

## The portrayals of state machinery figures in combating COVID-19 in Malaysia: A Study on Ernest Ng's CovidBall Z

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### ABSTRACT

In this time of pandemic, people engage with diverse narratives of infographics to make sense of their experiences. Scholars agreed that comics are graphic mediums and cultural artefacts that significantly contribute to the visual community of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the comic artists in Malaysia, Ernest Ng, initially published his comics online and later converted them into three volumes of comic books entitled CovidBall Z Volume 1 (2020a), 2 (2020b) and 3 (2021). The objective of this paper is to undertake a content analysis of the portrayals of the various state machinery figures both from the government and opposition sides (i.e., ministers, politicians and government officers) in their roles in combating COVID-19. Additionally, the analysis wishes to uncover contemporary attitudes Ng uses such as symbolism, exaggeration and irony, among others, to convey his views on the current issue in obvious and subtle ways. In analysing the data, this study employed data analysis techniques in the form of descriptive content analysis. It was found that the social commentaries presented in Ng's comics via the plot depict the existence of sexism, unfair treatment, and prejudice by several characters which lead to bully culture in the midst of the political metaphorical depiction of war and heroism among Malaysian state machinery figures. The images in his comics help people analyse, reflect on, and interpret our experiences by informing, providing meaning, and illustrating the COVID-19 outbreak narrative.

**Keywords:** *Comics, content analysis, CovidBall Z, Ernest Ng, Covid-19.*

### INTRODUCTION

Saji, Venkatesan and Callender (2021) coined the word "covidity" to describe an expression that encompasses intellectual, material, and emotional responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. Covidity encompasses a wide range of "individual and collective responses or reactions, including an intense experience of paradoxes, physical and mental toll, existential angst, fear and anxiety about the return of such pandemics, the need to reinvent oneself in the context of constant disruption, and the trauma of everyday life" (Saji et al., 2021, p.142) The complex experience of the COVID-19 pandemic starting from 2019 has not only exposed mankind to the need of new norms, but also the state of vulnerability on an unusual scale (Prasetyo, Castillo, Salonga, Sia & Seneta, 2020). Public intellectuals have rationalised the COVID-19 pandemic as a period that brings destruction, posthumanism, but also self-reflection and hope (Braidotti, 2020). The spoken or written accounts about fear, panic and reassurance due to the disruptions and uncertainties generated from the pandemic forms a term coined by Priscilla Wald as the "outbreak narrative" (Callender, Oboubi, Czerwiec & Williams, 2020).

As many novels, scientific, and social and political writings were produced from this outbreak, these narratives address the changing aspects of lives and measures to contain the spread of infections and ultimately find treatment methods to COVID-19 (Callender et al., 2020). Consequently, various media outlets were also utilised to raise awareness while also alleviating the fear generated by the pandemic (Alabi, 2020). In retrospect, there is a need for

local citizens to share, respond and find hope in respect to their local situation during the pandemic and that need is translated into the creation of various media outlets using platforms easily accessible to the public.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, human fears, anxieties, and hopes are expressed via images such as memes, cartoons, animations, gifs, comics, posters, webcomics, and editorial cartoons on social and traditional media platforms (Jin, 2021) which contributes to the outbreak narrative. Humorous posts about the pandemic began to circulate widely on social media immediately right after the outbreak in 2019 (Bischetti, Canal & Bambini, 2020). Among them were funny remarks regarding life in quarantine and how politicians dealt with public health policies (Bischetti et al., 2020), mostly in the forms of memes and comics. Comics can act as a nexus for political and persuasive communication (Piva, 2020). It acts as a criticism of politics and issues, encouraging tolerance and democratic principles (Marianto, 2019) and the humour during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated in funny texts was made available on various media platforms including the digital ones (Bischetti et al., 2020). As the content of comics appeals to a large number of people, it helps to sensitise the masses in a funny manner (Alabi, 2020). In retrospective, most past studies posited that humour can be a medium for people to express or vent their situational observations during the pandemic, notably their social criticisms or responses on the actions taken by their local authorities (i.e., political leaders).

Comics are presented in succinct manner, easily shareable formats and can convey information through compelling visual storytelling (Venkatesan & Lewis, 2021). Piva (2020) viewed visual storytelling as a universal phenomenon and comic strips as visual narratives that operate to socially construct cultural practices and provide opportunities for people to discuss, invent, and conceptualise their identities as projected on visuals (Piva, 2020). The idea of comics having its own storyline, setting, characters, conflict, dialogue, actions, and themes are didactic and cathartic from a literary standpoint (Alabi, 2020) because it can function as a critique and educate wide audiences on themes that serve as the foundation for a story. Comics, also, can be created with a goal of educating people about certain objective social situations and preparing them to conduct radical and progressive reforms (Alabi, 2020). Comics on COVID-19 not only address virus education and pandemic protocol development (Venkatesan & Lewis, 2021), but also provide guidance on the legal and social aspects of living under the pandemic. Hence, these characteristics of comics can help in bringing across social criticisms and observational commentary on the serious current situations and they are deemed effective because comics are able to attract the attention of the public and its readers using humorous and visual cues.

In order to counter the global impact of COVID-19, a strong political drive is needed. Without such push, it is almost impossible for a country to manage such crises especially when it has to involve policy changes and a large budget. Since the issue is unprecedented, all parties whether the government or the people are bound to face trials and errors and also success stories in the actions they make. Often than not, these stories made the pages of various media platforms. Cartoonists such as Ernest Ng put together these stories in his comics to highlight the happenings in the country in a comical manner. Humour has the potential to act as a form of social criticism. To date, though cartoonists across various media have engaged their arts during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a lack of local studies on comics that socially criticised the actions of political figures. The rationale for selecting Ng's

comic books is to showcase how the cartoonist frames what is going on in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic and its concurrent relationship with the local political events that is also happening through his personal observations and research. Overall, this research aimed at providing a better understanding of the issues and social criticisms of the Malaysian political climate during the COVID-19 pandemic via content analysis of the political figures that the comics portray.

The objective of this paper is to undertake a content analysis of the portrayals of the various state machinery figures both from the government and opposition sides (i.e., ministers, politicians and government officers) in their roles in combating COVID-19. Additionally, the analysis wishes to uncover contemporary attitudes Ng uses such as symbolism, exaggeration and irony, among others, to convey his views on the current issue in obvious and subtle ways.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Pandemic, Comics and Cultural Functions*

COVID-19-related comics express the concerns and anxieties of our tense connection with viruses (Callender et al., 2020). Comic books' popularity rose since its inception in the 19th century. Historically, comics have been used to depict natural disasters and pandemics (Venkatesan & Lewis, 2021). In 1918, American cartoonists made use of characters to help disseminate awareness about the global influenza pandemic. In the 1980s and 1990s, comics were utilised to raise awareness, educate and reduce worries about HIV/AIDS. Other examples are Gary Varvel's editorial cartoons concerning the H1N1 outbreak and a comic called "Sarszilla " created by Dan Collins where the culturally renowned Japanese monster Godzilla meets SARS, wreaking havoc on a city during the SARS outbreak. One of the issues that these comics emphasised on was the significance of taking precautions in public settings (Venkatesan & Lewis, 2021). Similar patterns can be noticed in the publication of comics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the main pulling effects of comics is images. Images have taken on a new significance in our visual culture, serving as the foundation for a complicated interaction between imagination, creativity and social practice (Piva, 2020). The conceptual and visual metaphors in images in comics make them both a medium and a cultural product. As a visual medium and cultural product, comics provide significant contributions to a pandemic's visual culture (Callender et al., 2020). Saji et al. (2021) examined the nature, purpose and selection of conceptual and visual metaphors in self-published comics and contended that military metaphors, anthropomorphism and super heroism are employed to describe and illustrate the pandemic's lived experience. Additionally, their articles examined the various sorts of metaphors, their utilities and the motivations for such representations.

Also, images in comics are critical components of the outbreak narrative and, more broadly, contribute to the visual culture of infection in our increasingly visual society (Callender et al., 2020). They assist the audience in processing, reflecting on, and comprehending experiences by informing, providing meaning, and illustrating the outbreak narrative. The visual documentation of the pandemic in comics helps debunk the myth of contagion's invisibility, fosters personal narratives about the pandemic, provides knowledge of public health measures, and can foster the spirit of unity due to shared emotions and experiences. Callender et al. (2020) further stated that comics have the ability to illustrate and communicate spatial, temporal, and relational aspects of the pandemic in ways that other

mediums may be ineffective. They are popular, especially among millennials. Hence, comics can entice them to learn about the current challenges surrounding the outbreak. This genre can also serve as a primary platform for conveying ideas aimed at fostering a nation's social consciousness (Lent, 2007). According to Alabi (2020), comic book creators have utilised their comics to depict the pandemic's negative consequences in social, religious, economic, and political spheres. They not only reflect the hardship of the people, but also speak out against national leaders' injustice, corruption and selfishness. All in all, this genre has been quick to respond to issues depicting pandemics or disasters and presenting them in dramatic and provocative ways (Saji et al., 2021).

Comics can affect how people view political and international events, make people think and laugh. During the pandemics, comics vividly depict the complex narratives, sufferings, and new social, cultural, and political conditions (Saji et al., 2021). Political cartoons, according to Onakpa (2014), are frequently sarcastic in character and are used to condemn societal misdeeds, sayings, viewpoints, or events involving prominent figures. He went on to say that cartoons help to remedy society's flaws by keeping public officials on their toes, and that the cartoonist acts as the conscience or voice of the people, speaking for and representing the people's views. Similarly, this rings true in comics. The characters in a comic can be drawn in exaggerated style, caricatures or even real-life lifelike and true to life (Lee, Cheah, Noraza & Badrul, 2017). Then, it is up to the readers to interpret comics from their cultural standpoints (Lee et al., 2017). Most of the time, readers start imagining themselves dragged into new or unusual situations portrayed by the comics as the result of their visual culture (Piva, 2020). When readers read comics, they are made to understand the psychological effects of the pandemic and lockdown had on them. At the same time, it relieves worry and tension owing to the comical characters presented in the comics, thus providing coping mechanisms for those suffering during the pandemic (Alabi, 2020).

Additionally, comics depict life and current state of affairs in its images in a humorous way. Lee et al. (2017) noted that comics highlight the beliefs and cultural systems that make up the social fabric we live in through humour, subversion, irony and mimicry. According to Bischetti et al. (2020), COVID-19 humour illustrates varying degrees of darkness and offensiveness. However, they also mentioned that most often, in the case of COVID-19, the humour is portrayed in a mild manner, depicting changes in daily habits and ways to pass time during the lockdown caused by the pandemic. Comic artists resort to the genre to educate readers about the virus, its mode of transmission, and the necessary precautions and safety measures to combat the spread of COVID-19. To illustrate certain points or issues, comics feature exaggerated depictions of physical activities, gestures, or even characteristics and expressions of faces that can take form in a direct, subtle, or stereotypically manner (Lee et al., 2017). Although some comics utilise caricature and exaggeration, most of them follow a simple art style and conventional format to share facts with their intended audience (Saji et al., 2021).

### *Comics and Its Influence in Malaysia*

According to Iman and Yamato (2018), the Malaysian comic industry did not grow until the arrival of comics from the United States, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Since the 1970s, the Malaysian comic industry has grown into a well-established local entertainment industry. The earlier comics in Malaysia were originally comics from Japan, or more known as manga.

Manga is one of the most popular genres of pop culture (Chan, 2018) and its popularity has skyrocketed around the world in the last few decades (Bryce, Barber, Kelly, Kunwar & Plumb, 2010). Japanese manga is distinguished by its “unique contemporaneous sensibilities, narrative approaches, and drawing style which include a harmony of linguistic elements, flexible frames and speech bubbles and iconographic images” (Chan, 2018, p. 208). During the inception of the manga hype in Malaysia, the imported comics were those translated into Mandarin from Taiwan and Hong Kong. By the late 1990s, Malay-locally translated mangas were already available. The Japan International MANGA Award which was established since 2007 recognises non-Japanese manga creators who have made significant contributions to the development of MANGA culture abroad (Japan International Manga Award, 2014). Lam Quek Chung, Malaysian manga creator “*Detektif Hantu*” won a bronze award at the 13th International Manga Award (Yap, 2020). Malaysian readers’ gradual consumption of the Japanese manga has spurred the development of comics by local companies and cartoonists which gradually adapted them based on local identity constructions (Chan, 2018). Chan (2018) asserted that Malaysian comics mimic the local identity markers in order to be relevant to its readers’ identity development.

According to Lee et al. (2017), the local cartoonists define the formation of Malaysian “everyday-defined realities” via their distinctive and creative process. Hence, it is no wonder that Malaysian original comics have evolved into more than simply for amusement purposes; it is also a forum to highlight issues in a dramatic way (Chan, 2018). Identity negotiation in everyday settings can take place via communication made available on these mediums (Chan, 2018). Realist cartoonists reproduce visuals as realistic as they can to provide readers with actual experiences (Iman & Yamato, 2018). One fine example of a famous Malaysian cartoonist is Mohammad Nor Khalid or his nom de plume Lat, who was among the earliest cartoonists to draw English comics in Malaysia. His writings and drawings are based on his real-life experiences, in which he narrates about rural living and its comparison to city life (Lee et al., 2017). Lat has the ability to deliver funny viewpoints, frequently in exaggerated forms, into anything he sketches (Lee et al., 2017). His work stands above the rest because they provide perspectives of multicultural societies. In addition, stereotypical characters can be easily identified in his visual representations. These help in communicating the ideas at hand (Lee et al., 2017).

The aspects that need to be considered when reading comics are character, setting and situation. These three are the means through which meanings and content are constructed. In other words, a comic book is a frame that represents the society in which the author and target readers live, the values and attitudes that serve as the cultural foundation for the narrative being told by the cartoonist (Lee et al., 2017). In their study, Lee et al. (2017) examined how Lat’s cartoons shape Malaysian culture standards and behaviours via characters, setting and situation portrayed in his comics. Similarly, the researchers will also be looking into these three aspects to bring out the thematic examples in their content analysis.

### *Cartoonist’s Background*

Ernest Ng’s interest in comics began when he read his late grandmother’s Old Master Q comic novel. From then on, he started reading popular manga titles such as Doraemon and Dragon Ball (Fernandez, 2020). His earlier drawings were inspired by black lines used in line drawings. As he grew older, he admitted his drawings’ inspirations came from the Japanese manga

(Sathiabalan, 2020). He has been writing professionally since 2010. Due to his interest in Japanese manga and anime, most of the characters that he designed are inspired by prominent series like Dragon Ball Z, Naruto, Bleach, and Jojo's Bizarre Adventure (Tan, 2020). He became obsessed with drawing when he was five and published his webcomics online in 2010 (Savitha, 2020; Tan, 2020). Since 2013, he has released comics entitled Here Comes The Bros, Bro Don't Like That La Bro, My Bad Bromance, the Brofessionals, and the Back to School series, many of which were motivated by his own experiences and that of others. In a study of Malaysian manga artists, Iman and Yamato (2018) found out that all manga artists tend to imitate the style of their favourite manga but at the same time infusing real life experience and local flavour.

### *CovidBall Z*

After many years of drawing based on his own life experiences, Ng decided to step out of his comfort zone and write on current issues (Tan, 2020). Due to popular requests, the comic book *If COVID-19 Was Anime: CovidBall Z* was produced based on Ng's webcomic, *If Malaysia Was An Anime* (Toh, 2020). Webcomics are cartoons and comics that are produced, circulated and read online (Alabi, 2020). *CovidBall Z* is Ng's first long form comic series where the weekly chapters are connected as opposed to his previous works where each piece is a standalone plot. Ng began creating the titled series and its animated motion comics shortly before Malaysia entered its first lockdown or Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020 (Savitha, 2020). On September 24, 2020, the first volume of *CovidBall Z* was released as a comic book series. The COVID-19 virus was portrayed as a parody of Dragon Ball villains Frieza and Cell and their villain-turned-friend Piccolo (Fernandez, 2020). Politicians and public personalities were the subject matter of the book; they are portrayed as cool and muscular, all rising to fight the infectious disease (Toh, 2020). Ng keeps up with the news on COVID-19 on a daily basis and strives to weave events into a coherent narrative (Fernandez, 2020). To make sure he did not cover unverified news, he would double-check the reports with his journalist friends for validation (Tan, 2020). Ng intends to play an uplifting role in Malaysia's present pandemic scenario by developing something hilarious and yet important to readers, as the issue has affected everyone globally (Tan, 2020). Thus, he considered writing comic books as a pleasant diversion from the situation (Fernandez, 2020).

During the MCO, Ng's portrayals of the virus went viral on social media (Toh, 2020). To date Ng has published 6 volumes of *CovidBall Z* but the focus of the study will only analyse Volumes 1 to 3. Volume 1 concerns the power struggle in Malaysia and how the elected government representatives respond to the coronavirus situation during the early days (Ng, 2020a). Volume 2 covers how Malaysia and the U.S. fight COVID-19 and how similar people can function in times of duress (Ng, 2020b). Volume 3 focuses more on the involvement of the various characters with their hidden agenda while the COVID force gets a bit side lined (Ng, 2021). As the volumes progress from one to the other, more and more characters are included. These volumes must never be read in a typical event-character development method. Ng (2021) himself admits stories in the volumes were inspired by whatever interesting current news that fits into the narration. All the characters are indeed representations of real-life characters, identified via their graphic representations and intentional misspellings of their names. Everyday Malaysians who follow the news update can easily identify with the events and characters, despite Ng's (2020a, 2020b & 2021) disclaimer,

“any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental and do not make any sense.” This statement has to be taken with a pinch of salt because Ng is after all a fiction writer. A few key-players appear right through all the volumes. While other characters are one-off characters, yet, their presence contributes to the understanding of chaos due to the pandemic.

#### METHODOLOGY

In analysing the data, this study used data analysis techniques in the form of descriptive content analysis. The descriptive content analysis is used to show the form of criticism contained within Ng’s comics. Owing to the comics’ graphical nature, in which images and words serve as the visual language, content analysis is useful to foreground the themes discovered in the comics analysed. The researchers will be using this method to analyse the contents portrayed by the chosen comics. The method of investigation is unobtrusive where it allows the researchers to systematically identify, describe and analyse images and text of popular culture (Garland, Policastro, Branch & Henderson, 2018). In addition, it was also proven to be a helpful tool for studying social problems. Garland et al. (2018) used two types of content analysis to analyse comic book pictures which are manifest and latent. Manifest content analysis focuses on the apparent, visible surface material provided in the comics while the latent content analysis emphasises the underlying meanings of the comics, requiring the analyst to derive significance from it. Since the focus of this paper is Ernest Ng’s CovidBall Z comic and his drawings are culled from the cultural perspectives of a Malaysian, the researchers also have to rely on subjective knowledge to interpret the chosen comic.

This study involves the revealing of implicit themes within the content, requires active interpretation by the researchers, and employs a flexible coding scheme. The analysis process was carried out by reading the three volumes of the comics, coding, analysing, interpreting, and concluding the issues and styles conveyed by Ng. During the coding process, the researchers identify common themes and reveal new meanings as relationships among images and words are uncovered.

The aspects that need to be considered when reading comics are character, setting and situation. These three are the means through which meanings and content are constructed. In other words, the comic book is a frame that represents the society in which the author and target readers live, the values and attitudes that serve as the cultural foundation for the narrative being told by the cartoonist (Lee et al., 2017). In their study, Lee et al. (2017) examined how Lat’s cartoons shape Malaysian culture standards and behaviours via characters, setting and situation portrayed in his comics. Similarly, the researchers will also be looking into these three aspects to bring out the thematic examples in their content analysis.

The following section discusses the findings of the study which are the representations of ministers, politicians and government officers in their roles in combating COVID-19 using manifest themes based on their characterisation, the setting of the story and its situational plot. Furthermore, latent themes that can be found from CovidBall Z using literary aspects of symbolism, exaggeration, irony and others are also analysed to convey the reflection of the author on the attitudes of Malaysian machinery figures in combating the pandemic.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *The Metaphorical Depiction of Characters in Relation to Malaysian Political Figures*

The researchers found the position of the events in all volumes are parallel to the political environment in Malaysia. Volume 1 kicks off with the depiction of a mysterious figure dressed in black hood covering his face in a trap card game (similar to the Japanese manga in the Yu-Gi-Oh!) with an opponent identified as Mahadir. According to Lee et al. (2017), the daily condition of a country and its political personalities are defined by a cartoonist's use of signifiers with which his readers can almost instantly identify with, as the work embeds and signifies our cultural similarities and belongingness. Even at the start, and throughout the comic, Ng depicts each character, event and setting using famous trends that can be found in popular manga which are known to their fans, especially among millennials. Furthermore, Ng uses these depictions as metaphors that give hints of underlying meanings and significations. This is a way to rationalise the happenings of real events and convey critical cultural and emotional truths (Saji et al., 2021). The trap game is reflective of the Sheraton Move initiated by Azmin Ali to manoeuvre the political crisis in Malaysia that led to the sudden resignation of Mahathir and appointment of a new Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin. Characters in the crowd are represented by their distinct identity markers as the leaders of the *Pakatan Harapan* coalition party. The one clad in orange t-shirt is Mat Sabu, man with goatee is Anwar Ibrahim, bespectacled East Asian man is Lim Guan Eng and hijab-clad lady is Wan Azizah. Ng's characters illustrated in his comics are based on definite features from recognisable political leaders (Tan, 2020).

### *The Metaphorical Depiction of COVID-19 as the Villain*

When the politicians are fighting with each other, they have forgotten the real enemy which is the virus. The COVID-19 virus is also visualised using metaphors. The battle myth, coined by Anne Hunsaker Hawkin in 1999, utilises the metaphoric language of war, threats and territory. Within such a framework, a disease condition is metaphorised as the battle between human hero and monstrous foe. Many cartoonists of COVID-19 comics draw heavily on the rhetorical, discursive and convening power of the war metaphor (Seixas, 2021). In the context of COVID-19, the battle myth is primarily framed as a war between the frontline workers and the novel coronavirus (the monstrous foe), and secondarily as humanity versus the same foe but on a pandemic scale. In Volume 1, a green colored alien GR19N is assigned to infect Malaysia. This COVID-19 character who serves as the villain in Malaysia is an ill-looking green alien with a buff body dressed in spandex (Tan, 2020). The reason why the virus is in the form of an alien denotes how unfamiliar the virus is at the beginning to the global community. However, in the second volume readers are made to understand that it is made of a bigger force called COVID Forces which comprise its commander-in-chief Commander GO19 and his soldiers GRN19 and BLU19A and later in Volume 3, PURP19. They are represented as multicoloured aliens from outer space, an inspiration from another Japanese manga, *Dragon Ball*. All of these aliens are bestowed with human traits. Suzanne Keen (2011, cited in Saji et al., 2021), observed that visual artists adopt the culturally familiar versions of human facial expression and bodily postures in their anthropomorphised characters in an effort aimed at strategic empathising. As such, anthropomorphic representation of the coronavirus captures the gravity of the pandemic and provokes readers to follow precautionary measures to combat the spread of the virus (Pensini & McMullen, 2022). Furthermore, according to Onal (2021),



such metaphors can be utilised to depict psychological and societal representations of the COVID-19 pandemic. GRN19's presence was not taken seriously until he started infecting people. He transmitted the disease to people in a manga war manner via employing concentrated ki attacks using fingers or snipe shots, commonly used by the emperor Frieza, in Dragon Ball. The background situation related to the coronavirus pandemic sets up tragic expectations, which the comic diverts from, setting a humorous clash by means of more or less innocuous themes (Bischetti et al., 2020).

#### *The Political Caricatures*

The use of superheroes in COVID-19 comics underscores a context in which super-heroic interventions are required to control the pandemic (Saji et al., 2021). However, in Ng's comics, most political figures are reconceptualised as stereotypical caricatures of superheroes with flaws. Muhidin, the leader of the country is exaggeratedly depicted in a superhero physique having six-pack abs. However, his physical image does not seem to correlate with his attributes. He called for state chiefs to 'work together and figure out how to beat this thing', leaving out representatives from the states of Penang, Selangor, Kedah, Sabah and Sarawak. When questioned, he gives a simplistic reason for "oversight" not that these states are not his political allies. Hence, this is not a characteristic of a good leader. He tries to defend against attacks from GRN19 by performing Ju-jitsu, a Japanese martial art, typical in the manga Naruto and other times fist fights. Fighting a vicious enemy using bare hands and the chakra is not effective. None of his methods so far bore success. This leads him to enforce Movement Restriction Order (MRO) as a form of barricading the people from the virus. Self-barricading is not effective either where in the long run it affects people's livelihood where "they can't work" or "everyone will starve." Muhidin continues to extend MRO when COVID-19 is undestroyable. Simultaneously, Muhidin has to face another enemy, Mahadir, also depicted in a super-heroic body. They engage in fighting actions called 'anti-gravity combat' which is the ability of the user to combine anti-gravity manipulation with physical combat to achieve a variety of effects for fighting opponents, such as increasing one's movements, avoiding harm, and/or offsetting an opponent's body. This form of fighting is similar to the one by Beetlemon in Digimon. Mahadir ends the fighting by putting down his card game 'no confidence'. This whole scenario is suggestive of Mahathir's motion for no-confidence of Muhyiddin's premiership debate at the parliament.

#### *The Epic Hero Metaphor in General Hisham*

Superhero metaphors imagine the current pandemic-causing virus as a supervillain and the health-care professionals or front liners as the modern-day superheroes and inspirational exemplars who save humanity from infection and death. The epic hero is a man whose fortune is brought about by his admired characteristics and in this narrative is General Hisham. His name is not given any name twist like other characters. In fact, he is given the title general, the highest rank officer in the army, suggesting his significant role in fighting COVID-19. Like a true saviour, he came about when "the pandemic (was) getting out of control" globally. He appears in formal work attire, grey shirt with dark tie underneath but with an upturned collar of long dark jacket holding a rather ordinary looking sword symbolising a man who holds something up his sleeve. Unlike Muhidin, he knows that he cannot fight the enemy alone. Thus, he himself is armed with a sword and mobilises his soldier front liners to fight with him. Being learned men and women they also come prepared with

their personal protective equipment suit, swords and shields symbolising medical aids. Together they fight the common enemy GRN19. As a warrior, he strategises his tactics. He is not afraid to challenge GRN19 to “stand back you foul beast” or uses his sword to fight vigorously whenever the number of infections rises.

#### *The War Metaphors in the Malaysian Fight Against COVID-19*

The battle myth, coined by Anne Hunsaker Hawkin in 1999, utilises the metaphoric language of war, threats and territory. Within such a framework, a disease condition is metaphorized as the battle between human hero and monstrous foe. Many cartoonists of COVID-19 comics draw heavily on the rhetorical, discursive and convening power of the war metaphor (Saji et al., 2021). In the context of COVID-19, the battle myth in Ng's comics is primarily framed as a war between the politicians and frontline workers and the novel coronavirus (GRN19 and his brethren) and secondarily as humanity versus the same foe, but on a pandemic scale. According to Saji et al. (2021), war metaphors particularly capture the contours of community, communicability and contagion and also function as a heuristic tool to relay the collective force of humanity. In the comics, like in any war, propaganda campaigns can influence people; General Hisham calls out people on the need to maintain standard operating procedures and hygiene during the pandemic. At one point under the comic frame where General Hisham was fighting, Muhidin was comically portrayed still doing the jutsu, suggesting this technique is ineffective. At other times General Hisham and his team varied the method of fighting, this time using the hunting method of lasso, to capture the virus. They managed to capture the virus momentarily until the virus was assisted by a fellow virus, BLU19 which was earlier assigned to invade the Freedom Land. The general warns that the enemy is a virus and thus “it is difficult to completely destroy him” especially when there are many like him around the world. Like any true leader he gives words of hope to his soldiers, “We can't destroy [the enemy] but we will do all that we can to suppress [him]...we must remain vigilant. True enough, not long after that, the country is affected by the enemies from foreign lands suggestive of new variants of the COVID-19 virus. The use of war metaphors in the representations is to communicate a threat and urgency that underpins drastic decisions.

#### *CovidBall Z Serving as a Social Criticism in Malaysian Politics*

It is quite general for comics that often reflect real-life observations by the cartoonist to have exaggerations in its characters, setting and plots. Exaggeration is a method to make a particular statement, image or situation look better or worse than its current condition. In “*Aku Budak Minang*”, Ujang the cartoonist employs exaggeration when drawing a character's face shape where a round face suggests dynamism and liveliness of the characters (Qiang & Khan, 2015). Mahathir is caricatured with his iconic big nose. Characters in Ng's comics are shown making exaggerated statements and actions that do not exhibit critical thinking and reasoning. Though these characters are unnamed, they can be identified by their markers, either their government posts mentioned, or language and visual traits used. The health minister is shown throwing warm water to GR19N which was received by a nonchalant response by the enemy. In another event the same minister in a news report, made reference to a video teleconference on COVID-19 he just attended with 500 ‘countries’ in participation. The Housing and Local Government Minister pushed aside the front liners, dressed in a hazmat suit to take part in a sanitation operation, ignoring WHO Director-General's statement

that sanitation is wasting resources. This practice was condemned as pointless because the virus cannot be destroyed in this manner. A figure resembling an assemblyman and former Penang health exco recommended haircuts to reduce high blood pressure during the pandemics. In another scene, another lady minister (interpreted as the Higher Education Minister) proposes young Malaysians to stay home during the pandemic and participate in a TikTok competition organised by her ministry. The depiction of these real-life events and incidents are already humorous, but adding the exaggerated pictorial depiction in the comics creates even more humour.

There are also depictions of the current political climate in Malaysia that also serves as a side-story concurrent to the pandemic. The social commentaries presented in Ng's comics via the plot depict the existence of sexism, unfair treatment, and prejudice by several characters which lead to bully culture. For example, there is an instance when a character called Hanayo queried the government roadmap to end child marriage she was questioned by the police. This similarly happens to a journalist who reported about foreign migrants in the country. The local police force is mobilised to hunt the migrant interviewee. According to the Chief Polis, the investigations are conducted whenever the public reports their dissatisfaction. However, the police did not take any actions of the public's grouches of the increase in their electricity bill to the CEO of T.N.Bee (a wordplay of TNB, Tenaga Nasional Berhad, which is the main electrical utility company provider in Malaysia), Mazir Kalid. This is an act of discrimination in the part of the part of the authority.

Ng's comics frame both contrasting incidents next to each other that can only signify as double standard practices employed by the local higher authorities. In addition, the word play of the electricity utility company name 'Bee' symbolically represents the characteristic of a bee which stings just like this electricity provider to its users. Sexist behaviour is also depicted in this comic. One character who is depicted as the Women, Family and Community Development Minister advises women to giggle coyly and speak in Doraemon-like voice during the lockdown to avoid marital arguments. The suggestion by the minister is deemed not only sexist, but demeaning to the status of women. In another event, a character named Khastri who is an MP was thrown offensive racist and sexist remarks by a fellow male MP as "*gelap lah tak nampak*" (it's dark I can't see) and "*pakailah bedak*" (put on some powder) both in reference to her dark skin. The politicians in Ng's comics from both the government and opposition side engage in abusive war of words and shadow boxing their opposite sides to 'defend' their bloc. In one comic frame, both MPs (the accuser and the accused) are placed side by side depicting the male MP skin colour is similar to that of the lady MP. This framing clearly suggests that he should not criticise someone else for a fault that he has himself which can be likened to the pot calling the kettle black. There are also several depictions of bully culture among the politicians in the comics whenever opposing parties meet in which each blames or undermines the other party's past actions. A politician character S.Sadiq was teased and made fun of in Parliament by an MP chiding him to "*pergi lompat pagar lah!*" (go jump hurdles). This event made reference to him climbing the fence to escape from a rowdy crowd at an event in Johor. While another MP teased S.Sadiq "*cucu nak cakap*" (grandson wants to speak) and "*tanya atok kenapa letak jawatan*" (ask grandpa referring to Dr Mahathir Mohamad why he resigned) referring to his relationship with his former mentor. These statements showed lack of professionalism by older and more experienced MPs and also a form of bullying to someone younger.

## CONCLUSION

Comic writing in Malaysia began in the 1930s. The comic circle at the time was focused on Malay language comics. Initially they were published in newspapers and magazines, and then moved on to comic books. Today, technology allows comics to be published in new platforms such as on websites and mobile apps. For a long time, comic books are not regarded as “real books” but just reading materials for children simply because they contain drawings.

In this period of COVID-19 pandemic, people's daily lives have been disrupted, and the global economy has slowed. COVID-19 humour, in terms of subject content, can be classified as a type of dark humour, that is, humour that deals with death or morbid topics and provokes a bitter amusement (Bischetti et al., 2020). Humour is used to target public figures such as politicians and leaders of health-related institutions (Bischetti et al., 2020). Humour can bridge barriers and is an effective approach to address serious topics and in turn be a transformative force to promote behavioural and social changes (Venkatesan & Lewis, 2021). Political cartooning in a country is influenced by the government in power (Lewis, 2007). Similarly, Ng utilises humour to convey messages how the government in power deals with the outbreak. The images in his comics help us analyse, reflect on, and interpret our experiences by informing, providing meaning, and illustrating the outbreak narrative.

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