

Negative Representations of Young People in Local Comic Books

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Abstract The presence of the many comic books in today's local media scenario cannot be disputed. As such, comic books do not only serve as a form of entertainment but may be a powerful source of influence to the readers especially the young ones. Being young and immature may cause problems to these young ones where whatever they read is observed to be true and have impacts on their behaviour and attitudes in real life. Whether young people are being represented in acceptable and desirable ways can be an interesting phenomenon to observe. Thus, this paper discusses the representations of young people as portrayed by the comic book artist in several issues of one of the comic books available in the local market. This study used content analysis method to analyse the comic book strips for the depiction of youngsters by focusing on their attitudes and behaviour. Findings indicate that young people are represented in several different ways that can be influential to the minds of the young ones and the perception of others about them.

Keywords Comic books; media; representations of young people.

1 Introduction

Reading comics is always seen as fun because comics contain humour, horror, adventure and many more. Unlike textbooks or any other types of reading materials, reading comics is never a chore to its readers. Its vibrant illustration and enjoyable content offer its

voracious readers a sense of relaxation and pure escapism. Comics are enjoyed by readers from all walks of life and age range. Among the many fans of this appealing and interesting read out are the young people. However, comics are not merely comics for the purpose of pure entertainment. Young minds do not just learn from what they hear, listen or watch but also from what they read. Representations of young people in the way they talk and behave in comics may give these young people ideas about what is acceptable and unacceptable of them in the world outside comics. Hence, comics can be a strong educating tool that can have major influence on the minds of the young people. Additionally, comics to others are another source of information that affects how the world perceives young people to be both positively and negatively. Scarcity of research on negative and positive representations of young people in local comic books and their impacts were reasons this study was initiated. The researchers believe that comic books are seen as fun materials to read but also influential reading materials in projecting and shaping true images of the young people. Thus, the focus of this paper is to explore how young people are represented negatively through their behaviours and attitudes as portrayed in one of the local comic book titles. It is hoped that the findings of this study can contribute to the existing body of research on the crucial role comic books play in creating the idea of acceptable and unacceptable youth behaviours and attitudes to the readers.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Representations of young people in media

Media plays a very important role in reporting events and activities of people from different ages. However, according to Mason (2011), where young people are concerned, the western media is claimed to be reporting untrue stories about them in relation to crime. Majority of the articles in the Scottish press frequently present them within a negative context like unemployment or anti-social behaviour (Mason, 2011). Young people in Britain for instance were reported to be groups of people who like to start fights, have sex and cause the emergency lines impossible to be reached (Mayer, 2008). Sercombe (2007) found that media portrayed young people as if they are trouble-maker and should be feared of. They appeared to be naturally challenging the society's norms, beliefs and values. These findings support Hebdige's theory (1979 as cited in Mattson, 2001)

that media representations of young people portray them as either fun or trouble.

In addition, Madge (2006) claims that media covers only newsworthy stories about young people to present to the public. The images of youth seen in the media and elsewhere suggested that the depictions of their behaviour were imprecise and status of the youth reported were concealed. Goddard (2005) reported that young people were frequently misrepresented by the media where news stories in particular were selected over others for coverage in British Broadcasting Corporations (BBC) news. Contradictory messages and negative representations of young people seemed to enjoy better coverage and given more attention to in the media compared to stories about “ordinary” well behaved child (Madge, 2006). Acland (1995) suggests that negative representations of delinquent young people (youth in crisis and youth gone wild) in films were for the purpose of reinforcing hegemony. Normal youth behaviour is being compared with deviant youth behaviour to ensure that youth conform to hegemonic values (Acland, 1995). Representations of young people out of control allow the uncontrolled youth to be controlled and the well behaved ones to be protected by the proper authority like the police.

Giroux (1997) argues that media represented youth as an empty category or empty person where representations are formed by adults out of their concerns and needs which may not necessarily reflect youth true identity. Contemporary films, television, and print media representations of young people appeared to consistently reflect the interest of the adult world. Media representations of young people seem to focus more on images of youth that threaten the society. These findings have proven that media was reporting news that did not reflect the reality.

2.2 The influences of comic books on young people

Like contemporary films, television and print media mentioned earlier, comic books have also gained popularity among audience from different ages. Comic books with different genres mushroomed on the shelves of book stores to cater to the needs of this wide audience.

Popularity of comic books as mediums of entertainment should be treated with care nonetheless. Although less words or texts

are used, visuals or graphics in comics may be a powerful meaning making tool. According to Potenza, Verhoeff and Weiss (1996 as cited in Kirsh & Olczak, 2000), comic book readers read at their own self-guided pace and become actively involved in the storyline of comic books, hence, comics ability to influence the readers cannot be underestimated. One of the ways comic books can influence young people as well as other readers who read them is the way young people are being represented in comics. However, Potenza, Verhoeff and Weiss (1996 as cited in Kirsh & Olczak, 2000) note that very few studies have been carried out on the good or bad effects of comic books have on the readers. Therefore, the main concern of the researchers in this study is the negative influence of comic books that the young people are exposed to, particularly the behaviours and attitudes.

Frequent exposure to negative representations may reinforce the idea among the general readers, be it old or young that these representations are the reality in the society. Negative behaviours and attitudes may further develop in young people as a result of this frequent interaction with comics. For instance, exposure to violence in the media has caused young people to be desensitized to aggressive and violent behaviours (Hughes, 1996 as cited in Zirpoli, 2008) resulting in increased levels of violent and aggressive behaviour among youths (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995 as cited in Zirpoli, 2008). Kirsh and Olczak (2002) have observed that plenty of comic books sold in the market contain extreme images of violence and acts of aggression. The male participants in one of the studies they conducted gave more negative responses (have more hostile intent) to ambiguous provocation story questions posed after being exposed for only a short while to extremely violent comic books (Kirsh & Olczak, 2002) which strengthens the idea that comic books with negative influence may affect readers in negative ways.

Madge's (2006) research indicates that media has a strong influence on children and young people as they grow older and this view is shared by adults. Clark, Ghosh, Green and Shariff's (2008) study shows that the three most common stories about young people in the British press are knife crime, gun crime and violent crime. National newspapers in particular in print more stories with negative portrayals. Being young is a very challenging time for the youngsters that appropriate models of behaviours and attitudes play important roles in shaping positive behaviours and attitudes in them. It is only fair that comics also provide positive models to the young ones and

help shape to the public the true images of young people and not portray them negatively most of the time.

However, it is also interesting and should be acknowledged that in education, reading coupled with visual stimuli of comic books have helped improved the literacy of young teenaged boys particular (Howe, 2011). Besides developing important learning skills like writing, spelling and vocabulary building, pairing of words and pictures in comic book reading enable weak students in language and reading skills to make sense and remember what they read compared to reading traditional books (Naillon, n.d.).

Given that comic books are popular and very influential reading materials to these young readers in relation to their behaviours and attitudes, it is timely that a study looking into this type of media representations of young people be carried out. Also, research on representations of youth thus far were concentrated in printed media like the newspapers and magazines but has been understudied for comics or comic books locally and abroad. The potential harm that comic books has on the readers of different age groups particularly young people with regards to negative representations seems great and it is hoped that the findings of this study can be an eye opener about the impact of comic books in shaping the images of the young people for the readers.

3 The Study

The main purpose of this study is to analyse one of the local comic books selected for the negative portrayals of young people when they are part of the comic book characters as such portrayals can have effects in developing the true identity of young people as well as shaping public perceptions of the young people. Specifically, the study aims at:

- a. identifying the negative representations of young people based on attitude and behaviours portrayed in the selected comic book title.
- b. classifying the negative representations of young people based on attitude and behaviours portrayed in the selected comic book title.

4 Methodology

In this study, *Lawak Kampus*, one of the local comic book titles available in the market was selected. It is a comic book created by Keith about the life of young people as secondary school students. This comic book is published by Art Square Group under Gempak Magazine and in June 2013, *Lawak Kampus* has celebrated its tenth year anniversary. To date Art Square Group has published thirty eight issues of *Lawak Kampus* comic books where each comic book presents a variety of situations experienced daily by these students. Available in the local market is *Lawak Kampus* published in Bahasa Malaysia. *Lawak Kampus* is deemed to be a suitable comic book title for this study by the researcher because young people (school students) were the focus in this comic book and hence representations of these young people as represented by the comic book artist may be obtained. *Lawak Kampus* was also selected because of its popularity as four hundred thousand Malaysian readers were reported to enjoy reading this comic book and hence how young people are represented in this comic book may have impacts on young people as well as other readers of different age groups.

For the purpose of this study, six issues of *Lawak Kampus* comic books (issues 8, 10, 12, 13, 14 & 18) from the year 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 were selected based on their availabilities at the book stores or as PDF files downloaded from the Internet. Using Marshall and Rossman (1986) content analysis method, the researchers read all situations in the selected issues where young people were involved. In *Lawak Kampus*, each situation or story line comes with four connected frames. All connected frames in each situation were carefully analysed based on the situation or story line before negative attitudes and behaviours were confirmed and categorised. After reading these situations, the researchers grouped similar attitudes and behaviours of young people from each story line that were perceived as negative into categories. Each category was given a name that was reflective of the attitudes and behaviours perceived. The attitudes and behaviours that were perceived as negative were later counted based on the most number of times the representations appeared in all the situations in the selected issues.

5 Findings and Discussion

Six issues (issues 8, 10, 12, 13, 14 &18) from the year 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 of *Lawak Kampus* were read and analysed for the negative representations of young people when they are part of the characters in the comic. Table 1 below shows that a total of 1057 situations from the six issues were read and analysed to find out the representations of young people as portrayed by the comic artist.

Table 1: Number of Situations Analysed

Issue	Number of situations analysed
8	172
10	173
12	181
13	171
14	181
18	179
TOTAL	1057

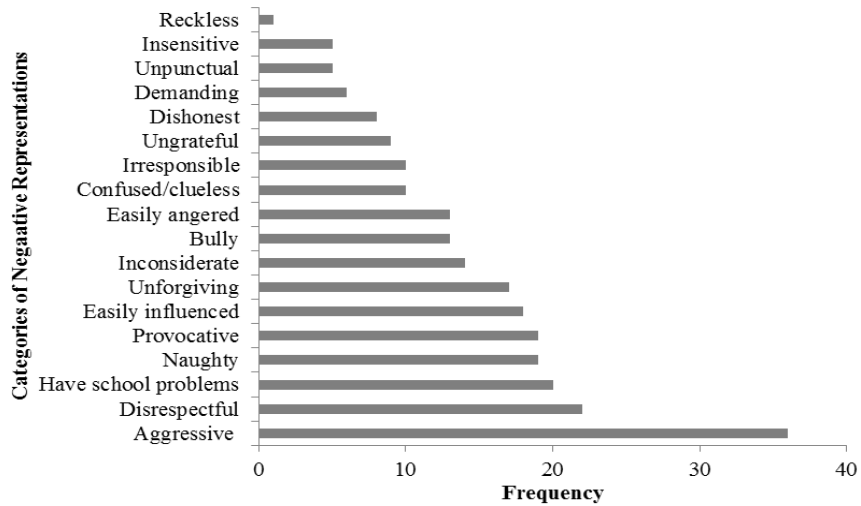


Figure 1: Categories of Negative Representations

Out of the 1057 situations read and analysed from the six issues of *Lawak Kampus*, it was found that young people were represented negatively in eighteen different ways (Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1, young people in the selected comic books were mainly portrayed as being aggressive (36 representations), being disrespectful (22 representations) followed by disliking school (20 representations).

Young people were observed to be aggressive from a range of repetitive behaviours like hitting, punching, kicking and throwing things at people (Table 2). Aggression has been specified by (Loeber & Hay, 1997) as 'a division of behaviour that causes or threatens physical harm to others' (p.373). It is generally used as not an exhaustive term but circles a variety of behaviours, including verbal aggression, physical fighting, robbery, rape and homicide. The young people in the issues analysed appeared to hit anybody they know or do not know with almost anything like a bowl, kettle, and spatula. They were seen punching anybody on different parts of the body mainly in the face, the buttock and the stomach. They were also portrayed kicking friends, teachers, an artist and even animals which were defined by Azizi, Yusof, Jamaludin, Jaafar Sidek, Fawziah and Amir Hamzah (2004) as the act of aggression where such behaviour can hurt others.

Next, Table 2 suggests that young people tend to be disrespectful. They show disrespect to their teachers by behaving in several different ways. They show disrespect by talking back and shouting at their teachers, and ignoring their teacher when they were questioned. Another behaviour showing their disrespect was being rude to the elderly. In "Empowering parents," (n.d.) instances of teens being disrespectful towards others are cursing, yelling, arguing, ignoring others, refusing requests, name-calling and this inappropriate behaviour is attributed to movies, music, internet sites and television that frequently glorify such behaviour. Although being disrespectful is a way to express oneself, it is still an unacceptable behaviour that should not be tolerated and ignored.

Table 2: Samples of Perceived Negative Attitudes and Behaviours

Category	Attitudes and Behaviours
Aggressive	Throwing objects at a friend. Throwing friend from a building. Punching a friend/a teacher. Kicking a friend/a cat/an artist.
Disrespectful	Talking back at the teacher. Shouting at the teacher. Ignoring the teacher when asked questions. Ignoring teacher's instructions. Being rude to the elderly. Calling people/friend inappropriate names.
Have school problems	Throwing school bag into the rubbish bin. Lying about their bags going missing. Not bringing books to school. Disliking exams. Uninterested in learning (bored).
Naughty	Hiding teacher's bag Hiding friends' books/belongings
Provocative	Making a friend mad by purposely calling him names. Disturbing an old man by stealing his food. Teasing girls by annoying them. Teasing a teacher/a friend
Easily influenced	Buying things without thinking. Believing whatever they hear although untrue. Being tricked by someone to do something.
Unforgiving	Taking a photo of a teacher in an inappropriate way for revenge Finding reasons to blackmail a teacher. Planning a revenge on a friend who lied to him
Inconsiderate	Not offering a seat to older people at a bus stop. Keeping a teacher waiting in class. Making noise in the library. Fooling around in class.
Bully	Intimidating weaker people.
Easily angered	Getting mad over small matters.

Table 2 (continued): Samples of Perceived Negative Attitudes and Behaviours

Category	Attitudes and Behaviours
Confused/clueless	Not knowing what to do in an emergency case. Wrongly complained to the police about fight they saw. Cannot relate that bad grades mean he is weak.
Irresponsible	Not preparing for a role-play competition. Not completing homework. Not doing classroom chore as assigned.
Ungrateful	Refusing to carry out activities although the teacher has bought them to the beach as planned. Giving away their belonging for no reason. Not appreciating others efforts/sacrifices.
Dishonest	Bringing prohibited materials in the exam room. Copying a friend's answer in the exam. Not paying for the food eaten at the canteen.
Demanding	Asking for a different present that was received. Wanting the school to provide WI-FI service.
Unpunctual	Being late to school. Being late for exam. Submitting homework late.
Insensitive	Ignoring a friend who is crying. Not helping a friend chased by a dog.
Reckless	Jumping the red light when driving.

Finally, these teenagers in *Lawak Kampus* are portrayed to have problems related to school do not seem to like school. Situations analysed show that they throw school bags into the rubbish bin so that they do not have to bring books to school because it is related to learning. In this category these school students also show that they do not like to be tested in the exams. In "Empowering parents," (n.d.) teenagers show signs of having problems at school like showing less interest in school activities, lack attention in classroom and seldom doing homework.

The findings of this study suggest that negative representations of young people (school students) are apparent in the comic book title involved. This is consistent with other previous media research on representations of young people where media has control in presenting the acceptable and unacceptable behaviour of young people (Acland, 1995). Selected representations of young people were adults' creations out of concern, anxieties and needs but may not necessarily be realistic to the true identity (Giroux, 1997). Both Acland (1995) and Giroux (1997) further asserted that the construction of unrealistic representations of young people in media resulted in the reinforcing of hegemony.

The repetitive images in the comic book of young people being aggressive, disrespectful and not liking school may further reinforce the idea to the readers out there that these school students are actually behaving as they are being portrayed (unacceptable behaviour). As observed by Gerbner (1986 as cited in Chandler, 1995), repetitive effects of television on young people images will influence how people see the world and hence affecting the identity of young people in general.

6 Conclusion

As only one comic book title was selected in this study, generalization to all other comic books on the negative representations of young people is not possible. Furthermore, increasing the number of issues of the comic book looked at, may result in other types of negative representations being recorded.

The findings of this study have revealed that the six issues of this local comic book analysed appeared to have used numerous ways to represent the young people in negative manners. Comic books appear to be more than just pure entertainment materials as they do have the ability to perpetuate good or bad messages and even stereotypes. Young readers can be heavily influenced by what they read as they are of the age and maturity where whatever they read is seen to be true. As young people, these teenagers are in need of a proper guidance and modelling from all sources. Educators in particular should create awareness of the existence of inaccurate portrayals in comics and comic books to their students to empower them to not accept the unacceptable. Where and when negative portrayals do exist, educators somehow have to find ways to teach

students about the acceptable behaviours. Parents need to be aware of the ability and influence of these popular culture texts on their children. They should monitor and ensure that their children are reading appropriate reading materials with suitable contents so that these young minds are not easily influenced by untrue portrayals.

In the daily interaction with comics, helping the youngsters to differentiate between fantasy and reality, particularly when it comes to negative portrayals in comics is the efforts of everybody. Exposure to too many negative messages and portrayals in comics over time may leave a powerful impact on their attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours on what are acceptable and unacceptable. Negative representations of young people can also affect the public minds and perceptions about young people which are removed from reality. Young people are not entirely bad, and have good attitudes and behaviours similar to other people. Therefore, balanced representations of young people in comic books are due to help paint accurate pictures of this generation.

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