Malaysian Comic Book Art Style
Classifying Visual Traits and Identity

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ABSTRACT

This research is meant to establish the visual components that are identifed as Malaysian comic art style. Comic book is undeniably a relevant communication medium which has been successfully adapted to entertainment, informational and educational tools, all with an exceptional result. In Malaysia, comic book publication used to be amongst the major industries that generated profits for the country and has matured at its best both in content and style, but in the recent years, sales of comic publication in Malaysia has ceased to exceed in meeting the market expectations. The research aims to outline familiar key elements and visual traits established in Malaysia's comic book art style, and to further discuss about them as prominent graphic traits in the pursuit to suggest potential constituents and explorative opportunities to position Malaysia's distinctive comic art style. The study will be based on the understanding of comic art as a creative content platform, a popular culture constitution and aesthetic merits of the medium. The focus will be subjected to the appealing conventions of the medium through a chronological visual analysis review of established comic books in Malaysia and a comparative data analysis review benchmarked to American Comic and Japanese Manga publications. The key elements and visual traits outlined can be employed as considerations in developing a comic art style to meet the popular culture expectation yet authentic to the culture and should be able to help position a sense of identity to Malaysia's comic industry, thus meeting consumers' expectations and demands.

Keywords: Comic Book, Art Style, Visual Analysis, Visual Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Comic book as a medium is subjected as a form of communication platform to social legitimacy through its function as an economic commodity. Started as a medium of entertainment merely catered for young children, the development and the impact of the medium are too interesting to be ignored as its convention has affected wide demographic breakdown into psychographic preferences. Traditionally, comic books dwell in the borders of popular culture, specific to followers of the medium but genuinely, comic book is actually a valuable historical artefact that both provides and features commentaries on people of all ages to identify with cultural and radical events on issues.

Comic books have long been predicted as the passage in shaping consumer culture like any other mass communication. The wonders of the comic book medium can be seen through the result from challenges and efforts featured in the work of comic artists or through its influence on the consumers that creates

enthusiastic groups to certain extend a believer. The splendour of comic books continues to be seen through the adaptation of the art form into other advance mass medium in line with technological innovation.

This research is meant to outline familiar visual traits that exist in the production of comic book art style in Malaysia. In Malaysia, comic book publication used to be the major industry that generated profits for the country and has matured at its best both in storytelling and visual style but in the recent years, sales of comic publication in Malaysia has ceased to exceed in meeting the market expectations. There are two major factors that contribute to the phenomenon. The first will be content exhaustion. Most of the Malaysian comic artists are too comfortable about drawing within the same theme, presenting the same context and dwell around similar content without the motivation to create varieties in visual approach and storytelling to counter the penetrations of foreign content. Second is the effect of globalization to creative content production. Popular

cultures have great impact on positioning a trend to comic art style, neglecting cultural values presented in the imagery and content. This phenomenon has led local comic artists to venture into foreign style in order to compete within the expectation of popular culture to meet consumer demands [1].

Malaysian comic readers are keen to accept and desire for American, Japanese and other foreign comic books due to the void and lust for new visual experience and content. With new emergence of local comic books, adhering to the visual trends still seems to be lacking of integrity and often not in an agreement to the portrayal of the cultural narrative. The visual similarities between local and foreign comic book creations are often debated and argued amongst local comic enthusiasts in discussing the potential of the medium in positioning a sense of identity to Malaysia's comic art style.

2. READING COMIC

Comic books have grown and developed into an artistic medium. Tremendous work, effort and approach have been adapted to reveal the level of complexity to the characters, the themes, the tones and strategic plots in the making of a believable alternate world. The script in the comic lined out by the writer, often profoundly contextualised when interpreted by the work of the artist. The script and the art are cohesively crafted to form meanings within a narrative structure of the medium and brings it to life in coherence of the visual mastery and strategic plot implied.

In a comic book, the story lives through the art. The role of art featured in the visual narratives is obvious, it is what we see. The driving components of the narrative are the characters. Readers could identify with the characters through their visual appearance, their action and their existence portrayed between the panels. The character reveals the world that the audience consciously immersed in, witnesses series of events happening in it, and showcases the spatial environment occupied by the character. The key part of the visual narrative is that most of the writing is invisibly transferred into separate images or plots in order to tell the story.

Whilst the works of the writer becomes invisible, the work of the artist is made visible instead. The art of an artist inevitably becomes what the characters are visualised and identified as. Actions are actualised from words to images, and readers are able to view what the characters actually acted as and how the characters did it through sequence of images. The reader's participation is required to assemble parts of the actions between the images, and then summarise them as a whole [2]. The process adds up to the whole experience of reading through the juxtaposition of images and involves meaning-making, a language of its own: a comic art. A series of images in concert forms a visual language.

Suggesting unfamiliar visual design expression may seem abnormal since the images are interpreted as signs, the whole concept of narrative is able to make sense and often in agreement to the experience.

3. COMIC BOOK ART AS A LANGUAGE

Peirce's triadic conception of signs facilitates the debate on the appearance of a representation that leads to a complex analysis of an image. The great value of Peirce theory lies in the fact that the presence of one aspect of signs does not exclude the others. Drawings featured in comic art are often iconic due to the resemblance of depiction leading to the utmost universal understanding as an agreement to the representation of the subject depicted. The Iconic sign differs from two other types of signs, Indexical and Symbolic [3]. An indexical sign expresses a meaning by an indication or a relation to the cause and effect whilst the symbolic sign *conveys* a meaning through a cultural agreement alone, such as words in a sentence. As Peirce mentioned, these categories of signs are not limited to which sign belongs in a category, but rather the understanding of signs is interrelated to help to map how and why these signs exist in corresponding to each other in coherence to making sense in comic art.

Visual expression of concepts, when placed in a discreet sequence, is literally a form of language [4]. Like sequential units of sounds in speech or bodily motion in sign language. *Therefore,* sequential images are ordered by a rule system, 'grammar', literally embraces a visual language. Adhering to this; a unique representation of cultural styles of drawing simply becomes a different visual language, the same way that verbal and sign language differ throughout the world. A uniquely positioned visual style provides a sense of belonging, entitled to the similarity and familiarity in a certain group or culture. For example, the distinction of visual characteristic that exists in American comic differs to Japanese manga. Often the identification of this visual characteristic resonates with consumers both effectively and affectively.

The representation featured within a comic book art constantly imitates the depiction of *real-world* happenings, the actual world event *seems* to be more similar to the events in comic books. Readers are led to assume that the alternate culture exists in the comic book would influence or be influenced by real world culture, therefore, the two *worlds* would seem interrelated [5]. It shows that comic book readers may learn, or reinforce their knowing of living culture and culture of others through the art of comic books.

4. COMIC BOOK AS AN ART FORM

Comic book is an art form dealing with a particular kind of experience in interpreting the content. It is introduced in a form of sequential art focused on capturing moments or triggering emotional response, concerned with storytelling.

Will Eisner and Scott McCloud are the pioneers in giving the art form of comic a more prestigious position in art. Eisner defines that "Comic is a sequential art", emphasising that comic is a form of art or method of expression [6]. Through Eisner's definition, McCloud clarifies with a more formal definition towards comics to describe the current production and motivations. "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" [7]. His definition extends beyond the general idea on the comic forms, spans from single-frame comics to graphic novels to the advancement of the form. Comic has grown as a means of creative expression, a distinctive discipline, mechanised artistry and visual literacy presented in the arrangement of images and words in driving audience into a conceptualised storytelling through dramatisation of ideas. The craft provides audience with an experience in line with audience exposures and expectations, thus proposed a trend.

Berel Lang's defined argument in the convention of style is best used to address the concept of trends or visual style interpretation. "Not only [is style] not a science but [it is] a version of fiction – a narrative form – tied to the literary trope of synecdoche in which one feature is an ingredient in all the others" [8]. The attempt in outlining visual style took on the consideration on the continuous development process, the changes happen over time subjected to a purposive hypothesis in the creation of something 'better'. Expanding from Lang defining the convention of style Munsterberg [9], explains that style is an idea subjected to personal work and its significant characteristic based on the similarity and relationship that exist in a pursued subject.

The attempt at finding Malaysia's comic art style will outline the breakdown of comic book components through its formal practice, components within the medium, the disciplines of the art form.

5. CLASSIFYING COMIC BOOK ART STYLE

Personal style is limited to the production of one particular artist, a significant individual. The works by others that were developed within the similar traits can be considered as a part of a school, or described as "in the style of". Style can be found in the touch of the artist, in this research, the way readers sense the artist's markings within the work of art. There are many ways to conceptualise the relationship, and many art historians use a mix of visual element qualities to define a personal style.

The idea of a personal style can be found in the art designed by a single person; it belongs to the mastery of the artist and remains within their inspirations, boundaries and experience. Munsterberg further suggested that, in the study of style, a chronological ordering into early, middle, and late would give an insight to the 'transitions' of it. The late or "old age" style has come to be valued as an interesting phenomenon, sometimes even a result of an entire inspiration. Methods of organisation may group the work of comic artists studied through its traits or elements featured in the medium. List of published works of a comic book down to the artist's marks-making will be analysed in order to classify characteristics and traits exist within the published artworks. The published comic book listing is positioned in a chronological manner to get an insight on the era that the art form is familiarised with, to seek for popular visual characteristic that might reveal insights on the phenomenal progression of visual style, influences adapted or specified movements by comic artists in the making of comic book art style within a culture.
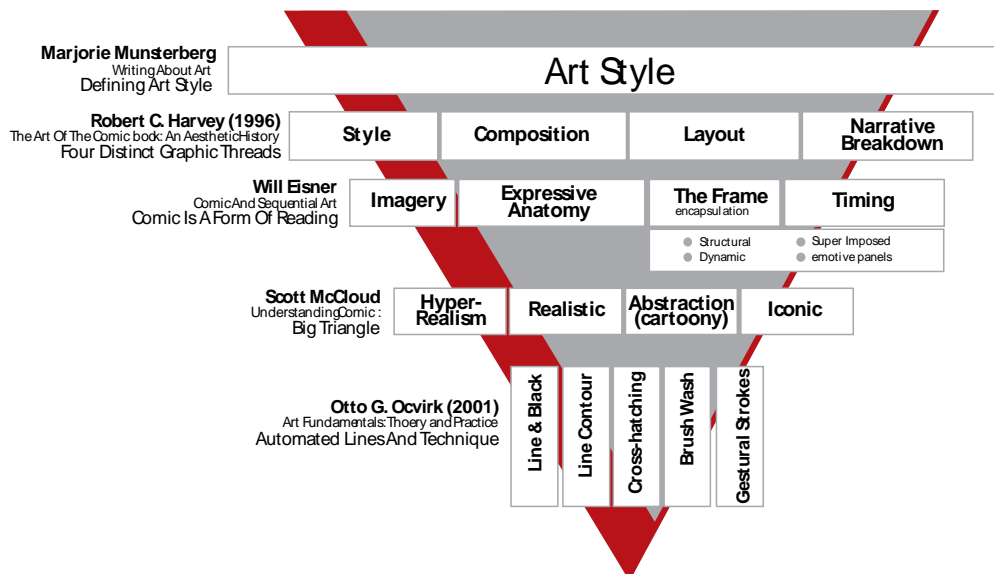

Figure 1. Contextual visual analysis framework and variable.

5.1 Bracketing

Munsterberg stylistic analysis on art style will be used as the principle guide in contextual study for the research in order to gain insights on the common patterns or similarities exist in Malaysian comic art style development. Contextual 'bracketing' components will be discussed to outline the features, forms and disciplines of the medium. The process of 'bracketing' the components will be based on the contributing disciplines, analysed through the variables of characteristic featured in the decision made by a comic artist in positioning their visual styles. The disciplines discussed by Robert C. Harvey [9], Will Eisner [6], Scott McCloud [7] and Otto G. OcVirk [10] are used to guide the visual analysis. (Figure 1)

5.2 Variables

The analysis focuses on Comic Book Art Style, the aesthetic merits, the celebrated aspect of the medium. This is because of the nature of reading comic books is spatial or interrelated; words and images; through understanding discipline of reading comic art.

Robert C. Harvey in his discussion 'Four Distinct Graphic Threads' is used to contextualise the formal disciplines of the medium by classifying variables that exist in: framing style, panel composition, layout consideration and strategic narrative breakdown.

Will Eisner in his discussion 'comic is a form of reading' is to contextualize the communication structure discipline classified through the sign components, variables established are: imagery depiction, expressive anatomy, framing encapsulation and pacing of frames to suggest timing.

Scott McCloud's 'Big Triangle' will be referred to, to contextualise the visual discipline to describe the projected feature, the artist visual approach and characteristic variable in the analysis of Comic Art Style (Figure 2). The variable discussed in McCloud's 'Big Triangle' is classified as: Hyper-realism, realistic, abstraction and iconic.
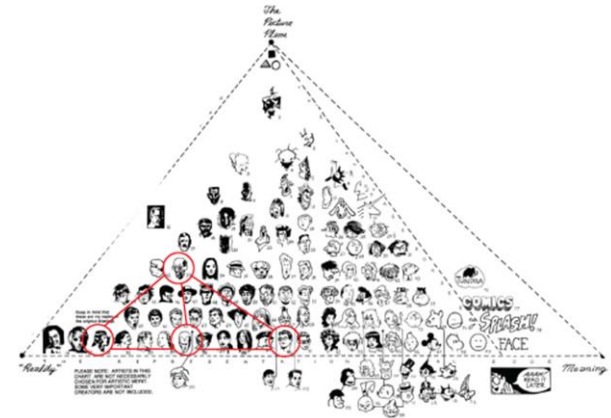

Figure 2. Variable of Malaysian comic art style. Contextualised to McCloud's 'Big Triangle'. The mark indicates the mapping centered on realism visual appeal.

The artist marks-making will be analysed through Otto G. OcVirk disciplines to contextualise the visual treatment adapted to the creation of comic art style. The variable is established through a cross-referral method between formal practice and common usage of drawing techniques, expression and tools adapted to the creation of visual art style in comic books. The variables outlined are line and black, line contour, cross-etching, brush wash and gestural strokes.

5.3 Visual Analysis

The data gathered from the analysis (Figure 3 and Figure 4) will provide insights on possible disciplines that can be used to identify visual traits that work to position a consideration in the development of Malaysia's comic art style, and may help to shape visual characteristic identity for future creative content.
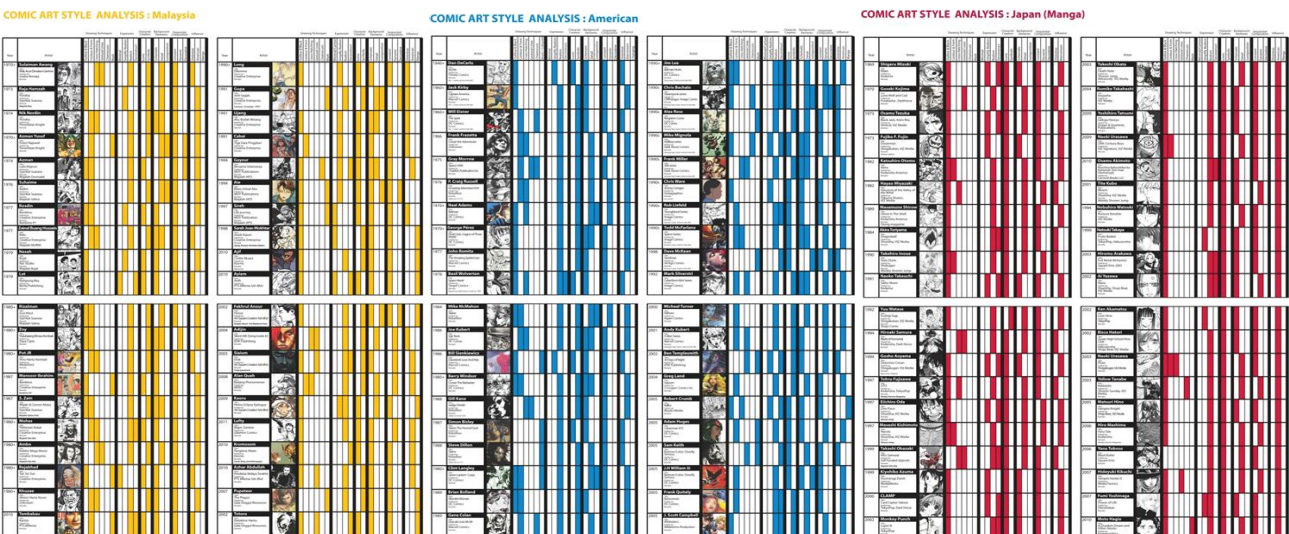

Figure 3. Contextual Visual Analysis of 40 established comic books in Malaysia, America, and Japan. Sequenced in chronological order to the year of publication, outlining similarities of variables within different cultures and establishing comparative variables.
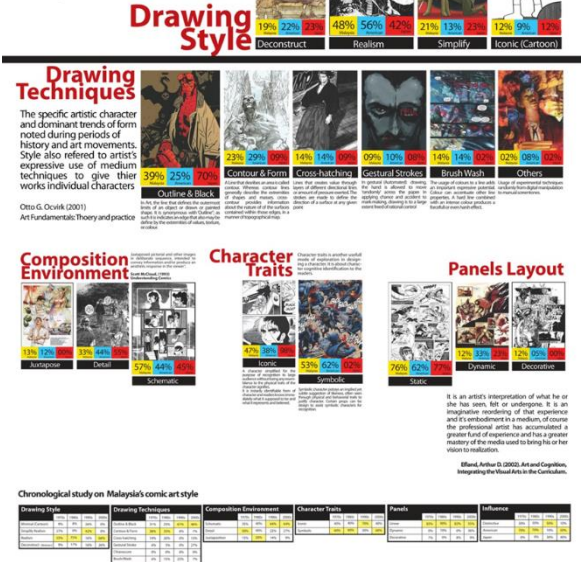
Figure 4. Data gathered from contextual visual analysis. Outlining chronological similarities and comparative variables of three different cultures.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There are two ways in deciphering the data outlined to describe the potential visual components that contribute to creating visual identity in the making of a comic book art style. By outlining comic book art style visual traits through a chronological study, the data classification will be able to establish justification on similar influence to be identified as the dominant characteristic that can be positioned as a Malaysian comic art style visual trait. The visual characteristic should reflect the identity developed within the culture. The comic book art style through the established visual traits should be able to resonate with local audience effectively and affectively if positioned in any trending storytelling and creative content directions.

Outlining comic visual traits through a comparative study from other cultures, the data classifications are able to suggest an insight towards possible consideration to establish new approaches to Malaysian comic book art visual identity in meeting the on-going trends whilst keeping the cultural influence. The visual characteristic should provide a variety of representations of the medium which will create new visual experience to new audience and be able to contemplate on new assimilation groundwork to position a sense of identity featured within the comic book art style.

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