Visual Patterns in Webcomic the Beauty of Angel

Dini Faisal[1], Hendra Afriwan[2], Utami Dewi Pramesti[3], and San Ahdi[4]
[124] Desain Komunikasi Visual, Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia
[3] Pendidikan Bahasa Indonesia, Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia
[1]dinifaisal@fbs.unp.ac.id [2]hendrafriwandkv@gmail.com [3]dpramesti0405@gmail.com
[4]sandesigncomm@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Webcomic has become subculture within comic medium. It still has the same visual elements with printed comic but has its own set of rules and presentation which contrasted from printed comic. South Korean webcomics, famously known as webtoon, are more adapt to digital and online media characteristic. It is show in the way they explore webcomic's vertical infinite canvas. However, each webcomic is unique and has its artist's idiolect. This paper breaks down visual patterns of a webcomic entitled "The Secret of Angel" (TSoA) in order to see the artist's idiolect, the way it exploits infinite canvas and how it stands out. Method use is qualitative descriptive, with 6 episodes of TSoA as samples. Findings indicate that TSoA is adapt to media convergence and the use of vertical infinite canvas and its latest episodes has shown maturity in using the verticality. However, TSoA still maintain its own artist's idiolect such as no speech balloons are inside panels, and longer and wider gutter.

Keywords: *webcomic, visual pattern, The Secret of Angel*

1. INTRODUCTION

Webcomic has become sub-culture in comic industry especially in digital and internet era. Webcomic, or web and comic, at first was comic published via website. But, nowadays, webcomic especially the one popularized by South Korean artist where published using an apps in smartphone. The popular term from South Korea is webtoon (web and cartoon) which means as comic (especially manhwa style) which published in chapters online using smartphone [1].

Smartphone has influenced visual elements on webcomic. For example, webcomic page layout adopted the vertical layout of smartphone screen, user interface, and user experience. It is one long vertical page with scrolling user experience. This is contrasted from printed comic book which has several pages that can be turn one page after another. Webcomic only has one long vertical page serve as infinite canvas. Although the term infinite canvas in webcomic doesn't mean that it is limitless, but quite the contrary it is limited to one page only. But, the feel scrolling through one long vertical page gives the vibe of an unlimited canvas. This new medium of comic should influence the way a comic is published and the way the reader experiencing the comic. Because webcomic is a new comic medium which exploits digital and internet characteristics [2].

The use of long vertical infinite canvas is not the only element that differ between webcomic and printed comic. This verticality construct a new panel layout and reading directions. It longer

serve the Z path or the reading direction one country has [3] but it serve the reading direction of smartphone verticality as panels is more vertical than horizontal.

Moreover, panel is not the only visual element that adopt this verticality. Gutter, as the most crucial part in comic is also presented in different pattern than gutter in printed comic. The smartphone smaller screen make webcomic artist presented the image and text of comic in different ways. However, this is not limitation in webcomic visual element. It is a potential which can be explored by webcomic artists. For example, gutter in webcomic is not serve as time and space for readers to decode the message but it can be exploit as a place for text and speech balloon.

The digital and internet integral part makes webcomic unique than other form of comic. Readers could communicate with other readers like they could in a digital forum. This is another culture that emerge with the use of webcomic apps. And webcomic or webtoon is not exclusive for South Korea only since readers from other country with different language can enjoy webcomic as long as they have access to internet. This booming industry also tries to include local comic artists to participate in creating webcomics. However, South Korean webcomic style (should I say webtoon) is as unique as they are more adapt to the webcomic industry and technological advancement.

For example, japan's webcomic visual element style is differ than South Korean webcomic (webtoon). Indonesia's webcomic doesn't adopt the verticality and the smaller screen into consideration as fluent as South Korea's webcomic artist. Even so, this paper is not to generalize webcomic style in a country but this paper is trying to analyze one webcomic that adopt the verticality thoroughly and break down the artist's visual pattern in presenting the comic elements.

The object for this research is a webcomic created by South Korea's artist. The webcomic titled as "The Secret of Angel" (TSoA) created by Yaongyi, a female artist from South Korea— I would stress the "female artist" part later in sub discussion about panels. TSoA is translated to Indonesian language, and is the number one webcomic in Drama genre. It is one of the most popular webcomic in Indonesia. TSoA has reached episode 75 when this paper is written. In this paper we use 6 episodes as sample, 3 from the first episodes (episode 1, 2, and 3) and another 3 from the latest episode (episode 73, 74, 75).

TSoA is not only because it is a popular webcomic in Indonesia but also because TSoA is quite adapt to webcomic verticality. Yet, it still maintain its own pattern that not all South Korea's webcomic is tune too. As said before, this paper will not compare one webcomic to another webcomic, but only analyze TSoA pattern on using the three basic element in comic such as gutter, panel and speech balloons.

2. METHOD

This paper use descriptive qualitative approach in order to analyze the pattern TSoA use in gutter, panel and speech balloons. Comic research analyzes text and visual to comprehend its communicative functionality [4]. There are six episodes that will be analyzed. Three from the first episodes—such as episode 1, 2 and 3—and three from the latest episodes—episode 73, 74, 75. These samples taken to see whether TSoA still maintain the same pattern throughout its episodes or not. The data were collected through samples and literature study about comic and webcomic. Research stages including instrument arrangement, deciding samples, TSoA webcomic in-depth reading and analyzing and reporting data.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Page layout is a salient characteristic in comic, it is how panels are position with each other. Page layout is the composition of artistic elements on the page , it is how the panels are arranged, shaped and positioned with each other [5], which is a salient feature in comic [6]. Webcomic verticality and smaller page reconstruct the way panel and gutter visualized in a webcomic. Several printed comics are published in digital format. However, those printed comics' elements are still in their conventional printed format. Reading these comics are proved to be difficult. Although readers could zoom in the page but it is not enjoyable for the readers. That's why webtoon verticality's adaption to smartphone is a better presentation for webcomic visual elements.

The three basic elements in comic are gutter, panel and speech balloon. The digital, especially smartphone format influenced how the gutter and panel visualized especially in South Korea's webcomic or webtoon. This is not how every webcomic artist should create their artworks, rather it is a potential that could be taken account of as it make reading webcomic more fun, enjoyable and communicative.

3.1. Gutter webcomic TSoA

We cannot talk about panel without talking about gutter. Gutter is a blank area or a white space between two panels [7] [8] [9] [10] where there is no story, text, images in that area, just a connection between panels or closure in readers mind [11] [12]. There is no standard size of gutter, it depends on the "artist's idiolect" [6]. However, there is a significant contrast between gutter in printed comics and gutter in webcomics, especially in webtoons. This happens because South Korean's artists are adaptive to vertical infinite canvas as the nature of webcomic's medium.

Figure 1   Figure 2   Figure 3

Figure 1. Size gutter between two rarely shown adjacent panels. Figure 2. Type of speech balloon. Figure 3. Speech balloon placement on gutter

In webcomic, especially South Korea's webtoon, gutter mostly took more space rather than the panel. The size of gutter is more flexible rather than gutter in printed comic. This spacious area of gutter has the potential for the artist to use it as part of text narration and not just as closure [3]. TSoA as part of South Korean's webcomic uses gutter not only as a blank space or closure but as area for speech balloons. Although, in rare occasion readers would find "normal printed size gutter" between two adjacent panels as shown in Figure 1. But normally TSoA uses longer gutter that is also serves as background page.

3.2. Panel webcomic TSoA

Panels in webcomic can be drawn as a long vertical panel that take readers to scrolling the screen in order to see it. If use correctly, this kind of panel could emphasize time and space expressively. But it could also limit readers ability to wander through panels.

Panels in TSoA are monotonous using rectangular shape only. TSoA panel layout usually use 1 panel horizontally despite using different sizes. Rarely it use adjacent panels horizontally (figure 1). If such panels exist it use smaller panels with tighter or normal printed comic looking gutter. In recent episodes, TSoA almost use up the horizontal width for panel while still maintain its long vertical gutter.

Aside from its monotonous rectangular shape panel, TSoA usually use these three panel patterns:

1. Borderline Panel; a panel with solid line in all 4 sides with different panel sizes and width
2. Borderless Panel; a no frame panel, it only consist of images with no solid lien or frame in all sides
3. Semi-borderless Panel; a mix of borderline and borderless panel. Meaning the panel use 1 solid line as a frame.

Table 1. TSoA Panel Types

Panel	Type	Description
	Borderline panel	In recent episodes, the artist use this size of borderline panel, which mostly took the width of the screen.
	Borderless panel	No frame, no lines in each sides. It could also use longer layout, so readers need to scroll the screen up and down to look the image
	Semi-borderless panel	Notice the solid line below the characters, that is the only line for the entire panel. Meanwhile, the upper image has no line.

TSoA panels are monotonous, using solid rectangular shape and line. It always use the same shape, though in different sizes. But, in recent episodes (sample 73-75) TSoA panels mostly as wide as the screen panels. This kind of panel is TSoA idiolect, since other webcomic and printed comic use more expressive panel shape and overlapping panel. But overall, visually, TSoA looks clean and digitalized despite the monotonous panel.

3.3. Speech Balloon webcomic TSoA

Speech balloon is comic visual element that are visualized using symbols. Speech balloon presence will help readers to understand the story. Although, without speech balloon reader could still understand the story [13]. So, what is speech balloon? Speech balloon is an iconic aspect on comic. It is a symbolic representation of a character's speech using an icon of balloon and tail where reader could understand which character is talking [13], [14]. Speech balloon is an emergent relationship which consist of three part: a carrier, tail and root [14]. Carrier is the balloon icon consist of a character's speech in the form of text, tail is the indexical part to show which character is speaking, and root is the character itself.

Speech balloon is not only represent text, but could also consist of pictogram and punctual marks. The shape of speech balloon vary from each comic. It also vary to differentiate its purpose as public speech, thoughts narrative, screaming or loud sound and so on. Here are the speech balloons that are used in TSoA.

Table 2. TSoA Speech Balloons Shapes

TSoA Speech balloon type	Type Name	Definition
	Rounded Balloon	A public speech balloon, the speech is intended to be spoken clearly and be heard by other characters. Comes with tail and no tail. No tail rounded balloon once in a while use pictogram, such as character's face to indicate who's talking. Therefore, the readers won't be confused
	Thought balloon	It looks almost exactly like rounded balloon or public speech balloon. The smaller bubbles as the tail indicates that this balloon is not spoken but more like a thought by a character
	Serrated countour balloon	Another thought balloon with no tails, could be oval or round with different form of serrated contour—depends on the emotional level of the thought. In TSoA this balloon used as screaming-thought balloon. While the thought balloon type is more like a normal sound balloon.
	Jagged balloon	A public speech balloon, usually indicates high level emotion as a screaming balloon. The shape is vary, it could be wider or more jagged. But, overall it represent a screaming text.
	Deflated balloon	It indicates deflated emotions. In this example the character is trying to convince herself that her unfortunate could be overcome. She is having a sad feeling and it shows through its speech balloon.

	Rectangular straight balloon	It looks like text messages balloon shape, and in this webcomic, it is a balloon for text messages. Simple and straightforward. Sometimes it took the shape of a smartphone as it visualized what the character is seeing through her smartphone
	Caption	Like most caption in comic, it is shaped as a rectangular balloon with no tail and with tail. In TSoA this caption are narrated by the protagonist. There are three types of caption: 1) to narrate the story; 2) to explain (caption balloon with arrow shaped tail); 3) to narrate time. But, mostly it is use to narrate the story by the protagonist speech.
	Phone conversation balloon	A phone conversation balloon. A straight line freeform balloon with more than 4 sides. The outline shade is lighter than other speech balloon.
	No Balloon thought	The thought text use no balloon

Speech balloon shapes are unique to each comic, although readers mind could always understand which shape indicates which balloon function. What's unique in TSoA speech balloon is the use of rectangular straight balloon which take the shape of a smartphone as shown in Figure 2. However, what's more unique in TSoA speech balloon is not the shape but the placement of speech balloons which is always placed in the gutter as shown in Figure 3.

My discussion is that gutter in webcomic is one big space interconnected with each other. Panels and gutters complemented each other elements throughout the entire story. The purpose of wider and longer gutter in TSoA as the area of speech balloon. TSoA panel is contrasting with other webcomic and printed comic especially Japan printed comic created by women for women genre (shoujo) [15]. Gravett argues that female comic artist from japan are more expressive in visualizing panels, and symbols. However, in TSoA that's not the case. In printed comics, image and text usually placed in each panel. In webcomic, most author explore the spacious gutter. In TSoA, the author use the spacious gutter as a room for speech balloons. There is no speech balloons placed inside panels. Some are slightly overlapped with panels, but mostly it is situated outside panels. In recent episodes, this pattern is more frequent. The author took one long gutter (which is as tall as the smartphone screen) only for speech balloons.

4. CONCLUSION

Webcomic is a booming industry which becomes popular within comic artist and comic readers. The way South Korea's webcomic adapt fluently to the use of smartphone medium is

notable. Although the verticality adaptation is now still unique to South Korea's webcomic only, it is not an obligatory style for every webcomic. However, this verticality potential should be taken into account for webcomic artist. TSoA, as one of popular South Korea's webcomic adopt the verticality effortlessly with one unique aspect which rarely be found in other webcomic such as the use of gutter to placed speech balloon. Overall, this make the TSoA visual tone as a clean, visually digitized albeit monotonous.

REFERENCES
[1]   D. Y. Jin, "Digital convergence of Korea ' s webtoons : transmedia storytelling," vol. 1451, no. March, 2016.
[2]   H. Cho, "The Webtoon: A New Form for Graphic Narrative," *The Comic Journals*, no. 206, p. 353521, 2016.
[3]   N. Cohn, "Navigating comics : an empirical and theoretical approach to strategies of reading comic page layouts," vol. 4, no. April, pp. 1–15, 2013.
[4]   A. Dunst, J. Laubrock, J. Wildfeuer, 2018, Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Multimodal, and Cognitive Methods. Routledge.
[5]   A. Schmidt, 2009, The Insider's Guide to Creating Comics and Graphic Novels. Georgetown: Impact Books
[6]   N. Cohn, J. Axnér, M. Diercks, R. Yeh, and K. Pederson, "The cultural pages of comics : cross-cultural variation in page layouts," *J. Graph. Nov. Comics*, vol. 00, no. 00, pp. 1–20, 2017.
[7]   L. Wallner, "Gutter Talk: Co-Constructing Narratives Using Comics in the Classroom," *Scand. J. Educ. Res.*, vol. 0, no. 0, pp. 1–21, 2018.
[8]   R. Krusemark, "Comic books in the American college classroom: a study of student critical thinking," *J. Graph. Nov. Comics*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 59–78, 2017.
[9]   R. Duncan, "Toward a theory of comic book communication," *Acad. forum*, vol. 17, no. 1951, pp. 71–88, 2000.
[10]   J. Aggleton, "Defining digital comics : a British Library perspective Defining digital comics : a British Library perspective," *J. Graph. Nov. Comics*, vol. 00, no. 00, pp. 1–17, 2018.
[11]   J. Dittmer and A. Latham, "The rut and the gutter : space and time in graphic narrative," pp. 1–18, 2014.
[12]   S. Witty, "Illutrative Text : Transformed Words and the Language of Comics," 2010.
[13]   C. Forceville, T. Veale, and K. Feyaerts, "Balloonics : The Visuals of Balloons in Comics [Version 15 jan . 2009]," no. 1985, pp. 1–23, 2009.
[14]   N. Cohn, "Beyond speech balloons and thought bubbles : The integration of text and image 1 Introduction," pp. 35–63, 2013.
[15]   P. Gravett, 2004, Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics.London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd