

Socio-cultural Construction of Meaning during Covid-19: Visual-Narratives Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract:

With the rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was necessary to achieve immediate societal and academic responses to it at the global level, taking into account the economic, educational and cultural differences between global citizens. Therefore, the role of language and visual communication in light of the pandemic has emerged to spread awareness of precautionary measures while overcoming obstacles related to illiteracy and low economic status. Hence, this research paper will investigate different visual narratives practiced by global citizens in selected metropolises around the world. Theoretically, the study is built upon Gunther Kress & Theodoor Van Leeuwen (2006) analytical approach of visual semiotic analysis. It selects its global cases based on a textual-visual analysis of some of the global artwork presented during the first two waves of the pandemic. Methodologically, the study provides a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the COVID-19 visual narratives based on Norman Fairclough's (1995) perception which reflects several socio-cultural transformations in relation to the sociology of pandemics. The main findings highlight how the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about social and cultural changes in our

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societies, in addition to reviewing a number of specialized academic concepts in the field of sociology.

Keywords:

Sociology of Pandemics; Grammar of Visual Designs; New Global Actors; Meaning-Making; COVID-19.

التشييد الاجتماعي والثقافي للمعني خلال جائحة كوفيد-19:

تحليل سيميولوجي للسرديات البصرية

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الملخص:

كان لانتشار جائحة كوفيد ١٩ تأثيرات متعددة طالت كل المجتمعات البشرية؛ إذ مثَّل الوباء خطراً عالمياً نتيجة سرعة انتشاره وتغير البيانات الإحصائية حياله بشكل لحظي. ومع هذا الانتشار السريع كان لا بد من مواكبتها بسرعة في الاستجابات المجتمعية له على مستوى العالم مع الأخذ في الاعتبار الفروق الاقتصادية والتعليمية والثقافية بين المواطنين العالميين. من هنا برز دور اللغة والتواصل البصري في ظل الجائحة لتعمل على نشر الوعي بالإجراءات الاحترازية مع تخطي المعوقات المتصلة بالأمية وانخفاض المستوى الاقتصادي. ويتمثل الإطار النظري للدراسة في نظرية كريس وليوين (٢٠٠٦) عن قواعد التحليل البصري لتختار حالاتها العالمية بناءً على تحليل سيميولوجي (نصي ومرئي) لبعض الأعمال البصرية العالمية التي انتشرت خلال الموجتين الأولى والثانية للجائحة. من الناحية المنهجية، توفر الدراسة تحليلاً نقدياً لخطاب السرديات البصرية لجائحة كوفيد ١٩ في بعض المدن العالمية الكبرى وفقاً لمعايير اختيار تحددها منهجية الدراسة بناءً على تصور نورمان فيركلاو (١٩٩٥) الذي يعكس العديد من التحولات الاجتماعية والثقافية فيما يتعلق بعلم اجتماع الأوبئة. ختاماً، أبرزت النتائج النهائية للدراسة عدداً من الآثار المختلفة لجائحة كوفيد ١٩، خاصة على المستويات الثقافية والاجتماعية، والتي حملت في طياتها العديد من الجوانب الإيجابية والسلبية معاً، وكيف أن الجائحة قد أحدثت تغييرات اجتماعية وثقافية جذرية بالمجتمعات البشرية

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جميعها، علاوة على تأثيرات أكاديمية بتخصص علم الاجتماع متمثلة في الحاجة للعديد من المراجعات النظرية والمنهجية والمفاهيمية من قبل الأكاديميين المتخصصين.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

علم اجتماع الأوبئة، قواعد التحليل البصري، الفاعلين العالميين الجدد، ابتكار المعنى، جائزة كوفيد ١٩.

Introduction:

The global context is forcing us to investigate the major transformations caused by COVID-19 within contemporary socio-cultural everyday practices using creative ways of study. Academically, sociology was at the center of this global situation. Since its first emergence via the writings of the founding father - *Ibn Khaldoun*- during the 14th century under the name (*‘Im āl‘mrān Ālbšry*), in English “science of human urbanism”, sociology was and continues to be the science of studying society and culture. Now, in the 21st century, Sociology of Pandemics needs to be established as a new branch to understand the meaning-making survival initiatives invented by global actors against the spread of Covid-19. Moreover, some of the fundamental terminologies in sociology has to be revised. For example, as humanity turned from face-to-face interaction to masked interaction, further definitions of ‘masked-interaction’ and ‘visual interaction’ need to be constructed. Other terminologies have to be established while constructing their socio-cultural connotations. For example, the term ‘meaning-making’ and its practices has to be sociologically reworked as a new term that highlights the human laborious act to make sense of hazardous situations in their everyday life practices. Meaning-making is slightly a new approach in social science, and it tackles the human ability for creativity and innovation through their socio-cultural practices.

That being said, this research paper investigates different visual narratives as depicted in the artwork of guideposts, street

graffiti, and murals practiced by global citizens in selected metropolises around the world in order to create meaning out of the entire context of Covid-19. The study does not limit itself to the analytical scope of a particular society or one city; as it deals with a global pandemic. Though, the chosen metropolises were selected randomly based on convenience sampling of global cities where images of Covid-19 visual narratives were presented within the public sphere using different global languages. However, the author designed a Multimodal Semiotic-Analytical Tool based on Michael Halliday's Meta-functions of Language to identify certain characteristic-model upon which the data of visual analysis could be selected (Figure 3). These criteria will be discussed thoroughly within the methodology section. Finally, the method of reading images has relied on different linguistic productions as the analyzed visual narratives of the study encompasses an assemblage of verbal and non-verbal forms of expressions of meaning-making.

Literature Review:

In the midst of speaking about the sociology of pandemics, other sub disciplines were also highlighted which introduced revised perspectives. Cultural sociology, comparative sociology, medical sociology, visual sociology, urban sociology, and sociology of knowledge are at the forefront of the revised disciplines. Some newly emerged disciplines have become very essential during the pandemic, especially digital sociology.

Most of the western literature originated from Europe, Australia, and North America tries to establish the new discipline

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of the sociology of pandemics (Matthewman. Steve & Huppertz. Kate, 2020; Zinn. Jens O., 2021). While some of the Arabic literature deals with the current pandemic within the discipline of ‘medical sociology’, others confirm the emergence of a new discipline named the ‘sociology of pandemics’. For instance, Al-Rawashdeh et al. argued in their study published in 2021 that the Covid-19 pandemic should be investigated within the sub-branch of ‘medical and health sociology’ in order to understand how societies deal with such phenomenon, in terms of its positive and negative impacts, social readiness, social solidarity, and the level of societal awareness during pandemics. Al-Rawashdeh et al. also highlighted the important academic shift towards ‘digital sociology’ as they argue that the digital impact of the pandemic is the most grounded and visible transformation in the modern human societies (Al-Rawashdeh. Alaa Zuhir et al, 2021: 269, 285).

On the other hand, Al-Hamadani (2020) argues that the spread of Covid-19 should be studied within new sub-branches of what he calls ‘Epidemiological Psychology’ and ‘Sociology of Pandemics’ in order to achieve a better understanding of the coping mechanisms produced by the main three social units (the individual, the family, and the society) in their dealing with the pandemic (Mubarak. Al-Hamadani, 2020: 2). However, it is very important to revisit the canonical definition of both medical sociology and the sociology of pandemics to achieve more understanding and to find out how certain academic disciplines need to bring about revolutionary developments to keep pace with

current societal transformations.

Starting with the term ‘Medical Sociology’, Encyclopedia of Sociology defines it as being a sub-branch within the ‘applied sociology’ which focuses on the study of national health policy analysis, illness behavior, hierarchal and medical staff-nurses power relationship, social relationships with patients, healthcare management, nursing, financing medical care, and funding resources (Borgatta. Edgar & Montgomery. Rohanda, 2000: 1158). Moreover, since its emergence in the middle of the 1900s, founded by the work of Talcott Parsons “The Social System” (1951), ‘medical sociology’ has gained recognition as a sub-branch by the American Sociological Association (ASA). Nonetheless, ASA revealed that the term is “narrow and misleading” and instead of using the name ‘sociology of medicine’, many courses and texts pointed out the sociology of health, health and health care, health and illness, health and medicine, or health and healing (Ibid: 1813-1814).

Moving to the term ‘Sociology of Pandemics’, in 2013 a collaborative work between British and American researchers have highlighted the importance of establishing a sociology of pandemics as a new branch in sociology especially when dealing with infectious disease which spread on a global scale causing global impacts. Their prospective study managed to anticipate the importance of a sociology of pandemics as a result of globalization and its several impacts on travel, economic, healthcare, and international relationships (Dingwall. Robert; Hoffman. Lily; Staniland. Karen, 2013: 167-168).

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Now, after the actual outbreak of Covid-19 pandemics in 2020, many sociologists started again to draw attention to the new discipline arguing that it is now the time to establish ‘the sociology of pandemics’ after the precautionary measures the world has witnessed and practiced at the same time of travel restrictions, global lockdown, and social distancing. The action of solidarity of practicing the same precautionary measures simultaneously all over the world made it obvious that a medical sociology that deals with health care systems on the national level is not enough. A broader discipline that responds to the global threats and opportunities has to be established to move on beyond the current global pandemic (Zinn. Jens O., 2021: 435-436).

Some sociologists went further asking for the establishment of a sociology of Covid-19 pandemic. For a sociology of Covid-19 pandemic {please refer to Matthewman. Steve & Huppertz. Kate (2020), Zinn. Jens (2021), and Ward. Paul (2020)}. For instance, in 2020, Paul R. Ward published a paper titled A Sociology of COVID-19 Pandemic. Within the same year, both Steve Matthewman & Kate Huppertz published another paper under the same title. Regarding the current argument, the research paper does not agree on calling for a sociology of COVID-19 or even for a visual sociology of COVID-19 as these researchers did. The contemporary pandemic is not the first to be faced by humanity and will not be the last. The global pandemic of COVID-19 represents a global problem that faces all humanity. That is why this study emphasizes the idea of ‘the sociology of living through pandemics’ to highlight a needed shift within the

theoretical, methodological, and conceptual foundation of the academic discipline of sociology. However, the previous critique does not diminish Ward's point of the "*urgent need for sociologists to engage theoretically and empirically on the social impact of issues related to Covid-19,*" and for a serious call of "*a social theory-driven research agenda*" that copes with the dramatic changes imposed by the spread of Covid-19 on both the social life and the sociological core theoretical ideas (Ward. Paul R, 2020: 726, 728).

Research Objectives and Questions:

Since the selected visual narratives presented in the research paper come from different global metropolises, the central message is to ask: How do the linguistic context and socio-cultural differences influence people's choice of visual models and illustrations during the Covid-19 pandemic? In this vein, the study comes to serve three main goals, as follows: to highlight the importance of visual analysis as a valid methodology in sociology (Method); to provide new understandings of social phenomena and their theoretical foundations (Theory); to scrutinize the canonical terminologies and provide new definitions (Conceptions).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework:

The analytical framework of the study is built upon Gunther Kress & Theodoor van Leeuwen's Semiotic analysis as presented in their book "The Grammar of Visual Designs" (2006- 1st ed. & 2020- 2nd ed.) and their approach of reading images. The

semiotic analysis of reading images is built upon the examination of three main pillars. First, social resources of a particular group (the global citizens for within the current research project). Second, social practices of this group (the visual practices of meaning-making and raising awareness about the spread of COVID-19 and its socio-cultural positive and negative consequences). Third, within a visual production that can be encoded and interpreted having shared meanings within this particular group of people (the artwork production, textual-visual images, and street graffiti).

- **Tri-model of Socio-semiotic Multimodal Analysis:**

The visual grammar of interpretations starts from the unquestionable grammatical structure of any simple English written sentence that consists of a noun, a verb, an active subject, and an object. Building on this linguistic structure, Kress and Leeuwen argued that the same structural analysis can be applied to multimodal visual designs by comparing the ‘visual structure’ to the ‘linguistic structure’ of the produced visual image. For them, visual grammar provides not just rules of interpretations for textual images, but also it helps the viewer of any image to encode its meanings and decode its several elements and regulated components. In this vein, the term *grammar* is applicable to any language and determine “*an inventory of elements and rules underlying culture specific forms of verbal communication,*” (Kress. Gunther & Van Leeuwen. Theodor, 2006: 3).

Within the same context, *multimodality* is identified as being “a rapidly growing realization that representation is always multiple,” that allows researchers to grasp the different meanings coming from different media, platforms, and ways of communication (Ibid: vii-1). It also allows researchers to grasp the idea of different meaning-making initiatives and survival techniques within the era of the COVID-19 pandemic using textual-visual data coming from social media platforms, newsletters, online websites, street art, and graffiti.

Additionally, using a grammar of visual analysis means to encode “meanings that belong to a certain ‘*culture*’, rather than to specific semiotic modes,” (Ibid: 2). Similarly, the visual analysis reveals cultural embedded narratives and meaning attached to the specifics of each society. Thus, it should highlight the socio-cultural meanings related to the societal context of the society in which it emerged and to which its people share the same cultural connotations.

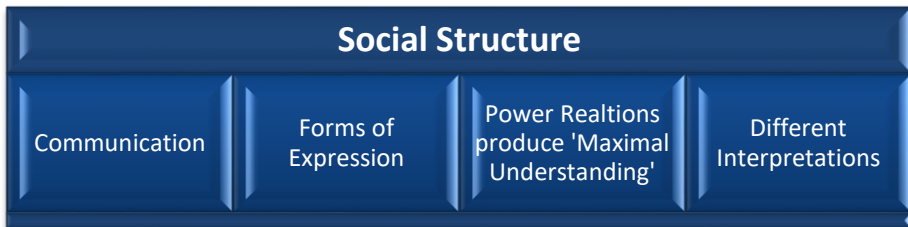
The analytical data should also interpret colors, signs, signifiers, signified, directions, and all compositional structures within the visual mode of interaction. By the same token, both Kress and Leeuwen identified the socio-semiotic analysis components as being:

- *the sign (sign-making).*
- *the signifiers (color, perspective, line).*
- *the signified (the way in which these forms are used to realize meanings) (Ibid:6).*

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The three components provide us with the process of meaning-making through visibility. Firstly, the visual representation is determined by the sign-maker's backgrounds, experience, culture, etc. Secondly, the sign-making is dominated by the social structure in which it occurs. Thirdly, on one hand, the sign is used as a way of communicating to send a message and convey a specific meaning and on the other hand, the representational meaning of the sign is controlled by power relationships that imposes different interpretations as shown in (Figure 1).

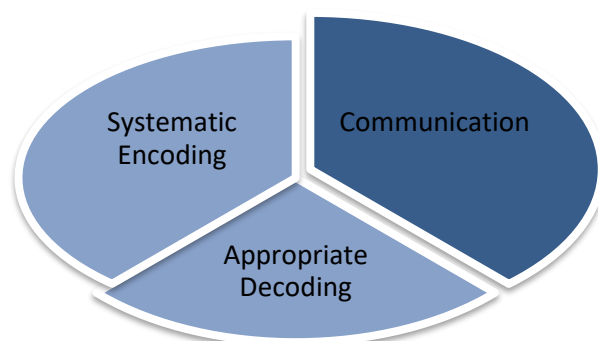
Figure 1: The process of meaning-making of visual representations



Source: Created by author and adopted from (Kress. Gunther & Van Leeuwen. Theodoor, 2006: 6).

Moreover, this analytical approach should acknowledge the fundamental changes within the process of '*social interaction*,' in the era of virtual-visual communication. The term '*communication*' is sociologically defined as a behavioral process of transmitting information between human beings, "*for behavior to be communicative, it needs to be shown that information has been both transmitted and received,*" (Kuper. Adam & Kuper. Jessica, 2005: 981) as shown in (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Definition of the term 'communication'.



Source: Created by author and adopted from (Kuper. Adam & Kuper. Jessica, 2005: 981)

Based on the previous definition, communication is a collective process that requires a certain message to be communicated by a 'communication agent' who on one hand provides a systematic encoding of the message information based on shared socio-cultural and historical contexts with a 'receiver' who on the other hand provides appropriate decoding for the message content and comprehensive connotations.

Methodological Framework:

As the study aims to understand the sociocultural construction of meaning during the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021, it depends mainly on official global reporting to understand the pandemic context⁽¹⁾. Methodologically, the study provides a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the COVID-19 visual narratives based on Norman Fairclough's perception. These narratives reflect the context, the actors, the hidden and manifest narratives, the techniques, and the explicit and underlined goals which reflect several social and cultural transformations in

relation to the sociology of living through pandemics. The analyzed discourse will encompass an assemblage of verbal and non-verbal forms of expressions using visual-textual analysis of different resilient techniques from the selected global metropolises.

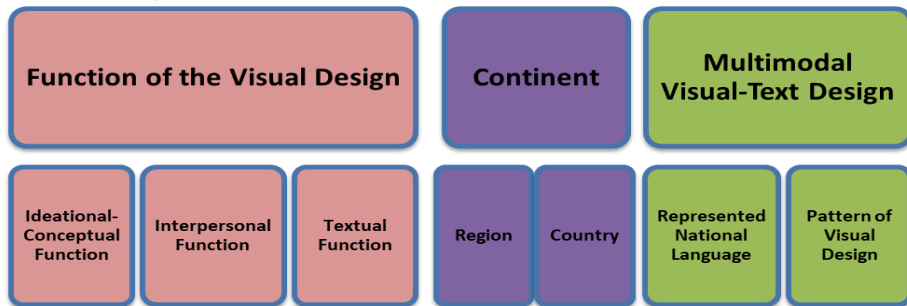
• **Analytical Tool of Socio-semiotic Multimodal Analysis:**

Weaving methodology into theory, it can be said that Kress and Leeuwen's visual grammar approach of multimodal visual-text provides three accounts of socio-semiotic analysis that consists of three different types of meanings: representational, interactive, and compositional. Based on *Michael Halliday's Meta-functions of Language* who argued in his *Systematic Functional Linguistics* (1995, -1st ed. & 2013- 2nd ed.) that language has three major functions (the conceptual, the interpersonal, and the textual functions), both Kress and Leeuwen have assigned '*three functions of the visual design analysis*':

- 1- *Ideational-Conceptual Function*: conceptualizing the world around and inside us through reproductive-representational meanings.
- 2- *Interpersonal Function*: enacting social interactions and interactive meanings.
- 3- *Textual Function*: presenting a coherent world of and around the visual text through giving compositional meanings (Kress. Gunther & Van Leeuwen. Theodor, 2006: 15).

As the paper follows a qualitative analytical approach, the criteria upon which the selected visual data of analysis were chosen was represented through a **Multimodal Semiotic-Analytical Tool** that can be explained via the coming illustration designed by the author to ensure a comprehensive perspective while analyzing a global phenomenon:

Figure 3: Multimodal Semiotic-Analytical Tool upon which the author gathered and analyzed the research data



Source: Created by author and adopted from (Kress. Gunther & Van Leeuwen. Theodoor, 2006)

- **Analytical Spatial and Temporal Framework:**

The spatial and temporal framework of the study is also guided by the theoretical framework of Kress and Leeuwen's grammar of reading images to compare between different models of visual narratives globally by selecting different metropolises from the main six continents in the world. The criteria for sampling the selected cities and their represented visual narratives serves the theoretical scheme of the study. The convenience sampling was determined to compare between models from developed countries in Europe, North America, China and

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Australia, and models from developing countries in Latin America and Africa. Bearing in mind that the selected models have to vary in their national languages, which has an original theoretical dimension related to the semiotic analysis of the study. For example, the study selects three African models representing three international official languages (Egypt- Arabic), (Kenya- English), and (Senegal- French). The European models addressed two other languages (Germany- German) and (Greece- Greek), as well as, (China- Chinese), (United States of America and Ireland- English), and finally (Mexico- Mexican). Those global models were chosen to confirm the importance of the visual representation of languages as appeared in visual narratives that need to be read. It also highlights the importance of visual representations of meaning-making initiatives during pandemics times in order to achieve societal flexibility, speed, and accuracy in disseminating information and raising the level of awareness and societal readiness in light of pandemics that spread worldwide.

Discussion:

Tailoring methodology into theory produces the research's analytical framework to be applied to the analysis of the written-visual COVID-19 discourse within the selected images of the study. That analytical framework will orbit around discussing the following: What are the different forms of situational-societal resilience globally (contextual analysis)? How was the response to the outbreak of COVID-19 communicated verbally and non-verbally? What are the most prominent survival techniques to

maintain mental, psychological, and physiological health during the lockdown (Techniques)? Who are the major actors and agents of change during the spread of Covid-19 (Actors)? What is the trending social and cultural thematic of COVID-19 (Hidden & Manifest Narratives)? These questions will be tackled respectively through the coming sections.

- **Societal Contextualization:**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the statistical data changes rapidly and makes it impossible to assert accurate facts. However, it is definite that humans did not turn to live inside caves in protection against the virus' lethal impacts. They invented different survival techniques for their mental, psychological, and physiological health.

However, the survival and continuity of human societies depends no more on direct interaction and eye-to-eye contact, as the famous Philip Zimbardo (1971) experiment has proved. Highlighting the idea of social relationships within The Stanford Prison Experiment, the research participants were prevented from making eye contact with their jailers who wore reflecting eyeglasses and called them using numbers instead of their personal names. Among its many provocative results, the one-of-its time experiment highlighted the importance of social relationships based on face-to-face interaction. The work of Philip Zimbardo, the research leader of that experiment, created the base of different social and antisocial initiatives among which was Abu Ghraib prison. Now, 50 years after Zimbardo's experiment, the idea of direct social interaction is rising on the surface again to

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highlight the importance of social relationships and social solidarity.

In this vein, the idea of ‘social distancing’ was a widespread notion during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It provoked a counter-discourse about the importance of social solidarity versus the ‘physical distancing’ imposed on humanity due to the spread of the Covid-19. Now, humanity life is depending on new roles imposed by the existence of a nonliving organism that caused the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, wearing a face mask, making adequate physical distancing, and canceling most of the social gatherings and family visits have become one of the important foundations for contemporary social interactions in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Opera concerts have transformed from formal opera concerts to balcony parties. Weddings took a virtual detour during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. Overcrowded Lecture halls have turned into electronic screens and virtual communication channels through which students communicate with their professors. Lectures are recorded and exams are performed using different online platforms. Some rigid academic mindsets that refuse to deal with any form of technology have turned into forced users of several electronic platforms in order to achieve active communication with their students after the suspension of face-to-face lectures. A global comprehensive shift within the educational systems that transformed lectures, workshops, and conferences to take place remotely online forced the educational systems to quickly provide digital support for teachers and university professors in conducting their classes online.

In the academic context, sociologists were influenced by the current pandemic. They started by questioning their discipline's concepts, methods, and theories in order to understand how this global phenomenon affects social life within human societies. They acknowledged the discipline's inability to grasp the meanings of the COVID-19 pandemic without questioning the sociological foundations first. In this vein, Carlos Miguel Ferreira argued that "*this crisis has profound implications and raises issues for which the contribution of Social Sciences does not seem to be sufficiently mobilized,*" (Ferreira. Carlos Miguel & et.al., 2020: 2).

Likewise, sociologists are making every effort to understand the societal consequences of Covid-19 as a social phenomenon which imposed itself in a certain time and place and creates a space for its socio-historical existence. They draw attention to three sequential problems out of the socio-historical context of COVID-19: The first problem is related to the loss of meaning while taking governmental precautionary measures without considering their potential consequences on the human physical and mental health . The second problem is related to the confusion in crisis management between different actors globally, regionally, and nationally who deal with the crisis management all on their own with minimum cooperative initiatives. The last problem should deal with the unclear boundaries between those actors, a problem that can lead to a bigger major problem of jurisdictional struggles (Ibid: 2).

However, one of the positive consequences of the spread of COVID-19 within the academic sphere is the call for serious revisions, scrutinization, understandings, cooperation, and open new horizons for all disciplines to conduct more and more interdisciplinary research for a better understanding of the current pandemic and the surly coming future ones and their consequences on the social life.

- **Manifestations of the Visual Narratives:**

Reading the selected images of the study has highlighted both the hidden and manifest narratives of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the visual narratives against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic depicted the idea of how people make meaning out of crises and how to create a new path for a better future out of disturbance and hazard situations. Most of the direct messages presented medical and hygienic procedures to fight the spread of COVID-19. As a practical example, the Senegalese capital city of Dakar used artwork in their fight against the spread of the Covid-19 by painting the outer walls of the university campus- Cheikh Anta Diop University, also known as Dakar University (UCAD), with colorful graffiti to raise awareness on the most basic hygienic procedures such as using wipes while sneezing, using hand sanitizer, wash hands with water and soap regularly for 30 seconds at least, and disposing of the used wipes in their suitable garbage bins (Figures 4-5).

Figure 4: In French, several contact information in case of COVID-19 emergency on the UCAD campus wall



Source: Author's field visit, Dakar, Senegal, 27th September 2021

Figure 5: In French “contre le covid, se couvrir le nez et la bouche avec un mouchoir a leter pour tousser ou éternuer” which means in English “against covid, cover your nose and mouth with a tissue to let you cough or sneeze”, on the UCAD campus wall



Source: Author's field visit, Dakar, Senegal, 27th September 2021

The Covid-19 visual narratives did not convey only direct messages of socio-cultural survival techniques for the people who produced these narratives. However, they also conveyed political discursive meanings. Consulting the visual analysis of this paper,

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graffiti from New York City, USA (Figure 6) symbolizing the former US President 'Donald Trump' as a hooded scary character wearing a black robe from an American movie while holding a huge scythe. The photo illustrates a representational meaning of the political narratives that dominated the American political arena during the transitional period between the end of Trump's presidency and the start of Joe Biden's tenure. When Trump was still in office, he refused to take the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic seriously and was asking people not to wear masks. The image's interactive meaning creates strong eye contact with the viewer as all words are written in red, resembling the blood to create a sense of fear from the COVID-19 pandemic despite the formal discourse about it at that time. The compositional meaning of the photo holds hidden narratives of the importance of social distancing during the pandemic represented in the fear from the scary hooded character that tells people not to be afraid of COVID-19.

Figure 6: A mural mocking Donald Trump in New York City.



Source: DW website (2021)

The same scary narratives were represented in Kenya with a direct public health message. The caricature graffiti symbolizes and magnifies Covid-19 as an evil creature, giving it a huge size than normal human aiming to spread fear and awareness at the same time. The most compositional meaning of that visual narrative lies in the informative value, salience, and framing it holds. Using the sign of ‘not allowed’ over an angry virus in the center of the photo conveys a tactic informative value and communicates the meaning of “we are not taking it easy, we are fighting back”. Placing the sign of “not allowed virus” in the very center of the photo attracts the viewer’s attention to the representational message of humanity’s battle against that microscopic creature. Lastly, having the entire graffiti’s background painted in red conveys the entire message of awareness, caution, alert, and fighting back (Figure 7).

Figure 7: A street graffiti from the Kenyan city capital, Nairobi.



Source: DW website (2021)

- **The Visual Grammar of New Global Actors:**

The visual narratives of COVID-19 from the selected global cities also shed light on the central actors and agents of change all through humanity battle against this pandemic. Some nations call their health workers the “white coat army” to delineate historical battle against one enemy that cannot be defeated by armies, weapons, and military equipment. All front-line health workers fight in this battle for all humanity. Considering different examples across nations and in different languages, the next photo from Greece depicts the sacrifices, tiredness, and the fear from the unknown faced by health workers in hospitals during the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 8).

Figure 8: A street graffiti in Thessaloniki city, Greece.



Source: DW website (2021)

By the same token, another mural from the city of Wuhan, China, where the Coronavirus was first broke out (Figure 9), depicts the white coat army as new global actors. The visual narratives convey a national battle symbolized through the painting of the Chinese flag and a red dragon in the background

with a woman wearing a medical mask and following the health procedures in front of the mural. One nurse is holding her thumb up while the other is making the victory sign in a representational meaning that this is a winning battle for humanity.

Figure 9: A mural from Wuhan city, China.



Source: DW website (2021)

Another compositional meaning that is highly important within the visual analysis of the study comes from Ireland where no cartoonish characters were used, but a real photo of one of the medical staff. In the Irish mural, the head depicts a real photo of one of the healthcare workers, the body is a cartoon drawing for a muscle puffed body that is borrowed from the American culture and accompanied with an American slogan used during the wartime “we can do it!” (Figure 10). Using a photo for a real face in the mural depicts the idea that the battle is real and that humanity is facing it on the ground, not like in some cartoonish movie where the hero always wins. The entire direct message conveys that the battle requires collective actions of alert and caution to defeat the spread of Covid-19.

Figure 10: Irish mural from Dublin city



Source: DW website (2021)

The next mural from Mexico (Figure 11) highlights the same manifested narratives of the global actors and agents of change during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. It sheds light on the importance of depending on the human resources as resembled in doctors and nurses as the true heroes. The hidden narratives convey that the world's superheroes are no more famous Hollywood characters. Instead, superheroes are now the health workers. The mural also holds an interactive connotation represented in the doctor's direct eye contact which conveys a message of alert to the viewer.

Figure 11: A mural of a healthcare worker wears a mask with Superman's logo in Mexico City,.



Source: DW website (2021)

The photographer's hidden message when photographing the mural while having the old-timer man standing in front of it wearing a mask, conveys a hidden narrative of the importance of taking care of all categories and segments of the society regardless of any difference of age, gender, religion or ethnicity. The political discourse during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a global concern regarding the healthcare for old people. Incidents of unintended old people during the spread of Covid-19 who died in their elderly homes in France shocked the entire world. The events provoked the world's political leaders and global health organizations to fight the battle for the old-timers by raising awareness of the importance of family ties, social solidarity, and social relationships.

The World Health Organization started a campaign on "protecting older people against COVID-19," (WHO, 2020, September 03). Global political leaders, such as the UN

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Secretary-General António Guterres, expressed their concerns about how our socio-cultural values could affect the older people's lives during the pandemic (WHO, 2020, June 16). Finally, different civil society organizations around the globe worked hard to raise the socio-cultural sense of solidarity towards the elderly by launching the “Everyone Matters” global campaign (Help Age International, 2020: 1).

• Non-Verbal Meaning-Making Practices

Many studies tried to capture how people managed to create different meanings out of the Covid-19 pandemic. How they managed to survive an invisible enemy that affects the entire globe and what are the different meanings they attached to the spread of the global pandemic of COVID-19. Last but not least, how they managed to do all this through creative-sense-of-humor innovative practices. Answering these questions would underline the meaning-making practices of living in the era of COVID-19. For instance, human societies expressed different verbal and non-verbal surviving techniques in order to cope with the psychological stress of the general lockdown that was witnessed all over the world.

The psychological impact of forcing quarantine and night curfew was confronted using different types and forms of humorous expressions either to make fun of the entire global situation or to convey a socio-cultural meaning regarding some wrong practices. For instance, after the first wave invasion of the COVID-19, many European countries suffered from supermarkets shortage due to closing borders between all EU and Schengen

Area countries. Germany was the most obvious example of people's responses and reactions towards the spread of the Covid-19. Many Germans lined in front of the supermarkets to buy household supplies. The panic over the closed borders, the general lockdown, and the unknown enemy drove them to over-consume regular products including toilet paper (Ray. Siladitya, 2020: 1; Batista. Fabiana, 2021: 1-3). That particular situation attracted different non-verbal humorous narratives as depicted in the cartoonish wall mural in (Figure 12).

The German mural depicts two animation movies' characters and highlights personal hygiene attitudes during the first lockdown period of COVID-19 when people practiced high levels of consumption for toilet paper. The mural calls it (the toilet paper) as *mein schatz* (in German) "my precious" which gives a representational meaning of the dominated structural meanings and narratives during the first wave of COVID-19 in Europe. The first narrative conveys the idea of certain consumption attitudes that are related to the pandemic, while the second narrative highlights the cinematic impact of Hollywood movies on the collective memory of global citizens. The two cinematic characters are from the 2001 film series "The Lord of the Rings," and the 2002 cartoon movies series "Ice Age". Nevertheless, having two decades after the release of these cinematic productions did not stop them from having a cultural impact on the global collective memory; as their key characters were recalled in order to spread awareness on some cultural misconceptions practices that emerged as a result of the global spread of the Covid-19.

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Figure 12: Street artwork in the German city capital of Berlin.



Source: DW website (2021)

Moreover, some of the meaning-making practices were illustrated through the usage of a historical figure in a moment of need in order to convey a highly important meaning to the people of a certain community during diseases and pandemics periods. The next visual narrative comes from the Senegalese capital city of Dakar, where the visual image depicts Professor *Cheikh Anta Diop*'s statue -a famous Senegalese historical figure. His statue stands in front of Dakar University (UCAD) which is named after him. The statue was wearing a surgical mask as a sign to urge the population and the students to wear masks during the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Professor Cheikh Anta Diop's statue in front of Dakar University (UCAD)



Source: HISTOIRE ET PATRIMOINE & TOURISME ET DÉCOUVERTE (2021).

The usage of historical figures was also represented in another mural from Illinois in USA (Figure 14) featuring Albert Einstein wearing a mask. The mural also features the rules of science, technology, and innovation as some of the hidden narratives that appeared within the aesthetics global expressions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The mural framed Einstein's big idea of the formula $E=MC^2$, which highlights one of the world's most famous equations that opened the door for innovation, creativity, and scientific thinking as a must-needed lethal- weapon against the Covid-19 global pandemic. The interactive meaning of the visual narratives comes from the message "be safe " which is written over a globe-like shape, featuring a direct message of caution and alert.

Figure 14: A graffiti of Einstein wearing a mask in Prospect Heights, Illinois, USA.



Source: DW website (2021)

- **Textual-Visual Meaning-Making Practices**

Weaving methodology into theory, it can be said that Kress and Leeuwen’s visual grammar approach of reading images provides three accounts of the socio-semiotic analysis that consists of three different types of meanings: representational, interactive, and compositional (Kress, Gunther & Van Leeuwen, Theodor, 2006: 15). Visual structures have socio-cultural meanings related to the specificity of the society that can be read and understood by the citizens of that society who share the same cultural heritage.

The visual grammar approach also provided us with a textual-meaning meta-function by which different realizations of the compositional meanings of a written text within a visual image could be acquired. The approach discusses the interplay between the visual and the written where the former plays an ‘anchor’ for the latter and not the opposite in a dialectic visual-textual analysis

(Ibid: 43). Moreover, the ‘multimodal-text analysis’ is a crucial point of departure here; as texts are becoming increasingly multimodal. They reach us through graphics, pictures, layout techniques as well as words (Thuy. Tran Thi Hieu, 2017: 164). Considering the textual-visual analysis, it highlights the compositional meaning of the visual media of the study in which three main components are being investigated, as follows:

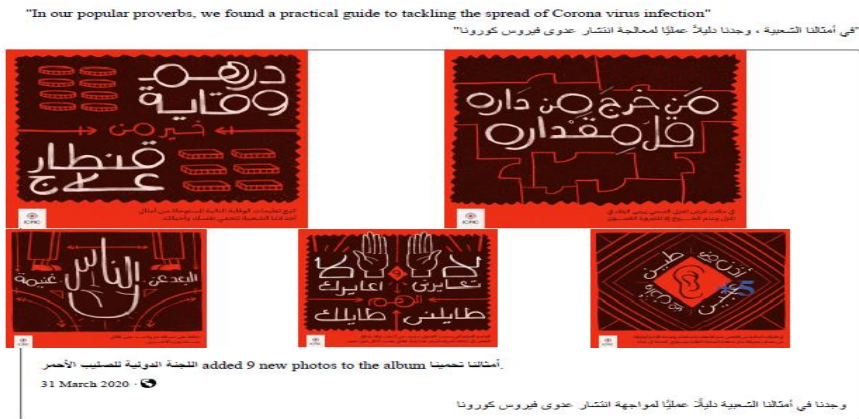
1. *Information value*: the positionality of different textual and visual elements within the image, and how a certain position would convey a certain informative value attached to “the various ‘zones’ of the image: left and right, top and bottom, center and margin”.
2. *Saliency*: which includes “the elements [of different] participants as well as representational and interactive syntagms, [who] are made to attract the viewer’s attention to different degrees,” based on having the main informative message in a certain position within the image (either in the foreground or background), and the message size, color, sharpness, etc.
3. *Framing*: which includes connected and disconnected elements of lines, borders, frames which may/ may not create a unified entity of a story that is transmitted through the visual-textual multimodal medium, (Kress. Gunther & Van Leeuwen. Theodoor, 2006: 177).

In this vein, one of the most pertinent examples of the COVID-19 narratives that took a textual-visual modality was the Arabic album of

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the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) that was posted across different social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. The textual-visual narratives came under the title “*ICRC albums, ‘Our proverbs protect us’*”, we found in our popular proverbs a practical guide to confront the spread of the Covid-19 infection,” posted on Facebook March 31, 2020. The entire album has a direct message that says, “*Follow the following prevention instructions inspired by the popular proverbs of our ancestors to protect yourself and your loved ones*,” (Figure 15). The online album takes certain Egyptian proverbs as its point of departure to relate them to the medical-preventive procedures that were taken by different governments and societies since the outbreak of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (Figures 15-21). However, ICRC has managed in a creative way to link these popular proverbs to a global campaign for raising awareness against the spread of the Covid-19 disease.

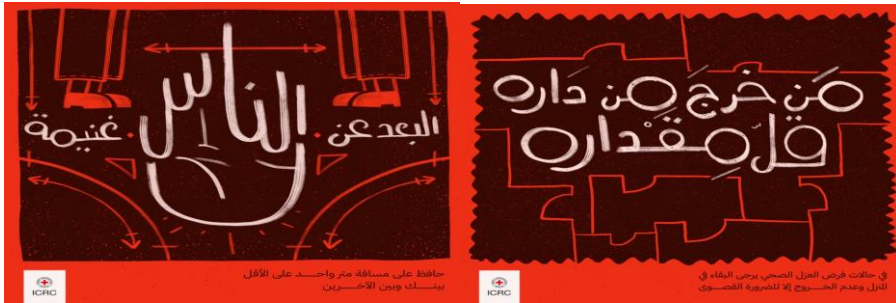
Figure 15: “*ICRC albums, ‘Our proverbs protect us’*”, posted on FB on March 31, 2020



Source: *The Arabic Page of ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross on Facebook*

Figure 16: Social Distance Procedure as represented in the Egyptian proverb “Staying away from people is a booty”

Figure 17: Quarantine Procedure as represented in the Egyptian proverb “Whoever goes out of his home, devalue his prestigious state”



Source: The Arabic Page of ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross on Facebook

Figure 18: Hygienic Procedure as represented in the Egyptian proverb “If the water is available, do not use dust for ablution”

Figure 19: Social Value Procedure against rumors as represented in the Egyptian proverb “[Don't listen to rumors] make one of your ears made of clay while the other made of dough [so not to hear rumors]”



Source: The Arabic Page of ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross on Facebook

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Figure 20: Social Value Procedure against bullying and fostering social solidarity; as represented in the Egyptian proverb "Don't bully me and I don't bully you, the grief [disease] affects us all

Figure 21: Social Value Procedure not to get sick from the first place by following the preventive measures as represented in the Egyptian proverb "An ounce [cent] of prevention is better than a pound of medication"



Source: *The Arabic Page of ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross on Facebook*

In general, the previous album has mainly illustrated some of the hidden and manifested narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic and their socio-cultural consequences as highlighted by the former textual-visual modals. It dealt with the issue of spreading rumors during pandemics, the idea of bullying against certain categories in the society who got infected by the virus, also the importance of hygiene, and the importance of following the governmental/ WHO procedures of social distancing, masking and self-quarantine. The message was written in direct simple language using the Egyptian

popular proverbs framed by a deep blood-red color in the center of each visual text. The outside of the picture frame was light red with a small caption at the bottom of each textual image to give further clarification of the message in semi-formal language. The inside arrows were used to draw attention to certain words in each textual image. For instance, the arrows directed to the outer borders were to highlight terms like ‘ distancing’ and ‘stay away’, while the arrows directed to the center of the textual image were to highlight key terms of ‘grief’, ‘benevolent’, and ‘rumors’, to urge people to do/ or not to do certain behaviors.

All in all, the textual images of ICRC perfectly represented the ‘three functions of the visual design analysis’: the conceptual, the interpersonal, and the textual functions in which the overall narrative highlights the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic represents a global pandemic, no one is safe, no country is safe, it gets to everyone all over the globe, and a collective work is needed to overcome its severe consequences.

Conclusion & Main Results:

With the rapid spread of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), it was necessary to achieve rapid societal and academic responses to it at a global level, taking into account the economic, educational and cultural differences between global citizens. On the societal level, the study has highlighted the role of language and visual communication in view of the pandemic. The study concluded that visibility has emerged to spread awareness of precautionary measures while overcoming obstacles related to illiteracy and low economic level.

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In this vein, the study found that visual communication has been heavily used since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as it allows greater access to more information about the crisis and the pandemic. That sheds light on Kress and Leeuwen's idea of 'visual literacy' vs. 'reading literacy'. The authors of the "Grammar of Visual Design" argued that 'visual communication' has become very important within the domain of 'public communication' rather than with the domain of 'specialists' communication' because ordinary people are not 'visually literate' as long as they share the same cultural norms and historical background of the visual production. That argument can be used to justify the reason behind spreading visual communication during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic to raise awareness between people.

The study also found along with different consequences of the spread of Covid-19, that it also affected the way by which people communicate, the way they greet each other as well as the way they disseminate vital information about the common invisible enemy. Moreover, it can be said that multimodal texts have become a trending way of communication that no longer depends on written words solely. However, the study found that based on the cultural specificity of human societies, sociologists cannot argue for having a universal grammar that can be used for visual analysis, nor can they argue for one unified interpretation of a certain visual representation within the same society. Sociologists have to acknowledge the 'regional and social variation' of the socio-cultural connotations of the COVID-19 visual discourse.

Eventually, the study also found that having a grammar of visual designs helps in determining some ground methodological rules for analyzing different visual ways of social interaction that are practiced during everyday narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper also tried to illustrate how communities and individuals utilized visual narratives as a form of coping mechanism during the period of the pandemic. The process of decoding people's experiences during the pandemic was so vital and represented the analysis base of the selected visual narratives as socio-cultural representations for people's lived realities. Finally, the paper also was actively engaged in enriching the intellectual sphere and represented a theoretical importance in contextualizing the discussions on some ongoing theoretical debates of emerging new branches in sociology. Many academics from various disciplines have found themselves in an inevitable situation where they have to revise their academic established ideas. Sociology was not an exception in this situation, especially as an academic discipline that is specialized in studying human society in general with all its phenomena. The era of the COVID-19 pandemic is not the first disciplinary shock for sociology as one of the dominant social sciences. Many sociologists have tackled the idea of approaching the discipline crisis throughout the field of methodological and theoretical foundations of sociology, among which some selective prominent stops exemplified in: Alvin Ward Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970), Ulrich Beck's *World Risk Society* (1986), Anthony Giddens' *The Constitution of Society* (1984), and

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of course Giddens' theory on the *Third Way* (1998). However, the contemporary crisis faced by different disciplines, including sociology, is based on a global unified crisis that requires innovative academic practices to create a meaning of the contemporary pandemic consequences based on the human societies' culture-related narratives.

As the study tried to direct the academic attention towards the importance of revisiting some of the canonical theoretical, methodological, and terminologies foundations of sociology that were shaken due to the societal consequences of the spread of the Covid-19, the study's usage of the analytical approach of both Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen that provided researchers with basic structure and patterns to best interpret the meanings of visual texts. Using this approach and applying it globally to reveal the global context, the study provided a visual analysis of several visual-textual data from around the world depicting different artworks from different global cities in the North and the South. The visual analysis also highlighted the discursive global context of meaning-making as depicted within the form of graffiti artwork.

Finally, the selected cases of the study came from different global metropolises where different languages are practiced and utilized within the everyday practices of visual narratives, have drawn the researcher's attention to the importance of completing the research path by doing future research dealing with the role of multiple local languages within each community separately, especially in African societies in which many local languages spread alongside the official language of the state, and the role of

those differences in achieving / or / obstructing the idea of societal resilience and spreading awareness, in light of pandemics and disasters in general. Based on the aforementioned, the study found that while humanity is facing global risks and uncertainties caused by the spread of Covid-19 pandemic, humanity also has global opportunities of learning and working together. Thus, a sociology of living through pandemics is now a vital branch that has to be rigorously established to raise awareness against these global risks and highlight the global opportunities for facing them.

Future Research Directions:

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic represents a pressing need for interdisciplinary studies to understand how the pandemic has changed human societies in all respective dimensions. In sociology, we have few studies on the pandemic mental image and its verbal-models-of-expression. Moreover, we need further comparative analysis of the pandemic discourse between different human societies which investigates certain issues such as: Does mean-making happen in response to the pandemic in developed countries in the same manner as in developing countries? Does it happen on the same continent in the same manner taking into consideration the languages differences? Does it happen in a similar fashion in Kenya as it happens in Senegal or Egypt? The analysis could deal with the local, native, domestic, regional, and global interpretations of the pandemic discourse. More research on the spoken texts of the pandemic and how they managed/failed to communicate the semiotic-related information about the disease. Comparative disciplinary studies could also be done

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between the visual semiotics and the linguistic semiotics of the COVID-19 discourse. Further studies are also needed within the field of visual communication that depend on a variety of collected data extracted from mass media, scientific diagrams, and statistical, global maps for the spread of the disease, timeline infographics of development of COVID-19 waves, and of course social media posts produced by global citizens around the world to express their reactions toward the global disease.

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Notes:

(1) WHO interactive timeline of its response to COVID-10 pandemic:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/interactive-timeline/> ;

Coronavirus - WHO (World Health Organization):

<https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus> ;

Coronavirus Worldmeter:

https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdvegas1? ;

BBC COVID Map: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51235105> ;

COVID-19 CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

