Research Paper

Decoding Innocence in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Semiotics of Palestinian Children's Cartoons on Twitter

Salinayanti Salim[1] & Sharifah Hayaati Syed Ismail[2]

[1]Corresponding author, Faculty of Education, Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, Malaysia; *ssalinayanti@unimas.my*

[2]Department of Siasah Syar'iyyah, Academy of Islamic Studies, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; *sashsiaq@um.edu.my*

Abstract

Following the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israeli-Palestinian conflict zones, social media, especially Twitter, saw a spike in cartoon sharing. This study examines the visual representation of Palestinian children in cartoons on Twitter to decode the perspectives of child characters within the broader contexts of conflict and innocence. The study employed social identity theory (SIT) to frame the children's innocence shown in the cartoons. Visual content for this qualitative study on Palestinian children's cartoons was collected from Twitter. Data were counted for frequency, categorised into themes, and analysed using Barthes' semiotic framework. Findings reveal 6 themes: Victimhood, Emotional Appeal and Social Responses, Cultural Context: Displaced Histories, Political Commentary, Resilience and Resistance, and Unaligned Representation. The predominant theme of Victimhood in the Palestinian children's cartoons underscores their vulnerabilities within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The discovery of Unaligned Representation in this study indicates a recontextualisation of diverse perspectives that challenge singular narratives.

Keywords: Palestinian Children; Social Identity; Cartoon; Semiotic; Innocence; Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

1. Introduction

The exploration of visual representations of Palestine has revealed diverse landscape rich in historical narratives and social semiotics. Studies on visual representation have scrutinised *Nakba* images, films like "Inch'Allah," (Muwaffa, 2021), photojournalism by Mohammad Torokman (Andrea, 2020), novels such as "Faces in Hot Water," (Al-Fayoumi & Brioua, 2021) and the street art movement (Alim, 2020), each contributing to the understanding of Palestinian historical consciousness, resistance, and political imagination. The other impactful visual representation of Palestine is in the form of cartoons. There have been studies on cartoons that symbolises the turmoil in Palestine such as visual composition of displacement (Lulu et al., 2022), controversies sparked by cartoons (Bourdon & Boudana, 2016), portrayal of gender roles (Yaqub, 2009), and the construction of identities (Najjar, 2007).

Whereas these representations potentially harbour compelling narratives, the expressions and voices in the discourses are adult-centric. The current visual landscape of cartoons featuring child protagonists presents a largely unexplored domain. Visual narratives depicting child characters serve as distressing reflections of raw emotions. They ideally offer insights into the legitimacy, justification and outcomes of war (Wells, 2008), as well as the unspoken realities, hopes, and fears of a population significantly impacted by conflict (Kara & Nisan, 2020). There have been studies concentrating on children in war zones like the studies of Kara and Nisan (2020) on visual analysis of drawings by Syrian children, Akesson and Grinberg (2020) on the roles occupied by Palestinian children within their familial environments and Habashi (2008) on national identity among Palestinian children. A notable gap emerges concerning an examination of the visual representations of Palestinian children within broader narratives from the perspective of their innocence.

Previous studies have highlighted children's roles in emotional appeals within media representation, focusing on their portrayal as victims and performers (Kaziaj, 2016) or as tools for propaganda and public stunts (Lim, 2018) within

mainstream news outlets in nonconflict countries: Albania and the US, respectively. The lack of scholarly attention within social media platforms, especially in conflict regions, perpetuates one-sided dissemination and contributes to incomplete narratives. Addressing this gap necessitates an exploration of the semiotic layers embedded within cartoons featuring child protagonists on Twitter. This study aims to decode the perspectives of characters depicted as children as the representative of innocence within the Palestinian visual landscape in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The trend of depicting children in conflict narratives aligns with the global craving for quick, clear stories, distilling complex issues into straightforward narratives of innocence and blame (Baudrillard, 2003). It is timely to explore further the role of a cartoon representation of Palestinian children following Israel's genocidal attack that has killed more children in the last four weeks than in 75 years of forced occupation. According to the CNN news Website, as of 6th November 2023, 4,104 children (41%) have been killed and over a thousand more are still trapped under the collapsed buildings and rubbles (Wilson et al., 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Visual Representation of Palestine

The studies on visual representation in Palestine bring to light diverse perspectives on how imagery and art serve as powerful tools for remembrance, expression, and resistance. Assaiqeli (2021) undertook critical discourse analysis focusing on visual representations in Palestine. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework, the study analyzed Nakba images, emphasizing their sociopolitical significance in preserving Palestinian history, focusing on themes like ethnic cleansing and the right of return.

Muwaffa (2021) conducted a study on the film "Inch'Allah," exploring coded visuals depicting Palestinian life amid Israeli conflict. Employing Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, the findings highlighted the film's representation of poverty, loss of possessions, and constraints on daily activities, aiming to evoke global empathy. Andrea (2020) analyzed Mohammad Torokman's photojournalism using Roland Barthes' semiotics theory. The findings revealed Torokman's imagery held dual meanings—resistance and solidarity—symbolizing collective struggle and unity against oppressive forces.

Al-Fayoumi and Brioua (2021) conducted semiotic analysis of the novel "Faces in Hot Water," capturing implicit meanings within the text, reflecting Palestinian culture, norms, and traditions. Rohe et al. (2022) examined visuals from war-affected regions employing Rose's model (2001). The findings uncovered narratives of lived experiences, power dynamics, and marginalized populations, depicting a somber portrayal of affected communities. Alim (2020) assessed Palestinian street art using Bourdieu's symbolic power and Mouffe's political framework. The findings highlighted street art's role as a tool of resistance, fostering collective consciousness and serving as an alternative political imagination amidst Israel's imposed reality.

2.2. Representation of Children in War-Effected Zones

The representation of children in war-affected zones offers profound insights into their experiences, emotions, and societal roles, shedding light on the complexities they navigate within conflict-ridden environments. Kara and Nisan (2020) examined the drawings by Syrian children depicting the 2015 wars using Barthes' and Pierce's semiotic approaches. The findings revealed prevalent emotions of fear, despair, longing for home, and the widespread impact of war on noncombatants, highlighting awareness of conflicts in other Muslim countries like Palestine.

Akesson and Grinberg (2020) explored the roles of Palestinian children within home dynamics amid the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Using collaborative family interviews, the study revealed children's limited vocal presence but glimpses of their perspectives through alternative methods, focusing on the negotiation of roles within Palestinian homes. Habashi (2008) investigated the construction of national identity among Palestinian children across varied locales in the West Bank. Findings highlighted the multifaceted nature of children's expressions within the national identity framework, emphasizing their role as active geopolitical agents.

2.3. Cartoon Representation of Palestine

Cartoon representations have served as influential conduits for political and social commentary, providing a visual narrative that transcends mere aesthetics. Across studies, cartoons within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict have been scrutinised, revealing intricate layers of meaning, societal perceptions, and the dynamic relationship between the intended message and its reception. Lulu et al. (2022) conducted a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of eight political cartoons addressing the Palestinians' displacement in Shaykh Jarrah. The study showed visual composition aspects: representational, interactive, and compositional, stressing themes of Israeli oppression and Palestinian resilience.

Bourdon and Boudana (2016) scrutinized 16 cartoons from Western countries on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, employing E. D. Hirsch's framework to distinguish intended meaning from reception contexts. Their analysis revealed contentious debates, with critics and defenders at odds over interpretations, highlighting complex debates on the cartoons' offensive nature. Yaqub (2009) explored gender portrayals in Palestinian political cartoons. The data were collected from the influential cartoons of Naji al-Ali, which were prominently featured in Arabic newspapers from the 1960s until his tragic death in 1987. Additionally, it includes the works of six modern cartoonists: Baha Boukhari, Khalil Abu Arafeh, Omayya Joha, Muhammed Sabaaneh, Naser al-Jafari, and Emad Hajjaj, showcasing a blend of historic and contemporary perspectives in political cartooning. Al-Ali's cartoons emphasised male struggles and the role of women in preserving Palestinian identity. Meanwhile, the contemporary artists have shifted focus to depict men's roles in public life and express uncertainties regarding a secure homeland through portrayals of Palestinian motherhood. Najjar (2007) investigated the role of cartoons in shaping identities related to Palestinian refugees and Arabs. Employing methodologies from psychology and anthropology, the study emphasized the need for intricate interpretations, underscoring the symbolism in cartoon imagery and the dynamic between cartoonist and audience.

Studies on visual representation in Palestine, ranging from critical discourse analysis of Nakba images to analyses of film, photojournalism, street art, and novels, showcase the power of imagery in preserving history, fostering resistance, and shaping Palestinian narratives. Investigations into children's representations in war zones and cartoon depictions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict offer insights into emotions and identity constructions. To add to the existing literature on visual representation, this present study fills the gap by providing a comprehensive analysis that clarifies the semiotic dimensions within Palestinian children's cartoons through the social identity theory (SIT).

2.4. Social Identity Theory (SIT)

This study employed the framework of SIT to decode the innocence of children in cartoons in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Originating from the work of Henri Tajfel (1978), SIT posits that social contexts significantly shape individuals' self-concepts through their group memberships. The theory highlights the tendency for individuals to align with their in-group's norms, potentially leading to favouritism and discrimination. Tajfel (2010) also argued that societies and cultures are fundamentally shaped by groups, their interactions, and the conflicts that arise between them. Social identities are informed by a variety of factors, including societal roles and demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, and social class. SIT provides a unique account of intergroup relations and conflict, offering insights into the dynamics underlying intergroup relations (Reimer et al., 2020). Group affiliations are pivotal to individuals' self-esteem and emotional connectedness, leading to an inherent preference for one's in-group over out-groups (Greene, 1999). This in-group bias influences perceptions and attitudes, thereby fostering a sense of superiority over those not belonging to the in-group.

SIT is also used to understand wars and conflicts. Sorek (2021) argued that there is a critical role of culture as a politically charged sphere in Palestine/Israel. It reveals how cultural expressions and practices are both shaped by and shape political forces, identities, and conflicts within the region. According to Felty (2019), Palestinian groups view themselves as liberation movements fighting against an occupying force, perceiving their actions as part of a struggle for freedom and independence. This perception supports a narrative of resistance against oppression, further entrenching the in-group and out-group divide (Felty, 2019).

This study adapted the important concept of SIT: in-group vs. out-group dynamics The study investigated how cartoons distinguish between Palestinian children as part of the in-group and Israel as the out-group.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employs a semiotic analysis framework influenced by Roland Barthes (1960) to decode the representations and underlying meanings in cartoons. Barthes introduced new perspectives on signs, emphasising the role of the reader in extracting meaning from various visual media (Barthes, 1977). According to Al-Naimat and Saidat

(2018), signs are not merely symbols but contain ideological significance which prompts inquiries into the ways of cultural distinctiveness in visual representations. Barthes highlighted two levels of signification: denotation, the literal meaning of a sign, and connotation, the socio-cultural associations linked to it. Barthes' approach challenged traditional semiotics, urging a deeper examination of overlooked aspects of visual culture. Barthes notably viewed myths as meanings created by influential societal groups through language and media, often masking their origins and transformative processes of signification as indicated in Figure 1:
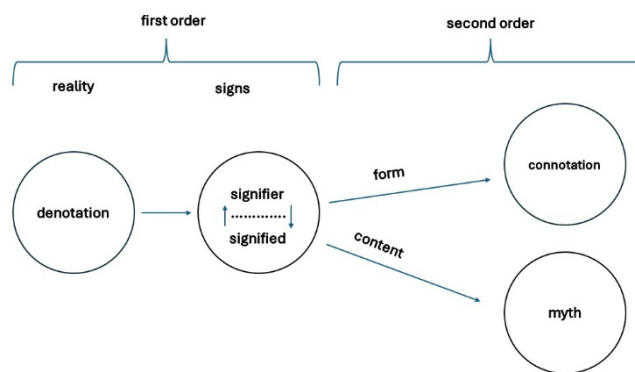

Figure 1. Barthe's Semiotic Framework

Using semiotic analysis is relevant in the studies of war because war itself is a form of order (Jacob, 2021). This study focuses on cartoons gathered from Twitter, beginning October 7, 2023, following the attacks in both Palestine and Israel. Twitter was chosen as the platform for data collection due to its wide reach and accessibility. As mentioned by Oliveira and Miranda (2022), tweets on Twitter serve as a mirror of the significance of current events as perceived by the community. It, thus, offers a vast pool of content contributed by various individuals, allowing for the collection of perspectives and diverse narratives relevant to the study's focus. A total of 55 cartoons depicting themes related to the conflicts in Palestine and Israel were collected from Twitter. These cartoons were systematically gathered after the first attack to ensure the capture of immediate and responsive visual representations The sample size of 55 cartoons was established as adequate when the algorithm began displaying repetitive content, and the use of hashtags did not yield new cartoons relevant to the study. This repetition suggested that the initial pool of cartoons had been exhaustively mined for unique, relevant examples, thus reaching a natural saturation point in the data collection process.

This study employed the visual analysis of widely shared social media cartoons, facing challenges in identifying original sources due to rampant dissemination. However, a significant number of cartoons show the artists' signatures, offering a crucial means of attribution. Acknowledging that as a potential limitation, the methodology relies on these signatures to credit creators and employs cross-referencing for verification when possible. Potential biases stemming from Twitter's algorithmic curation and the visibility of cartoons were considered and noted as a limitation.

The visual content analysis, inspired by Barthes (1960), comprises a series of inquiries about the images and categories derived from thematic observations (Charmaz, 2006). The process initiated with authors meticulously studying the cartoons, considering their potential significance in comprehending the research topic. Cartoons were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives regarding the conflict. In this case, cartoons were intentionally chosen because they specifically depict or relate to Palestinian children and aspects of their identities and experiences in the context of the conflict.

The criteria for the selection of the cartoons are as follows:

1. Cartoons were chosen based on relevance to the conflict; the representation of Palestinian children through images, the mention of children in language form and representation of their daily life in the conflict.

2. Cartoons featuring symbols tied to Palestinian identity, like flags or traditional/religious attire, were included.

3. The cartoons were chosen from a range of Twitter accounts including artists, activists to ordinary citizens.

Subsequently, the researchers engaged in discussions while organising the cartoons based on prevalent themes and central motifs discovered within them. In the final stage, the cartoons were categorized under primary headers. Themes were identified based on the inherent narrative elements present in the collected cartoons. These themes were selected to align with the study's objective, allowing for focused analysis and categorization of the visual content. The chosen themes aim to explore the children's representation of innocence, conflict impact, and societal perspectives conveyed through these cartoons.

The cartoons were categorized into six themes. Afterwards, two cartoons were selected from each theme for in-depth visual analysis employing Barthes' framework to decode visual narratives, connotations, and the socio-political context encapsulated in the cartoons. The cartoons were chosen based on their richness in visual details, such as symbols, facial expressions, and detailed backgrounds. This complexity indicates that they contain deeper stories and meanings, making them ideal for detailed analysis. The framework of the semiotic analysis was based on the order of signification below:

1. Denotation refers to the direct, tangible meaning of words or images. It involves a concrete and specific interpretation without relying on symbolism or associations. For instance, an image showing the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem directly denotes a religious site.

2. Connotation involves the emotional, symbolic, or cultural associations linked to words or visuals. It extends beyond the literal meaning and is influenced by personal experiences and societal context. For example, the image of the Dome of the Rock can connote historical significance, religious importance, and cultural identity for Palestinians and Muslims worldwide.

3. Mythology encompasses narratives that societies use to explain and understand various aspects of life. These narratives shape societal perspectives on themes like culture, religion, and social norms. For instance, a visual representation of the Palestinian *keffiyeh* (traditional scarf) not only denotes a piece of clothing but also connotes resilience, Palestinian heritage, and the struggle for self-determination, personifying a mythos of resistance and identity.

4. Findings

The data analysis reveals six themes that represent the innocence of the children in the cartoons on Twitter as demonstrated below.

Table 1. *Cartoon Theme Distribution*

Themes	No. of Cartoon (*n*)
Victimhood	16
Emotional Appeal and Social Responses	11
Cultural Context: Displaced Histories	10
Political Commentary	8
Resilience and Resistance	5
Unaligned Representation	5
Total	55

Table 1 depicts the collection of 55 cartoons, revealing distinct thematic strands that capture various facades of the Palestinian children's social identities. Among these themes, "Victimhood" emerges prominently, with 16 (29%) cartoons depicting the grim realities and struggles faced by Palestinian children. Supporting the study of Kaziaj (2016) that children are often portrayed as victims, the visuals in this study depict the suffering, oppression, and vulnerabilities experienced by the children within the conflict-ridden region, amplifying the narrative of injustice and adversity. According to Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020), narratives depicting victimisation wield significant influence over audience empathy and support for the afflicted, particularly when accompanied by visual elements. This explains why this theme has the highest frequency of cartoons disseminated on Twitter.

Secondly, "Emotional Appeal and Social Responses" captures the essence of 11 (20%) cartoons that aim to evoke emotive reactions from the Twitter audience. Through emotional imagery and impactful symbolism, these cartoons attempted to elicit empathy, compassion, or indignation, compelling viewers to reflect upon the human toll and societal

implications of the ongoing oppression. The emotive influence and perceived authenticity of visual media intensify their impact, engendering heightened emotional responses (O'Loughlin, 2011).

Similarly, the theme of "Cultural Context: Displaced Histories" is discernible in 10 (18.1%) cartoons, weaving cultural symbols and references, unique to the Palestinian identity. On social media, cultures are actively defined through genres and ritual expression (Hallinan et al., 2023). In this study, these visuals serve as a window into historical contexts and societal norms offering insights into how the culture has been tragically affected by the war.

"Political Commentary" is apparent in 8 (14.6%) cartoons, employing satire, irony, and symbolic imagery of Palestinian children, to critique political events, policies, or power structures. These visuals serve as a platform for commentary on sociopolitical dynamics, presenting a critical lens on the complex landscape of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furia (2009) characterised hypocrisy as a discrepancy between an individual's private actions and their publicly professed beliefs. In essence, politicians often advocate stringent moral codes for others or fellow politicians while demonstrating less stringent moral conduct themselves (Jordan et al., 2017).

"Resilience and Resistance" emerges in 5 (9.1%) cartoons, spotlighting the unwavering spirit, resilience, and defiance exhibited by Palestinian children amidst adversity. According to the American Psychological Association (2022), resilience refers to how effectively individuals adjust to challenges such as adversity or trauma. In this study, these visuals of Palestinian children amplify not only the narrative of determination in resistance against the challenges faced by the community, they also comprise of pleasantness gained beyond this world.

As for the final theme, "Unaligned Representation," 5 (9.1%) cartoons depict either a balanced portrayal that blames both Hamas and Israel together for the destruction, blames Hamas alone, or supports the Israelis instead of Palestinians. This theme was included in this study because, according to *Wall Street Journal*, Palestinians largely hold Israel responsible for the war but there is a growing number that blames Hamas, too (Stancatti & Ayyoub, 2023). The subsequent images demonstrate the visual analysis of the cartoons for each of the themes listed above.

4.1. Victimhood

The theme of 'Victimhood' in this study refers to the portrayal of Palestinian children as oppressed individuals enduring hardship and injustice within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, highlighting their suffering as exemplified by Cartoon 1 and Cartoon 2:
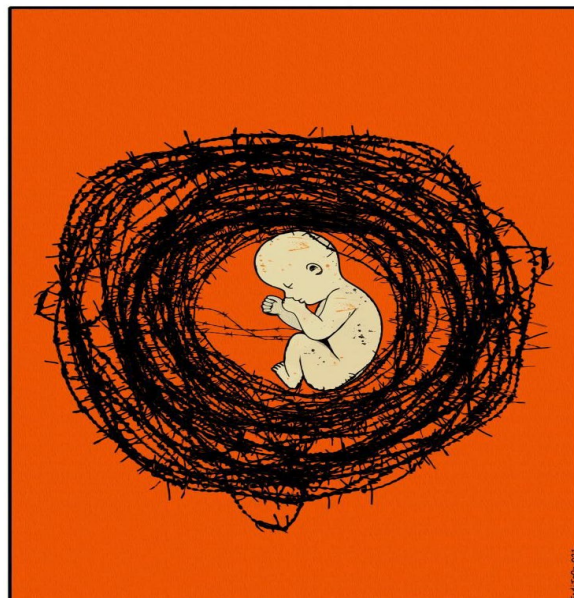

Cartoon 1. Baby Surrounded by Barbed Wires

Cartoon 1 illustrates an unborn baby surrounded by barbed wires, representing a fetus confided by the environment. The umbilical cord symbolised by barbed wire suggests a connection between the baby and a restrictive environment.

The barbed wire surrounding the baby could connote imprisonment or danger, signifying a hostile or threatening environment for the child before birth as vulnerable victims. The striking red background represents a sense of urgency, vulnerability or violence, amplifying the intensity and gravity of the situation.

The use of barbed wire as both the protective womb and a confining element in the image might construct a myth around the struggle for survival in a hostile world. The umbilical cord symbolises not only a life-sustaining connection but also an entanglement or constraint, potentially implying a bleak future.
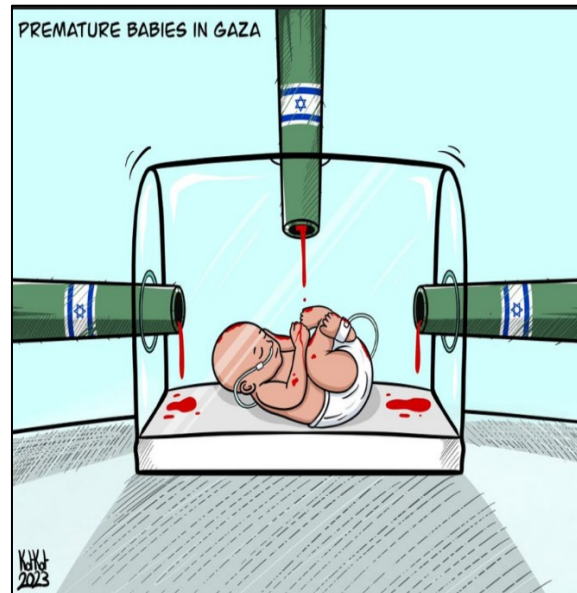
Cartoon 2. Premature Baby in Incubator With Tank Muzzles

Cartoon 2 portrays a premature baby in an incubator with three tank muzzles pointed at it through the incubator windows. The baby is depicted as vulnerable, being in a critical and fragile state, symbolised by its premature birth and placement in the incubator.

Connotatively, the tank muzzles, all adorned with the Israeli flag, connote a threatening and aggressive stance towards the baby in the incubator. The blood dripping from the tank muzzles onto the baby and the incubator implies violence, danger, and the potential for harm. This imagery suggests a hostile environment for the innocent child.

The mythological context of this cartoon refers to the stark reality of the ongoing conflict in Palestine and it is killing harmless, fragile babies. The tanks, representing military force, with the Israeli flags create a mythos of overwhelming aggression and threat imposed on the innocent life of the Palestinian child. The imagery perpetuates a narrative of conflict-induced violence affecting the most defenceless individuals within the Palestinian community.

The portrayal of the babies in both Cartoons 1 and 2, symbols of innocence, in such a hostile environment creates the narrative of victimhood as an integral part of the in-group's identity, contrasting sharply with the perceived aggressiveness of the out-group.

4.2. Emotional Appeal and Social Responses

Based on the findings in this study, emotional appeals and social responses within the cartoons (Cartoon 3 and Cartoon 4) illustrate the depiction of Palestinian urgency, seeking support or intervention. It simultaneously portrays the reactions and responses of the world and media within the cartoon narratives:

Cartoon 3. Mother Holding Her Dead Child and Globe-Faced Man

Cartoon 3 portrays a grieving Palestinian mother holding her deceased child, conveying intense sorrow and despair. In the background, the burning Ahli Arab Hospital signifies destruction, indicating an attack. An Israeli jet hovering above links the devastation to aggression. There is a man with a globe for a face who expresses shock and disbelief while covering his mouth with his hands.

The capitalized words "CONVINCED YOURSELF," and "GENOCIDE" suggest a strong emotional appeal, indicating a plea or accusation against denial or indifference regarding a perceived genocide. The mother's anguish and the hospital's destruction evoke sentiments of horror, loss, and tragedy due to the conflict. The globe-faced figure signifies worldwide reaction or shock in response to the depicted devastation.

The lifeless innocence child in the mother's arm magnifies the desperation for the firm attention from the world. The narrative constructed in this visual represents the emotional outcry and social response to the perceived tragic events, emphasising the urgency and severity of the situation. It shapes a societal perspective, possibly seeking acknowledgment and action regarding what's considered a genocide, highlighting the emotional toll and global shockwaves triggered by the conflict's brutality.

Cartoon 4. Mother Holding Her Injured Child

Cartoon 4 depicts a mother holding an injured child, surrounded by microphones from various news outlets. The mother and her child are in monochromatic colours with six arms holding microphones labelled with logos of different news channels pointing towards them, indicating an interview or media attention. A text at the top reads "BUT DO YOU CONDEMN HAMAS?"

The image of the mother holding an injured child surrounded by microphones induces emotional associations of distress, helplessness, and the overwhelming weight of media attention in the face of tragedy. It implies societal notions of exploitation of human suffering for political narratives, highlighting the powerlessness of noncombatants amidst the chaos of conflict.

This portrayal could mythologise the media's role in shaping narratives, underscoring its ability to sway public opinion and political discourse. It constructs a societal belief that media, while tasked with disseminating information, sometimes steers attention away from immediate human suffering, instead focusing on political agendas or controversies. This myth implies a detachment between the media's responsibilities in crises and its prioritisation of political discourse over empathetic coverage.

Cartoons 3 and 4 highlight the in-group loss and despair, aiming to spark a global response by depicting Palestinians children as the conflict casualties of Israeli-perpetrated atrocities. It critiques how media attention, though a possible vehicle for awareness, often eclipses the conflict's immediate human toll, reinforcing the division between in-group and out-group.

4.3 Cultural Context: Displaced Histories

'Cultural context: Displaced Histories' as narrated by Cartoon 5 and Cartoon 6 encapsulates the echoes of historical injustices imposed upon Palestine. It reflects a grim narrative of contemporary Palestinian treatment mirroring historical discriminatory practices, showing a representation of displacement and struggles:

Cartoon 5. Civilians' Deportations by Soldiers

Cartoon 5 shows a soldier, labelled "IDF," directing a group of civilians including a small boy who is holding his father's hand, away from an area marked with a sign in German, which translates to "Palestinians are forbidden to enter the residential area." The caption reads "Deportation to Gaza Ghetto."

Connotatively, this cartoon can be interpreted as a representation of power imbalance and forced displacement. The sadness of the child while abiding by the order of the soldier may evoke emotions related to conflict, oppression, and segregation. The caption, "Deportation to Gaza Ghetto," implies the forced relocation or exclusion of Palestinians, particularly to Gaza, pointing towards imposed restrictions and the creation of segregated zones.

The myth could be about the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the presence of a group of detainees across all ages from the elderly to the children. It portrays a narrative where power and military force are used to control and displace people, reflecting on broader themes of human rights violations and territorial disputes, mythologizing the concept of a restricted and segregated Palestinian existence. It echoes past ghettos designated for specific groups namely Jewish concentration camps during the oppression of Adolf Hitler in Nazi-occupied Europe, implying the perpetuation of power dynamics and oppressive measures.

Cartoon 6. Child and Adult Dialogue in an Ambulance

Cartoon 6 illustration depicts a conversation between an adult and a child inside a vehicle. In the upper-left corner of the image, the Arabic phrase "الإسعاف سيارة فى" translates to "in the ambulance." Nearby, an intravenous fluid bag is visible, suggesting a medical context. The adult with dark hair and beard, wearing an orange shirt appears to be a nurse or paramedic, as indicated by the presence of a medical bag beside him. There are speech bubbles containing text in both English and Arabic, indicating dialogue between the two characters. The adult is asking why the child is carrying a school bag and if it contains books, to which the child responds that the bag contains his little brother.

The connotation highlights the tragic reality of displacement and loss experienced by Palestinian children amid conflict. It emphasizes the child's innocence juxtaposed against the weight of a heartbreaking truth—having to carry a sibling, symbolized as a school bag. This cartoon could suggest that the parents have passed away, and the child is carrying his possibly injured or deceased sibling to the hospital. This conveys a narrative of disrupted childhoods, hinting at the burdens thrust upon the young due to the conflict in their homeland.

This cartoon goes beyond its simple story to challenge a common belief about the role of ambulances in war zones. It shows a paramedic and a child, who represent the innocent and the importance of medical help, inside an ambulance. This image argues against the idea that ambulances are used for military purposes. It questions the justification for attacking these vehicles, suggesting that ambulances are wrongly targeted. By doing so, the cartoon defends the need to keep medical services safe in conflicts and highlights the wrongness of harming those who are vulnerable (children) and in need of help.

Both cartoons offer a powerful critique of the impacts of conflict on the youngest members of society. They symbolise the in-group experience of Palestinian children as part of the in-group, marked by vulnerability, displacement, and the fight for survival, against the backdrop of the out-group's actions (portrayed here by the Israeli military and broader conflict dynamics).

4.4. Political Commentary

In this study, 'Political Commentary' denotes the depiction and critique of social and political circumstances, aiming to question or challenge prevailing ideologies, policies, and power structures within a particular context, as presented by Cartoons 7 and 8:
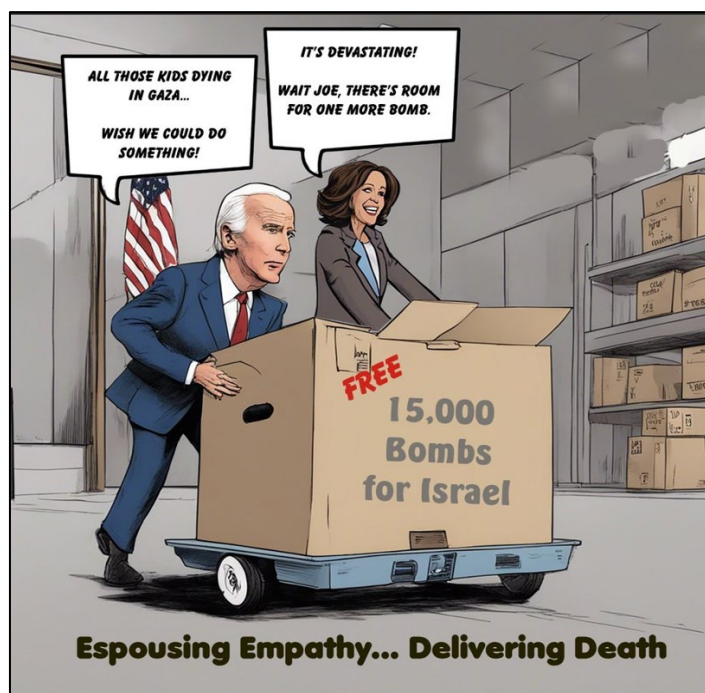
Cartoon 7. Biden and Harris Pushing Box Full of Bombs

Cartoon 7 shows President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris pushing a large box labelled "FREE, 15,000 Bombs for Israel" on a trolley in a store filled with similar boxes. Behind them is a US flag, and the two leaders are engaged in conversation. Biden expresses concern about the children dying in Gaza, stating a wish to take action, while Harris responds by suggesting there's still space for one more bomb. Additionally, an ironic phrase, "Espousing Empathy…Delivering Death," is juxtaposed in the cartoon.

The connotation of this cartoon highlights the irony and hypocrisy in political discourse. It could signify the contrast between purported empathy and actual actions, revealing the dissonance between stated concerns for the children in Palestine and policies that perpetuate conflict. This blatant dichotomy suggests the gap between political rhetoric and the reality of decisions that contribute to ongoing violence.

Whereas the cartoon might not directly depict a Palestinian child, it implicitly reflects the vulnerability of children affected by the conflict in Palestine through the conversation between Joe Biden and Kamala Harris about the devastating situation of children in Gaza. Their discussion, set against the backdrop of the decision to provide more bombs to Israel, juxtaposes their verbal expressions of concern with the action of supplying weaponry. This contrast enhances the representation of children in the conflict—as innocent casualties affected by decisions made at a political level. The absence of direct visual representation still highlights the theme of innocence by pointing out the hypocrisy in discussions about the tragic circumstances faced by these children while simultaneously facilitating actions that contribute to their suffering.

Cartoon 8. Netanyahu Doing Lab Experiment

Cartoon 8 paints a sinister image of the Israel Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu wearing a mask on his face and gloves on his hand, pouring what seems to be a chemical substance into a larger container that has Gaza written on it. The laboratory's backdrop is littered with scientific equipment—test tubes, scalpels, wires, and jars filled with eerie contents such as human skulls and what appears to be unborn infants. The ambiance is orange and the container has small humans in it.

The scene connotes a chilling atmosphere, with the figure's actions suggesting a sinister purpose behind the pouring of the unknown substance into the designated container. The use of a chemical lab setting, along with the presence of human skulls and unborn babies in jars, invokes a sense of macabre experimentation. Benjamin Netanyahu's actions, pouring an unknown substance into a container labelled with a state's name, imply a nefarious intent or a dangerous operation linked to a political entity. This imagery evokes feelings of unease, danger, and potential harm, hinting at clandestine actions or ominous agendas taking place within the confines of the laboratory setting.

The myth inherent in this imagery could characterise a calculated manipulation and covert actions by political entities (of Israel) during times of conflict. It mythologises the idea that within the context of war or political strife, unseen forces engage in clandestine set-ups, symbolised here by the ominous lab setting. This myth constructs a narrative of hidden agendas, potentially suggesting that powerful entities engage in manipulative or morally ambiguous actions behind the scenes, utilising scientific means to further their political objectives or agendas related to conflict or war.

Cartoons 7 and 8 present the Palestinian children as the in-group while the out-group is extended to consist of US politicians. This depiction of hypocrisy and malevolent acts of the political figures of Israel and its supporter, the US is in contrast to the innocent victims of Palestinian children, who got caught in the crossfire of political agendas and actions.

4.5 Resilience and Resistance

In this study, the 'Resilience and Resistance' theme is extended to encompass not only the capacity to persist and adapt in challenging circumstances, but it goes beyond earthly realms, while actively opposing oppressive forces or situations to maintain identity, values, or principles. Cartoon 9 and Cartoon 10 demonstrate the meaning in more specific contexts:

Cartoon 9. Resilience: Now and Then

Cartoon 9 outlines two distinct panels separated by the years 2023 and 2008, a recurring backdrop of a tower bearing the Palestinian flag is evident. The 2023 image portrays an adult Palestinian fighter holding a firearm, while the 2008 image depicts a young boy amidst the ruins of a destroyed home, surrounded by fires and smoke, visibly distraught and tearful due to the devastation.

The connotation of this cartoon highlights the evolution of Palestinian struggle and resistance over time. It could signify the transition from childhood trauma and devastation in 2008, symbolised by the distressed young boy amid the destruction, to the transformation into an adult Palestinian fighter by 2023, suggesting the endurance and resilience developed through adversity.

The myth presented could suggest the cyclical nature of Palestinian resilience, passing down the legacy of struggle from one generation to the next. It might signify a narrative of endurance in the ongoing conflict, where the innocence of childhood evolves into the resolve of adulthood, symbolising a collective determination to resist oppression and fight for Palestinian rights.

Cartoon 10. Angel Babies Amid Destruction

Cartoon 10 showcases a group of deceased babies, smiling, each adorned with prominent, angelic white wings, soaring upward amid a scene of partially demolished buildings. Their flight resembles that of birds, emphasising the contrast between the innocent babies and the desolation of the damaged structures. The babies are seen wearing T-shirts bearing a Palestinian flag. The sky above them is clear, accentuated by some thick clouds of smoke and dust which is caused by strikes and explosions.

Commonly, the connotation of this cartoon could evoke themes of innocence, tragic loss, and an ethereal departure. The comparison of these innocent souls against the damaged landscape and buildings might evoke a sense of tragedy, highlighting the stark contrast between the purity of infancy and the harshness of the environment. However, the babies are happy and they look like they are free from any trouble. The babies are far from the clouds which can indicate their relief from the harsh circumstances. In regards to resilience and resistance, this cartoon conveys a message of a 'happy ending' against the erasure of innocence despite the devastation caused by conflict.

It might mythologise the idea that innocence and purity, embodied by the children, persist beyond the mortal realm. The portrayal of children as angelic figures, despite their earthly demise, constructs a mythos of spiritual endurance, suggesting a belief in an afterlife where innocence is rewarded and preserved. This myth speaks to the resilience of the human spirit, implying a realm where the hardships of the mortal world cease to exist, offering solace and hope beyond the conflicts and tragedies of earthly life.

Cartoons 9 and 10 imply the in-group's persistent fight for rights and dignity. This resilience contrasts with the harsh reality of conflict wrought by the out-group that is comprised of adults. It shows the enduring human spirit which starts at the very young age.

4.6. Unaligned Representation

The final theme in this study, 'Unaligned Representation' refers to the diversification of perspectives within, displaying varied or conflicting viewpoints on the conflict, challenging singular narratives and promoting multifaceted interpretations as signified by Cartoon 11 and Cartoon 12:

Cartoon 11. Hamas and Bibi Politically Dining Dialogue

Cartoon 11 portrays a unique perspective compared to the other cartoons. The cartoon depicts the leader of Hamas on the left and the President of Israel, known as Bibi, sitting together at a dining table. They are both shown carving a chicken on a platter. Both figures are holding weapons; the left one holds a rocket labelled "IRAN," and the right one holds a missile labelled "USA." A speech bubble from the figure on the right reads, "PASS THE SALT!"

Connotatively, the background appears to be shaded darkly, suggesting an ominous or tense atmosphere. The cooked chicken may imply that the suffering of children in Palestine and the loss of their lives is caused by both parties,

Hamas and Israel. The speech bubble from the figure on the right calling for salt may signals to casual or indifferent attitude of political leaders towards the misery of their citizens.

The prevailing belief about the cartoon is the leaders' actions that represent the ongoing conflict fuelled by external support (depicted by the labelled weapons). The casual request for salt implies a detachment from the consequences of their actions, highlighting a disconnect between leadership and the suffering of civilians. It means, while largely people blame Israel for the occupation of Palestine, there are ideals that suggest Hamas is also responsible for the conflict. It also insinuates Iran and the USA; two external powers being used to exacerbate the already tense situation in Palestine with no regards for the plight of the Palestine children.

Cartoon 12. Hamas Using Children as Shields

Cartoon 12 depicts a complex and sensitive issue involving conflict in Palestine. It shows a character who looks like the leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, labelled "Hamas" holding children, with a speech bubble expressing outrage at Israel for attacking civilians. He appears to be tying children around and above him. In the background, there's part of a Palestinian flag and an ornate vase on top of a pedestal. At the back of him is another character peeking from behind curtains.

Connotatively, Ismail Haniyeh has an exaggerated facial expression of annoyance towards Israel as indicated in the speech bubble that reads, "HOW DARE ISRAEL ATTACK CIVILIANS … ."   This is contradictory to his action, having children tied up around him. The children appear scared and confounded.

As the leader, Ismail Haniyeh is depicted as the representative of the Palestine resistance group; Hamas, thus it is clear that Hamas in general is being criticised for using Palestinian children as human shields and for their violent actions against Israel. It also suggests the fact that Hamas is using civilians as a shield to protect themselves from Israeli attacks. The message implied is that Hamas is responsible for the violence and that they are using innocent people as armour to protect themselves.

Cartoons 11 and 12 raise the notion that within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, interpretations of right and wrong, aggressor and victim, are not monolithic. They reveal a landscape where both in-groups (Israelis and Palestinians) and out-groups (as perceived by each side) are subject to critique, with their actions contributing to the conflict's perpetuation and the suffering of civilians, especially the children.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the Palestinian children's cartoons reveals that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shapes the identities of Palestinian children, agreeing with Tajfel's (2010) theory that societies are formed by the conflicts in which they are entangled. In these cartoons, Palestinian children are depicted as victims, showing the stark contrast between them as members of the Palestinian in-group, embodying innocence, and the Israeli military forces and their allies, notably the United States, as part of the out-group. This portrayal aligns with SIT's concept of in-group favouritism, casting the children as symbols of innocence and purity. It suggests a mismatched battle between the fully equipped Israeli military and Palestinian children, who have no way to defend themselves. It evokes empathy and reinforces the Palestinian social identity against the backdrop of conflict.

Palestinian children are predominantly portrayed as innocent victims within the thematic construct of 'Victimhood', (*n* = 16), indicating their suffering and vulnerabilities in the face of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict undeniably shapes the identity of Palestinian children, but embedding a representation of a victim more than a sense of resilience and resistance amidst adversity. This portrayal is different from previous studies by Andrea (2020) on photojournalism, Lulu et al. (2022) on political cartoons and Alim (2020) on street art, which emphasised the resilience and resistance of Palestinians. This study also reveals that among its various themes, 'Resilience and Resistance' stands out as the sole theme portraying children in a positive light, through the depiction of their ability to embody strength and defiance in adversity. The emphasis on children's victimhood suggests a strategic narrative shift, aiming to highlight the humanitarian aspects of the conflict and counteract accusations of militancy.

Additionally, the study identifies a distinct theme named 'Unaligned Representation' as the smallest subset of cartoons (*n* = 5). This theme is noteworthy for its deviation from the predominant narrative through recontextualization which refers to the process of taking social events and reinterpreting them to understand their meaning in a different or new context (Azimi, 2015). This theme involves a critical reinterpretation of the conflict's depiction in cartoons, challenging the one-sided narratives by illustrating actions from leaders of both Israel and Hamas that could be seen as contributing to the conflict's perpetuation. Unlike the other five themes that align with the Palestinian viewpoint—echoing Huda et al. (2021) findings of mostly pro-Palestine sentiments in social media narratives about the 2021 Gaza attack—'Unaligned Representation' offers a divergent perspective. It critically examines the contributions of both sides to the conflict, thereby questioning the prevailing pro-Palestinian sentiments. This recontextualization suggests a complex examination of blame, particularly when children are casualties, potentially shifting public discourse and demanding a deeper analysis of the conflict's intricacies.

6. Conclusion

This study has analysed Palestinian children's cartoons using semiotic analysis. Within the framework of SIT, the cartoons cast Palestinian children as symbols of the in-group's innocence, whereas Israelis are portrayed as the conflicting out-group. The visuals capture the complexity of Palestinian children's experiences through themes of victimhood, emotional appeal and social responses, cultural context, political commentary, resilience, and unaligned representation. It illuminates the suffering, societal responses, historical echoes, and intricacies of cultural representation within the visual narratives of Palestinian children within conflict. The cartoons of Palestinian children offer a powerful means of humanising the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the innocence of children. It provides marginalised voices a platform to challenge dominant narratives and assert agency amid the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Future studies could explore the origins of cartoons and conduct interviews with the creators to gain deeper insights into the inspirations behind their work.

Information on Informed Consent or any Data Privacy Statements

This study does not involve direct human participation or sensitive personal data. The content is part of open public discourse, widely shared on social media.

Conflict of Interest

This study does not have any conflict of interest.

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