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Comics and humor as a mode of government communication on public hygiene posters in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes national campaign comic posters as a government tactic to regulate social behavior. One of Singapore's first national campaigns, Keep Singapore Clean (1968) has continued in various reiterations, such as Keep Public Toilets Clean. From this particular campaign, four comic posters are found throughout the city-island's public toilets and provide instruction on social etiquette regarding the use of public toilets. Drawing upon sociopragmatic humor studies (Attardo, 2020; El-Arousy, 2007) and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), the comic posters are read as verbal-visual representations set within a specific sociopolitical context. Humor is shown throughout to serve as a powerful discursive strategy to educate the public and makes the content relatable, while addressing the taboo topic of bathroom business.

1. Introduction

Comics are a form of multimodal discourse, relying on verbal and visual modes to produce humor across a series of panels in a specific sociocultural context (El Refaie, 2003; Tsakona, 2009). Comparing comics to the art of storytelling, self-reflective comics artist Scott McCloud (2004) notes that "words and pictures have great powers to tell stories when creators fully exploit them both" (p. 152). The interplay of verbal-visual elements can build any number of narrative elements—setting, mood, character, dialogue—raising the complexity of comic's narrative line (Martinez & Harmon, 2012, p. 323) besides making social or political commentary (Shwed, 2018, p. 3). Even more, when used in a national campaign, comics become ideological tools, transforming from simple to persuasive texts that are intentionally designed to influence behavior (Blommaert, 2005). Singapore's frequent use of national campaigns has been described as part of its "social engineering" with promotion of courtesy on the road (Lazar, 2003), productivity at work (Teo, 2004), marketing of "Asian values" , and regulations to keep the city clean, such as bans against chewing gum (Clancey, 2018, p. 215) and fines for littering and smoking. The role of comics on government campaign material has yet to be explored.

This paper looks at how humor is used on poster comics from an ongoing Keep Public Toilets Clean campaign in Singapore, examining the multimodal integration of text and image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) and the social interaction enacted by the comic figures (Goffman, 1959, 1967). As instructions for public hygiene, these comics are dependent on their context. Not insignificantly, they are located in public toilets, a semi-backstage region. To analyze public toilet behavior, Cahill et al. (1985) apply Goffman's concepts of backstage/frontstage and observe that public toilets are backstage regions for the privacy offered by the stalls, yet they are also frontstage for some public performances. Of interest in this study is how the comics relay interpersonal rituals and shared behavioral standards through verbal and visual modes. For the context of Singapore, a conservative and pragmatic society that emphasizes collective values and self-cultivation (Kong & Yeoh, 2003; Tan, 2012), the comics instill values of proper hygiene and courtesy through humorous scenes.

Thus, in examining a new context for humor and how it is used in national campaigns, this study asks the following questions:

- What are the functions of comics on national campaign materials?
- What kind of humor is used and how does it operate in establishing shared values?

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- How do comics serve as discursive tools for citizen pedagogy?

Findings illustrate that humor is used as a discourse strategy to instill values of courtesy and cleanliness and provide instruction on good public hygiene. While encouraging individuals to take proactive behavior, the comic posters uphold the power of Singapore's government over the people's lives and private acts (Lazar, 2010; (Yeo & Tupas, 2018)). In this regard, this project extends the research of how comics as public service announcements fall under the domain of "governmentality" (Foucault, 2011; Foucault et al., 1991; Rimke, 2000; Rose, 1999; Thompson & Furman, 2018). The humor in comics softens instruction, which may increase uptake of its message, and hides the very power of the government. After several introductory paragraphs about national campaigns in Singapore, the study describes the methodology and data, and then turns to a multimodal discourse analysis of four signs posted in public toilets around the city-island, which are part of the Keep Public Toilets Clean campaign.

2. Literature review

2.1. National campaigns in Singapore

To effect social change, the Singapore government launches on average ten national campaigns per year (Seng, 2013). Such intervention in and influence of various aspects of Singaporean life has led to Singapore being described as a "campaign country" (Lee, 1984, p. 8; Lazar 2000, p. 374; 2003, p. 203), "nanny state" (Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 35), and "landlord state," which Clancey (2018) uses to emphasize the role of the government in its creation and maintenance of its infrastructure (p. 216). The national campaigns reflect the development of the young island-nation. Achieving independence in 1965, Singapore was eager to establish itself as part of the first world. The People's Action Party (PAP), which has governed Singapore since 1959, focused on laying the foundation of a new nation with campaigns addressing environmental conditions (Keep Singapore Clean, 1968; Tree Planting, 1971), family planning (Stop at Two, 1970–1976; Family Life, 1990s), work (National Productivity Movement, 1982–1990), language (Speak Good English Movement, 2000), and social behavior (Gracious Society campaigns, 1980s-1990s).

Previous research on Singapore national campaigns has noted the high regulation of its citizenry and overlapping political ideologies. During the 1980s, National Courtesy Campaign (NCC) posters were "engineered" by the government as part of their nation-building ideology (Yeo & Tupas, 2018). Values of "consideration" and "thoughtfulness" are projected in the 1995 Courtesy Campaign series with images of smiling people from the three major ethnic groups in Singapore, a representation carefully constructed to ensure an equal projection of Singapore's multiracial composition but also one of a society working together (Teo, 2004, pp. 205–206). Clements (1999) discusses how these courtesy campaigns were part of a government "narrative of national crisis," which legitimized its mandate for the development of a "gracious society." In the 2000s, a health crisis arose with the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), resulting in the unprecedented use of Singlish, a colloquial variety of Singapore English, in the public media discourse (Lazar, 2009). Similar to the presence of Singlish, the use of humor may be a discursive strategy in national campaign material to reach a broader audience.

Ideology and imagery are operated in Singapore national campaigns to project specific kinds of social relations. In a study on Singapore's public road and transport sector courtesy campaign, Lazar (2003) observes a style shift in the political discourse from a government-centered discourse to one that engages the community. Lazar describes these dual messages as *communitization* and *informalization;* the former works to decrease the social distance and power between the government and the people, and the latter invents a sense of community among the people. Representing this integration is Singa, a friendly lion cartoon that was created by the government as a mascot championing adherence to the transportation signs.[1] As a result, the rhetorical power of comics lies in how they are a less face-threatening medium in which to exert social control. The 'softening' of the authorial voice and the semiotic recontextualization in the use of the friendly mascot mitigates the force of the utterance (Lazar, 2003, pp. 212-213).

Similarly, Yeo and Tupas (2018) observe the effectiveness of an informal tone on the NCC posters. Thought bubbles with the incomplete sentences of the comic characters may encourage the viewers to associate the messages of the posters more with everyday thoughts. This informal conversational tone may prevent the messages from moralizing the viewer (Yeo & Tupas, 2018, p. 66). Yet, this present study might point out that through the use of thought bubbles (rather than a speech bubble), the comic characters can moralize through informal tone, which may be less face threatening or more nuanced on account of reduced formality while still reflecting moral values and reproduce ideology. For example, as the analysis will demonstrate, Figs. 1 and 2 begin with one character telling another what they should and shouldn't do (you should use the hand dryer/you shouldn't squat on toilets). This is an example of how informal rhetoric (through speech bubbles) and the use of should can be seen as a moralizing speech act. While the NCC posters are no longer being reproduced, the public toilet hygiene posters are still being reproduced and are present around Singapore, which add to their relevancy and need for analysis. Further, we suggest that the overall sense of informality can be seen in the genre of comics for this Keep Singapore Clean media campaign as well.

Keep Singapore Clean is one of Singapore's first and longest-running campaigns. Initiated in 1968 by the founding father of Singapore, the first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, Keep Singapore Clean emerged from a history of government attempts to "civilize" the tropical island. Since the 1860s, colonial and post-colonial government officials used regulation about public health and hygiene as a way to modernize the city-country (Ooi & Tarulevicz, 2019, p. 73). In a tropical environment, the management of human waste is a critical task and also mirrors broader policy initiatives in regulating public behavior (Tarulevicz, 2013). Initially a month-long campaign, Keep Singapore Clean was deemed a success and continues yearly, supplemented by various campaigns such as Keep the Toilets Clean launched in 1983 (Yeong Jia & Seng Lim, 2012). Each year has a distinct theme, and in 2019, emphasis was on raising collective civic-consciousness and considerate behavior. Collaborating with non-government charity organizations such as the Restroom Association of Singapore (RAS) and Singapore Kindness Movement (SKM), government organizations such as NEA and the Public Hygiene Council, (PHC) use educational material to promote good habits and practices.

Besides guiding the behavior of its people, Singapore's government has extensive control over the island's media and arts scene, a censorship that has not been without criticism (Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2007; Duffy and Yang Yuhong, 2012). Noting the authorities' rejections of caricatures of local politicians, Tju (2000) argues that political cartoons in Singapore are constrained politically and socially from their typical purpose; instead, "they

[1] In the graphic design world, comics and cartoons are not the same. According to McCloud (2004), cartoons are an "approach to picture-making—a style" while comics are a "medium which often employs that approach" (p. 21). Also, the term 'cartoon' usually refers to a single panel illustration while a 'comic' is a narrative told across multiple panels.

serve a consensus-shaping function in the political process of nation-building and national education" (p. 80). Lent (1998) also observes Singapore's tight government control over creativity and laments that this hampers the development of Singapore comic art. As a result, artists created methods to "circumvent" the authoritarian government, such as Sonny Liew's 2015 graphic novel The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye that relies on both metaphorical and literal ways to dissent (Leow, 2020). Studying comics on national campaign posters bridges these two areas, shedding light on how political discourse and art are used for ideological purposes.

Building on this literature of Singapore national campaigns, this study suggests that comics are a way that the Singapore government gains its power through governmentality rather than a show of sovereign power (Foucault, 2011; Foucault et al., 1991). As a non-imposing text, comics may encourage the willingness of individuals to follow social norms by their own governance. Providing the *why* is part of how governmentality works; as a combination of *government* and *rationality, governmentality* works on a rational system (Foucault, 1988). Providing rules and procedures makes clear how to behave. The magic is creating a text that does not appear to be authoritative but rather supports an image of the government that directs the practices of "free" subjects (Foucault, 1988, pp.19-20). One such genre that can be seen as a form of governing conduct from a distance is self-help literature, which Rimke (2000) argues creates a discourse of "citizens who are psychologically 'healthy' inasmuch as they are governable, predictable, calculable, classifiable, self-conscious, responsible, self-regulating and self-determined" (p. 63). The poster comics in this study also provide a discourse of self-regulated behavior, one of cleanliness in this case. Thus, this study contributes to how comics are connected to the management of populations.

2.2. Comics in politics and education

Comics have been used to teach and disseminate values in political and educational contexts. Since the 1700s, political cartoons have been a vehicle to engage citizens in public discourse (Edwards, 1999; Medhurst & Desousa, 1981). As social history, political cartoons usually take a particular point of view, might be humorous, and contain some surprising element (El Refaie, 2009, p. 186). Besides their historical use in print newspapers, comics are being used by educators. For example, cartoon-based video games engage learning about serious topics such as the Middle Eastern crisis with Darfur Is Dying (Peng et al., 2010). Further, comics serve as an important medium for improving literacy by combining printed words and pictures to represent narrative in today's increasingly visual world (Tiemensma, 2009). RSAnimate digital series include the use of cartooning through whiteboard animation for its public lectures that help people learn through visual storytelling (Thompson, 2020). Further, picture books have been used to foster children's emotional literacy (Nikolajeva, 2013). This study on comics adds to both political and educational research by examining how government campaigns use comics to educate Singaporeans on public toilet etiquette.

In addition to being used for teaching, comics are increasingly being accepted as an appropriate medium for presenting complex ideas. Although comics and graphic novels are often thought of as simpler versions of their text-only counterparts, McCloud (1994) was an early proponent of comics, arguing that they deserve more respect and should be considered as a significant storytelling form. Evidence of this shift in the level of acceptance for cartoons by academia includes the recent publications of the graphic doctoral dissertation Unflattening (Sousanis, 2015a, 2015b) and a graphic special issue of Digital Humanities Quarterly (Whitson & Salter, 2015).

Research has shown that humor can increase learning, attention span, and retention of a message (Chesney-Chauvet & Hofmeyer, 2007). Further, the brevity of comics' messages can grab viewers' attention and increase retention of the message. Public health campaigns have tapped into the power of humor in its campaign messages with positive results. The more humorous viewers find the campaign, the more likely they will share it with others (Campo et al., 2013). The humor in these Singapore comics frames the message more positively and may work to encourage willingness of individuals to participate in their own governance and exert proper social etiquette.

3. Methodology: humor, multimodal discourse, and impression management

3.1. Humor and sociopragmatic functions

A sociopragmatic function of humor in this context is the use of humor to impose social order. While humor is assumed to be inherently good, Billig (2005) proposes that negative uses of humor, such as through forms of embarrassment, mocking, and teasing, are methods to control others. Pointing to anthropological evidence, Billig (2005) notes that mothers of various cultures use teasing to control their children. Verbal discipline is preferred in some societies over physical discipline, similar to the tactic here of the government but nonverbally in the use of a less direct and aggressive way to control their 'children.' Related to teasing and embarrassment is *mocking* or making fun of someone. Mocking remarks may be used in response to a mistake or slip-up of the target's performance (Haugh, 2010). While viewers may understand the mocking as humorous, it can be face threatening and not be appreciated as funny. Teasing, embarrassment, and mocking pressure one to perform a certain way, and in this case, to follow social norms of public hygiene.

The interpersonal effect of comics on viewers has been of interest to scholars. Using Gary Larson's *The Far Side* cartoons, Watson Todd analyzed the reaction of readers by asking them to rate the perceived funniness of each cartoon pair, the original and a modified one that had been cleansed of interpersonal expressions, or "markers of personal feelings and semantic prosody, language focused on maintaining and building relationships, and lexis expressing attitude and affect" (Watson Todd, 2012, pp.42-43). The original cartoon was consistently rated funnier, suggesting the role of interpersonal expressions in producing humor. Also focusing on interpersonal effect, Teo (2004) examines the participants depicted in Productivity campaign posters in Singapore. Smiling faces and thumbs-up gestures give a positive image of people working together while allowing the government to adopt a more friendly position in order to appeal to the people in Singapore.

3.2. Multimodal discourse analysis and comic design

Studies on the current communication landscape have pointed to the increasingly multimodal form (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Kress, 2009; Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, 1998). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), multimodal texts are "any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic mode" (p. 183). To examine multimodal texts such as comics that consist of verbal and visual modes, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) provide a visual semiotic framework in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design.* Utilizing Halliday's (1978, 1985) Systemic Functional Linguistics, Kress and Van Leeuwen aim to connect function with form. Three metafunctions of meaning-making are outlined: the interpersonal, the experiential, and the textual. The focus of this paper is the textual metafunction, which provides a means to

investigate where and how elements are placed on a page (or screen). The elements on the left, especially in English script, are regarded as "given information," with which the reader is already familiar, while the elements on the right are new information. The new is presented as "problematic, contestable, the information in issue, while the given is presented as common-sense and self-evident" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1988, p. 198). In ongoing texts, each new item of information, in turn, can become given for the next new item. Reading from left to right, the events in comics unfold chronologically as well (McCloud, 2004, p. 13).

Comic design has distinctive visual and verbal features. Consisting of minimally two panels, or text-image boxes framed by a thin line, comics are read as a narrative sequence with its humor constructed across panels (Cohn, 2013; Davies, 2019). The narrative sequence is made in differences arising from similar, juxtaposed frames (D'Angelo & Cantoni, 2006). For instance, the same characters and setting are carried over to the next panels while changes in speech and action indicate progression in the story. The humor in the comic may be created in the written verbal mode itself, such as character dialogue or from the caption; from the image itself (Hempelmann & Samson, 2008); or from the interaction between language and image (Tsakona, 2009), necessitating a multimodal humor framework (Forceville, 1996; Watson Todd, 2012).

Certain aesthetic and grammatical traditions of comics are used to make connections between the two modes, such as speech bubbles and thought bubbles. Jagged speech bubbles indicate loudness, wavy lines mean death, and bold italics place emphasis on a word, among other conventional rules of comic book grammar (Piekos, 2009). Relying on this iconography and aesthetics, exaggeration in comics is made through shape distortion, dialogue bubbles, and letter iconography to represent sounds and feelings of the characters. Body proportions of characters are made abnormal to emphasize a particular feature, such as large eyes and gaping mouths (Qiang & Kahn, 2015). Large lettering signals a high level of emotion, such as yelling out of anger or surprise. Exaggeration also occurs semantically when making a contrast more extreme or dramatic than it really is. Understanding the design and various configurations of the comics' verbal and visual modes helps deconstruct their meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Besides involving more than one mode or way to make meaning, multimodal texts are situated in the cultural, societal and political context of the time. For Iedema (2003), multimodality as an analytical tool provides ways to describe the blurring of the traditional boundaries between verbal and non-verbal modes of meaning-making, which includes the traditional roles allocated to language, image, page, layout, and document design.

3.3. Impression management

Goffman's (1959) impression management is helpful in examining the behavior represented by the comic characters and relating it to real-life toilet behavior standards. According to Goffman, people try to present themselves in a way to avoid embarrassment with behavior governed differently whether frontstage or backstage. Frontstage behavior refers to actions visible to others, while backstage behavior consists of actions that people engage in when there is no audience. Frontstage behavior is typically polished and refined with the presenting of one's best face; backstage is a relaxing of face. So, while toilet business is backstage, the setting as public toilets demands some frontstage social etiquette as they are shared spaces.

3.4. Data: Singapore public hygiene poster comics

The data draws upon poster comics that are part of the Keep Singapore Clean campaign and commissioned by the National Environment Agency (NEA), the main government agency that oversees public spaces. The NEA works with the Public Hygiene Council (PHC), a government organization formed in 2011 to promote good hygiene practices and to improve personal and public hygiene standards, as well as with the charity organization Restroom Association of Singapore (RAS), which was founded in 1998 and maintains the motto "A Gracious Society Embracing Excellence in Restroom Culture."[2] The organizations work with facility owners to keep public spaces clean and educate the public on showing kindness through considerate acts.

The poster comics are found throughout the island-nation in public toilets, such as at libraries, community centers, public gardens, train stations, and hawker centers, or open-air food courts. The posters are hung on toilet stall doors, walls around the communal sink areas, and paper towel dispensers [see Appendix]. While a small dataset, these posters illustrate a consistent tone and message and are made available on the NEA website for additional distribution and awareness.[3] Further, the posters are of particular interest as Singapore has historically exerted efforts to regulate public hygiene as a sign of its modernization (Ooi & Tarulevicz, 2019; Tarulevicz, 2013). Singapore's national priority of cleanliness is still a concern despite its highly modernized state.

Public health has long been a concern of the Singapore government since its official beginning in 1965 (Tarulevicz, 2013), and continues to influence the values of its people. In the Keep Singapore Clean campaign, the NEA continues the "highly interventionist" approach adopted by the government (ibid., p. 851). The campaign promotes values of collective effort, community support, and individual responsibility, following the principles of "Our Shared Values," the state's vision for Singapore from a Confucian perspective (Tan, 2012). To be a "good citizen" entails sacrificing personal rights for the common good (ibid., 2012, p. 453). In this case, changing individual habits and respecting semi-public spaces such as public toilets are in one's own self-interest besides that of others.

How public toilet hygiene campaigns are predominant in Singapore encapsulates the story of the remarkable development of Singapore from a Third World to a First World nation. The history of public health in Singapore is linked to the history of food safety and the colonial project in Singapore, but also to development as modern, cosmopolitan, and safe. As Chakrabarty (1992) points out, discourse about public space and hygiene is connected to modernity because "it is the language not only of imperialist officials but of modernist nationalists as well" (p. 541). Singapore has a long history, since colonial time, in addressing public health and hygiene, particularly food safety issues (Ooi & Tarulevicz, 2019) to bring order and to clean the city and the citizenry. The regulation of public toilet use can also be understood as part of Singapore's broader attempts to control and discipline the population who are remarkably compliant. Public hygiene, as in other social and economic engineering projects, in Singapore arise from the broader government program to discipline, govern, and modernize the city-state (Barnard, 2014; Henderson et al., 2011). Public hygiene, as manifest in the cleanliness of public toilets, is seen as a measure of civil society in Singapore and has become the norm as a community.

[2] Restroom Association of Singapore (RAS) is a charity founded in 1998 and maintains the motto "A Gracious Society Embracing Excellence in Restroom Culture." The Singapore Kindness Movement (SKM) is a non-government, non-profit organization whose mission is to "find kindness in everyone" (SKM, 2019). The PHC is a government organization formed in 2011 to promote good hygiene practices and to improve personal and public hygiene standards in Singapore. One of its key objectives is to "lead the Keep Singapore Clean Movement to influence societal habits and lifestyle" (About, 2019).

[3] We thank Singapore's National Environment Agency for permission to use the digital formats of the posters for research and publication. https://www.nea.gov.sg/corporate-functions/resources/educational-materials/posters.

The comics are produced by local cartoonist Lee Chee Chew, who has a series of comics in Singapore called "Chew On It" that illustrates candid snapshots of everyday Singaporean life. Lee is currently the Assistant Art Editor with *The Straits Times*, which is Singapore's flagship English-language daily, most widely circulated newspaper, and controlled by Singapore Press Holdings, which has close ties with the government.

The poster comics were examined using the El-Arousy's (2007) adopted version of Attardo's (1994, 2001, 2020) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). In order to analyze cartoon humor, El-Arousy employs the six knowledge resources identified within the GTVH, with a slight modification. Instead of Attardo's Narrative Strategy, El-Arousy employs Semiotic Strategy, which is a model more suitable for analyzing multimodal data. Following El-Arousy's bottom-up approach, this analysis starts with Situation (social context in the cartoon), Language (verbal/written text), Semiotic Strategies (visual/non-verbal elements), Target (object of the joke), Logical Mechanism (shared reasoning), and Script Opposition (reversal of truth). Our analysis also draws upon the analytical tools offered by Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar to examine the Language and Semiotic Strategies. Through these two approaches, the analytic steps taken to examine the comics went from the concrete level to the more abstract and ended with a discussion of the verbal-visual text set within its sociopolitical and spatial contexts.

4. GTVH and multimodal discourse analysis of comics

4.1. Analysis of the keep public toilets clean campaign posters in Singapore

Below is an analysis of four public hygiene campaign posters posted in public restrooms across Singapore.

Fig. 1 is a government-sponsored comic that is hung on the common wash area and on stall doors in male public washrooms in Singapore.

Fig. 1. Use the Hand Dryer or Hand Towels.

Situation:

The Situation is of two figures: one wears glasses and a collared shirt while the other has short hair and wears a t-shirt. The conversation occurs in a male public washroom, which is indicated by a sink, mirror, hand dryer, and hand paper towel dispenser.

The language and semiotic strategy:

Both the language and semiotics of the comic work together to make it funny and instructional. The bespectacled man on the left is depicted as more knowledgeable. This is implied by the glasses and made explicit in his language when he tells the other man what to do and why. The other man has a goofy big smile, which implies that he is not as smart. Moreover, he responds to the advice with a rhetorical question and imprudent response. The second panel shows the effect of not heeding the warning; the man is now represented by a barefoot and sandal, which is flying in the air. The long tail of the exclamation, *WHOA!,* extends down to the figure beyond the panel, indicating that he has fallen on the floor. Further, the exclamation is enclosed by a burst balloon that signals screaming in dialogue (Piekos, 2009). His companion looks on with exasperation. With lowered eyebrows, the smarter man voices the obvious, *. . .and make it slippery*, which cues the punch line.

The layout of the comic also affects the reading and thus meaning of the message. The position of the figures depicts a narrative of Given and New information (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) by having the wise man on the left and the delinquent on the right. The left side of a layout is usually the Given or what the reader is already assumed to know as a member of the culture. The New information is typically on the right. Here, the Given information is the social norm which is challenged by the New, problematic, or contestable information, which questions the logic behind the social norm. Besides its horizontal axis, the comic has a vertical axis that projects an Ideal and Real. The Ideal in the top panel presents the idealized essence of the information, i.e., the instruction to use the hand dryer or hand towels. The Real is the reality, the less desirable state, i.e., not drying hands and slipping. The juxtaposition gives a sense of opposition, giving the Ideal the prominent position.

On the poster, but external to the comic narrative itself, the Singapore government displays its agency three ways: contact information and website, the logo National Environment Agency, and Harpic, a toilet cleaning supply company. These institutional details are at the bottom, framing the information as factual and Real.

Target:

Non compliancy and stupidity are the source of humor in this cartoon. The flicker is stereotyped as stupid because he does not follow the social norms of public hygiene, which includes drying one's hands after washing them. The underlying message is that following social rules in public washrooms is an intelligent way to act.

Fig. 2. Do Not Squat on Toilet Bowls.

Logical mechanism:

The reversal of facts happens when the flicker doubts the reason for drying his hands to realizing why when he slips. The wiser man makes this switch clear by stating: *and make it slippery.*

Script opposition:

Each character has a script. The man with the glasses is the voice of reason and logic while the rebellious man is the voice of stupidity. The punchline occurs in the change of scripts from doubting to (painfully) accepting the logic behind the social norm.

Discussion:

The general theme of the comic is that the government encourages the people to use the hand dryer or hand towels after washing their hands, and when following this sequence, the toilets keep clean. The lesson of the comic is explicit, with the line saying, for example: *Clean public toilets are possible.* By linking the image of the flicker to this comic, connections to discourse of social irresponsibility and disgrace are made. One would fall in social standing and be laughed at if there is deviation of social etiquette. Interesting though is that the message is on keeping the public area clean. Absent is any message about how drying the hands could improve personal hygiene.

Another point to consider is that there is no offer of understanding given to the fallen man, although this is usually given as a defensive, face-saving measure (Goffman, 1959). He could be injured but he fails to evoke empathy from the other character or likely from viewers. Responsible for his own fall, the offending individual assigns blame with self-inflicted pain, so there is no need for others to do so (Goffman, 1959).

While Fig. 1 is on display in the male public washrooms, Fig. 2 is hung on the common wash area and on stall doors in the female public washrooms in Singapore.

Situation: The characters in this comic are three women. One is wearing a hajib, long sleeves, and long skirt (portraying the Malay Muslim culture of Singapore); another has black curly hair and is wearing a collared short-sleeved blouse and skirt (perhaps representing Chinese Singaporeans); and a third is wearing a tank top and a short skirt (unknown ethnicity but likely representing the youth). They are in a women's washrooms, which are indicated by the female restroom icon on the first panel, and a mirror, hand sink, toilet stall, and toilet in the second panel.

The language and the semiotic strategy:

Like Fig. 1, Fig. 2 has two panels with the humor occurring in the script opposition. In the first panel, the Muslim woman says to her companion, "You know, people shouldn't squat on the toilet seat. They make it unusable for others by dirtying it." Although the two women are talking together, the reader is privy to their conversation so could also be the recipient of the direct address, *you know*, a second person pronoun that in English can also be plural. The reference in *for others* suggests a shared knowledge of who is this group, i.e., other women in Singapore using public restrooms.

In the second panel, the woman with the blouse has a toothy smile and points to the third woman, who yells HELP! in response to her foot stuck in the toilet bowl. The all caps, exclamation point, and jagged bubble suggest her sense of urgency and represents her desperation. The Muslim woman stares in disbelief, similar to how the reader likely responds.

The Language and Semiotic Strategy both work in coherence to illustrate the importance of following toilet etiquette. While the language emphasizes the importance of cleanliness, the visual depicts reasons for safety and face-saving.

Target:

Clearly, this third woman is the Target of humor. The underlying message is that the consequence of squatting on toilet bowls is embarrassment, discomfort, and social humiliation. It could also be implied that the elderly are wise and the youth in need of instruction.

Logical mechanism:

In this comic, the reason for not squatting on toilets is not the most evident. That is, the more logical reason is so that the toilet seat does not get dirty while the more surprising reason is so that one does not slip into the bowl.

Script opposition:

The script opposition occurs in the contrast between the two scripts. The first script comes from the two women who discuss what one should do. Given in the top panel, this Ideal behavior is described as to not squat on toilet bowls. On the bottom panel, the second script, the Real, shows the reality, what happens when people *do* squat on toilet bowls. The punchline occurs in the interaction between the verbal and visual: the utterance by the woman in the blouse ("or by losing their footing!") explains the visual of the third woman who cries out in anguish. The humor is in this discovery that another reason not to squat is so one does not lose her footing.

Discussion:

Similar to Fig. 1, the poor woman loses face but is not in serious danger and self-inflicts her sticky situation. The other two women do not appear to be concerned but rather stunned and amused. Perhaps this reaction implies that the likelihood one would get their foot stuck is low, allowing for a chuckle and eye-roll by the reader.

Also, the woman's plea for immediate help in the comic could be interpreted as a projected cry for help to the Government, who reiterates the guidance below the comic with the same font styling as Fig. 1 (all caps, bold, sans-serif): *DO NOT SQUAT ON TOILET BOWLS.* This guidance about toilet etiquette follows Western toilet practices, supporting Singapore's narrative as being modern and cosmopolitan (Ooi & Tarulevicz, 2019).

Fig. 3 is a comic that also appears in the female public washrooms in Singapore. It is hung beside the mirrors in the common wash area and on stall doors.

Situation: Two figures are presented in the comic. One of them is an elderly female cleaner with grey hair in a bun, holding a plunger, and wearing scrubs and galoshes, and the other is a woman with curly dark hair and wearing a skirt, heels, earrings, and a purse. They are in a women's washroom in the city, which is indicated by the female restroom icon and skyscraper in the background on the first panel, and a mirror, hand sink, toilet stall, toilet, bucket, female restroom icon, and *Closed* sign in the second panel. A third smaller panel is a ball of trash mid-air, landing into a bin (implied by the dotted lines of the movement).

Fig. 3. Put Litter into Bins. Note. A comic strip showing a woman who is desperate to use the restroom yet is unable to because the toilets are clogged with litter.

The language and the semiotic strategy: Like Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, Fig. 3 has two panels that work in coherence to express the comic's humorous message. The first scene shows the woman in the skirt running with glee, yelling, *Finally! A public toilet, at last!!*, with double exclamation points heightening the intensity of her text. She sprints to the toilets, making a "speed line" that shows her movement as a whole (Forceville, 2011). The dotted line between her eyes and the female toilet icon shows that the process is reactional in which "the vector is formed by an eyeline, by the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 67). Her hands are stretched out and her purse swings back, as her feet kick up the dust, propelling her towards the Goal (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 64).

In the second panel, water is overflowing from the toilets and sink. The cleaner holds up her hand to stop the woman (a gesture not unlike a police guard). The gesture is emphasized by *CLOSED* sign (all caps and in bold) at the entrance of the restroom. As text within the comic, the sign is diegetic and "experienced' by the characters who populate the story world as well as by the readers (Pratt, 2009, p. 208). The cleaner explains (to both the woman and the reader), *Sorry - The toilet is flooded because the sink and toilet bowl are choked with litter again...* For the toilet to be flooded *again*, earlier consequences have occurred and it is these earlier consequences that the latest one is connected. The ellipses stand for omitted text, also implying the repeated event. The woman's expression has changed to one of shock and desperation (frontal view to the viewer with gaping mouth, bulging eyes, knocking knees, and hands on her cheeks).

The cleaner's utterance could be interpreted as an explanation for the public toilet rules, which is reiterated below the comic. The rule in the same font and all caps as Figs. 1 and 2 (all caps, bold, sans-serif) reads: *PUT LITTER INTO BINS.* The underlying message is that the consequence of putting litter into the toilet and sink instead of litter into bins is discomfort to the point of social humiliation.

Target: The urgent woman is the target of the humor.

Logical mechanism: In normal circumstances, using the restroom is considered a necessity but not necessarily urgent. In the comic, the woman's response implies immediate relief is needed.

Script opposition: There is a clash between what is expected and the reality. The woman seeking to use the public toilet expects to find the facility open. When realizing this is false, she reacts hyperbolically with a panicked expression and anguished body language (sweat drops around her head, hands to cheeks, shaking knees). The extreme flip of emotions between scripts provides the punchline.

Discussion: The desperate woman is the victim, but not mocked, as in Fig. 2. Her expression of panic is directed to the viewer by a direct eye gaze. This design technique appeals to the viewer for empathy, effectively closing social distance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Befriending the audience through apparent familiarity or synthetic personalization has been observed to be a practice by corporate entities in the media (Fairclough, 2015), on television (Matwick & Matwick, 2014; 2019), and online (Thompson, 2012). This growing trend in "visual synthetic personalization" is being used in other medical discourse with images of the everyday person in an effort to prompt social action (Thompson, 2012). These comics illustrate a new discourse strategy, a visual-verbal synthetic personalization, which is being used on government posters with illustrated characters and dialogue.

Fig. 4 is a comic that is displayed in the male public toilets in Singapore.

Situation: Two characters are talking in front of a public restroom that has a smell emitting from the entrance. It is at night, and the setting is nature.

Fig. 4. Flush Thoroughly After Use.

The language and the semiotic strategy: The comic makes both verbal and visual references to the excrement in the toilet bowl. The implicit reference to it (*what was in the toilet bowl*) is understood by the woman who gasps, as indicated by the visual mode with an exclamation point (!) and hands covering the mouth. Her understanding suggests that earlier occurrences have occurred, and it is to these earlier occurrences that *what was in the toilet bowl* is connected.

Another visual connection is made with the wavy stink line emitting from the toilets. A weak connection of the excrement to a *ghost* suggests a ghastly or dreadfully frightening sight. These implicit references may be a consideration to politeness strategies. Although human excrement is undeniable, few cultures celebrate this connection to the natural world (Van Der Geest, 1998; Weinberg & Williams, 2005). Bodily control takes skill, as Goffman (1967) says, "the individual is always in jeopardy because of the adventitious linking of events, the vulnerability of his [or her] body, and the need in social situations to maintain the proprieties" (p. 169). Avoiding direct reference to the fecal matter helps create visual, aural, and olfactory distance between the viewer and the implied waste. What is explicit is the social etiquette: FLUSH THOROUGHLY AFTER USE.

Target: The butt of the comic is the man who looks pale because of the disgusting sight.

Logical mechanism: In normal circumstances, ghosts may not exist or at least are not visible. In this comic, the man's response implies that the sight was even worse than a ghost, which implies that the man has seen one before.

Script opposition:

The clash of scripts is between what is expected and the reality. Upon the woman's question in the first panel, the expected script is a response about seeing the ghost. Instead, the man's response is that he saw the bodily remains of the ghost. This possible reading then is that fear comes from seeing everyday bodily functions of someone else, which causes great fear and anxiety.

Discussion:

It is curious that the woman character does not make reference to the smell although the stink line implies that the odor is so strong that it is emitting from the public toilets. The foul smell may be offensive not only to the users of the toilets but also to those passing by.

4.2. Design and framing as a storytelling technique

The storytelling of the comics relies on design and framing. The visual and nonvisual elements work together to convey expressions of emotion. For example, phrases such as *Even worse: I saw what was in the toilet bowl!* (Fig. 4) are encircled with a wavy word bubble, paralleling the shaking of the character's hand and knees (as indicated with two wavy lines). Nonverbal words also conveyed through the visual include the character's gasp as an exclamation point and in bold (Fig. 4). The visual mode also indicates characters' facial expressions of emotion. For example, in Fig. 4, eyes popping out and a slack jaw indicate surprise (by the woman), while eyes popping out combined with raised eyebrows and clenched teeth convey fear (by the man) (McCloud, 2006, p. 95). Accompanying facial expressions are other visual signals such as body language cues like head and hand position and gaze direction (McCloud, 2006, p. 87). In Figs. 3 and 4, both women have their hands to their face, which exaggerate their distress. Color further supports the visual mode and meaning of the words. Pink and blue are used to emphasize the gender of the washrooms (female in Fig. 3 and male in Fig. 4, respectively). The pee green-yellow add the meaning of disgust to the stink line (Fig. 4). Although the visual and verbal elements work together to create a construction of the characters who transgress the rules as suffering physically and figuratively compared to the rule-abiding characters, the visual is the dominant mode of representation, with the verbal extending or complementing the information provided by the visual (McCloud, 2004).

Framing is used in these comics to connect the panels (the similarity in size, large panels, and so on). The visual and verbal elements work together to create a construction of the public restroom use as the proper public hygiene; in comparison to the first two panels that rely on both verbal and visual mode, the third panel uses each mode each separately. The verbal mode—the government mandate—is given spatial predominance with its large, bold, all-capital letters. On either side of the written text is one or two visuals —images of hands using a dryer and dispensing paper towels (Fig. 1), a red "X" above a toilet seat stained with shoeprints (Fig. 2), pulling down a chain and pushing the handle to flush (Fig. 4), etc. In this case, the visual mode illustrates the verbal, with the side alignment reinforcing meaning besides adding balance to the overall design strategy (Teng, 2009). The distinct use of verbal-visual modes for their different purposes—combined for the comic strips, separate yet complementary for government discourse—may be an overall Language and Semiotic Strategy design that helps delineate the two genres. Comics can provoke

laughter while government discourse is no laughing matter. The bottom frame serves as a solid foundation for the rule of public social hygiene, while the upper section as the realm of the user's supposed hygiene practice and emotive aspect.

Part of the framing is the level of formality of language. In the top frames, the written rhetoric in the speech bubbles utilizes informal language, while directives are in the bottom frame (i.e., Use the hand dryer; Do not squat on toilet bowls; Put litter into bins; Flush thoroughly after use) telling viewers how to behave. The only fonts that are comparable in size and boldness to the formal language are the exclamations, *WOAH!* and *HELP!* (Figs. 1 and 2), which have jagged wavy speech bubbles to distinguish them from the directives at the same time support the message by emphasizing the painful consequences of social irresponsibility to the viewers as a means of instruction. In this way, we could say that the directives are the most salient piece of textual language on the poster.

Underneath the directive, each poster says, *Clean public toilets are possible*. The modality of possibility in the phrase *Clean public toilets are possible* and the move between directives and invitations as seen in the final phrase, *Let's make them happen* with the use of the pronoun *us* (let us) do this together shifts to a solidarity move, which fits the informality and tone of the campaign posters. The invitation to make clean public toilets possible in the collective "we" (*Let's make them happen)* may encourage mutual obligations and prompt users to consider the wellbeing of other users of the toilets and of people outside as well. This can also be viewed through the lens of synthetic personalization as the government speaks to individuals en masse. There is also an interesting use of repetition to these ideas but a shift in delivery in Figs. 1 and 2. Both begin with a *should* statement at the top (You should use the hand dryer or hand towels after washing) and then at the bottom of the poster *should* is deleted, but the main message remains (use the hand dryer or hand towels). Thus, repetition of the written message at the top and bottom reinforces the message.

With regards to Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2006) information values framework, the posters are examined in relation to reading direction and speech bubbles. In addition to an analysis on the left and right orientation for given and a new information, the posters can also be read using a top to bottom orientation (ideal/real). The comics are in two frames with one on the top and one on the bottom, yet the comic is situated within a poster with two frames of the comic and four frames of the public service message and logos of the government agencies in the bottom two frames. The top frame serves as the abstract, with the narrative progressing through conflict, resolution, and coda, and the reader's gaze moves down the page. Seen as a whole, the text has a relatively higher accessibility than the visual (words tend to be more easily understood than messages in the images). Yet, the two aspects, the words and the visual, work together to reinforce the public toilet etiquette and support the nation-building ideologies of Singapore.

At the same time, it must be noted that alternative readings of the comics may occur. Situating the study within a multimodal discourse analysis framework, the texts have meaning potentials rather than merely one fixed interpretation. According to Ledin and Machin (2020), "A multimodal approach would be interested in the way that signs are used in combination, adding up to a whole... In this sense the meaning of signs is treated as a potential rather than as something fixed. So, the meaning of the sign is realized in contexts through its combination with other elements" (p. 16). There are multiple potential readings by the audience while the comics still point to the dominant readings.

4.3. Humor, taboo topics, and semi-backstage regions

Humor can be a useful discursive strategy both to educate the public and make the material relatable, especially in the context of face-threatening acts and taboo topics (Chimbwete-Phiri & Schnurr, 2017). In using comics, public toilet etiquette can be addressed that otherwise may cause giggles and be uncomfortable to discuss politely if addressed directly. Further, the activities that happen in public toilets are typically off-topic for their face threatening nature, because as Goffman (1959) observes, "defecation involves an individual in activity which is defined as inconsistent with the cleanliness and purity standards in many of our performances" (p. 121). Individuals seek privacy to avoid discrediting their public face. Toilet stalls offer this backstage region, or private spaces where individuals can relax and drop their front, forgo public performance, and perform defacing acts. But for public toilets, these sanctuaries are also publicly accessible and shared spaces. Occupants may simultaneously occupy the "open region" of public toilets, the area that is not enclosed by toilet stalls, and may be observed by others. The hand washing and drying area is part of this private yet public setting, thus constituting a semi-backstage region, where one's "personal front" can be dropped, but interpersonal rituals are still expected to be followed (Cahill et al., 1985). To help maintain social order, the posters address both backstage (Figs. 2, 4) and semi-backstage regions (Figs. 1, 3). Such rituals express and sustain central values of a culture, and specific to Singapore, that of cleanliness, courtesy of others, and prudency.

At the same time, bathroom configurations can vary and thus the frontstage and backstage distinction can vary based on the context—or possibly be interpreted by viewers in relation to their repertoire of bathroom contexts. The comics are situated within bathroom configurations in which a man may be in public view urinating in a shared urinal or line of urinals while other occupants pass on the way to the stall. Comics tend to use a very simplified view of settings (McCloud, 2004); so, often in these posters no public or shared urinals are made visible. For example, the public/private distinction in which the open region reflects a space with only sinks and that all toilets are in stalls with privacy may be maintained in public bathrooms in other parts of the world. While the comics reveal the influence of globalization, particularly the mandate to sit, not squat, on toilets in the manner of Westerners, viewers may imagine more complex frontstage/backstage performances depending on their context.

4.4. Governmentality in Singapore comic posters

The effectiveness of the Singapore comic posters comes into question. While the simple narrative and humor add to the comics' appeal (Yoon, 2014), the humor could be problematic for some viewers who may perceive the use of humor as inappropriate in serious situations or may be distracted by the humor from the part of the message that is not funny. Humor draws our attention to humorous parts, but less so to other parts. The funnier aspects (i.e., the figure's expressions; the script opposition) may detract from the message about public hygiene practices. Further, the use of humor may contribute to a decrease in the source credibility. For example, Bryant et al. (1981) find that the humorous illustrations in college textbooks resulted in a negative persuasive effect. Similarly, this "source-mediation" rationale could decrease the effectiveness of institutional discourse in the use of humorous cartoons.

Further, viewer identification with the comics may not be strong enough to effect change. As Meskin (2011) argues, much of our decisions are derived by factors other than self-identification, such as how much we like the characters. The humor would be a key factor in increasing the likeability of the poster comics' characters, especially in this case where verbally and nonverbally the comics are not recognizably Singaporean. Instead, place and character types are generalized, perhaps to avoid typecasting a particular community for flouting these public toilet rules. Further, there is a noticeable lack of Singlish, which

contrasts with other Singaporean government posters (Lazar, 2003) and government and private company advertisements (Hiramoto, 2019).

At the same time, the invitation to a collective adherence to the same hygiene standards encourages self-government, i.e., Foucault's governmentality, which may increase the comic posters' effectiveness.

Also, important to note is that the posters do not include facts about the severity of improper hygiene nor indicate legal ramifications for disobeying, unusual for Singapore which is jokingly known as a "fine city" for its practice of imposing heavy fines on legal transgressions. Instead, the instruction emphasizes voluntary acquiescence, self- and other-monitoring, and the consideration of how one's behavior affects others.

The production of humor requires and presupposes knowledge of the social and cultural information. Comics are like cartoons that depict stereotypes and provide information on social and political reality (Edwards, 2014). To realize both goals—increase likeability and provide understanding—the national campaign posters perhaps should tap into more culturally shared schemas and integrate more everyday speech, i.e., Singlish, and use more recognizable stereotypes. For example, in Fig. 3, the woman who is cleaning the restroom most likely represents an Aunty, what Singaporeans affectionately call elderly women (Uncle for elderly men). She would most likely speak Singlish.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of humor in Singapore campaign posters concerning public toilet etiquette has shown an underlying government ideology of a "keep clean culture" directed to personal habits, public hygiene, and toilet use (SG Clean, 2021). The comic's humor and visual-verbal interplay, simple narrative plot, and exaggerated characters make it possible to remind, instruct, and chide without sounding overbearing. Further, the choice of the comic genre as the medium of the message allows for a made-up world, making it more possible to address unpleasant topics and makes the message more relatable and memorable to the general public, including a younger audience. As a *modus operandi,* cleanliness and public hygiene are not exempt from government intervention in Singapore but the design strategy may help the campaign to stand out to an already campaign-familiar Singaporean audience.

While examining the effectiveness of the campaign is beyond the scope of this study, future research could examine whether comics are more compelling or more likely to persuade citizens towards action. Another possible direction of future research is exploring the cross-cultural aspects of interpreting humor in the verbal and visual design of comics. This could include the variability of viewer interpretation in discerning characters' emotions and facial expression intensity (c.f. Stamenković et al., 2018). As other fields have shown, such as psychology (Matsumoto, 2009), exploring the relationship between culture and humor would be fruitful for linguistic studies.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Fig. 5. Comic posters hung on the communal sink area of the women's toilets at Tiong Bahru Hawker Centre.

Posters

Available online at Singapore's National Environment Agency, Educational Materials.

https://www.nea.gov.sg/corporate-functions/resources/educational-materials/posters.

Appendix A

See Fig. 5.

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