

Determining the Visual of National Unity in 1980s Newspaper Comics

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ABSTRACT

The newspaper comic is a part of a comic that has been placed and composed inside the newspaper. Essentially, newspaper comics can be found in a dedicated section, and the comics themselves are recognized as humorous tools. This may provide a release and relax the newspaper reader when they read the news in the newspaper. On the other hand, newspaper comics can also be considered a part of visual communication because they communicate with the audience that reads the newspaper. Thus, newspaper comics play an important role in that part of the newspaper. This potentially makes newspaper comics a part of national unity promotion and campaign tools. However, the suitable visuals that can be composed in the comic panel must be forward-looking. Thus, this study makes a content analysis of the newspaper comics from the 1980s. The 1980s were chosen because this decade is known as an era when people not only bought newspapers but also marked the beginning of mass printing. There are 36 comic titles that have been labelled with a number between 1 and 103, which have been determined to have a visual that potentially can be a national unity visual in the newspaper comic. However, further research is recommended to identify more variations of key elements in the future.

Keywords: newspaper comic, comic, content analysis, visual study, newspaper



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1 INTRODUCTION

Comics are known as a humorous type of media (Abdul Mutalib, 2016). Several types of comics exist today, such as comic books, graphic novels, and digital comics. Typically, each comic portrays similar elements and characteristics, such as specific styles of drawing. However, researchers have also determined that comics are a type of media that can communicate to an audience through visuals. The visual communication in a comic can be extended to national agendas, such as promoting national unity. National unity is a major national objective intended to unite the community, especially in Malaysia. While researchers understand that the authorities have already created and composed agendas to promote national unity among Malaysians, new and fresh ideas can also become a part of this mission.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several types of comics that can be identified. However, researchers have determined that a comic is a drawing that has been visualised within a comic panel or frame. A comic can be formed using several panels; however, there are also comics formed in a single panel, known as editorial comics or cartoons. On the other hand, comics can also be identified through several related terms, such as comics, cartoons, caricatures, and animation. Below is a summary explanation of each term.

Table 1 Key Terms

Key Term	Explanation
Cartoon	Cartoons can be identified in several types, such as editorial cartoons and strip cartoons (Mahamood, 2010).
Caricature	A combination of images and specific language (Arief et al., 2022).
Animation	A cartoon that has been composed into a moving format, as shown in the study by Risdiyana and Lestari (2021).

Based on Table 1, the terms related to comics typically share the same elements, such as drawing. However, a comic is an artwork primarily composed for humorous purposes. Even as comics have developed over the years, researchers have identified that they still preserve their originality through the use of drawings, speech bubbles, and panels. This gives comics a unique identity compared to other types of artwork.

Furthermore, comics can be defined as a form of visual communication. They communicate with the audience through the visuals and text within the comic panels. This allows comics to act as a medium that "speaks" to the audience independently. For example, comics have been utilised by the medical sector as educational tools and teaching aids (Lee et al., 2019). Similarly, comics have served as visual communication tools to portray "good deeds" among readers in Indonesia, as seen with the *Si Pitung* comic (Pamungkas & Arizal, 2024). This demonstrates that comics are not only humorous tools but can also serve a greater purpose, such as promoting national unity.

2.1 Understanding National Unity

Malaysia is known as a multiethnic country with a unique community (Geng et al., 2023). This statement was also supported by other scholars when they mentioned Malaysia is rich in various religions and known as multiethnic countries (Abd Rahman et al., 2025). Basically, Malaysians share the same inspiration to remain peaceful, maintain understanding, and always stay united. National unity in Malaysia began during the pre-independence era due to colonisation. Malaysians united to ensure their freedom from colonial rule. Several important figures also stood up and supported the campaign to ensure Malaysia achieved independence at that time. Rentap and Dato' Maharaja Lela are examples of individuals who led the Malaysian community in their struggle for freedom (Hashim et al., 2015).

However, after independence, the riots that occurred after the 1969 election forced the Malaysian government to re-examine the aspect of national unity among its citizens. Thye (1979) mentioned that the Ministry of National Unity, the National Education Policy, the Five-Year Malaysia Plans, and the New Economic Policy were planned and composed by the government to foster national unity. They sought a strategy to ensure the community felt more balanced regarding government actions toward the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Furthermore, researchers have determined that national identity can also portray national unity in Malaysia.

For example, the comics composed by Dato' Lat have been studied, and five themes have been identified that reflect a national identity. "1 Malaysia," independence, festivals, national culture, and daily scenes were determined to be key elements reflecting a national identity that represents national unity characteristics (Zainuddin & Mahamood, 2018). Researchers have also identified that some of these elements may be outdated in Malaysia's current situation, with the exceptions of independence and national culture. However, researchers also noted that the elements of festivals and daily scenes are typically related to national culture. Furthermore, daily scenes are automatically reflected in almost every comic because this theme is used extensively within Dato' Lat's comic panels. Thus, independence and national culture are the elements that appear most appropriate as parts of a national identity that can portray national unity.

3 KEY ELEMENTS OF NATIONAL UNITY

Based on existing studies related to national identity by Zainuddin and Mahamood (2018), the researcher determined that the most appropriate key elements to portray national unity in comics are independence and national culture. The researcher has adopted the key elements presented in that previous study as the primary indicators of national unity for this paper. Essentially, national identity is an element of unity discussed in the official pamphlets by the Ministry of National Unity (Kementerian Perpaduan Negara, 2021). This demonstrates that Malaysian authorities acknowledge national identity as a core part of the national unity agenda.

In the context of this paper, the "independence" key element relates specifically to Malaysian independence. Malaysia achieved its independence on 31 August 1957 (Saat, 2021). This milestone is also closely associated with the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj. The second key element for this study is "national culture." Broadly, Malaysians share a common space and must accept the diverse cultures within it. There are many cultures practiced in Malaysia by the multiethnic community itself. Ponirin Amin and Syed Thajudeen are examples of local artists who utilise themes of Malaysian identity in their artwork by incorporating elements of culture and locality (Humaini et al., 2020). Furthermore, the researcher determined that national culture is also guided by the National Cultural Policy. This policy is driven by three main principles: Islam is the main pillar of national culture, the culture should accept positive features from other cultures, and the culture should represent its own distinctive nature (Sarena Abdullah, 2024, as cited by Mohd Afandi, 1973).

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To determine the visuals used in 1980s newspaper comics, the researcher proceeded with a qualitative research method. A qualitative research method is characterised by the absence of numerical data (Ugwu and Eze, 2023). This method is suitable for this paper because the study utilises content analysis as its primary analytical process. The three phases of this research are outlined below.

Table 2 Methodology phases

Phase	Activity
1	Collecting newspaper comics from libraries or archives.
2	Analysing the comics using content analysis.
3	Determining the visuals that are appropriate for representing Malaysian national unity.

The research activities began with the collection of newspaper comics available from libraries and archives. Specifically, weekend newspapers were chosen due to the wider variation of comics and their availability within the sources. For the purpose of this research, only comics published between 1980 and 1989 were collected. Subsequently, content analysis was conducted to determine the visuals appropriate for representing Malaysian national unity.

5 FINDING

Based on the content analysis, 103 comics were identified from the years 1980 to 1989. However, only 36 of these comics were found to contain the key elements of national unity. The researcher chose this timeframe because the 1980s was a significant era for printing and publication in Malaysia, during which newspapers were easily accessible to the general public. Below is a table organised into columns indicating the visual label numbers, the year of publication, the two national unity key elements, and the specific visuals that portray those elements.

Table 3 Newspaper comic analysis result

Label Number	Year	National Culture	Independence	Visual references
1	1980	/		Eid
2		/		Sawm
4		/		Sarong
9	1981	/		Greeting Card
10		/		Sawm
14	1982	/		Sarong
16		/		Turban
17		/		Eid, Baju Melayu, Sampin, Baju Kurung, and Songkok
18		/		Turban
19		/		Sarong
20		/		Sarong
30	1983	/		Sarong
31		/		Sarong
35	1984	/		Sarong
37		/		Sarong
39		/		Baju Kurung
44		/		Sarong
46		/		Sarong
47		/		Sarong
49	1985	/		Sarong
52		/		Sarong and Songkok

53		/	Sarong
55		/	Sarong
57		/	Sarong
59	1986	/	Baju Kebaya
67	1987	/	Baju Kurung, Sarong and Baju Kebaya
68		/	Songkok
70		/	Sarong, Songkok and Turban
73		/	Songkok, Sarong and Baju Melayu
81	1988	/	Turban and Sawm
86		/	Baju Kebaya
89	1989	/	Baju Kurung
94		/	Sarong
95		/	Baju Kurung
96		/	Greeting Card and Sarong

Based on the table above, only the "national culture" key element was identified in the comics published between 1980 and 1989. The visuals portraying national culture identified in the studied newspaper comics include the *songkok*, *sampin*, Eid festivals, *sawm* (fasting), *sarong*, turban, greeting cards, *Baju Melayu*, *Baju Kurung*, and *Baju Kebaya*. Most of the visuals identified are related to Malay culture in Malaysia.

However, the visual of the *sarong* appears universal because it can be worn by any ethnicity in Malaysia. Nonetheless, the *sarong* is also typically reflective of the Malay community (Aziz et al., 2023). Furthermore, the Eid celebration and *sawm* are more closely related to religious aspects for Muslims in this country (Nnizamy, 2024; Supriyanti & Sanusi, 2024). The researcher also identified the visual of the turban, which is synonymously worn by the Sikh or Punjabi community in Malaysia. According to Gill et al. (2015), the Sikh community maintains its own distinct beliefs. Finally, the greeting card is an item sent to family and friends, typically associated with special celebrations.

Furthermore, Malay costumes and accessories such as the *Songkok*, *Baju Melayu*, *Baju Kurung*, and *Baju Kebaya* were identified during the content analysis as traditional wear related to the Malay community. Essentially, the *Baju Kebaya* is a traditional costume that has been popular **since** the 1800s (Saadiyah, 2023). Another female costume found in this study is the *Baju Kurung*, which is considered a formal garment that can be **worn** in Malaysia (Ahmad et al., 2007). Additionally, the *Songkok*, *Sampin*, and *Baju Melayu* are typically **worn** by males. According to Azmi et al. (2021), as cited in Isnaeni (2012), the *songkok* is a heritage identity **reflective** of the Malay community. Finally, the *Baju Melayu* is a Malay costume typically **worn** with special accessories like the *sampin* and *songkok* (Veenthan, 2020).

Even though there was a lack of visuals identified in this content analysis, more potential visuals could be determined if a larger set of newspaper comics with different titles were analyzed. The potential visuals related to independence might be those that refer directly to Malaysian independence itself. The lack of visuals reflecting independence in this content analysis may have occurred because such visuals are typically only composed by artists for special events, such as "Hari Kemerdekaan" in Malaysia.

6 CONCLUSION

Newspaper comics contain potential visuals that can portray national unity, especially within the Malaysian community. However, suitable visuals intended for use as visual communication tools must be chosen carefully. Additional key elements can be developed in the future to create a wider variety of visuals that reflect national unity. Consequently, campaigns aimed at promoting national unity can be more easily developed by using visual guidance specifically related to national unity within the Malaysian context.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to the production of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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