

The Visual Rhetoric in Comics for Reader Interpretation and Engagement to Meaning-Making in the Medium

MULIYATI MAT ALIM*

IDA PUTERI MAHSAN

MOHD FAUZI HARUN

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

MOHD YUSOF ZULKEFLI

Universiti Teknologi Mara, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Comics are a unique form of sequential art that combines text and visual graphics to tell a story. In academic circles, the purposeful use of visual elements to convey meaning or visual rhetoric has been gaining increasing attention. This research explores how comics' use of visual rhetoric affects readers' interpretations of and interactions with the medium. Additionally, the study seeks to explore how the discussion about models and concepts used affects readers' interactions with the medium and their meaning-making processes. To achieve this, the research employed qualitative methods, using descriptive and semi-systematic approaches to gather information on visual rhetoric related to three predetermined objectives. The study's results advance the field of comics studies by offering new insights into the potential of visual rhetoric to convey complex ideas and abstract concepts. It also contributes to the academic study of comics by providing fresh perspectives on using visual rhetoric to convey complex ideas. Overall, this research offers a better understanding of the interplay between visual elements and textual components in comics, helping readers better appreciate the medium's storytelling capabilities. Through a detailed analysis of comics and their visual rhetoric, this study sheds light on the nuanced ways in which visual elements contribute to meaning-making in the medium. The findings of this research have implications for educators, artists, and scholars interested in understanding the role of visual rhetoric in communication and storytelling.

Keywords: *Comics, visual rhetoric, visual elements, interpretation, communication.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, comics have transformed from a specialized type of entertainment to a widely used storytelling medium. Graphic novels and comic books are sequential arts that use text and visual visuals to tell a story. Comics' visual components are essential to how readers comprehend and interact with the medium. In the academic study of comics, the deliberate use of visual components to express meaning or visual rhetoric has attracted considerable interest.

This study aims to explore how comics' use of visual rhetoric affects readers' interpretations of and interactions with the medium. The study will look into two objectives (1) introduction about visual rhetoric use in comics, (2) review previously published study papers how visual rhetoric in the comics and readers interpret stories, (3) discussion about model and concepts used affects readers' interaction with the medium and meaning-making.

For the first objective, the study will be about the history of visual rhetoric in comics and its developments. The second objective will focus on the finding for latest studies because

*Corresponding author: muliyati@fbk.upsi.edu.my

E-ISSN: 2289-1528

<https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2024-4003-25>

of its significance in exploring the visual rhetoric in comics as communication elements for readers' interpretation. For the third objective, concepts used affect readers' interaction with the medium and meaning-making will be explored.

This paper's primary objective is to deepen readers' comprehension of how comics' verbal and visual parts interact and how that interaction affects how the medium conveys meaning. Doing this will add to the increasing corpus of study on comics and offer fresh viewpoints on the medium's potential to explain complicated concepts and engage readers in exciting and novel ways. We must look to works outside our area that offer analytical and heuristic viewpoints from within the profession as rhetoric and composition become more deeply ingrained in the study of visual culture, new media forms, and multimodal creation (O'Brien, 2017). *Making Comics* is one of these works because it skilfully invests its energies in skilfully elucidating the different forms, genres, techniques, and prevailing philosophies of comics art, both as a matter of practice and as a matter of theory. As a result, it would seem to be quite helpful in classes that might consider comic books and related creative forms as both consumer and producer goods (McCloud, 2006). Given his flexibility, McCloud's most recent work merits at least equal attention. Additionally, scholars concur that comics serve as graphic mediums and cultural artifacts that have significantly impacted the visual community during the COVID-19 pandemic. One notable Malaysian comic artist, Ernest Ng, began by publishing his comics online and later compiled them into three volumes titled *CovidBall Z Volume 1 (2020a)*, *Volume 2 (2020b)*, and *Volume 3 (2021)* (Kudus & Lee, 2022).

INTRODUCTION OF VISUAL RHETORIC IN COMICS

Visual rhetoric can be found in various visual creative works, from classic visual artwork to web page design and contemporary comics. This form of rhetoric, which relates to the logic of vehicle paintings, can influence people as effectively, if not more so, than verbal communication. Hence, visual rhetoric is a powerful analytical approach with numerous applications (Zahra & Arts, 2021). Visual rhetoric refers to the intentional use of visual elements, such as images, colours, shapes, and composition, to convey meaning, influence perception, and evoke emotional responses in various forms of communication, including comics. It involves strategically using visual techniques and design principles to communicate ideas, arguments, or narratives effectively. In comics, visual rhetoric enhances the reader's interpretation and engagement with the medium (McCorkle, 2010). Comic creators utilize visual elements to express emotions, establish settings, depict actions, convey symbolism, and guide the reader's attention. The arrangement of panels, the composition within each panel, the use of word balloons, and the placement of characters and objects on the page all contribute to the visual rhetoric of a comic. For example, the size and placement of characters within a panel can convey their importance or dominance in a scene. Using colours can create specific moods or signify changes in time or space. The panel arrangement can control the narrative's pacing and flow, emphasizing certain moments or creating visual connections between events. Visual rhetoric in comics also involves using visual metaphors, symbols, and visual storytelling techniques to convey complex ideas or abstract concepts. By harnessing the power of visual language, comics can evoke emotions, engage readers on multiple sensory levels, and facilitate a deeper understanding and interpretation of the story being told (McCloud, 2006). While there are various formats for teaching visual literacy, comics provide affordances that other methods might not have. Since the introduction of multimodality in composition, visual rhetoric has played an increasingly important role in professional

communication. To do this, the National Council of English Teachers recently urged educators to use various communication techniques in the classroom, including alphabetic and visual meaning-making systems ('NCTE' 17). The NCTE warns that the digital divide that generates access difficulties for students of different backgrounds can hinder praxis-based research in the field. Including both visual and alphabetic writing in the classroom can strain an already crowded professional communication classroom (Watkins, 2014).

Table 1: The definition of visual rhetoric in comics as described by different scholars

Scholar	Title	Year	Definition
McCorkle	A Rhetoric of Sequential Art	2010	Visual rhetoric refers to the intentional use of visual elements, such as images, colours, shapes, and composition, to convey meaning, influence perception, and evoke emotional responses in various forms of communication, including comics.
McCloud	Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels.	2006	Visual rhetoric in comics involves strategically using visual techniques and design principles to communicate ideas, arguments, or narratives effectively. It is crucial in enhancing the reader's interpretation and engagement with the medium.
Watkins	Sequential Rhetoric: Teaching Comics as Visual Rhetoric	2014	Comics, as a form of visual literacy, provide unique affordances for teaching visual rhetoric and multimodality in professional communication.

A sizable portion of the study on visual rhetoric explores what is gained and lost by developing an accepted picture of what visual rhetoric involves, much like Jo Allen's general worry about defining professional communication (Watskin, 2014). It is also attempted throughout entire volumes, such as *Defining Visual Rhetoric and Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, which aim to develop a comprehensive visual lexicon. Finding concise descriptions of language used in visual rhetoric can be difficult. A definition provided by Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope can be a starting point for this discussion even though it isn't perfect. They contend that the origin of visual rhetoric may be traced to "embracing a critical perspective that links visuality and rhetoric, locates the study of visual rhetoric within a disciplinary framework of communication, and explores the role of the visual in the cultural space of the United States"(Watskin, 2014). Three presumptions are made about it: 1. Visuals should not be studied in isolation but rather in the context of where and how they appeared. Visuals are not isolated entities but are embedded within a larger communicative framework. A more comprehensive understanding of their rhetorical impact can be gained by studying visuals in their context, such as their placement, surrounding elements, and intended audience. 2. According to Bruce E. Gronbeck (Watskin, 2014) the visual is essential to the study of rhetoric since, like text and talking, visual aspects have been around since antiquity. This presumption acknowledges the longstanding presence and significance of visual elements in communication. Just as spoken and written language have been traditionally studied in the field of rhetoric, visuals too have a rich history and contribute to the rhetorical process. Same goes for cartoons in comics which can also trigger something like social protest and legal action on account of the critical positions they adopt towards powerful personalities and/or organizations. Using tools of satire, humour, symbols, social labels or stereotypes, caricatures and captions in the medium of cartoons get the point of the cartoonist across with precision

(Swain, 2012, cited in Latif & Elgarrai, 2021). Recognising the essential role of visuals expands the scope of rhetorical analysis and deepens our understanding of persuasive strategies employed in various media. 3. The rhetorical heritage and "conceptual resources" from different disciplines must serve as the foundation for the visual rhetoric language. This emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of visual rhetoric. Some studies discuss the emergence, social function, visual style, and distribution system of comics and one of them is independent comics in the late 1990s to early 2000s. It's have related to visual rhetoric, for example, the relationship between comics and the medium of photography has been examined, as seen from its categorization, function in the story, and exploration. Apart from the medium of photography, imaginative images that represent photos can be seen in their role in weaving comic stories (Bajraghosa, Irawanto & Ajidarma, 2023). Visual rhetoric also employs simulations and virtual embodiment, particularly through memes, counter-memes, comic books, and graphic novels. These mediums reveal the complex history of games and comics while prominently featuring marginalized identities (Haukaas, 2024). Visual rhetoric draws on insights and concepts from various disciplines such as rhetoric, semiotics, communication, art, and design. By integrating these conceptual resources, visual rhetoric establishes a foundation for analysing and understanding the persuasive power of visual communication. It recognises that the language of visual rhetoric is built upon a collective body of knowledge from multiple fields.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participants in Cohn's study from 2014 were asked to arrange panels on comic book pages in the order they would read them. The drawings and text on those pages were removed. The findings demonstrated that, whereas readers typically follow a Z-path to explore panels, other paths are also available based on variations in size or proximity. Eye-tracking was utilized in Mikkonen and Lautenbacher's (2019) study to analyse the effects of narrative content and layout on comic book reading. Although readers had a significantly less organized eye movement pattern at the very start and end of each page, they still discovered a prevalence of the Z-shape pattern. They proposed that readers utilize a global attention scale and a local attention scale. Nakazawa (2016) discovered that expertise affected one's capacity for understanding comics. Furthermore, Zhao and Mahrt (2018) demonstrated that more proficient readers had shorter eye fixations than less proficient readers and more proficient readers did better on the comic book comprehension test.

Rhetoric in English refers to the art of speaking or delivering speeches. According to Echols in 1990, it is the skill of using words both orally and in writing, or speaking through performance and design, as mentioned by Hornby and Parnwell (cited in Syamsuddin, 2014). On the other hand, visual rhetoric can be understood as the meaning behind visual images. It is not just about design or images, but also about the culture and meaning reflected or portrayed in the visual work. Visual rhetoric applies a perspective of understanding the process of translating visual symbols to convey messages or communicate. In 1970, visual images were included in the study of rhetoric through the National Rhetoric Conference organized by the Speech Communication Association (Sloan et al., 1971, cited in Foss, 2006).

Furthermore, visual rhetoric refers to images created by designers who use visual symbols for communication. Examples include innovative products such as comics, paintings, photographs, advertisements, or buildings. Images used as visual rhetoric serve persuasive (persuasion) purposes, aesthetic value, and practical benefits (Muliwati, 2019). Not all visual objects are considered visual rhetoric. There are three main characteristics of visual rhetoric.

Firstly, the image must be symbolic. Secondly, it involves human intervention. Thirdly, it was presented to the audience for communication with that audience by Foss in 2005 (Qadir, 2023).

The conceptually astute (and whimsically rendered) *Understanding Comics* by McCloud, published in 1993, was praised almost universally and provided scholars with an analytical framework for studying comics and graphic novels. *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud's follow-up book published in 2000, offended many of his previous followers with its bold, manifesto-like approach. McCloud demanded a major overhaul of both the comic book medium and the professional makeup of the field (critic Gary Goth even wrote a book deconstructing dubbed "*McCloud's Cuckoo-Land*"). *Making Comics*, a publication that provides readers and comics creators with a rhetorical handbook for an art form that is finally receiving the kind of serious scholarly attention it deserves, marks McCloud's return to form in 2006. *Making Comics* gives readers a fairly detailed introduction to the entire field of comic illustration, looking at single-panel cartoons, manga, daily comic strips, and more in addition to comic books and graphic novels (Enculturation 7,2010). The main goal of McCloud is to provide the reader with various options for the different aspects of comics writing, including panel layout, lettering styles, what action to depict, and word choice. He does more than just list these options, though (which is the reason the book is a rhetoric of comics), because he also explains why someone may favour some options over others to heighten dramatic effect, encourage ambiguity, or foster character connection.

MODEL AND CONCEPTS

a) *Visual Lexicon in Comics*

"Visual lexicon" is a visual language model that consists of several visual units or items such as Attention Units, Smaller than Syntax, and Construction. This model can relate with visual rhetoric since it discusses panel, positive and negative elements in communication. Lexicon Representational Matrix (LRM) is also involved in this model and explains the stage in visual representation in the panel of comics. Based on the number of positive entities displayed, it can be categorized as a Lexicon Representational Matrix (LRM). Polymorphic is the highest level contained in LRM, followed by Macros, Monos, Micros, and the lowest level is Amorphics where these levels are about the placement of visuals or images in panels. Polymorphic is the last or highest level in the LRM sequence and it contains full actions in one panel, that is, the repetition of repeating entities (Cohn, 2006). Below is one of the examples of repetition of entities used as visual rhetoric in comics.

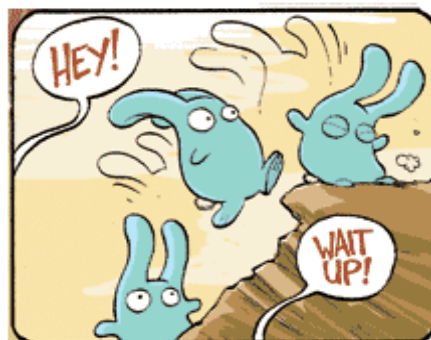


Figure 1: Repetition entities in one panel
Source: ComixTalk (Cohn, 2006).

Other than that, here is the sequence of levels that can be seen in the form of a graph called "Lexicon Representational Matrix" or "LRM" (Cohn, 2021).



Figure 2: Sequence or flow graph of the levels used in comic illustration
Source: ComixTalk (Cohn, 2006)

The flow of stages or levels within the Lexicon Representational Matrix (LRM) can be utilized in various ways, depending on the specific requirements and quantities of panels and their potential to capture readers' attention (Cohn, 2006). This dynamic approach highlights how visuals within these panels function rhetorically to provide meaning to readers. Another formal similarity is the potential for the use of compositional elements. Perceived distance, angle of view, colour, arrangement of elements, simulated lighting effects, and other elements of composition could be used in all of the forms of visual communication mentioned earlier. They all draw upon the same visual vocabulary (Duncan, Smith & Levitz, 2023).

The LRM concept revolves around a visual language model encompassing different visual representation levels or categories in comics. Through his research, Neil Cohn investigates the organization and structure of visuals within panels, aiming to convey meaning and establish communication with readers. At the highest level of the LRM, the "Polymorphic" stage represents complete actions or recurring elements within a single panel. On the other hand, the stages of "Macros," "Monos," and "Micros" denote varying degrees of visual complexity and detail. Additionally, "Amorphics" encompass visuals or images that lack specific form or structure. Cohn's study underscores the significance of comprehending the placement and arrangement of visuals within panels to enhance visual rhetoric and communication in comics. By analysing the presence of positive entities displayed in a panel, the categorisation within the Lexicon Representational Matrix can be determined. The introduction of LRM provides a framework for the analysis and discussion of visual aspects in comics, shedding light on how different levels of visual representation contribute to the overall process of meaning-making in sequential art. Neil Cohn's research on LRM offers valuable insights into the structure and cognition of sequential images, thereby advancing our broader understanding of visual language within comics studies. In addition, visual narratives like comics, not only do comprehenders need to track shifts in characters, space, and time, but they do so across a spatial layout (Hacimusaoğlu, Klomberg, & Cohn, 2023).

b) Semiotics in Comics

Before clarifying the significance of sign functions in comprehending comics, it is critical to highlight the format's organizational principles. *The System of Comics* (Groensteen, 1999), a foundational work by Thierry Groensteen, remains highly relevant in comics studies today, providing a robust foundation for a semiotic understanding of how particular aspects of the comic medium function. When the book was published, semiotic analysis of comics was still somewhat underdeveloped. Groensteen's goal in *The System of Comics* is to view comics as "an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning" that function through passages of text and visuals. Thusly understood, semiotics will interact with each sign use's historical context and each semiotic structure in comics in at least three different ways: by differentiating the collective and individual conditions of each reading and hermeneutic process; by describing the social context that a comic depicts as the comic's condition of possibility and the basis for its interpretation; and by describing the political affordances assumed to be present in the production, distribution, and communication through, about, and with comics as each actor involved in those processes posits themselves within the power relations that underlie those processes (Packard & Wilde, 2021). Additionally, Halliday theorized that the semiotic resources of the mode of language fulfil three social metafunctions/meanings: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

The ideational metafunction pertains to the representation of events, objects, participants, places, experiences, and circumstances in an environment or the world. The interpersonal metafunction focuses on the use of semiotic resources by sign-makers to create "relations between viewers and the 'world' that they depict" through enacting attitudes, values, relations, and social interactions. The textual metafunction refers to how semiotic resources are used to structure a text and to create coherence. Although the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions can be considered independently, the three kinds of meaning occur simultaneously (Pantaleo, 2023). The misleading but pervasive tendency to believe that we know what we are looking at because we can see what it looks like (Packard, 2019; Wilde, 2021) is one thing that the cartoonish aesthetics cannot help but expose in every panel, although we are unable to do either. According to this viewpoint, the social state of communication is constantly manifesting itself. Roland Barthes' 1977 is one of the traditional sources that has been cited the most in the essays for this issue, which may not come as a surprise. The distinction between denotation and connotation in verbal and visual messages made by Barthes—often overlooked by its more technically minded epigones—goes beyond the categorization of these various elements of the semiotic structure of contemporary pictorial communication and goes on to identify the ideological nature of their perplexing readings: We erroneously believe that what we have observed supports the way we have described it.

c) Loopy Framing in Comics

Loopy framing, or fragmented frames, is one of the theories presented in comic illustration production. The elements existing within the frames, such as speech bubbles, thought bubbles, and panels, are mostly used as a medium to convey thoughts and expressions. When observed broadly in comic illustrations, one element stands out as an invisible phenomenon in graphic form. Meanwhile, speech bubbles serve as discussions or thoughts, and panels determine boundaries within and between events. These elements serve the general function of conveying information (Cohn, 2007, 2021). An image, figure, and subject matter (entities)

are placed within a panel, while words or text are placed within speech bubbles. However, both elements can interchange, with speech bubbles containing images and panels containing text. In a radical sense, both elements share similarities when their functions can be exchanged. Both elements are prominently used in Manga comics.



Figure 3: Ballon used as panel
Source: ComixTalk (Cohn, 2007)

Figure 3 conveys the meaning of 'what is being thought' and not 'invisible' as depicted. However, it depends on the author or cartoonist in creating their work. Of course, speech bubbles and panels have distinct differences. However, speech bubbles are usually placed together within a panel. The same goes for the third panel is not connected to the first panel, it still maintains a connection and continuity within the same narrative.

d) A Rhetoric of Sequential Art

In light of the context mentioned above, Scott McCloud's book *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels* can be interpreted as a comprehensive exploration of the rhetoric of comics. McCloud's text goes beyond being a mere instructional guide, as it provides readers with practical and theoretical insights to create visually compelling comics and serves as a persuasive argument. By presenting its content visually captivatingly and sophisticatedly, McCloud's book exemplifies the principles and techniques it discusses. Through the seamless integration of practical advice and theoretical concepts, readers gain the knowledge to produce aesthetically compelling comics and witness the application of these principles in action within the book's pages. McCloud continues to demonstrate to the reader the wide range of technical, creative, and rhetorical skills available to authors and artists in his recognisable comic book style (primarily black and white, cartoonish, with bold line work). He starts by outlining the "five choices" (moment, frame, picture, phrase, and flow), which he refers to as the fundamentals of rhetorical craft. According to McCloud, 2006 these entire sets of decisions are the foundation for creating gripping stories that audiences can easily relate to. In addition, he proceeds to discuss methods of portraying facial expressions, body language, and gestures, among other elements of nonverbal communication, to effectively convey emotional, physical, and narrative information to the reader (Berndt, 2023). Other than that, Narrators can be of two kinds: external or character-bound. External narrators are not part of the story world and can be either perceptible or non-perceptible. Being perceptible means that a narrator refers to himself/herself/+. A perceptible external narrator typically is a human being who narrates events that took place in the past in which he/she/+ played a role at the time, and which he/she/+ can thus comment on and evaluate with the wisdom of hindsight (Forceville, 2023).

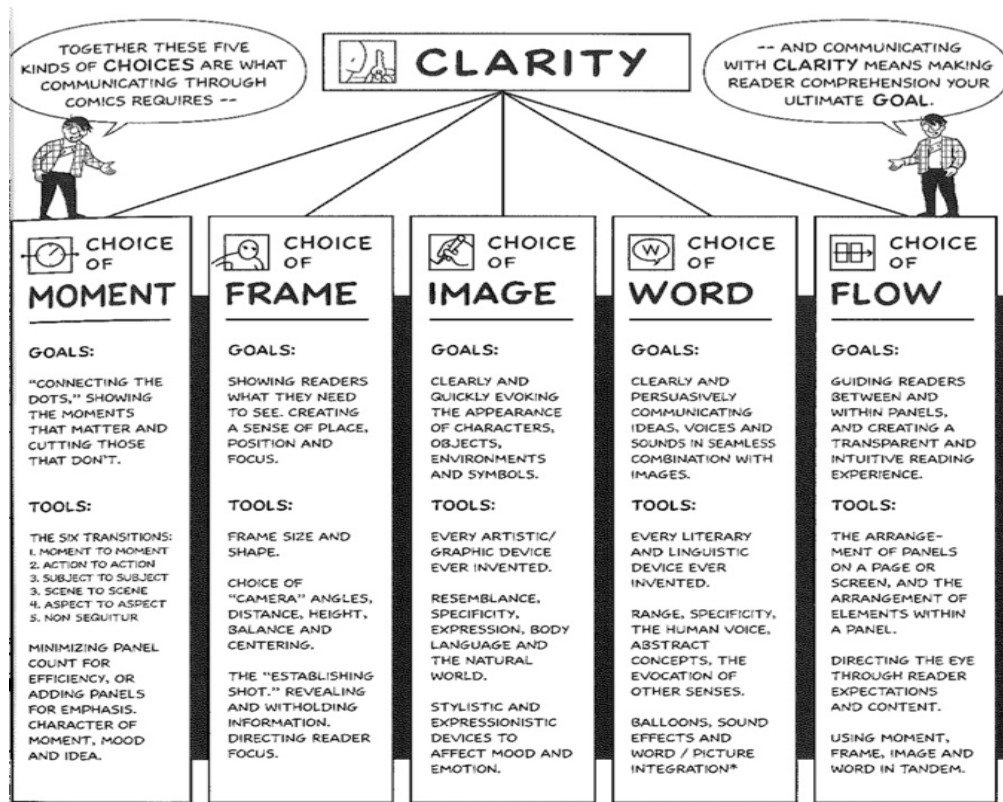


Figure 4. Concept of Clarity "five choices" (moment, frame, picture, phrase, and flow), which he refers to as the fundamentals of rhetorical craft
 Source: McCloud (2006)

McCloud's concept of the "five choices" in his book *Making Comics* refers to the fundamental components of rhetorical craft within comics. These choices play crucial roles in shaping the narrative and engaging readers. 1) Moment: The choice of moment refers to the specific point in time that the creator selects to depict within a comic panel. It involves deciding which moments are most significant or impactful for advancing the story or conveying a particular emotion or idea. 2) Frame: The choice of frame pertains to the composition and structure of the panel itself. It involves determining the panel's size, shape, and arrangement to effectively convey the desired message or create a specific visual effect. Frames can vary in their level of detail, perspective, and focus. 3) Picture: The choice of picture focuses on the visual elements within each panel, including the characters, objects, and environments depicted. It involves selecting and designing these visual elements to effectively communicate the intended meaning, atmosphere, and visual aesthetics. 4) Phrase: The choice of phrase relates to using text within the comic, including dialogue, captions, and sound effects. It involves carefully crafting the words and expressions used to complement and enhance the visual storytelling, adding valuable information, characterisation, and emotional depth. 5) Flow: The choice of flow refers to the arrangement and sequencing of panels across the comic page or screen. It involves considering how readers navigate through the sequential order of panels, the pacing of the narrative, and the overall rhythm and visual coherence of the storytelling. McCloud goes so far as to outline the physical underpinnings of the human face and body. He also makes rather intricate charts of facial expressions for fear, joy, surprise, and anger. While undoubtedly informative, these disembodied faces are unquestionably the creepiest part of the book. The relevance of alphabetical elements in

comic art is then discussed, along with the numerous ways that words and images interact and the various ways that words can express themselves graphically through diverse writing styles and onomatopoeia. McCloud's focus on these textual issues is an effort to help his readers grasp what is frequently mistaken for being exclusively a graphical art form. It must be understood that the combination of drawings and images in comics has created a narrative that can be observed and enjoyed. Furthermore, comics also feature characters, settings, plots, and specific themes in conveying their stories. This makes comics a hybrid work, combining both visual/graphic art and literature (Hamid & Ghazali, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, visual rhetoric plays a vital role in comics, employing intentional visual elements to convey meaning, influence perception, and evoke emotional responses. Comics utilize various visual techniques and design principles to communicate ideas, narratives, and arguments effectively. Comics is a type of popular multimedia that presents its content in a specialized multimodality form—with the cooperation of image and text. Meanwhile, it provides rich media data for multi-modal human communication studies that incorporate cultural narratives (Chen, 2023). Comic creators enhance the reader's interpretation and engagement with the medium through the strategic arrangement of panels, composition, word balloons, and visual metaphors and Comics, being a medium that combines visual and verbal elements, serve to bridge gaps, facilitate comprehension, and prompt us to adopt a fresh perspective on the world (Al Faruque, 2023). The use of visual rhetoric in comics extends beyond mere aesthetics, allowing for the portrayal of emotions, establishment of settings, depiction of actions, conveyance of symbolism, and guiding the reader's attention. Additionally, comics also can be understood as a vehicle of memory and remembrance, and the richness of the plot, the narrative fragmented into many panels, becomes a metaphor for real life and its socio-cultural scenarios (Moretti, 2023). Elements such as panel arrangement, character placement, colour usage, and visual storytelling techniques contribute to the overall visual rhetoric and storytelling experience. Comics provide unique affordances for teaching visual literacy and have gained recognition in professional communication due to the increasing importance of multimodality. Other than that, structures and processes of cognition inform the comprehension of comics and can present a clearer understanding of how multimodal communication prompts the rich texture that makes reading comics so engaging to readers and critics alike (Borkent, 2023). Educational bodies such as the National Council of English Teachers have advocated the integration of visual and alphabetic writing in the classroom. However, challenges such as the digital divide and limited classroom resources may hinder the implementation of visual rhetoric in professional communication classrooms. Defining visual rhetoric can be complex, but it involves embracing a critical perspective that connects visibility and rhetoric within the communication framework. Visual rhetoric should be studied with its context and historical heritage, drawing upon conceptual resources from various disciplines.

The studies conducted by Cohn (2023), Mikkonen and Lautenbacher (2019), Nakazawa (2016), with Zhao and Mahrt (2018) shed light on various aspects of comic book reading and the role of visual rhetoric. Cohn's study revealed that readers tend to follow a Z-path when exploring comic panels, but variations in size and proximity can also influence their reading paths. Mikkonen and Lautenbacher's (2019) eye-tracking study highlighted the effects of narrative content and layout on readers' eye movement patterns, with the prevalence of the

Z-shape pattern. They proposed the use of both global and local attention scales in comic book reading.

Expertise was found to impact the understanding of comics, as Nakazawa (2016) discovered, suggesting that proficiency plays a role in comprehending visual narratives. Zhao and Mahrt (2018) further supported this notion, demonstrating that more proficient readers had shorter eye fixations and performed better on comic book comprehension tests. Visual rhetoric encompasses the art of using visual images to convey meaning and communicate messages. It goes beyond design and aesthetics, delving into visual works' cultural and reflective aspects. Visual rhetoric involves the intentional use of visual symbols by designers to persuade, convey aesthetics, and serve practical purposes. Examples of visual rhetoric include comics, paintings, photographs, advertisements, and buildings. Critical characteristics of visual rhetoric include symbolism, human intervention, and communication with the audience.

The concept of a "Visual Lexicon" provides a visual language model that includes various visual units or items, such as Attention Units, Smaller than Syntax, and Construction. This model relates to visual rhetoric by discussing panels and the positive and negative elements involved in communication. The Lexicon Representational Matrix (LRM) is also part of this model and explains the stages of visual representation in comic panels. Based on the number of positive entities displayed, the LRM categorizes panels. Polymorphic is the highest level, followed by Macros, Monos, Micros, and the lowest level, Amorphics, which pertain to the placement of visuals or images in panels. Polymorphic panels represent full actions within a single panel, often involving the repetition of entities. Semiotics plays a significant role in understanding comics, and Thierry Groensteen's foundational work, "The System of Comics," provides a semiotic understanding of how specific aspects of the medium function.

Semiotics in comics involves analysing the collective and individual conditions of each reading process, describing the social context, and recognising the political affordances present in comics' production, distribution, and communication. The visual nature of comics exposes our tendency to rely on appearances without fully understanding their meanings. Loopy framing, or fragmented frames, is a theory in comic illustration production where elements like speech bubbles, thought bubbles, and panels convey thoughts and expressions. Speech bubbles are discussions or thoughts, while panels establish boundaries within and between events. Both elements, image and text, can interchange within panels, showcasing their functional similarities. This approach is commonly seen in Manga comics. McCloud's concept of the "five choices" in *Making Comics* highlights the essential elements of rhetorical craft in comics. These choices play crucial roles in shaping the narrative and engaging readers. The choices include the moment, frame, picture, phrase, and flow. The choice of moment determines the significant points in time depicted within the panels, conveying emotions and advancing the story. The frame choice involves the panels' composition and structure, utilizing size, shape, and arrangement for effective visual impact. The choice of picture focuses on the visual elements, such as characters and environments, to communicate meaning and aesthetics.

Visual rhetoric plays a crucial role in comics by using visual elements to convey meaning, evoke emotions, and engage readers. Visual elements in comics can also be translated into verbal narratives through three key components: character, setting, and perspective (Saifudin et al., 2024). The arrangement of panels, the use of colours, and the placement of characters all contribute to the visual rhetoric of a comic. Semiotics and the

concept of a visual lexicon provide frameworks for understanding how visual symbols and structures convey comic messages. Loopy framing theory explores using fragmented frames and elements like speech bubbles to convey thoughts and expressions. These concepts enhance our understanding of the intricate language of visuals in comics, enabling deeper interpretation and engagement with the medium. McCloud's "five choices" in *Making Comics* are fundamental components of rhetorical craft in comics, shaping narratives and engaging readers.

BIODATA

Mulyati Mat Alim is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Communication and Media, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia. Research specialization includes Advertising, Visual Communication, Illustration, and Visual Rhetoric. Email: mulyati@fbk.upsi.edu.my

Ida Puteri Mahsan is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Art, Sustainability and Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. She has been teaching at the Department of Art and Design for Visual Art Education Degree Programme. She has more than 20 years teaching experience. Her research interest was in Art Education, teaching technology and fine arts. She was also involved in research grants from UPSI and the ministry of higher education. Email: idaputeri@fskik.upsi.edu.my

Mohd Fauzi Harun is a senior lecturer in the Creative Multimedia Department, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). He specializes in graphic design, visual communication and branding. His research interest is in branding including Islamic influence in branding. Email: fauziharun@fskik.upsi.edu.my

Mohd Yusof Zulkefli specializes in health communication, particularly in the areas of social behavior, communication, and autism. Currently, he serves as a faculty member at UiTM Shah Alam within the Department of Liberal Communication, where he continues to make significant contributions to his field. Email: yusofzulkelli@uitm.edu.my

REFERENCES

- Al Faruque, S. N. (2023). The unique power of comics: A comprehensive exploration of the visual-verbal medium and its impact on storytelling, communication, and culture. *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, 5(10), 1-11.
- Bajraghosa, T., Irawanto, B., & Ajidarma, S. G. (2023). *A tale of humanity: Visual rhetoric of photographic imagery in independent comic*. Paper presented at the 11th International Conference for Asia Pacific, October 18-19 (pp. 38-50). Indonesia.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-music-text* (Trans., Stephen Heath). Fontana Press. https://monoskop.org/images/0/0a/Barthes_Roland_Image-Music-Text.pdf
- Berndt, J. (2023). An affective form of comics. In Ahmed, M. (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to comics* (p. 82-101). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/gsmx64>
- Borkent, M. (2023). *Comics and cognition: Toward a multimodal cognitive poetics*. Oxford University Press.
- Chen, Y. (2023). *A framework with hierarchical models for visual narrative sequence comprehension and its applications* [30673780, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, North Carolina State University]. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/framework-with-hierarchical-models-visual/docview/2890688931/se-2>
- Cohn, N., Cardoso, B., Klomberg, B., & Hacımusaoglu, I. (2023). The Visual Language Research Corpus (VLRC): An annotated corpus of comics from Asia, Europe, and the United States. *Language Resources & Evaluation*, 57, 1729–1744. <https://doi.org/nhvf>
- Cohn, N. (2007, March 18). Comic theory 101: Loopy framing. *ComixTalk*. http://comixtalk.com/loopy_framing/
- Cohn, N. (2014). *The visual language of comics: Introduction to the structure and cognition of sequential images*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Cohn, N. (2006, November 5). Comic theory 101: Visual poetry. *ComixTalk*. http://comixtalk.com/comic_theory_101_visual_poetry/
- Duncan, R., Smith, M. J., & Levitz, P. (2023). *The power of comics and graphic novels: Culture, form, and context*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Forceville, C. (2023). Narrating and focalizing visually and visual-verbally in comics and graphic novels. *Pragmatics & Cognition*, 30(1), 180-208.
- Foss, S. K. (2006). Rhetorical criticism as synecdoche for agency. *Rhetoric Review*, 25(4), 375-379.
- Groensteen, T. (1999). Særtræk i den 7. og 9. kunstart. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 15(30), 19-26. <https://doi.org/nhvg>
- Hacımusaoglu, I., Klomberg, B., & Cohn, N. (2023). Navigating meaning in the spatial layouts of comics: A cross-cultural corpus analysis. *Visual Cognition*, 31(2), 126–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13506285.2023.2198271>
- Hamid, M. N. S., & Ghazali, M. N. S. (2021). E-komik Hikayat Patani: Putera Pewaris Kerajaan (Satu analisis tekstual, kepentingan dan cabaran). *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2021-3702-11>
- Haukaas, A. (2024). From memes to comics: Virtual embodiment in visual rhetoric. In A. Haukaas (Ed.), *Disability identity in simulation narratives* (pp. 95–123). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-44482-1_5
- Kudus, N. V., & Lee, N. A. A. (2022). The portrayals of state machinery figures in combating COVID-19 in Malaysia: A study on Ernest Ng's CovidBall Z. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 38(2). <https://doi.org/nhvh>

- Latif, R. A., & Elgarrai, S. (2021). The power of political cartoons: A case study of Zunar's 'Twit Twit Cincin'. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 37(1), 163-176.
- McCloud, S. (2006). *Making comics: Storytelling secrets of comics, manga, and graphic novels*. Harper.
- McCloud, S. (2022, November 4). On the drawing board: Visual communication and beyond. <http://www.scottmccloud.com>
- Mikkonen, K., & Lautenbacher, O. P. (2019). Global attention in reading comics: Eye movement indications of interplay between narrative content and layout. *ImageText*, 10(2).
- McCorkle, B. (2010). A rhetoric of sequential art: A review of making comics: Storytelling secrets of comics, manga and graphic novels by Scott McCloud. *Enculturation*, 7. <http://enculturation.net/a-rhetoric-of-sequential-art>
- Mulyati, M. A., Ida Puteri, M., & Rafidah, A. R. (2019). Interpretation of visual rhetoric-semiotic in Malaysia environmental public service announcement. *International Journal of Heritage Art and Multimedia*, 2(5). <https://doi.org/10.35631/ijham.25004>
- Moretti, V. (2023). The social genres of comics. In *Understanding comics-based research: A practical guide for social scientists* (pp. 77-100). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83753-462-320231005>
- Nakazawa, J. (2016). Manga literacy and manga comprehension in Japanese children. In N. Cohn (Ed.), *The visual narrative reader* (pp. 157–184). Bloomsbury.
- O'Brien, A. (2017). Visual rhetoric, intercultural writers: The university's turn. In C. Glenn & R. Mountford (Eds.), *Rhetoric and writing studies in the new century: Historiography, pedagogy, and politics* (pp. 82-103). Southern Illinois University Press.
- Packard, S. (2019). Which Donald is this? Which tyche is this? A semiotic approach to nomadic cartoonish characters. *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, 5(2), 248-267.
- Packard, S., & Wilde, L. R. A. (2021). What more can semiotics do for comics? Looking at their social, political, and ideological significations. *Punctum.: International Journal of Semiotics*, 7, 5-15 <https://doi.org/10.18680/hss.2021.0015>
- Pantaleo, S. (2023). The meaning-making in kindergarten children's visual narrative compositions. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. <https://doi.org/nhvk>
- Qadir, E. M. (2023). Visual rhetoric in election posters: A multimodal critical discourse analysis approach. *Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(1), 136-159.
- Saifudin, A., Risagarniwa, Y. Y., Citraresmana, E., & Sidiq, I. I. (2024). From pictures to words: A linguistic approach to comic strip humor. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 12(1), 396-411.
- Syamsuddin, M. (2014). *Ruang lingkup retorika*. Universitas Terbuka.
- Watkins, R. D. (2014). Sequential rhetoric: Teaching comics as visual rhetoric [Doctoral dissertation, Iowa State University of Science and Technology]. <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/13940>
- Wilde, L. R. A. (2020). Material conditions and semiotic affordances. Natsume Fusanosuke's many fascinations with the lines of manga. *Mechademia: Second Arc*, 12(2), 62-82.
- Zahra, F., & Arts, F. (2021). Visual rhetoric: Framing the methodology for truck visuals through visual rhetoric theory and rhetorical appeals. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 15(9), 409-418.
- Zhao, F., & Mahrt, N. (2018). Influences of comics expertise and comics types in comics reading. *International Journal of Innovation and Research in Educational Sciences*, 5(2), 2349–5219.