



Virtual Identity Presiding Social Media World: A Semiotic Analysis of Pakistani Covid-19 Social Activism Photoshoot

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Abstract

The study is exploring virtual identity construction on social media created through social activism photoshoot Covid-19. The framework of the study is semiotic analysis. The social activism photoshoot Covid-19 is taken from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It is a qualitative study applying semiotic analysis to randomly selected photographs. The semiotic analysis of the social activism Covid-19 photoshoot revealed that as icons the images are representing a concept of support and solidarity in Pakistani society whereas an index expresses that government, NGOs, and elite class are equally taking part in social welfare activities and photoshoot is a kind of evidence of such activities. The symbolic representation show both positive and negative aspects of the photoshoot. The positive aspect expresses that the Pakistani government, NGOs, and elite class are standing with poor class in the critical times of coronavirus whereas negative aspects throw light on the hidden agendas. The study finds that virtual identity on social media is created to receive acceptance and application by society and the world. It is quite opposite to the real-world reality where people are reluctant and ignorant.

Keywords: Virtual identity, Social media, Semiotic analysis, COVID-19, Pakistani social activism photoshoot

1. Introduction

Virtual identity is a kind of interface created by the user in a virtual world such as video games, social media, chat rooms, etc. Virtual identity helps to represent oneself opposite to his/her real image. There are various categories of virtual identities and these can vary on different social sites, chat groups, video games, etc. The virtual world is the reciprocal of the real world. Virtual identity is not bound to follow the restriction and rubrics of the real world. One is free to express him/her in any way. In other words, one can say that it is the dream world. This is the reason it is entitled to the virtual world. In contemporary times, people connect through their virtual identities fashioned on social media.

Social media is a platform where users via the internet can interact, share ideas/views, or share personal images and videos of life events, parties, functions, activities, etc. The type of things one shares creates his/her identity on social media claimed as a virtual identity. With the advancement in technology, the latest version of the web allows users not only to share content but also to remain in contact at every moment through virtual interaction. Users share images, information, audios, and videos that enable them to reach anywhere they want all over the globe. They can see, comment, transfer, and save any information they need. People most likely construct virtual identities by updating their profile images, posts, comments, etc. in various groups of family members, friends, colleagues, and strangers. The most common social sites are Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, WeChat, Snap Chat, Linked In, Google Plus, and many others. All of them are easy to access and feasible to stay connected. The current investigation concentrated on virtual character development through web-based life. These days individuals are over the world are much of the time utilizing web-based social networking plate structures to impart data to one another. It is because of lockdown circumstances as a result of COVID-19. COVID-19 is a novel dangerous respiratory malady that began from fish advertise, in Wuhan City, China. It is a zoonotic infection that is infectious between individuals too. Because of this explanation individuals will undoubtedly keep separated and stay at home. Far up till now, it is the greatest emergencies in the planet's history. This pandemic has taken 769,009 lives while affirmed cases are 21,618,289 and recuperations are 14,334,332 everywhere throughout the world. Pakistan is additionally one of the affected nations where 6,168 individuals kicked the bucket and affirmed cases are 288,712 while recouped cases are 266,301. Pakistan is an underdeveloped nation where the dominant part of ordinary people is poor and works. They feed their families on everyday compensation and because of lockdown circumstances these individuals can't get work to take care of themselves. To support these penniless individuals, Pakistani government associations, non-government associations, and individuals from the exclusive class attempted to take care of such poor individuals. Alongside such great deeds individuals likewise began to share photoshoots of such foundation deals with online networking. Progressively it is polished as a contemporary design.

The researcher has tried to find the difference between the virtual identity and the real identity of Pakistani people. A semiotic analysis approach is applied to analyze photos shared on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. As per its historical underpinnings, semiotics conveys the postfix "ics" as in science and, as per Gómez de Silva, this signifies: "from; normal for" (Gómez 2013: pp358) showing the state of "relating to" whatever the thing in the world is. Then again, the postfix "logy," as in science or brain research, relates all the more actually to the idea or study regarding a matter. Taking everything into account, we will say that semiology is the science

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that reviews the wonder of semiosis (from the Greek *semeion*=sign and the suffix - sis=action of), in other words, the procedure by which a living being that faces an arrangement saw brings out a psychological design, while semiotics is a descriptive word comparing to something having a semiosis related quality.

1.1. Research questions

The researcher is looking for the following question:

Q1: What are the dissimilarities between social media virtual identity and real identity?

Q2: How virtual identity shaped by social media photoshoot Covid-19 is dissimilar from the real identity of Pakistani people?

2. Literature Review

Digital discourse studies focus on sociolinguistics and discursive practices based on both micro-level linguistic practices and macro-level socio-cultural processes. Linguistics tries to look into practices to find the linkage between language and other modes of communication (Thurlow et al, 2020, Machin and Mayr, 2012). Text-based discourse is mainly concerned about words and their stylistic/semantic properties (Tan et al, 2018). The socio-cultural discourse talks about how images encode media and socio-cultural ideologies (Thurlow, 2017). The market of the stock image has expanded its business in media culture via the internet and digitalization. These commercial and stock photographs represent how people around the world are engaged in online and offline media culture.

Symbols, signals, and signs are the three significant elements of the communication process. These three have complex modifications related to each other and carry deep meanings depending on preexisting history. Signals deal with the constant energy flow where their basic function is to provide a single environmental factor change to attract attention for transferring meaning to readers/viewers. A sign is a 'concrete denoter' that has an inherent particular analogous meaning to the sentence (Ashely Montagu). A sign can any drawing, picture, or even any posture or a gesture. The difference between a signal and a sign is that a signal is an extrinsic meaning (a scream for help) whereas a sign is an intrinsic meaning (a school's badge). This results that many animals respond to signals while only trained dogs can respond to any specific sign. The meaning of signs varies with culture, form, location, or even color. A symbol is one's intricate perception of the world. It is a device that aids to create any type of abstraction. They are mostly metaphors or analogous representing certain reality about things (Whitehead). The most common example can a wedding ring. A photograph is a kind of speech similar to an article of a newspaper (Barthes, 1957).

Nationalism as an attitude of awareness that assists in achieving national unity, strength, prosperity, identity, and integrity (Sudana et al., 2020). These kinds of issues always remain in the media and news. The researchers explored interactive discourse full of signs and meanings that represent nationalism in debates on media using semiotic analysis. The theme of the interactive data is based on the rejection of the criminal RUU KUHP in Indonesia. The study has taken the linguistic data in the form of texts. Peirce and Organon's theory of semiotic analysis was used to analyze the data of the study. The findings of the study say that the problem of nationalism showed in media discourse has a lot of pons and cons attached to it. The media use to represent the one-sided picture of nationality. The responders never care about the integrity of the whole nation but the interest of certain groups matters for them. The media discourse is not based on facts and figures.

Gündüz, U. (2017) in his research paper 'The effect of social media on identity construction' described social platforms as showcase places where people show their living experiences. People play their certain type of roles in the social arena to develop virtual identity. Social media is gaining importance over time. It allows people to express identity, experiences, and exploration based on their real day to day life. Participants have the right to choose their favorite and fascinating activities they want to participate in. Communicating online also offers users to create a virtual identity with fake names and information. The study explores practical facets of identity construction and the reason behind virtual identity construction. It also questioned social, cultural, and ethical values. Iftikhar, M et.al (2017) in their paper 'Virtual Identities and Social Media: A Case Study of Snapchat (2016-17)' also discussed virtual identities constructed through social media. They chose one domain 'Snapchat' which explored about increasing popularity of it among youngsters. Researchers are in the view that content shared on Snapchat by youngsters of the university level is funny, expressing personal feelings. This content has a positive effect on interpersonal relationships. The study is a survey conducted in 300 universities in Lahore, Pakistan. The researchers find out that virtual identity created through snap sharing is based on real-life experiences and it's a humorous way of sharing the self-expression of users among close relations and friends.

Sanawi, J. B. (2014) in the study "Ideologies underlying the use of photographs in newspaper coverage of Bersih 3.0 rally" expects to break down how the standard and elective papers transfuse their philosophy about the assembly through the visual delineation of the occasion. Three prevailing papers to be specific Utusan Malaysia, The Star, and Harakah were picked dependent on their political monetary foundation and their high disseminations status. In light of the visual developments of the two standard papers; Utusan Malaysia and The Star, it is discovered that the two papers were basic towards BERSIH 3.0. Aside from that, the two papers likewise implanted their racial plan where it was discovered that Utusan Malaysia attempts to connect the assembly with

the dull catastrophe of thirteenth May 1969 while The Star attempts to kill the inclusion of the Chinese through positive symbolism. Conversely, Harakah praised the restoration and the solidarity of the individuals from all races in their battle towards social equity as the fundamental topic. Simultaneously, Harakah outwardly depicted PAS as an ideological group that regarded pluralism, gain acknowledgment from youngsters, and submitted with the PR. The exploration has demonstrated that the photograph has the abilities to be a medium to disperse belief system

3. Methodology

The study is based on the Peirce framework of semiotic analysis. Peirce's approach is dissimilar to that of Saussure's. He says 'a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity' (Peirce, 1958). The typology defined by him has three categories of signs named Icons that signify by resemblance, Indexes which signify via causal connections, and Symbols that signify through convention and have to be learned (Berger, 2010). In an expansive diagram, we could state that Semiology is the science that reviews semiotics. As it seems that semiotics is the study of 'signs.' There are two basic components of sign: I) Signifier: The physical existence of images, sounds, or letters. II) Signified: The conceptual understanding of the signifier is known as signified. According to Peirce's definition, a sign is a representation of itself, the thing that is referred to is the object and the interpretation of the sign is the product of connection between interpretant and object.

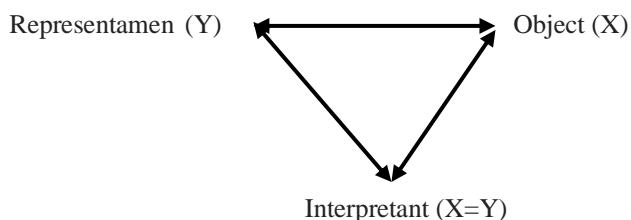


Figure 1: Peirce's diagram of semiosis

3.1. Population

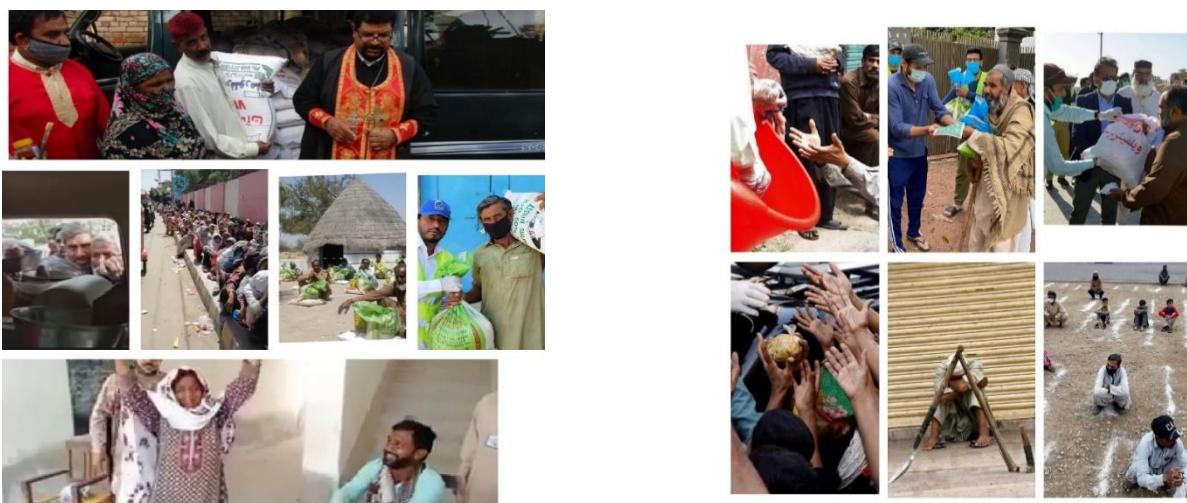
All the government, NGOs, and celebrities' social activism photoshoot COVID-19 related to ration distribution on social media is the population of the study.

3.2. Sample

All the Pakistani government, NGOs, and celebrities' social activism photoshoot COVID-19 related to ration distribution is the sample that is collected using a convenient sampling technique.

4. Analysis

The data of the photoshoot of Pakistani social activism COVID-19 is taken from social media including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The data is taken randomly from social media charity groups. The images are shared by government officials and non-government organizations, social activists, and celebrities who tried to feed the needy on their social media pages. Below are randomly selected images from social media for analysis



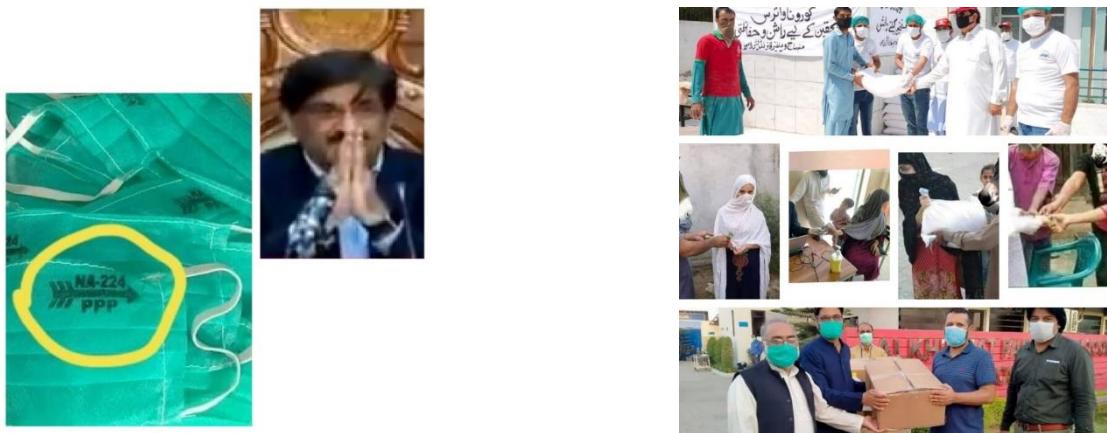


Figure 2: Government, NGOs, and celebutante's social activism photoshoot COVID-19 shared on social media

In semiology, we mainly focus on the signs and symbols. It not only includes linguistic signs but also non-linguistic signs. These signs and symbols have specific meanings attached to them. According to Peirce, signs have three categories called Icon, Index, and Symbol. An **icon** is a physical representation of any reference whereas an **index** (developed via cause and effect relationship) is evidence of any concept. A **symbol** (approved by consciousness) has not a direct connection either with a form or a concept, but it is related to culture. The symbols show cultural connotations attached to anything. These all images in figure 2 are acting as icons, indexes, and symbols at the same time conveying different meanings to the viewers of social media constructing the virtual identity of government, NGOs, and celebrities.

4.1. Icon

These images as Icon represent the following features:

4.1.1. Aesthetic function

All the images have some common aesthetic functions which create the emotive identity of signs or images. These emotive identities include romantic, cheerful, fresh, hostile, supportive, mysterious, etc. The photographs are produced according to the frame. The frame is important as it represents how the audience perceives photos. It makes viewers perceive the subject in the photo as something weak, strong, solidarity, or solitary. The above-given images according to the frame are representing the solidarity of financially strong people with poor/needly people at the time of pandemic COVID-19.

4.1.2. Poor Vs rich class

In every society the poor and rich class is present. All these images give the concept that this class is also existing in Pakistan where authoritative or rich people are helping deprived and unprivileged people in the difficult times of coronavirus. These images are developing the concept that rich people are always there to serve poor ones in the time of economic crisis.

4.1.3. Power and prosperity

The other important fact these images representing is the concept of power and prosperity. The powerful members of Pakistani society are ruling over the poor ones. The authoritative and rich are the ones who are not only distributing the food, clothes, or money but in reality, are the cause of prosperity and happiness. All the hands of the poor are the ones who are taking some valuable things from the hands of the rich or authoritative so the prosperity is directly related to the power.

4.1.4. Index

An index is developed by the cause and effect relationship. The cause here is the pandemic coronavirus whereas the effect is the way government, social welfare organizations, and the privileged are behaving to support the unprivileged and depressing ones. These images act as indexes that give the concept that the three major level contributions are going on to feed the famished in Pakistani society.

4.1.5. Government level

Covid-19 is not only the reason for worldwide deaths but it also affected the economy of the nations. Pakistan is an under developing nation where people are still struggling for better living. In the corona time, due to lockdown in the whole nation, the majority of the poor people were unable to feed their families for one time in a day or even for a week. To control the conditions government started to provide ration and other essentials such as facemasks, sanitizers, gloves, etc. Figure 2 shows that government leader such as the chief minister of Sindh Murad Ali shah is appealing to people to take safety precautions with folded hands.

4.1.6. Non-government level

The NGOs are also working to support the needy people in war times. These organizations are opening relief camps following SOPs to distribute the ration and essentials among penurious people. In figure 2 one can also see that NGOs are not only distributing ration and essentials through relief camps but a door-to-door giveaway

is also practiced. Member of the other religion such as Christianity is also participating in welfare works around Pakistan.

4.1.7. Individual-level

At the individual level celebrities from all the professions including sports, film industry, music industry, mass media and journalism, health and sciences, industrialists, artists, etc. all are contributing to social activism. People other than stars are also ready to serve. One after is the other is uploading images of social activism on their Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts (Figure 2). These practices show that coronavirus is considered as one of the tragic situations where every elite class member is trying to give relief to the deserving one to improve his/her lifestyle.

4.2. Symbol

The symbolic illustration is related to the conscious acceptance of events. It is mostly cultural related and has many functions to play which areas:

4.2.1. Phatic function

It answers the question that how an image behaves or acts? The image can be formulated on acts such as religious acts, charity acts, sporting events, couple courtship, etc. The attitudes of the characters in an image are very important as they represent the hidden identity of a character. The attitude also depends upon the character's relationship in the image. These images have some characters who are involved in charity events. The authoritative people have smiles on their faces, it seems that they are relaxed while the poor are looking sad and dependent. The women in most images have covered their faces. These images represent the destituteness of the poor. The giver is looking proudly towards the camera while the receiver is shy to look at it.

4.2.2. Denotative function

Denotative function is related to the literal meanings of the image. These images show that the needy are being supported by a privileged one. They are standing next to the needy and are always there to support them in any condition. The government, non-government organizations, and elite class of Pakistani society are also serving deserving and depressed at their best. The government has planned best and combating strategies to fight against deadly COVID-19. There is no religious, gender, racial, etc. discrimination in the country.

4.2.3. Connotative function

This function is based on individual interpretation of image/photo. The cultural and social norms are also attached to it. The individuals of the same society will interpret the image in the same way while difference comes with various cultures. People of a Pakistani society will take the same meaning of solidarity, help, and good deed. By seeing these images shared on social media by a particular or general group, people will appreciate them and will try to follow them in the same way. They will only help to get fame by creating a virtual identity on social media. The privileged only care about the number of 'likes' and 'followers'. Virtual identity is opposite to the real identity where these people will not feed their members of a family.

4.2.4. Interpretive function

It is related to the subsidiary message of photos or images to help the viewer to understand the main message. The image's subsidiary message is to help people in need while the main message is to represent oneself as a pious and kind-heart Muslim who should do good deeds. Sharing these images on social media helps in creating the virtual identity of a pious and kind-heart Muslim who cares about Muslim Ummah.

4.2.5. Results and discussions

Virtual identity in contemporary times has more value attached to it in comparison to the real identity. Creating social media accounts and sharing day to day life stories is nowadays in trend. People all over the world remain active and enthusiastic to upload unique, attractive, exciting, funny, and moral works to be appreciated by others in the form of likes, shares, and comments. To win this race people cross the boundaries and perform one or the other moral activity. Coronavirus is also the time when people can get attention on social media simply by helping others. The analysis of the social activism Covid-19 photoshoot (Figure 2) revealed that as icons these images are representing a concept of support and solidarity in Pakistani society whereas an index express that government, NGOs, and elite class is equally taking part in social welfare activities and photoshoot is a kind of evidence of such activities. The symbol is related to the acceptance of any concept and these Covid-19 photoshoots also have two symbolic sides. The one-sided picture is representing that the authoritative and privileged class is sharing solidarity with needy people while the other is showing that social welfare photoshoot is shared in the virtual world to creates a virtual identity that exists nowhere in the real world. The unequal distribution of rights resulted in two extremes, rich and poor people. The number of poor people is far more than that of the rich. One can also see the deprived and poor people are sitting depressed and alone representing solitary. They are not worried about their health but they are conscious of food, ration, and relief. They are aware of the bitter fact that if they remain safe from coronavirus, they will be dead because of hunger pangs. Lockdown has left them empty-handed and there is no other option left other than taking relief or ration. Their faces are the index of the kind of worries they are living with. If the government, NGOs,

or elite class make proper strategies and policies to provide proper employment/funding to these people, there would be not a single left to make a queue for ration.

5. Conclusion

The study is conducted to find the dissimilarity between virtual identity and the real one. For this purpose, the researcher has randomly taken the Covid-19 social activism photoshoot from social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) official accounts of the Pakistani government, NGOs, and celebrities. To analyze the data researcher has taken Pierce's semiotic theory. From the above discussion, it is concluded that a virtual identity created through social media is quite opposite of a real identity. The images represent two extreme sides of the same Pakistani society where unequal distribution of basic rights leads the people to live unprivileged lives. A large number of people in Pakistani society are hand to mouth. They hardly get one-time food to fill their bellies. The government on one side tries to support them but their hidden agenda is only to get votes by publicity. The masks provided by the Sindh government to the public have the logo of their party. Other non-government organizations have logos on food items only for fame and name. When such images are shared on social media they create a virtual identity on it. It is highly practiced by people/organizations to get appreciation and acceptance by people. If one looks at the other extreme of reality, no one, in reality, cares for such needy. The major fault of the government which is unable to provide equal rights to every citizen of Pakistani society. People hide their original identities and create virtual identities in the social media virtual world to receive appreciation and proof themselves as devout, virtuous, and kind-hearted. Virtual identity can easily be customized according to the choice of the creator in the virtual world.

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