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The Demonstrations of Muslims in Western Countries: A Semiotic Study

A B S T R A C T

Western countries believe that Islam is a negative and bad religion. It is a fundamental source of terrorism, violence, racism, and extremism. Muslims in western countries protest against this wrong idea about Islam carrying posters that express that. The purpose of this paper to prove the idea of Islam is a good and positive religion in western countries. To demonstrate the positive idea of Islam, the posters of the protestations should be analyzed semiotically according to Barthes' theory of denotation and connotation to get the aim of this paper. Seven photographs are analysed to prove that because they have effective strong evidence about Islam and Muslims. It is concluded that Islam is a good and positive religion. It is a religion of peace, safety, sincerity, and tolerance. It doesn't come to kill people or restrict their freedom as western countries' people think.

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مظاهرات المسلمين في الدول الغربية: دراسة سيميائية

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المستخلص

تعتقد الدول الغربية أن الإسلام دين سلبي وسيئ. إنه مصدر أساسي للإرهاب والعنف والعنصرية والتطرف. يحتج المسلمون في الدول الغربية على هذه الفكرة الخاطئة عن الإسلام حاملين ملصقات تعبر عن ذلك. الغرض من هذه الورقة لإثبات فكرة الإسلام هو دين جيد وإيجابي في الدول الغربية. لإثبات الفكرة الإيجابية للإسلام، يجب تحليل ملصقات الاحتجاجات بشكل سيميائي وفقاً لنظرية بارت في الدلالة والدلالة للحصول على الهدف من هذه الورقة. تم تحليل سبع صور لإثبات ذلك لأن لديهم أدلة قوية فعالة عن الإسلام والمسلمين. يستنتج أن الإسلام دين جيد وإيجابي. إنه دين السلام والأمان والإخلاص والتسامح. لا يأتي لقتل الناس أو تقييد حريتهم كما يعتقد شعوب الدول الغربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رهاب الإسلام، المظاهرات، المسلمون، الدول الغربية.

Introduction

Most people from western countries have Islamophobia which means fear or hatred of Islam. Western countries believe that Islam is a negative and bad religion. It is a fundamental source of terrorism, violence, racism, and extremism. They believe that because of many reasons, firstly because of the attacks of the groups of extremist terrorists. The most prominent one is the attack of September 11th, 2001 in the United States of America. In addition to, the attacks of ISIS. Secondly, Western countries thought that Islam restricts freedom. It imposes constraints on all Muslims. Thirdly, Western countries ignore the Islamic culture because of the wrong thoughts that are transformed by media about Islam which has a substantial role in distorting the culture of Islam. Because of all these reasons people of western countries refuse the existence of Islam in their countries so they protest against Islam to get rid of it.

On the other hand, Muslims in western countries protest against this wrong idea about Islam carrying posters that express that. To demonstrate the positive idea of Islam, the posters of the protestations should be analyzed semiotically. To analyze the posters semiotically, it first should shed the light on semiotics as the main domain that concerns the study of signs to get a successful analysis of signs that are found in pictures and posters whether they are verbal or non-verbal.

The most basic definition of semiotics and the shortest one is "the study of signs." According to this definition, semiotics includes the study of signs in all their own types. Anything that can generate meaning is regarded as a sign. A sign can occupy the form of images, objects, words, gestures, and sounds. The study of signs should not be in isolation but as a part of semiotic systems such as a genre of signs. In other words, the study of signs depends on how they represent their reality and how they made their meaning (Chandler, 2007, p. 2).

Eco (1976, p.7) defines it as "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken to be a sign." He claims that semiotics examines everything that people say in ordinary

speech, including both what people refer to as signs and what really resembles signs, such as words, pictures, sounds, gestures, and physical things. He claims that everything has signs that stand for something else.

Semiotics is commonly used to refer to the study of human beings' innate ability to comprehend and produce signs of all kinds (Sebeok, 2001, p. 8).

Richards and Schmidt (2010, p. 521) define semiotics as "the theory of signs, the analysis of systems using signs or signals for the purpose of communication (semiotic systems)."

The term "semiotics" comes from the Greek word "*sema*," which also means "sign interpreter." Its root is the Greek word for sign, *semesion*. The study of how sign systems work or the examinations of signs is central to the field of semiotics (Cobley & Jansz, 1997, p. 5). It originally appeared as a branch of philosophy. It is regarded as the first explicit mention of semiotics by the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), who also introduced semiotics as a subfield of philosophy in the seventeenth century. He defined it as the "doctrine of signs." Locke stated that the human mind made use of the nature of signs to comprehend things and consequently conveyed its knowledge to others (Martin & Ringham, 2000, p. 1).

The 19th century saw the beginning of modern semiotics. The majority of academics recognised two distinct schools, each of which originated on a different continent and used a different methodology to research semiotics. The Swiss philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) presented one of them from Europe, while the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce brought the other from America (1839–1914). The two pioneers are acknowledged as the creators of modern semiotic theory and practice. They have contributed greatly to the field. They established the fundamental framework for identifying and categorising signals, as well as for using semiotics to research knowledge and cultural systems (Yakin and Totu, 2014, p.5).

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure designated semiotics as *semiology* and defined it as "a science which studies the roles of signs as part of social life" (Chandler, 2007, p.3).

According to Saussure, a sign is a binary or dyadic phenomenon. The signifier and the signified are the two components that make up a sign. They complete and support each other. They cannot be separated. The signified is a conceptual creation, whereas the signifier is the physical component, expression, or sound image described as the material form of the sign. The signifier is an idea or meaning that it alludes to. It is a fact of psychology. Saussure stated that there is an arbitrary and unnatural relationship between signifier and signified. That means, between the word and its concept, there is no logical relation. This makes the finding of the meanings of any sign very interesting or problematic (Chappell, 1999, p.74).

Social convention determines the conceptual and usual relationship between the signifier and the signified. They might signify many things to certain people. In other words, cultural and social norms that people must acquire strongly influence the interaction between the two elements of signals (Chandler, 2007, p.28).

Like the French linguist, philosopher, and educator Roland Barthes, who argues that humans conveyed messages that consist of diverse signals, many eminent semiotics experts have adopted Saussure's semiotics theory. These communications rely on codes. Additionally, he distinguished between connotation and denotation (Cobley, 2001, p. 4-5).

Barthes is regarded as the first one who applied the ideas of semiotics to visual images such as photographs, paintings, advertisements, etc... His works showed an important and useful summary of the substantial aspects of semiotics. He illustrated that the meanings of the signs of any image are not limited to what the viewers see or how they understand what they see. But it is associated with their culture. In other words, the denotative or basic meanings are attached to the connotative or cultural meanings (Curtin, 2005, p. 54-55).

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher who lived from 1839 to 1913, made significant contributions to several academic fields, particularly in the area of semiotics. He is credited with founding the American School of Semiotics (Nöth, 1990, p.39). He was the creator of the idea of signs and one of the most influential people in semiotics history. He designated it as "the formal doctrine of signs" and gave it the name "semiotics." (Chandler, 2007, p.3)

Peirce describes a sign as "anything which stands to somebody for something in some regard or capacity" in his theory of the sign. It addresses someone by producing an equivalent or maybe more complex sign in that person's thoughts. (Nöth, 1990, p.42)

Peirce used a triadic framework to explain signs. He notes that a sign is made up of three crucial elements in his sign theory. They serve as the interpretant, the object, and the representative. The term "representamen" refers to the shape a sign acquires; it is comparable to Saussure's signifier, a tangible sign. A referent is an object. It is anything that is covered by the symbol that it designates or stands for. The interpretant, on the other hand, denotes whatever meaning has been conveyed by the representative. Peirce emphasises the significance of the three elements of signs because they define what is conveyed as "the object," how the sign is represented as "the representamen," and how people interpret it as "the interpretant" (Siau & Tian, 2009, p.18). The interaction between the three parts of the sign is referred to by Peirce as semiosis, which is a significant and crucial process. He makes the observation that semiosis unites reality and representation in living systems (Preucel, 2006, p.56).

The use of posters

A poster can be defined as "a graphical expression of pictures and words or only words." Pictures and graphics in compositions visualize the text. However, through pictures and letters or words together the message of a text is conveyed to the target (Halldin, O. <http://www.kb.se/docs/collections/historyposters.pdf>).

The fundamental purpose of the poster is to convey a message to a moving audience because it is considered a means of communication. It can be noticed that a poster can easily fulfil its function in a very effective and sincere way. It may tell the viewers new and different things. It can entertain, warn, or disturb them.

You can plan your poster's design well before beginning. You will only have a short amount of time to catch and keep your readers' attention. You can plan your design around the one aspect of the information that must deliver the message. You can consider the images that will best represent your message visually once you have determined the most important information. Should you use one huge image or a number of little, interesting shapes? Would using bright colours help you achieve the desired mood or emotions? Should some words be printed in very large type to make them easier to read? The sort of format that will be used must also be known. The poster's size is unknown. How large or small? You will find it easier to position the imagery and text if you do that. Also you can think about the poster's size and shape, as well as the location where it will be displayed. Using thumbnails, explore alternatives to find the most compelling and dynamic visuals. You can take out any unnecessary information. You can determine the proper positioning and size for each element on the poster. You can keep balance and proportion in mind because you often operate on a huge scale.

A poster should:

- 1- The type size should be between 10 and 15 times the width of the format.
- 2- The layout should be simple and clear so that the reader knows where to go for the information.
- 3- Size, colour, or value should be used to emphasise the most important message.
- 4- Show art that is relevant to the message.
- 5- Have the type and imagery arranged in a logical, useful sequence.
- 6- Use bold, different colours to accentuate your message and make it more visible from a distance. (<https://www.cis.rit.edu/htbooks/dtp/projects/poster/poster1.html>)

Methodology

To show and prove the idea of Islam is a good and positive religion in western countries, the qualitative method is used. Seven photographs will be analysed to prove that because they have effective strong evidence about Islam and Muslims. To analyze these photographs and the posters inside them, Roland Barthes's (1977) "*image, music, text*" is used. Barthes defines signification as the process or the act by which the signifier and the signified are connected to produce a sign (Barthes, 1964, p. 48).

In order to describe the process of signification, Barthes uses two terms signifier and signified which are derived from Saussure's study of sign and signification. Signifier means the object that produces meaning like books, body, clothes, etc... whereas signified is the mental impression of the signified or the concept. It may have many significations (Abdul Jabbar, 2014, p. 6)

The central concept of Barthes' semiotic theory is the difference between denotation and connotation. He asserts that humans are able to identify various message types when we read signs and sign complexes. The "literal or obvious meaning" or "first-order signifying system" is referred to as denotation. For instance, the literal, descriptive meaning of a picture is referred to as its denotative meaning. Connotation is referred to be "second-order

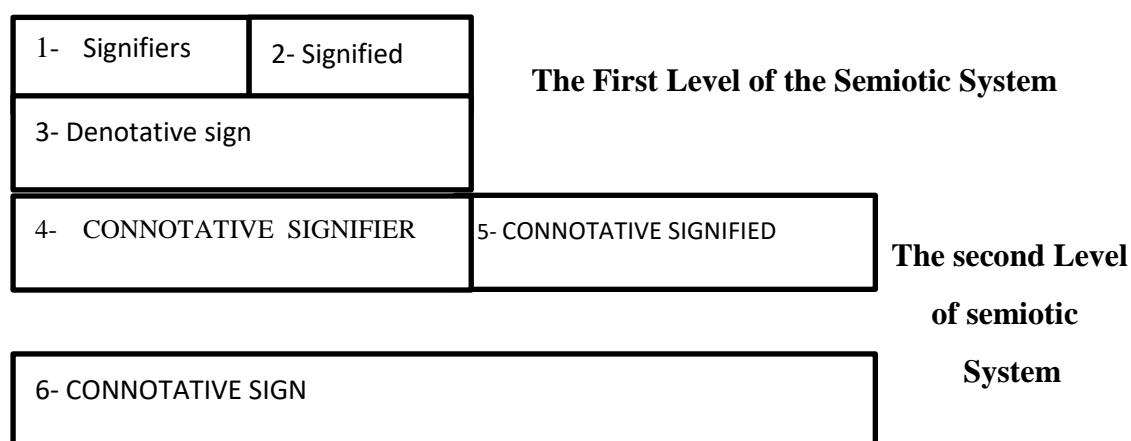
signifying systems," and we may also deduce extra cultural meanings from a picture or text(Erkki, 2003, p. 4).

At the first order of signification which is the denotation, a sign is composed of a signifier and signified. However, in the second order of signification which is connotation, the denotative sign (signifier and signified) is its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified (Chandler, 2007, p.140).

According to Barthes, the connotation is any sign that is derived from the signifier of a denotative sign so denotation leads to a chain of connotations. Therefore, Barthes himself gives priority to connotation claiming that it is not easy to separate the signifier from the signified, the ideological from the literal (Chandler, 2007, p. 143).

Barthes made this theory to discover the hidden and implied meanings that are found in any sign. He states that the system of secondary meanings is called a Myth. He describes the field of connotations as ideologies. According to him, when the mass media try to give their messages a foundation in nature, produce ideologies or mythologies as secondary connotative systems. They express the primary or natural meanings at the denotative level. However, they hide secondary and ideological meanings at the connotative level (Noth, 1990, p. 311).

Figure 1: Barthes' Map of Sign Functioning



The denotative sign (3) is created from the signifier (1) and the signified, as can be seen in the table above (2). On the second level of the semiotic system, they both create the denotative sign, which also functions as the connotative signifier (4). To create a connotative sign, the connotative signifier must produce a connotative signified (5). (6). that is where the type of systematic approach to signals that Barthes sought to pursue becomes quite challenging.(Chandler, 2007, p.143).

Data Analysis

Some pictures that have been selected will be analyzed according to Barthes's theory of denotation and connotation to get the aim of this paper.

Picture 1:



1. Denotation

In this photograph, a group of people from western countries demonstrate with Muslims to support and advocate for them. They carry posters that have their point of view about Muslims and Islam. Two of the posters appeared. They have simple words and sentences which are handwritten, written in capital letters, and with different colours. They are "*Justice for Muslims*" and "*We stand with Muslims.*"

2. Connotation

In this photograph, Not only Muslims demonstrate to illustrate their points of view about Islam and protect the existence of Islam in western countries, but also some people from western countries support and advocate for them. Some people from western countries believe that Islam is a good and positive religion and that Muslims are very peaceful and good people. Therefore, they protest with Muslims to prove that. They feel that Muslims are very oppressed and aggrieved in western countries because they have the wrong idea about Islam and Muslims. The prevailing idea about Islam and Muslims in most western countries is that Muslims and Islam represent ISIS and terrorism. So they should expel Muslims from their countries. They think that the existence of Muslims means the existence of terrorism and destruction to their countries and the restriction of their freedom. The protestations of western countries' people to support Muslims are regarded as strong evidence that Islam is a positive religion. The two posters reflect the points of view of western countries' people. Basically, they want justice for all Muslims that live in western countries and they stand with Muslims to protect their existence in their countries because they believe that Muslims do not represent ISIS and terrorism. Muslims are kind, peaceful, tolerant and merciful people. They want to live peacefully without any violence. They hate ISIS like other people. The posters are handwritten to make them easily understood and close to all people. They are written in capital letters and with different colours to make people pay more attention to them.

Picture 2:

1. Denotation

In this photograph, many Muslims gather making protestations in the streets of western countries to correct the wrong and negative ideas about the Islam religion and Muslims in general. They are discriminated against and oppressed because of their religion, especially Muslim women. So they protest peacefully without any violence or fierceness carrying many posters that display Islam as a good and positive religion. Those posters show some expressions that have good and positive ideas about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) such as *"Prophet Muhammad is the father of Good Manners."*, *"Prophet Muhammad is the father of Civil Rights."*, *"The Prophet (sallahu aliahi wa sallam): a mercy for universe."*, *"Prophet Muhammad is the father of justice and decency."*, *"Muslims must speak out for justice and truth."* And others that have the same meaning.

2. Connotation

Muslims are strongly oppressed in western countries because of their religion. Most people from western countries have a negative idea about Islam and they have Islamophobia. So they want to get rid of all Muslims in their countries. Consequently, Muslims protest against them. Muslims want to clarify that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance through their peaceful and pacific demonstrations. Although all Muslims hold posters that have simple words, these posters have effective and strong messages for all the viewers who see them. All the posters clarify the Muslims' thoughts about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). They display that the prophet of Islam is a good person. He is the saviour of Islamic society and the world in general because he comes to save the world to publish the Islam religion and its rules (sharia). They write on the posters that The prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the father of civil rights, the father of justice, and the father of good manners. That means The Prophet comes to publish justice and decency in the world. He does not come to kill people or restrict their freedom as all people from western countries think. Muslims consider the Prophet as a mercy for the world to illustrate the positive idea of Islam. Muslims in their posters do not specify the Prophet as a mercy to Muslims only but they generalize their idea to be a mercy for all the world. That means the Prophet Muhammad specially and Islam generally come to save the world to publish all the good things not to destroy and damage the world. All posters are white because this colour

has a meaningful idea. The white colour reflects the purity, peace, and safety of Islam. Some words are written in Arabic (transliteration: which means writing some expressions in the characters of another language) like (*sallahu aliahi wa sallam*) which means (peace be upon him) to make their effect strong. To display the glorification and magnification of the Prophet.

Picture 3:



1. Denotation

In this picture, Muslims from different countries hold a big poster that reflects their points of view about ISIS. They write on it "*Muslims against ISIS*". The poster is written with capital letters and in red and black colours. ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) means the jihadist group which controls some cities in Syria and Iraq. ISIS means violence, fierceness, brutality, and destruction. Because most people in western countries believe that Muslims and Islam support and advocate ISIS because its name connects to the name of Islam religion and Muslims, Muslims stand together to illustrate their point of view toward ISIS. They look happy, pleased, and cheerful.

2. Connotation

As the words of this poster are very simple, they have a strong idea about Islam and Muslims. Western countries overgeneralized the doctrine and ideologies of ISIS on Muslims. They believe that Muslims follow and support ISIS. They believe that Muslims are a part of ISIS. Therefore, Muslims protest against their thoughts to demonstrate that western countries are wrong. Muslims from different countries gather to say that we are like you against ISIS. As Muslims, We have ideologies and doctrines different from theirs. We are governed by rules from the holy book "Qura'an" and Al Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). We are against the killing of people, destruction, constraints, and compulsion. We are pacifist and peaceful people. We refuse any offence or insult to anyone regardless of his religion and his nationality. So they seem so pleased because they are Muslims. They write the words with capital letters to make the viewers pay more attention to the idea implied behind these simple words. The sentence is written with different colours to show different ideas about ISIS and Muslims. They want to say that they are different in their doctrines and attitudes. They write the word "ISIS" with a red colour to denote that ISIS is very dangerous and wild people because this colour means blood, killing, and danger whereas they write the rest of the

expression with black colour to make it distinct. Islam's doctrine is opposite ISIS'. So Muslims want to display to all viewers that they are against ISIS even by using colours.

Picture 4:



1. Denotation

In this photograph, a child Muslim girl holds up a simple poster written on it “*ISIS is not Islam.*” As she is a Muslim, the girl wants to illustrate her point of view about the wrong idea about Islam and Muslims by using simple words and simple ideas.

2. Connotation

Although this poster has only one simple sentence which has very simple words, it has deep meaning and a strong message to all viewers. Muslims are oppressed in western countries because they believe that all Muslims and Islam represent ISIS. All people from western countries believe that the existence of Muslims in their countries means the existence of anxiety, destruction, killing, and Islamophobia because they regard Muslims as ISIS. They have a wrong idea about Muslims. The photographer chooses an influential photo that has a meaningful poster. He endeavours strongly to display Islam as positive religion. He chooses a little girl, a child because she represents innocence. He wants to illustrate to all viewers that Islam is a religion of innocence and tolerance and all the good things. It is not a religion of killing, slaughter, destruction, and restrictions. So Islam does not have any relation with ISIS and ISIS doesn't represent Islam. This is an obvious message to all viewers about Islam.

Picture 5:



1. Denotation

In this photograph, Muslim women protest in western countries carrying posters against the wrong idea about Islam. They are wearing scarves and veils to cover their faces. They write on the poster “*we cover our heads not our brains.*” It is written in capital letters. They also draw a Muslim woman on the poster who wears the hijab.

2. Connotation

People from western countries think that Muslim women are not educated because the Islam religion prevents them. They have the wrong idea about Islam and they believe that it is a negative and bad religion because it obliges Muslims to do bad and forbidden things like killing and wearing the scarf (hijab) and prevents them from other things like education. Therefore, Muslims protest against this wrong idea about Islam and endeavour to demonstrate the positive side of Islam. Through this poster, Muslims, especially women want to display to the world that Islam does not force them to wear hijab. But they themselves wear a hijab without any force to protect their beauty. They resemble the beauty of Muslim women to the beauty of the flower. As any flower has thorns to protect it, Muslim women wear the hijab to protect their beauty. The photographer chooses an effective photo to make his message understood by all viewers. The poster has a meaningful message which carries deep meaning. So it is written in capital letters to make the viewers pay more attention to its meaning. The simple sentence on the poster illustrates that Islam is not a bad religion that prevents or prohibits Muslims from education and restricts their freedom. Even if they wear hijab, that does not mean they cannot learn like other people. They can think, learn, and invent. To prove that, there are a lot of Muslim genius, professors, doctors, and scientists over all the world. Islam does not affect their education. On the contrary, it supports them.

Picture 6:



1. Denotation

In this photograph, a large protestation of Muslims in western countries carries posters that reflect their demands and display their points of view about Islam and ISIS. The three posters that appear in the photograph are written on them “*Humanity against terrorism*”, “*ISIS does not present me*”, and “*ISIS is threat to humanity.*” All the posters are written in capital letters and different colours.

2. Connotation

To prove Islam is a good and positive religion, Muslims in western countries protest peacefully without any violence. They demonstrate to show their points of view about Islam and show the world especially western countries that Islam is a religion of humanity not killing, it is the religion of tolerance not of slaughter, it is the religion of peace and safety not of violence, and it is the religion of freedom not of restrictions. Muslim children, young, and old men, again and again, protest to prove that Islam is not ISIS and not present it because ISIS' doctrine is different from Islam's. Although Muslims carry posters that have simple words, they have a substantial message and strong point of view about Muslims and Islam. Those posters are written in capital letters and different colours to make all the viewers pay more attention to their explicit meanings and their implied meanings. The red colour reflects danger, killing, and blood. So they write the word "ISIS" and "terrorism" in red colour. They are written to correct the wrong idea that people of western countries have about Islam. Because of Media and other broadcasts, Western countries believe that Islam is ISIS itself or it supports ISIS. It destroys humanity by killing and slaughter. It is the enemy of humanity. Therefore, by these posters, Muslims show all the viewers that they are wrong and mistaken because Islam is a good religion. On the contrary, it represents humanity. It protects people regardless of their nationalities and religions. It confirms tolerance, forgiveness, and compassion.

Picture 7:



1. Denotation

In this photograph, a group of Muslims demonstrate in western countries to illustrate their point of view about Islam and correct the wrong idea about Islam and Muslims. They carry some posters that reflect that. Three posters appear in the photo. They write on them short and simple sentences "Islam teaches Harmony", "We Condemn ISIS" and "ISIS does not represent Islam." All of them are written in capital letters.

2. Connotation

Muslims in western countries are oppressed and depressed because people do not like their existence in their countries. Western countries have a wrong idea about Islam and Muslims because of the attacks of some extremist terrorist groups and ISIS. So they thought that Islam and ISIS are the same. They have the same doctrine and same rules that govern them. However, they are totally different and unlike. ISIS does not represent Islam because it

has different rules that confirm violence, killing, destruction, and racism. It claims religious authority. Whereas Islam is a religion of peace, forgiveness, and pity. It emphasizes love, tolerance, and justice between people. The three posters show the points of view of Muslims. Through these posters, they want to convey an effective and strong message to all people of western countries. This message is that Muslims condemn ISIS because they are terrorists. They want to live peacefully without any violence with people from different religions like Christianity because Islam teaches them that. All posters are written in capital letters to make all the viewers pay more attention to the implied meaning behind these expressions.

Conclusion

After analyzing the photographs of demonstrations of Muslims in western countries and the posters that are found in them semiotically according to Barthes' theory of denotation and connotation, the essential conclusion that can be drawn is that Islam is a good and positive religion. It is a religion of peace, safety, sincerity, and tolerance. It doesn't come to kill people or restrict their freedom as western countries' people think. The Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) is sent to the world as mercy and saviour. Muslims follow the Islamic rules from the holy Qura'an and Al-Sunnah which are found to protect people's lives and lead them to the right way. All Muslims are peaceful, tolerant, and kind people, not terrorists. All these proofs demonstrate that Islam is not negative. It is positive. It is not bad. It is good. The analysis of posters proves that Islam does not represent ISIS and terrorism. Muslims are not extremists terrorists or ISIS and they do not support them as most people from western countries think. Therefore, the analysis corrects the wrong idea about Islam and Muslims

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