Representations of Young People in Local Comic Book

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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 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. 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: *representations of young people, media, comic.*

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 offers 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 learn not just 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 comic. 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 on how the world perceives young people to be. Thus, the focus of this paper is to explore how young people are represented negatively through their attitudes and behaviours portrayed in one of the local comic book titles.

Representations of young people in media

The western media more often than not represented young people as somebody at the bottom of social hierarchy. Young people are only occasionally represented by the media as valued members of the society. They are perceived to be rebellious, disrespectful, lazy, binge-drinking and drug taking scum. Young people in Britain for instance were reported to be groups of people who like to start fights, have sex and causing 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) claimed 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 behavior 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 in the media. Acland (1995) suggested that negative media representations of young people were for the purpose of reinforcing hegemony by identifying the acceptable and unacceptable behaviour of young people. Young people were reported to be in an uncontrolled state that needed constant monitoring to ensure they conform to hegemonic values (Acland, 1995). Giroux (1997) argued that media represented youth as an empty category

that reflects adult concerns and needs which did not reflect reality of youth identity. Contemporary film, television, and print media representations of young people appeared to consistently reflect an adult perspective. These findings have proven that media was reporting news that did not reflect the reality.

It is therefore important that media represent young people in a realistic manner. As our beliefs are shaped by what we read about young people in the printed or digital media, it is unfair for the media to always portray young people in an unfair or negative manner. It is indeed unfair to young people as their attitudes and beliefs are shaped to the public by the media's portrayal of untrue images of them.

As comics are fast gaining popularity among its young readers, 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 yet to exist for comics or comic books.

Objectives

The general objectives of this study are to analyze the negative portrayals of young people in the local comic book title selected when they are part of the comic book characters. Specifically, the study aims at:

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

    b.   creating the awareness of the impact of these negative portrayals on young minds as well as perception of others.

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 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 their impact on young people as well as other readers. For the purpose of this study, six issues of *Lawak Kampus* comic books (issues 8, 10, 12, 13, 14 & 18) were read and analysed for the negative portrayal of young people as represented by the comic book artist by looking at the attitude and behaviour in situations given in all the six issues. The most number of times the representations were shown were identified and counted. Evidence of such portrayals was also recorded to further strengthen the representations observed.

Findings and Discussion

Six issues (issues 8, 10, 12, 13, 14 &18) 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

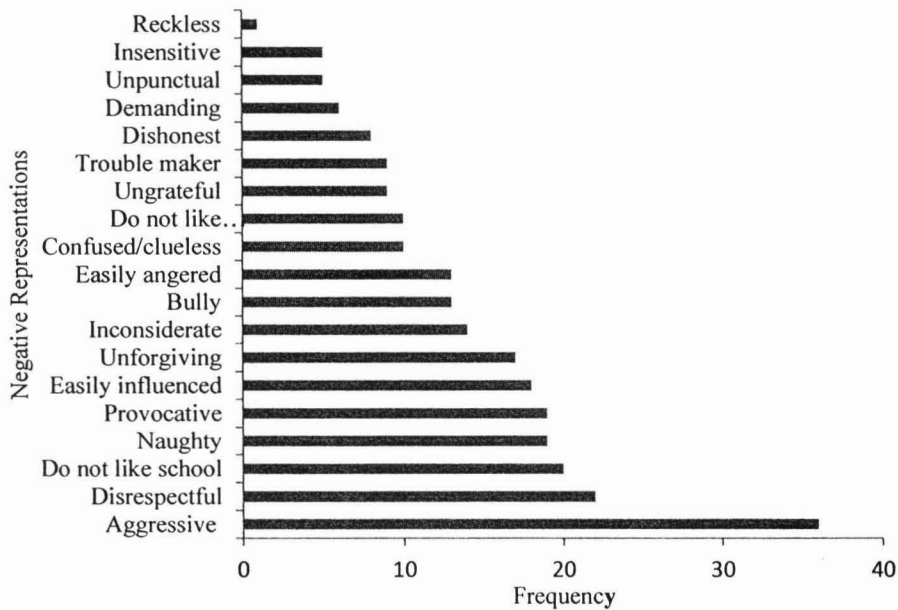| Issue	Number of situations analysed
8	172
10	173
12	181
13	171
14	181
18	179
TOTAL	1057

Figure 1: Negative Representations Observed

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 nineteen different ways (Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1, young people in the comic book 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 behaviour like hitting, punching, kicking and throwing things at people (Table 2). They hit anybody they know or do not know with almost anything like a bowl, kettle, and spatula. Young people in the comic book were seen punching anybody on different parts of the body mainly in the face, the buttock and the stomach. They were portrayed kicking friends, teachers, an artist and even animals.

Table 2: Evidence of Negative Representations

Negative Representations	Evidence
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. Being rude to the elderly.
Do not like school	Thinking of destroying school building. Throwing school bag into the rubbish bin. Lying about their bags going missing. Not bringing books to school. Disliking exams
Naughty	Teasing a teacher/a friend
Provocative	Making a friend mad by calling him names. Disturbing an old man by stealing his food. Purposely throwing objects (stones and a ball) at someone to make them mad.
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. Casting spells on an unfavoured teacher. 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.
Bully	Intimidating weaker people. Calling people with inappropriate names. Teasing girls by annoying them.
Easily angered	Getting mad over small matters.
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. Submitting homework late. Not sweeping the floor 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.
Trouble maker	Making noise in the library (fooling around). Fooling around in class.
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.
Insensitive	Ignoring a friend who is crying. Not helping a friend chased by a dog.
Reckless	Jumping the red light when driving.

Next, evidence in Table 2 above suggests that young people tend to be disrespectful. They show disrespect to their teachers by behaving in several different ways. They showed disrespect by talking back and shouting at their teachers, and ignoring their teacher when they were questioned. Another evidence of showing their disrespect was being rude to the elderly.

Finally, these teenagers do not seem to like school. Evidence shows that they would think about destroying the school building suggesting they hate school. They also throw school bags into the rubbish bin so that they do not have to bring books to school because it is related to learning. Since these school students do not like school, evidence also shows that they do not like to be tested in the exams.

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 necessary 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 young people identity on the whole.

Limitation

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. Further, increasing the number of issues of the comic book look at may result in other types of negative representations being recorded.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study have revealed that the six issues of this local comic book analysed have used numerous ways to represent the young people in a negative manner. Comics appear to be more than just pure entertainment materials. It does 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. If such negative portrayals were accurate, 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. 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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