

The Unique Power of Comics: A Comprehensive Exploration of the Visual-Verbal Medium and Its Impact on Storytelling, Communication, and Culture

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Abstract

Comics, characterised as a literary and aesthetic media, have a specific storytelling capability that combines visual and verbal components, resulting in a distinctive form of expression. This study undertakes a thorough examination of the various impacts of comics on narrative, communication, and culture. From the historical comic strips to the contemporary graphic novels, the study analyses the development of this artistic medium and its capacity to effectively depict and communicate complex narratives and concepts. When examining the interplay between visuals and text, it also analyses the ability of comics to surpass linguistic and cultural boundaries, providing a broadly comprehended form of communication that appeals to a wide range of individuals. Comics have established themselves as a powerful medium for communication and social criticism, extending their influence beyond popular culture to the domains of education and campaigning. This study explores the use of comics as a means to tackle pertinent social issues and delves into the ways in which comics have been employed to give voice to marginalised people to catalyse transformative societal shifts. 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. They have not only become a mirror of our culture but also a driving force for social progress.

Keywords: Comics, Visual-Verbal Medium, Storytelling, Communication, Culture

1.Introduction

Comics, a form of visual storytelling, have been an integral part of culture for a significant period of time. They serve as a powerful medium for communicating narratives, expressing emotions, and sharing information. The utilisation of graphic format serves as a valuable tool in the realm of storytelling, as it allows for the creation of an immersive experience that

captivates readers. Unlike other forms of literature, graphic format has the unique ability to enliven the connection between the narrative and its characters, offering a level of engagement that is unparalleled. This immersive experience not only enhances the reader's understanding of the narrative, but also deepens their emotional connection to the characters and their journey. In essence, graphic format offers a distinct and powerful means of storytelling that transcends the limitations of other literary forms. This paper will explore the historical development of comics and highlight the ways in which they have galvanised audiences. By delving into history, we can gain a deeper understanding of the immense impact that comics have had on the world of storytelling.

Comics, in their expansive nature, extend beyond the boundaries of fiction and have emerged as powerful tools in addressing pressing social concerns, fostering transformative change, and amplifying the often-unheard voices of marginalised communities. Through their unique blend of visual art and storytelling, comics provide a platform for creators to explore complex themes such as racism, gender inequality, environmental degradation, etc. By presenting these issues in a visually engaging and accessible format, comics have the potential to reach a wide audience and generate meaningful conversations. They serve as a catalyst for dialogue, encouraging readers to critically examine the world around them and question prevailing norms and structures. Through this analysis, the study will illuminate the ways in which comics have effectively addressed a wide array of pressing concerns, spanning from the pursuit of gender equality to the importance of prioritising mental health. The utilisation of comics as a means of creative expression allows for the communication of narratives that actively defy traditional notions of what literature can achieve.

2. Defining Graphic Narrative

The phrase “A picture is worth a thousand words” suggests that in situations where verbal communication of complex and sophisticated ideas falls short of conveying meaning, an image may prove to be a more effective means of imparting the same. The integration of visual clues with verbal descriptions has the potential to enhance the understanding and retention of information when compared to a non-illustrated text. In recent times, there has been an increase in the growth and expansion of interest in storytelling via verbal and visual narratives, and comic book is a form of such graphic storytelling.

Will Eisner, a renowned comic book theorist and illustrator, who is also regarded as the “Father of the Graphic Novels”, in his 1985 book *Comics and Sequential Art*, defines comic books as sequential art “that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatise an idea” (5). The art form of comics can be perceived as a linear medium due to the intent to narrate stories in a sequential manner, akin to the cinematic medium. It was initially used to depict cartoons and satirical caricatures to amuse readers through the inclusion of witty, humorous and many times thought-provoking anecdotes, but it has gradually developed towards becoming a narrative form comprising multiple sub-genres. Comics, an enduring and unique medium, has attained a pervasive presence within popular culture.

Comic books were easily accessible to nearly everyone, but they were considered low art or intellectually undemanding amusement in the United States because of their widespread popularity among readers who look for intellectually less demanding material. However, besides the comic book critics, this notion was also shared by the comic book artists themselves; as the creator of Teen Titans, a superhero team, Bob Haney claims: “Comics, they’re just the lowest form of popular culture. What the Germans called kitsch. Nowadays, of course, they’re art. And they are much better; they’re much more – great creativity and serious talent. But in those days... It’s kid’s junk. Kid’s poison ...Kids needed junk. And the junk was comics for years. That’s why it sought the level that it did” (Haney).

Accentuating the medium as a powerful form of interaction, the comic book theorists Duncan and Smith, in their book *The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture*, claim, “Comic books tell stories and involve readers in ways that no other art form- not plays, novels, or film- can duplicate” (13). The comic book medium is distinct in its feature of storytelling potential through an amalgamation of words and pictures. The duo further states, “Unlike static or stand-alone pieces of art, which are quite often focused on capturing a moment or invoking an emotional response, sequential art is, with some exceptions, concerned with storytelling” (3).

While defending this popular medium, Scott McCloud, an American cartoonist and comics theorist, in his influential work *Understanding Comics*, trying to explain the usefulness of the narrative, also puts forth the history of the medium and explains the basic vocabulary of this sequential art form. He thus begins by defining comics: “comics are juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). He also argues: “if people failed to understand comics, it was because they defined what comics could be too narrowly. a proper definition, if we could find one, might give lie to the stereotypes, and how that the potential of comics is limitless and exciting” (3). McCloud contends that it is a widely held belief among individuals that using words and images together is unsophisticated or too simplistic (141). This is because it is perceived that a combination of words and images is too basic or lacks depth and creativity. This belief is largely based on the idea that words alone can be used to convey nuanced ideas and concepts and that images are not needed. However, words and images, when used together strategically, can be an effective way to communicate an idea or concept.

3. Historical Overview

Tracing our way back through the annals of history, we observe that sequential art existed long before the written language was invented for communication. Ancient people often used pictures to tell stories, to record events, and to document their beliefs and customs. The juxtaposed sequential images are still significant in interpreting history, ranging from cave paintings to Egyptian Hieroglyphics (3300 BC), to the Bayeux Tapestry (1100 AD). The series of pictographic symbols in Egyptian Hieroglyphics and the 70 meters long embellished cloth displaying the Norman Conquest of England in the Bayeux Tapestry help us perceive

history through sequential images. It shows how visual communication has been used for centuries to record and interpret history, making it an invaluable source of knowledge.

The medium provides a wide range of scope for writers and readers to deal with diverse subject matters varying from factual accounts of history to creative works of fiction. It also allows writers to experiment with multiple possibilities as they can combine text and visuals to create unique stories. During one of his lectures, John Updike, who had a keen inclination towards cartooning, proposed various novel techniques for presenting a novel. He states: “I see no intrinsic reason why a doubly talented artist might not arise and create a comic strip novel masterpiece” (Gravett & Stanbury 8).

In 1843, London’s Punch magazine began publishing humorous drawings satirising the then government and its politics. The magazine’s cartoons were so popular that they soon



Figure 1. John Leech, *substance and Shadow: Cartoon No. 1* (1843) in *Punch Magazine*, satirizes the insensibility of the British government amidst the Britain "Hungry Forties"

became regular features. Its success led to other magazines and newspapers following suit with their own satirical cartoons. *Substance and Shadow: Cartoon No. 1*, published in the *Punch*, depicts the government’s overly concern about decorating the New Palace of Westminster rather than addressing the problem of poverty among citizens (Chute 6). The cartoon acted as a social tool to criticise government policies and expose irresponsible politicians. The cartoon also highlighted how the government was wasting public money on unnecessary luxuries. This disparity between the actual needs of the poor and the government’s superfluous and meaningless measures is emphasised by the concluding line of the cartoon: “The poor ask for bread, and the

philanthropy of the State accords — an exhibition” (22). It serves to highlight the lack of concern and action taken by the government towards the real needs of the people. The cartoon thus serves as an effective tool to bring attention to these issues and to encourage people to speak up and demand change. During that period, cartoon drawings were widely perceived as humorous, leading individuals to associate them with comedic or amusing content. Thus, the amalgamation of cartoons/caricatures and textual elements gave rise to a new form of verbal-visual narrative medium that is widely recognised as “Comic Book”.

4.Evolution of Comic Books: Exploring Societal Transformations through Webcomics and Graphic Novels

The realm of comic books has seen significant changes, giving rise to fresh perspectives that challenge existing conventions and alter the limits of creative representation. Through an exploration of Webcomics, and Graphic Novels, this section analyses the complex transformations that have significantly altered the nature of this dynamic artistic medium.

This section aims to represent a pivotal point in the exploration of the intersection between tradition and innovation within the realm of comic books. It delves into the profound changes that are actively shaping this captivating field, examining the transformative forces at play.

4.1 Webcomics

The dominance of digital technology in the current age can be seen in every facet of life, including how we read, which is likewise undergoing constant transformation. The use of modern computers as a platform for artistic expression and exhibition is nothing new. Many creators employed computer networks to produce ground-breaking works of art, as Campbell, in his book *The History of Webcomics*, states – “It was the World Wide Web that made the Internet visual enough to match cartoonists’ ambitions” (Campbell 1). Webcomics have established themselves as a platform for future skilled artists, a means of expanding the medium, and a respectable means of livelihood. Webcomics, which are often referred to as digital comics, have emerged as a well-liked method of providing entertainment over the course of the previous two decades (Batinić 81).

The meteoric rise of webcomics has also paved the way for a new approach to comics production that just wasn’t achievable in the past. This is one of the many ways in which the medium has been revolutionised as a result of the internet. According to Allen W. Todd, the first official Web comic is generally considered to be David Farley’s Doctor Fun, a single-panel gag comic that uses humour to convey its message; beginning on September 23, 1993, the series continued to operate until 2006 (Todd 62). In recent years, webcomics have grown in popularity as a medium for addressing socially significant issues and for providing social commentary, and this trend is expected to continue. They provide a medium for engaging with social concerns in a way that is not only accessible to a wide audience but also has the potential to incite serious introspection among readers while simultaneously entertaining them. In addition, webcomics can be utilised to educate readers about topics that are not commonly addressed or comprehended, such as social justice, disability rights, mental health, environmental issues, social stigmas surrounding women’s healthcare, etc.

4.2 Webcomics as a Tool to Address Significant Social Issues

The stigma associated with mental health issues makes it difficult for anyone to seek help. This is because there is still a lot of misunderstanding and ignorance about mental health issues, and many people are afraid of being judged or ridiculed for seeking help. Webcomics have been utilised by a large number of people who have gone through the same situation or who might connect to it to share their stories and experiences with varied degrees of humour and tragedy. These creators have connected with their audiences to share the message that mental illness is manageable and that one’s outlook on life may improve no matter how bad things may seem at the moment. Several creators attempted to use the medium of webcomics as a means of explaining the stigma that is associated with mental health disorders.

Depression Comix by Clay Jonathan is one example of such comics that tackle the subject of mental health. It is a weekly webcomic published on his website that examines life with depression and other mental illnesses from the perspective of people who are afflicted with

these conditions. It is a collection of comics portraying the ups and downs of living with depression that can be heart-breaking at times, sensitive at others, and extremely relatable throughout. The comics discuss the challenges of living with depression and the ways in which it can impact all facets of a person's life, including relationships, jobs, and activities that are performed on a daily basis. They also provide a feeling of hope and perspective, demonstrating that it is possible to deal with and overcome depression despite the fact that doing so can be challenging.

There are many other webcomics available online that deal with the sensitive subject matter of mental health difficulties. Some examples of such works include *Sandy*, *Sarah's Scribbles*, *Hyperbole and a Half*, *The Awkward Yeti*, etc. These webcomics provide a way for people to process their feelings and gain insight into how to cope with their mental health struggles. Additionally, they can provide support for people who are going through similar experiences and can create a sense of community for those who are struggling.

Around the world, gender disparity continues to be a significant social problem, and these disparities between the genders are rooted in the societal construction of gender roles (Wani & Dastidar 384). These systems assign certain expectations and roles to each gender, and these expectations often limit the opportunities and rights available to the less privileged gender. There are numerous webcomics available that focus on the myriad ways in which women are treated unequally in today's society, on the idea of women empowerment, and on feminism.

Aminder Dhaliwal's *Woman World* is a webcomic that explores feminist themes. The story is set in the future in a society that has been devastated by an apocalyptic event. The only people who have survived are women since, for some reason, all the men have inexplicably vanished, leaving the women to reconstruct society. It is both a humorous and poignant comic that emphasises the value of female companionship and solidarity, as well as the ways in which women can unite together to help and support one another in a world devoid of men. The comic book conveys a powerful message of self-love and urges readers to accept themselves as unique individuals by celebrating their own individual personalities. In addition, the comic book also examines the tenacity and fortitude of women in the face of hardship and demonstrates how women can work together to build a new and improved world.

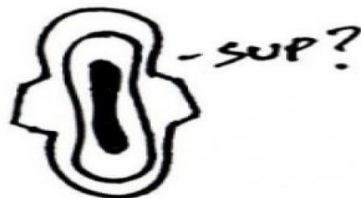


Figure 2. Image of Blood-stained Pad from
Sanitary Panels

The webcomic *Sanitary Panels* deals with a highly sensitive topic in Indian culture: women's menstruation. It's an ongoing project by Rachita Taneja, an Indian artist and activist, to combat discrimination, shame, and myths associated with menstruation in India. An image of a bloodstained sanitary pad is featured in one of her panels, which she utilises to confront the taboos and shame surrounding menstruation. A powerful visual reminder that menstruation is a natural part of the female body and should not be seen as something to be ashamed of is provided by this image. It contributes to the development of a culture of resistance and normality of menstruation by eliminating the stigma associated with it. Taneja uses a series of comic panels to discuss issues, including the scarcity of period hygiene products, the embarrassment and guilt attached to menstruation, and the general lack of knowledge and awareness regarding the entire process.

Her work also explores the gendered preconceptions that exist in the society. She examines how gender roles are embedded in language, media, and other cultural artefacts and how they can shape the way people think and behave. Taneja advocates for the eradication of limiting gender norms through her art, with the goal of empowering women to reach their full potential. She also discusses topics such as the gender pay gap, sexual harassment, and the importance of having more women work in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). In addition, readers are encouraged to take action by understanding the fundamental factors behind gender disparity and then work towards reforming the system.

Therefore, webcomics are potent narrative devices that may be utilised to tell stories with wit as well as conviction, where social critique is disguised as humour and challenges many of our preconceived notions. Due to the wide variety of webcomics that are currently available, there is certainly something for everyone, and this makes them an extremely helpful medium for disseminating significant messages and initiating conversations that are relevant.



Figure 3. Image taken from the Graphic Novel *A contract with God* by Will Eisner

5.Graphic Novel that Revolutionised the Medium Irrevocably

One of the most ingenious comic creators, Will Eisner, began challenging the conventions of the existing comic books. He decided to advance the artistic expression of comic strips by refining and perfecting the form. Eisner's technique was predicated on the assumption that

people who grew up reading comic books are still admirers of the format of comic books, but they would have lost interest in the same kind of genre stories (Weiner 20). The 1940s Golden Age gave birth to numerous superhero icons, but Eisner wasn't particularly interested in those larger-than-life figures. As a matter of fact, "frail, fallible, suffering human beings" (Couch & Weiner 10) were the subjects that most piqued his interest. He saw the potential for the medium to evolve and create stories beyond what had previously been explored and sought to expand readers' experiences through character development and intricate plotlines. Eisner was also able to create a more immersive experience that resonated with readers who had grown up reading comics. This allowed readers to become more emotionally invested in the story and characters, thus increasing their engagement with the medium.

In 1978, with the release of his first graphic novel, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, Eisner was able to bring his vision to fruition and come up with his groundbreaking invention in the field of visual storytelling. The book is composed of four distinct stories, which are all intertwined. These stories are based on the recollections of Eisner's childhood, depicting what it was like growing up in a tenement in the Bronx. Each story delves deeper into his memories, providing the reader with a unique insight into his life. In the preface, he states – "In the four stories, housed in a tenement, I undertook to draw on memory culled from my own experiences and that of my contemporaries. I have tried to tell how it was in a corner of America that is still to be revisited" (Eisner ii). Each story has its own unique characters, themes and events, but they all link back to Eisner's experiences. By telling stories that are based on real memories and experiences, he has created a unique and powerful narrative that captures the struggles, hopes and dreams of those living in the Bronx at the time.

As Eisner states – "A Contract with God is drawn from life" (Yronwode 68); the experiences include his personal loss as he lost his sixteen-year-old daughter who had Leukemia, anti-semitism faced by Eisner and his family, the conflict between the cultural assimilation in America and Jewish ethnicity, daily lives of the people living in the tenement, their morally ambiguous characters, their constant abuses, and violence, etc. His stories dealt with real human affairs and the choices they make in life, and a few were semi-autobiographical. He even experimented with other significant themes such as death, brief happiness that wealth provides, sexuality, etc., themes which were believed to be confined only within serious prose literature and movies and were considered unimaginable to be expressed in a medium that was solely regarded as a juvenile. This timeless classic graphic novel is a testament to the power of storytelling via verbal-visual medium and its ability to evoke powerful emotions and inspire deep introspection. It is an enduring masterpiece that will continue to influence generations of readers and will continue to be cherished as an artistic achievement for many years to come.

6.What Makes Comics Special: Exploring the Impact of Visual-Verbal Medium

Comic books were considered to be a superficial and fleeting form of entertainment for a significant portion of their history. However, in this current digital age, the world is

embracing visual media and is more captivated by visual culture than ever before. Stories can be communicated more effectively through the power of visuals, as opposed to a written narrative alone. While emphasising the fact that comic books can be both intellectually stimulating and aesthetically pleasing, Eisner, in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*, mentions – “the reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit” (8). In addition to being a great source of entertainment, pleasure, and education, comic books also serve as a form of self-expression for many people. But what is it about comics that makes them so popular, and why is the blending of words and visuals so distinctive?

Comics have become an integral part of our culture, and its use of visual-verbal medium provides a unique and captivating experience for readers. The visual-verbal medium is a powerful tool for delivering messages because it combines the immediate visual impact of images with the detailed explanation of words. The idea can be conveyed more efficiently by merging words with images, resulting in greater precision and compelling power than either medium alone. The two mediums complement each other by offering a more detailed and complete picture of the message.

Comics are an incredibly powerful form of communication as they offer readers a unique form of storytelling that captures the imagination and inspires creativity. Through the combination of visuals and words, comics are able to capture the nuances of a narrative and also illustrate the emotional resonance of the story in a way that would not be possible with words alone (Beckler 4). By using images and text together, comics are able to transcend language barriers and be accessible to readers of all ages and backgrounds. Comics can break down big ideas into smaller, more manageable chunks and present them in a way that is both entertaining and educational. This makes them an ideal medium for teaching and communicating ideas, allowing readers to better retain and understand the information presented.

Comics have the potential to offer an immersive experience that can be enjoyed by readers around the globe. They now reach a much larger audience than ever before due to the emergence of digital comics. These digital comics provide readers with access to a much broader range of stories from various backgrounds and ethnicities. By exploring different cultures, beliefs, and perspectives, readers can gain a deeper feeling of admiration for the diversity of the world around them. Comics can also be a platform for people from underrepresented and marginalised groups to tell their stories and be heard. By leveraging the power of visuals and narrative, comics can be used to create meaningful and lasting impacts in the world. For example – Grassroots Comics are a powerful medium of communication that allows people to express their own stories and experiences. Grassroots comics are comics which are not prepared by professional artists but by socially conscious individuals from the local community based on their own opinions and beliefs. “Grassroots Comics aims at bringing change in the society by directly acting on the thought process, prejudices, stereotypes, mindsets through nonthreatening local stories” (World Comics India).

While many comic writers have traditionally relied upon the medium as a form of foolish escapism, the recent emergence of more serious and mature graphic narratives has been marked by the introduction of more realistic components, with many of these stories even being based on actual events. As Gruenberg, in his research article, states – “Artists and writers brought up on the comics have become increasingly aware of the potency of their medium and they have attempted increasingly to use their gifts and their skills with conscious purpose” (210). The medium also provides a unique insight into real-life situations, with its aesthetics and visually drawn panel lines allowing for a vivid interpretation of events. Consequently, comic books can be seen not just as a form of entertainment and artistic expression but also as an effective historical lens. The publication and immense commercial success of graphic novels in recent times, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (the first graphic novel to receive the prestigious Pulitzer Prize), Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, have contributed to the legitimisation of graphic narrative as a form of storytelling.

7. Conclusion

Through an extensive examination of the visual-verbal medium in comics and its significant influence on storytelling, communication, and society, this research has shown the distinct potency inherent in comics within the domain of narrative arts. From their modest beginnings to their present-day popularity, comics have shown their versatility and significant impact as a mode of artistic expression. The investigation has shown that comics are not just limited to providing amusement. They function as a powerful instrument for facilitating communication, promoting inclusiveness, and enhancing accessibility. Comics has the ability to surpass linguistic obstacles, thereby serving as a universally accessible medium of communication that may be enjoyed by individuals from many cultural backgrounds and age groups.

In the culmination of the investigation into the distinctive potency of comics, it is evident that this amalgamation of visual and linguistic elements constitutes not only an artistic expression but also a dynamic influence that moulds our perceptions and interactions with the surrounding environment. Within the expansive realm of narrative expression, comic books serve as a profound tribute to the innate human aptitude for imaginative prowess, originality, and effective conveyance. It also underscores the capacity of words and pictures to surpass their inherent constraints and, when artfully merged, engender a profound resonance inside our cognitive and emotional faculties.

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