

The Comic Strip as a Multimodal Tool for Environmental Action

Research Proposal

Jerilynn Hoover

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The thorough history of the comic strip stretches back nearly a hundred years and began as a visual escape from the hardships of World War II. As such, the central tropes within these comic strips aimed at various societal issues to reflect and offer comfort during the state of society at the time. Via a series of panels with text and drawings of characters and their surroundings, these comics communicate some sort of concept or story to its viewer. There lies a form of multimodal communication through the use of more than one method of sharing information (Almeida, 2016). This method is encompassed by the comprehensive field of visual communication and its proven ability to extend viewer comprehension beyond a fundamental understanding (SAGE, 2023).

After decades of simple and rather clearly expressed messages, comicists began including different types of inferences within their work thanks to the critiques of Scott McCloud. McCloud proposed that comics could have the potential to generate deeper evaluations and understandings of a given topic (McCloud, 1993). His definition of comics, from which further knowledge is built on, are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 9).

This history and foundation of the concept of comics and communicating, along with the information to come, provides a strong argument for considering the extent that viewers can interpret a message through the comic. Additionally, the power of a comic stems from an extended record of symbolizing societal issues, such as racism and poverty, and how more recent comics have addressed areas of political issues, medical care or mental health. As such, sharing information and making positive social change could be more accessible through comics.

Review of Literature

Connected Themes

The prevailing discussion within the current literature surrounding visual communication focuses on the general sharing of information that is often unpleasant to receive. Using visuals to share this type of information has been studied by a few authors in the Visual Communication Journal's special issue *Information is Ugly*. The mere 390 viewers of this section gained an understanding of the possibility for seemingly irrational information to entice activism (Fass, et al., 2022). Additionally, the use of cartoon illustrations as an educational assessment tool has been successful. In experimenting with the power of visuals, a professor found that his "students' visual presentation – through hand-drawn scientific figures and cartoons – provide[d] an overview much richer than just language" (Fradkin, 2018, p. 4). The subject of this assignment regarded marginalized populations dealing with health disorders and the systematic perceptions of them. This is further clarified by Uschi Kein's analysis of autism spectrum disorder and photography, where he found photography to allow adults with ASD to not only exhibit their lifestyle to others, but also make sense of their place in the world and better their overall self-image (Klein, 2022). These themes converge to propose the importance of accepting unpleasant information as a means to better society. Further, this is proven to be done effectively through multimodal methods, such as comics.

Conceptualization & Operationalization

Simply put, the comic strip is a timeless phenomenon that effectively communicates dense information (Almeida, 2016). This isn't as productive when done through some of the more conventional methods, such as a written story, which is due to the additions of symbolism, word-image relationships, undrawn inferences, humor and others as often used in comic strips.

With the historical robustness as an addition to these multimodal features, there is a strong foundation for the above research questions to be put in place.

For the operation of this study, a single comic strip will be used to depict the misconception of reducing personal waste and how simple it can actually be. To measure the participant's comprehension, there will be a focus on the degree that participants feel a connection to the topic. I plan to understand whether participants are able to decipher the information from the images within the strip or if they more so understand it on a fundamental level. Additionally, I want to find if participants have a more profound affinity towards the climate issue as a whole. In all, these definitions and operations of the study will result in reliable variations among the responses of the participants.

****include some information about what the comic strip will include**

Research Questions

The totality of current research and knowledge of the aforementioned information provides an adequate foundation for This study can be seen as three-fold in its effort to answer the question, "Can comic strips be a substantial source for informing the importance of combating environmental issues and decreasing the misconception of reducing waste?" Initial clarification will focus on the reader's ability to decipher inferences in the images and form a sound understanding of the message will create a base for additional findings. This study will then attempt to discover if participants acquire a connection to environmental protection and extend that to how likely they would be to make changes in their everyday lifestyles.

Methods

The qualitative abilities of a focus group to stimulate conversation in a research study is central to answering the questions above. This allows for discussion which creates deeper

thoughts, especially when the message concerns a sensitive social issue. Generally, these issues are better understood when hearing the opinions of others and comparing them to one's own. The need for finding the extent that viewers can interpret and understand the comic strip. As explained in the participants section, the importance of exchanging opinions on various social issues is central to finding deeper connections, specifically between the participants and environmental protection measures.

Essentially, this study would find overarching interpretations by not restricting procedural methods and the information discussed or found. It would identify not only broad aspects of communicating through comics, but also many specific individual opinions. As well, people inherently notice and pay attention to the things around them that are attractive, such as colorful graphics. Taking advantage of this by extending it into areas of communication, education and comprehension would provide more exhaustive knowledge of the world around us. In all, the interactions that occur in conversations like this often beget very unique responses. As such, the findings will be significant in advancing the understanding of comic strips as a more effective method of communicating.

Participants

Social issues such as this are generally better understood when comparing the opinions of others to one's own, especially between people with different backgrounds. Therefore, participants for this study will have a broad mix of age and education. This allows for different background knowledge of reading comic strips, as well as varying levels of awareness of environmental pollution and methods of reducing the impact. Participants in this study will be ages 18-45 years old and varying degrees of education.

This age range is a significant factor of the study, in how it includes a generation that holds a mindfulness of social trends and issues, as well as a generation that is more adept to the phenomenon of comics. I believe that, because of their knowledge of the "funnies" included in newspapers, this generation will account for any necessary prior knowledge of how comic strips generally communicate a message. Overall, these two age characteristics will allow for more substantive conversations during the focus group.

Initially, I would consult informants to begin the process of selecting participants. These would be various student organizations on our campus that revolve around broad or related aspects of both environmental issues and comics. In turn, I would be able to find potential participants and connections to other community members. This provides the convenience of including participants within an interrelated population that meets the study's criteria and is reliable for the validity of the study.

Research Design

Initially, I would consult an informant to gain insight on how the local community interacts with comic strips which would establish a focal point for recruiting participants. To do this, I would utilize Facebook and Instagram, as well as flyers at common gathering areas to collect participants. This search will continue, along with a coupon incentive, until around 25 people are interested in participating. This number seems attainable, but additional measures may be needed to reach my goal. Although effective small group discussions occur with just 3-5 people, I would like to have multiple separate focus groups to generate more noteworthy results.

Preparation for the study will involve addressing my personal opinions surrounding the topic. I'm rather passionate about graphic design and protecting our environment, which isn't likely to affect the results and is more so the fuel behind this study. External preparation includes

finding a location, such as a community center or public library, with a room that comfortably accommodates up to six people. I will also administer a brief, online questionnaire prior to the focus group session for a record of the participants' demographic information, views on comic strips, their opinions on the climate issue and their current, if any, efforts to mitigate pollution. As well, a meeting agenda will be made to outline opening remarks, instructions, questions to stimulate conversation, major concepts that may answer my research questions and closing statements. It will also be important to prepare statements for reorienting the group, should they begin to discuss the overarching issue of environmental pollution instead of focusing on the specific message of the comic strip.

To begin the focus group, I would greet the participants as they arrive and direct them to the conference room. After a welcoming statement and briefing instructions, each participant will read through the comic strip themselves for about ten minutes. Then, initial questions will be non-directive such as a general assumption of what they think the comic strip is trying to say. Upon some short discussion on this, I would ask for their feedback on the frequency of underlying inferences that were noticed and their personal interpretation of those features. I believe this point of the study would be critical in paving the way to answers for my research questions. There should be rich conversations, as the combination of my two chosen generations and the extra levels of information within comics will fuel their opinions. I think this discussion will ultimately establish their levels of empathy for environmental pollution, which would then lead to determining how they may take action. Some questions will be asked to retain this aspect of the study, based on how they arrive at the point. The group discussion would last up to an hour and conclude with my sincere appreciation for their time. Additional completion measures

include a plan for the transcription of the discussions, as it will be time consuming, since it is very important for accurately reporting the research results.

Data Analysis & Expected Results

The main concepts of this study can result in a few different ways. Generally speaking, the results will almost certainly show an increase in viewer understanding of environmental pollution and its side effects. This is established by the prior research stating that any message that is shared multimodally will increase comprehension. Some research carries this concept over into more sensitive topics, therefore, my main hypothesis is that participants will form a deeper connection and personal responsibility to take action. This would show that the comic strip's abilities had a significant effect on their individual behaviors and lifestyle.

Other possible findings could show how other people can influence personal opinions on the climate issue. Specifically, if someone who doesn't care or see a need for action changed their opinion based on others' thoughts. A result of this would align with my third research question for the possibility of this study to cause someone to start individual climate change measures. On the contrary, it's possible that participants don't interpret the message, either at all or not enough. This would beget further research to identify what aspects of the comic strip are lost in translation. Communication per se very often creates many different interpretations of a single message and the multimodal addition would only increase this ability. Consequently, I would expect to find many unique variations in the participants' opinions and discussion, which would be applied to the research findings. Finally, the need for more studies and better teaching of multimodal communication methods, specifically drawings and their textual relationship, could be identified as a means to decrease environmental pollution.

References

- This assignment requires a **minimum of 6 references** from Communication journals. You are welcome to have more than that amount. Those references should be cited properly both in the text and in the reference list using APA style.

Almeida, H. (2016). From comics to biology diagrams: structure and inference in visual narratives of transformation. *Visual Communication, 16*(1), 85-108.

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McCloud, S. (1993). Understanding comics: The invisible art. *Kitchen Sink Press*.

SAGE Publications. (2023). Visual communication: Sage journals. SAGE journals.

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