

A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 METAPHORS ON MAGAZINE AND JOURNAL COVERS

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Abstract

Magazine and journal covers became important sites for communicating about the COVID-19 pandemic and for conceptualizing complex scientific and social issues in accessible ways. This study examines metaphorical framings of the COVID-19 pandemic on magazine and journal covers published between 2020 and 2024, focusing on how metaphors are constructed through the interaction of visual and verbal modes. The analysis identifies WAR as the most frequent source domain, alongside less frequent domains such as BURDEN and CONTAINER. The results further indicate that metaphors are most frequently realized multimodally, with cover design playing a crucial role in structuring how images and cover lines interact to cue source and target domains. The study highlights the role of multimodality not merely in enhancing rhetorical impact but also in shaping how metaphorical meaning is created and interpreted within a highly condensed communicative space.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic; magazine covers; journal covers; multimodal metaphor*

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, media discourse played a central role in informing the public, acting as a primary intermediary between scientific knowledge and society (Anwar et al., 2020). Metaphors are widely recognized as powerful tools in science communication, capable of simplifying complex concepts while also shaping how scientific knowledge is interpreted (Kueffer & Larson, 2014). In the context of COVID-19, metaphorical language was widely employed, as it allowed complex and unfamiliar experiences to be understood through more familiar domains (Semino, 2021a).

Previous research on COVID-19 metaphors has primarily focused on political speeches and newspaper cartoons, demonstrating how figurative language shaped collective understandings of the crisis (Asenjo Alcalde & Gil, 2023; Castro Seixas, 2020). While cartoon studies have contributed significantly to the analysis of multimodal metaphor in pandemic discourse, the inclusion of magazine covers within such datasets risks overlooking their distinct communicative functions (Wang, 2021:552). Unlike public service advertisements, which promote protective behaviors (Feng & Wu, 2022), or cartoons, which often rely on humor or critique (Asenjo Alcalde & Gil, 2023; Filardo-Llamas, 2021), covers are subject to distinct communicative constraints. They must convey the content of an issue while also reinforcing the publication's brand identity and serving broader marketing purposes.

Research on magazine covers in metaphor studies remains relatively limited and has primarily focused on economic and political crises, leaving metaphorical representations of health crises underexplored (Silaski & Durovic, 2017; Tseronis, 2015). Moreover, this gap extends to journal covers, where metaphorical analysis remains limited despite their important role in disseminating scientific knowledge (Wu et al., 2024). In this study, magazine and journal covers are analyzed together as distinct yet comparable communicative

contexts. Although they address different covers in both contexts provide an initial representation of content and publication identity. To achieve this, covers rely primarily on visual and verbal modes, which may operate independently or in combination.

Building on this background, the present study aims to identify and analyze the metaphorical framings of the COVID-19 pandemic on magazine and journal covers published between 2020 and 2024. Focusing on covers as a multimodal genre, the study explores how image and verbal text interact within a single page to conceptualize the pandemic across both public-facing and scholarly contexts, highlighting how metaphor contributes to rendering the pandemic more accessible. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the most frequent metaphorical source domains used to frame COVID-19 and related target domains?

RQ2. Through which modes are metaphors represented on the covers?

RQ3. How is the COVID-19 pandemic conceptualized metaphorically?

2. Theoretical Background

According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:36), metaphor is a cognitive process through which we understand one domain in terms of another. Metaphors are fundamental to human cognition as we think and act metaphorically (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:154). Everyday thinking is thus structured by metaphorical concepts that shape how individuals perceive, reason about, and interact with the world.

Metaphor involves a cross-domain mapping between two conceptual domains. This process is represented as *A is B*, where the target domain (A) is understood in terms of the source domain (B). Metaphorical mappings are typically

unidirectional, meaning that properties of the source domain are mapped onto the target domain (Kövecses, 2010:6). Through this process, familiar and embodied experiences provide a basis for understanding more complex or less tangible phenomena such as argument or time.

Building on CMT, Forceville (2009, 2016) argues that if human thinking is metaphorical, metaphors should also be observable in non-verbal modes such as images, sounds, and gestures. In this framework, a “mode” can be understood as a sign system through which meaning is communicated. Following Forceville (2009), this study distinguishes between monomodal and multimodal metaphors based on how the source and target domains are conveyed. In monomodal metaphors, both the source and the target are conveyed within the same mode, for instance, entirely through language or entirely through images. In contrast, the source and target domains of multimodal metaphors are represented “exclusively or predominantly” in different modes, for instance, when the target is conveyed verbally and the source visually (Forceville, 2009:25). However, in many multimodal metaphors, the source, the target, or both are cued in multiple modes simultaneously (Kövecses, 2010:72).

3. The Genre of Covers

Periodical publications constitute an important form of mediated communication, fulfilling a wide range of social functions, including contributing to public debate, disseminating knowledge, supporting professional communication, and providing both information and leisure (Prior-Miller, 2015). A distinction is commonly drawn between consumer magazines, which address a general readership, and trade or professional publications targeting specific occupational communities (Johnson & Prijatel, 2007; Prior-Miller, 2015). Scholarly journals, in turn, represent a distinct category, typically publishing peer-reviewed contributions that advance knowledge within

specific academic disciplines (Johnson & Prijatel, 2007; Prior-Miller, 2015).

Within this communicative landscape, covers emerge as visual gateways that condense editorial identity and content into a single, highly structured page. They provide a preview of the publication's content by highlighting major themes, topics, or featured contributions, while also influencing how readers encounter and make sense of what follows. In both magazines and journals, covers foreground what is considered novel and relevant, although this function operates differently across contexts.

Research on magazine covers has come to recognize them as distinct multimodal texts that combine images and text, blending art, editorial content, and marketing strategies aimed at attracting readers (e.g., Held, 2005; Spiker, 2015). Magazine covers typically draw on broader social issues and ongoing trends, targeting a general readership (Johnson & Prijatel, 2007). They guide readers' interpretation of current issues in line with the perspective the publication seeks to promote (Silaski & Durovic, 2017:126). Their role, therefore, extends beyond commercial goals by not only capturing attention but also highlighting particular aspects of a topic and influencing how it is understood.

A comparable development can be observed in scholarly publishing, where journal covers have become increasingly visually oriented. High-prestige journals now frequently feature a visually striking cover image for selected articles, reflecting a relatively recent shift in scientific publishing compared with the long-established use of cover stories in the popular press (Wang et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2024). These covers contribute to the dissemination of scientific knowledge, reinforce journal branding, and increase the visibility of selected articles, particularly in digital publishing environments (Kong & Wang, 2020; Wang et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2024).

As a result, cover design has become increasingly important to how scientific articles are presented in prestigious and high-impact journals.

Covers do not merely present content but also shape expectations about how that content should be approached and by whom. Despite differences in audience and institutional context, magazine and journal covers share several communicative purposes: they attract attention, communicate identity, and foreground selected content across both print and digital environments (Kong & Wang, 2020; Spiker, 2015; Wu et al., 2024). Covers can therefore be understood as a communicative genre in their own right rather than merely as decorative features

From an analytical perspective, this implies that cover design constrains the semiotic resources through which meaning is produced. Drawing on the cover typology proposed by Johnson and Prijatelj (2007), cover designs differ in the number and arrangement of images and text, ranging from poster covers (single image, no cover lines) and all-typographic covers (text-only), to more complex multi-theme layouts combining images and cover lines. These structural differences are not merely formal; affect which the semiotic resources available for metaphor identification. As Tseronis (2021) suggests, metaphorical meaning is construed when elements on a cover appear conceptually incongruous, prompting viewers to establish similarities between domains.

Front covers operate primarily through two modes: visual and verbal, which together contribute to the realisation of metaphorical meaning (Silaski & Durovic, 2017). Depending on how these modes are deployed, metaphors may be monomodal, in which both the source and target are conveyed within a single mode, or multimodal, in which meaning is distributed across visual and verbal elements. In some covers, metaphors may also involve forms of double coding,

in which metaphorical mapping is reinforced across both image and text (Tseronis, 2021).

Moreover, the combination of images and cover lines enables multiple metaphorical framings to coexist within a single cover, particularly in multi-theme covers. For instance, a central image and accompanying texts may draw on different source domains. Figure 1 illustrates how a multi-theme, one-image cover can simultaneously activate a GAME metaphor visually and a WAR metaphor through a subheadline.

4. Data and Method

4.1. Corpus compilation

The analysis is based on a corpus of 70 magazines and journal covers published between 2020 and 2024 that address the COVID-19 pandemic. The dataset consists predominantly of English-language covers ($n = 69$), with one Swedish example analyzed with the assistance of DeepL Translator. Covers were collected from Google Images and official publication archives, with particular attention to source authenticity. Relevant examples were identified through targeted keyword searches (e.g., "COVID-19 magazine cover," "coronavirus magazine cover," "COVID-19 journal cover") and by systematically filtering official archives by publication date.

Figure 1 *U Magazine*, Fall, 2020.



Following Silaski and Durovic (2017), metaphor identification is treated as dependent on the interaction of visual, verbal, and contextual cues, with COVID-19 pandemic established as the overarching target domain prior to analysis. While previous studies of magazine covers have often been able to determine topical relevance based on the cover alone (e.g. Silaski & Durovic, 2017; Tseronis, 2021), this was not always the case in the present corpus. Because virus-like imagery may refer to diseases other than COVID-19, explicit verbal references (e.g., 'COVID-19', 'coronavirus', 'corona', 'SARS-CoV-2') were used as the primary criterion establishing whether a cover addressed the pandemic.

When the cover alone was insufficient, the issue's content was consulted to confirm relevance. This was particularly important for poster-style covers without text, where the topical focus is not always explicitly stated (see Figure 2). Of the 70 covers analyzed, 52 were confirmed directly through the cover itself, while the remaining 18 were verified by consulting the content of the corresponding issue.

4.2. Method

The study adopts a primarily qualitative approach, supplemented by descriptive quantitative measures. The identification of visual, verbal, and multimodal metaphors was guided by previous procedures (Forceville, 2009; Pérez-Sobrino et al., 2021; Šorm & Steen, 2018; Steen et al., 2010). A

representation was coded as metaphorical when a cross-domain mapping could be established between a more concrete or embodied source domain and a more abstract or complex target domain.

Metaphors were classified as verbal (both domains cued verbally), visual (both domains cued visually), or multimodal (domains distributed across modes). All coding was conducted manually by the author.

Each cover was first examined holistically to establish its overall meaning through an analysis of its visual and verbal elements. Target domains were identified primarily through explicit verbal cues and, where applicable, visual representations, while unrelated text (e.g., headlines about other topics) was excluded. To ensure consistency in identifying visual representations of the coronavirus, the study adopts the CDC's (2020) illustration of SARS-CoV-2 as the primary visual reference (see Figure 3 below). Characterized by its spherical form and protruding spike proteins, this image serves as a baseline for recognizing visual depictions of the virus across covers. Verbal references to the virus include words and expressions such as 'corona', 'coronavirus', 'Omicron', 'SARS-CoV-2', and 'virus', which explicitly cue the target domain. Other target domains, including COVID-19 as a disease, the pandemic, long COVID, and lockdown do not have conventional visual representations within the scope of this study and were therefore identified through verbal cues, typically appearing in headlines or subheadings.

Target domains were classified into the following categories: the virus itself (CORONAVIRUS, SPREAD OF CORONAVIRUS, EVOLUTION OF CORONAVIRUS VARIANTS, CONTROLLING CORONAVIRUS); the disease (COVID-19, CONTROLLING COVID-19, RECOVERING FROM COVID-19, LONG COVID); the pandemic as a broader event (PANDEMIC); government interventions (LOCKDOWN); and health-related efforts (VACCINE, VACCINATION, FINDING A VACCINE,

Figure 2 *The New Yorker Magazine*, March 2020.



HEALTH CARE WORKER). Source domains were identified through non-literal elements in visual and/or verbal representations. Specific source domains were first grouped into broader general source-domain categories. For example, WEAPON and SOLDIER were grouped under the broader category WAR, while PLAYER, BALL, and other game-related source domains were grouped under GAME. General source-domain categories that shared a common conceptual structure were then combined. For instance, GAME, RACE, and SPORTS were treated as a single general source-domain category, labelled GAME/RACE/SPORTS, rather than as three separate categories.

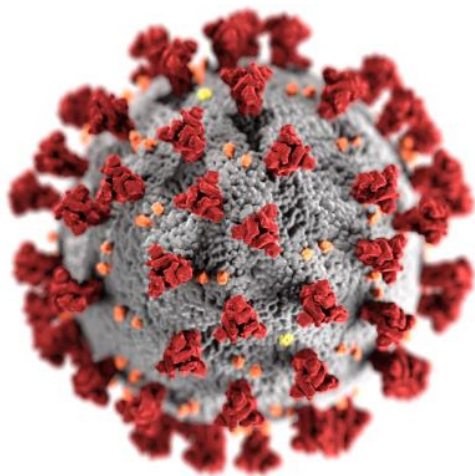


Figure 3 Illustration of coronavirus created at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Credit: CDC, Eckert, A. (MSMI) & Higgins, D. (MAMS) (2020).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Metaphoric source domains

As shown in Figure 4, WAR emerges as the dominant source domain, appearing 24 times across the corpus. Metaphors drawn from the RACE, GAME and SPORTS domain (n = 20) follow closely, framing the pandemic as a competitive process governed by speed and skill, shifting the emphasis from heroic struggle to coordination and strategy.

NATURAL FORCE, NATURAL DISASTER, and NATURAL ENTITY (n = 15), including storms, floods, fires, animals and plants, are also prominent, representing the pandemic as part of the natural world and positioning it as external to human society. JOURNEY metaphors (n = 10) conceptualize the pandemic as a process unfolding over time, marked by obstacles, stages, and milestones.

Less frequent but still significant are metaphors drawn from the domains of BURDEN (n = 6), OBJECT (n = 4), and CONTAINER (n = 3), each contributing a distinct perspective to the metaphorical framing of the pandemic. OBJECT metaphors conceptualize the coronavirus and responses to it through concrete artefacts or tools, such as an emergency alarm, umbrella, telescope, or hiking pole. BURDEN metaphors conceptualize the crisis as a weight that must be carried or endured, highlighting the strain placed on individuals and

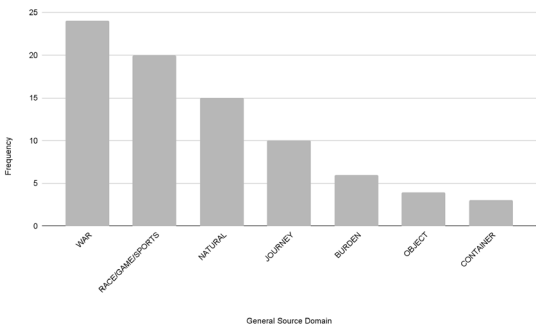


Figure 4 Distribution of general source domains.

societies. Finally, CONTAINER metaphors translate abstract public-health measures into embodied experiences of confinement and boundedness.

5.2. Distribution of metaphors across modes

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of metaphors across multimodal, monomodal verbal, and monomodal visual realizations. Multimodal metaphors clearly dominate the corpus (n = 50), typically involving visual representations paired with metaphorical headlines or taglines that reinforce or clarify the conceptual framing. By comparison, monomodal visual (n = 17) and monomodal verbal metaphors (n = 15) occur at similar frequencies.

The predominance of multimodal metaphors reflects the communicative constraints of covers, which must condense complex issues into a limited and visually engaging space. Within this setting, cover design emerges as a key structuring factor. Drawing on the typology proposed by Johnson and Prijatel (2007), cover type shapes how metaphors can be realized by determining the number and arrangement of images and verbal texts available for interpretation. Visuals, particularly when combined with text, are more persuasive than text alone, thereby enhancing the rhetorical impact of covers while increasing reader engagement (Silaski & Durovic, 2017; Wu et al., 2024). This interaction is also central to metaphor identification, as verbal elements can guide, clarify, or reinforce the metaphorical mapping suggested by the image.

From this perspective, different cover types enable distinct forms of metaphor realization. Covers combining images and text tend to facilitate multimodal metaphors, whereas poster-style covers consisting solely of imagery primarily support visual metaphors, and all-typographic covers restrict metaphor realization to the verbal mode. Multi-theme covers introduce a further layer of complexity to metaphor interpretation. In these covers, the relationship between image and text is

not always aligned: while a main headline may reinforce the image's metaphor, additional cover lines can introduce metaphors drawn from different source domains. This means that a single cover may simultaneously evoke multiple conceptualizations of the same issue.

5.3. Examples of COVID-19 pandemic covers

The New York Times Magazine is a long-running Sunday supplement of The New York Times newspaper, targeting a broad readership with news and current affairs content. It is known for its long-form journalism and visually distinctive covers that address major social and global issues. The cover of its July 19, 2020, issue provides a clear example of a monomodal verbal WAR metaphor (see Figure 6). Although the cover image depicts a fatigued health care worker, the metaphorical framing is activated verbally through the headline “Why We’re Losing the Battle with COVID-19,” which explicitly represents COVID-19 as an enemy. The subheadline reinforces this metaphor by stating that the escalating crisis in Texas suggests that the United States could have “the worst coronavirus response in the developed world,” linking the idea of losing the battle to shortcomings in the national response. As shown in prior research, militaristic metaphors play a central role in structuring public understandings of COVID-19, particularly in political discourse, where they are used to mobilize citizens,

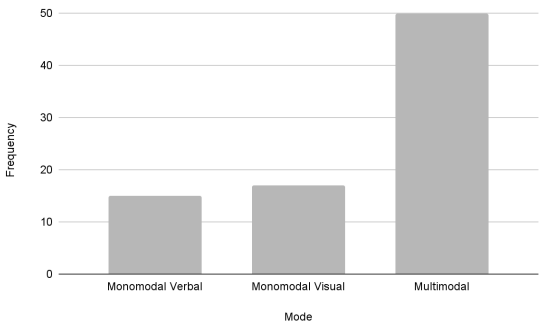


Figure 5 Distribution of metaphors across modes.

legitimize extraordinary measures, and foster resilience (Castro Seixas, 2020). In contrast, the metaphorical framing on this cover shifts the emphasis from mobilization to vulnerability, drawing attention to the perceived shortcomings of the pandemic response. The metaphor therefore frames the pandemic not as a conflict that will necessarily be overcome, but as a struggle in which institutions and public health systems are under severe strain.

Allergy, the official journal of the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI), is an international peer-reviewed journal that publishes research in allergy and clinical immunology, targeting healthcare professionals and researchers. The March 2021 issue cover depicts a scene in which the coronavirus is anthropomorphized, by being given human-like qualities and agency, and positioned as an opponent in a card game against a masked medical professional (see Figure 7). The headline “COVID-19” anchors the visual scene to the pandemic context.

The metaphor is activated visually through a game setting in which both the virus and the scientist are depicted as players. The coronavirus is represented with human-like facial features and posture, suggesting intentionality and agency. As Forceville (2009) notes, personification constitutes an important type of multimodal metaphor, allowing non-human or abstract entities to be understood in terms of human

characteristics such as agency and intentionality. In this case, the virus is represented as an intelligent adversary participating in a game against scientific expertise. By portraying the coronavirus as a game opponent, the cover reinforces the idea that the virus can plan and counter human efforts, much like an intelligent rival.

The cards placed on the table depict elements associated with scientific research, including antibodies, genetic material, and medical treatments, while the scientist holds a card showing a syringe, symbolizing vaccination. Through this arrangement, the cover metaphorically frames the pandemic as a contest between scientific intervention and the evolving virus. The metaphor CORONAVIRUS IS A GAME PLAYER therefore conceptualizes the crisis as a calculated interaction between competing forces, in which scientific knowledge and medical innovation function as the human player's strategic moves against a responsive opponent.

The Guardian Weekly is an international news magazine published by The Guardian, offering a curated selection of reporting and commentary. The cover of the April 24, 2020, issue exemplifies an all-typographic cover design (Johnson & Prijatel, 2007) using bold typography (see Figure 8). The word “LOCKDOWN,” rendered in large, stacked black letters that occupy nearly the entire cover, visually creates a sense of compression and enclosure.

Figure 6 *The New York Times Magazine*, July 19, 2020, depicting the COVID-19 IS AN ENEMY metaphor.



Figure 7 *Allergy*, Vol. 76, Issue 3, March 2021, depicting the CORONAVIRUS IS A GAME PLAYER metaphor.



The typographic arrangement constrains visual space, producing a sense of confinement that echoes the experience of lockdown. The red, slanted overlay “HOW DO WE BREAK OUT OF IT?” introduces a contrasting visual dynamic. By cutting diagonally across the rigid black structure, the text evokes urgency and signals a desire to disrupt or escape the imposed constraints. The design thus creates a visual tension between containment and rupture.

This tension activates the metaphor LOCKDOWN IS A PRISON, an instance of the CONTAINER metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lockdown is conceptualized as a bounded and restrictive space analogous to imprisonment, from which individuals seek to escape. The metaphor highlights the experiential distinction between “inside” and “outside,” reinforcing perceptions of social restriction and limited mobility, and representing lockdown as a spatial condition that constrains movement and agency.

Nature Immunology is a peer-reviewed journal that addresses advances in immunological research, targeting scientists and healthcare professionals in the field. The February 2024 cover illustrates the metaphor CORONAVIRUS IS A BURDEN, visually capturing the prolonged impact of the virus beyond the acute phase of infection (see Figure 9). The imagery corresponds to the issue’s theme, “Immune dysregulation in long COVID,” linking biological dysfunction to the experience of enduring, persistent effects.

The cover depicts a solitary human figure straining to drag a colossal red coronavirus particle resembling the widely circulated CDC visualization of SARS-CoV-2. The dramatic disparity in scale between the small human silhouette and the oversized virus creates a form of visual hyperbole that amplifies the sense of disproportionate weight and effort. Rather than presenting the virus as an immediate biological threat, the image illustrates it as an overwhelming load that must be carried and managed over time.

The act of pulling the virus foregrounds exertion and endurance, suggesting that long COVID involves a prolonged struggle rather than a clearly bounded episode of illness. In this way, the cover simplifies a complex immunological condition into an accessible visual message, conceptualizing the lasting effects of COVID-19 as a burden that must be endured over time.

6. Discussion

The findings highlight the communicative importance of magazine and journal covers as a distinctive site of multimodal meaning-making in media discourse, guiding audiences toward particular ways of understanding salient issues and developments at a given moment.

Through the strategic combination of visual and verbal elements, covers shape how the main story is understood (Tseronis, 2015). Within this constrained yet impactful format, metaphor emerges as a particularly effective figurative device, enabling the rendering of abstract and complex phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, more accessible.

The findings suggest that magazine and journal covers employ broadly similar metaphorical framings to conceptualize the COVID-19 pandemic. The prominence of the WAR domain aligns with previous research on COVID-19 metaphors (Crespo-Fernández, 2021; Feng & Wu, 2022). Across the corpus,

Figure 8 *The Guardian Weekly*, Vol. 202, No. 19, 24 April 2020, depicting the LOCKDOWN IS A PRISON metaphor.



WAR metaphors are realized through both verbal expressions (e.g., fighting, frontline, battle) and visual references to military imagery. Closely related representations conceptualize the virus as an opponent or enemy (Asenjo Alcalde & Gil, 2023; Feng & Wu, 2022), thereby construing it as an autonomous agent capable of attacking, spreading strategically, or responding to human actions (Crespo-Fernández, 2021:24; Kremer & Felgenhauer, 2022:7). Such representations often rely on personification, a type of ontological metaphor in which non-human entities are conceptualized in terms of human characteristics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

RACE, GAME, and SPORTS metaphors frame the pandemic response in terms of competition, speed, and strategic action, particularly regarding vaccine development, often described as a “vaccine race” (Pedrini, 2021). Visually, this metaphorical framing appears through imagery associated with stopwatches, hourglasses, play, and athletic competition, reinforced by verbal expressions such as sprint, rush, racing, and winning, which frame the pandemic not only as a contest against the virus, but as a time-sensitive process in which delay carries significant consequences. JOURNEY metaphors similarly introduce a temporal by emphasizing endurance, unpredictability, and the absence of a clearly defined endpoint, while still implying the possibility of eventual movement toward resolution.

Figure 9 *Nature Immunology*, February 2024, Vol.25 No.2, depicting the CORONAVIRUS IS A BURDEN metaphor.



Metaphors drawing on natural entities, natural disasters, and natural forces often frame the pandemic in terms of non-human phenomena that appear external to human society, such as storms, floods, and wildfires, thereby emphasizing the urgency of societal and governmental response (Charteris-Black, 2021:74). These metaphors are realized through images of virus-filled waves and natural elements reimagined as coronavirus particles. The WAVE metaphor, widely used to describe successive rises in infection rates (Charteris-Black, 2021:79), reinforces the perception of the pandemic as an external force beyond human control. In contrast, the FIRE source domain foregrounds a form of controllable threat, as fires can be contained or mitigated through coordinated action, underscoring the role of collective response (Semino, 2021b). Similarly, representations that conceptualize the virus as a living organism further reintroduce human agency, for instance, when controlling the virus is represented as taming an animal, suggesting that the threat can be managed.

Another notable finding is the presence of CONTAINER and BURDEN metaphors, which have received comparatively less attention in previous research on COVID-19 metaphors. BURDEN metaphors shift attention from action and confrontation to endurance, representing the virus as a prolonged weight borne by individuals and societies. Rather than depicting an external enemy, these metaphors emphasize the cumulative physical and emotional toll of a prolonged crisis. In the corpus, this is visually realized through representations of the virus and its long-term effects as heavy objects to be carried, pulled, or pushed. Human figures are shown struggling to drag oversized coronavirus particles or support them with ropes, reinforcing the sense of ongoing strain and effort.

CONTAINER metaphors, in turn, spatialize restriction by representing lockdown as enclosure, translating abstract public-health measures into lived experiences of boundedness and limited movement. In this corpus, this source domain is consistently mapped onto the target domain of lockdown

rather than the virus itself, shifting attention away from action and response toward conditions of restricted mobility and limited agency. This framing foregrounds the inside-outside distinction, in which being “inside” is associated with safety, containment, or obligation, while the “outside” is rendered inaccessible, restricted, or potentially dangerous. Visually, this is realized through imagery that emphasizes enclosure and blocked movement, such as figures positioned within closed or partially sealed spaces, or exit routes obstructed by the virus. In doing so, these metaphors not only represent physical restriction but also evoke the social and psychological dimensions of lockdown, including isolation, separation, and the disruption of everyday spatial routines.

7. Conclusion

Magazine and journal covers constitute multimodal sites where the COVID-19 pandemic is framed and interpreted through metaphor. While covers primarily serve commercial and editorial purposes by attracting attention and summarizing the theme of an issue, they also play an important role in shaping how major events are conceptualized. Metaphors are used on covers to translate complex and abstract aspects of the pandemic into more familiar and emotionally resonant representations. The COVID-19 pandemic is conceptualized through a range of metaphors, with WAR as the dominant, while BURDEN and CONTAINER represent less widely discussed ways of framing the pandemic, foregrounding experiences of endurance and restriction.

The use of covers to present content is not limited to popular magazines but has become increasingly prevalent in scholarly journal publishing (Wang et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2024). Despite differences between magazines and journals, their covers rely on similar design elements, including images, headlines, cover lines, and typographic arrangements, that perform comparable communicative purposes. Across both publication types, these elements are used to convey key

aspects of the pandemic before readers engage with the issue's content.

The analysis also highlights the role of cover design in shaping the realization of metaphors. The arrangement of images and cover lines constrains the semiotic resources available for interpretation and influences whether metaphors are expressed visually, verbally, or across modes. In this sense, cover design operates not as a neutral container but as an active contributor to the construction of metaphorical meaning. The analysis further shows that a single cover can incorporate multiple metaphorical mappings, drawing on different source domains in both the image and the cover lines.

Taken together, these findings suggest that covers do not merely reflect public discourse on global crises but also actively participate in shaping how such crises are conceptualized across different communicative contexts. The study highlights a shared visual communication strategy across public-facing magazines and journals, positioning cover design as a key site where complex societal and scientific developments are interpreted and given meaning. Future research could extend this analysis by examining metaphorical framings on covers across languages and cultural contexts to explore potential cross-cultural differences in the multimodal representation of global health crises.

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Appendix

For copyright reasons, images of the original magazine and journal covers are not included in this article. Where available, QR codes are provided to direct readers to the original images for reference. The data analysis is available via the following Open Science Framework (OSF) repository: <https://osf.io/s2qc6>.