SOCIAL SATIRE IN COVID-19 MEDIA CARTOONS IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE: A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Tajudeen Abodunrin Osunniran

Obafemi Awolowo University,
Ile-Ife, Nigeria
osunniranta@oauife.edu.ng

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach involving satire, multimodality, and critical discourse to investigate the interplay of semiotic modes used in *Gbich!* COVID-19 cartoons. It examines how these cartoons depict the socioeconomic and political realities of Ivorian citizens during the pandemic and how they served as tools to raise public awareness, critique governmental and global (in)actions, and challenge existing traditional structures and practices. The study is based on 6 purposively selected COVID-19 front-page cartoons of *Gbich!*, a prominent satirical and humorous newspaper in Côte d'Ivoire. The data were analysed using Kuiper's Perceptual Theory of Satire and Machin and Mayr's Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings reveal that the newspaper satirised issues reflecting domestic, local, and global discourses during the pandemic. It highlighted power dynamics within family structures during crises, as well as between the virus, citizens and global entities. The paper concludes that the newspaper elicited discussions on gender roles and expectations, information management, crisis management and prioritisation of responses during emergencies. Moreover, it impressed its ideological stance on solidarity, power and marriage to its audience.

Keywords: semiotic modes, satire, COVID-19 cartoons, power dynamics, ideology, Ivorian citizens

ОПШТЕСТВЕНАТА САТИРА ВО МЕДИУМСКИТЕ КАРИКАТУРИ ЗА КОВИД-19 ВО БРЕГОТ НА СЛОНОВАТА КОСКА: МУЛТИМОДАЛНА КРИТИЧКА АНАЛИЗА НА ДИСКУРСОТ

Таџудин Абуданрин Асунирен
Обафеми Ејволово Универзитет,
Иле-Ифе, Нигерија
osunniranta@oauife.edu.ng

Оваа статија користи интердисциплинарен пристап, кој вклучува сатира, мултимодалност и критички дискурс за да ја истражи интеракцијата помеѓу семиотичките модуси што се користат во карикатурите за КОВИД-19 во списанието *Gbich!*. Во статијата се истражува како карикатурите ја прикажуваа социоекономската и политичка реалност на граѓаните на Брегот на Слоновата Коска за време на пандемијата, и како тие служеа како алатка за подигнување на јавната свест, за критикување на владините и на глобалните (не)дејствувања и за поткопување на постојните традиционални структури и практики. Студијата се темели на единаесет избрани карикатури за КОВИД-19, објавени на насловната страница на *Gbich!*, влијателен сатиричен и хумористичен весник кој се објавува во Брегот на Слоновата Коска. Собраните податоци се анализирани низ призмата на Кајперовата перцептивна теорија на сатирата, како и преку мултимодалната критичка анализа на дискурсот, според Мејчин и Маир. Резултатите од истражувањето покажуваат дека весникот ги сатиризираше прашањата кои се однесуваа на домашните, локалните и глобалните дискурси за време на пандемијата. Тоа ја нагласи динамиката на моќта во рамките на фамилијарната структура, во текот на кризата, како и релацијата помеѓу вирусот, граѓаните и светските ентитети. Во заклучокот се потцртува дека весникот поттикнуваше дискусија за родовите улоги и очекувања, за управувањето со информациите и со кризите и за давањето предност на реакциите за време на кризи. На ваков начин, весникот во јавноста ја искажа својата идеолошка позиција во однос на солидарноста, моќта и бракот.

Клучни зборови: семиотички модуси, сатира, карикатури за КОВИД-19, динамика на моќта, идеологија, граѓани на Брегот на Слоновата Коска

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019 (Wong and Chan 2022) and escalated into a global crisis in March 2020 (Cucinotta and Vanelli 2020), plunging the world into an unprecedented state of panic. Across the globe, efforts were made to contain the disease and address the societal, political, and economic challenges it brought. Amidst this chaos, the media played a significant role in raising public awareness and critiquing disease management strategies. This study focuses on the contribution of the print media in that regard, with particular emphasis on newspaper cartoons.

Cartoons are an artistic medium that combines image and language (Wang 2021) and serve as tools for disseminating information, propagating ideas, and reflecting on socio-political events within speech community. As a form of visual news discourse, Joubert and Wasserman (2020) note that cartoons can comment on current events, criticise those in power and provoke public reaction against injustice, often employing satire or humor. Over the years, cartoons have been analyzed across a diverse range of "social scenarios" (Paramita 2018: 458) in fields such as politics, religion and sports, with political cartoons receiving the most scholarly attention (Hussein and Aljamili 2020, Asiru and Bello 2020). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new genre – pandemic cartoons – emerged, as cartoonists sought to contribute to the fight against the virus. Those cartoons became vital tools for raising awareness, critiquing government policies, providing humor, and highlighting the challenges faced by the population.

Research on COVID-19 cartoons depicting realities during the pandemic from various countries includes Indonesia (Robingah 2020), Jordan (Hussein and Aljamili 2020), Saudi Arabia/UAE (Hameed and Afzal, 2021), Egypt (Abd El-Aal Sultan, 2021), Singapore (Marissa and Tan 2023), South Africa (Joubert and Wasserman 2020), the Philippines (Imperial, 2020), Pakistan (Alkhresheh 2020), and Nigeria (Asiru and Bello 2020; Alabi 2020). These studies highlight cartoons and comics as tools for communicating, through humor, satire, and symbolic imagery, the realities of COVID-19. They underscore the role of cartoons in mitigating psychological burdens and social tensions (Abd El-Aal Sultan 2021; Alabi 2020; Robingah, 2020; Hussein and Aljamili 2020), criticizing political leaders and corrupt practices (Imperial 2020; Asiru and Bello 2020; Hameed and Afzal, 2021), and raising awareness (Alabi 2020; Marissa and Tan 2023; Joubert and Wasserman 2020) during the pandemic. The thematic focus of these studies varies by region. For instance, Imperial (2020) and Asiru and Bello (2020) explored how cartoons in the Philippines and Nigeria highlighted governance issues and societal challenges during the pandemic. Marissa and Tan (2023), focusing on Singapore, observed how comics effectively disseminated health-related information, positioning them as tools of "graphic medicine." In South Africa, Joubert and Wasserman (2020) demonstrated how cartoons can contribute to scientific communication and help explain the virus itself.

To my knowledge, no research has been conducted to study cartoons related to COVID-19 in Côte d'Ivoire. Building on the contributions of previous studies on COVID-19, this research adopts an interdisciplinary perspective – incorporating satire, multimodality, and critical discourse—to examine the realities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in Côte d'Ivoire through the front-page cartoons of *Gbich!* newspaper. *Gbich!*, a weekly humorous and satirical Ivorian newspaper, was established in 1999 as the first publication in Côte d'Ivoire to use humor and satire to critique the political and social ills of society (*Jeune Afrique* 2010; Glez 2012). The newspaper's front page typically includes semiotic elements such as a major headline, a cartoon occupying the central space, and an optional rectangular frame with a message labeled "Foulosophie", which can appear in any of the four corners of the page. This study focuses specifically on the cartoons. The aim is to investigate how these cartoons contributed to the discourse surrounding COVID-19 in Côte d'Ivoire from a multimodal critical discourse perspective. The research seeks to address the following questions:

i.   How do the visual and verbal semiotic resources of the cartoons interact to depict the realities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic?
ii.   What forms of social satire are portrayed in the COVID-19 cartoons?
iii. What power dynamics and ideologies related to the COVID-19 pandemic are represented in the cartoons?

2   Research Methods

This study employs qualitative and descriptive methods to analyze its data. Given the widespread digital presence of traditional newspapers today, the data for this study were collected from the online version of *Gbich!* newspaper, accessible at https://gbich.net/. During the pandemic, *Gbich!* published 14 front-page cartoons on COVID-19. These cartoons address themes such as family, prevention, misinformation, struggles against the virus, and socioeconomic and political issues. Published between March 19, 2020 (shortly after Côte d'Ivoire's first reported case), and January 6, 2022, these cartoons are thematically categorized in Table 1.

Table 1: Thematic Distribution of the Cartoons

S/N	Themes	Number
	Family	3
	Prevention	2
	Misinformation	1
	Struggles against the virus	2
	Socioeconomic challenges	5
	Sociopolitical challenges	1
	Total	**14**

The corpus of this study comprises six (6) front-page COVID-19 cartoons selected from the aforementioned 14. One cartoon was chosen from each thematic cluster, with purposive sampling applied to clusters containing multiple cartoons (themes 1, 2, 4, and 5), prioritising those rich in content and most relevant to the study's objectives. These six cartoons are labeled A–F for analysis. Each cartoon is examined for its linguistic and visual components using a tripartite framework that incorporates satire, multimodality, and critical discourse.

3   Theoretical Framework

As mentioned earlier, the study is underpinned by Kuiper's (1984) Perceptual Theory of Satire and Machin and Mayr's (2012) Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). These two frameworks provide complementary tools for analyzing the complex and layered meanings of COVID-19 media cartoons. Their combination allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the satire's social impact and multimodal construction. Kuiper's theory reveals the intent and interpretative dynamics of satire, while MCDA unpacks the visual and textual layers that convey intricate social messages. In the context of Côte d'Ivoire's COVID-19 cartoons, this theoretical blend aids in examining the sociopolitical context (through satire theory) and the multimodal presentation (through MCDA), facilitating a thorough analysis of how the cartoons communicate and critique the pandemic's impact on Ivorian society.

3.1 Perceptual Theory of Satire

Singh (2012) defines satire as a technique used by writers to critique societal issues – such as politics, morality, or social norms – through humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule, with the aim of promoting behavioral change or improvement. Satire is a common feature in most editorial or political cartoons, where it humorously exposes the actions of political figures (Singh 2012). With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, satire has been employed in editorial cartoons to critique various occurrences related to the pandemic as they have impact on individuals, societies, and the world at large.

The Perceptual Theory of Satire, developed by Kuiper (1984), serves as a framework for explaining how readers interpret the satirical effects aimed at satire's targets (Sani et al., 2012). This theory posits that satire is a discourse requiring readers to navigate its humorous surface alongside its critical undertones. Kuiper (1984: 459) states that "[t]hree independent factors appear to be responsible for the perception of satire: a perceived intent to alter the perceiver's view of some state of affairs, a similarity of form of the satire with some other artefact, and the perceiver finding the satire humorous." In essence, satire operates by manipulating audiences' perceptions of reality or challenging conventional views and expectations to critique individuals, institutions, or societies. As highlighted by Serafini (2010),

this variance in perception is influenced by the reader's understanding of (multimodal) texts, shaped by their background knowledge as well as sociocultural and personal experiences (Abd Aal Sultan 2021:25). This perception-based approach is particularly valuable in contexts like COVID-19 satire, as it facilitates a deeper understanding of how satirical information is comprehended and reacted to (Ogbodo et al. 2024). In this study, the Perceptual Theory of Satire is employed to identify the types of satirical depictions in the selected cartoons. The process involves identifying specific individuals, groups, events, or societal issues targeted by the satire and examining how this satire is manifested through techniques such as exaggeration, irony, parody, humor, and visual metaphors.

3.2 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Machin and Mayr (2012) describe discourse as the broader ideas shared by people about how the world operates within any society. For Fairclough (2003), discourse relates to ways of representing aspects of the material, mental, and social worlds. Critical discourse originates from Critical Linguistics (Machin and Mayr 2012), which examines how language and grammar can function as ideological tools. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) seeks to analyze texts such as news articles, political speeches, advertisements, and textbooks (Machin and Mayr 2012) to expose social identities and inequalities, class conflicts, cultural issues, social practices, power dynamics, and control as manifested in language (Van Dijk 1993; Wodak and Meyer 2009; Alkhresheh 2020).

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) builds upon CDA, providing a framework for analyzing media texts that combine multiple semiotic modes – such as language, images, sound, and color. It offers a structured approach to examining how these modes blend to portray representations of people and events. According to Machin and Mayr (2012: 29), its purpose is to investigate "…how semiotic choices used by speakers and authors in visual communication are able to signify broader discourses, ideas, values, identities, and sequences of activity even though these are not specifically identified."

In cartoons, visual and linguistic semiotic resources with different affordances (Machin and Mayr 2012) work together to communicate with readers. These affordances in the selected COVID-19 cartoons are analyzed using the MCDA framework. The textual resources are examined for their lexicogrammatical features, while the visual modalities considered include participants, size, gaze, settings, objects, and pose. The analysis focuses primarily on the denotative and connotative meanings attached to these resources. At the denotative level, the events, people, places, or objects depicted in the cartoons are identified. At the connotative level, the study uncovers the ideas and values communicated through these representations.

4 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 COVID-19 and Family Life

As preventive measures to curb the pandemic, curfews and lockdowns were imposed in most parts of the world, and Côte d'Ivoire was no exception. These restrictions on movement and activities significantly impacted the structural dynamics of many families. Cartoon A, analyzed in this section, offers a glimpse into some of the realities of life at home during the COVID-19 pandemic in Côte d'Ivoire.

A

The setting is a kitchen with three participants: the husband, the wife, and their baby. The husband, positioned in the foreground with a baby tied to his back, is pounding yam with a mortar and pestle. He is burdened with household chores, including childcare, cooking, and cleaning. Meanwhile, the wife, dressed seductively, is standing in the background against the door. On the one hand, she is inviting her husband to collect a bucket and mop, and on the other, she is engaged in a phone conversation with an unseen participant.

Each participant communicates different information to the viewers. The wife, located on the left-hand side of the image and not making eye contact with the viewer, presents a "given" value. Her posture reflects an emancipated woman enjoying newfound freedom due to the lockdown. She appears happy, carefree, and indifferent to her husband's plight. Her seductive pout further invites viewers to

admire her. In contrast, the husband, positioned on the right-hand side and making eye contact with the viewer, demands attention. His facial expression – showing exhaustion and displeasure – and his sideways glance convey his frustration with the overwhelming domestic responsibilities. His inability to soothe the crying baby, wailing "*ouinnn*" on his back, exacerbates his condition. His appearance reflects a fall from his position of authority, appealing to the viewer for sympathy.

The cartoon employs color contrasts to emphasize the themes. The kitchen is painted pink, a color often associated with femininity, which may symbolize the man's discomfort in this traditionally "feminine" space. The wife wears vibrant shades of green, symbolizing life, energy, rebirth, and progress (Trisnayanti et al. 2021), further highlighting her empowered state. The husband, by contrast, wears red, signifying danger, while the blue cloth used to tie the baby suggests the child is likely a boy.

In her phone conversation, the wife tells her unseen friend : "*Ma copine, si je te dis, est-ce que tu peux croire? Confinement est doux dèh! Mon mari pile foutou actuellement!*" ("My dear friend, if I tell you, will you believe me? Lockdown is sweet ooo! My husband is pounding yam as I speak!"). She pauses to assign further chores to her husband, commanding: "*Chéri, tiens! Si tu finis, va laver dans la douche!*" ("Dear, take this! When you're done, go clean the bathroom!"). The term "*Ma copine*" (my dear friend) suggests intimacy between the interlocutors. The rhetorical question "*Si je te dis, est-ce que tu vas croire?*" (if I tell you, will you believe?) emphasizes the unexpected nature of her revelation. Her exclamation "*Confinement est doux dèh!*" (Lockdown is sweet ooo!) implies that the lockdown is a welcome development for women. The use of the loanword "*dèh!*" adds humor, excitement, and local flavor to the discourse, grounding it in its cultural context. Her statement, "*Mon mari pile foutou actuellement!*" (My husband is pounding yam as I speak!), reflects a reversal in traditional gender roles and power dynamics.

The wife's command, "*Chéri, tiens! Si tu finis, va laver dans la douche!*" (Dear, take this! When you're done, go clean the bathroom!) further underscores the power shift within the household. By proudly sharing this development with her friend, the wife positions herself as an example of empowerment, celebrating her newfound dominance in the domestic sphere. In many traditional African families, often governed by patriarchal norms, men typically do not engage in tasks like cooking, carrying children, pounding yams, or cleaning toilets. The restrictions on movement during the lockdown forced the husband in the cartoon to assume roles traditionally assigned to women, exposing his vulnerability. His struggles with multitasking, highlighted by his facial expression, inability to soothe the baby, and awkward attempts at pounding yam, serve as visual metaphors for the strength and adaptability of women. Thus, in Cartoon A, the newspaper uses the context of the pandemic lockdown to challenge traditional gender roles, prompting readers to reflect on the often-overlooked sacrifices women make in managing household responsibilities.

4.2 COVID-19 and Preventive measures

With no known cure for the virus, prevention emerged as one of the most reliable ways to curb the spread of infections (Okpara et al. 2021). The preventive measures prescribed by the World Health Organization (WHO) included staying at home, frequent hand-washing, using alcohol-based sanitizers, wearing nose masks, and maintaining social and physical distancing (Alabi 2020). Leveraging these WHO-recommended preventive measures, *Gbich!* uses Cartoon B to educate the Ivorian population on the habits necessary to protect themselves against the virus.


B

The cartoon features five anthropomorphized participants: a nose mask, hand glove, soap, hand sanitizer, and the coronavirus. The nose mask, hand glove, soap, and hand sanitizer, all symbolic of protective measures, are portrayed with fiery and intimidating facial expressions, confronting the virus. The hand sanitizer holds a placard inscribed with the word "STOP" directed at the coronavirus on the right. This action is particularly salient, as it encapsulates the mission of these protective tools – to halt the virus's spread. The black background reinforces the authority and potency of these tools in combating the virus. Similarly, the green substance evaporating from the virus into the atmosphere signifies a loss of its strength or potency. The coronavirus, depicted in red, appears visibly frightened, further emphasizing the efficacy of these protective measures.

The phrase "*Feu sur coronavirus*" ("Fire on Coronavirus") conveys a strong and direct message. It complements the visual elements, explicitly reinforcing the idea of a rapid and destructive attack on the virus. The word "*feu*" (fire) is used metaphorically to evoke a vivid image of the virus being obliterated. This blend of verbal and visual elements can be interpreted as encouraging the target audience to adopt the depicted protective measures, promising an aggressive stance against the virus.

Another textual message, "*Le couvre-feu ne couvre rien*" ("The curfew covers nothing"), employs wordplay and metaphor to critique the curfew measure imposed by the Ivorian government during the pandemic. The French compound word *couvre-feu* ("curfew") originates from *couvrir* (to cover), and literally translates to "cover-fire" in English. Thus, the statement "*Le couvre-feu ne couvre rien*" can be understood literally as "The cover-fire covers nothing". This linguistic wordplay (cover-fire/covers nothing) allows for a metaphorical interpretation, implying that the curfew, as a protective measure, was ineffective and failed to achieve its intended purpose. When juxtaposed with the phrase "*Feu sur coronavirus*" ("Fire on Coronavirus"), the cartoon, while criticizing the government's curfew policy, advocates that the population adopt effective preventive measures to combat the virus. In an African context characterized by communal life, confinement at home for specific hours of the day is inadequate if genuine protective health measures are not implemented. In conclusion, *Gbich!*, through Cartoon B, employs linguistic tools such as persuasion, wordplay, metaphor, and negation, alongside visual rhetorical devices like anthropomorphism, to satirize the inefficacy of the curfew during the pandemic in Côte d'Ivoire. Simultaneously, it encourages adherence to the World Health Organization's recommended preventive measures.

4.3 COVID-19 and Misinformation

Another significant challenge accompanying the virus was the infodemic (Joubert and Wasserman 2020) – pandemic of information characterized by the proliferation of conspiracy theories, rumors, misinformation, and fake news (Mu'azu et al. 2022; Zhang et al. 2023). Consequently, while countries were striving to contain the spread of the disease, they were simultaneously battling the rapid dissemination of misleading information. The media played a pivotal role in supporting this effort, as exemplified in Cartoon C from *Gbich!*.

The cartoon depicts numerous human and non-human participants. The setting is a central location where people of all ages gather for leisure and relaxation. In the foreground, two lovers are seen talking and touching each other, while in the background, others are engaged in activities such as playing games (ludo, football) or rushing to catch an overcrowded public transport. The human participants represent a society carrying on with everyday life, seemingly oblivious to the health crisis surrounding them.

The non-human participants include the anthropomorphized 'coronavirus' and 'rumour', shown conversing near the foreground. The 'coronavirus', with a monstrous appearance, protruding canine teeth, and spiky edges, is depicted in red and is shown oozing black venom from its mouth. 'Rumour', sharing similar grotesque features but rendered in yellow, stands beside it. Their proximity and visual parallels suggest equality, implying that 'rumour' and 'coronavirus' are equally potent threats to society. Together, they symbolize invisible terror lurking amidst an unsuspecting populace.

The conversation between 'coronavirus' and 'rumour' reveals their shared mission. 'Rumour' tells 'coronavirus': *"COVID-19, je leur ai dit que tu n'existes pas. À toi de frapper!"* (COVID-19, I told them you don't exist; now it's your turn to strike!). The mode of address, "COVID-19", signifies familiarity and collaboration between the two entities. The statement, *"je leur ai dit que tu n'existes pas"* (I told them you don't exist), reflects the essence of any rumour – generaly understood as a statement of questionable accuracy, usually spread by word of mouth. The command, *"À toi de frapper !"* (It's your turn to strike!), highlights 'rumour's' role in enabling 'coronavirus' by spreading misinformation about its

existence and urging it to act swiftly. The verb "*frapper*" ('to strike') emphasizes the anticipated harm in an environment rife with misinformation. The grin on 'coronavirus' signifies its delight at the opportunity to exploit such conditions.

Through the interplay of visual and verbal elements, the cartoon underscores the dangerous synergy between misinformation and a health crisis. By blending dark humor with impactful imagery, it warns readers about the dangers of misinformation and highlights the importance of relying on "authoritative, legitimate sources of information" (Joubert and Wasserman 2020: 10).

4.4 Struggles in containing the virus

The fight against COVID-19 began at a slow pace due to the politicization of the outbreak. World powers engaged in a blame game (e.g., the U.S. vs. China) and downplayed the severity of the virus (Wang, 2021). This delayed response allowed the virus to spread unchecked and left governments worldwide struggling to devise effective containment strategies (Mu'azu et al., 2022). Cartoon D satirizes the power struggle between the virus and the global community.
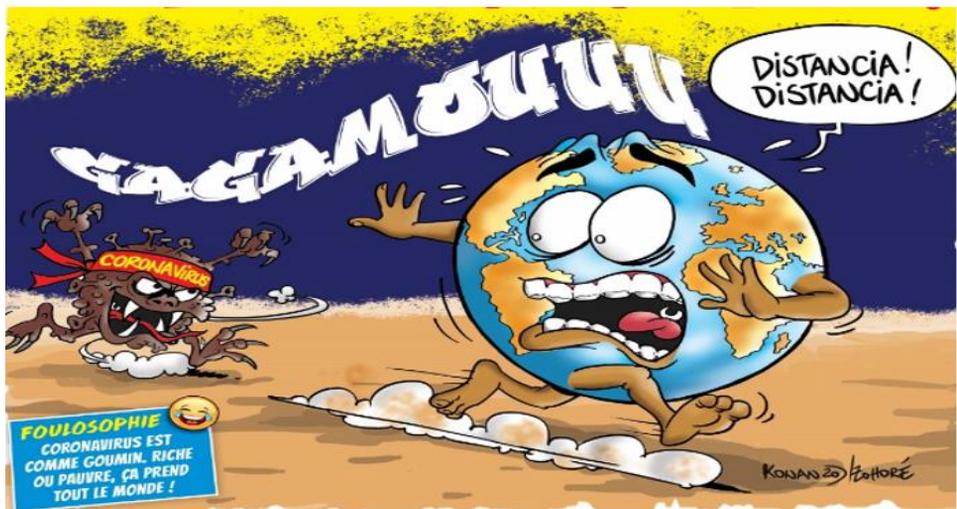
D

The cartoon contains two participants, coronavirus and planet Earth, both endowed with human features and behaviors and engaged in action processes of running and speaking. Coronavirus is depicted in brown, a color evoking strength, and wears a red headband with the inscription "coronavirus" in yellow. It chases the second participant, planet Earth, portrayed as a globe with human-like limbs and exaggerated facial features. The globe appears in blue and golden brown: the blue symbolizes the Earth's water bodies, while the golden brown represents its

continents. The virus's headband, in the African context, resembles that of a guerrilla fighter, suggesting that it is waging unconventional warfare against planet Earth. The intensity of the chase, conveyed through the participants' facial expressions and the white dust beneath their limbs, underscores the immense pressure the entire world is experiencing.

The speech processes contextualize the visual message. The virus chases planet Earth with a roaring sound, "*Gagamouuu*", while Earth flees, pleading with the virus to maintain "*Distancia! Distancia*!" (a loanword from Spanish and Portuguese). The word "*Gagamouuu*" is a playful wordplay derived from the French slang "gaga", used to describe someone who is excessively enamored or obsessed (*Le Petit Robert*, 2020). Through this elongated and humorous expression, the virus expresses an exaggerated fondness for planet Earth, pursuing it for a potential "relationship". Planet Earth, in turn, responds defensively, urging the virus to "maintain distance".

The combination of verbal and visual semiotic modes in Cartoon D highlights the power struggle between a dominant force (the coronavirus) seeking a forced connection with the global community, which responds by resisting and advocating for physical distancing. This response subtly reinforces the prevailing public health narrative that maintaining physical distance is one of the most effective measures to combat the virus.

4.5 COVID-19 and Socioeconomic Challenges

The stay-at-home order had a significant negative impact, particularly on the masses. It led to hardship and suffering, forcing many to seek alternative means of survival (Alabi 2020). Cartoon E satirizes the effects of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of Ivorian citizens.

E

The cartoon depicts seven participants in a supermarket. Contrary to expectations for such a location, a woman is seen unfolding and spreading a mat; the man behind her is holding two heavy traveling bags; a girl is enjoying herself watching television as if in a living room; and a boy is asking the cashier for directions to the restroom. From their interactions, it can be inferred that these unwelcome visitors represent a family (husband, wife, and two children) who have come to observe lockdown in the supermarket. Their mode of dress suggests they belong to the lower class of society. In Côte d'Ivoire, as in other parts of Africa, supermarkets are generally frequented by the upper and middle classes, while the lower classes often shop at general markets or street stalls. Thus, the presence of this low-income family in a supermarket is highly unusual.

The security guard addresses the husband, saying: "*Vous-là! C'est quoi ça?! Il est l'heure de fermer le supermarché!*" ("You there! What is this?! It is time to close the supermarket!"). The man replies: "*On est venus se confiner ici!*" ("We have come to observe lockdown here!"). By addressing the man with "*Vous-là!*" ("You there!"), the security guard asserts his authority over him. The question "*C'est quoi ça?!*" ("What is this?!") suggests his astonishment at the family's actions, and the exclamation mark following the question mark reinforces his bewilderment. To indirectly assert his authority and indicate that the family needs to leave, the guard declares: "*Il est l'heure de fermer le supermarché!*" ("It is time to close the supermarket!"). However, the man's response, "*On est venus se confiner ici!*" ("We have come to observe lockdown here!"), challenges the guard's authority. The use of the neutral pronoun "*on*" ("we") and the verb "*venus*" in plural

form suggest a collective decision. This implies that the man is not only speaking on behalf of his family but also representing citizens facing similar predicaments. By stating that they have come to observe lockdown in the supermarket, the man highlights their search for a place where their basic needs can be met. The boy's incongruous question to a bewildered cashier – "*Tantie, où sont les toilettes?*" ("Auntie, where are the toilets?")—further reinforces the family's intention to turn the supermarket into their home. The use of the term "*tantie*" ("auntie") creates a sense of familiarity, recreating the warmth of a family setting in the supermarket.

This cartoon captures the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on a society already grappling with poverty and economic inequality. It portrays citizens in disarray as they struggle with the effects of the lockdown and, by extension, the pandemic. The cartoon also depicts a power struggle between authorities enforcing lockdown rules and citizens who, driven by survival needs, resist these measures in indirect ways.

4.6 COVID-19 and Internal Sociopolitical Challenges

From 2020 to 2021, the pandemic disrupted the lifestyles of people already grappling with various socioeconomic and political challenges. As 2021 approached, expectations for change and improvement were high. Cartoon F captures the psychological impact of 2020 on people and their hopes as they prepared to welcome the new year, 2021.
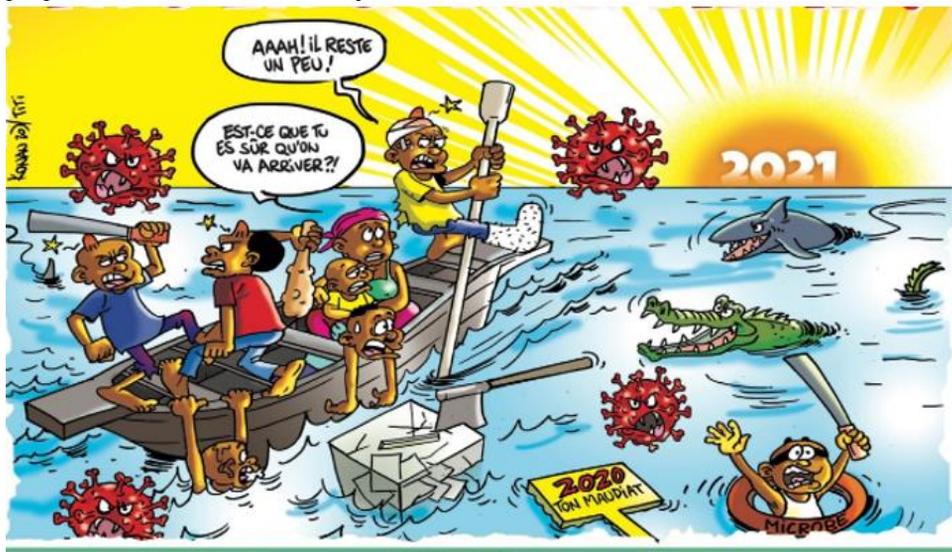
F

Cartoon F depicts a chaotic scene in the middle of the sea aboard a boat sailing toward the year 2021. The boat serves as a metaphor for society, representing the

collective journey of people through the year of the pandemic. The participants range from animate beings to inanimate objects. Four red COVID-19 icons, symbolizing the health pandemic, are strategically positioned at the four corners of the boat. This placement underscores the omnipresent nature of the virus, leaving no escape route. The crocodile and the shark, poised to attack the boat, represent natural disasters threatening human existence.

Two armed human participants fighting each other in the boat, along with two others clinging to the boat to avoid drowning, depict internal conflicts and their deadly repercussions. Another armed young man swimming with a tube inscribed with the word *"microbe"* (a term metaphorically describing a despicable person who spreads harm, as per *Le Petit Robert 2020*), represents youth delinquency. The frightened woman and her child symbolize society's most vulnerable groups, while the wounded sailor struggling to steer the boat to its destination embodies an overwhelmed leader grappling with crisis management.

Among the inanimate objects, a ballot box floating on the water with an axe attached to it illustrates "electoral violence", further exacerbating the dire conditions of the participants. A yellow placard bearing the year 2020, also floating in the water, provides a temporal frame for the events depicted. The phrase *"Ton maudiat"* (an Ivorian slang for *"Tu es maudit"* or "You are cursed") is inscribed under the year 2020, labeling it a "cursed year" due to the calamities experienced. On the horizon, however, a rising sun bearing the inscription "2021" symbolizes hope for a new beginning.

In the verbal exchange, the woman skeptically asks the sailor, *"Est-ce que tu es sûr qu'on va arriver?!"* ("Are you sure we will get there?!"), casting doubt on their chances of surviving the crises surrounding them. The sailor, attempting to reassure her, replies, *"Aaah! Il reste un peu!"* ("Aaah! We are almost there!"), suggesting that the destination is near. However, the exclamation *"Aaah!"* adds an air of uncertainty to his assurance.

Through a blend of verbal and visual elements, Cartoon F highlights how the pandemic has intensified the plight of African societies already grappling with numerous challenges, including electoral violence, natural disasters, internal conflicts, youth delinquency, and poor leadership.

4.7 Discussion of Findings

Three research questions guided our analysis in this study. The first question focused on the interaction between the cartoons' visual and verbal elements to depict scenarios related to COVID-19 in Côte d'Ivoire. The study found that the linguistic elements, in the form of dialogues between participants (A, C, D, E, F) or verbal descriptions from the cartoonists (B, F), complement or explicate the message portrayed by the visual representations. This strategy, which was also observed in other studies (Alabi 2020, Hameed & Afzal 2021, Sani et al. 2021), allows for better contextualization and interpretation of events depicted in the visual modes.

Regarding the different satires expressed in the cartoons, the study revealed that during the pandemic, *Gbich!* used its medium to (i) challenge existing traditional structures and social practices (A), (ii) satirize government efforts to curb the disease (B), (iii) advocate for prevention measures (B, D), (iv) highlight the dangers of misinformation (C), (v) deride the world's impotence in confronting the virus (D), (vi) reveal the economic impact of the pandemic on citizens (E), and (vii) provide insights into the internal challenges facing sociopolitical life in Côte d'Ivoire and other African countries (F). This finding shows that the issues covered by the newspaper during the pandemic reflect both local and global discourses, impacting individuals, the country, and the world. These discourses revolve around gender roles and expectations (A), information management (C), and crisis management (B, D, E, F). The satires were expressed using a casual register manifested through informal lexis, colloquialisms, wordplay, loanwords from local languages, manipulative language, and a conversational communication style. This type of communication allows the newspaper to influence its target audience by creating the impression of belonging to the same social strata (Leitner 1980, in Machin & Mayr 2012: 42). The visual satirical tools employed by the newspaper included exaggeration, visual metaphor, symbolism, and anthropomorphism.

The virus was represented with evil-looking facial expressions and exaggerated spiky stalks around its spherical body. It was given the ability to run, talk, grin, intimidate, attack, or be scared. From a purely scientific perspective, as argued by Joubert and Wasserman (2020), viruses do not possess these traits. They explain that "there is no thought, intent, or capacity for malice on the part of the virus; it cannot be sneaky, evil, or aggressive; viruses cannot attack us or wage war against us [...] the virus does not exist to kill or harm; those are just its side effects" (Joubert and Wasserman 2020:6). The attribution of human traits to viruses is meant to instill fear, which can compel individuals to follow protective instructions (Gill and Lennon, 2022). Consequently, anthropomorphizing the coronavirus in this context makes its actions more immediate and accessible to the viewer, helping to conceptualize it as a natural enemy that must be confronted collectively (Marrissa and Tan, 2023; Joubert and Wasserman, 2020). In our corpus, other inanimate objects or abstract entities anthropomorphized include the preventive tools (B), rumors (C), and the planet Earth (D). Such depictions served as visual metaphors, highlighting their real agency and increasing their perceived efficacy (B), threat (C), or collective dire situation (D).

The third research question aimed to uncover the hidden power dynamics and ideologies expressed through the cartoons. The study revealed that the coronavirus, in its interactions with other represented participants – ordinary citizens and the world at large – was depicted as a dominant force exuding fear, hopelessness, mental illness, and intimidation, while also being a source of economic crisis. During the pandemic, citizens and global communities were portrayed as weak, subdued, hopeless, and uncertain about the future. The study further showed that through the cartoons, the newspaper conveyed ideological messages to its audience, reflecting the sociocultural context of the Ivorian speech community. The ideology

of solidarity, which emphasizes the importance of standing together in times of need to address collective challenges, was evident in cartoons F (where people were seen confronting the virus as a group), E (where a whole family defied authority to express their difficult economic situation), B (where a group of preventive tools confronted the virus), D (where the fight against the virus involved the whole world), and E and F (through the verbal use of the pronoun "*on*" [we] – the people). Also prominent in some cartoons was the display of power as a tool to intimidate (coronavirus vs. the world [D], and vs. the citizens [C & F]; preventive tools vs. coronavirus [B]; authority vs. the citizens [E]) or manipulate others (women vs. men [A]). In the same vein, the belief in marriage, as reflected in the sociocultural context of this study, was also advocated in cartoon (A).

5 Conclusion

This study highlighted the contribution of newspaper cartoons as a form of discursive practice in managing public health crises. It demonstrated how, through their unique style and manner of presentation, *Gbich!* used cartoons to depict sociocultural and political realities in Côte d'Ivoire and around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. The cartoons were employed to advocate for social and behavioral change, raise awareness about the virus, influence opinions, and instill ideological inclinations reflecting the sociocultural context of the Ivorian community. These findings align with previous research, reflecting similar sociocultural challenges (Abd El-aal Sultan 2021, Alabi 2020, Robingah 2020, Hussein and Aljamili 2020), issues of misgovernance (Imperial 2020, Asiru and Bello 2020, Hameed & Afzal 2021), and advocacy efforts (Alabi 2020, Marissa and Tan 2023, Joubert & Wasserman 2020). Consistent with earlier studies, this research emphasized the significant role of newspaper cartoons as a discursive tool in addressing public health crises. From a broader perspective, this study contributed to the discourse on pandemics. It showed that the pandemic, though negative, could serve as a medium to question behaviors, attitudes, stereotypes, practices, democratic processes, and preparedness for health crises. This research is one of the few studies on cartoons in Côte d'Ivoire. It is hoped that it will raise awareness of the role of this medium of communication in shaping perceptions and advocating for behavioral change and societal reforms in Côte d'Ivoire.

Bibliography

Abd El-Aal Sultan, A. (2021). Fighting COVID-19 with fun: Multimodal discourse analysis of Egyptian coronavirus webcomics. [Online] *Cairo Studies in English*, (2): 4–24. Available from: https://doi.org/10.21608/cse.2022.48096.1074 [Accessed: September 30th, 2023]

Alabi, O. S. (2020). Crisis communication and coping strategies during COVID-19 pandemic: A content analysis of coronavirus cartoons and comics (CCC). *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1–16.

Alkhresheh, M. M. (2020). Semiological discourse analysis of the editorial cartoons of international newspapers on COVID-19. [Online] *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology*, 14 (4): 6169–6179. Available from https://doi.org/10.37506/ijfmt.v14i4.12564 [Accessed: September 12th, 2023]

Asiru, H. T. and Bello, S. (2021). A linguistic and literary analyses study of selected cartoons on the novel Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. [Online] *African Identities*. 679–702. Available from https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2021.1963671 [Accessed: November 13th, 2023]

Cucinotta, D. and Vanelli, M. (2020). WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic. [Online] *Acta Biomed*, 91 (1): 157–160. Available from https://doi.org/10.23750/abm.v91i1.9397 [Accessed: September 10th, 2023]

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.

Gbich! Newspaper, Nos. 1062, 1065, 1066, 1068, 1095. https://gbich.net/ [Accessed: September 24th, 2022]

Gill, K. A. and Lennon, H. (2022). Conformity through fear: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of COVID-19 information adverts. *CADAAD, Journal of Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 14 (1): 22–44.

Glez, Damien. 2012. Gbich!, un éclat de rire ivoirien. http://www.slateafrique.com/1823/journal-gbich-coup-de-poing-mediatique. [Accessed: September 24h, 2022]

Hameed, A. and Afzal, N. (2021). Visualising pandemic issues: A semiotic study of contemporary Arab media cartoons on COVID-19. [Online] *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7 (2): 84–102. Available from http://dx.doi.org/10.32601/ejal.911507 [Accessed: September 10th, 2023]

Hussein, A. T. and Aljamili, L. N. (2020). COVID-19 humor in Jordanian social media: A socio-semiotic approach. [Online] *Heliyon*, 6 (12) : 1–12. Available from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05696. [Accessed: September 10th, 2023]

Imperial, D. (2020). Constructing myths via art of controversy: A semiotic analysis on political cartoons. [Online] *International journal of linguistics and translation studies*, 1 (3): 81– 99. Available from https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v1i3.53 [Accessed: September 10th, 2023]

Jeune Afrique 2010. Média : Un coup de Gbich!, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/196733/societe/m-dias-un-coup-de-gbich/, [Accessed: September 24th, 2022]

Joubert, M. and Wasserman, H. (2020). Spikey blobs with evil grins: Understanding portrayals of the coronavirus in South African newspaper cartoons in relation to the public communication of science. [Online] *Journal of Science Communication* 19 (07):

A08, 1-26. Available from https://doi.org/10.22323/2.19070208 [Accessed: August 30th, 2023]

Kuiper, K. (1984). The Nature of Satire. *Poetics*, 13 (6): 459–473. [Online] Available from https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(84)90018-4   [Accessed] July 3rd, 2022]

Le Petit Robert, dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française. (2020). Paris : Dictionnaire Le Robert.

Machin, D. and Mayr, A. (2012). *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Marissa, K. L. E. and Tan, S. (2023). Communication as 'graphic medicine'. A multimodal social semiotic approach. In S. Tan and K. L. E. Marissa (eds.). *Discourses, modes, media and meaning in an era of pandemic. A multimodal discourse analysis approach*, 42–66. New York: Routledge.

Ogbodo, Jude. N., Emmanuel C. O., Blessing E., and Emem, O. (2024). Mainstreaming and Weaponizing Satire in Nigerian Journalism Practice. Journalism and Media 5: 219–232. https://doi.org/10.3390/ journalmedia5010015 [Accessed: 03rd November, 2024]

Robingah, R. (2020). Pierce's semiotics analysis on Benny's cartoons related to Covid 19 issues. [Online] *Journal of Language and Literature* 8 (1). 86–95. Available from https://doi.org/10.35760/jll.2020.v8i1.2564   [Accessed: November 11th, 2023]

Sani, K. A., Budiarsa, M., Laksana, I. K. D. and Simpen, I. W. (2021). Discourse structure of Covid 19 edition cartoon: Critical discourse analysis. [Online] *The International Journal of Social Sciences World TIJOSSW,* 3 (1): 51–64. Available from https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4474803. [Accessed: September 25th, 2022]

Singh, R. K. (2012). Humour, irony and satire in literature. *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)*, 3 (4): 65–72.

Trisnayanti, Ni M. D., Pratiwi, D. P. E. and Candra, K. D. P. (2021). Discovering hidden messages in COVID-19 advertisement "Stay Home Save Lives": A semiotic analysis. [Online] *RETORIKA: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa*, 7 (1) : 25–31. Available from https://doi.org/10.22225/jr.7.1.3137.25-31 [Accessed: September 10th, 2023]

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. [Online] *Discourse & Society*, 4 (2). 249–83. Available from https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006 [Accessed: November 11th, 2023]

Wang, Y. (2021). The metaphors and its critical analysis in COVID-19-related cartoons. [Online] *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 11 (4): 539–554. Available from 10.4236/ojml.2021.114041 [Accessed: September 10th, 2023]

Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (2009). Critical discourse analysis: History, agenda, theory and methodology. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (eds.). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, 1– 33. London: Sage.

Wong, K., Man, S. and Chan, A. H. S. (2022). Subjective wellbeing and work performance among teachers in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic: Does autonomy support moderate their relationship? [Online] *Sustainability*, 14 (19) 12092: 1–14. Available from https://doi.org/10.3390/su141912092   [Accessed: November 16th, 2023]

World Health Organization. 2019. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019. [Accessed: September 10th, 2020]

Zhang, Y., Tan, R., Marissa, K. L. E. and Tan, S. (2023). Defamiliarise to engage the public. A multimodal study of a science video about COVID-19 on Chinese social media. In S. Tan & K. L. E. Marissa (eds.). *Discourses, modes, media and meaning in an era of pandemic. A multimodal discourse analysis approach*, 160–177. New York: Routledge.