic-related issues paint the entire world, thus, the problems faced are also communal signifying the need for a common course of action against COVID-19.

An important part of the analysis was to analyze the linguistic content of the selected cartoons as well. It was noted that mostly the cartoons carried brief linguistic messages. Moreover, these linguistic messages were provided as captions in most of the cartoons to assist the reader to identify the context and content of the cartoon. Few cartoons carried no linguistic content as the message itself was very clear. Thus, it can be argued that the issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic were mostly presented in visualized forms with less focus on language.

The visuals were the most important part of the analysis highlighting various major issues related to pandemics worldwide. The first issue that can be observed is related to life closure. Safety precautions and isolation has forced the world to stop many of its activities including the festivities. The first two cartoons explain how the world has shut the door of various life activities. Whenever there is a little more threat, all type of activities is closed. The world cannot have a proper social life as well as professional domains are also disturbed. Similar findings are observed by Hussein and Aljamili (2020) in Jordanian social media as they comment that coronavirus has changed the course of life. They further add that people cannot expect a routine social life as there is death presiding over the streets (Hussein & Aljamili, 2020). Besides, another important issue highlighted by these recent cartoons is the new strains. The virus has caused many new issues that are discovered every day including the new variants. Thus, the world is in constant panic due to these new strains. The third important issue depicted is related to countries already facing issues related to terrorism. This particular image (cartoon number six) explains the problems related to terror-struck countries like Iraq where the pandemic situation has worsened (as faced by both internal conflicting situations as well as an external worldwide pandemic).

The next important issue represented in these cartoons was related to the economy. The images exemplify how the world economy is badly destroyed by the pandemic. More importantly, in this situation, the working class is suffering the most. Sattar et al. (2020) also had similar findings of economy-related issues illustrated in the national newspapers of Pakistan. Alkhresheh (2020) in his study of Pakistani and Britain media highlighted the economy-related issues that are significantly presented in the selected cartoons. Thus, it can be deciphered that economy was one of the severely hit areas during the pandemics. Another interesting issue emphasized by the recent cartoons was related to vaccine hold and distribution. The two selected images (cartoons 9 and 10) elucidate the situation related to a vaccine which clearly reflects imperialist and capitalist approaches even during life-taking pandemics like COVID-19. The images depict those powerful countries like European countries have complete control and authority over the vaccine process (imperialism). On the other hand, rich countries have also prompt access to the vaccine as compared to poor countries (capitalism). Moreover, another issue related to a vaccine is also presented i.e. preparation of the vaccine for masses access and so on.

The last issue represented by the last two selected cartoons was yet a complete satire of what the world calls progress. These images illustrate how the world has failed to handle the pandemic situation (caused by a small microorganism) regardless of making and enunciating massive accomplishments in the fields of science and technology. This point resembles what Imperial (2020) has highlighted in his analysis of cartoons in the Philippines newspapers where he finds that world technology is not adequate or more appropriately not right to deal with the present pandemic. Moreover, the cartoons focus on emphasizing armaments, planetary, and communication technologies which specifically focus on world advancement today. This is quite alarming as it points towards the world's failure despite its immense technological invasion and suggests acclimatizing to a new unfriendly environment, imposed by COVID-19, for its growth.

6.   Conclusion

The present study focused on cartoonish representations of the Corona pandemic by the Arab media (newspapers). For this purpose, the contemporary published cartoons showing COVID-19 related issues in Arab and Gulf Newspapers were scrutinized. The semiotics theory provided both the theoretical and methodological approaches for the present study. The findings revealed that Arab media has proficiently illustrated the issues faced by the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most prominent issues highlighted in the selected cartoons were related to life's closure, the economy's destabilization, the working class's sufferings, vaccine's dissemination, and the world's fiasco to handle the pandemic. The cartoonists of the selected newspapers mostly represented the whole world by illustrating how pandemics become collective human issues to be solved. Moreover, issues of the terror-struck and poor countries were prominently presented as they had to deal with internal issues along with the Coronavirus pandemic – implying that such countries needed explicit attention and a more humane approach. In addition, the issues related to holding the vaccine and its distribution were illustrated to show the concern of the world over imperialistic and capitalistic attitudes prominent in this process. The study suggests that cartoons are much more than simple caricature drawings and semiotics effectively help to identify and examine the realities presented by the cartoonists.

7.   Acknowledgment

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