

Telling a Compelling Story: An Exploration of Cognitive Simplicity in Comic Book Design and Characterisation as Visual Communication for Political, Cultural and Social Influence

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to discuss the role of comics as a source of political and social influence, to understand the challenges in modern comics upholding of aesthetic simplicity and cultural authenticity. To explore comic's significance and value as a cultural art-form, several aspects of comic design and characterisation development through modernisation are discussed through literature and case studies, based on the problem statement: Can comics be a source of political and social influence? For primary research, qualitative interviews and a survey were conducted among Malaysia's art and design communities using sequential mixed method research. The aim was to examine target audiences' perceptions of comic design and shifts in characterisation, and how global cultural trends such as media convergence and entertainment marketing affect comics' authenticity. Findings suggest that comics are not time-bound products; hence their immense capacity to engage fans despite shifts in characterisations. Significantly, comic art fans in Malaysia seem to adopt a conservative attitude in desiring characters to maintain aesthetic simplicity and cultural authenticity. Overall analysis suggests that maintaining original essence in characterisation enable audiences to understand artists' authentic cultural experiences through graphic storylines documenting the issues addressed. Results suggest that mainstreaming of comics propel the industry's future growth through diversification and inclusiveness of social narratives, but audience's perceptions of comics as a source of political and social influence maybe affected. Future research could probe the degree in which comics' aesthetics appeal and cognitive simplicity contribute to extending comics' role as an authentic global cultural art-form.

Keywords: *comics, cognitive simplicity, graphic novel, pop culture, media convergence*

INTRODUCTION

Comic art have had a powerful impact and immediacy as an effective communication tool, fascinating artists, media, storytellers, scholars, leaders, and society over the last century. Many researchers study graphic novels and comics as a social art-form, yet contributions in this field are far from abundant and some culture critics take discussions of comic lightly. Traditional comic artistry is impacted by shifting cultural attitudes to embrace a scope of social development such as diversity and inclusiveness, and reflecting shifting social tastes, but at the same time the changes also compel researchers to ask: *Have modern societies lost or gained something from the change? Would comic commercialisation and progression of time remove the authenticity of storytelling traditions which comics and graphic novels had always projected, stood for, or symbolised?*

The aim of this paper is to seeking broad perspectives rather than answers for these thinking points. Identifying audiences' perceptions of "what comics do for society" is critical, as changes in global political and sociocultural development are reflected in today's wide range of visual communication practices and forms, albeit novels, animated cartoons, digital publications, films, etc. These issues could be problematic for the growth of traditional comic and graphic novel industry in the future, as audiences' perceptions and acceptance of characterisation changes may hinder audiences' appreciation of comics' value as aesthetic art-form and creative storytelling tools, to being globally marketable products designed to be mere commercial entertainment genres.

Research Questions

To understand the scope of issues, several research questions guide this paper in framing of analysis: *How do visual aesthetics and cognitive simplicity in comic books engage readers? How do modernisation and cultural shifts influence comic design and characterisation? How does mainstreaming of comics enhance its popularity and propel the industry's growth?*

Authoritative visual communication and visual culture references are reviewed in literature to understand how historical, political, aesthetics and social contexts interplay in the framing of comics as functional visual content. Comics traditionally depict morality struggles, with heroes typecast as normal, superior or dysfunctional, battling enemies and villains constantly and courageously. What confronts today's comic and graphic novel audiences, however, is a dichotomy of perceptions. To start, are modern comics to be regarded as legitimate cultural art-forms, if traditional perceptions continue to linger labelling it as a non-beneficial art genre?

A distinct study gap is assumed in commencement of research: that there exists an unstudied area of huge differences between visual communicators and design researchers' perceptions towards the value of comics as cultural work, and audience's perception of their ability to influence social attitude change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many remarkable books and essays have been written and published about graphic novels' historical uses as visual communication tools for social storytelling. For instance, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) art historian David Kunzle wrote of the 1800s Swiss schoolteacher and caricaturist, Rodolphe Töpffer, whose folk-flavoured satires on European society were published five decades before comics started to gain American public interest (Kunzle 2007).

Background of Comics

The 1930s to 1980s saw comic books begin its cultural golden age. The industry bloomed, its influence as an entertaining, constructive, and instructive medium providing simple ways of understanding socio-political themes, conflicts, and human issues imaginatively. The basic function of comics is to be a premise that creatively captures experiences, in settings familiar, fantastical, or otherwise; to craft and tell stories through the mirror of realism (realistic scenes, timelines, events, and characters), thus representing audiences' social reality, while portraying or delineating social and cultural identities (Chaney 2017; Maggio 2007).

Cartoonist Scott McCloud (1993) traces comics' trajectory over two centuries of visual communication history, with origins as prehistoric cave paintings, to the daily record-keeping of Egyptian hieroglyphics; code inscriptions of the Aztec civilisation; the sacred texts of Mayan peoples and Japanese hand-painted *emaki* scrolls. In his book, McCloud pays tribute to a range of early contributors such as English satirist William Hogarth who in the 1700s engraved caricatures of lewd common behaviours among the uneducated populace.

McCloud's thesis also produced a triangularity framework, *The Picture Plane* (51–52). Using this model, McCloud determines comics as consisting of "vocabulary simplification of ideas" using simple *characters*, simple representation of perceived *reality* such as environment, time and space, and simple *language, icons, and images*, to produce desired audience responses through aesthetic appeals, symbolic, and representational meanings. McCloud (1993, 9–12) terms comics as "the juxtaposition of pictures and other images in deliberate sequence for aesthetic response," in other words, a serial approach to pictorial stories designed to communicate ideas and tell stories socially to audiences.

Cognitive Simplicity in Social Storytelling

New York cartoonist Will Eisner's definition of graphic novels as a sequential art-form is the foundation in which comic genre imply that skilful visual illustrators are storytellers (Eisner 1985). Unlike other mediums, the immediacy of comics comes from narrative skills: comic artists must master narrative flow in visuals, giving readers the freedom, and ability to navigate "the physical word and images, which is re-converted by one or more senses back into thoughts" (McCloud 1993, 193–198).

The cognitive process passes through the mind, then hand, then paper, to the eye, and back to mind, to construct experience, meaning, and representation. As such, comics communicate through eye tracking and information scanning, applying the cognitive rules of closure to study the design of panels in framing the artist/author's ideas.

Cohn (2020) provides a recent model that brings together a system that comprises units and sequences that enables a language to be built in readers' or audiences' minds to process visual imagery. He discusses the challenges of "reading" sequential images (Figure 1), concluding that they are not always universally understood but is determined by individuals' cognition capacities, the complexity of decoding involved, and the level of exposure within cultures.

In developing cultural and social attitudes, graphic novels' simplicity offers audiences the freedom to reimagine the significance of historical events and scenes to make cultural sense of dialogues (Heimermann and Tullis 2017). Modern cartoonists have been accused of confusing audiences on philosophical, psychological, and political grounds. As characterisation of comics shift to embrace cultural inclusiveness and mainstream social identification, traditional comic books with certain slants (such as *Tintin*) have been increasingly questioned for ethical appropriateness in dealing with socio-political issues (Heimermann and Tullis 2017).

An interesting analysis between comic panels and the page of printed text is produced by Simon Barton (2015), whose monograph examines the prose fiction of novels in linking the sense of words and meanings *cognitively*. This differs from how comics use words and images *interdependently* in its total experience. This reading sequence involves *saccades* or eye movements, similar to poetry reading method.

Maggio (2007) elaborates on comic illustrations as powerful language of cognitive freedom. Words and picture are freely juxtaposed, visual sequencing in either linear or "Z" forms. This "double writing" technique enables various pathways for message and information to be received through scanning of images, textual processing, rescanning for meaning, etc. Crawley and van Rijswick (2012) argue that the complexities of actual social experiences can be captured in graphic novels' simplified story frames, and this enjoins audiences' direct engagement with the comic, in other words, simplicity compels, persuades, or otherwise urges society to take political action by getting audiences to *recognise* the need for justice, support resources, and healing.

Semiotics is another contemporary critical approach to discuss how graphic novels transform society's notions of humanity, identity, and power. Comics as a symbolic form of creativity, social reality, and life experiences have expanded in the domain of popular (pop) culture to adopt increasingly globalised perspectives (Donovan and Ustundag 2017, 225). Even non-English comics such as Japanese manga get translated or dubbed into English or other languages to cater to fans around the world. The adaptation of foreign comics to localised content involve more than domestic transliteration of verbal narratives; it requires nuanced changes in visual elements, format, image, colouring, layouts, etc. (Zanettin 2014).

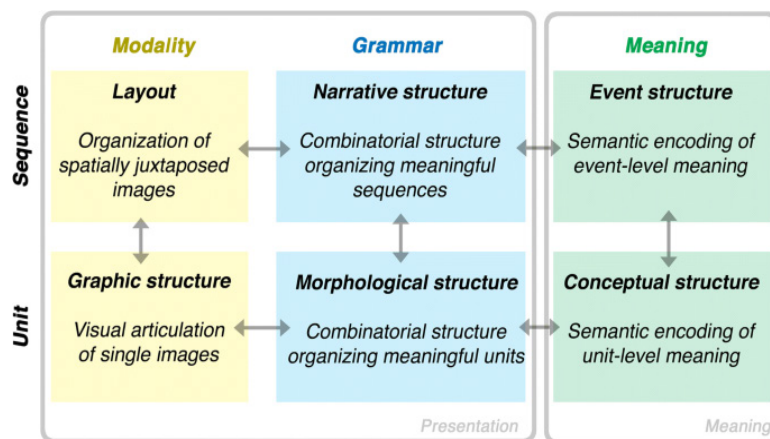


Figure 1 Visual narrative in sequential images.
Source: Cohn (2020).

In sum, cognitive researchers in various fields ranging from education, media, visual culture, visual communication and design, social psychology, linguistics, etc., use comics to effectively demonstrate (or suggest) social relations through speech, to make spatial-time transitions, present actions and events, or visualise thoughts and feelings to conceive and construct symbolic and cultural meanings (Riesman, MacDonald, and Boxer 2018; Cohn 2013).

Political Influence in Comics

Comics have been the keen subject of scholarship for political justice, rights advocacy, etc. The application of political science and humanist theories somewhat validates comic characters as signifiers of human potential, as explored in exhaustive cultural studies on the superhero phenomenon as an aspect of counterculture (Wesseling 2016; Wright 2001). Culture scholars have also applied rhetorical frameworks of behavioural and social construction in genre analysis of political issues which span every human concern: crime, corruption, war horrors, radical ideologies, scientific discoveries, tragedies of justice, intergalactic invasions, supernatural powers, etc. Certain titles show representation of political and cultural realism of specific periods, such as Belgian writer Hergé (*The Adventure Tales of Tintin* in late colonial eras of the 1930s); Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's superhero line-up of *Fantastic Four*, *The Hulk*, *Thor*, and *X-Men* (Marvel n.d.). Others trans-literal genres of cultural tropes, myths, or acculturation explore non-representational character design using archetypes, Mary Shelley's romantic gothic protagonist *Frankenstein* being one example. Pop culture scholars seek to understand graphic novels' popularity, studying how comics describe the culture and social experiences of the times and the potential of futurity (Riesman, MacDonald, and Boxer 2018; Freeman and Gambarato 2018).

Comic's role as visual propaganda tool had been a popular area in visual studies. Subculture comics like Art Spiegelman's (1986–1992) Pulitzer Prize *Maus* distills the Nazi Holocaust in caricatures, capturing the harrowing effects of World War II on survivors and their antecedents. *Maus* draws attention to the morality dilemmas surrounding post-war trauma effects on Holocaust survivors, with Nazis depicted as cats and the Jews as mice. Political comics have often been criticised by moral historians for being antithetical to cultural development, through narrative arcs and imageries questioning collective interpretation of rights, and regulation of justice. Crawley and van Rijswijk (2012, 10), for instance, critiqued comics for not upholding truths in the progression of time and historical events.

Worries had been raised earlier by conservatives circa 1940s–50s, who took an offensive stance on the use of comics as a critical communication tool (Maggio 2007). Until that era, there was a taken-for-granted perception of comics as essentially frivolous, value-deprived, low-grade pulp fiction designed for mischief (Chambliss 2012). Comics were viewed as propaganda tools intent on disaffecting vulnerable readers (Wesseling 2016). Today's scholars argue that graphic narratives, far from being juvenile, is a legitimate literary genre classed as *bildungsroman*, with purposeful ability to foster audience's understanding of issues as part of psychological, social and educational exposure to cultural, social, political themes.

For instance, Joe Sacco's 1993 *Palestine* was a comic book which illustrated real life impacts of Israeli occupation on Palestinian society through the eyes of Maltese American cartoonist/journalist (Figure 2), Joe Sacco (Al Jazeera 2008). Sacco graphically depicted the traumatic tortures arising from Israeli incursions of the state, but paid equal attention to the "smaller details" of daily living and scenes affecting ordinary Palestinians during an era when fear and suspicion ran rife, and street policing led to greater seclusion of communities. Readers could engage in understanding the backstory to the incidents that accrued through the author's eyes.

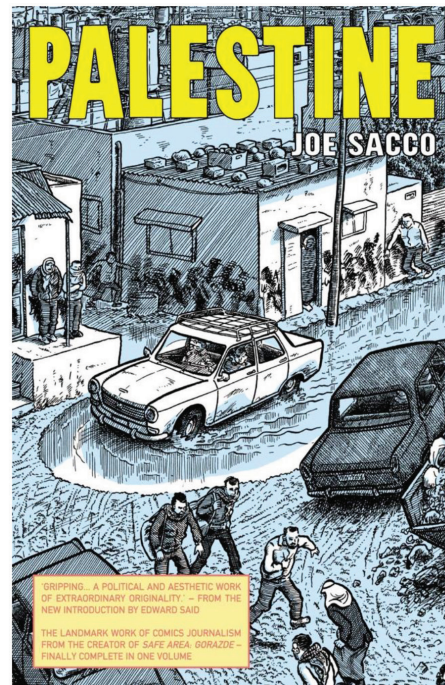


Figure 2 *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (1993).
Online image.

Source: <https://www.amazon.in/Palestine-Joe-Sacco/dp/0224069829>

V for Vendetta (Figure 3) by Alan Moore, illustrated by David Lloyd, is an example. Conceived from a direct inspiration based on the theme of rebellion, it symbolically depicts Guy Fawkes, the eponymous 17th century Catholic conspirator who planned political anarchy. Moore's graphic novel contextualises the message with modern iconic signifiers such as Judge Dredd, Max Ernst, Adolf Huxley, Thomas Pynchon, Robin Hood, George Orwell, David Bowie, etc, masked to represent anonymity (Moore 1984). Walsh (2006) regards *V* as a postmodern trope representing the idealisms behind Moore's essay that society desires political revisionism in the face of social control and orchestrated human rights incursions. *V* was created to hide the identity of political provocateurs and question the legitimacy of libertarian systems where citizens voicing out against authorities stand behind "cartoonish" idealisms, their struggles nothing more than chaotic perversions of democratic reforms rather than solutions for terrorism, revolt, and vengeance.

Comic Culture in the Participatory Economy

Comics are viewed by media scholars as both a resistance subculture and a mechanism for the genre's alignment to the *participatory economy* (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). As theorised by trans-media author Henry Jenkins, individuals who identify with the comic community enact their own narratives to explore the aestheticism, characterisations, and symbolisms in comic texts. In the converged participatory culture, two factors engage comic audiences and fans: *diversity* and *inclusiveness*.

Fundamentally, researchers believe comics function effectively as symbolic identifiers of fan communities whose backgrounds contribute to different aspects of the genre's growth. Being "low-barrier" forms of artistic and cultural expressions, comic stories reflect its members' experiences, psychoses, surroundings, and social relations (TEDx Dartmouth 2011). In doing so, fans find a shared universe of belonging through fictional worlds, albeit different levels of connections may involve individual perception filters (cited in Lynch 2017, 26).

X-Men by Stan Lee is proof that comic books are more intrusive in fans' everyday lives than they appear to be. Jones (2011) illuminated the political construction of *X-Men* as a tribute to the civil movement against racial oppression. Although the main plot discourses on discrimination and social injustices, it simultaneously reveals artistic ignorance: a glaring lack of originality in fictional characters "fighting" for causes through rebellion and violence (Walsh 2006). Nevertheless, as a long serial with multichannel spinoff formats (TV shows, video games, film trilogies, etc.), *X-Men* is a pioneering example of the comic genre's search for equality, justice and acceptance. Media professor, Dr. Claudia Bucciferro (2016) claims convergence has brought *X-Men* into the global pop culture spotlight for its anti-bigotry stance against 20th century's "harsh realities" such as human rights issues, but these may ultimately have also contributed to creating fear and increasing our repulsion of *Others*.

Traditionalists who oppose design shifts question the commercialisation and marketing of the genre, believing it to detract from comics' original essence or authenticity. Among visual culture scholars today, however, the predominant belief is that successful comic design and narratives should make bold symbolic shifts to appeal to more diverse audiences (Heimermann and Tullis 2017). Tullis's (2014) dissertation offers a critical feminist thesis on the "masculine vs. misogynistic" representations of female archetypes by examining portrayals of femininity as an inverse discourse of social progress among predominantly male-authored graphic novels. The ideals of womanhood in the Hispanic community have always been traditionalist; thus, antithetical female characters that deviate from this cultural typology may be viewed negatively by conservative Latino readers.

Criticisms hinge on another aspect of comic evolution: time progression. Time progression necessitates a change in character designs (Foster 2013). Creators indicate modernity with the timely refresh of elements such as attires and attitudes, or introduce new characters, but the question is whether the original essence should

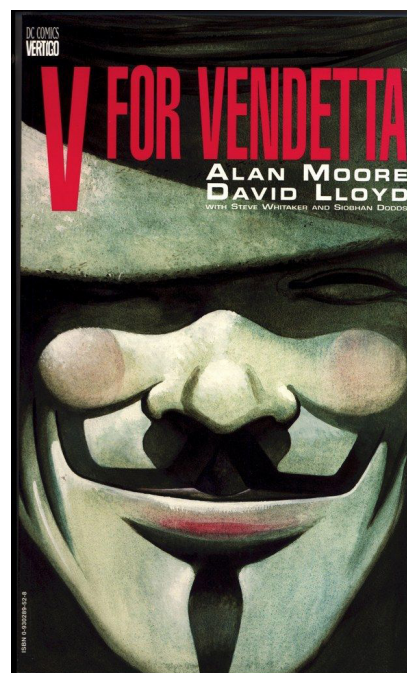


Figure 3 *V for Vendetta* by David Lloyd (1982). Collected edition cover art, online image.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_for_Vendetta#/media/File:V_for_vendetta.jpg

be maintained with the passage of time, as characters age, disinherit their iconic mantle or handover to their progenitors (Wright 2001).

Decisions by asset owners (Disney, Marvel, Star Trek, etc.) to franchise or license content to global media networks and conglomerates may please or delight new fans, but distance or alienate older followers, affecting audiences' anticipation to future seriality, and consequently affects the control of intellectual assets of content copyrights (Freeman and Gambarato 2018, 52–61).

An example is DC Comics' global franchising agreements of DC Universe brands which entails characterisation flexibility, enabling marketers to exploit the brand's creative assets by adapting to new entertainment platforms catering to different audience segments, while deploying creative or commercial tactics and product marketing to cater to specific markets, ranging from audiences' diverse tastes for action genre, serial web publications, video games and even privately commissioned artworks (Zeegan 2012). Hybridisation using new media storytelling of mockumentaries (entertainment-styled documentaries), webtoons in vertical layout for flipping on smartphones, have gained interest among art communities (Hyeon-Yun 2019; Rose 2018; Pilikian 2011; Riesman, MacDonald, and Boxer 2018).

On the other hand, Marvel Cinematic Universe's *Avengers* mythology is an instance when multimodal narratives make storytelling increasingly onerous, with considerations of *spreadability* of the genre to wider audiences undermining its traditionalist "hero" discourse (Cicci 2015, 75). Cicci (2015, 19) believes that as distribution, access and comic art appeals broaden due to globalisation of entertainment marketing, the result is a "divorce" of comic consumption for personal use, favouring a more generic universal participation in trans-media and blockbuster successes, losing the niche flavours that edgy comics once projected. Comics have, in short, become a less serious, consumable leisure genre instead of being a conduit of serious social change.

Trans-media Convergence and Comics

Comic artists have surprising abilities to shape and change society mind-sets through graphic narratives on both mundane and controversial issues, and to portray diverse cultural trends through political and social narratives. However, increasing mainstreaming and entertainment marketing of this genre affects readers' understanding of the original content and essence.

Salkowitz (2012) studied the proliferation and popularity of comics through observing convergence of media trends such as Comic-Con festivals, online forums and cosplay events where movies, games and thematic events bring comic characters to life, triggering high-value brand marketing of Western and Asiatic graphic genres such as anime in merchandise, fanzines, video games and movies, forging ties between audiences and fan communities to experience the narrative and time passages of graphic art-forms.

Mainstreaming of popular culture has taken the comic industry into the participatory economy, with the political and social influences of graphic novels gaining increased public acceptance, producing consequences both positive and negative. As Foster (2013) argues, the success of comic books, animated features and movies are proof that the consumer market does evolve and adapt if content publishers and producers took direct interest in promoting adaptations of comic art in movies, digital animation, and other commercial genres.

Batman: Arkham Asylum (Figure 4), one of the most successful action-adventure video games released by Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment in 2009, garnered positive reviews from fans, critics and players who praised its rich, first-person character voicing. Salkowitz (2012) argues that the later commercial success of *Batman: The Dark Knight* was augmented on the back of critical acclaim for the comic's combative sequences.



Figure 4 *Batman Transformation 1966–2016* by DilkushMP (2016). Video image.

Source: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3xipjy>

In summary, changes in characterisation and designs of comics are contemporary adaptations to trans-media marketing demands. Traditional comic content publishers find themselves needing to explore new creative territories and expand to cater different markets through mainstreaming to increase genre spreadability. This is possible via deliberate efforts to launch new digital channels and products in order to reach new (often younger) segments, whether producing illustrated novels, webtoon serials, or computer animation and stop-motion films, or content for video gaming communities, cosplayers, or new fans of fine art. Overall, as the comic industry turn mainstream, franchising and marketing aid in gaining traction and recognition. Mallory stated that trans-media entertainment marketing activities such as advertising, live events, and merchandising may be gradually eclipsing what traditional comics once symbolised, the experiential possibilities that inform of our human struggles and fallibilities, through the authentic lens of visual artists (quoted in Bucciferro 2016).

METHODOLOGY

To develop insights on perceptions of comic book design and implications of media convergence on comic industry development, this research uses sequential mixed methods, conducting both qualitative and quantitative data collection in two phases. Sequential mixed method analysis is not a frequent approach in the study of visual design.

Sequential mixed method is described by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) and Cherryholmes (1992) as a social and behavioural research procedure that values pragmatic explanations of causality and reality. Pragmatics, undertaken by phenomenology researchers, is favoured over the search for cogent truths, which is presumed undiscoverable in understanding human social relations (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003, 28). A two-phase constructivist approach begins with undertaking a qualitative line of investigation (such as interviews), followed by quantitative scaling of assumptions from qualitative results, using a survey instrument to generate participation and insight from targeted participant communities. Proponents like Creswell and Clark (2011) believe the combinatory model enables different typologies of research to be embedded (or nested) within case study frameworks. This binary method is useful insofar as to consider how certain change criteria, when planned, affects the formation of longitudinal attitudes (Plano Clark et al. 2013). Regardless of the vantages, the limitations of exploratory mixed method design have been critiqued by researchers such as Giddings (2006), who state that interpretive qualitative procedures tend to be “undervalued and underused,” symptomatic of the post-positivist epistemologies that often undergird the decisions made by the researcher during the three stages of research design which begin with setting questions, following of which is data collection and the sequencing of data for interpretation (Plano Clark et al. 2013, 6).

Creswell (2007) wrote that research procedures in experimental conditions produce variable aspects of worldview depending on the situational contexts of study. Utilising a mixed method research method is helpful as it may help explain the cultural factors or mechanisms that contribute towards results. In the context of graphic novels and comics, an objective and critical evaluation should involve expectations from one method (qualitative or quantitative) as having a predictable influence on the outcomes of the other method. Either method, in isolation, would not be able to produce generalisability of data and interpretation.

Creswell (2009, 207) emphasised that the four considerations of sequential mixed methods procedure: (1) timing, (2) weighting, (3) mixing, and (4) theorising of qualitative and quantitative elements, should be carefully designed to funnel inductive or deductive outcomes towards critical analysis and evaluation. From Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (2003) principle argument that a combined approach reveals insights that lead to pragmatic “taxonomies of cultural observations,” a mixed method procedure is pointedly relevant to this paper, since comic art and graphic narratives are sited within the realm of modern cultural phenomena.

Nevertheless, Creswell (2007) clarifies that in mixed method procedures, there should be a component of symbolic participation in the process of data collection where the analysis is meaningful because the participants play the “advocate” role, with personal worldviews or beliefs that determine or validate their outlook, opinions, and interests towards the subject. In short, participants adopt a post-positivist epistemological position due to being “insiders” and stakeholders who have observed the subject closely and value the contributions of their peers. In conducting mixed method exploratory research, the qualitative phase was the first stage to identify taxonomy of instruments, followed by a survey in the second stage.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS I: PROCEDURE OF ANALYSING THE QUALITATIVE APPROACH

For this research, structured interviews were used to gain data for the first stage qualitative investigation, administered in the form of online interviews whereby three respondents, identified as Participant A (PA),

Participant B (PB), and Participant C (PC), were emailed a list of questions. PA and PB are both academics who lecture in the multimedia design faculties at a Malaysian creative design institution. PC is a comic artist.

The mode of research was a questionnaire comprising a set of contextual questions designed to probe the comic artists' aesthetic and story development process, market reception, and social influence aspects. Questionnaires were sent online to respective participants. It was felt that creative practitioners from professional art, design, and visual media backgrounds would generate critical reflections through providing thick descriptions of the issues. This enables the researcher to flesh out relevant insights and perspectives on comics' role as a visual communication tool for social change. A questionnaire was designed to gather views, based on the taxonomy of how aesthetic, cognitive, psychological, and semiotic signifiers of comic art engage readers in forming attitudes, perceptions, cultural opinions or perceptions towards social issues. The interview questions (IQ) are as follows:

- IQ1: How do you think comics inform us about how we view ourselves?
- IQ2: How does modernisation affect comic book's image and reception by fans and other readers?
- IQ3: How do graphic novels and comic books influence society and impact social change?
- IQ4: Should comic book artists and publishers preserve cognitive simplicity of characterisation design in line with shifts in cultural trends?
- IQ5: Would shifts in characterisation as part of modernisation affect the reception of readers and fans? What if that process involves addressing issues of diversity and inclusivity?
- IQ6: Why do you think comics industry have become more mainstreams? How does this affect pop culture and the comic book community?

Findings of the Study I: Qualitative Data

In answering IQ1, the three interviewees concur that comics are more than fiction; they embody the lives of "Others" which could not otherwise be imagined. Comic books narrate our social conditions and problems, highlighting lived events, and experiences.

- PA: Like any other form of art, comics describe, illustrate, record, and celebrate our existence and thoughts. With plenty of comic books to choose from, they not only entertain but also inform us of realities. Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine* is a good example of this.
- PB: Comical characters are the easiest and simplest form of visual self-expressions that transcends age, language barrier, and social conditions.
- PC: Absolutely. This is also why comic characters have lasted so long. We see ourselves in certain characters because they have special abilities, also flaws. Sometimes we aspire to be like some characters, but sometimes, we are also thankful that we are not.

Replying to IQ2, participants acknowledged that mainstreaming was a perpetual debate that comic fans dialogue about.

- PA: So long as the fundamentals of character design and essence of personality is kept intact, the older fans of that comic work will somehow learn to embrace mainstreaming.
- PB: Comic books are a good reflection of culture, and the fan reader is part of that culture. So, it is natural that they are re-contextualised and modernised for newer audience.
- PC: Reinvention keeps comic characters fresh and contemporary. Fans either embrace changes or reject it. Mostly, the core fans would embrace it.

IQ3 on social influence of comics and whether the genre helps foster social change, participants believe they trigger new ideas and actions when it comes to dealing with issues.

- PA: Comics celebrate and reaffirm audiences' sense of belonging to the society. Comic books catalogue society's ambitions, thoughts, fears, etc.
- PB: Comic books contribute in the sense of cultural exposure to different parts of the world. Also, it can become a minor source of knowledge and information to its readers.
- PC: Comics have been used to spread political propaganda and religious ideologies.

IQ4 questions the need to preserve cognitive simplicity of design and characterisation in the face of cultural shifts, and whether comic design should align with shifting social attitudes, incorporating themes of inclusiveness and diversity, or maintain original essence.

- PA: Is it really freedom of thought [by reflecting social diversity]? In my opinion, everything we see can be a signifier for a whole lot of unspoken meanings.

PB: Comic books require some design and content changes in order to maintain freshness for readers. If design approach changes along with the trend towards diversifying narratives, writers and artists need to challenge themselves to find new ways to relate to readers. However, my belief is that comics need to maintain its base design. Constant tinkling with character designs might interfere with the principles of what each character should be.”

IQ5 probed the issue of audience and market reception to character design shifts to incorporate social diversity and inclusiveness. Each participant was asked to comment on the given example of characterisation shift in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, the 2018 Golden Globe-winning animated reboot of Marvel Comics’ *Spider-Man* franchise, where Peter Parker is killed and the character design of Miles Morales, Spider-Man’s alter-ego and shifts from being a Brooklyn-born Caucasian to a teenager from black and Puerto Rican parentage (Figure 5).

PA: Due to rapid social and political developments, portrayal of different cultures must be constantly reimagined in order to suit the current worldviews and perceptions of readers.

PB: Readers would need some time to reflect and adapt to change.

PC: A little controversy is always good for sales, so I believe the writers do it on purpose.

IQ6 on why comics have becoming more mainstream and how this affects the comic book community, participants stated that mainstreaming is needed as publishers, content creators and artists, in their bid to commercialise works successfully, must be challenged to approach comic design creatively.

PA: Readers are now more exposed to different cultures compared to the old times. Pop culture marketing leaves a big impact on the comic book industry, giving artists leverage to gain public recognition.

PB: There is commercial interest in getting comic genres adapted into movies, providing a bridge between popular culture and the comic community.

PC: Comic books have influenced movies and games. The phrase from *The Incredible Hulk*, “you wouldn’t like me when I’m angry” has made it into retro pop culture. Batman soundtrack themes are universally known. To me, it is a win-win situation where the movie makers of a comic franchise derive inspiration from the genre. Mainstream marketing of comics can encourage content creators to think more creatively in designing comics that appeal to wider audiences and cater to specific markets seeking different genres.



Figure 5 Miles Morales in *Spider-Verse*, the 2018 animation reboot of *Spider-Man*. Online image.

Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/spider-mans-new-look-with-peter-parker-dead-marvel-seeks-diversity-with-new-webslinger-miles-morales/2011/08/02/gIQAdjedpI_blog.html

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS II: QUANTITATIVE METHOD AND ANALYSIS

At the end of the interview process, it was felt that a perception survey would complement qualitative data to identify the important factors behind comics’ role in influencing society thinking and impact social change. It was thus decided that conducting a public survey would enable the study to seek more rigorous and objective

outcomes by challenging the researcher to bring reflexive considerations on each component of research design with equivalence in terms of weight and emphasis for future research directions (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). According to Creswell (2009), integration of quantitative with qualitative procedure is suited for research leaning towards qualitative outcomes, but not necessarily based on theoretical perspectives from previous studies. Surprising or unexpected results described in thick descriptions by participants could counter the weight that quantitative results often produce.

It was decided to conduct an online survey to gather opinions from general comic reading audiences. The sequential timing was intentional; qualitative procedures were used in the research first phase to generate inductive themes from industry practitioners (insiders) whose informed perspectives enable them to analyse comics critically in terms of aesthetic, cognitive, psychological, and semiotic elements. Their answers would be the connector with the second research phase, designed for the general population who may be uninformed or updated on graphic art development issues. This sequential mixed method using combined qualitative and quantitative approaches was aimed to produce cross-perspectives from industry stakeholders which are then mapped to perception responses from the larger public audience (comic consumers, readers, and fans).

A survey instrument consisted of a set of four questions asked in a Likert Scale questionnaire was sent individually via social media to 156 respondents with ages ranging between 18 to 28 years old. The gender composition was 63 females and 93 males. The survey questions were restricted to perception-based aspects of comic content (design, characterisation) and access context (marketing), which differentiates from the probing questions posed to participants. It was assumed by the researcher before the completion of data collection that some respondents may be from comic readership fan-base, graphic design, and illustration communities in Malaysia.

During analysis, survey findings were tabulated were cross validated with results from qualitative interviews. The survey questions (LSQ) are as follows:

LSQ1: How much do you agree that changing character design in comics affect readers' recognition of image, identity, and specific characteristics of authentic comics?

LSQ2: How much do you agree that the commercial mainstreaming of comics on integrated digital platforms resulted in a loss of aesthetic authenticity for the genre? Why do you think so?

LSQ3: How much do you agree that mainstreaming of comics using media and marketing channels (e.g., franchise films, digital serials e.g., webtoons, video games, merchandise, entertainment marketing, etc.) supports the popularity of traditional comics by giving it added exposure?

LSQ4: How much do you agree that simplicity of narratives and character design help readers better understand the content and context of comics and graphic novels?

Findings of the Study II: Quantitative Data

Results of the survey were tabulated, and findings are shown in the charts in this section, which will be followed by a discussion in the section which follows.

Table 1 Survey on the major fan-base of comic art and graphic design communities in Malaysia.

Questionnaires	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
How much do you agree that changing character design in comics affect readers' recognition of image, identity, and specific characteristics of authentic comics?	34%	50%	2%	13%	1%
How much do you agree that the commercial mainstreaming of comics on integrated digital platforms resulted in a loss of aesthetic authenticity for the genre? Why do you think so?	19%	69%	2%	9%	1%
How much do you agree that mainstreaming of comics using media and marketing channels (e.g., franchise films, digital serials e.g., webtoons, video games, merchandise, entertainment marketing, etc.) supports the popularity of traditional comics by giving it added exposure?	48%	48%	2%	1%	1%
How much do you agree that simplicity of narratives and character design help readers better understand the content and context of comics and graphic novels?	21%	73%	1%	5%	0%

For LSQ1, Table 1 shows 50% of respondents agreed and 34% strongly agreed that changes in character design in the development of a comic series may affect recognition towards authentic comics. The percentage of disagreement and strong disagreement was less than 15% of respondents.

For LSQ2, results show that respondents predominantly agree, with 69% claiming genre mainstreaming affects comic book aesthetics' authenticity negatively, while 19% strongly agree. The minority percentage either strongly disagreed or disagreed about the issue of loss of authenticity.

For LSQ3, respondents' scale of agreement is split down nearer to the middle, with 48% of respondents strongly agreeing that mainstreaming of comics using media and marketing channels help gain exposure of modern audiences to traditional published comics as a cultural art-form.

For LSQ4, results show 73% of respondents agreed that comic books create contextual engagement through simplicity of content in the narratives and characterisation. The percentage who stated they strongly agreed with this question was 21%, while the percentage of survey respondents who disagreed made up 5%.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In mapping audiences' perceptions of comic design to global trends of media convergence, the researcher aimed to understand how these cultural shifts may affect comics' authenticity and original essence for modern audiences.

Participants' answers to IQ4 imply a conservative belief that comics' value derive from their powerful social ability to connect using variable multimodal frames. As a means of learning cultural information, comics provide cognitive freedom enabling readers to speculate on what happens from one design frame to the next without presuppositions and assumptions.

The question on whether shifts in character design—using the example of Miles Morales in *Into the Spider-verse* (2018)—suits changing social contexts seems to be a challenging issue. By questioning the necessity for change, it demonstrates a generally “conservative” attitude of practitioners in maintaining authenticity of original characterisation and story arch. Respondents claimed that changes must nevertheless be made, and they believed most readers will embrace change either immediately or eventually.

It was notable from qualitative findings that social diversity in character design is not an “need-to-have” element which all audiences could relate to, especially in introducing new readers who had just started to take interest in the comic and who may be seeking to establish connections with the characters' symbolic values. This factor correlates with survey findings from LSQ4, where the majority response demonstrates a “conservative” attitude towards the production of graphic art, whose merit should be based on authentic story essence and experiences of artists, rather than constantly adapting to over-dizzying changes to capture ever-shifting social attitudes. While persuading society to cultivate freedom of imagination and to appreciate social attitudes such as diversity and inclusiveness are key reasons why comics appeal, the results of this survey suggest that, at least for Malaysian comics' readers, the simplicity of storytelling and characterisation must foremost capture their attention and interest.

One of the participants pointed out that giving freedom to readers' thought process isn't necessarily a given aspect of audiences' engagement with a comic narrative. This implies that modernisation could lead to readers feeling “misled,” while taking readers “by surprise” may result in detachment from the new characterisation and other negative perceptions about authenticity. Similar opinions were expressed by survey respondents in answering the second question of LSQ2 (Why do you think so?) whereby respondents felt a loss of authenticity would result from commercial mainstreaming of the comic genre.

From mixed method research findings, it could be argued that enhanced visibility, content value and entertainment marketing success help boost comics' spreadability throughout global pop culture markets, but these may lose the interest of traditionalists who prefer the original essence of comic design which they feel should remain relatively static.

Overall, this research points to a possible answer for the study gap. Well-informed readers will have little trouble accepting fresh content and character shifts, as they expect and assume that survivability for the comics' industry means adapting to the needs and values of changing times. For the uninformed, however, findings imply that cognitive simplicity isn't the only important factor for comic design development: public education about the role of graphical media in capturing political issues and projecting social change answers is equally vital.

Survey findings thus concur with Wright (2001) and Maggio (2007), whereby consumption of graphic novels and comics is a cultural transmission tool, as individuals experience the genre's impressions, interpretations, and cultural realism on personal and idiosyncratic levels. This suggests a direct correlation

between comics' social influence and simplicity of visual language that help comic art fans and general audiences engage through created self-identities and social communities of belonging. Findings correlate with Cicci (2015), as participants share the belief that the integration of comics into commercial pop culture media platforms is a modern phenomenon which influences comic book reception and impacts growth potential. Without mainstreaming, there would be insufficient challenges for comic artistry, and practitioners may endure a lifelong struggle to gain recognition for their aesthetic outputs.

The overall findings of research show a relationship between cognitive simplicity and its untapped potential to help propel the comic industry's growth. Simplicity is the greatest challenge to the imagination of comic artists. In terms of enhancing the aesthetics appreciation and adaptation to sociocultural influences, findings clearly merit maintaining simplicity in comic characterisation. Story narratives and images, the fundamental units of comic design, are powerful in provoking society's critical thought processes. Comics offer audiences the freedom to explore individual responses to cultural storytelling.

Practitioners persuasively argue that comics need authenticity in design and characterisation: plots and characters work best to highlight the ebbs and flows of our life experiences and how to deal with, or avoid, contentious situations, emphasising our humanity in facing common anxieties in social relations due to a lack of cultural understanding towards inclusiveness and diversity within complex global communities.

As a cultural phenomenon, audiences' perceptions towards mainstream comics suggest its potential mediation role as a tool for social change. This is reflected in nearly half of responses showing that mainstreaming comics as pop culture products help create "bridges" to enable creative trans-media content to thrive globally while providing exposure to traditional comics as an authentic cultural art-form.

With a growing number of audiences adapting to commercial platforms to access and engage with comics, it strongly suggests that mainstreaming for a digital participatory economy would be crucial for genre spreadability, which further sustains and supports the traditional comic book industry's survivability.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To address the study gap, visual media and design researchers need to continue addressing cognitive simplicity of comics as a significant factor in comics' success in communicating and exchanging ideas via social storytelling. Trans-media trends help to grow interest in comic genres via commercialisation, but these would not be optimised for social change if attitudes remain conservative.

Hence, it is suggested that scholars continue exploring cognitive simplicity framework to understand how the model sustain traditional comic and graphic novel appeals. The role of aesthetics in visual communication could be tapped through increasing public awareness of political influences in comic culture by developing strategic engagements with community stakeholders outside the design fraternities. These initiatives will continue to challenge comic artists and content designers in producing narrative diversity when discussing political issues for more reserved audiences and conservative cultures.

One of the challenging limitations in the use of mixed method research in discovering perceptions toward comics is to objectively identify its significance as a social change tool, which was not possible during stage two of quantitative survey as the questionnaire did not raise issues of inclusiveness and diversity, nor cover grounds on the role and effectiveness of comics in discussing political issues. Another limitation of this research was the lack of frameworks and suitable rubrics to fully explore and measure the depth of psychological impact which the comic reading culture may have on participants and respondents.

The target sample surveyed is another area for future improvement. Having a mix of "well-informed" audience segments such as art and design lecturers, fan-base, and design communities (whose personal interests in graphic art, illustration, and visual media would presumably have begun earlier) and general audiences who belong to "uninformed" segments (whose exposure is highly subjective to media access and the reach of mainstream marketing channels), would have diluted the essence of understanding comics' cultural significance.

The element of "meaning" may be a major differentiator, in accordance with Cohn's (2020) visual narrative model (Figure 1), since visual comprehension depends on having cognitive processing abilities for images, a skill that creative practitioners have gained and honed over years of exposure, training and experience. Future research could assess degrees in which narrative storytelling and aesthetic simplicity impact general audiences' cognitive abilities, as well as their role in changing social attitudes and perceptions of readers who are introduced gradually to comic titles, from youth to adulthood, and into mature life stages.

A lack of existing robust study data on Asian audiences' perceptions towards contemporary comic design is another limitation. Addressing this gap requires huge effort to gather larger samples for qualitative assessment. Evaluating large segments of the wider population using limited participant samples is a task

researchers should take caution about, as it may be too ambitious and ungeneralisable to study as a cultural phenomenon.

Evaluation of cognitive simplicity in comic design should be relevant to social development. Audiences' experiences with comics must examine issues that are culturally relevant for developing societies, for instance, discussing topics centred on racial discrimination, corruption, transparency of the law, speech and media freedom, and technology challenges.

Interestingly, the tangible applications of the comic "superhero" phenomenon have been demonstrated to be "less of a counterculture than a mainstream visual communication" tool among Malaysian audiences, with advocates favouring the use of "hero" and "superhero" archetypes as socially-relatable cartoon characters as ambassadors and icons fronting public campaigns ranging from anti-bullying, health and medical awareness to environmental conservation causes; or as satirical critiques of social oppression, well-publicised criminal cases, or political injustice. It is proposed that education and awareness for the advocacy of comics as tools of cultural information and political ideology formation should be considered "from the audiences' rather than theorists' perspectives."

The use of fictional heroes is an under-researched area worthy of future pursuits, as it has direct implications to policymaking for social development. Digital publishing on new media platforms can be greater explored to understand the unique convergence of artistic vision in the social construction of knowledge fostered into the virtual environment. Future research could identify specific psychological vulnerability of youths learning about political and social issues in their developmental years, e.g., violence, discrimination, etc.

Comic art research in this paper demonstrates the rich intersections of disciplines of scholarship from art, psychology, media, culture studies, and social studies, each adding perspectives on the complex attributes of contemporary comic design (Riesman, MacDonald, and Boxer 2018). Character design and content shifts invariably represent broader, diverse identities today (ethnicities, social demographics, gender orientation); plots have potent rhetorical meanings, symbolisms, and values to different audiences. Changes in characterisation should nevertheless be carefully considered, as succumbing to the pressures of commercialisation merely to game-change the comic industry affects aesthetic appeal and dilutes originality.

To affirm Bucciferro (2016), the diversity of comic fans and follower base is important. It instigates content creators, artists, illustrators, designers, and publishers to regularly dialogue with communities to deepen cross-cultural understanding of aesthetic appeals, including what audiences see, like, and want (or otherwise), and resolving ethical issues arising from negative or hostile reception towards comic design, characterisation, and messages.

Some publishers expect followers' approval through introducing character design shifts that appeal to the tastes of new readers. In competitive entertainment marketing sectors, design changes are mirrors of social and political issues, and adaptations could augment or denigrate traditional comics' brand image. For the hybridised digital and new media era, comic artists and publishers must effortfully rationalise changes in storytelling direction, and to avoid losing originality and essence of authentic design.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to understand the current issues involved in contemporary comic design, to review the power of comics in telling compelling stories, and to objectively consider whether conflicts between mainstreaming and commercialisation and traditional comic artistry as an authentic voice of counterculture can be resolved in contemporary visual practice.

Comics are visual texts created to engage audiences with meaning-making narratives, composed within multiple frames. It is clear through case analysis of selected comics in this research, themes of diversity and inclusiveness will prove to be valuable to the future growth of the genre yet portraying "humanness" remains core to comic culture. Whether prized as hand-drawn artworks, content integrated into films and other new media, comics remain relevant as a centrepiece of social change discourse, creating opportunities for direct audience engagement through participation in diverse cultural themes and experiences (Bucciferro 2016; Freeman and Gambarato 2018; Jenkins 2006; Wright 2001). As mainstreaming and spreadability predominates, the art of graphic novels should not lose its distinctive symbolism of subculture resistance, in a competitive quest to become more externalised as consumable products rather than an internalised tool for change. Comics must maintain its authenticity without losing potential as a pop culture art-form.

Comic artists and designers need to protect the integrity of their visual practice as an essential narrative of social and political change, preserving flexibility of storylines and character design without succumbing to commercial pressures of cultural trends. As artist Will Eisner emphasised four decades ago, freedom is the

comic genre's rudimentary core. Despite challenges ahead, comic art will find a footing among new audiences through its endearing simplicity and capabilities in addressing social issues and tapping into our cultural and creative imaginations, individually and collectively.

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