



IMPLICIT MEANINGS OF SOCIAL ISSUES IN THE ANIMATED SERIES FREEJ: AN UMBERTO ECO SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Nisaul Kamila¹, Zulkhairi², Nurul Azmi³

^{1,2,3}Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh

Email: 220502013@student.ar-raniry.ac.id, zulkhairi.sofyan@ar-raniry.ac.id, azmihj837@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates the implicit meanings of social issues in the animated series Freej through the semiotic framework of Umberto Eco. Previous studies on Freej have primarily focused on cultural representation, identity construction, and the preservation of Emirati traditions, while limited attention has been given to the processes through which social meanings are implicitly produced and interpreted. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how social criticism is constructed through Eco's typology of sign production. Employing a qualitative semiotic approach, the study analyzes five purposively selected episodes from Season 1 of Freej, chosen for their representation of tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary Emirati society. The findings reveal that issues of modernization, cultural marginalization, and identity negotiation are communicated through visual composition, spatial organization, performative contrast, and linguistic interaction. These meanings emerge through the semiotic processes of recognition, ostension, replica, and invention, which enable viewers to actively interpret the social messages embedded in the narrative. The study demonstrates that Freej functions as an open text that conveys social criticism implicitly rather than through direct verbal expression. Theoretically, this research extends the application of Eco's typology of sign production to animated media and contributes to the understanding of how implicit social meanings are generated through audience-text cooperation. Practically, the findings highlight the potential of animation as a medium for social reflection, cultural awareness, and social critique in contemporary society.

Keywords:

Freej

Semiotics

Typology of Sign

Production

Implicit Social Issue

Animation

تجريد

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن المعاني الضمنية للقضايا الاجتماعية في المسلسل الكرتوني فريج (Freej) من خلال الإطار السيميائي لأومبرتو إيكو. وقد ركزت الدراسات السابقة حول فريج بصورة أساسية على التمثيلات الثقافية، وبناء الهوية، والمحافظة على التراث الإماراتي، في حين لم تحظَ عمليات إنتاج الدلالات الاجتماعية الضمنية وتأويلها باهتمام كافٍ. وانطلاقاً من هذه الفجوة البحثية، تسعى الدراسة الحالية إلى تحليل كيفية بناء النقد الاجتماعي من خلال أنماط إنتاج العلامة عند أومبرتو إيكو. وتعتمد الدراسة المنهج السيميائي الكيفي من خلال تحليل خمس حلقات مختارة قصدياً من الموسم الأول لمسلسل فريج، وذلك بناءً على تمثيلها لحالة التوتر بين التقاليد والحداثة في المجتمع الإماراتي المعاصر. وتكشف النتائج أن قضايا التحديث، والتمهيش الثقافي، والتفاوض الهوياتي تُنقل عبر التكوين البصري، والتنظيم المكاني، والتقابل الأدائي، والتفاعل اللغوي. وتنطبق هذه المعاني من خلال العمليات السيميائية المتمثلة في التعرف (Recognition)، والإشارة (Ostension)، والاستنساخ (Replica)، والابتكار (Invention)، مما يتيح للمشاهد المشاركة الفاعلة في تأويل الرسائل الاجتماعية المتضمنة في السرد. وتبين الدراسة أن فريج

يعمل بوصفه نصًا مفتوحًا ينقل النقد الاجتماعي بصورة ضمنية بدلاً من التعبير اللفظي المباشر. وعلى المستوى النظري، توسع هذه الدراسة نطاق تطبيق أنماط إنتاج العلامة لدى أومبرتو إيكو في مجال الوسائط المتحركة، وتسهم في تعميق فهم كيفية إنتاج المعاني الاجتماعية الضمنية من خلال التفاعل التعاوني بين النص والمتلقي. أما على المستوى العملي، فتبرز نتائج الدراسة إمكانات الرسوم المتحركة بوصفها وسيلة للتأمل الاجتماعي، وتعزيز الوعي الثقافي، وإيصال النقد الاجتماعي في المجتمعات المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية :

فريج
السيمبائيات
تصنيف إنتاج
العلامة
القضايا الاجتماعية
الضمنية
الرسوم المتحركة

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji makna-makna implisit dari isu-isu sosial dalam serial animasi Freej melalui kerangka semiotika Umberto Eco. Penelitian-penelitian sebelumnya tentang Freej umumnya berfokus pada representasi budaya, konstruksi identitas, dan pelestarian tradisi Emirat, sementara perhatian terhadap proses pembentukan dan penafsiran makna sosial secara implisit masih terbatas. Untuk mengisi kesenjangan tersebut, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana kritik sosial dibangun melalui tipologi produksi tanda yang dikemukakan oleh Umberto Eco. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan semiotika kualitatif dengan menganalisis lima episode terpilih dari musim pertama Freej yang dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan representasinya terhadap ketegangan antara tradisi dan modernitas dalam masyarakat Emirat kontemporer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa isu-isu modernisasi, marginalisasi budaya, dan negosiasi identitas dikomunikasikan melalui komposisi visual, pengorganisasian ruang, kontras performatif, dan interaksi linguistik. Makna-makna tersebut muncul melalui proses semiotik berupa pengenalan (recognition), penunjukan (ostension), replika (replica), dan invensi (invention), yang memungkinkan penonton secara aktif menafsirkan pesan-pesan sosial yang terkandung dalam narasi. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Freej berfungsi sebagai teks terbuka yang menyampaikan kritik sosial secara implisit, bukan melalui ekspresi verbal yang langsung. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperluas penerapan tipologi produksi tanda Umberto Eco pada media animasi serta berkontribusi pada pemahaman mengenai bagaimana makna sosial implisit dihasilkan melalui kerja sama antara teks dan audiens. Secara praktis, temuan penelitian ini menegaskan potensi animasi sebagai media refleksi sosial, peningkatan kesadaran budaya, dan penyampaian kritik sosial dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata kunci:

Freej
Semiotika
Tipologi Produksi
Tanda
Isu Sosial Tersirat
Animasi

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A. Introduction

Not all animated series present social problems in an explicit or direct manner. In many cultural contexts, particularly within societies where certain social issues are considered sensitive, animation often communicates social meanings indirectly through visual signs, narrative structures, and symbolic interactions rather than overt statements.

This indirect mode of representation enables animated texts to address complex social realities while maintaining humor, accessibility, and cultural appropriateness. Consequently, the absence of explicit discourse does not imply the absence of social critique; instead, social meanings are frequently embedded within subtle semiotic practices that require active interpretation from viewers (Arafaat, 2023). Recent scholarship confirms that animation and visual media can encode moral, cultural, and ideological meanings through visual symbolism, narrative organization, and non-verbal signs rather than direct exposition (Azhari, 2026; Hamidah et al., 2025; Kholifatunnisa et al., 2026).

This condition underlies the motivation for selecting Freej as the object of this study. Rather than articulating social problems openly, Freej frequently employs everyday interactions, non-verbal expressions, and visual contrasts to suggest underlying social tensions within contemporary Emirati society. Such narrative strategies position Freej as a text where social issues are present but remain unspoken, conveyed through signs that rely on shared cultural knowledge and interpretive participation. Previous studies have examined Freej primarily in terms of cultural identity and representation, yet they have not sufficiently addressed how social meanings are produced implicitly through semiotic processes (Lagrange, 2013). Comparable studies of Arab visual narratives show that social conflict, cultural values, and humanitarian experience are frequently constructed through interactions among images, dialogue, symbols, and contextual knowledge (Hameed & Alsager, 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2024; Rezeuki et al., 2025).

To examine this mode of indirect social representation, this study employs Umberto Eco's concept of the typology of sign production as an analytical tool. Eco's framework enables the analysis of how meaning is generated through recognition, ostension, replica, and invention, allowing unspoken social issues to emerge through sign production rather than explicit discourse (Eco, 1976). By applying this approach, the present research seeks to uncover how Freej functions as a semiotic space in which social issues are negotiated implicitly within animated narrative forms. Recent applications of semiotic theory to Arabic comics, poetry, and cultural texts further demonstrate that meaning depends on interpretive relations among signs, cultural codes, and audiences (Azizah et al., 2025; Jannah et al., 2025; Maghfirah et al., 2025; Salbiah, 2025).

Previous studies have highlighted the significance of animation as a medium for cultural representation, identity construction, and social reflection. Within the Arab context, animation has increasingly been utilized to preserve cultural values while

responding to the challenges of modernization and globalization. As one of the most influential animated series in the United Arab Emirates, Freej portrays Emirati social life through humor, visual storytelling, and culturally grounded narratives (Ercegovac et al., 2025). Studies of contemporary audiovisual narratives also show that series and digital visual texts can organize social values, marginalization, and audience positioning through narrative and representational choices (Ina et al., 2025; Wardah & Surur, 2025).

Research on Freej has primarily focused on cultural representation, Emirati identity, heritage preservation, and the negotiation between tradition and modernity. For example, Ercegovac et al. (2025) demonstrate that Freej functions as a cultural text that preserves Emirati traditions while simultaneously reflecting social transformation in a rapidly globalizing society. Similarly, studies on Emirati media have emphasized the role of Freej in articulating national identity and cultural continuity within contemporary social change. The tension between cultural continuity and social transformation identified in such media can also be understood in relation to recent studies of cultural identity, modernism, ritual meaning, and symbolic preservation (Hamdoune & El Khairat, 2025; Rahmatillah et al., 2024; Saputra et al., 2025; Zulkhairi et al., 2024).

Despite these contributions, previous studies have largely concentrated on what cultural and social issues are represented in the series rather than how such meanings are produced and communicated through semiotic processes. Consequently, the mechanisms through which implicit social meanings emerge in Freej remain insufficiently explored. This limitation reveals a methodological gap, as existing research tends to emphasize content representation and cultural narratives rather than the production of meaning through signs and signification processes. Recent research on public and news discourse likewise demonstrates that ideology and social reality are constructed through rhetorical, lexical, and representational choices, although these studies generally focus more directly on verbal discourse than on implicit sign-production processes (Fajri, 2025; Mulyadi et al., 2025; Zubaidah & Hasaniyah, 2025).

Furthermore, a theoretical gap exists in the limited application of Umberto Eco's semiotic theory, particularly his typology of sign production, to Arab animated media. While Eco's framework has been applied in studies of visual and animated texts, its use in examining Emirati animation remains relatively scarce. In addition, a regional gap persists because semiotic studies of animation predominantly focus on Western and East Asian productions, leaving Arab animation comparatively underrepresented in contemporary

media scholarship. More recent semiotic work on intertextuality and digital audience responses also underscores the active role of readers and viewers in producing meaning from culturally circulating signs (Noriska et al., 2026).

This study differs from previous studies because it investigates the implicit construction of social meanings in Freej through Umberto Eco's typology of sign production. Rather than merely identifying social issues represented in the narrative, this study examines how meanings emerge through the processes of recognition, ostension, replica, and invention. By focusing on these mechanisms, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how social criticism is communicated implicitly in Arab animated media and how audiences participate in the construction of meaning. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how implicit meanings of social issues are constructed in the animated series Freej through Umberto Eco's semiotic theory of sign production.

B. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in semiotic analysis to examine how implicit social issues are constructed in the animated series Freej. Qualitative research is commonly used to explore meaning, interpretation, and social phenomena within cultural texts (Sugiyono, 2019). This approach is appropriate because the object of analysis is not numerical data but signs, meanings, and cultural representations embedded in audiovisual texts. The analysis focuses on how social meanings are produced indirectly through visual, spatial, performative, and linguistic signs rather than through explicit verbal statements.

The primary data source consists of selected episodes of Freej directed by Mohammed Saeed Harib. Episodes were selected purposively based on the presence of scenes that strongly represent social tension between tradition and modernity, cultural marginalization, spatial hierarchy, and identity negotiation. Purposive sampling enables researchers to focus on data that are most relevant to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2019).

Data collection was conducted through repeated viewing of the selected episodes to ensure close and comprehensive observation. This technique aligns with qualitative observation methods that emphasize depth and contextual understanding (Moleong, 2018). During this process, significant scenes were identified and documented by noting visual composition, character positioning, spatial arrangements, gestures, dialogue, and forms of

address. Screenshots and detailed scene descriptions were used to support systematic interpretation of the signs appearing in each unit of data.

The analytical framework is based on Umberto Eco's typology of sign production, which consists of four interrelated processes: recognition, ostension, replica, and invention. At the stage of recognition, signs are identified through shared cultural codes and social knowledge. Ostension is applied to analyze how certain signs are pointed out, emphasized, or hierarchically positioned within the narrative space. Replica refers to the repetition of similar signs and representational patterns across scenes or episodes, which contributes to the stabilization of meaning. Finally, invention is used to interpret how new meanings emerge through the cooperation between the text and the viewer.

Data analysis was carried out by systematically applying these four stages to each unit of data. The analysis moves from identifying signs to interpreting their social implications, emphasizing how meaning is produced implicitly rather than stated explicitly.

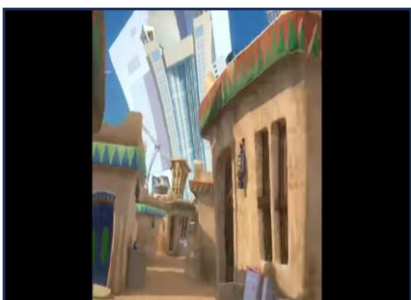
C. Result and Discussion

This study is grounded in Umberto Eco's concept of sign production, which emphasizes how meaning is generated through signs rather than merely transmitted through explicit linguistic codes. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco (1976) argues that signs are not fixed entities but are produced through processes that involve interpretation, cultural competence, and contextual recognition. Meaning, therefore, emerges from the interaction between the sign, its mode of production, and the interpreter.

Within this framework, ostension refers to a mode of sign production in which meaning is conveyed by showing rather than explicitly stating. Ostensive signs do not rely on fully coded linguistic structures but instead invite interpretation through observation, situational context, and shared cultural knowledge (Eco, 1976). Silence, gestures, visual emphasis, and narrative pauses function as meaningful signs when they are intentionally presented to be interpreted.

In audiovisual texts, such as animated series, ostension plays a crucial role in communicating social meaning indirectly. Visual narratives often rely on non-verbal cues and situational contrasts to convey social tensions without overt explanation. As noted in semiotic studies, animated texts function as complex sign systems capable of producing layered meanings through visual and contextual signification (Cobley, 2001).

By applying Eco's concept of ostensive sign production, this study examines how Freej communicates social issues implicitly. Rather than articulating social problems through direct discourse, the series presents situations that allow viewers to infer meaning through culturally informed interpretation. This approach aligns with Eco's view that semiosis depends on the cooperation between the text and its audience, where meaning is actively produced rather than passively received (Eco, 1976).

No	Image	Recognition	Ostension	Replica	Invention
1		traditional Emirati houses and modern skyscrapers are identified as signs of tradition and modernity through the audience's shared cultural knowledge. As explained by Eco (1976), sign recognition occurs when an object is interpreted through pre-existing cultural codes. In spatial studies, Lefebvre (1991) argues that architecture is never neutral, as it always embodies social and historical meanings.	manifested through the visual positioning of traditional settlements as marginal backgrounds, while skyscrapers dominate the frame. This act of visual pointing establishes a hierarchy of space. Such representation aligns with Harvey's (2012) argument that modern urban development centralizes economic and symbolic power. Within the theory of sign production, Eco (1979) defines ostension as the act of indicating and prioritizing certain signs over others.	this contrast is repeatedly reproduced across episodes. Repetition transforms inequality into a normalized visual condition. In media studies, Kellner (1995) explains that repetitive representation plays a crucial role in legitimizing power relations. This process corresponds with Eco's (1976) notion that sign replication stabilizes social meaning.	the accumulation of recognition, ostension, and replica produces an implicit critique of modernization that marginalizes local culture. According to Eco (1990), such meanings are not explicitly stated but emerge through the interpretive cooperation of the audience.

No	Image	Recognition	Ostension	Replica	Invention
2		traditional and religious performances are identified as symbols of communal cultural practices. This recognition relies on the audience's cultural encyclopedia, which Eco (1976) describes as the foundation of meaning production. In cultural studies, Storey (2018) emphasizes that traditional practices play a key role in shaping collective identity.	The stage of ostension appears when these performances are visually presented as receiving little public attention. Passive audiences indicate a shift in cultural priorities. This displacement reflects the dominance of popular culture, which Kellner (1995) argues often marginalizes traditional forms within media representation.	scenes of audience disinterest recur across episodes, reinforcing the perception that traditional performances have lost their social relevance. In Eco's theory of sign production, repetition functions to consolidate meaning within cultural consciousness (Eco, 1976).	Freej constructs an implicit critique of the declining legitimacy of tradition in contemporary society. As noted by Eco (1990), such social criticism operates indirectly through representational structures rather than explicit statements.
3		modern performances are identified as symbols of popular culture associated with progress and success. Storey (2018) explains that popular culture often occupies a dominant position in contemporary societies. This recognition enables	The stage of ostension is evident in the spatial and narrative positioning of modern performances as central attractions, accompanied by enthusiastic audience responses. This visual emphasis signifies cultural legitimacy.	scenes of public enthusiasm for modern performances are consistently repeated. Repetition strengthens the dominance of modern entertainment as the cultural norm, aligning	Freej implicitly critiques the elevation of modernity as the sole indicator of progress, displacing traditional values. This critique emerges through the structured interplay of signs, consistent

No	Image	Recognition	Ostension	Replica	Invention
		audiences to interpret visual enthusiasm as social validation (Eco, 1976).	In media theory, Kellner (1995) argues that such representations reinforce dominant values, while Eco (1979) conceptualizes this process as hierarchical sign indication.	with Eco's (1976) concept of meaning stabilization through sign reproduction.	with Eco's (1990) theory of open texts.
4		shopping malls are identified as symbols of modern consumer spaces, while elderly female characters represent traditional identities. According to Eco (1976), such recognition depends on established cultural codes. Urban theorist Harvey (2012) notes that consumer spaces are often designed for specific social groups.	The stage of ostension becomes apparent when elderly women are visually portrayed as uncomfortable and out of place within these spaces. This visual discomfort functions as a sign of exclusion. In semiotic terms, Eco (1979) describes ostension as the process by which exclusionary meanings are pointed out through representation.	the repeated depiction of alienation reinforces the idea that exclusion is structural rather than incidental. This aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) concept of socially produced space and with Eco's (1976) notion of repeated signification.	At the level of invention , Freej produces an implicit critique of modernity that marginalizes elderly and traditional subjects. This meaning emerges through audience interpretation, as theorized by Eco (1990).

No	Image	Recognition	Ostension	Replica	Invention
5		At the recognition stage, the term “madam” is identified as a global-commercial form of address, while “umm” is recognized as a culturally embedded linguistic marker of identity. Eco (1976) emphasizes that linguistic signs are interpreted through social codes. From a discourse perspective, Fairclough (1995) views language as a site of power relations.	The stage of ostension occurs when the global term is consistently used in public interactions, despite its cultural inappropriateness. This indicates the dominance of market-oriented language. In semiotic terms, Eco (1979) describes this as hierarchical sign placement within social interaction.	Through the replica, the repeated use of standardized global language marginalizes local forms of address. This process reflects linguistic homogenization in globalization, as discussed by Pennycook (2007), and corresponds to Eco’s (1976) concept of repeated sign reproduction	Freej implicitly critiques the erosion of local identity caused by linguistic globalization and consumer culture. This critical meaning is produced indirectly through interpretive engagement, consistent with Eco’s (1990) framework.

The findings demonstrate that Freej constructs unstated social issues through layered semiotic strategies. Applying Umberto Eco’s typology of sign production, the process of recognition allows viewers to identify familiar symbols of tradition and modernity. These symbols draw upon shared cultural knowledge embedded within the audience’s cultural encyclopedia.

At the level of ostension, the series positions modern spaces, performances, and linguistic practices as socially dominant, while traditional elements are marginalized. This positioning is not conveyed through explicit dialogue but through visual hierarchy, spatial arrangement, and character interaction.

Through replica, these representations are repeated across episodes, reinforcing normative assumptions about progress, success, and cultural relevance. Repetition normalizes inequality and exclusion, making them appear natural within the narrative world of Freej.

At the stage of invention, meaning is produced implicitly as social critique. The series invites audiences to reflect on the consequences of rapid modernization, including cultural displacement, generational conflict, and erosion of local identity. As an open text, Freej relies on audience cooperation to interpret these meanings.

These findings align with previous semiotic studies that emphasize the role of animation as a medium for indirect social criticism. However, this study extends existing research by focusing on Arab animation and applying Eco's semiotic stages to uncover unstated social issues specific to contemporary Emirati society.

Compared with recent semiotic research on Arabic comics, animation, poetry, and ritual culture, the present findings show a methodological distinction. Peircean studies generally identify icons, indices, symbols, and the representamen-object-interpretant relationship (Hamidah et al., 2025; Jannah et al., 2025; Kholifatunnisa et al., 2026; Maghfirah et al., 2025; Zulkhairi et al., 2024), while Barthesian work emphasizes denotation, connotation, myth, and visual symbolism (Azhari, 2026; Salbiah, 2025). In contrast, Eco's typology used here foregrounds the process by which signs are produced and stabilized through recognition, ostension, replica, and invention. This process-oriented perspective helps explain not only what a sign represents, but how repeated visual arrangements invite viewers to construct implicit social criticism.

The social critique identified in Freej also resonates with recent studies of Arab audiovisual and media discourse. Representations of social and cultural values in film, gender marginalization in drama, socio-political dilemmas in cartoons, and ideological framing in public and news discourse demonstrate that visual and linguistic choices organize social positions and cultural legitimacy (Fajri, 2025; Hameed & Alsager, 2024; Mulyadi et al., 2025; Ramadhan et al., 2024; Rezeuki et al., 2025; Wardah & Surur, 2025; Zubaidah & Hasaniyah, 2025). Freej differs, however, by embedding these tensions in humor, spatial contrast, and everyday interaction rather than explicit argumentative discourse.

The findings concerning modernization and identity negotiation can further be read alongside studies showing that cultural meaning is produced through encounters between

tradition, modernity, symbolic space, and audience interpretation (Azizah et al., 2025; Hamdoune & El Khairat, 2025; Ina et al., 2025; Noriska et al., 2026; Rahmatillah et al., 2024; Saputra et al., 2025). This reinforces the interpretation of Freej as an open cultural text in which viewers mobilize shared cultural knowledge to recognize marginalization and negotiate the significance of social change.

This study has certain limitations related to its analytical approach. The analysis focuses on visual situations and non-verbal elements in the animated series Freej without incorporating textual dialogue or direct visual extracts. Rather than examining specific lines of speech or still images, this study interprets meaning based on the overall visual presentation and narrative context.

While this approach allows for an emphasis on ostensive sign production and implicit meaning, it may limit the level of textual or visual specificity in the analysis. However, this methodological choice aligns with the study's objective to examine how social issues are communicated indirectly through visual signification rather than explicit discourse.

Future research may complement this approach by incorporating multimodal analysis, including dialogue, subtitles, or selected visual frames, to further explore the interaction between verbal and non-verbal signs in animated texts.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the animated series Freej constructs social issues implicitly through semiotic mechanisms rather than explicit verbal statements. By examining visual composition, spatial arrangements, performative contrasts, and linguistic interactions, the analysis reveals how social tensions related to modernization, cultural marginalization, and identity negotiation are embedded within everyday narratives. These issues are presented as normalized aspects of contemporary life, inviting viewers to engage in interpretation rather than direct judgment.

Through the application of Umberto Eco's typology of sign production, the findings show that social meaning in Freej is produced through a sequential process of recognition, ostension, replica, and invention. Signs associated with tradition and modernity are first recognized through shared cultural codes, then hierarchically positioned within modern urban spaces. Their repeated representation across episodes stabilizes patterns of marginalization, while meaning is ultimately invented through the interpretive cooperation

of the audience. This process confirms Freej as an open text in which meaning is not fixed but continuously negotiated.

The study also highlights the role of animation as an effective medium for implicit social critique. The flexibility of animated form allows sensitive social issues to be articulated subtly through humor, exaggeration, and visual symbolism, particularly within culturally constrained contexts. As a result, Freej functions not merely as entertainment but as a cultural text that reflects and critiques social transformation in contemporary Emirati society.

Overall, this research contributes to the study of animation and media semiotics by demonstrating the relevance of Eco's typology of sign production in analyzing implicit social issues within animated series. It underscores the importance of reading animation as a serious cultural discourse and opens possibilities for further research on audience reception, comparative studies of Arab animation, and the application of alternative semiotic frameworks

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