Encoding/Decoding Characters and Narrative in *Nusantara Droid War*

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Abstract. The portrayal of droid characters in *Nusantara Droid War* and its narrative style, as stated by its authors, are an effort to introduce and promote Indonesian culture through a webtoon so that it can be widely accepted by readers. Regarding the mentioned subject, we intended to study the readers' receptions by employing Stuart Hall's arguments on encoding/decoding model of communication. The research was conducted by doing a literature study to obtain data about encoding and interviewing selected informants using purposeful sampling method to obtain data about decoding. The results of this study shows that the authors try to instill respect and appreciation to Indonesian culture in the readers through pictures and narrative of the webtoon. This intention is well-understood by the readers as the majority of informants can be categorized in preferred/dominant/hegemonic reading while only few respondents are categorized in negotiated reading.

Keywords: Nusantara Droid War, Indonesian culture, webtoon, encoding, decoding.

1 Introduction

The increasing number of smartphone and social media users has boosted the popularity of web comics.One of the web comics that is well-known and widely read by millennials is webtoon. The term webtoon, an acronym for the words web and cartoon, first appeared in a Korean newspaper, *Hankyoreh*, in August 2000 (Lee, et al., 2015) [1]. It was created as a new manhwa (Korean comic) format, powered by digital technology and mobile network sites (Jin, 2015). [2]. Since then, webtoon has become a new genre in the Korean culture industry (Jang & Song, 2017) [3] and the target audience varies from students to people who are already working (Putri & Lubis, 2018) [4]. According to Welsh (2007), about 10 million internet users in South Korea read webtoons for free (Yonkie & Nugroho, 2017) [5]. The data shows that in less than five years the webtoon has become one of the most popular readings in its home country. Webtoon went global when the online messaging application, LINE, launched a web comic service on a mobile operating system called LINE Webtoon in 2014, which began to be accessible in Indonesia in 2015. The aforementioned facts are the reason we choose webtoon in this research.

In addition to having regular comic artists who regularly publish their works, LINE Webtoon Indonesia created a Webtoon Contest service where the winners got prize money and had the opportunity to become a regular comic artist on LINE Webtoon (Indriyanti, 2016) [6]. One of the winners of the contest was a comic entitled *Nusantara Droid War*. It presents a unique combination of Japanese shounen manga storytelling style and the diversity of Indonesian traditions and lores which are represented by the so-called droid characters such as, Arjuna, Karna, Nyi Roro Kidul, Malin Kundang, and Keong Mas. These characters are not only adapted in terms of names but also their known traits and powers. Coming from different myths and legends across Indonesia, those characters are met in a story about droid competiton and its intrigues. With a rating of 9.74 (out of 10), it can be said that the majority of readers like the webtoon. These factors are the reason we conduct a study on *Nusantara Droid War*.

We are interested in analyzing the reader's reception or response about the ways the characters and narrative in *Nusantara Droid War* are presented, which carry out an effort to introduce and promote cultural diversity in Indonesia through recontextualization traditions and lores. Therefore, we use encoding/decoding model of communication proposed by Stuart Hall in his essay entitled *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973) [7]. Hall's encoding/decoding model describes a theoretical approach to how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. In this case, the readers of the messages take an active role in decoding the message conveyed because they are bound to their own social contexts. By employing the theory we can locate the positions of the readers in regard with author's delivered messages through the webtoon, whether they are in preferred/hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional reading, which will eventually show if the intended messages are well-perceived.

A previous study used as a reference for this research is *Unsur-Unsur Grafis dalam Komik Web* (Graphic Elements in Web Comics) written by Andrew Yonkie and Agus Nugroho (2017). This research examines the expression of author's creativity in composing stories by utilizing new image styles and layouts. The objects are three original Indonesian webtoons, namely *Super Santai*, *Nusantara Droid War*, and *Mantradeva*. The three webtoons were analyzed for their graphic elements, namely illustration style, layout, color, and typography. The results show that each of them has their own characteristics in the forms of distinctive style of illustration and story. Yonkie and Nugroho's research provides a research gap for us. In this regard, instead of analyzing a webtoon from researchers' perspectives our study tries to provide a different dimension by focusing on the analysis of the readers' perspectives, that is their understandings about the content of a chosen webtoon (*Nusantara Droid War*). In other words, this study focuses on analysis of meaning presented by the informants.

The informants are selected readers gained by the purposeful sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [8]. They are selected based on the following criteria: a) informants are webtoon fans and read the products of LINE Webtoon Indonesia; b) informants have read, are currently reading, and/or are willing to read *Nusantara Droid War* from episode 1 (18 December 2015) to episode 212 (20 March 2020); and c) informants have knowledge or, at least, have heard or known about certain traditions and lores in Indonesia which are adopted and adapted in *Nusantara Droid War*. There are nine readers who meet the criteria as well as submit a letter of consent; they are the informants. Their responses to some some formulated questions based on the encoded messages from the authors of *Nusantara Droid War* are expected to show and explain their positions in reading the webtoon.

2 Discussion

Hall (1973) argues that the intended meaning of a message might be understood differently by its receivers. This happens because of the polysemic nature of the text. In this context, the term encoding is used at the level of delivering messages and the term decoding is used at the level of receiving messages. In the encoding position, the message sender creates and conveys his intention through certain ways in hopes that it can be understood by the readers/receivers in accordance with his expectations. In the decoding position, the readers/receivers interpret and understand the message conveyed according to their perspectives. Hall distinguishes the positions of reading, that is the ways readers perceive what they read, into three types: a) preferred reading/dominant reading, which is a reading position where a reader receives a message as it is intended (by the sender) to be perceived; b) negotiated reading, which is a reading position where a reader receives a message as it is intended, but not in its entirety; c) oppositional reading, which is a reading position where a reader rejects an intended message and offers a different understanding that contradicts the message sender's intention.

We use Hall's premises on encoding/decoding to analyze how our informants interpret the messages conveyed by their senders, namely the authors of *Nusantara Droid War*, related to character portrayals and narrative. The research problem is the position of informants' interpretation of *Nusantara Droid War* in regard with the authors' effort in introducing and promoting Indonesian culture through a webtoon. To solve the research problem, we describe the informants' reading positions in accordance with Hall's arguments in *Encoding and The research Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973) and *Encoding/Decoding* (1980) [9]. Thus, the description starts from the initial position before the message is delivered, namely the authors' framework of knowledge. The framework of knowledge is manifested in the first meaning structure at the encoding level which is then articulated discursively in a series of images and narrative in *Nusantara Droid War* episodes. The explanation is followed by a description of the readers' responses, which are in the forms of the second meaning structure at the decoding level which is influenced by the informants' framework of kowledge.The results are then categorized based on Hall's three types of reading positions. The last step is to draw conclusions based on the findings.

2.1 Encoding *Nusantara Droid War*

The background of *Nusantara Droid War's* production is revealed in an interview with its authors whose transcript is documented by Evandio (2016) [10] and published on www.unjkita.com. The results of the interview describe the intentions of the two authors, Satria Suleman and Vega Mandalika Jhauhary, in presenting their work for webtoon readers. In the context of packaging, the concept of character formation, development, and story adapts shounen manga style, namely by presenting central characters who are children and teenagers in a plot dominated by fighting or battle between the droid characters that they own. These findings are based on the following interview transcript.

> *Bagaimana caranya aku bisa bikin komik yang disukai Indonesia tapi nggak biasa? Bagaimana mencuri perhatian pembaca dengan cerita yang tidak terpikirkan sebelumnya? Dari hasil brainstorming itu aku dapat ide untuk menggabungkan seluruh budaya Indonesia dalam satu cerita, karena dasarnya Indonesia adalah negeri yang penuh dengan budaya…. Gimana kalo aku nggak perlu nulis cerita dari*

setiap budaya dan hanya menggambil karakter-karakter pokok yang ada didalamnya untuk di-battle-in kayak Digimon, Pokemon, atau Bakugan. Dan JREENGG! Jadilah Nusantara Droid War! (Suleman, wawancara dimuat di www.unjkita.com, 2016)

How can I make comics that Indonesians like but are not familiar with? How to grab the reader's attention with an unthinkable story? From the results of my brainstorming, I got an idea to combine all Indonesian cultures in one story, because basically Indonesia is a country full of culture…. What if I don't have to write a story from every culture and only take the main characters from it to battle-in like Digimon, Pokemon, or Bakugan. And Voila! *Nusantara Droid War* was born! (Suleman, an interview published on www.unjkita.com, 2016)

Kebanyakan (inspirasi NDW-pen.) ya dari komik-komik fantasy lain dari Jepang seperti Onepiece, Naruto, Kill la Kill, dan beberapa riset-riset cerita fantasy yang lainnya. Iya ada beberapa. Idenya terinspirasi dari Pokemon, Digimon, Bakugan. Anime dan komik laris dari Jepang. Tapi konsepnya tentang mainan yang bisa disummon dan dipakai bertarung mirip dengan manga Angelic Layer karya CLAMP…. Ini soal character building dan desain karakternya kami buat semenarik dan menyenangkan mungkin untuk menarik pasar. Dan juga yang pasti desain unik, gampang diingat dan tidak mainstream. Sehingga orang sekali lihat tahu itu tokoh dari komik kita, tidak dimirip-miripin tokoh lain (Jhauhary, wawancara dimuat di www.unjkita.com, 2016)

Most are from other fantasy comics from Japan, such as Onepiece, Naruto, Kill la Kill, and several other fantasy stories. Yes, there are several stories. The idea is inspired by Pokemon, Digimon, Bakugan. Bestselling anime and comics from Japan. But the concept of toys that can be summoned and used to fight is similar to CLAMP's Angelic Layer manga…. It's about character building and we make the character designs as interesting and fun as possible to attract the market. And also for sure a unique design, easy to remember, and not mainstream. So that when people see it, they know it's a character from our comic, it doesn't look like other characters (Jhauhary, an interview published on www.unjkita.com, 2016)

The quotations above show that the storytelling model of *Nusantara Droid War* is influenced by popular Japanese manga and/or anime (Digimon, Pokemon, Bakugan, Naruto, One Piece, etc.) which have been known globally. However, modifications are made in the aspects of characterization and setting. Human characters and droid characters in *Nusantara Droid War* have identities and origins that come from various cultures in Indonesia. In addition, the background of the story is taken from the names of cities or regions in Indonesia.

The global-local style is intended to attract the market to read the webtoon. This is indicated by the statements of the two authors who both mention their efforts to attract readers with a webtoon that is considered to offer novelty, namely by combining the Japanese shounen manga story model which is popular among young readers and characters inspired from local cultures. The targeted readers are not only from within the country, but also from abroad, despite the fact that the narrative in the webtoon is not translated into international languages. The two authors also have the desire to introduce and promote various Indonesian cultures to the readers through the depiction of droid characters who take inspiration from local myths and legends. They also want to foster an appreciation for Indonesian culture. These are explained in the following statement.

Ya kita semua tahu kalau budaya adalah salah satu senjata utama untuk menggaet pasar Internasional kepada Indonesia. Sayangnya banyak masyarakat Indonesia yang menyepelekan budaya kita sendiri dan lebih tertarik dengan budaya luar hahaha…. Makanya aku bisa dapat ide ini. Indonesia itu punya cerita-cerita dongeng luar biasa yang kalau diangkat jadi cerita bisa bersaing dengan cerita-cerita yang ada di luar negeri. Kenapa nggak ngangkat seluruh budaya Indonesia dan dilempar kepasar? Sasaran aku bikin NDW bukan hanya untuk menumbuhkan rasa cinta anak negeri akan budayanya, tapi juga mau bikin orang luar mengenal budaya Indonesia yang sangat melimpah (Suleman, wawancara dimuat di www.unjkita.com, 2016).

Well, we all know that culture is one of the main weapons to attract the international market to Indonesia. Unfortunately, many Indonesian underestimate our own culture and are more interested in foreign cultures hahaha…. That's why I came up with this idea. Indonesia has extraordinary lores which, if made into a story, can compete with stories from abroad. Why don't we take all of Indonesian culture and throw them into the market? My goal for creating NDW is not only to foster Indonesian children's sense of love for their own culture, but also to make outsiders know the abundant Indonesian culture (Suleman, an interview published on www.unjkita.com, 2016).

The aforementioned intention is actualized in the forms of images and narrative in *Nusantara Droid War*. The practice of producing and circulating the webtoon in a series of comic strips containing images and narrative serves as a language to convey the authors' ideas to the readers. This is in line with Hall's argument, *"The "object" of these practices is meanings and messages in the form of sign vehicles of a specific kind organized, like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse"* (Hall, 1980). In other words, the images and narrative are vehicles that carry the authors' ideological messages. They operate in the language codes of a webtoon and move in a syntagmatic chain that can be read by the webtoon readers. This is where a discursive practice occurs.

After analyzing the authors' interview transcripts, we identify the first structure of meaning (structure of meaning I). The structure is the authors' messages through the encoding they deliver on digital comic strips. The codes used are in the form of a combination of images (layout, pattern, and picture style) and narrative (character words) that build the story of *Nusantara Droid War*. In this case, the images and narrative are the material contexts of message production, namely the realm where the momentum of discursive communication is created. Substantively, the structure can be formulated in the following table.

Table 1. Encoding (Structure of Meaning I)

No	Encoding (Structure of Meaning I)	
1	*Nusantara Droid War* combines various Indonesian cultures in one story	
2	*Nusantara Droid War* presents characters that exist in various Indonesian cultures and removes them from the context of their original stories to be contextualized in a story which centers around the battles between characters (such as Digimon, Pokemon, Bakugan, etc.)	
3	*Nusantara Droid War* takes inspiration from Japanese manga (such as One Piece, Naruto, etc.)	

| 4 | *Nusantara Droid War* presents attractive, unique, memorable, and non-mainstream designs and characters to attract the market. | |
| 5 | *Nusantara Droid War* fosters a sense of love of Indonesian culture and introduces Indonesian culture to the public. | |

The structure of meaning at the encoding level, as shown in Table 1, becomes a reference for determining the informants' reading positions at the decoding level. This also becomes a reference for semi-structured questions asked in the interviews with them.

2.2 Decoding *Nusantara Droid War*

The decoding process, in Hall's opinion, is the most significant process in meaning because a message conveyed is only meaningful and has an impact after being translated by the reader (Procter, 2004) [11]. That is, even though the intent of the message is predetermined at the encoding level, the message will not reach its potential significance until it is at the decoding level. This is where the reader plays an important role in determining whether the structure of meaning I mentioned in Table 1 is accepted as intended, negotiated with the readers' framework of knowledge, or rejected.

Three reading models in the context of decoding, namely dominant/preferred reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading, serve to explain the informants' reception of *Nusantara Droid War*. All of them are structural foundations that can show the pattern of the decoding process. In this case, the categorization of the three reading positions is not seen as something which is too deterministic but as a starting point for explaining the complexity of the reading process. This is in accordance with the opinion of Morley and Hall.

> "David Morley points out that he and Hall never intended this to be read in an overly deterministic way. Rather they were suggesting 'a much more complex process, through which structural position might function to set parameters to the acquisition of cultural codes, the availability (or otherwise) of which might then pattern the decoding process" (Shaw, 2017) [12].

The informants' dominant/preferred reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading positions are identified based on their responses to a series of questions based on findings at the encoding level. The responses described are those related to the five points of the structure of meaning I. The results of the informants' readings csn be summarized in Table 2 as follows.

Table 2. Decoding (Structure of Meaning II)

No	Encoding (Structure of Meaning I)	Decoding (Structure of Meaning II)		
		P/HR	*NR*	*OR*
1	*Nusantara Droid War* combines various Indonesian cultures in one story	**100%**	**0%**	**0%**
2	*Nusantara Droid War* combines various Indonesian cultures in one story	**67,7%**	**33,3%**	**0%**
3	*Nusantara Droid War* presents characters that exist in various Indonesian cultures and removes them from the context of their original stories to be contextualized in a story which centers around the	**100%**	**0%**	**0%**

	battles between characters (such as Digimon, Pokemon, Bakugan, etc.)			
4	*Nusantara Droid War* takes inspiration from Japanese manga (such as One Piece, Naruto, etc.)	**100%**	**0%**	**0%**
5	*Nusantara Droid War* presents attractive, unique, memorable, and non-mainstream designs and characters to attract the market.	**100%**	**0%**	**0%**

P/HR   *: Preferred/Hegemonic Reading*
NR   *: Negotiated Reading*
OR   *: Oppositional Reading*

From the table above, it can be seen that all nine informants are in the hegemonic/preferred reading position for all points except point 2. At this point, three informants are in the negotiated reading position. This indicates that the readers exercise their right to negotiate with the dominant reading in accordance with their own framework of knowledge. The negotiated reading position are shown by the readers who do not entirely accept the portrayals of several droid characters and express their own preferences about characters. The negotiated character portrayals are: a) Calon Arang, which is seen by one of the three informants as lacking in showing the characteristics of Balinese traditional clothing (based on his understanding about the story of Calon Arang from Bali); b) Si Pitung, which is seen by one of the informants as a character from Betawi who would be better attributed if he performed a traditional poem (*pantun*) before fighting; and c) Arjuna, which is seen by one of the informants to be more suitable if he wears headgear or headdress as what the informant understands from the Javanese puppet show. Despite offering their perspectives about what could have been done to improve the portrayals of several characters, in general, those informants can accept the character protrayals presented by the authors.

3 Conclusions

Nusantara Droid War is a manifestation of a hybrid between Indonesian traditional culture and global popular culture, namely Japanese manga or anime. The combination between Indonesian traditional culture and popular culture in general aims to introduce various Indonesian cultures to young people who consume comics. This is confirmed by the responses of the informants. The results of their readings (decoding)are mostly categorized in preferred/hegemonic reading on all message points conveyed in the structure of meaning 1 (encoding). Only three informants are in the negotiated reading position and all of them are negotiating the aspect of character portrayals and their relevance to the readers' imagination based on their perspectives. As for oppositional reading, no respondent expresses a rejection of the structure of meaning conveyed by the authors. Thus, it can be said that the authors' messages through *Nusantara Droid War* is well-perceived by the readers.

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