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The Representation of the White Army in Social Media Posts: Critical Discourse Analysis

Saif Abdulkareem H. Shaban¹, Rusul Adnan N. Al-Asadi²

1,2. Instructor of linguistics, Department of English, Faculty of Education, University of Kufa, Najaf, Ira

Abstract: During the years of the pandemic (2020-2022), the efforts of the medical group adopted a new approach. They played an essential role in the process of fighting COVID-19. People tried to thank, encourage, and support them by using language tools. The current research presented a study in critical discourse analysis to investigate the texts that people used, whether to thank, describe, or encourage the members of the medical field during the war against COVID-19. This work aims to investigate the linguistic devices used in Facebook posts concerning vocabulary and text structure to praise the medical crews during the pandemic, deconstruct the mental models that led those people to publish such posts, and interpret how this digital discourse contributes to reshaping the social image of the medical crews. Furthermore, this study analyzed five discourses, posts published on the Facebook social media platform, based on levels put forward by linguists specialized in critical discourse analysis, such as *Norman Fairclough* and *van Dijk*. Finally, the current research concluded that the posts employ several metaphorical expressions, such as the knight and the army of mercy. Besides, the text structure of these discourses, was categorized by strong coherence and clear logical reasoning. The language used to praise the medical crews was not spontaneous, but rather depended on intensive linguistic tactics that transformed doctors and other medical staff from the medical lexicon into the military field. Finally, the study demonstrated that the tribute phrases used contributed to redesigning the social identity of the medical members. Doctors and other medical staff were shifted from specialized employees into heroes and social leaders.

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1. Introduction

Language is an essential tool in human life. It is mostly the vital medium by which people from different societies interact and communicate their ideas, feelings, and needs. By employing the spoken or written language, people can express their opinions, give instructions, ask questions, and exchange knowledge [1]–[3]. During the COVID-19 period, language played a very special role in society when people from all countries in the world on social media started to convey wonderful pictures about the medical members, the White Army, to reassure people, as everyone at that time entered the circle of panic from losing their relatives. This has prompted the language scholars to investigate the language used and reveal the hidden ideologies of such linguistic-social phenomena.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a social process that examines different kinds of discourse in a particular society and analyzes them. According to that community, these kinds of texts are processed. The current study analyzes the discourse on the social media

platform, Facebook, in Iraqi society. The analysis will focus on the words expressed in people's published posts. It includes a real understanding of the important role of the "White Army" and raising people's awareness to respect this army and appreciate its efforts.

1.1 The Problem of the Study

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is a pure medical phenomenon, it quickly transformed into a linguistic, social, and cognitive one, especially on social media platforms like Facebook. In that time, social media platforms had a strong impact as they contributed a lot to make people feel safe by encouraging and reassuring them that there is a strong army that will do its best to save their lives. The social image of the medical members has been reformed, and they were called the members of the White Army. The problem of this study is located in the presence of an analytical-cognitive gap in understanding how tribute expressions can contribute to the reproduction of a new linguistic and social power for the medical crews during the pandemic period. The current research will try to fill this gap by achieving the following aims:

1. Examining the linguistic devices used in Facebook posts concerning vocabulary and text structure to praise the medical crews during the pandemic.
2. Deconstructing the mental models that made those people publish such posts praising medical crews during the pandemic.
3. Interpreting how such digital discourse may contribute to reshaping the social image of medical members by representing them as heroes and soldiers sacrificing their lives in the sake of stopping the threat of the coronavirus.

In order to achieve those aims, the study will answer the following questions:

1. What are the linguistic devices and textual characteristics that are utilized by Facebook users to praise the medical crews (White Army)?
2. How does the language of Facebook posts reflect mental models that society experienced during the pandemic?
3. To what extent do those Facebook posts contribute to reshape the image of medical crews positively inside the Iraqi society?

1.2 The Significance of the Study

The value of this research lies in its contribution to provide better understanding of the linguistic and social effects of using language. Linguistically, it discovers how people employ language to represent the medical members as the White Army who will sacrifice themselves to save people via integrating Fairclough's with van Dijk's theory to show the linguistic, critical, and social aspects of Facebook posts.

Socially, it is hoped that this work will increase the consciousness of people about the role they can fulfill in encouraging any positive effort via the appropriate use of language on the platforms and how it can be a double-edged sword; as such, people in the future will be able to deal with any crises with more awareness.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. CDA

The CDA approach was developed by a group of scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, and others. It can be defined as "*a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context in order to reveal, and eventually resist social injustice*" [4].

Roger illustrates that "CDA" is different from other discourse analysis methods because it includes not only a description and interpretation of discourse in context, but also offers an explanation of why and how discourses work [5].

Furthermore, CDA studies real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take a partially linguistic form. The critical approach is distinctive in its view of: (a) the relationship between language and society, and (b) the relationship between analysis and the analyzed practices [6]. This means that CDA is concerned with studying real cases that are actually related to society and social interaction among people. It analyzes discourse and texts in order to arrive at an appropriate linguistic and social interpretation of these pieces of discourse.

2.2. Approaches to CDA

2.2.1. Norman Fairclough's Approach

Norman Fairclough is a British professor; he is called the father of Critical Discourse Analysis. His contributions in this field were of great importance. On one occasion, he made a statement about his main goal, which is "to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step for emancipation" [7].

Fairclough views discourse as a "form of social practice". He illustrates that it is a method used by discourse makers. In this way, discourse is part of society as it is influential and participates in the activities of society, and its role is clarified by purifying the relationship between language and society, where language is part of that specific society [8].

In 1989, Fairclough put forward a model showing three basic levels of CDA, as he was the first to establish a theoretical, analytical framework and actually bases for CDA and set the basic principles for interpreting the text. These three levels are interconnected and dependent on each other [9].

The levels of this approach are "textual analysis", "processing analysis" and "social analysis".

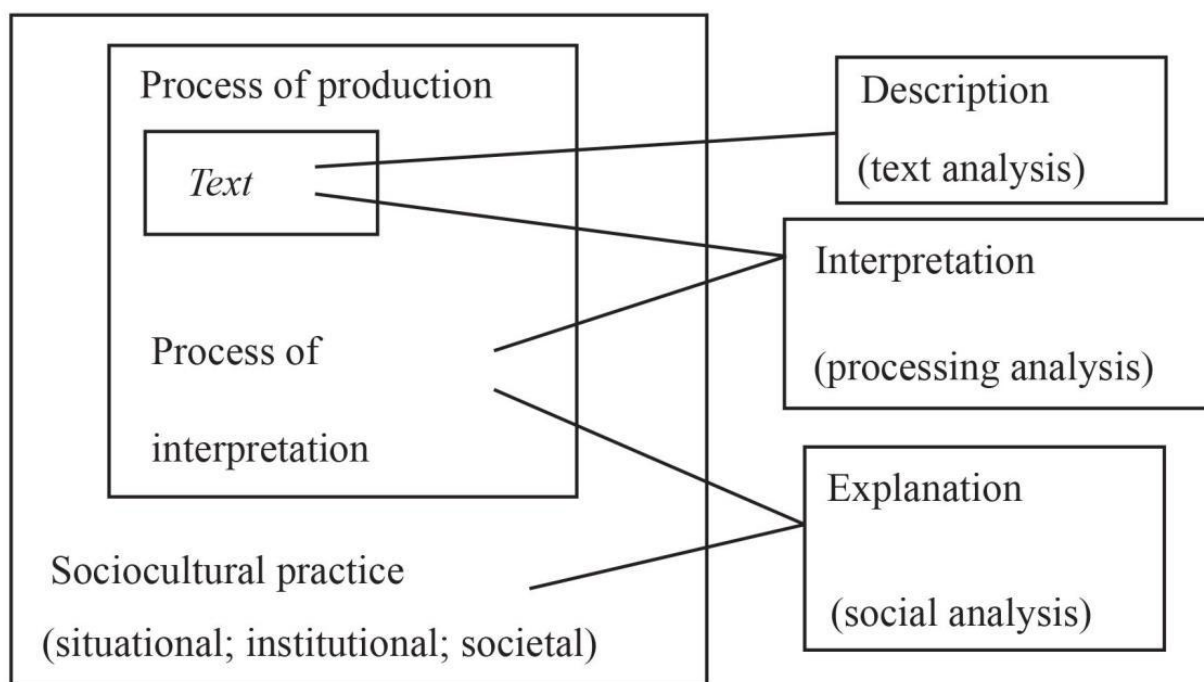


Figure 1. Fairclough's Approach to CDA
Quoted from Fairclough (1995)

2.2.1.1. Textual Analysis (Description)

Textual analysis is the first step in the "three-way method". This level focuses on analyzing the structure of the discourse and the way discourse is being formed. According

to Fairclough, his level of CDA deals with four main headings that are “*Vocabulary deals with individual words, Grammar deals with words combined into clauses and sentences, Cohesion deals with how clauses and sentences are linked together, and Text Structure deals with large-scale organizational properties of texts*” [10]. This means that it deals firstly with “*Vocabulary*”, which tackles the individual words regardless of the text, that is, it analyzes each word separately. Secondly, “*Grammar*”, which deals with the structures and patterns that make up correct grammatical sentences. Thirdly is the “*Cohesion*”, which examines how these grammatical sentences link together and in a logical way. Fourthly, and finally, “*The Text Structure*”, which is the broadest, as it focuses on the amount of complexity and interaction in the discourse.

Table 1. Fairclough's Textual Analysis

Text Analysis			
Vocabulary	Grammar	Cohesion	Text Structure
Deals mainly with individual words: - Word choice - Word meaning - Wording - Metaphor	Deals with words combined into clauses and sentences: - Transitivity - Modality	Deals with how clauses and sentences linked together: - Connectives - argumentation	Deals with large scale organizational properties: - Interactional control - Sentence length and complexity

Quoted from Locke [11].

This level of analysis includes an essential way to the analysis of the text, but it is not sufficient because “*it does not focus on the links between texts and societal and cultural processes and structures*”. This means that CDA must go beyond the text [10].

2.2.1.2. Processing Analysis (Interpretation)

Processing analysis is the second step in the “three-way method”. The second level is called the “Interpretation Stage.” At this level, the analyst must know that the text is produced for specific contexts and is consumed by a person or group of people. Therefore, it is important to know who produced the text and the circumstances in which it was created. This level is based on three main headings used to analyze, which are the ‘Force’ of utterances, the ‘Coherence’ of texts, and the ‘Intertextuality’ of texts [10].

2.2.1.3. Social Analysis (Explanation)

Social analysis is the last level in the “three-way method”. For Fairclough, discourse is a *social practice* that constitutes part of our social life. At this level, the discourse must be recognized as having a close relationship with social and cultural reality. This CDA focuses on “*the language and individual words that shape a text*” because some words in the community are interpreted according to the way the of how community uses them. Therefore, the word and its connection to the community are of great importance [9].

2.2.2. Teun van Dijk's Approach

Teun Van Dijk is a leading figure in critical discourse studies. The ideas presented by *van Dijk* do not focus only on the structure of the discourse, but rather concentrate on what is beyond that special discourse.

Van Dijk claims that, “*Discourse is not simply an isolated textual or dialogic structure. Rather, it is a complex communicative event that also embodies a social context, featuring participants as well as production and reception processes*” [12].

Van Dijk presents CDA on three levels of analysis. The first level is “*Discourse Analysis*.” At this level, the focus is on the text itself, whether by focusing on words or the interrelationship between words and the lexical structures used in the text. The second

level is *"Social Analysis."* This level presents the relationship between society and discourse, meaning that the analysis depends on the context in which the dialogue is presented, how discourse reflects and constructs the social structure. The third level of analysis is *van Dijk's* new gift that distinguishes his approach from other approaches in CDA, which is the *"Cognitive Analysis"*. At this level, the focus is on a subjective mental model in which text and context are linked through cognition. Moreover, he adopts the socio-cognitive approach that connects discourse, social, and cognition together. He focuses on *"how context is mediated through cognition and how individuals relate text and context through 'subjective mental models ongoingly constructed by the participants of the current communicative events'"* [13].

The difference between *Fairclough's* approach and *van Dijk's* approach is the social cognition perspective. This level is the mediation between society and text. According to *van Dijk*, social cognition is defined as *"socially shared representations of societal arrangements, groups and relations, as well as mental operations such as interpretation, thinking and arguing, inferring and learning"* [14].

2.3. Social Media

Nowadays, social media can be considered the mirror of society because it freely expresses people's opinions and attitudes. They can share their videos, photos, stories, and news easily. It is a valuable communication tool that includes many platforms. Facebook is one of the social media platforms that is widely used by Iraqis to express different opinions concerning political, social, religious, medical, service issues, and so on. On Facebook, users can hold conversations, share information, and produce web content, photo-sharing sites, and instant messaging [15].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The current study adheres to the qualitative descriptive method in order to achieve its goals. It basically follows the CDA approach. The practical structure has been established depending on an eclectic model of analysis including *Fairclough's* textual and social levels of analysis and *van Dijk's* social – cognitive approach of analysis in order to cover all the aspects of Facebook posts published in the sake of praising Iraqi medical staff during the period of COVID19 between 2020 and 2021.

3.2. Data Collection

The data were collected from the social media platform *Facebook* in the Iraqi society. It includes five publicly available posts gathered by using the purposive sampling method to achieve the goals of this study. The term *"White Army"* was mentioned in the collected data alongside other tribute phrases that praise the members of the medical field.

3.3. Eclectic Model:

The following table represents the procedures of the analysis. The collected data will be analyzed following those procedures applying three levels of analysis: the first is *"Textual Level"*, that presented by *Fairclough's Textual analysis*, which is limited only to vocabulary and text structure. The grammar and cohesion are excluded from the analysis in order to avoid repetition and focus on the research objects. The second is *"Social Level"* presented by *Fairclough*, and the third level based on *van Dijk's "Social-Cognitive Analysis"*.

Developing an eclectic model of analysis can be justified by:

1. Facebook posts contain a lot of fear emotions of those who are publishing, and those emotions need a cognitive level of analysis to be studied and analyzed, which is available in *van Dijk's* socio-cognitive perspective.
2. *Fairclough's* perspective is a powerful toolkit to deal with words and phrases included in the posts, yet it is not enough.

3. Representation of the images of good (the medical crew) and evil (the coronavirus) in Facebook posts published by different groups of people requires a type of analytical tools that study in-depth the linguistic, social, and cognitive aspects of those posts.

This is what forced the researchers to adopt an eclectic model that includes all those aspects together.

Table 2. Stages of Analysis

Stage of Analysis	Model(s) of Analysis	Description
Description	Fairclough's (1989) model of textual analysis [7]	- Vocabulary (the individual words regardless of the text) - The Text Structure (the amount of complexity and interaction in the discourse)
Explanation	Fairclough's model of social practice	- the association of individual words with social reality and identifies the writer's point of view and the impact of the discourse on society
Analyzing	Van Dijk's model of socio-cognitive	- how context is mediated through cognition; how individuals relate text and context through 'subjective mental models ongoingly constructed by the participants of the current communicative events'

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Textual analysis (Descriptive) – Fairclough

- Post 1

The discourse in Arabic	The discourse in English
- "الجيش الأبيض: الجنود لا تقاتل فقط في ساحات المعركة، سابقا كنا الحشد الشعبي ضد داعش والان أنتم الحشد الطبي ضد كورونا."	- The White Army: Soldiers do not fight only on the battlefield. Previously, we were the popular mobilization against ISIS; now you are the medical mobilization against covid_19.

1. Vocabulary

The post includes the word "soldiers" as a metaphor for the members of the White Army, which is an ideal description of the situation that the medical group is going through, as the word "soldiers" creates in the reader's mind metaphors of an actual war in which soldiers fight and die during the battle. Moreover, the term "battlefields" is also mentioned in the same context with the popular mobilization and medical mobilization to reinforce the metaphor of actual war. In fact, the scene of violence, death, and conflict on the real battlefields is not different from what exists in the halls of hospitals where people infected with *Covid-19*, as in both arenas, soldiers are exposed to the danger of being killed, and both soldiers know the possibility of their death to defend the general public and save their lives. Thus, there is no distinction between the "popular mobilization" and the "medical mobilization," and this is a very clear metaphor.

2. Text Structure

Neither of the two previous sentences contains real complexity, as the text is very clear and starts by mentioning the topic of the post, which is the White Army, then giving a justification to make them soldiers in an army. After that, the writer makes a clear

comparison between the past and present heroes, as he links the Popular Mobilization against ISIS toward the Iraqi society with the Medical Mobilization against the threat of the coronavirus. Both of those threats hardly affected the Iraqi people, as both of them caused a lot of pain and suffering to Iraqis. This comparison put the medical crew in a strong position because, as the Popular Mobilization Forces defended the Iraqi people in 2016-2017 against ISIS and defeated them, the medical crew will also triumph over COVID-19

- Post 2

The discourse in Arabic	The discourse in English
- 'يطل من أبطال الجيش الأبيض، بعد ان أدى واجبه في العمل وتعرض الى الإصابة بالفيروس الوبائي كورونا المستجد، عاد ليتبرع في البلازما بعد تماثله للشفاء.'	-A hero from the White Army, after he performed his duty at work and was infected with the novel coronavirus pandemic, he returned to donate plasma after recovering.

1. Vocabulary

The publisher uses the metaphoric expression "hero" to describe a member of the medical crew. This word includes positive representation. People label a person who performs a heroic act as a hero. Often, heroic deeds include helping people and saving someone's life, as the person in this post donated blood plasma after being cured of COVID-19, and thus, he gave a person a chance to survive, so he deserved to be classified as a hero.

2. Text Structure

The head of this post is a member of the White Army. This discourse starts by describing him as a hero, then explains his situation after being affected by the virus while performing his duty. When he recovered from the virus, he returned to donate blood plasma. The publisher presents evidence of this person's heroism, as he clarified one of the forms of heroism that this individual embodied.

- Post 3

The discourse in Arabic	The discourse in English
"الجيش الأبيض العراقي، خط الصد الأول."	-The Iraqi White Army, the first line of defense.

1. Vocabulary

The publisher introduces the White Army as the "first line of defense", which is a metaphoric symbol given to all individuals in the army on the battlefields who are positioned at the point of direct contact with the enemy. This line is considered to be the most dangerous point in the battle, where the engagement with the enemy takes place. The same matter with the members of the medical field who stand in the "first line of defense" with courage and strength, against the threat of COVID-19.

2. Text Structure

This discourse begins with a strong coherence and clear logical reasoning. If we ask who is the "first line of defense," the answer will be "the Iraqi White Army", which is free of complexity and ambiguity. The head of this post again is the White Army. The publisher mentions another word, which is "Iraqi". This word is of great importance in the context, since this choice delivers a message that the Iraqi medical staff fighting in front of enemy lines with courage, just like the Iraqi soldiers in any war conducted previously. The picture in this post moves from heroism to sacrifice and finally to altruism.

- Post 4

The discourse in Arabic	The discourse in English
أحد فرسان الصد الأول من الجيش الأبيض، بعزمنا تهزم كورونا.	- One of the Knights of the First defense in the White Army: With our determination, we will defeat Corona.

1. Vocabulary:

The publisher describes one of the medical crew members as a "Knight". It is a description given to a brave person who possesses noble and sacrificing features. The same thing with the White Army members, they are brave and defending their country against COVID 19. The expression "the first defense," which we discussed earlier, is also mentioned in this post to emphasize the importance of the White Army's efforts. Concerning the expression "With our determination", the word "determination" denotes doing an action that requires the utmost commitment, and exceptional efforts to call the work we do "with determination".

2. Text Structure

The text is introduced in an easy and clear language. The publisher starts the post with a new description, which is "The Knights", and as in the previous post, the publisher builds an image of war to simulate the duty of the medical group to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reader can understand the comfort of this publication by reading any part of it. All the sentences carry one goal, which is to indicate the heroic and important role the medical crew plays in this crisis. The post is ended by the expression "with our determination; we will defeat Corona", this creates a picture implies that the medical crew has the utmost commitment and they did their best to defend against the virus.

- Post 5

The discourse in Arabic	The discourse in English
الجيش الأبيض، جيش الرحمة وخط الحب الاول	-The White Army: The Army of Mercy and the First Line of Love.

1. Vocabulary

The use of the metaphorical expressions "Army of mercy" and "the First Line of Love" refers to the people's reassurance that the hands of the medical crew are the hands of mercy and love. Mercy is the process of ridding the individual of any pain. The "first line of defense" was previously mentioned in an earlier post, but in this post, the word *defense* is replaced by the word "love", and the phrase "the first line of defense" turns into "the first line of love". In fact, the word love in this post takes a place that all people agree on, which is a big place in the heart.

2. Text Structure

In the last post, the terminology and the image conveyed by the publisher are different, as this publication presents a romantic image and a new perspective for the medical crew. The post consists of two phrases, both of which convey a tone of positive aspects: mercy and love. This post implies a warm message that creates an emotional effect on people.

Indeed, this convergence in this latest post is striking. It represents an elegant shift in the previously discussed approach. Previous posts drew parallels between the regular military and the "White Army" (medical personnel), emphasizing that both make immense sacrifices, sometimes even risking their lives, while performing their sacred duty, as perceived by both themselves and society. However, here, the "White Army" (medical personnel) is linked in a different way, associated with mercy and love—a connection

rarely found outside of films, where cinematic imagination plays a significant role. In the literature of traditional warfare, concepts of mercy and love are seldom present; instead, cruelty, killing, and destruction are often cited as justifications for victory or the defense of the homeland and its people. Love and mercy, on the other hand, are readily apparent to medical personnel as they perform their duties, which is why they are frequently described, in many contexts, as angels of mercy. This approach in this post does not disrupt the linguistic cohesion or logical coherence; on the contrary, it adds a constructive dimension to the discussion.

4.2 Fairclough's Social Analysis (Explanation)

At this level, Fairclough focuses on how discourse relates to social structures, ideology, and power relations, and how it contributes to the reproduction or transformation of society.

1. Reproducing the "Ideology of Resistance and Martyrdom":

The publications' borrowing of military lexicon in the Iraqi context is not simply a rhetorical device, but rather a call of a dominant socio-political ideological structure in post-2014 Iraq (the period of the war against ISIS). Here, the discourse "secularizes" the concept of jihad and military struggle, transforming it into a "medical jihad," thus presenting a sacred legitimacy upon the sacrifices of medical crews.

2. Transforming Symbolic Capital:

Iraqi society at that time was experiencing an existential health crisis, compounded by its political crises. Therefore, the discourse appropriates the "symbolic capital" possessed by the Iraqi military (army/Popular Mobilization Forces) and bestows it upon the doctor. This "institutional borrowing" of terms like "White Army" and "Knights" aims to raise the status of medical personnel from "public sector employees" to "protectors of national identity and existence."

3. Institutionalizing social solidarity during times of crisis:

Discourse functions as a social practice to regulate collective behavior. For example, comparing the virus to ISIS raises societal awareness of the danger, transforming it from a passing illness to a brutal enemy. Accordingly, adhering to medical procedures and supporting doctors becomes a national and moral responsibility, parallel to supporting the army on the front lines, thus contributing to continuing social cohesion against collapse.

4.3 Van Dijk's Social Cognitive Analysis

Van Dijk focuses on the "three-dimensions approach": (discourse - perception/knowledge - society). He is interested in how texts are shaped and influenced by mental models and shared social representations.

1. Collective Mental Models:

The Iraqi collective consciousness between 2020 and 2021 possessed a very active and modern mental model of "war, enemy, sacrifice, victory." When the COVID-19 pandemic struck (an abstract and invisible threat), traditional mental models failed to absorb the shock. Publishers on Facebook intervened to perform "cognitive mapping," projecting the schema of the war against ISIS onto the schema of confronting the virus.

2. Social Representations and Managing Hidden Anxiety:

The virus is an unknown enemy that evokes cognitive terror; therefore, discourse transformed this invisible enemy into a "personalized enemy" that could be fought through a "first line of defense" and a "mercy army." This shared social representation reduces the existential anxiety of society, as the cognitive perception of the pandemic shifts from an "inevitable catastrophe" to a "winnable battle" provided the "knights" (medical staff) persevere.

3. The strategy of binary ideological classification (In-group vs. Out-group):

Van Dijk applies the ideological square (exaggerating our positives and exaggerating their negatives). In these texts, medical staff is represented as (us/the positive inside: sacrifice, mercy, love, protection), and the virus/ISIS is represented as (them/the negative outside: death, devastation, threat). This cognitive division reinforces in the consciousness of the Iraqi digital reader the image of the doctor as an icon of national salvation.

All in all, the social and cognitive scopes intersect in understanding the digital praise discourse directed at Iraqi medical crews. While Fairclough's social analysis divulges that military metaphors (such as the army and the White Mobilization) are a socio-ideological practice that borrowed the symbolic capital of the stable military resistance construction in the Iraqi context to legitimize the expenses of medical community members and institutionalize solidarity, van Dijk's cognitive approach breaks down the cognitive instrument of this discourse, showing that it provided "cognitive mapping" that permitted the collective awareness to absorb the vague danger of the pandemic by projecting it against familiar mental maps of war and the personified opponent. This reshaped social pictures and framed medical personnel as a "positive insider" who would save them in the face of a fatal enemy. Thus, the discourse as a whole transformed from mere emotional flattery into a dual defensive tactic (ideological and cognitive) to control collective awareness and manage existential anxiety during the pandemic.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis, the most prominent conclusions can be summarized as follows:

1. The language used in Facebook posts to praise the medical crews was not spontaneous, but rather depended on intensive linguistic tactics that transformed doctors and other medical staff from medical lexicon into the military field. The employment of expressions like *army*, *front lines of defense*, *knights*, and *hero* permeated the ordinary duties of medical crews with sacred, jihadist, and patriotic figures. This can be called a linguistic militarization of medical discourse. Besides the text structure of this discourse, performed with strong coherence and clear logical reasoning, that helps people to understand the message directly with no complexity.
2. The analysis uncovered that the praise forms for the medical crews that showed on those Facebook posts are direct psychological and cognitive responses to the crisis mental model that came from fear of death and the pandemic. The collective mind of publishers of those posts restored to producing a hero and savior, which is the White Army, as a defense strategy to decrease the existential concern and feelings of helplessness toward the pandemic.
3. The study demonstrated that the tribute phrases in the posts on Facebook contributed to redesigning the social identity of medical crews. Doctors and other medical staff were shifted from specialized employees into heroes and social leaders.
4. The analysis of Facebook posts (2020-2022) discovered that the community's employment of conscious and precisely targeted language contributed to raising collective consciousness of the pandemic's brutality and shifted social media platforms into an influential umbrella of psychological and moral support. This sensible discourse successfully established absolute popular support for the frontline guards, the White Army, confronting the crisis, providing them with the essential social support to manage the health disaster successfully and progressively. This emphasizes that responsible language in times of crisis is a vital partner in confronting and rescuing the population.

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