

Imagery and social representations of the Coronavirus pandemic in East African press: A critical content analysis of *The East African* newspaper

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a phenomenon intersecting different parts of the world. The East African Community which prides itself for enabling socio-economic, political and cultural integration between its member states has had to deal with uncertainties caused by misinformation about the pandemic, which in turn threaten to derail its objectives. In line with this, *The East African* newspaper stands out as a leading provider of information concerning each of the countries in the community. And although a report in the *MarketWatch* (2023) indicates that the World Health Organization expects to declare end of the pandemic some time in 2023 as the virus has become more like seasonal flu, *The East African* newspaper which has established itself as a leading provider of information covering the five (5) member states of the East African Community has continually reported on the pandemic. How this publication represents the pandemic can influence how its readers understand it. Thus, guided by the Social Representation Theory (SRT) and employing a critical content analysis approach, this paper examines how the newspaper uses imagery in creating social representations about the pandemic. This study contributes to the discourse of media representations of pandemics.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Pandemic, Social Representations, East African Community, Critical Content Analysis

Introduction

The novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019, was declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (World Health Organization (WHO) 2020a). Since then, COVID-19 has been considered a social phenomenon due to its complex nature of infection, efforts to develop treatment and the public's responses to the disease (MacGregor et al., 2020).

As the pandemic continued to spread and countries endeavoured to mitigate its spread, there have been widespread uncertainties among the global populations (Ahir et al. 2020; Ling & Chyong 2020). These are partly due to misinformation spread in various media platforms regarding the origin of the disease, its transmission and treatment. For instance, it has been noted that various social media platforms, while facilitating conversations regarding the disease, have enabled the spread of misinformation (Garza 2020). Hence, the media through their reportage, have the potential of determining the collective responses, as well as shaping the public's attitude towards the pandemic (Mian & Khan 2020).

Coronavirus in East Africa

Since its first reporting, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a phenomenon intersecting different parts of the world, impacting on people's daily lives and co-existence. Similarly, the East African Community

(EAC), which is an intergovernmental organization comprising six partner states namely: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan and Burundi, has not been spared from effects of the virus (EAC website).

Following the EAC recording its first case in Kenya on 13th March 2020, the Community which prides itself for enabling socio-economic, political and cultural integration between its member states has had to deal with uncertainties surrounding the disease. These have been partially caused by lack of adequate knowledge about it, which in turn have threatened to derail the peaceful co-existence of the member states (Magoti 2020; Mian & Khan 2020).

There has also been an exponential increase in media coverage of the pandemic in the region. For instance, *The East African* newspaper which has established itself as a leading provider of information covering the member states of the EAC, has continually reported on the pandemic with the aim of providing content that cover stories and in-depth analysis from each of the countries in the region (The Nation Media Group). Hence, how this regional publication represents the pandemic has the potential of influencing how its readers in the region understand the disease and how it affects them (Gabore 2020).

Social Representation Theory

Originally advanced by Moscovici (2001;1973) as a psychoanalysis theory, the Social Representation Theory (SRT) has gained traction in media studies as a means of studying how the media create collective cognition in their audiences (Höijer 2011). This is due to the fact that the SRT advances the representation mechanisms of objectification and anchoring that can help in explaining and understanding how scientific phenomena are communicated about and integrated into common knowledge.

Through these mechanisms, the theory strives to explain how social thinking is created, maintained or transformed (Polli & Camargo 2015). It has therefore been extensively employed in various empirical studies to explain how communication affects the organization of collective thought in populations (Höijer 2011).

The mechanism of anchoring aids in meaning creation by relating a phenomenon to familiar concepts that audiences can relate to. Through objectification, a phenomenon is made common knowledge when it is transformed into a concrete concept that the audience can perceive and understand (Markova 2003; Höijer 2011). Objectification may take the form of a symbol, person, or metaphor, while anchoring classifies and assigns names to a phenomenon, thereby giving it meaning that the audience can relate to and enable them to understand it. In this study, the two mechanisms have been treated as mutually dependent in the formation of social representations.

Understanding how the media, by using these representation mechanisms, represented a phenomenon like the COVID 19, is critical in light of the recent research findings that suggest that uncertainties about the disease are due to information received either directly from the media or spread on various social media platforms (Ahir et al. 2020; Ling & Chyong 2020; Garza 2020).

Social representations in the media

It is through the process of communication that Social Representations (SR) are created, expressed and shared (Höijer 2011; Polli & Camargo 2015). Studies have established that the media plays an important role in the construction of SR (Olausson 2010; Billig 1993; Van Dijk 2000; Jodelet 2008). Hence, in a social context where a novel disease has been declared a pandemic and the public faced with uncertainties and surrounded by disinformation, the media has the responsibility of creating awareness about the disease, educating their audiences on preventive measures, as well as countering misinformation (WHO 2020b; Sambhav 2020).

The WHO's (2020c) guidelines on how to manage uncertainties during a pandemic, advises that public communication should incorporate information about the disease, risks and prevention measures coupled with recommendations on how to counter misinformation. Accordingly, while working as a bridge between

the government and the society, the media globally have endeavoured to create awareness about the disease, correct the misinformation and encourage adoption of recommended preventive measures (Mian & Khan 2020).

Nonetheless, considering that information in the media greatly contributes to the public's knowledge of their social world, there have been criticisms expressed about how the media represents events and situations (Garza 2020). It is against this background that research within this framework has investigated how social representations are created in relation to challenging social phenomena (Markova 2003)

The SRT has been applauded as relevant in explaining how ideas (or social representations) are communicated by the media and how through these representations, the media generates collective cognition (Höijer 2011; Marková 2003; Moscovici 2001). There is therefore a correlation between social representations and social constructs of phenomena, in that, it is these collective cognitions that lend to social constructs.

However, media representations are never objective and may not be a true reflection of an issue, often leading to double, sometimes contradictory meaning to any element of representation (Schudson 2003). Thus, proponents of the theory postulate that it is predominantly concerned with analyzing and describing media content and predicting social representations advanced by the media (Moscovici, 2001; Markova 2003; Höijer 2011).

Therefore, in order to understand how representations are produced and reproduced, it is important to explore not just the theories that elucidate the art of representation, but to also examine the characteristics of the media content that lead to the construction of these representations (Ross 2019).

This paper therefore, by using the tenets of the SRT, seeks to deconstruct how the Coronavirus pandemic was portrayed in *The East African* newspaper and how this contributed to the overall social representation of the pandemic.

Imagery in the media

Several scholars have emphasized the primacy of images when used in communication, specifically media communication content and their role in the promotion of social representations (Höijer 2011; Ross 2019). Photographic images when used as visual presentations in a text, end up registering on the reader's subconscious level thereby holding potential to convey information, stimulate various emotions and influence how the reader conceptualizes their world (Joffe 2008; Thayer & Skufca 2019).

Correspondingly, captions are a common feature attached to photographs, that lead readers through the different denotations of corresponding photograph (Logaldo 2017). These are often used as emotional anchoring and objectification mechanisms because, besides providing details that entice the reader to a text, they also provide information that a reader can use to understand the overall thesis of an article (Joffe 2008).

Thus, when exploring the representative role of textual photographs, merging the information obtained from both the photograph and caption can provide reliable source for scholarly deductions (Saberri & Heng 2015; Logaldo 2017). Similarly, this study extends this notion by incorporating picture specific information in establishing the social representations advanced by *The East African* newspaper in regarding to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Methodology

Adopting a pragmatic approach and guided by the tenets of the SRT, this study used critical content analysis (CCA) to analyse the newspaper content. CCA offers flexibility in theoretical approach and content selection, where the focus is on using the tenets of a theory in analyzing and interpreting data (Utt & Short 2018). It has therefore been shown to be best suited for analyzing news content where the intent is to use mixed-methods approach (Bryman 2012).

Hence, in order to systematically code and analyse the content, a mixed-method approach was used. This involved quantifying the content in order to measure the frequency of occurrence of the photographs and qualitatively conducting an in-depth analysis of the content. The period of analysis was between 13th March 2020 and 5th April, to cover the time the first Coronavirus case was reported in one of the member states of the EAC to the time the last member state recorded its first Coronavirus case.

The primary unit of analysis were the photographic images and accompanying captions, as written by the newspapers, producing a sample of N=23 news articles. The articles were identified using the keywords ‘Coronavirus’ and ‘COVID-19’. Only those articles that had mentions of African countries in their headlines and published in the science and health section of the newspaper were considered for analysis. This was based on the fact that Coronavirus is a phenomenon affecting the health of its victims.

Results

The photographs were categorized based on the subjects in the photographs and the accompanying caption that aided in explaining the subjects. Hence, it emerged that a majority of the photographs used were those showing heads of state or health ministers at 12(52%). There were also photographs showing health officials either treating or testing the public 5 (21%), the preventive measure being taken by the governments 3 (13%), casualties either the sick or death 1 (4%), efforts being made to find a cure 1 (4%), the public in various capacities 1 (4%).

The subjects in the photographs and the accompanying captions were qualitatively analyzed with the intent of establishing how they contributed to emotional anchoring and objectification of the pandemic and their inherent implications. Hence, the following emerging narratives were identified:

a) Threat perception

During the analysis, some of the photographs and their accompanying captions were coded as evoking various reactions on the reader. These emotions ranged from fear, compassion or uncertainty. For instance, the following captions to some of the photographs illustrate how the reader was made to fear, either the disease, the testing or treatment process.



i.

Nurses wearing protective clothing handle a vial containing a potentially infected coronavirus swab at a drive-through testing centre (sic) at the University of Washington Medical campus on March 13, 2020. Rwanda on March 14, 2020 reported first coronavirus case. (March 14th 2020)



ii.

Nurses wear protective gear at Mbagathi Hospital in Nairobi where an isolation and treatment centre for the new coronavirus was set up on March 6, 2020. (March 13th 2020)



iii.

A coronavirus patient arrives on a stretcher at the Columbus Covid Hospital, which has been assigned as one of the new coronavirus treatment hospitals in Rome, after being transferred by medical workers in protective white suits from the Gemelli Hospital, in Rome, Italy, March 16, 2020. (March 19th 2020)

Photograph (i) plus its caption invokes fear and uncertainty on the reader. Fear because of the dressing of the subjects, who according to the caption are nurses and uncertainty because the faces of the subject have been cut off. The same can be said of photograph (ii) because of how the subjects, identified as nurses, are attired. Based on the fact that the public are not familiar with the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in their everyday encounters with health professionals, they may be petrified when presented with such images. Regarding photograph (iii) and based on how the patient is shielded and isolated, coupled with the way the health workers are attired, the image conjures fear in the reader about how one is treated when infected with the disease.

b) Misrepresentation and deception

Misrepresentation was coded when the accompanying photograph did not complement the headline used on the article. For instance, the following photograph used in an article headlined “South Africa confirms 13 cases of Coronavirus”, was captioned as:



i.

A medical staff member holds samples from patients infected by the Covid-19 coronavirus before nucleic acid test at Red Cross Hospital in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province on March 10, 2020. (12 March 2020).

Similarly, the following photograph under the headline: *'Djibouti confirms first coronavirus case'*, had the following caption:



ii.

A coronavirus patient arrives on a stretcher at the Columbus Covid Hospital, which has been assigned as one of the new coronavirus treatment hospitals in Rome, after being transferred by medical workers in protective white suits from the Gemelli Hospital, in Rome, Italy, March 16, 2020. (19 March 2020)

While the following article published in with the headline: *'Ethiopian drug ready for clinical trials'*, had a photograph with the following caption:



iii.

A researcher works on a vaccine against coronavirus at the Copenhagen's University research lab in Copenhagen, Denmark, on March 23, 2020. (4 April 2020)

In photograph (i), the subjects in the photo and caption are medical personnel in China, the alleged source of the Coronavirus (WHO 2020a). This is an irony because the headline indicates that the story is about cases in South Africa. This therefore serves in representing the disease as foreign and originating from China. Similarly, instead of using a photograph that focuses on Djibouti's case, the newspaper used photograph (ii) depicting a patient in Rome, Italy. In the case of photograph (iii), the headline indicates that the article will provide details about the Ethiopian government's efforts to find a cure and the progress it has made in this regard. However, the accompanying photograph does not illustrate this information. Instead, by showing how the vaccine is being developed in one of the developed countries in the world, the photograph serves in diminishing the efforts being made by the African country, while applauding those of another.

Considering that headlines are relevance optimizers guiding readers to specific news stories (Dor 2003), and that photographs despite being silent hooks drawing the reader to a story, are also used to enhance the stories (Engel 2008), combining the two makes a message understandable and memorable (Graber 1996). However, when the newspaper failed to use photographs corresponding to the headlines and to correctly identify the subjects, they risked misleading the reader on how to understand the phenomenon.

c) Legitimacy and realism

Legitimacy and realism were coded when the subjects in the photographs were either heads of state or health ministers of the various countries being reported on. These photographs served in portraying the legitimacy of the situation, for instance, the directives issued by the governments in order to contain the disease such as curfews and restriction of movement. They also served in representing the situation as a reality that the public had to deal with. The following photographs and captions show the various ministers and heads of state portrayed by the newspaper:



President Uhuru Kenyatta addresses the 5th Annual Devolution Conference via video link from State House in Nairobi County, April 24, 2018. (15 March 2020)



Tanzania's Minister for Health Ummu Mwalimu. Tanzania on March 16, 2020 confirmed its first case of Covid-19 in the country. (16 March 2020)



Kenya's Health Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe. (17 March 2020)



Uganda's Health Minister Ruth Jane Aceng who said the country's first Coronavirus case which was confirmed on March 21, 2020 is a 36-year-old Ugandan man who arrived from Dubai aboard an Ethiopian Airlines flight. (22 March 2020)



Burundi Health Minister Thadée Ndikumana addresses a news conference on March 31, 2020. (31 March 2020).

d) Government protection

Some photographs depicted the preventive measures put in place by the various governments, in order to control the spread of the diseases. These helped in advancing the governments' role in protecting their citizens:



i.

Several hand washing units have been installed in the main commuter parks in Rwanda's capital Kigali. Rwanda on March 15, 2020 confirmed four more coronavirus cases, bringing the tally of infections in the country to five. (16 March 2020).

The same photograph and caption were used in an article published on March 17th, 2020.



ii.

A worker checks the temperature of travellers (sic) at the border post with Kenya in Namanga, northern Tanzania, on March 16, 2020, on the day Tanzania confirmed the first case of the covid-19. (18 March 2020)



iii.

Health personnel measure the temperature of a visitor at the entrance of the Mbagathi Hospital in Nairobi, Kenya on March 18, 2020. (20 March 2020)



iv.

A health worker sprays disinfectant to prevent an outbreak of the Coronavirus disease at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, Kenya on March 24, 2020. (27 March 2020)

e) Public agitation

There were photographs that served in portraying the public's agitation towards their government. For instance, the article headlined "African youth living with HIV to bear the brunt of new attack" had a photograph whose subject was captioned as follows:



i)

Activists demonstrate in Nairobi to push for access to HIV/AIDS drugs. Young women (aged 15–24 years) account for 26 per cent of new HIV infections. (21 March 2020)

f) Hope

The newspaper also used photographs that gave hope to the reader. This was achieved when the photographs showed the efforts being made to get a cure for the disease. The photograph used in the article published on April 4th, 2020 had the following caption:



i)

A researcher works on a vaccine against Coronavirus at the Copenhagen's University research lab in Copenhagen, Denmark, on March 23, 2020. (4 April 2020)

Discussions

From the results above, our study elucidates *The East African* newspaper's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic at its initial stages and the subsequent social representations of the pandemic.

Threat perception

The foregoing presentations have shown that the analyzed photographs evoked various emotions in the reader, and these in turn served in the formation of social representations that could be used in relation to the pandemic. Consequently, how the reader perceives the disease, for example as a threat, may impact on how they respond to it. This could either lead to their support and adoption of preventive measures as directed by their respective governments or they may feel disheartened (Bavel & Baicker 2020).

Similarly, given that during the analysis only one photograph was coded as showing a patient suffering from the COVID 19, the photograph may have served as a *pars pro toto* representation, where the image may be taken as a representation of what happens to infected patients. Such a representation may evoke fear on the reader preventing them from seeking treatment, further derailing efforts to control the pandemic.

Misrepresentation and deception

Ecker et al. (2014) established that misleading headlines often result in misconceptions in readers who may not read beyond the headlines. Studies have also shown that misleading content, without being blatantly false, can affect a reader's memory, inferential reasoning and behavioural intentions (Ifantidou 2009). Therefore, in a case such as the pandemic, and taking into account the instances when the reader was misled by the photographs, the newspaper's reader can be triggered to develop biased interpretations of the pandemic.

This is in line with assertions that the media's constant reference to geographical areas and linking them to the origin of a disease that has turned pandemic, can lead to the creation and perpetuation of stigma and discrimination (Cohn 2012; Russell 2020). For instance, when the media repeatedly referred to the virus as 'Wuhan virus' or 'Chinese virus' or when they repeatedly showed images from these geographical areas. Although these were inferences made by the newspaper in relation to the disease, it is these inferences that contributed to the social representations that the reader may have used in relation to the phenomenon. For instance, such representations may steer the reader to discriminate people from these areas. The same can be said of the images portrayed in the newspaper articles analyzed in this study, where photographs used were either from China or other countries different from those mentioned in the headline. The reader may end up linking the disease to and subsequently stigmatizing persons from these areas whom they deem to be transmitters of the disease.

Similarly, when the newspaper used photographs showing patients from other countries, they risked leading their readers to develop an 'optimism bias', the belief that bad things are more likely to affect others than

themselves. Consequently, studies have established that people often tend to underestimate their like likelihood of contracting a disease when they cannot relate to the subjects in a communication context (Bleiker & Kay 2007; Bavel & Baicker 2020) It can therefore be surmised that the newspaper's readers developing such an outlook can further lead them to ignoring public health warnings relating to the pandemic.

Legitimacy and realism

Trust in institutions and government is important in promoting public corporation towards abiding by set policies (Vinck et al. 2019). During a pandemic, when the public need to be informed, they tend to trust first-hand information they receive from the government, health professionals, friends, and family. Thus, considering the misinformation and uncertainties surrounding the COVID 19 pandemic, information from these credible sources provide reassurance to the public (Khan et al. 2020). The same can be postulated of the newspaper's usage of health officials and presidents as their sources. By using photographs where the main subject is a government health official or the president, the articles served in invoking trust in the reader, which in turn could have persuaded them to adopt and implement preventive guidelines advanced by their governments. The information from these sources deemed trustworthy may have also decreased anxiety and reassured the readers.

Government protection

During a health pandemic such as the one occasioned by the COVID-19, the public are often left with uncertainties and fear both of the disease and its implications on their socio-economic lives. Hence, in such a scenario, and as part of the government accountability to their citizens, they should provide protection and subsequently reassure their citizens (Schillemans 2012; Jacobs & Schillemans 2016).

In this regard, the media have the responsibility of highlighting the measures being put in place by their governments. This works in a transposal way, where the perceived risk of negative publicity in the media invoking anticipatory reactions in the public can drive the government to be accountable (Schillemans 2012).

Similarly, considering the media's role as the link between the government and the public, it can be surmised that they have the ability to stimulate and highlight government accountability, trigger public accountability and stimulate the two actors to reflect on their behaviour (Jacobs & Schillemans 2016).

Hence, following the declaration of the pandemic, the various governments of the EAC have taken the necessary measures to prevent the spread of this disease. These measures have in turn been disseminated by various media (Garza 2020; Mian & Khan 2020). For instance, the current study established that *The East African* newspaper has been diligently reporting on the measure put in place by the various governments in order to protect their citizens from infection by the virus. The photographs plus their captions are thus used to summarize the efforts being made by the various governments towards containing COVID-19 transmission, suggesting that what is portrayed in the photographs is what is happening throughout the country or region. Thus, given that COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon that the public within the EAC have to contend with, the reader having read the photographs, is reassured of their government's protection against the disease.

Public agitation

Reports indicate that the pandemic has had significant effects on the public, such as unprecedented socio-economic hardship caused by preventive directives like lockdowns and curfews (Adams & Walls 2020). These hardships have in turn created stressors that have contributed to public agitation, and as Wong et al. (2020) established, this has become a common behavioural emergency facing governments as they battle the pandemic.

The public are also prone to get agitated when they feel restricted by government policies, disadvantaged in accessing services and when are uncertain about the disease (Wong et al. 2020; WHO 2020b). Similarly,

misinformation can lead to uncertainties, and uncertainties when left un-cleared, can leave room for false claims, which in the middle of a pandemic, can lead to behaviours that impede preventive measures. Hence, the media have the social responsibility to keep the population properly informed (Mejia et al. 2020).

In line with this, the current study coded photographs that portrayed the public protesting against their inability to access fundamental services during the pandemic. Taking into account that images of mass mobilization have the ability of provoking the public towards activism, such a depiction has the ability of inciting the reader to criticize the government restrictions aimed at containing the disease. Drawing from already established role of the media during a pandemic (Khan & Naushad 2020; Mejia et al. 2020; Gabore 2020; Mian & Khan 2020), it is therefore important that the media in such a situation, provide understandable, clear and adequate information on the pandemic.

Hope

During a pandemic like the COVID-19, when uncertainties and fear are widespread, there is need for hope (WHO 2020b). Misinformation in the media is blamed for causing panic and despair among the public. In line with this, as a means of controlling the despondency, the WHO (2020b) recommends amplifying positive and hopeful stories and positive images of local people who have experienced COVID-19. For example, by highlighting stories of people who have recovered or who have supported a loved one and are willing to share their experience.

Likewise, based on studies on mass media campaigns and healthy behaviour, it has been established that mass media campaigns can elicit positive behaviour change and even prevent negative behaviour in individuals (Ogbogu & Hardcastle 2020). The media can therefore bridge the gap between public and expert opinions by how they report on the disease. They do this by providing information on the progress and severity of the pandemic, prevention and treatment measures and vaccine development efforts (Davis 2014).

Hence, during the analysis of photographs used in *The East African's* coverage of the pandemic, it was established that there were photographs that elucidated the measures being taken by experts to develop a vaccine for the virus. Such information evokes hope on the reader, which in turn can affect their likelihood of adopting and implementing preventive measures (Crum et al., 2013).

Conclusion and recommendations

Given the complexity of social representations, various scholars opine that these representations tend to be full of contradicting ideas (Höijer 2011; Marková 2003; Moscovici 2001). This is attributed to the fact that, embedded in the theoretical framework is the concept of '*cognitive polyphasia*', meaning that communication may sometimes incorporate opposite forms of thinking or different rationalities. An analytical approach can reveal how these mechanisms are articulated in media texts (Van Dijk 2000). This includes making inferences to their possible denotations (Hier & Greenberg 2002) and highlighting the social representations that the media presents to their audiences in relation to a specific phenomenon. It is this aspect that this study sought to elucidate and in so doing highlight how these opposite rationalities were presented by the newspaper. In this regard, we recommend that further analysis be carried out to establish the impact of this on the audience.

The results of this study have however provided valuable insights into how *The East African* newspaper depicted the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the emerging social representations that its readers could have used to understand the pandemic. Thus, considering the possibility of the media generating and propagating stigma and discrimination with their coverage, we recommend that the media should endeavour to provide accurate, factual, fair, evidence-based and non-sensational information especially during a pandemic.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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