

## Images of Covid-19 in selected socially-mediated WhatsApp messages shared in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

*This paper employs the Reader Response criticism to analyse a selection of artfied posts inspired by the Covid-19 pandemic and shared in WhatsApp groups by Zimbabweans. Social media groupings are the 'in-thing' today-this is where many now gather and interact variously unfettered by geographical constraints. The reader is a key element in the situation since messages are written with a reader in mind and sent to be read, hence the 'natural' selection of the Reader Response lens of analysis assumed here. The study notes that socially mediated messages in the artistic realm such as those analysed in this paper are potent communication and educational means as they are instantaneous and have the potential to reach all corners of the world via social media platforms. They can also be re-sent, edited and repurposed. They can go viral and assume meme status. In doing this, the word gets to the world. If however it gets there contaminated as often happens in pandemic induced infodemic settings, the powers that be can always intervene and address the misinformation. The paper contends that the texts that consist of cartoons, a combination of image and words, apparently photo-shopped pictures, combined with other signs and reassigned tell different stories about the pandemic. They can thus be treated as literature. The paper notes that Covid-19 is dramatised variously in the selected images: as something brought by Satan to win souls away from God, as a hide-out for the socially depraved and as an overly fearsome monster, among others. In spite of the horror of loss, some of the messages may be seen as providing the much needed cathartic outlet for the art producers and recipients cum sharers. In a way, such art provides comic relief especially for the pandemic hostages holed up in different lockdown settings around the globe. In education settings the images that can be perceived as pandemic 'by-product' art can be employed in different subjects as media to inculcate critical thinking and sharpen analytic skills.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, socially mediated messages, WhatsApp, Reader Response

### Introduction and background

This paper looks at the depiction of Covid-19 in the most widely used social media platform in Zimbabwe, WhatsApp. The study is confined to a few selected artfied pictorial messages circulated during the Covid-19 pandemic that has claimed the lives of 3 933 152 (European

Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 1 July 2021). Such pictures are differentiated here from the ‘factual’ and untempered ones intended to accompany official news items. The underlining point is that the images are works of art, whether they are cartoons or photo-shopped pictures. Such artefacts are a far distance from the ‘factual’/ ‘scientific’ original photojournalistic products or cold statistical updates from the World Health Organisation or health ministries of affected countries that characterised the period in question. The researcher belongs to a variety of WhatsApp groups that provide a rich vein of the said raw materials that are repackaged and repurposed to warn, to console, to shock-treat, to evangelize, to rebuke, among others. The *re*-presentation is an ‘act’/ ‘art’ as the signs concocted defamiliarise as the subject is looked at anew.

In its second volume report entitled ‘How COVID-19 is Changing the World: A Statistical Perspective Volume II Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities’ the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) warns that “The information contained herein is even grimmer than in the first volume, confirming the unprecedented impact of the pandemic on the economic and social fabric of our societies” (UN DESA, 2020:3).

The report goes on to give some key findings as follows:

- Global foreign direct investment is now projected to fall by as much as 40 per cent in 2020;
- Global manufacturing output fell by 20 per cent in April 2020 compared to the same period of the previous year, accelerating an already declining trend;
- The pandemic is pushing an additional 71 to 100 million people into extreme poverty;
- Globally, the first quarter of 2020 saw a loss of the equivalent to 155 million full-time jobs, a number that increased to 400 million in the second quarter, with lower- and middle-income countries hardest hit;
- Simulations suggest a steep and unprecedented decline in the Human Development Index (HDI), undermining six years of progress... (UN DESA, 2020:3)

The above observations show to what extent the pandemic has negatively impacted on a cross section of life making it a huge source of inspiration of the artistically endowed among us. By 18 March 2021 Zimbabwe had 36 484 recorded cases and 1503 deaths(European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021).According to the U.N. Zimbabwe chapter,“in Zimbabwe the COVID-19 pandemic is evolving against the backdrop of a difficult macro-economic environment, climatic shocks (cyclone Idai and drought). (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2020:3).

The UN paints an even grimmer picture when they describe the pandemic as more than a health issue:

In an attempt to understand the potential impact of the pandemic on Zimbabwe, it is instructive to note that although it is primarily a health crisis, it nonetheless has far-reaching public governance, socio-political and economic ramifications (United Nations Zimbabwe, 2020:10).

The above statistics paint a grim picture of the state of the pandemic and its impact on the society the research is focused on. This impact finds expression in social media often as eye-catching images broadcast throughout the world. At times the socially mediated messages may contain inaccuracies that can be termed ‘infodemics’.WHO explains that the term ‘infodemic’ means

...an over abundance of information, both online and offline. It includes deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals. Mis- and disinformation can be harmful to people’s physical and mental health; increase stigmatization; threaten precious health gains; and lead to poor observance of public health measures, thus reducing their effectiveness and endangering countries’ ability to stop the pandemic. (WHO,23 September 2020 )

Studies such as the current one can assist those tasked to inform and educate people about the current and other pandemics by gauging their level of understanding. Infodemic inaccuracies noted from social media use and social media studies can be addressed at appropriate fora. Both the pandemic and the attendant infodemic need to be fought against.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Reader-response criticism*

Reader-response criticism rose to prominence in the 1970s but its historical roots can be traced to the 1920s and 1930s (Bressler, 2011; Eagleton, 2011). Plato and Aristotle in *The Republic* and *The Poetics*, respectively, acknowledge the important role of the reader in the creation of meaning. This explains why Plato, for instance, did not want to accommodate most literatures in his ideal republic because of his fear of how the texts would influence young and impressionable minds.

In Reader-response the reader is perceived as an active and key participant in the creation of meaning (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005; Klarer, 2004). Reader response critics assume many 'hues'. There are Structuralists such as Gerald Prince who believe that a reader brings to the text a pre-determined system for ascertaining meaning and applies this sign system directly to the text. Reader response critics who follow the phenomenological tradition such as Hans R. Jauss emphasise the perceiver's role. The text becomes important because it contains signs or signals that have pre-established and acceptable interpretations to the reader. Such critics argue that objects can have meaning only if an active consciousness absorbs or notes their existence (Habib, 2011). Jauss argues that:

A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue (Jauss cited in Seldon, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005: 51)

Wolfgang Iser, like Jauss, is of the opinion that an object does not achieve meaning until an active consciousness recognises or registers it. Iser (1987) posits that it is impossible to separate the mind that knows from what it knows. For subjective critics such as Norman Holland and David Bleich, the reader's thoughts, beliefs and experiences play a greater part than the actual text in shaping a work's meaning. For Holland (1989), there is no one correct interpretation- all interpretations are individualised and correct.

According to Louise Rosenblatt, one of the most well-known reader response critics, the reading process involves a reader and a text who share a transactional relationship. The text simultaneously shapes the reader's experiences; selecting, limiting and ordering those ideas that best conform to the text (Tompkins, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1994; Tyson, 1999). Rosenblatt declares that:

There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual literary works. A novel or a poem or a play remains merely ink spots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols (Rosenblatt, 1995:24).

Through this transactional experience, the reader and the text produce a new creation called a poem. For many reader response critics, a poem is realised during the reading process or aesthetic transaction (Rosenblatt, 1995) which happens each time there is interaction between the reader and text, implying that the same reader can have a different poem each 'different' time he/she interacts with the same text. Rosenblatt notes that the poem "...must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during the coming together... of a reader and a text" (Rosenblatt, 1978:25). This implies that readers from different interpretative cultures and times will always access different 'poems' from the same work. Similarly Jauss posits that: "literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue" (cited in Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005:51).

This short exposé has shown that the Reader response school is by no means a congregation of like-minded thinkers, hence the variations. In spite of the differences, they share the premises that texts affect readers in unique and subjective ways, that readers are part and parcel of the interpretative process and that the reader's background has a profound effect on the resultant interpretation of a work of art (Habib, 2011; Selden, Widdowson&Brooker, 2005). Bressler (2011:73-4) succinctly summarises the relationship between the different strands of reader response when he avers that what "...reader-response critics, reader oriented critics or audience-

oriented critics share is a concern for the reader. Believing that a literary work's interpretation is created when a reader and a text interact and/or transact..."

Reader response criticism shifts the emphasis from the text as the sole determiner of meaning to the significance of the reader as an essential cog in the process of discerning meaning. Reader response was chosen to analyse the electronic documents because they were posted in order to be 'read'. It is possible to have other readings of the images different from what this paper provides. This is not unusual as there can be as many interpretations as readers for a sign although there can be convergences in readers who share a culture or subculture.

### **Literature Review**

According to Noonan and Piatt (2014:11)

Social media is content developed, either in part or whole, by a community of authors and may refer to world events, personal topics of interest or simply communication between the author and one or more individuals. Environments that enable such discourse are numerous, each providing a different perspective on the context of information sharing.

Social media have revolutionised twentieth century life in all its facets, be it family, business, religion, sport, education, journalism, politics, courtship or entertainment. They do so not only through what they offer but also, perhaps more importantly, the speed at which they have impacted the whole spectrum of life across the board. According to Statista, which aggregates user information, 1.4 billion people used social networks around the globe in 2012. The figure was expected to almost double in a space of four years by 2016, to an estimated 2.13 billion (Dosemagen, Vis, Wardle & Etlinger, 2016).

The percentage of individuals in the EU who used the internet in 2012 was 73 % and of these about one third used the internet on mobile devices away from home or work (Dosemagen, Vis, Wardle & Etlinger, 2016). All this shows how mobile internet use has revolutionised communication in the twenty first century.

The situation in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is illustrated in the quotation below:

According to a study published in June 2012 by global consultancy firm TNS, between 2010 and 2011 internet use in Africa grew by over 2500%, faster than anywhere else in the world. This internet consumption is overwhelmingly mobile. With over 695 million mobile subscriptions in the region, this equates to 65% of the population having mobile access. To put in another perspective, 12% of the total SSA population are Internet users (Noonan & Piatt, 2014:16).

On mobile broadband social media in the SADC region, Media Institute of Southern Africa (2020:19) has this to say:

usage in SADC region is driving mobile Internet Usage in the region. The high demand for social media is directly contributing to internet usage for example in Zimbabwe WhatsApp contributes over 44% of all mobile internet usage in the country. Mobile broadband coverage affects the penetration of social media in the region.

Studies have been done across the globe and across disciplines on the influence of social media. Siddiqui and Singh (2016) focus on the positive and negative impact of social media on business, education, society and youths in India.

McDool, Powell, Roberts and Taylor (2016) explore the effect of children's digital social networking on their subjective wellbeing in the United Kingdom. Cheeseman, Fisher, Hassan and Hitchen (2020) focused their research on how social media and digital technology shaped Nigeria's 2019 elections. In the article the authors also note that surveys and analyses from Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Sierra Leone show how social media are used by parties, candidates and voters. Van der Bank and van der Bank (2015) explore the impact of social media on tourism operations and management in South Africa.

A number of researches have been done in Zimbabwe. Marima (2019) looks at the relations between users on online social media platforms in terms of political leanings and gender in a polarised Zimbabwean environment. Mungwari and Ndhlebe (2019) discuss social media's role in narrating the events that unfolded in Zimbabwean intraparty and national politics. Mapako and Mareva (2019) examine the place of social media notification statuses (WhatsApp) in human

communication. Chiridza, Yorodani, Sigauke and Katsaruware (2016) look at the use and abuse of the WhatsApp facility by youths in Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe.

The brief exploration of researches above shows that social media is now an integral and pervasive part of human life. Another important observation is that none of the researches tackles the artfulness or literariness of the messages shared which is the focus of the current one. The current research therefore has this gap to fill.

### **Research Questions**

- What is it about Covid-19 that is projected in the selected socially mediated images?
- How is Covid-19 packaged in the selected images?
- Why is it re-presented in that manner?
- What is the contribution of the socially mediated art in dealing with the worldwide scourge?

### **Methodology**

This research falls under the purview of the interpretivist paradigm and uses the qualitative approach or methodology which according to Creswell (2014:3) “is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. The design is qualitative content analysis. According to Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen and Razavieh (2010:29) content analysis “focuses on analyzing and interpreting recorded material to learn about human behavior. The material may be public records, textbooks, letters, films, tapes, diaries, themes, reports, or other documents”. According to Collis and Hussey (2003: 55) methodology is concerned with the following main issues:

- Why you collected certain data.
- What data you collected.
- Where you collected it.
- How you collected it.
- How you analysed it.

In this research data were collected to see how Covid-19 is/was perceived by the interpretive community. Socially mediated messages were collected on the subject from social media groups



the researcher belongs to. The researcher purposively selected from an avalanche of others those messages that focused on the subject from an aesthetic angle. The data were treated as works of art that needed to be, according to Rosenblatt (1995), aesthetically read.

The following section subjects the different images to analysis by looking at the different carefully picked signs assembled in order to speak to the reader. The signs include the words, pictures whether drawn or photo-shopped and the colours used. The analysis deliberately starts with the gloomy picture of a seemingly vanquished world as shown by the triumphant looking corona virus flag followed by the reactions of the different people including the socially deprived. The paper deliberately chose to analyse what the author titled 'the last laugh' piece of art to take the battle to the supernatural realm.

### Analysis of findings

## The Official flag of 2020



The type of mask in the picture is the most prevalent in international media. It is associated with the medical personnel/hospitals and affluence as it is the disposable type. Those with limited resources use home-made masks. The blue mask acts as an embodiment of all the other masks and shields used all over the world. It is hoisted on a conspicuously white mast against an almost 100% blue cloudless sky that shows little hope of rain, a life giving liquid. The flag has coloured and conquered the world blue, the colour of worry and anxiety. The mask-cum-flag seems to be flapping triumphantly in the wind taunting the efforts by humanity in a 2020 that seemed to come to nought as more and more succumbed to the pandemic.

The caption of the 'artwork' is written in black against a contrasting white background making it stand out arrogantly and seemingly undisputed. The title describes the mask as the official flag of 2020. This statement summarises how the pandemic played havoc in the lives of humanity throughout the world. Humanity was conquered and national flags subdued and replaced by the new flag, the mask, according to the artist. By wearing the mask humanity shows allegiance to the 'nation' represented by the mask, a nation where the Covid-19 tribe rules.

Through the concoction of signs deployed, the artist portrays a gloomy picture that shows a world defeated and forced to salute a new oppressive regime. Ironically, the once divided human race is forced by circumstances to unite under one flag after being threatened with extinction by a common enemy, the corona virus. The global village is a common habitat for humanity –an affliction in one corner is an affliction for all. If one member coughs everyone else catches the cold.

Flags are important in that they are used to mark new territories. Newly independent nations also hoist their own flags with a colour combination that would never have been used before. The flag metaphor is therefore befitting under the circumstances as it describes a new disease or force claiming more and more territory and that demands novel ways to deal with.

Learners of literature can benefit a lot from the unpacking of the symbolism in the concoction of signs that constitute the above image.

### **Eye-blasting face mask**

**Just ordered my new face mask -  
it should really help with  
social distancing!!!**



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Social distancing is considered a very important move/measure in controlling or limiting the spread of corona virus hence the measures such as banning of social gatherings. The mask in the post has the image, in full colour, of a profusely running nose with the thick mucus freely flowing into the open mouth in two rivulets. The image may cause those prone to alimentary upsets to throw up upon seeing it. This is likely to make the mask effective as an instrument to help maintain social distancing by socially ‘repelling’ other people.

The method used by the artist is to shock the viewer in order to achieve social distancing. Some writers such as Dambudzo Marechera and NoViolet Bulawayo use this ‘shock treatment’ or ‘mind blasting’ in their works to drive their points home.

For instance in *My Son*, Albert Nyathi and Ignatious Mabasa write:

*Nxauyisqholo, isiqoqodo, isangondoIqhalaqhala, iqil’ elizikhoth’  
emhlane, Uzakufauzihudela mfanawami. Ungabiliqaqa elingazizwa ukunukakwalo  
Mfanawami (p30)*

(Loosely translated it means if you are hot-headed, stubborn, dumb, a shrewd schemer and crook you will perish, drowning in your very own diarrhoea. Don't be like a civet cat that cannot smell its own stench (p30).

On the style employed above, Nyoni (2017: 49) notes that:

The grotesque picturesque image of free flowing noisily discharged watery stool succinctly captured by the original Ndebele stanza quoted above in general and the word '*uzihudela*' in particular, is meant to shock the young hunter into changing his ways to avoid an undignified exit ...

The 'mask' may be seen as a hyperbolic statement meant to dissuade close-up interactions in the same way the 'strong' language used above is meant to dissuade the son in Nyathi and Mabasa's poem from going astray.

The piece of art seems to be toying with the mask motif: the mask as a shield to block the virus from entering one's respiratory system as well as a mask as a piece of facial clothing to hide one's true identity and to assume a new one with the undesirable features the other members of the community would find repulsive. The actual face will be clean and attractive behind the mask. The piece of art therefore feeds on the theme of appearance versus reality.

## Christmas Dinner 2020

### Christmas Dinner 2020



The post above shows a group of people who are probably family members at a dinner table during Christmas in 2020. The artist clearly gives the setting of the event in the caption. Every family member is in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at the dinner table. The PPE can be seen as a wall intentionally erected to avoid contact between the humans and the virus but is now barring family members from interacting meaningfully. The latter is unintended. Social distancing is an un-human trait. Human beings are gregarious by nature. The combination of cutlery and masks remind the reader of a theatre. In this particular ‘theatre’ food is machine ingested, it is clinically partaken – food is treated as biochemicals to keep the organism, not a human being, alive.

Family members are almost unrecognisable behind the PPE. In fact the family members seem to be too stunned to say anything. The ‘diners’ seem to be morose and uninteracting. This is in line

with the sombre atmosphere created by the pandemic worldwide with this family as a microcosm.

The family member at the head of the table is actually looking and facing sideways from the rest of the family. As probably the head of the family at the head of the table, he/she is expected to set the tone of the festivities. Since things have fallen apart he/she, like the others, can only breathe and wait. He/she cannot even afford to look the other family members in the eye.

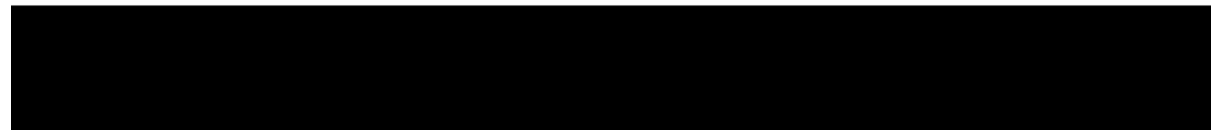
The family member on the far right, like several others, has a breathing apparatus on and does not seem to have any food. He/she is toying with his/her spoon/fork. He/she is partaking air which is now more important in 2020 than food. Air has always been taken for granted. A number of family members have ventilators. Even homely air is a suspected carrier of the deadly virus. The artist seems to be asking the question: Where are we safe?

The diners have their masks on yet partaking of food on the table. They seem to be too afraid to takeoff masks while 'eating'. How is survival possible then? Christmas is normally a time to feast, dine and wine but the new normal (exaggerated) makes it impossible to do all these. This shows how far life has been disrupted by the pandemic. The irony is that the food is available, it is Christmas after all. Yet, the mood and atmosphere do not allow for festivities. It is an abnormal new normal.

The table cloth is red, the colour of love and also the colour of blood of the Covid-19 victims. It also alludes to the blood of Jesus who was born (as commemorated at Christmas) to die for others. Diners seem to be afraid : the PPEs and ventilators and the body language reflect a subdued group of people marooned in their house, probably representing our common global diseased home as humanity. The overprotection that borders on hyperbole, can be a result of the infodemic about the pandemic that results in information overload, distortion and frustration as to where to turn to, resulting in people retreating into their individual physical and emotional shells. Yet, this is the time people need each other the most. Members of the family seem to be in a laboratory, resembling scientists analysing food items detachedly and unfeelingly. The post tells a story of desolation with the family members clad in PPEs but still very much afraid to even eat or breathe naturally.

**January 2021 off the calendar!**

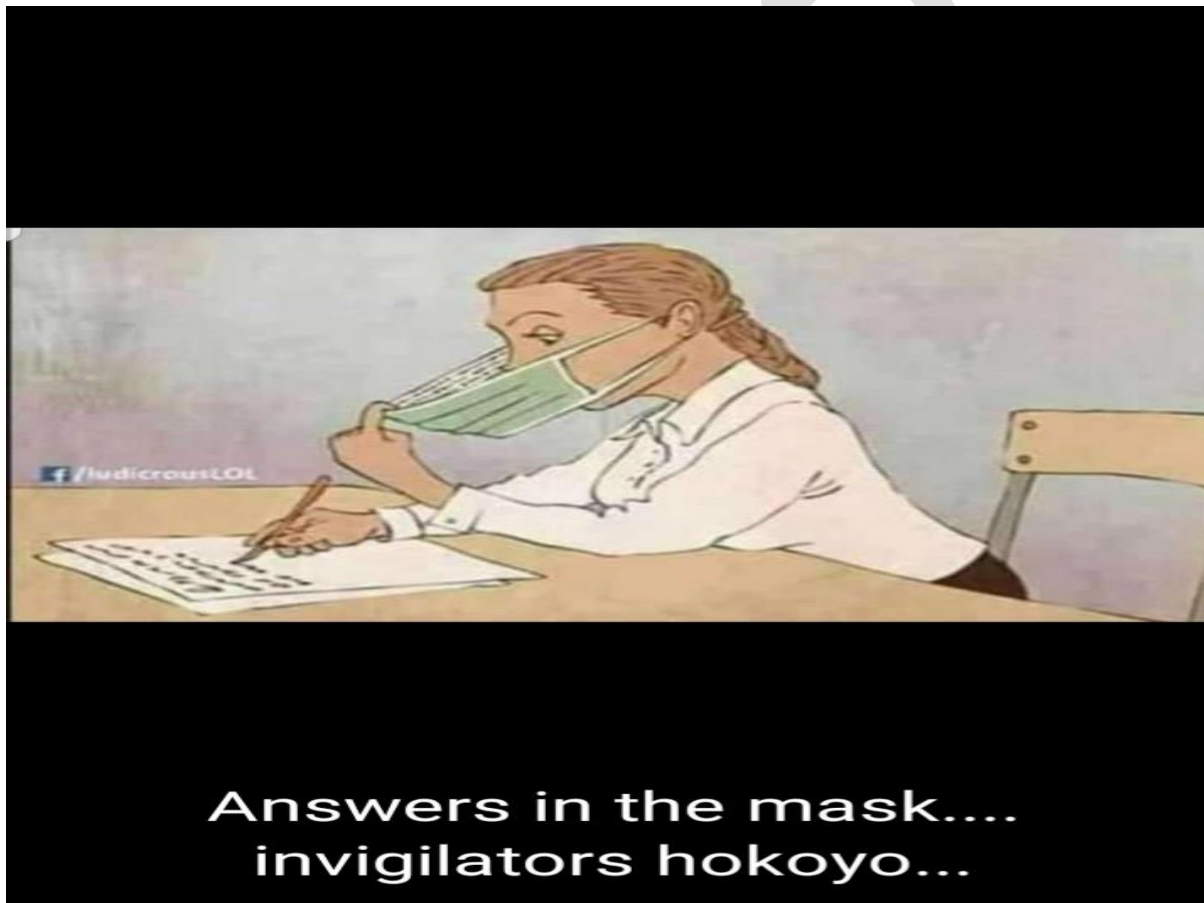
The image is that of part of the 2021 calendar depicting the month of January that has been cancelled in red on a surface that is mainly white for conspicuous effect. In reality, one cannot just cancel out a month from a calendar and hope it has disappeared.



On 2 January 2021 the Zimbabwe government announced another lockdown (Statutory Instrument 10 of 2021: Supplement to the Zimbabwean Government Gazette Extraordinary) which prompted the social media artist to express his or her frustrations at the symbolic removal of the month in question. To the artist the announcement of the new national lockdown level four for a period of thirty days starting on the third of January up to 4 February *subject to review*, meant that the bulk of January went down the drain as Zimbabweans, again, withdrew into inactive hibernation that essentially sucked the life out of the first month of a new year. It was painful because it was only two days into a brand new year. In fact, the new year ‘threatened’ to be a ‘rerun’ of the previous one hence the bleeding ink used in the cancellation stamp used to symbolise the anguish in the citizenry denied of a normal life by a powerful and cruelly disruptive invisible enemy. The calendar looks like a desk type used in offices. This is significant as it shows that by rendering it a nonentity as a symbol of a non-event, once called January,

sources of income were severed, leading to poverty-induced suffering. The fact that there are no notes on the calendar shows that the working year had not started when it was ‘stopped’-it was stillborn. Workers were yet to report to their workplaces after the festive season. There is a feeling of being waylaid by the same assailant with the guard way down *again*.

### Behind the mask



The cartoon depicts a young lady, most probably a college/university student, who is writing an examination. We can tell from the kind of chair she sits on as well as the contents of the desk she occupies which only has papers and a pen. The young lady is wearing a mask which helps to situate the setting of the work of art in terms of when it was produced, that is ‘the era of the face mask’.



The candidate seems to have written copious notes in the inside of her mask that she is now consulting. The artist is therefore tackling the ‘new normal’ cheating. For the avoidance of doubt, the artist provides the information on what is taking place: “Answers in the mask ....invigilators hokoyo...” The word ‘hokoyo’ means ‘beware’. The artist seems to be castigating the lady for abusing the mask to conceal her answers and therefore pass fraudulently and be a disservice to her country and the world since she will not be competent. She is also a danger to all the other people in the examination room as she is technically without a mask making her expose the invigilators and other candidates to her exhalation.

The invigilators are made aware of the new variant of examinations cheating in the wake of the pandemic. The fact that there is no invigilator in sight shows that the examination system has been caught off-guard the same way the pandemic ambushed humanity.

### Nine months past Corona



The cartoon shows two women and a child presumably at a clinic or a gynaecologist's surgery. The woman who is heavy with child asks the woman holding a crying baby about the identity and, presumably, whereabouts of the child's father upon which the latter replies: "Don't know, he wore a mask!" The pregnant woman might have asked the other woman who the father is because the young woman seemed to be overwhelmed. The latter could have helped to bear part of the parental baggage thereby lessening the burden on the child's mother. The curt and indifferent response shows that she is too embarrassed to talk about him and inversely her 'stupidity' and loose character: she does not know the child's father. In fact she avoids looking at the pregnant woman who in turn is shocked by the answer she gets. This other woman may be in the same boat since she seems to be all alone yet she is heavily pregnant. In fact, the 'sweat' droplets that escape her face as she turns her head in disbelief may indicate her own gross fears. She shudders to think how she would bear her own cross when the time arrives.

The artist seems to portray women, particularly the woman with a 'fatherless' child as naive and a figure of fun. By not knowing the identity of the child's father because 'he wore a mask' the artist portrays the woman as loose and brainless and the man who wore a mask and walked away as hopelessly irresponsible and no better than a conscienceless animal. At another level the artist seems to suggest that women are helpless without the 'provider', the man, which is a condescending attitude. On the other hand, the cartoon may be seen as painting all men as sex pests who would disappear into thin air once their physiological needs are catered for. Cartoons are inherently reductionist in approach. Once a subject is picked it is discussed in a simplified and stereotypical manner thus providing food for thought for the particular vice identified. That vice is held up for all to see and cruelly paraded. The aim is to reflect on our behaviour and patch it up.

The cartoon may be sending the message that young women should be wary of tricksters who will leave them with another challenge after the current one of the corona virus is past, that is, a bundle of trouble instead of a bundle of joy.

### **How dare you?**



The cartoon captures an altercation between husband and wife because the former saved the latter's phone number as 'COVID 19'. The husband seems to have been pulled by the leg from the couch by the angry wife. In the process, they cause a potted flower to fall down. This reflects on the extent of the altercation. What we are given by the artist is part of the verbal exchange:

**Wife:** ...how dare! You saved my mobile number as COVID 19...

**Husband:** U take my Breath away.

The words 'How dare you?' are normally used to tell someone how shocked and angry one is about something they have done or said. The couple might have been seated on the same couch and the wife might have rung her number on the husband's phone to find out how her number is saved and indirectly get to know how the husband perceives her. We conclude thus because one of the phones is still ringing on the couch. The fact that her number is saved as 'COVID 19' incenses her into meting instant justice on the husband. The floored husband pleads for mercy and tells the wife that the reason for the use of that name is that she takes his breath away. The word 'breath' is capitalised to show that he utters it with greater force than the other words for emphasis. One Covid-19 symptom is shortness of breath. The husband's response is ambiguous. The first meaning might suggest to be extremely impressed. The second one might mean extremely shocking. Yet another meaning would be that of literally causing someone to lose breath and die. The husband wants the wife to think of the first meaning but actually equates the

wife to the pandemic that is ravaging his life. The two's body postures and gestures speak volumes about their relationship. The wife's facial expression and body language reflect anger and aggression while the hapless husband's body language shows pain and fright. His palms put together almost in a prayerful posture show a desperate henpecked husband pleading for mercy.

The work of art depicts domestic violence meted by a wife on her husband. It might be seen as a comment on the impact of the pandemic on the emotional well-being of family members as they were forced to spend more and more time together due to the lockdowns. This led family members, especially spouses, to be forced to observe microscopically the transgressions and imperfections of their kith and keen/partners for longer periods than before the lockdown regulations. Some were alarmed at how imperfect their life partners were.

The husband and wife seem to view Covid-19 differently. The wife perceives Covid-19 as a menace. Hers is an efferent reading of the contact name, 'COVID 19' (Rosenblatt,1995). Efferent reading entails, getting *information* based on the facts and figures given by various sources during the scourge. The husband on the other hand uses the term 'COVID 19' aesthetically(Rosenblatt,1995).This conclusion is based on what he wants the wife to conclude. There is therefore communication breakdown between the two that results in a comic altercation. It is ironical that the husband says the wife takes his breath away. What is probable is that the wife wants to literally take away the husband's breath thus killing him for the 'capital' crime. The apparent double-speak that is associated with fools in Shakespeare's plays and contemporary comedians, adds to the confusion and the comical nature of the 'altercation' which is supposed to be read as more comic than serious. The work of art therefore gives the reader a glimpse of the comic side in an era seemingly drowned in desolation. The realisation of that side provides comic relief to the hopelessness that is often painted by news broadcasts, daily updates and scary jingles on the pandemic that scare the life out of the consumers of such messages.

### **The last laugh**



The cartoon shows two characters, Satan and God, in dialogue. As we read from left to right, as dictated by our interpretive community, we start by reading what Satan says. His posture and gesture reflect overconfidence and arrogance. The spread open palms, the slightly reclined body and sneer all point to someone who thinks he has won hands down. The open palms 'claim' his dominion of the world. In fact the palms also give the impression that he is pinning the world down as some captive that may flee. His face shows radiance at the new found prey. The hooks in the moustache and goatie give the impression of someone who is obsessed with external appearances, a manipulator or trapper showing that he would use hook or crook to have humanity on his side and under his grip and spell. Satan boisterously tells God that he has closed the churches using Covid-19. This is in reference to the national shut downs that were imposed all over the world that also included the ban on public and church gatherings. By causing the churches to be closed, Satan thought he had triumphed over God by preventing God's children from attending church and therefore worshipping Him.

In response God tells Satan that contrary to his belief that people were no longer worshipping Him because of closure of churches, He had in fact opened a church in every home. The phrase

‘every home’ is pregnant with meaning since it refers to all of humanity. Humanity realised, through the devastation of the pandemic and their helplessness in spite of the perceived strides in science and technology, that there is a bigger and more powerful Being than the frail and mortal human beings. Covid-19 therefore ensured a closer relationship between God and humanity. The golden triangle behind God may represent the trinity: God, the Holy Spirit and the Son. Through this triangle the whole of humanity is covered by God’s network. ‘Home’ like ‘temple,’ may be looked at as the humanely bodies that house God. Covid-19 gave humanity an opportunity to stop or slow down and reflect or introspect on their powerlessness and the need to plug in again to the Creator they had retired. Satan misses this completely. Instead of celebrating the physical closure of buildings he should in fact bemoan this since the opening of the more sure and intimate and sincere church in each heart spells doom for Satan who is ironically celebrating his demise showing his foolishness and naivety. What God says in the cartoon may be seen as an allusion to what He says in Jeremiah 31 verse 33-34 where He talks of a new covenant with Israel thus:

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.* And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me...

What is significant from the biblical references above is that God will write His law on humanity’s hearts so that all will know Him. This may be said to be what happened when the mindboggling and heart wrenching pandemic struck: humanity ran back to God after realising their own limitations.

What Satan closed are physical buildings that are meant to be places of worship not worship *per se* that takes place in the heart, the temple God wants to be squeaky clean. Churches are representative of external manifestations of worship that are often not genuine but full of vanity. What God prefers is a personal communion with Him.

In the cartoon the two characters are contrasted in terms of what they say as well as their paralinguistics. Satan seems to be pinning down humanity in an effort to force it to follow him. On the other hand, God’s hands are not on the globe because He wants humanity to have its own

freewill to follow or not to follow Him. Satan seems to be more stylish in deportment in order to attract and deceive humanity through his extraneous entrapments. God shows a more simplistic and down to earth outlook.

After reading what God says our eyes drift down to what is written on the globe that represents the people, the souls the two antagonists compete to win over. Humanity is implored to ensure that their homes/hearts are spiritually habitable for God to boast about. The two exclamation marks are meant to doubly emphasise the message. It is significant that Satan talks first and God last. The latter has the last laugh.

The name dropping by the artist is meant to ensure that there is no doubt on the message and characters depicted. However the depiction of evil as dark and good as fair is problematic in a world that is colour-sensitive and racist.

The aim of the cartoon is therefore to evangelise and to give hope to a world that seems to lose hope and is drifting away from God because of the affliction. Like Job, humanity needs to soldier on and avoid the temptation to question the Sovereignty and existence of God. Worship should not be seen as something external to the believer but internal and intimate with the body housing the Almighty.

### **Summary of findings**

In this section the paper briefly revisits the research findings in the light of the research questions.

*What is it about Covid-19 that is projected in the selected socially mediated images?*

Covid-19 is projected as a relentless affliction that has changed the world creating a new painful normal. The pandemic is projected as not only ubiquitous but also octopus-like in how it has entered and taken a vice grip in all aspects of human existence. Because of this, social media 'art' is awash on how the different aspects of life have been afflicted. The pandemic is projected as both a huge nuisance as well as a hide-out convenience by others. Those prone to vice seem to exploit the confusion that Covid-19 has caused to ply indecorous missions behind the mask. The extra marital affairs, examination cheating and promiscuity have assumed new variants under the

shadow of Covid-19. However in all this Covid-19 initiated mess, God is depicted as unchanging and being still in control. The religious among the social media users take the pandemic-initiated pandemonium as a fertile time to evangelise and win souls.

*How is Covid-19 packaged in the selected images?*

Colourful messages with everyday images that the readers can relate to such as masks, calendar and flag are used to package the Covid-19 pandemic. The stories are those of ordinary people writing exams, partaking of their food at table, having disagreements and waiting at a clinic for health check-ups, among others. God and Satan are depicted in concrete form as they are given human features making them more accessible, relatable and anthropomorphic. God is depicted in a more favourable light and Satan as despicable.

In all the narratives, the everyday objects and experiences are defamiliarised in Shklovskyan style, forcing the reader to look at them more closely for newer insights. In most of the narratives humour is used to magnify the Covid-19 imposed disruptions. It becomes an attempt by social media users to cope with the 'new mindboggling normal'.

*Why is it re-presented in that manner?*

This kind of re-presentation seems intended to show that Covid-19 has transformed the world resulting in the creation of challenges to the ordinary people. The re-presentation also shows how Covid-19 is exploited by the socially deprived to further their not-so-holy activities. The portrayals are also meant to change people's behaviour concerning the pandemic, to counsel the infected and affected, to lighten the burden by 'trivialising' the impact of the scourge and debunking its invincibility as well as to rebuke and to expose bad behaviour.

*What is the contribution of the socially mediated art in dealing with the worldwide scourge?*

Socially mediated art may be viewed as feedback from the people expressing how they feel about or take the pandemic. Infodemic inaccuracies can also be noted and addressed at appropriate fora after noting such in social media use.

Social media content can provide an indication as to the accuracy or otherwise of the information shared. If distorted, those with the mandate can chip in and address the issues.



Pictorial and instantaneous messages are sent and received. These have an immediate impact on the reader. Today's digital natives are at home with such kind of message encoding and decoding. Therefore, messages couched this way are likely to be more effective with such an audience.

Humour is abundantly employed making the messages to be more receivable and intimate. This is contrasted with the scientific and detached messages from the laboratory that may be said to be devoid of the human touch.

The socially mediated messages are generally brief and relatively easy to digest as they are by and large reductionist in character. Social media users neither have acres of space in their phones to tell their tales in limitless detail nor all the time in the world to read what would have been posted, therefore the culture of brevity pervades this discourse.

#### *Implications of the pictorial images to educational contexts*

Because of its immediacy and brevity, the pictorial art collected and analysed in this paper can be used in pedagogical circles to teach critical thinking as well as literary analytic skills in an 'economic' way. This is because the materials are not bought and time is saved since the pieces of art are short and analysable in one lesson. Such use will not only afford the learners the opportunity to interrogate the portrayal of the pandemic in the images thus enhancing the learners' understanding of the new normal but also sharpen the learners' narrative and analytic skills in such subjects as Literature and language. For instance, in Literature, different literary devices such as hyperbole, dramatic irony, symbolism, biblical allusion, ambiguity and polysemy, figurative expression, metaphor, plot, characters, setting, depiction and characterisation can be effectively taught using the pictorial image as the primary raw material. In English language, the colourful pictorial image can be used to kick-start composition writing as well as offer fodder for speaking and debating assignments. Depending on the creativity of the educator or facilitator the same can be said for subjects such as Art, Family and Religious Studies, Biology and the rest. The images therefore have the potential to educate and to entertain.

#### **Conclusion**

The study notes that the selected and analysed socially mediated messages in this paper are potent communication tools that can reach all corners of the world through the touch of a button, with no respect for distance or territory. The artfied ones selected in this study use Covid-19 as the subject they treat in different ways. For some the pandemic is treated as something fearsome and undisputed as a harbinger of suffering and death while for others, the disease is treated as a medium or stage on which good and evil wrestle for supremacy. The Covid-19 pandemic has also been exploited by the socially maladjusted as a hide out to commit misdeeds behind the mask. It appears the artfied messages may receive more appreciating audience than the 'scientific' ones with their chilling clinical and detached statistics and 'dos and don'ts'. The type of pictorial images dealt with in this paper are more affective in approach and appeal to the heart and may probably sway readers more to act in ways that may not jeopardise their lives. The messages can be seen in the mould described by Horace as "*dulce et utile*" (cited in Bressler,2011:26),that is, instructive as well as entertaining. The study concludes that the creation and sharing of the 'works of art' can be viewed as a coping mechanism for members of a species threatened with extinction and holed up in the relative safety of homes.

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