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## **New fuel pump prices and expression of social discontent in nigeria: a socio-semiotic deconstruction of selected cartoons and placards**

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**Abstract :** The removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria in 2023 triggered widespread social discontent, leading citizens to increasingly rely on digital platforms to articulate their frustrations. Among the most prominent forms of online expression were political cartoons and protest placards that employed Nigerian English, humour, sarcasm, and visual symbolism to critique governance. However, the multimodal complexity of these texts often renders their meanings opaque. This study investigates how verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources are deployed in selected cartoons and placards to communicate public grievances about corruption and the fuel subsidy removal. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) socio-semiotic framework, the analysis examines how imagery, colour, composition, facial expression, spatial arrangement, and linguistic choices interact to construct layered meanings. Using purposive sampling, five cartoons and three placards published between June 2023 and May 2024 were subjected to multimodal analysis. The findings reveal that these visual texts operate as grassroots communicative strategies through which citizens resist dominant ideological narratives and articulate sociopolitical critique. The study demonstrates that visual and textual elements function synergistically to encode messages of dissent, frustration, and political awareness within the Nigerian socio-cultural context. It further establishes that meaning-making in socio-semiotic discourse is inherently ideological, shaped by power relations and collective experiences of hardship. This research contributes to scholarship on African visual culture and multimodality by highlighting the central role of digital visual artifacts in contemporary political expression. It offers insight into how everyday Nigerians use semiotic creativity to negotiate and contest sociopolitical realities, thereby expanding current understandings of visual resistance in African public spheres.

**Keywords:** socio-semiotics, multimodality, fuel subsidy removal, Nigeria, digital activism.

**Résumé :** La suppression des subventions sur le carburant au Nigeria en 2023 a engendré un vif mécontentement social. Les masses ont utilisé la couverture médiatique pour exprimer leurs douleurs, générant un nombre important de caricatures et de pancartes comportant de l'anglais nigérian, du sarcasme et de l'ironie qui sont difficiles à déchiffrer. Cette recherche vise à examiner les modes de communication verbale et non-verbale employés dans certaines caricatures et pancartes sélectionnées, associées à la corruption en général et à la suppression des subventions sur le carburant en particulier. Ancrée dans la socio-sémiotique de Van Leeuwen et Kress (2006) comme cadre théorique, cette étude cherche à révéler comment divers modes de communication non-verbale tels que les images, la mise en page, les couleurs, les expressions faciales et les arrangements spatiaux, fonctionnent de concert avec les modes verbaux pour apporter une révélation plus profonde de la source et du niveau de mécontentement social résultant de l'augmentation du prix du carburant à la pompe. L'étude réalise une analyse multimodale d'un total de cinq (5) caricatures et de trois (3) pancartes sélectionnées de manière ciblée, publiées entre juin 2023 et mai 2024. L'analyse révèle comment les ressources sémiotiques contenues dans le message visuel sont des tactiques socio-politiques utilisées par les masses pour résister aux idéologies de la classe dominante. L'étude montre également comment les représentations visuelles et textuelles contribuent, dans le contexte nigérian, à transmettre des messages de résistance sociale. L'étude conclut que la production de sens (le meaning-making) dans une analyse socio-sémiotique n'est pas un processus neutre, mais est enchâssée dans des pratiques sociales, des relations de pouvoir et des perspectives idéologiques.

**Mots-clés :** message visuel, subvention sur le carburant, Nigeria, multimodalité, mécontentement social.

## Introduction

Communication has long shaped how societies negotiate meaning and power, and in contemporary Africa, digital media has intensified these processes by expanding access to visual expression. In Nigeria, recurring socio-economic crises particularly, rising fuel prices and persistent corruption, have generated a surge of political cartoons and protest placards circulating on social media. These visual texts provide citizens, especially young people, with accessible means of critiquing governance and articulating social unease. With the ubiquity of smartphones, visual commentary has become democratized, enabling ordinary Nigerians to participate in meaning-making practices once dominated by professional cartoonists or institutional media. Despite their prominence, these multimodal expressions often carry symbolic and ideological meanings that remain inaccessible to many viewers. As Makinde (2023) notes, cartoons have contributed to the ongoing representation of societal issues in a humorous way by

contextualizing the ills in society via visual and verbal representation of reality. However, the visual mode of this representation is dense and frequently misread due to its reliance on metaphor, spatial design, and cultural codes. Political cartoons, long conceptualized as rhetorical artifacts that condense complex socio-political critique (Edwards, 1997), employ exaggeration, caricature, and symbolism to shape public perception. Studies within African contexts such as Abiodun (2009), Kanu and Chukweloka (2024) and Adetola (2020) demonstrate how Nigerian cartoons function as sites of resistance, social commentary, and political negotiation. Similarly, research on protest placards (e.g., Adegaju & Oyebode, 2015) reveals how linguistic brevity and visual resonance combine to communicate collective frustration during demonstrations. However, most existing scholarship privileges newspaper cartoons or focuses solely on linguistic slogans, often overlooking the multimodal complexity of the digital environment. Few studies analyze cartoons and placards together, despite their parallel roles in online activism. Even fewer examine visual responses to fuel price increases, an issue that significantly shapes everyday Nigerian life and public anxiety. This gap highlights the need for a socio-semiotic approach that accounts for how contemporary visual texts articulate social unease. This study applies the socio-semiotic framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to analyze meaning construction in five cartoons and three placards purposively sampled from UFTAN social platforms. It addresses the following questions: What visual and linguistic resources do these texts use to communicate social unease? How do they construct meanings about fuel price increases and corruption? (3) What ideological messages do they embed? How do cartoons and placards differ in their multimodal strategies?

## **1. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

### **1.1. Theoretical Framework: Socio-Semiotic Approach of Kress and van Leeuwen**

This study adopts the socio-semiotic framework of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), specifically their approach to multimodal

discourse analysis, as the theoretical lens for analyzing cartoons and placards related to social discontent in Nigeria. Socio-semiotics provides a comprehensive method for examining how meaning is constructed not only through language but also through multiple semiotic modes, including visual, spatial, and textual elements. This framework is particularly suited for studying multimodal texts such as cartoons and placards, where visual and verbal resources interact to convey complex social and ideological messages.

Kress and van Leeuwen's socio-semiotic theory builds on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978) and earlier sociocultural semiotic perspectives (Hodge & Kress, 1988). It emphasizes that meaning is socially shaped and culturally situated, reflecting the interests, positions, and intentions of the sign-makers. Signs, though arbitrary in form, are motivated by social and ideological contexts, making them powerful tools for analyzing public discourse and protest communication. Multimodality, a central concept in their work, recognizes that communication rarely relies on a single mode; instead, meaning emerges from the integrated use of language, images, layout, colour, gestures, and other semiotic resources.

The framework is anchored on three key concepts: multimodality, visual grammar, and design/mode selection. Multimodality acknowledges that all modes contribute to meaning-making, each with its own affordances. Visual grammar provides a systematic approach for analyzing visual elements, focusing on features such as composition, colour, salience, perspective, and representational structures. Design and mode selection refer to how sign-makers choose and combine semiotic resources to achieve communicative goals, demonstrating the interplay between social intention and visual form. Within socio-semiotics, meaning in visual texts is analyzed through three dimensions: representational, interactive, and compositional meanings.

Applied to this study, these concepts enable a nuanced analysis of how cartoons and placards related to fuel subsidy removal and corruption in Nigeria construct social and ideological meanings. By

examining how verbal and visual elements interact, the socio-semiotic approach reveals how ordinary citizens resist dominant ideologies and articulate collective discontent. It provides a framework to decode both explicit messages and subtle socio-political commentary embedded in multimodal texts, highlighting the cultural and political contexts that shape visual communication.

## **1.2 Methodology research design**

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in socio-semiotic and multimodal discourse analysis. This design is appropriate because the objective is to interpret how cartoons and placards construct social meanings related to fuel subsidy removal, corruption and public discontent in Nigeria.

### **1.2.1. Data Source and Sampling Procedure**

The data for this study consist of nine visual texts five cartoons and four placards circulated in response to the 2023 removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria. These visual texts were purposively selected from the UFTAN (University French Teachers Association of Nigeria) Social WhatsApp platform, a forum widely used for socio-political commentary among Nigerian university teachers' users.

### **1.2.2 Sampling Justification and selection Criteria**

Purposive sampling was adopted because the study seeks to analyze visual texts that are specifically rich in semiotic content related to fuel subsidy removal, governance, and social resistance. Qualitative socio-semiotic analysis emphasizes depth rather than numerical representativeness; thus, a small, information-rich sample is methodologically appropriate. The selected items are adequate because they contain diverse semiotic resources (textual, visual, symbolic) that allow for a comprehensive application of Kress and van Leeuwen's theoretical framework. Furthermore, the nine visual texts were the most widely circulated and thematically relevant items within the period of study, enabling a focused exploration of dominant visual narratives. Concerning the selection criteria, items were included if they met the following conditions:

Explicit reference to fuel subsidy removal, corruption, or governance issues; presence of both visual and verbal semiotic elements; circulation on the platform between June 2023 and May 2024. Therefore, items that did not meet these criteria were excluded. All selected images were downloaded and catalogued with accompanying metadata, including date of circulation and descriptive notes. Data were analyzed using the socio-semiotic and multimodal framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Each visual text was examined across three metafunctions (representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning) Ethical procedures were followed in accordance with qualitative research standards. Only publicly circulated cartoons and placards were used as data.

## **2. Presentation and analysis**

### **2. 1. Presentation and analysis of the selected placards**

#### **2.1.1. Datum 1**



This placard, held by a young Nigerian woman during 2023-2024 fuel increase protest, combines visual and linguistic resources to construct a powerful and emotionally charged message that links personal hardship to structural political failure. Following the multimodal discourse framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the image operates as a meaning-making ensemble in which gaze, colour, textual choices, and composition work together to produce

socially situated meaning. The central visual element is the woman herself, dressed in a white T-shirt. The colour white often connotes simplicity, sincerity, or purity, and in this context may underline the authenticity of her grievance. Her direct gaze at the viewer corresponds to what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe as a “demand” image-one that establishes interpersonal meaning by confronting the viewer and compelling emotional engagement. Her unsmiling expression and slightly narrowed eyes reinforce the affective intensity of the scene, signaling frustration, fatigue, and a plea for recognition.

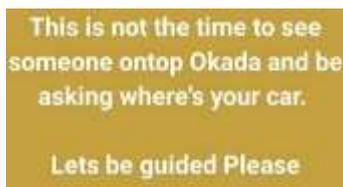
The verbal mode is equally significant. The placard bears the inscription: “Na because of bad govt I never see husband @ 37 yrs.” Rendered in Nigerian Pidgin English, this translates to “It is because of bad governance that I have not found a husband at 37 years old.” The choice of Pidgin widely used across linguistic, ethnic, and class boundaries in Nigeria enhances accessibility and signals what Kress (2010) refers to as “affective proximity,” whereby semiotic choices bring the audience emotionally closer to the message. Written in bold capital letters, the text amplifies urgency and directness. The ironic yet deeply affective statement suggests that even intimate aspects of life are shaped by the failures of political leadership.

Within Nigerian socio-cultural norms, where women are often expected to marry in their twenties, referencing the absence of a husband at 37 becomes a provocative form of socio-political critique. By attributing this personal circumstance to “bad govt,” the protester highlights how governance failures such as economic hardship, insecurity, and unemployment penetrate the private sphere and influence life choices and opportunities (Akinwotu, 2020; Oduguwa, 2019). Colour also plays an essential role in the multimodal construction of meaning. The pink background contrasts sharply with the blue and green lettering, thus enhancing salience a key concept in multimodal analysis referring to visual prominence (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This contrast ensures that the message

stands out clearly within the crowded protest environment. Furthermore, the woman's closed facial expression, marked by a lack of joy or softness, interacts with the verbal text to strengthen the representation of emotional exhaustion and socio-economic strain.

Overall, the placard functions as a multimodal artefact that mobilises visual design, linguistic form, and cultural symbolism to articulate personal suffering within broader political structures. Through its integration of visual and verbal elements, it produces a socially situated critique consistent with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) conception of multimodality as a complex orchestration of semiotic modes.

### **2.1.2. Datum 2**



The text in the image reads: "This is not the time to see someone on top of Okada and be asking where is your car. Let us be guided, please." This expression conveys a socially oriented message encouraging empathy, restraint, and contextual awareness. From a multimodal discourse perspective (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), the image combines linguistic and visual semiotic resources to construct a commentary on Nigeria's contemporary socio-economic reality. The linguistic mode constitutes the primary communicative resource. The message is framed as a cautionary admonition, urging people to avoid insensitive remarks during a period of economic hardship. The reference to "Okada" the local term for motorcycle taxis anchors the statement within a distinctly Nigerian cultural and socio-economic context. This lexical choice situates the viewer within a shared social environment where rising fuel prices have forced many car owners to abandon personal vehicles in favour of cheaper, more

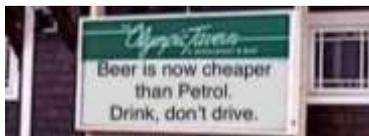
accessible transport options. The expression therefore serves as a reminder to refrain from shaming individuals whose financial constraints have altered their mobility choices.

The visual mode enhances the textual meaning through its colour and layouts. The light brown background evokes neutrality, sobriety, and seriousness. In multimodal terms, the colour functions to foreground the written message by eliminating distracting visual elements and creating a calm tonal atmosphere. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), colour can guide viewer attention and shape affective responses; here, the subdued palette supports the function of the text as a social advisory rather than a humorous or sensational statement.

The composition places the text at the centre of the visual field, making it the dominant element and reinforcing the importance of the verbal message. The use of white, bold typography against a plain background increases salience, ensuring that the viewer engages directly with the text. This aligns with the concept of salience in multimodal analysis, which determines what the viewer is drawn to first and most strongly (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Although the image does not depict an interaction between human participants, it indirectly constructs a form of social relationality through its directive tone. The admonition “Let us be guided” functions as an interpersonal cue, encouraging collective responsibility and emotional sensitivity. This imperative combines evaluative and persuasive discourse, subtly invoking the idea that Nigerians share similar socio-economic struggles, especially under the pressure of rising fuel costs, inflation, and transportation challenges. The message ultimately serves as a piece of social commentary. It highlights how structural economic crises manifest in everyday life, shaping mobility, identity, and social interactions. It also employs light humour a common discursive strategy in Nigerian public communication to soften the message while still conveying serious concerns about hardship and empathy. Through its multimodal orchestration of colour, textual choice, layout, and

cultural references, the placard functions as an accessible and emotionally resonant reminder of the need for compassion during difficult times.

### 2.1.3 Datum 3



On the above placard it is written "Beer is now cheaper than Petrol. Drink, don't drive" which means "now beer is cheaper than gasoline. Drink, don't drive." The text is a direct and humorous commentary on the high cost of fuel. It highlights the drastic economic shift where a luxury item "Beer" (alcohol) highlighted with a capital letter has become more affordable than a necessity "petrol" (gasoline for transportation) highlighted as well with a capital letter. The advice "Drink, don't drive" is a darkly humorous coping mechanism, suggesting that staying home and drinking is a more viable option than driving due to fuel costs. This humor paints a vivid picture of the socio-economic impact of fuel pump price increases. It also expresses frustration, desperation, and resilience in the face of hardship. The sign's humor hinges on a dramatic inversion of the conventional value hierarchy. Necessity vs. Luxury: Petrol (Gasoline) is a modern necessity essential for work, commerce, and daily life. Beer is a non-essential luxury item. The sign highlights a painful economic reality of Nigeria where the cost of the luxury is now less than the cost of the necessity. The psychological shock: this inversion is more than an economic observation; it's a statement about the system being broken. It suggests that core components of modern life in Nigeria (transportation) have become so extravagantly priced that they are now valued above optional indulgences (alcohol). The adverb "now" is critical. It grounds the joke in a recent, undeniable shift, transforming a timeless observation into a timely, bitter complaint about current nigerian government policy. The text establishes a clear conflict that defines the public's mood. The placard effectively

contrasts the high-cost reality (driving) with the low-cost retreat (drinking). The placard reflects the discontent of the population who can no longer afford the pleasure of moving their car around as in the past. "The adverb 'now'" reflects what was obtainable in the past. Therefore, through the socio-cultural context this poster is more intended to show with bitterness the disappointment of the Nigerian people in the face of the increase in the price of fuel. These people who could afford the luxury of driving their personal car easily here and there to visit are forced to lose this habit. In other words, the poster exhorts the population, hard hit by the soaring fuel prices, to turn to beer to drown their sorrows and forget about travel. "Drink, don't drive."

## **2.2. Presentation and analysis of the selected cartoons**

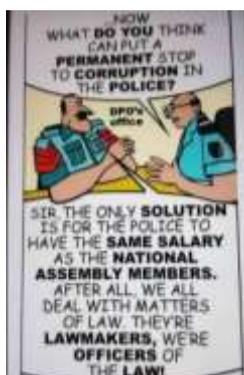
### **2.2. 1. Datum 1**



The cartoon shows two groups: white male lenders in Western suits on the left, and Black African borrowers in traditional white boubou on the right. The image is descriptive rather than narrative. The lenders' dark clothing, forward gaze, and upright posture connote focus, rationality, authority, and financial power. Their distance from the borrowers suggests control and dominance. The borrowers, dressed in celebratory boubou and shown with large bellies, are depicted as indulgent despite being "borrowers." Their scattered gazes contrast with the lenders' focused look, implying disorganization, confusion, and a lack of intelligence. Although the boubou is culturally dignified, in this context it is used to signify laziness, backwardness, and lack of seriousness. The spatial arrangement reinforces binary oppositions: the "smart" Western

group on the left (associated with the positive/known) and the negatively portrayed African group on the right. This contrast constructs an “us vs them” dynamic in leadership competence. Overall, the cartoon suggests that Nigeria’s political leaders misuse borrowed funds for personal pleasure rather than societal development. The multimodal elements appearance, gaze, and clothing, work together to critique careless and self-serving leadership in Nigeria. The multimodal analysis reveals how seemingly simple visual element like physical appearance, gaze, and clothing can be combined to convey deeply messages on the mismanagement of leadership in Nigeria.

### **2.2.2. Datum 2**



The second comic cartoon is transactional in essence. It uses a combination of visual elements and text to deliver a satirical commentary on police corruption in Nigeria and a proposed, likely unrealistic, solution. The visual elements show the DPO’s (Divisional Police Officer) office, with two Nigerian police officers. Their uniforms show their roles and their connection to the issue of corruption. Their lively facial expressions suggest engagement and perhaps a degree of conviction or even amusement in their discussion. The direct eyes contact shows no sense of pity or regret concerning their involvement in the act of corruption. It implies symbolically matter-of-factness, a lack of remorse about the current

situation of corruption, perhaps even a sense of entitlement or justification through the proposed solution. The speech bubbles are the primary way through which the dialogue and the central message are conveyed. Their placement and style are straightforward, indicating a direct conversation. The textual element represented by the dialogue is the core of the cartoon's message. The interplay of visuals and text anchors the dialogue within the Nigerian police context. The uniforms and setting clarify who is speaking, and the officers are not shown as desperate or pleading, which heightens the humor. The cartoon exposes the contrast between widespread police corruption and the exaggerated proposal of matching National Assembly salaries. It criticizes the vast pay disparity between government branches and mocks lawmakers' high earnings, implying that corruption will persist without substantial salary reform. By highlighting drastic inequalities in public-sector pay, the cartoon points to these disparities as a root of social problems. The officer's serious posture and direct gaze underscore the sincerity behind the satire: he acknowledges corruption but frames it within broader systemic injustice. Ultimately, the cartoon questions why lawmakers in an underdeveloped country earn so much while ordinary citizens and other state agents cannot meet their basic needs.

### 2.2.3 Datum 3



The cartoon presents two figures in stark contrast. On the right, a man stands on a three-legged stool with a rope labeled “New fuel

increase,” symbolizing how rising fuel prices push citizens toward desperation. His downward gaze and plea “in the spirit of renewed hope remove the rope” express vulnerability and a desire for relief based on the government’s slogan. The rope becomes a metaphor for socio-economic pressure and imminent danger. On the left stands the government representative, likely echoing the president’s voice. Dressed in a blue Yoruba-style boubou and hat, he appears powerful, detached, and authoritative. His response “I am not here to remove the rope but the stool” shows a deliberate refusal to address the real cause of suffering. His laughter, pointing finger, and cold gaze heighten the sense of mockery and indifference. The minimalist white background isolates the figures and emphasizes their unequal power dynamic: a helpless citizen versus a government agent who controls the outcome but chooses harm over help. The linguistic contrast between “renewed hope” and “new fuel increase” highlights a perceived gap between political rhetoric and lived reality. The declarative tone of the government’s statement reinforces finality and lack of empathy. The cartoon uses a powerful visual metaphor to critique the government’s inadequate response to hardship, suggesting that policies intensify rather than relieve suffering. The representative’s gesture interpretable as a weapon and his exaggerated expression further symbolize institutional violence. By focusing on this tragic interaction, the cartoon exposes social discontent and the disconnect between official promises and citizens’ struggles. It must be recognized that: “iconic signs are not the objects they show, but they serve to refer, in a coded way, to objects of the world by playing on the codes of representation and perceptible analogies”( Aissaoui, 2023: 32 ) and speaking of the role of icons, it must be noted that they make it possible to isolate the figurative units that constitute the visual message which are: “forms on backgrounds that we have learned to know according to our expectations” (Joly, 2005: 98) enabling viewers to decode the underlying political message.

#### 2.2.4. Datum 4



The cartoon is humorous, narrative, and transactional. It shows a woman with long dark hair, leaning toward a bald man in a green shirt. She looks affectionate, saying, “words cannot express how much I love you.” Her posture and pursed lips convey sincerity and intimacy. The man, however, grimaces with scrunched brows and a tight mouth, signaling stress or frustration. His sarcastic reply “use FUEL” contrasts sharply with her romantic declaration.

His expression and the bold, all-caps word “FUEL” highlight his social discontent over rising petrol prices. The cartoon humorously illustrates how economic hardship, especially the high cost of fuel, overshadows personal relationships. Love is measured against fuel, now portrayed as the most valuable commodity in daily life. Fuel becomes a symbol of survival and stability, its value so high that it outweighs emotional expression. The man’s grimace underscores how the fuel crisis burdens individuals to the point that even affection is filtered through economic stress.



The above cartoon is narrative and transactional. The visual mode of the cartoon shows, on the right, a man on one knee, holding out a jerry can labeled "PETROL" to a young lady standing on the right. She is ecstatically reacting with arms outstretched and hearts above her head. Text bubbles show the man asking, "AMAKA... PLEASE... MARRY ME?", and the young lady exclaiming, "OH MY GOD! YES... YES... YES-OH!"

The man's posture reflects a traditional marriage proposal, but the gasoline replaces the engagement ring, creating the comic effect. The woman's delighted reaction, hands to her mouth, shifts the scene from romance to commentary on Nigeria's economic crisis. The simple background centers attention on the couple and the petrol can, decorated with a ribbon to highlight its symbolic value in today's socio-economic context. The joyful exclamation of Amaka, "OH MY GOD! YES... YES... YES-OH!", intensifies the satire. The cartoon uses exaggeration to show that petrol has become so valuable that it surpasses traditional symbols of love even in Igbo culture where bride prize is of a very high concern. Her reaction reflects the desperation of a society where fuel scarcity and high prices turn basic necessities into luxuries. The petrol can symbolizes wealth, security, and the ability to function in daily life, making her acceptance not only about marriage but about material survival. The cartoon critiques Nigeria's harsh economic reality, showing how essential goods have become more prized than social rituals. Its humor exposes the absurdity and pain of the fuel crisis, prompting viewers to reflect on the situation's gravity.

## Conclusion

Placards and cartoons blend imagery, context, and language to offer satirical social commentary. They allow the masses to express opinions and resist dominant power structures. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory, the analysis reveals hidden ideologies behind fuel price increases and the public's resignation, which turns suffering into humor. The visual and textual elements function as tools of social resistance, showing that meaning-making in socio-semiotic analysis is shaped by social practices, power relations, and ideology.

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