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Visual Semiotics: Identity Reflection in Personal Symbol Creation

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on personal identity reflection in personal symbols created by first year design students. The personal symbols, together with descriptive texts that answer the prompt question: *How does the personal symbol created reflect you as a designer?* created by first year design students were used to identify the common themes relating to identity reflection and the extent of how connotative meanings are embedded in the personal symbols. Using the method of thematic analysis on the descriptive texts, 6 themes relating to personal identity reflection are identified including (1) Personal Preference, (2) Personal Names, (3) Character Personality, (4) Cultural Identity, (5) Design Style and (6) Design Philosophy. The extent of how connotative meanings are embedded in the personal symbols was analysed using Barthes' visual semiotics analysis. It is proposed that there is a correlation of recurring themes across the two sets of findings, which is the theme (1) character personality, suggesting the significance of the theme in informing design students' identity reflection in personal symbols. The framework and methods used including the integration of thematic analysis and visual semiotics to analyse symbol creation employed in the present study is aimed to provide new knowledge in the field of visual communication and graphic design. Furthermore, it is implied that these can be adopted by design educators to analyse various visual works of design students within the design field in the future.

Keywords: Thematic Analysis, Visual Semiotics, Personal Symbols, Design Philosophy, Visual Analysis

INTRODUCTION

In deciphering the meaning of symbols in various forms of visual works, semiotics theory has been widely practiced since it was first founded by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce, independently, at the end of the nineteenth century. The two divergent 'theories of the sign', identified as French and American semiotics respectively, have influenced the development of visual analysis and meaning-making across different disciplines. These disciplines include linguistics, visual communication and cultural studies. It was in the 1960s that Roland Barthes, a semiologist, built upon the works of Saussure to study signs as "dynamic elements of a social and cultural fabric" and pioneered in "focusing systematically on texts made of non-linguistic signs, particularly visual images" (Aiello, 2020 p.370). From Barthes' perspective, signs are composed of two levels of meanings; known as *Denotative* and *Connotative* meanings. The first level, *Denotation*, refers to the literal and universally agreed meaning, whereas *Connotation* is the secondary level of meaning consisting of "the changing associative meanings" (Yan & Ming, 2015, p.60). These associative meanings in connotation relate to the symbolic, ideological or cultural associations used in 'reading' the images (Aiello, 2020).

In further analysing and grasping the meanings behind a visual artwork such as personal symbols, it is important to also take into account any textual components that are used as a written accompaniment of the visual. This includes image descriptions or titles of artworks which are used to provide a context to the meanings of the visuals. In analysing such written components, the method chosen for such analysis should be suitable and appropriate for application in both visual and written types of texts. Thematic analysis is one of the methods commonly used due to its adaptability to both text types. An example of a suitable application for thematic analysis is newspaper articles. In such formats, both written and visual textual forms contribute to the interpretative meaning and overall impression formed by the reader (Ahuvia, 2001). Thematic analysis's applicability in visual communication can be seen across studies on animation and illustration (Shi, et al., 2021), branding (Qyll, 2020; Osorio, Centeno, & Cambra-Fierro, 2020), packaging design (Grilo, et al., 2021; MacGregor, et al., 2020) and social media engagement (Song & Park, 2020). The integration of both visual semiotics and thematic analysis methods in deciphering the meanings behind visual artworks is able to provide further insights into the process of meaning-making. Additionally, we are able to also identify how the meanings relate to the creators or designers.

OBJECTIVES

The present study aims to find out the extent of personal identity reflection in the creation of personal symbols. By looking at the connotative meanings of the personal symbols created and compare these with the thematic analysis of the textual accompaniment of the symbols, insights on the personal identity reflection of first year design students can be identified. The objective of the present study is twofold; the first objective is to identify the common themes relating to personal identity that arise from the personal symbols created by first year design students. The second objective is to analyse to what extent do the first year design students embed connotative meanings in their personal symbols to reflect their personal identity. It is proposed that by identifying the common themes of personal identity and analysing the extent of how personal identity is reflected in creating the personal symbols, the impact of personal symbols in informing and reflecting the personal identity of a first year design learner can be identified.

As new learners of design, first year students' may still be exploring their own identity, and thus the reflection of their identity in their design works may not be as apparent as those of design experts or more matured designers. By identifying the themes relating to attempts in identity creation, it is implied that future educators can use these to focus on developing first year students' personal design identity. This would lead to future designers that are more refined, creative and have a unique stand in the design world. Furthermore, it is also aimed that the framework of thematic analysis and visual semiotics on symbol creation as employed in the present study can be applied to analyse other visual works of design students of similar nature within the field of visual communication and graphic design and thus help in the development of design education.

METHODOLOGY

Procedures & Participants

The personal symbols analyzed in the present study were created by a group of first year design students undertaking the Theory and Practice of Visual Communication course at School of The Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia. 115 design students were involved in the design task of creating personal symbols as part of their visual communication assignments. Based on the rubric marking and evaluation of the design works, 20 best personal symbols created with the highest marks as evaluated were selected for the present study's visual semiotics analysis. In creating the personal symbols, students were given the freedom to express and reflect themselves and their identity by visualising their own personal symbols, with no specific restrictions of design style, colours, type of logo chosen

and digital design technique. Although that is so, a few guidelines were given for the purpose of final design output standardization. First, students had to present a digital version instead of a manual sketch of their final personal symbols using either Adobe Illustrator or any other suitable digital software. Secondly, each personal symbol must be accompanied by a written text description of about 80 to 200 words, answering a prompt question: *How does the personal symbol created reflect you as a designer?*

All 20 selected personal symbols and text descriptions of the students were coded to represent the students, such as *S1* for Student 1, *S2* for Student 2 and etcetera to organize the data for analysis purposes. Next, several themes were generated based on the text descriptions provided by the design students to accompany their personal symbols. The theme generation process adapts the inductive thematic analysis method, in which the generation of themes is derived from the material being studied or analysed, in this case the description of personal symbols, instead of any theoretical preconceptions or pre-existing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes reflect the design students' attempt towards meaning-making in relation to reflecting their identity through the personal symbols. The themes derived include (1) Personal Preference, (2) Personal Names, (3) Character Personality, (4) Cultural Identity, (5) Design Style and (6) Design Philosophy. The details of thematic analysis is further explained in the subtopic Thematic Analysis under this methodology section.

Next, the personal symbols were analyzed for their connotative meanings, basing on the method of Barthes' Denotation and Connotation visual semiotics analysis. These were contrasted against the thematic analysis of text description provided by the design students in answering the prompt question given: *How does the personal symbol created reflect you as a designer?* A detailed discussion on how the visual semiotics analysis was conducted is further discussed in the subtopic Visual semiotics: Denotation & Connotation of this methodology section. Finally, a conclusion was drawn to address the objectives of the present study, in which the common themes relating to personal identity that arise from the personal symbols were identified, and the extent of connotative meaning-making in personal symbols to reflect personal identity was analysed and concluded.

Thematic Analysis: Reflection of Personal Identity

The systematic element of data analysis afforded by thematic analysis is suitable and appropriate with the present study's analysis methods that deal with interpretations (Alhojailan, 2012). This method enables us to classify any recurring keywords, similar ideas or content in the text descriptions provided into categories or themes that will help us in analysing the main elements of their reflections. Thematic analysis also provides a ground for analyzing "the frequency of a theme with one of the whole content" which will present "accuracy and intricacy" in the data interpretation (Alhojailan, 2012 p.40). We are able to identify the strongest or most important theme that arise in the meaning-making process of design students in reflecting their identity through their artworks.

In conducting the thematic analysis, the present study adapts Braun & Clarke (2006)'s six-phase thematic analysis framework. First is to familiarise oneself with the data including reading and re-reading the materials before proceeding to the second step of generating initial codes. These initial codes were based on the research question of the present study, which is to find out the extent of personal identity reflection in the personal symbols. Therefore all of the text descriptions were analysed and words or phrases relating to personal identity reflection, relevant in addressing the research question, were highlighted and coded. For the third step of the analysis, these codes were examined and those that fit together were collated into a theme. The next steps involve reviewing and defining the themes to come up with the final revised themes to be used for the analysis and write-up. Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis was adapted by a similar study on symbols, which looks at traditional and contemporary symbols in packaging design (Hu, 2020). In terms of identity, it was also adapted by Kunrath, Cash & Kleinsmann (2020)'s study on the professional identity of designers. The present study will first address each theme accordingly and these will be presented in the results section. There are 6 themes in total, and for the thematic analysis, each theme's significance and frequency in the text descriptions will be evidenced by data and important keywords describing the

theme will be highlighted accordingly.

Barthes' Visual Semiotics Theory: Denotation and Connotation

The meanings embedded by design students in the 20 selected personal symbols can be deciphered through identifying both the denotative or literal meaning as well as the second order of meaning-making, the connotative meaning. In order to relate how the students reflect their personal identity on the personal symbols, it is important to firstly identify all of the denotative meanings of the *signified*, in this case the apparent or obvious elements of the personal symbols such as the colour used, the form or shape of the symbols, readable words or any other apparent characters. Although explicit meanings are able to inform viewers a reasonable understanding of the *signified*, visual works such as symbols may have another layer of meaning interlaced in them. Such visuals are usually considered as “less explicit” with “contextually specific meanings”, with influence of the viewers’ culture, knowledge and personal meaning-making process (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009 p. 20). As connotative meanings are heavily influenced by the viewers’ own experience, background and personal feedbacks, the present study’s connotative meaning analysis of personal symbols will be analysed based on the researcher’s own experience and background as a design practitioner and design educator.

RESULTS

Based on the inductive thematic analysis method and six steps guide afforded by Braun & Clarke (2006), 6 main themes were generated as the final revised themes including (1) Personal Preference, (2) Personal Names, (3) Character Personality, (4) Cultural Identity, (5) Design Style and (6) Design Philosophy. In this section, excerpts from the text descriptions will be highlighted to show the keywords that were found to describe the themes.

Thematic Analysis: Personal Preference

For the theme (1) Personal Preference, keywords used in the text excerpts that reflected preference such as ‘favourite’ and ‘love’ were identified. S3 and S18 both mentioned the use of their favourite colours in the symbol, while S10’s remarks “can’t get enough of the color green” showed her preference of colour. As for the word ‘love’, the students’ favoured objects or elements such as “bunnies” (S5) and “music and art” (S19) were chosen to be a part of their created personal symbols. Last but not least, S6 mentioned his photography hobby, which was also reflected in his personal symbol.

Thematic Analysis: Personal Names

As for the theme (2) Personal Names, there was a high number of students who used their names to be a part of their personal symbols, as this may seem as the apparent way of identifying a person. Some students resorted in using their name initials to form their personal symbols (S2, S7, S12, S13, S14, S16). Several students also used their nicknames (S3, S5, S6, S18) and their “short form of name” (S17). One particular student described how the overall symbol portrayed a “bright, loud summer” which describes her name “Summer” that was used by her colleagues for her (S4). Apart from that, S11 resorted in using part of his signature in the symbol, which he thought would be good for “originality” (S11).

Thematic Analysis: Character Personality

In terms of character personality, students tend to create symbols that show their behaviour or personality as a person, by using the power of symbolism meanings and compared this with their personality. For example, S16’s symbol showed “professionalism, elegance, and seriousness” to be “in line” with her “low-key and introverted personality”. This technique was also used by S2, S4 and S13. Some of the students used metaphors in symbolism, which were not universally common, such

as S12'S take on how the shape of 'Halo' was used to represent "genius". This was also done by S13 in describing "lightning" as her symbol to portray her "sudden but huge, loud and bright, and noticed by everyone" personality. Positive personality that revolved around happiness was also reflected in the students' symbols (S14, S15, S19, S20). Two of the students described a much less straightforward take on personality, where phrases such as "a detailed execution that needs a keen eye to interpret it" (S3) and "hidden true self especially at night time" (S9), were used to reflect their personality.

Thematic Analysis: Cultural Identity

The cultural identity reflected in the students' personal symbols relates to how they used the identity belonging to a group, and may be related to their ethnicity, generation or locality. Based on the excerpts, some of students used their Chinese names as part of their personal symbols (S6, S10, S15, S20). S5's chosen symbol of a rabbit represented her birth year according to the Chinese calendar. S6's choice of using his Chinese name relates to not only the physical characters of the Chinese characters, but rather to the meaning of "bravery" (S6). One of the students reflected their zodiac sign, which was the fire sign to show as her identity in her personal symbol (S13). Last but not least, S15's idea was to incorporate his passion towards Chinese culture, where a symbol was chosen that was "more related to Chinoiserie and it makes me feel satisfied when looking at it" (S15). His symbol was also in the shape of the Chinese seal or signature chop stamp.

Thematic Analysis: Design Style

For the theme of design style, when students described how their personal symbols reflected the way that they design their artworks or design output, a few of the students referred to their favourite art movement or "favorite art movements of all time" (S18), which was minimalism (S1, S15, S16 and S18). The keyword "elegant" or "elegance" were also favourable among the students to portray their favourite style or design approach (S1, S2, S11). S3 wanted to show her "signature art style" in her symbol, while S19 preferred to show her style, where she mentioned "my works are neat and clean" (S19). Lastly, the attention to details in doing artworks was seen in S7's excerpt, where she took consideration in creating "geometrical shape for structure" in order to "suit the alphabets" chosen for her symbol.

Thematic Analysis: Design Philosophy

Last but not least, for the theme (6) Design Philosophy, students reflected how design mottos or philosophy of popular philosophers or designers shaped or influenced the way they do their design works. For example, S9 quoted Sir Martin Luther King Jr. "Only in the darkness, can you see the stars." to describe her take on "bringing hopes" through her art while S14 quoted Picasso's "Music and art are the guiding lights of the world". S2's design philosophy relates to her positive message about "embracing and encouraging" to "spread to the whole world". Several students described their design philosophy that reflect their design vision and creativity (S6, S7, S18) including their "imaginative side" (S4). A few students believed in design "power" (S12) and "strength" (S2) to guide them in designing. Several students stand by the power of empathy and showing compassion to others, including the people that they design for, such as "Spreading love, offer happiness and joy and remove suffering from other people" (S10) as well as "bringing hope" and "make people feel safe and secured" (S17, S11). Last but not least, a student pointed out her philosophy of design which is "the mouth speaks, the hand tells" that portrays the way she approaches her designs.









Barthes' Visual Semiotics Theory: Denotation and Connotation






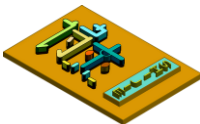
The analysis conducted using Barthes' Denotation and Connotation theory to further decipher the message behind a symbol is shown in Table 1 below. For denotative (signified), literal meanings based on the representations of the students were identified. Connotative (signified) meanings are analysed based on visual communication theories, including shape psychology, symbolism, visual

metaphors and other related theories suitable with the visual analysis. The connotative analysis is also influenced by the viewer's backgrounds, which in this case is how a visual researcher with art and design background view and decipher the symbols.

Table 1: Denotative and Connotative Meanings of Personal Symbols

| Student Code | Signifier (Personal Symbols) | Signified | |
|--------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| | | Denotative | Connotative |
| S1 | | The symbol uses white thin-stroke outline for the overall design. It has a circle frame, and inside the circle are a few shapes arranged to somehow mimic an image of a face. The symbol also looks like a tall, wine glass or somehow like the branches of a tree. Overall a minimalist approach. | White can connote purity, and when paired with thin strokes it can amplify the minimalism feel. The mimic of a 'smiling' face with one eye winked connotes a playful character, often used to portray cheekiness and fun demeanour. A glass-shaped head can metaphorically mean 'a vessel' of knowledge, similar to branches of trees in the head area can connote 'growing' knowledge. |
| S2 | | The capital letter 'K' was used as the basis of the symbol. Thick, flowy or handwritten font was used as the choice of symbol. Two-toned pink gradient was used as the colour, for both the outer circle frame and 'K'. Black background was chosen for the symbol. | The capital letter 'K' may stand as a name initial or a surname initial, it can connote a safe or direct choice for personal symbol, or, on the other hand portray the strength of character to show authority. Black background heightens the boldness of the symbol, together with the choice of thick strokes for 'K'. The colour choice, gradient and flowy font style somehow tones down the bold, authoritative feel and shows a much softer, or feminine side of the creator. |
| S3 | | Black pen, design stylus or wand was used as the main symbol. Vibrant colours of bright purple, pink, orange and yellow were used for the stroke of wand. Sketchy or brush-like stroke was chosen for the 'wand stroke'. The letter 'e' is somehow seen in the flow of the rainbow wand stroke | Black pen or design stylus used can signify the passion of drawing, sketching or digital drawing of the creator, thus using it as their personal symbol. The wand stroke and the use of wand itself may connote magic, fantasy or the powerful magic of colours. It either refers to how magical the world of drawing is to the creator, or how their creation creates magic to the existing world. The rainbow stroke can connote a global palette of colours, global exploration of art or to symbolize freedom. |
| S4 | | Left hand showing the universal 'OK' sign is used as the main symbol. Pale yellow is used as the main colour, with turquoise as the outline. An eye is seen as another symbol created inside the hand, in between the index finger and the thumb. Three tiny line strokes were drawn near the tip of the index finger and thumb. | The symbol of an eye within a hand gesture can connote 'looking through the hands' or how the creator's hands direct or controls the look of any creation/artworks produced. When three lines of that nature is used within an illustrative symbol, it can represent a 'sound' symbol, either to depict the sound of fingers clicking, or to represent the eyelashes of the 'eye' symbol. Three fingers showing the universal 'OK' sign can suggest happy-go-lucky character, or a positive vibe shown by the creator of this symbol. |
| S5 | | A faint, handdrawn, pink brush stroke was used as the outline for the rabbit symbol. The letter 'v' was used for the eyes of the rabbit, with a simple circle dot as the nose. One of the rabbit's ears is pointing up and the other folded down. The shape of the rabbit head mimics the shape of a heart. | A rabbit used as a symbol can connote playfulness or soft character of the creator. Paired with faint choice of pale pink colour, it heightens the softness feel. The shape of the heart to form the rabbit's head can connote warm, fuzzy feeling or caring character. Both eyes used 'v' which could represent the name of the creator. |
| S6 | | At first glance, the overall shape of the symbol mimics a blue camera lens. The layers of circles used, together with the gradient-style colour helps form the camera features. The silhouette of the camera forms the small letter 'b'. | Lens as a symbol can connote observing another person's character or the surrounding of the creator. It can represent a very detailed or observant person, which can describe their design style. The gradient-blue colour used can symbolize a calm and collected demeanour. |

| | | | |
|-------------------|---|---|---|
| <p>S7</p> |  | <p>This abstract-shaped symbol uses the pale, faded colours of turquoise and peach. If examined closer, the abstract shape actually was formed from the letters 'S' and 'E'. None of the shapes are connected, as the creator uses the 'closure' principle to create this symbol.</p> | <p>The abstract-shaped symbol looks highly mechanical, which can mean the person puts a lot if thinking in doing design. All of the elements do not connect, and the closure principle used in the symbol can connote a very careful and detailed person. Although showing their very technical side, soft colours were used for the symbol to somehow tone down the overall rigid feel.</p> |
| <p>S8</p> |  | <p>At first glance, a disco ball dominates as the main shape of the symbol. It also looks like a globe. Two sparks or stars created compliment the disco ball as seen in the overall composition. The black shape at the bottom of the disco ball can represent hands or a holder where people use to display ball ornaments. Green was used as the overall colour for the symbol background.</p> | <p>A depiction of a ball, globe, or earth, it may symbolises universal, worldwide or international standard. This may refer to the style of the creator and how they visualise their work. Disco ball with complimentary sparks can connote retro feel or musical inclination of the creator. It may also refer to playfulness or fun in designing. The 'hand' or 'holder' shape identified is being placed at the bottom of the globe-like/disco ball shape. On one hand it could mean control, or limitation, or on the other hand connotes presenting a gift, giving or caring demeanour of the creator.</p> |
| <p>S9</p> |  | <p>A distinct red circle was used as the background to frame the symbol. A crescent moon with a single cloud drawn behind the moon were both drawn using the digital 'line etch' style for shading. An interplay of black, dark blue, white and turquoise were used to colour the crescent and moon and cloud. Lastly, mini or tiny white stars were used as part of the symbol.</p> | <p>When a night scene is depicted using a red sky, it can somehow connotes the inner feeling of the creator, showing the eagerness to escape from a very calming environment. The overlapping black and bright turquoise colour used in some of the moon and cloud elements screams contrast, as these colours are the opposite hues of the main red colour used.</p> |
| <p>S10</p> |  | <p>This abstract symbol has several shapes going on to form the overall symbol. A slanted line at the top, followed by three uniform circles, and a big connecting circle with a vertical line forms the symbol. A 'peace ribbon' is placed inside the circle, and the same moss green is used throughout the symbol.</p> | <p>The overall look connotes a very minimalist, Zen-style symbol, with shapes that form a somehow Japanese arch look. The muted green used, together with the peace symbol in the middle heightens the calmness, Zen feel that the creator is trying to portray. Three circles arranged in such composition can also mean uniformity.</p> |
| <p>S11</p> |  | <p>A thin stroke of orangy-yellow line forms the number '3'. The letters 'NFEL' is written below, with a long, thin stroke that looks like a sword crosses in the center of the word. All of this brightly gradient shapes are placed inside a dark grey circle complete with a glowing shadow at the bottom right.</p> | <p>A very dark take on an abstract-shaped symbol was put forward as the main emotion. The '3' and sword symbol in the middle were designed to look like fire or light to contrast against the dark eclipse moon.</p> |
| <p>S12</p> |  | <p>A three-point black crown dominates this symbol. Another three-point white crown is layered inside the bigger black crown, with a small, white triangle being placed at the bottom right corner of the crown. The word 'MARSEATIONS' was written at the bottom.</p> | <p>A crown depicts royalty, more precisely the power of a king. It can connote a powerful character, or an empire, depending on the intention of the creator. The three points used as the crown's form may depict three goals, three aims or three principles used by the creator in making design.</p> |
| <p>S13</p> |  | <p>A bright orange capital 'E', connected with a distinct lightning shape forms the symbol. A slight gradient of yellow in the middle area of the symbol was used, and sharp, pointy font was used for the edges of the whole typeface.</p> | <p>Lightning connotes strength, power or distinctive design works. The character of the creator may be someone who likes to stand out, or maybe this was used to symbolise the power of their design works. When the lightning is connected with a capital 'E', which can represent the creator's initial, it may suggest the power of the creator himself as a powerful person.</p> |
| <p>S14</p> |  | <p>A soft, illustrated guitar symbol was used, with a rainbow mark at the bottom part of the guitar's body. Behind the guitar is another three-coloured cloud of rainbow, with a slight white cloud that sits at the front of the guitar.</p> | <p>A guitar, being a musical instrument, can represent the musical, creative side of the creator. Rainbow can connote a lot of different meanings, one of it being joyfulness and carefreeness.</p> |

| | | | |
|-------------------|---|--|--|
| <p>S15</p> |  | <p>Two rectangle blocks of red and white, respectively were used for the form. Chinese calligraphic writing, each with two characters were used as the main element of the symbol.</p> | <p>The uniform rectangles used as symbol can represent a very careful, or strict person. This is heighten by the colour choice of distinctive red and white. Both of the rectangles carry the same chinese character, this could connote an emphasis or to show authority.</p> |
| <p>S16</p> |  | <p>At first glance, a capital 'W' is seen as the main symbol. Thick black stroke was chosen as the font, and in the middle of the 'W' is a slanted arch used as a connector.</p> | <p>The 'W' was designed to have a slanted angle in the middle, and when the black stroke is taken into consideration, this angle can represent a hand, similar to the hand used for the general 'person icon' used universally. It can connote the person is trying to show their hands as the powerful tool as a designer, or it can show how the hands dominate the way design works are created, including this symbol.</p> |
| <p>S17</p> |  | <p>Two purple moons accompany the letters 'L, Y, Y' and the word 'space' is placed at the bottom part of the whole symbol. All of the objects are formed using the digitized, pixelated style of illustration. Four tiny stars are used to highlight the letters 'L, Y, Y' which are coloured in orange.</p> | <p>The pixelated style used for the whole symbol depicts a playful character, as this style is usually used in games and character design. 'L, Y, Y' can refer to the initials of the creator, and the word 'space' can show authority in the sense of space created. A very joyful feel was reflected in terms of the crescent moon, the 'L, Y, Y' and overall composition used.</p> |
| <p>S18</p> |  | <p>An abstract symbol was created using thin, white strokes that overlap each other to form a shape within the frame of a rectangle. All of the strokes are straight, angled lines that are geometric, and this abstract symbol was placed against a dark, turquoise background.</p> | <p>The fully-abstract composition of the symbol shows intricacy, details and careful demeanour. Thin lines used as strokes in such composition can also create an art deco feel, matched with the dark, contrasting background. This style of symbol also reflects elegance, which may be the goal of the creator.</p> |
| <p>S19</p> |  | <p>A very simple, thin, black stroke was used to create this symbol. On one hand, the symbol looks like connected triangle flags, two joint 'A's or a bowtie.</p> | <p>Such simplistic symbol can carry different connotations. Although positively it can symbolize minimalism, simple, clean feel, if looked at a different perspective it can mean rigidity. This is due to the type of thin, sharp lines used. A bowtie can also portray formalism.</p> |
| <p>S20</p> |  | <p>A tangerine flat platform, angled at 3d perspective was used for the symbol. On the platform, chinese characters of different colours was created, and on the right side is a bright, turquoise rectangle with a smaller set of chinese characters. 3D style of illustration was used.</p> | <p>The overall style and composition of this symbol reflects the very playful character of the creator. Bright colour palette was used, together with distinct shadows for each chinese character show the amount of time and consideration used for the creation of this symbol.</p> |

DISCUSSION

Reflection of Identity in Personal Symbols

Based on the results derived from the thematic analysis and Barthes' visual semiotics analysis on connotative meanings, several important key points that can be highlighted are addressed in this section. This is to bring light to the extent of how personal symbols reflect the identity of design students, together with providing key answers to the prompt question *How does the personal symbol created reflect you as a designer?*. Firstly, the most distinctive themes that are used to reflect their personal identity are identified. The themes (2) Personal Names and (3) Character Personality are the two themes that have the highest number of input based on the data from the text descriptions. The theme (6) Design Philosophy was the third, followed by (5) Design Style, (4) Cultural Identity and (1) Personal Preference.

For the theme (2) Personal Names, the rationale behind the use of name initials and nicknames as the element for their symbol can be because of how names are considered as an apparent personal identifiable information. This type of information, which has "referent(s) to uniquely identifiable persons" (Al-Fedaghi & Thalheim, 2009), is used by students to provide a mark or identity to the creation of a personal symbol. Although the prompt question that guided the symbol

creation mentioned phrases such as “reflect you as a designer”, students find that their individual identity as a person should also be present in their symbols. The second plausible explanation for this may be due to how they see themselves as newcomers in the design industry, thus the technique of new brand launch or brand recognition was implemented. This is because figurative symbols, such as names, are highly familiar and more beneficial for brand recognition purposes, as compared to abstract designs (Buttle & Westoby, 2006), especially for new brands in the market.

The second highest input was from the theme (3) Character Personality, in which students showed their behaviour or personality as a person, through the use of symbolism. The forms of miscellaneous objects coming from both nature and man-made objects such as lightning, crescent moon and pen were used for their symbolic meanings to portray or mirror the students’ personality. Some students resulted in creating new forms of symbol to show their intended characters such as making marks that could show elegance and professionalism. This theme received the second highest input, in line with the strength of character and personality in forming a ‘personal brand’, which usually is formed from traits such as personality, first impression character and how one communicate with others (Rangarajan, Gelb & Vandaveer, 2017). The impact of design philosophy to inform who a designer is, their intent, or to reflect their design thinking (Zhao, 2013) shows how important it is in the formation of personal identity for designers. This theme received the third highest input by students, with symbols that were created to show famous philosophies, or their own personal philosophy in doing design. Design philosophy, an “analytic lens that provides valuable insights into the development of individual designers” (Watkins, et al., 2020 p. 2116) is able to show the kind of designers that the students aspire to be.

When we look at the lesser focused themes such as (5) Design Style, (4) Cultural Identity and (1) Personal Preference, although having importance in the formation of design identity in designers, only several distinctive entries by students show their reflection relating to these themes. For instance, the theme (5) Design Style received entries by students relating their favourite style and concepts, including art movement that they used in their design artworks. (4) Cultural Identity was mostly used in terms of their names in their cultural language, and although some interesting entries such as using zodiac signs and cultural elements were embedded in students’ symbols, this theme did not receive high input from students compared to the other themes. Last but not least, the theme (1) Personal Preference, which relates to implementing favourite objects, hobbies, preference of shapes in personal symbols were the least used theme for reflecting the students’ identity.

Connotative meanings in Personal Symbol

When we look at the extent of how first year design students embed connotative meanings in their personal symbols to reflect their personal identity, several key points can be highlighted based on the visual semiotic analysis. Similar to the thematic analysis, one of the most distinctive connotative meanings used by students were the hints of their character personality that were shown using symbolic meanings embedded in various forms of objects and elements. For example, S1, S4, S5 and S20 hinted about their playfulness character, while S2, S8, S12 and S13 used the symbolism of authority and power with distinctive elements such as lightning (S13) and crown (S12) to show their stand and strength as designers. A number of students also reflected their analytical character as designers by using elements that reflected systematic design and planning, such as S7, S10, S18 and S19. Last but not least, some students used gestures and facial expressions to show their character personality, such as ‘winking’ (S1), universal ‘OK’ hand sign (S4), folded rabbit ears (S5) and presenting hands (S8). All of these are translated as showing personal characters of the individual students, when the meanings are deciphered using connotation method. The intricacy of S18’s symbol is able to inform about design style as much as character personality, which is another theme identified from the thematic analysis of text descriptions. Uniform design composition used in S7, S15 and S19 personal symbols connote their preference towards ‘clean’ design style and how they approach their design process and works. Other students were more inclined towards showing their expressive design style, with the use of ‘free’, organic strokes (S3 and S5) and colour palettes using bold combinations (S9, S14, S17 and S20). Apparent passion towards design was even shown by

students such as S3 and S6, who used stylus pen and camera respectively as their main symbols, to connote the two essential tools used widely by designers.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, this study has afforded an overview of how personal symbols created reflect the identity of first year design students, with a distinct recurring theme in both the thematic analysis and visual semiotics of connotative meanings. The most significant identity reflection theme identified from the text description and connotation analysis was the theme (2) Character Personality. As shown in the results, the data derived from both analysis showed that students find the use of character personality in their personal symbols as the most important in reflecting their identity as designers. Although personal name also receive a high data input, its nature as an apparent personal identifiable information may be the plausible reason behind this. As for the theme (5) Design Style, although it did not receive high input of data as compared to (1) Personal Names and (2) Character Personality in the thematic analysis, the semiotic analysis on connotative meanings behind the personal symbols revealed that students do in fact embed their preference of design style in the creation of personal symbols. This informs the extent of how connotative meanings are in fact used by students in informing and reflecting their personal identity.

From this study, we can see the impact of personal symbols in informing and reflecting the personal identity of first year design students. Design educators can use these elements to focus on developing first year students' personal design identity. By training first year design students to develop their own design identity, and reflecting this on their design works, it is proposed that future designers that are more refined, creative and have a unique stand in the design world can be achieved. Furthermore, it is implied that the framework of thematic analysis and visual semiotics on symbol creation as employed in the present study can be applied to analyse other visual works of design students of similar nature, within the field of visual communication and graphic design by future design educators.

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