

REPRESENTING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN LAT'S CARTOONS: A FRAMEWORK OF MADANI CONCEPT

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Abstract. A cartoon is a metaphor used by many visual artists to convey meaning effectively without resorting to lengthy sentences. In the Malaysian context, cartoons have long played a significant role in documenting everyday life, social relationships, and multicultural values through humour and visuals. Sadly, many underestimate the importance of cartoons in creating a harmonious environment, especially among multireligious people. This study aims to investigate Lat's cartoons in disseminating cultural identity, focusing on the use of colour and symbolic meanings in reflecting the shared values of Malaysian society. Qualitative research methods were carried out for data collection. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method was applied to achieve the aim of this study. The findings reveal that Lat's colour palette, ranging from monochromatic tones to culturally symbolic hues, evokes shared interethnic values and collective memories of Malaysian life. Visual symbols such as food, architecture, traditional attire, and kampung settings were found to embody values of compassion, harmony, and inclusivity. The study concludes that Lat's cartoons function as powerful visual narratives that communicate multicultural unity and moral values aligned with the ideals of Malaysian society's identity.

Keywords: *cartoons, visuals, cultural identity, Malaysia*

Introduction

Cartoons are important visual communication tools to transfer many types of content, especially cultural identity messages as cultural texts reflecting social realities, and national identity. In the Malaysian context, cartoons have long played a significant role in documenting everyday life, social relationships, and multicultural values through humour and visuals. Among Malaysian cartoonists, Lat (Mohammad Nor Khalid) is recognised for his artistic style to capture the lived experiences of Malaysian society across ethnic, cultural, and generational lines (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). Scholars have consistently noted that Lat's cartoons serve as visual representations of Malaysian cultural identity, portraying themes of tradition, modernity, and social harmony through cartoons (Subramaniam et al., 2025). In Malaysian society, cartoons are frequently regarded as mere entertainment for children, which appears unproductive and is largely overlooked. The perception of cartoons featured in editorial sections, educational inserts, or sports segments of newspapers and magazines seems insignificant and provides minimal value. Overall, the public typically perceives cartoons as a source of humor or jokes found in local newspapers, magazines, comics, or television, rather than recognizing the deeper meanings and communications conveyed within the cartoons.

Lat's use of visual symbols, such as kampung landscapes, traditional clothing, eating customs, and communal areas, that together create a common understanding of

Malaysian life makes his paintings especially noteworthy. These symbols serve as both aesthetic components and cultural messengers that foster interethnic understanding and collective memory. According to earlier research, Lat's cartoons effectively convey national and cultural identity by fusing humor with social critique, enabling viewers to interact with intricate cultural values in a relatable and approachable way. The function of color and symbolic meaning as communicative elements within modern nation-building frameworks has received little consideration, despite the fact that prior literature has examined themes of national identity and multiculturalism in Lat's works (Chin et al, 2017). Thus, this study investigates Lat's cartoons in portraying cultural identity through colour and symbolic meaning in reflecting shared Malaysian values through MADANI framework. By adopting a qualitative instrumental case study approach, this research seeks to deepen understanding of how visual narratives function as cultural communicators. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on visual communication and cultural identity by demonstrating how cartoons can align with contemporary nation-building ideals while preserving collective memory and multicultural unity in Malaysia.

Literature review

Cultural identity in Malaysian cartoons

Cartoons are a stylized form of depicting humorous figures that can entertain people (Khalis and Mustaffa, 2017). Cartoons as a tool for conveying content through humorous methods began in 1957, when the first cartoon was published in the *Berita Harian* newspaper under the title 'Tenaga dan Keringat di Russia' by Low, followed by 'Keluarga Mat Jambul' by Raja Hamzah and 'Selamat Zaman Baru' by Peng. Element of unity and culture was a favorite component incorporated in the cartoonist Datuk Lat through his comic entitled 'Scenes of Malaysian Life' which was published in 1975 (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). Identity, in today's digital world, is influenced by numerous sources such as national characteristics, ethnicity, social class, community, and gender (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). Cultural identity is a fluid concept influenced by social practices, history, language, ethnicity, and religion. Hall (2015) conducted a study in which he emphasized that identity is constructed through representation, particularly in visual and media texts. In the context of Malaysia's diverse society, the multicultural identity includes Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Indigenous groups. Lent (2001) noted that cartoons in Asia have historically acted as social mirrors, reflecting cultural norms and political perspectives. In Malaysia, the role of cartoons has transitioned from colonial propaganda to instruments for intercultural dialogue and social and political critique, significantly contributing to the preservation of ethnic and cultural equilibrium across various media. Mahamood (2022) pointed out that Malaysian editorial cartoons frequently tackle themes such as religion, education, race relations, and the conflicts between tradition and modernity. Humor and sarcasm are often employed to portray daily interactions among characters from different ethnic backgrounds. Visual aspects such as attire, language, festivals, and cuisine illustrate Malaysia's multiethnic composition, functioning as visual ethnographies of daily life (Abd Rahim et al., 2023).

Visual elements are better known as a way of interpreting meaning without using sentences or words. Visual elements, particularly colour and symbols, are central to the way meaning is constructed in cartoons. Colours can evoke emotions, cultural associations, and shared values, while symbols serve as visual shorthand for complex

social ideas. Studies on visual culture and cartoons suggest that visual elements are instrumental in shaping audience interpretation and reinforcing cultural identity within multicultural societies. In Lat's cartoons, the strategic use of monochrome tones, earthy palettes, and culturally symbolic hues contributes to the portrayal of everyday Malaysian life and reinforces themes of harmony, empathy, and coexistence (Khalis and Mustaffa, 2017).

Theoretical reference

This research was conducted with guidance from semiotic theory. Semiotic Theory involves the examination of signs and symbols, focusing on the processes through which meaning is created, conveyed, and understood within a society. This theory is particularly beneficial in the fields of visual and media studies, as it elucidates the roles that images, colors, characters, and narratives play as vehicles of cultural significance. The investigation of semiotics, with particular attention to semiotic theory developed by Roland Barthes for sign interpretation, using three layers of signs which focuses on denotative (literal meaning), connotative (mental notions), and mythic (connected to viewers' history and culture) (Jadou and Ghabra, 2021). The human brain merges cognitive and emotional functions to decode visual data. Visual perception, therefore, involves sensing, thinking, and feeling, unfolding through a series of immediate and intentional steps (Barthes, 2012). It is a subjective evaluation supported by theories, models, and data related to visual processing as shown in *Figure 1*.

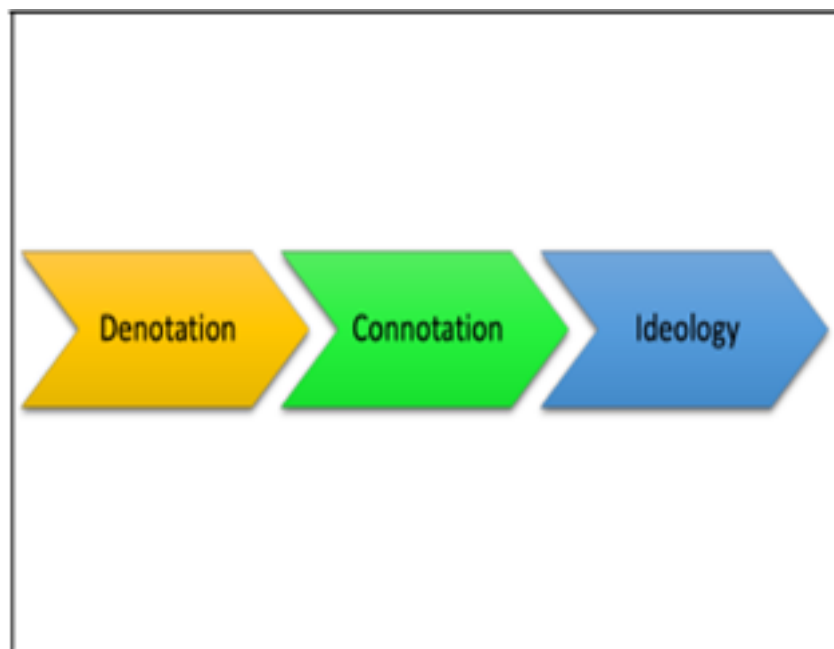


Figure 1. Semiotic theory.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative research investigates the relationship between Lat's cartoons and cultural identity in Malaysia through MADANI framework. As noted by Kumar (2018) as well as Creswell and Creswell (2017), the methodology is contingent upon the nature

of the research question. An instrumental case study design (Creswell and Poth, 2016) was utilized through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to gain insights into broader themes. Maximum variation sampling was employed to capture a range of perspectives that reflect Malaysia's multicultural society. Informants, aged 25–60, from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous backgrounds, including working-class, creative, academic, and industry professionals, provided comprehensive views on the cultural significance of Lat's work within Malaysian society using Malaysian MADANI work as a case study. To document the perceptions of informants, data were gathered through group discussions. Two focus groups were organized, each consisting of four informants from diverse backgrounds. Member checking and peer debriefing processes were carried out for the credibility and reliability of the results (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases: familiarization, code generation, theme identification, review, definition, and report writing. This systematic method effectively revealed recurring cultural and symbolic patterns, offering valuable insights into Lat's role in visualizing Malaysian identity under the Malaysia framework used in analyzing the results.

Results and Discussion

The FGD explored informants' perceptions of colour and meaning in Lat's cartoons as reflections of cultural identity within the Malaysia MADANI framework. Eight informants joined two moderated sessions, with findings presented through coded informant quotes (e.g., I1) with respective themes such as colour and meaning of the symbols as shown in *Table 1* and *Table 2*.

Table 1. *Colour of the symbols.*

Category	Description
Focus group 1	
11	"No differences between races."
	"White suggests that there is no distinction among ethnic groups."
12	"If we look at it in terms of unity, whether the houses share one colour or different colours, the message of unity is still there. Even if one row of houses is bold red, or each is different, that itself symbolises unity."
13	"The white is not just a background; it's part of the respect shown in the story between characters, cultures, and lifestyles."
Focus group 2	
15	"When we're talking about the colour yellow in MADANI sejahtera. Why yellow? As it symbolises culture."
16	"...because it's calm, very soothing. So, we enrich this kind of culture, diversity at all and yellow kind forte in a certain part also."
17	"You can put colours on the things that you want to focus. You can also make it black-and-white. So, it depends on the style and how you execute it."
	"...yellow for me is more for royalty. So, I think sejahtera would be something like green or blue. It's not warm, it's a light cold colour. And for me personally, I think it shows sejahtera."
18	"So, it doesn't matter whether it is colour or black and white, important thing is the style of the illustration and how the message is presented."

Table 2. *Meaning of the symbols.*

Category	Description
Focus group 1	
11	"The patterns used for diff religious are different. Patterns can be symbolic like a crescent moon or circular shapes. Even the shape of a lamp can show a character's background. When one culture celebrates something, everyone is enjoying it."
12	"For example, in Melaka, the building design appears to be Malay, but the roof design looks like it has Chinese influence, right?"
13	"The use of attires, clothes, baju patterns, and house decorations. These can symbolise certain cultures, reflect cultural values, and express beauty." "There's a lot we can interpret from the shapes themselves."
14	"Furniture in Malay homes is different from Chinese or Indian homes, right? And then there's the attire of Malays wear the songkok, baju Melayu, and sampin. These kinds of things can be reused or brought back into design."

"Lat always presents this kind of character. The kampung areas. They're very harsh in a way. But if we look at the continuity in his work, we see the balance. His kampung is like this... his city is like that."

Focus group 2

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| 15 | <i>"colour blue is suitable for representing MADANI, as it symbolises unity, peace, and harmony. This highlights that colour itself is also a key element of symbolism, capable of conveying emotion and meaning"</i> |
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| 18 | <i>"Blue should be the colour. So, if MADANI are to be a colour - black, grey, obviously would show violence. "Ya, you see, for example, black colour. A lot of Malaysians, especially Chinese, try to avoid. Because black is a colour of mourning.... But black to the Japanese, they have different interpretations. Black to the Japanese is a warrior colour. If you are a warrior, a hero, it's black. But younger generations, Gen Y and Gen Z, perceive black as a stylish, elegant, trendy colour."</i> |
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Focus group 1

Analysis of the informant's responses indicates that colour in Lat's cartoons is interpreted as a symbolic medium conveying broader messages of national harmony. Informant (I1) perceived the use of white as a unifying visual element that transcends ethnic distinctions, describing it as a symbol of well-being and equality rather than a purely aesthetic choice. According to (I1), white represents an inclusive vision of "One Malaysia," where differences among ethnic groups are visually dissolved. Similarly, (I2) viewed colour as a metaphor for individuality and emotional expression within a cohesive society. The participant explained that variations in the colours of houses, whether uniform or diverse, do not disrupt unity but instead reinforce it, suggesting that diversity in appearance can coexist with collective harmony. This interpretation highlights how colour contributes to a cohesive cultural identity while acknowledging individual uniqueness. Expanding on this perspective, (I3) emphasised that white space in Lat's cartoons functions symbolically rather than as a neutral background. The participant interpreted white as representing mutual respect among characters, cultures, and lifestyles, acting as a visual buffer that upholds dignity and equality. Collectively, these views suggest that Lat's strategic use of colour and space communicates values of coexistence, understanding, and shared quality of life within Malaysian society.

Focus Group 2

Informants in Focus Group 2 emphasised that Lat's frequent use of black-and-white imagery directs attention toward narrative depth and symbolic meaning rather than visual embellishment. P5 observed that many cultural identities portrayed in Lat's cartoons, such as iconic local foods like nasi lemak and durian, remain instantly recognisable even without colour, indicating that cultural meaning is deeply embedded in form and context. (I5) further associated the colour yellow with cultural significance and well-being, particularly in relation to the MADANI concept of sejahtera. (I6) initially proposed blue as a colour representing stability, trust, and calmness, but later acknowledged that yellow carries stronger emotional warmth and cultural resonance. This shift reflects the layered and context-dependent nature of colour symbolism. (I7) highlighted that Lat's choice between colour and monochrome is purposeful, suggesting that black-and-white compositions often convey a stronger message of harmony depending on execution and emphasis. The participant noted that while yellow may symbolise royalty, cooler tones such as green or blue more effectively represent sejahtera due to their calming associations. Meanwhile, (I8) argued that colour is not essential to effective storytelling, as illustration style and visual composition can successfully communicate meaning regardless of palette. Collectively, these

perspectives underscore that Lat's black-and-white illustrations are deliberate artistic choices that demonstrate his skill in conveying emotion and narrative through line work, shading, and compositional balance. This approach reinforces Malaysian cultural identity by foregrounding human experiences and shared social values rather than visual spectacle.

LAT's cartoons and cultural identity

Participated informants observed that the colors in Lat's cartoons symbolize Malaysia's multicultural identity, representing various ethnic groups and traditions. Yellow signifies festivity and unity, while red and gold are associated with Chinese culture, green with Malay heritage, and deeper shades with Indian identity. These colors not only embody cultural significance but also evoke nostalgia and pride in Malaysian life. Consequently, color enhances visuals through layered symbolic meanings that convey deep cultural values and identity (Yan and Suhaily, 2025). Although Lat frequently employs black-and-white imagery, informants felt that his moral messages still resonate effectively. Some argued that color adds emotional depth, while others believed that cultural elements such as food remain recognizable even in its absence. The study by Chin et al. (2017) elucidated that visual emphasis, whether in color or monochrome, contributes to a lasting impact. Colors were also linked to emotional states and triggered memories associated with family and culture. Informants connected colors to clothing, food, and architecture, reflecting everyday Malaysian experiences and reinforcing cultural familiarity. The vibrant colors in lanterns unify diverse ethnic traditions, and Lat's deliberate use of color promotes interethnic harmony and a shared cultural identity. Lat's cartoons serve as powerful representations of Malaysian values, unity, and traditions. Informants noted that cultural elements such as clothing, patterns, and architecture signify a multiracial identity and inclusivity. Abd Ghafar et al. (2022) analysis highlighted that integrated cultural elements act as symbols that unconsciously shape perceptions of identity through their meanings. Informants pointed to the hybrid architecture in Melaka and emphasized communal kampung life as central to Lat's narrative. They commended Lat's skill in embedding moral values without offending cultural sensitivities. Beng (2025) comprehensive review affirmed that the virtues in Lat's Kampung Boy are deeply rooted in adat and akhlak.

Conclusion

Lat's cartoon represents a significant portrayal of Malaysia's multicultural identity. The research revealed that the colors in his cartoons possess emotional richness and cultural significance, resonating with the Malaysian MADANI values of 'compassion', 'respect', and 'trust'. Additionally, it evokes feelings of nostalgia, pride, and belonging, especially when juxtaposing kampung scenes with urban environments, illustrating the cultural continuity and transformation inherent in the MADANI values of 'sustainability' and 'innovation'. The symbolic elements in Lat's depiction of everyday objects exemplify multiracial harmony, inspiring Malaysians to collaborate for the nation's progress, as envisioned in the MADANI value of 'prosperity'. His black-and-white cartoons deliver powerful visual narratives through color and symbolism to impart meaning. Familiar cultural symbols remain identifiable even in monochrome, while the moral values and emotional visual stories infused with humor make his work relatable across generations. Consequently, Lat's enduring visual style fosters intercultural

understanding within a collective national identity aligned with MADANI values. In reflecting on Lat's cartoon, participants conveyed a unified dedication to national pride as a multicultural society. Most participants shared similar perspectives on the significance of multiracial and cultural harmony, although some differed in their emphasis on particular elements, such as the potency of color and symbolic detail in conveying unity. These differences highlighted that the experience of Malaysian identity, while collectively embraced, is influenced by the diversity that shapes the Malaysian MADANI value as a national vision. A recurring theme articulated by the participants is the respect and acknowledgment of multiculturalism as a defining characteristic of the Malaysian identity. The findings suggested that cultural diversity fosters unity, with colors and symbolic meanings embedded in Malaysia's multicultural heritage, languages, and traditions, offering a sense of integration and togetherness.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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