

Uncovering the Anti-Islamic Sentiment in *The New Yorker* Cover Issued on July 21, 2008: A Semiotic Analysis

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Received 13 April 2021; accepted 29 April 2021; published 17 May 2021

ABSTRACT

An image is deemed as one of the tools through which a magazine communicates particular messages. The messages may include various purposes, such as commercial or political purposes and values. Thereby, understanding a magazine cover image constitutes an essential issue for the underlying purposes and values that a magazine tries to communicate through it can be revealed. One of the most controversial magazine covers is that which was issued by *The New Yorker* on July 21, 2008, depicting Obama and his wife, Michelle. The portrayal was perceived as controversial on account of sentiment to a particular religion, namely Islam. Hence, this study aimed to figure out the meanings of the magazine cover, particularly in association with the anti-Islamic sentiment. Besides, the qualitative method, a semiotic analysis based on Barthes' (1986) theory of signification, was employed. The findings revealed that the signs had some indications for the anti-Islamic sentiment represented through the portrayals of the figures of Obama, Michelle, and the other pictures surrounding them. Moreover, some conclusions drawn from the analysis asserted that the magazine cover image represents signs having to do with the portrayal of Obama and Michelle during the election campaign and these also represents some attitudes vis-à-vis the anti-Islamic sentiment of some people in the US then. Finally, the present study advocates some considerations to reduce such a negative sentiment to Islam and Muslims, namely through education, appropriate and thorough framings from the American media, and intensive communication through inter-religious rapport and contact.

KEYWORDS

Anti-Islamic Sentiment
Magazine Cover
Semiosis
Semiotics

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1. Introduction

An image constitutes one of the essential means to convey a particular message. This kind of use of an image is also utilized by mass media, including a magazine that commonly appears on the initial page, in other words, as a cover. A number of reasons underlie its use by a magazine. Some magazines use them for a commercial purpose (Held, 2005), whilst some may also use them as mere information or even a 'political attitude of the publisher' (Schmidt & Schmidt, 2005), or it even can show an essential dimension of international politics of one country (Schlag, 2016). In addition, a magazine cover has undergone changes from time to time, and in the early twenty-first century, its use is required to match with several considerations, for example, "commercial typography, channel-hopping, web-surfing, consumer culture, competing values, and objects clamoring for attention" (Grow, 2002, p. 19). Thus, by knowing the meaning of the image in a magazine cover, readers may know the underlying values that a magazine owns.

To come to that end, this study was conducted to scrutinize one of the covers in a magazine in the US, i.e. *The New Yorker*, published on July 21, 2008. The cover was selected based on some grounds. Albeit it was issued more than one decade ago, but due to its controversy, it was perceived that understanding the image of the magazine cover was worth researching. In this regard, its controversy was caused by the 'indecent' depiction of one of the candidates of the US presidents at that time, Barack Obama, with his wife, Michelle. Regarding this, the controversial issues emerged as the cover magazine depicted Barack Obama wearing Moslem attire and his wife wearing military attire-like. Such portrayal was regarded as deteriorating when it was accompanied by the other controversial portrayals in the cover, such as the flag of the US that was burned and a photo of

Osama Bin Laden. Such controversies, namely Obama, who was perceived to be Moslem due to the Moslem attire, had led to prejudice of him as a terrorist who was associated with the portrayal of his wife with the military-like-attire, the burned flag of the US, and the picture of Osama Bin Laden. Furthermore, due to these portrayals, there seemed anti-Islamic sentiments that the cover image envisaged. It is pondered to be a crucial issue since public opinion and behavior can be influenced and shaped by the power of media (Jackson, 2010; Smith, 2013). Moreover, it becomes more problematic if this is associated with the origins in which the media is from, for instance, as reported by Khan, Wu, Pratt, and Akhtar (2019), some Western news media perceive freedom of expressions of a portrayal of a provocative news magazine which was perceived by the Islamic news media as containing "anti-Islam and anti-Muslim".

Concerning the anti-Islamic sentiments issue, it was perceived that this issue had become one of the enticing variables studied and scrutinized by lots of researchers. In this regard, firstly, it was perceived that anti-Islamic sentiments have emerged in many countries, and it has even become more severe as the 9/11 attacks in the US happened (Amnesty International, 2012; Ghosh, 2010). In addition, a study conducted on 719 subjects in the US revealed that Muslims were obtained negative impressions by American people, particularly based on the white people's lenses (Zainiddinov, 2013). Besides, Delibas (2009) reveals that recently the term "international terrorism" has an association with Islam. Such an assertion may lead to negative Muslim prejudices, and thereby will adverse effects on the Muslims, such as marginalization (Akbarzadeh, 2016). In addition, the anti-Islamic sentiments may not only be due to the racial issue but also including religious issues, and such views were still perceived by the American people (Stockdale, 2004). This condition seems problematic since the United States is perceived as "the country of multiculturalism par excellence" (Wieviorka, 1998). Moreover, it even becomes more crucial since anti-Islamic sentiment is not only having to do with religious contexts, but it may also involve the secular context as reported by Ribberink, Houtman, and Achterberg (2017) that a significant relationship was found between "non-religiosity and anti-Islamic sentiment". As a consequence, it is not only deemed complex, but also there is still a long way to reach equality for Muslims in Western countries (Foner, 2015).

To this end, namely interpreting the magazine cover, a systematic study to grasp the meaning of an image is required. One of the areas in linguistics and communication studies having to do with unfolding the meaning of an image is called semiotics. In particular, semiotics is the study to answer the question, such as "What does X mean?" (Danesi, 2004). Moreover, originally, semiotics derives from the Greek words, namely *seme*, associated with the word *semeiotikos*, meaning 'an interpreter of signs'; hence, basically, semiotics can be defined as "The analysis of signs or the study of the functioning of sign systems" (Cobley & Janz, 2012, p. 9). Regarding signs, there are, as Chandler (2005, p. 2) points out, various forms of signs comprising "words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects." Concerning the concept of sign, it, as noted by Halliday & Hasan (1989, p. 3), originally derives from Greek linguistics advocated by Stoic philosophers around the third or second century, namely "*semainon*, *semainomenon*, meaning *signifier*, *signified*". In addition, Sebeok (1994) reveals that signs having a number of functions such as communicating ideas, thoughts, information, and commands were initially used in the domain of medical science, particularly on the "symptomatology" by physicians, such as Hippocrates, Galen of Pergamum. The concept of sign in the modern era was initially developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Saussure developed the concept of signs into two entities as aforementioned, namely signifier and signified; such concept was also introduced by Hjelmslev's notion of signs which divided them into two types of planes, i.e. "expression-plane" and "content-plane" (Eco, 1984).

Moreover, there are several other concepts advocated and developed by other experts, and one of the most eminent ones is the concept advocated by Barthes (Cobley & Janz, 2012). He advocates the theory of signification involving signifier and signified embedded in certain planes comprising expression (E) indicating signifier, content (C) indicating signified, and relation (R) between EC; in this case, there are two types of ERC system, i.e., the first system has to do with denotation which can be followed up to generate the second one having to do with a connotation (Barthes, 1986).

By employing the significance theory, the present study was to fill the gap of the previous study. In this regard, the previous related study, namely a study conducted by Rossing (2011), had

investigated the same magazine cover, but its focus was on the aspect of racial justice, whereas the present study was concerned with the aspect of anti-Islamic sentiments. Thereby, the present study may be considered to be different from the previous study to a certain extent, i.e. it aimed to scrutinize the meanings of the signs in the magazine cover and the anti-Islamic sentiment represented in it.

2. Method

A constructive paradigm was employed in this study. In this regard, there are three characteristics underpinning constructivism comprising *relativist* (ontology) that refers to realities that emerge as constructed mentally, socially, and experientially by the individuals, *subjectivist* (epistemology) that refers to the findings which are obtained through making use of the interactions between 'inquirer' and the 'inquired', and *hermeneutic, dialectic* (methodology) that refers to the constructions that are made through elicitation in a hermeneutic fashion and making comparisons and contrast in a dialectic fashion that leads to a consensus (Guba, 1990). This paradigm was deemed appropriate to be used in scrutinizing the analysis unit of this study since as indicated by its name, the constructive paradigm involves an interactive process and a particular context that lead to the understanding of 'historical and cultural' settings'(Creswell, 2014). In addition, this paradigm relies on a researcher's meaning-making ability by making use of the unmeasurable characteristics having to do with social variables around the researcher (Lincoln, 2007). Thereby, the meaning-making associated with the interpretation of analysis unit in the present study relies heavily on the researcher's rigorous sensory ability to make connections of the social variable having to do with it.

Moreover, a semiotic analysis was employed. This type of method is appropriate with the objective of the present study, that is, to unfold the meaning of the signs appearing on the magazine cover. In this case, Schreier (2012) asserts a semiotic analysis constitutes an appropriate method to gain in-depth meanings of signs or messages; in this regard, it tries to figure out both the denotative meaning and connotative meaning. In addition, the analysis unit encompassed the magazine cover of *The New Yorker* published on July 21, 2008. It comprised the image and line that appear on the cover. The magazine was selected because it was perceived as one of the most popular magazines in the United States, and it claimed that it has got a commitment to truth and accuracy. In addition, the cover was chosen because it was deemed the most controversial one from that time until recent time. Moreover, Barthes' (1986) theory of signification was employed to analyze the meaning of the image; in this regard, the analysis encompassed scrutinizing the meanings of the signs comprising denotative meaning of image followed with connotation meaning found in the magazine cover.

Furthermore, to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, some techniques were utilized. First, 'prolonged engagement at a site' was employed, i.e., in this regards, the researcher tried to lengthen the time to collect the data, to revisit, and to review the data several times; second, 'establishing referential adequacy' was utilized by making use of documents and other resources associated with the interpretations of the data; third, 'thick description of the context of the present study was also employed; fourth, 'audit trail' was utilized by generating some notes or journals concerning the data; fifth, 'practicing reflexivity' concerning the findings that were obtained were employed (Guba, 1981).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. A Brief Description of *The New Yorker*



The New Yorker is one of the magazines in the United States. It was founded by Harold Ross in 1925. Two kinds of forms are provided by this mass media, namely in a print form and a digital form. The former is initially published weekly (but recently only 47 in a year with a two-week span-publication), whereas the latter is published daily. Concerning the segmentation, it covers several daily issues encompassing politics, cultures, fiction, poetry, and humor. The magazine has claimed that they commit to the truth and accuracy of the materials presented. Moreover, there are a number of features given to readers by this magazine, for example, The New Yorker app that is downloadable freely in the App Store; the contents are also published through some social media,





such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Moreover, this magazine also provides a radio program that can be accessed through iTunes named The New Yorker Radio Hour. Besides, the other features having to do with the festival under the name of The New Yorker Festival commonly inviting writers, artists, editors, and other guests. Moreover, it also provides space for the contents of advertisements. During the magazine career, it has got some covers that the public perceived as controversial ones. In this case, one of the most controversial ones is the edition published on July 21, 2008, portraying the US presidential candidate, Barack Obama, and his wife, Michelle Obama then (Blitt, 2008).

3.2. Signs with Their Meanings Found in the Magazine Cover

To find out the meanings of the magazine cover, the pictures on the cover were divided into several frames so that the meanings of the signs found can be interpreted. In addition, the signification encompassing the denotation meaning followed with connotation meaning was conducted and scrutinized. In this regard, by conducting the semiotic analysis of the magazine cover through the signification, there were some signs found. These are summarized and shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Cover Signification

Sign	Denotation	Connotation
	<p>Michelle is giving a fist pump to Obama each other.</p>	<p>It depicts Michelle congratulating Obama or vice versa (Ly & Jung, 2015; Meier & Medjesky, 2018; Zourbanos, Tzioumakis, Araújo, Kalaroglou, Hatzigeorgiadis, Papaioannou, & Theodorakis, 2015).</p>
	<p>Michelle, with an afro, is wearing black panther and military trousers as well as bringing an assault rifle that is hung over her shoulder. Also, she is wearing boots and standing with crossed legs and with an arm akimbo, and another one is giving a fist pump. Besides, she slightly bows her head and is smiling with a quite intense gaze.</p>	<p>In terms of the emotional aspect, based on the gestures, namely an arm akimbo can be interpreted as anger, whereas her smile and a fist pump indicate approval and greeting of success to her interlocutor; the gesture of a slight bow indicates her position is lower than the interlocutor in this regard, it is Obama. Moreover, the assault rifle brought, with a black panther dress, and afro hair cut associated with a black woman may indicate the role as a terrorist (Charles, 2018; Devereux, 1966; Mehrabian, 1969).</p>

Sign	Denotation	Connotation
	<p>Obama is standing, smiling with eyes narrowed or closed, and giving a fist pump and wearing a white turban and brown <i>thawb/thobe/thaub</i> or a Moslem tunic with long sleeves. Also, he wears slippers.</p>	<p>The Moslem attire worn by Obama indicates he is regarded as Moslem. Moreover, the brown <i>thawb</i> worn by him can be associated with nature (Christophe, 2011; Gorla & Papadopoulou, 2012; John & Olajoke, 2012); moreover, if it is related to clothes, it can be interpreted that the event happened in the summer season, i.e. the same time as the magazine was issued (Guldberg, 2012). Also, based on the emotional aspect that can be shown by his smile with narrow/closed eyes indicates that he is feeling pleased. Besides, a fist pump indicates he greets the interlocutor for success (Charles, 2018; Devereux, 1966; Mehrabian, 1969).</p>
	<p>The flag of the United States is being burned in a fireplace.</p>	<p>The flag desecration depicts an action showing disrespect, an insult, or a protest to the US, either it is due to its policy or its power. In a severe fashion, it can be interpreted to destroy the US or attack the people of the United States; in other words, this refers to Obama and Michelle's action, i.e., having to do with the role as terrorists (Charles, 2018; Helwig & Prencipe, 1999).</p>
	<p>A painting of a man wearing a white turban and white Moslem attire is hung on the wall.</p>	<p>It depicts a picture of Osama Bin Laden which was regarded as a terrorist (Dar & Ali, 2015; Diamond, 2002; Macneill, 2014; Smith, 2013). Moreover, it symbolizes petrification (Stoker, 2017).</p>
	<p>A bald eagle oval rug with the figures of Michelle and Obama are standing on it.</p>	<p>It can be interpreted that Michelle and Obama were in the Oval office then (Dagremond, 2021).</p>

Sign	Denotation	Connotation
<i>"The Politics of Fear," by Barry Blitt.</i>	A line entitled "Politics of Fear" by Barry Blitt.	It may be interpreted that the politics that happened at that time were full of fear due to several views concerning Obama regarded as a terrorist and Michelle regarded as a 'Black Panther or something' who would assault white people (Gray & Myers, 2017). Also, by putting his name, it indicates that the artist is quite responsible for the picture he made.

3.3. Discussion

Based on the results concerning the significance involving the denotation meanings and connotation meanings, some impressions emerge. In this regard, on the one hand, there are some tendencies in regard to the way the people in the United States saw the figures of Michelle Obama and Barack Obama during the election campaign. The artist argued, based on the information released by some mass media concerning the grounds as he created the cover image, the picture was inspired by the impressions, rumors, and insinuations of the people during the election campaign in the United States then (Gray & Myers, 2017; Sklar, 2008). If this information is connected to the results of the representations of the signification of the denotation meanings and connotation meanings above, it can be perceived that they, 'some' people in the United States (the word 'some' used is based on the credence that Obama has also some pro's or supporters during the election campaign hence not all of the people had such a tendency) perceived that Michelle was considered as an aggressive and violent black woman and Obama was regarded as a terrorist.

Moreover, concerning this issue, the representations of the figures of Michelle and Obama in the cover image can be depicted through several aspects. The first aspect has to do with the physical appearance, accessories used, and things or decorations surrounding them. In this case, the attire and equipment used by Michelle, for instance, who wore a Black Panther dress with military trousers and boots while she was also bringing a gun, hung over her back. Such appearance and accessories attached to her may be interpreted that she would be ready to fight against other groups of people; in this case, based on the artist's argument, it referred to the white people (Gray & Myers, 2017). Moreover, the same way works in the picture of Obama. In this regard, wearing a Moslem attire, namely a white turban with brown *thawb/thobe/thaub*, he was perceived a radical terrorist in association with the painting hung on the wall, a picture of a figure perceived as the terrorist organizing and initiating the September 11 attack in 2001 Osama Bin Laden (Dar & Ali, 2015; Diamond, 2002; Macneill, 2014; Smith, 2013) enclosed by a picture of the flag of the United States being burned in the fireplace. The act of burning the flag can be interpreted negatively, namely as an insult and lack of respect (Helwig & Prencipe, 1999); in this case, it concerns the United States or even its people. Besides, in a severe view, it can be interpreted that the United States will be attacked or destroyed; hence a terrorist role is attached to the figures of Obama and Michelle represented in the cover along with the burned image of the flag and a picture of Osama bin Laden. Such depiction is debatable since even Obama was found to have 'protectionism' to American people and 'anti-racism' (Adriyadi, Megah, & Razali, 2020)

In addition to the aspect concerning the physical appearance, accessories, things, and decorations, the representations can be associated with the gestures and colors appearing in the cover image of the magazine. In this regard, the first gesture found in the magazine cover is the fists pumps between Michelle and Obama. It can be interpreted as Michelle greeting Obama a 'good luck' and vice versa (Ly & Jung, 2015; Meier & Medjesky, 2018; Zourbanos, Tzioumakis, Araújo, Kalaroglou, Hatzigeorgiadis, Papaioannou, & Theodorakis, 2015). One thing that requires to be taken into account is what type of action can be associated with such a greeting of success. To bear in mind, if this gesture is associated with the surrounding aspect between them, it can be perceived

that the action may have to do with perceived terrorism as indicated by the flag desecration and the weapon Michelle brought, and in relation to the painting depicting Osama Bin Laden hanging on the wall. Moreover, there is a line "Politics of Fear" indicating that the politics that emerged at that time was full of dreadful conditions, as can be associated by the other representations showing that Obama and Michelle in negative fashions. Such lines can be considered problematic since such lines conveyed by mass media were consumed by the public, which lead to influence readers or society (Haq & Mahdi, 2020; Megah & Noor, 2020).

On the other hand, the cover image of the magazine also represents some concerns related to anti-Islamic sentiments. In this regard, it mostly can be viewed particularly from the representations of Obama and the surrounding pictures. As Obama is depicted by the Muslim attire surrounded by some other pictures such as her wife, Michelle, bringing a weapon, namely an assault rifle on her back; in this regard, both of them give a fist pump one another. Moreover, the most controversial one is the representation of the flag which was burned in the fireplace and a photo of Osama Bin Laden hanging on the wall; in addition, all of these representations seem to take place in the oval office which is the part of the West Wing building at White House. All these representations seem to be connected to one another that led to the indication that Obama and Michelle were regarded as Muslim terrorists. Such finding seems in line with a study conducted by GaneaBassiri (2013), who reveals that some of the American people have doubts about Obama's nationality and faith. Similarly, Ghosh (2010) reveals that Obama was perceived by almost a quarter of the people in the US as a Muslim. Also, the present study follows the finding obtained by studies conducted by Brooks and Mutohar (2018) and Jackson (2010), who assert that Islam and Muslims were regarded as the groups having the negative prejudice, particularly after the 9/11 attack appeared. Following this, Dar and Ali (2015) reveal that the mass media gives a label associated with terrorism, albeit Osama Bin Laden's deceased had already been pronounced. Similar to Dar and Ali's findings above, Ciftci (2012) explicates that the negative sentiments were caused by the media's exploitation. Also, Powell (2018) reveals that media constitutes a significant agency having to do with the creating a framing of an act of terrorism that leads to fear among citizens. Besides news coverage, the individuals' conservative political view (Marinov & Stockemer, 2020), and religion also provide a significant contribution to the anti-Islamic sentiments (Ogan, Willnat, Pennington, & Bashir, 2014).

Moreover, the representation of the portrayal of anti-Islamic sentiments in the magazine cover may also be perceived and prevail in some of the American people's attitudes or views. In this case, if such anti-Islamic sentiments issues were connected to the editor of the New Yorker, David Remnick's argument that it was based on the negative insinuations spread in some people in the US about Obama (Sklar, 2008), it can be perceived that some of the people in the US (particularly to those who had contradicting choice during the campaign election) had a tendency to perceive that Obama was regarded as a Moslem, and if he was a Moslem, then he was supposed to have a connection to terrorism. This assertion is corroborated by Uenal, Bergh, Sidanus, Zick, Kimel, and Kunst (2021, p. 270), who reveal that one of the constructs regarding the anti-Islam sentiment has to do with the notion that "The Islamic religion is harmful to world peace". Similarly, Ciftci (2012) also points out in his study that lots of western people perceive Muslims in negative sentiment, namely have "violent individuals" having relation to al-Qaeda. Also, Ahmed and Matthes (2017) reveal through their meta-study indicating that the negative framings were provided to Muslims and Islam that was perceived as a "violent religion". However, if Rannik's argument is true, namely based on some people's views in the US, reducing such provocative portrayal in mass media should also be taken into account since it may trigger hatred among Muslims. Given this issue, the findings may indicate that lack of mass media were still found to have such considerations of the stereotypes of Islam and anti-Islamic sentiments. Nevertheless, such interpretation of the findings of the present study contradicts a study conducted by Moore (2018), who reveals that mainstream media does not show stereotypes and anti-Islamic sentiments or Islamophobia. Thereby, further investigations may also prefer to be conducted in association with the primary underlying reasons for creating the image cover from the investigated media of the present study, namely The New Yorker, that lead to more comprehensive findings concerning this issue.

Regarding the interpretations above, to mitigate the anti-Islamic sentiments issues, there are some considerations to be taken into account, for instance, through education discussing Islam which is aided by the appropriate and thoughtful framing from American news Media (Smith, 2013;

Zainiddinov, 2013). Education can be an effective means for reducing anti-Islamic sentiments among the Westerners as Ciftci (2012) reveals that higher levels of education owned by individuals may assist them to know Islam better and hence may mitigate the negative sentiments. Moreover, building intensive communication through inter-religious rapport and contact may be the alternative to solve this issue (Ogan et al., 2014). If such issues do not obtain ample attention and adequate endeavor to cope with, the US national unity will be at risk, and not only Muslims but also the other minority groups may receive the same issue in the future (GaneaBassiri, 2013).

4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis and the findings presented previously, the present study reached some conclusions. First, the magazine cover image represents some signs having to do with the portrayal of Obama and his wife, Michelle, during the election campaign. In this regard, the portrayals were found based on some aspects such as the physical appearance, accessories used, things or decorations surrounding them, and gestures. Moreover, those aspects had some connections to one another that led to the other interpretation, namely anti-Islamic sentiments. The anti-Islamic sentiment in the magazine cover was also the representation of some people's views concerning Islam and Muslims in the United States. The present study also suggests some endeavor to reduce such negative sentiments to Islam and Muslims, namely, these can be conducted through providing education that brings comprehensive and holistic knowledge about Islam as well as by appropriate framing from the American media; also, intensive communication by creating inter-religious rapport and contacts are required in order that the agency of such negative sentiments can be mitigated. In addition, the present study also suggests for the mass media such as magazines and the like require some considerations as communicating messages embedded through the image cover for it may influence the way individuals perceive, think, act or behave. Furthermore, this study was regarded to have constraints for its scrutiny was based heavily on the interpretations of the magazine cover; therefore, further investigations to find out the issue concerning the anti-Islamic sentiment of the American people through a different method, such as survey, were suggested. Also, the other framework to analyze images on the magazine cover constitutes another alternative for future studies.

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