Beyond *Shoujo Manga* Trope:A Semiotic Study of *Kabedon*as A Productof Fan Culture

Luna Lifiora[*]
English Department Faculty Of Arts, Udayana University
[contact.rinfiora@gmail.com]
[*]*Corresponding Author*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji signifikasi unsur-unsur semiotika pada serangkaian meme Jepang yang viral di media online, yang dikenal sebagai "Kabedon." Secara harfiah, kabedon berarti "wall-smack". Penelitian ini diilhami oleh fenomena maraknyakomunitas penggemar budaya modern Jepang sebagai salah satu komunitas online yang paling pesat perkembangannya, dimana media tersebut merupakan wadah ekspresi diri. Analisis ini dilakukan menggunakan teorisemiotika yang didukung dengan perspektif budaya modernmengenai komunitas pecinta budaya modern Jepang. Kerangka yang digunakan untuk penelitian ini adalah model diadikyang dicetuskan oleh Saussure. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyingkap signifikasiunsur unsur dari elemen semiotika yang ditemukan pada meme kabedon menurut perspektif subkultur terkait, yang kemudian diuraikan menggunakan kerangka Saussure. Penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa signifikasi yang terdapat pada kabedon bukanlah suatu objek analisis yang dangkal. Sebagai contoh, indeks yang hanya nampaksebagai indikator gender, memiliki unsursimbol semiotikayang berbeda jika diteliti lebih lanjut. Unsur simbol dalam ilmu semiotika mengungkapkandinamika hubungan antar karakter yang bertentangan dengan klaim identifikasi gender belaka. Penelitian ini lebih lanjut mengelaborasi penerapan perangkat visual yang sering diaplikasikanpada publikasi shoujo manga, yang diungkap melalui sudut pandang komunitas tertentu di luar konsumen umum. Analisa perangkat visual tersebut mampu mengungkap stereotip pada karakter-karakter fiktif tertentu. Elaborasi setiap aspek dari penelitian ini diharapkan dapat menjelaskan secara keseluruhan unsur-unsur yang belum banyak dibahas pada fenomena ini.

Kata kunci: budaya, popular, semiotika

1. Bakcground of Study

Fan culture of popular media is one of the richest subcultures that shows an immense and rapid growth in recent years, and as such, the products that these communities of fans produced throughout their involvement of self-expression, is an invaluable source of semiotic wealth that had in fact, inspired quite a number of studies by scholars and social cultural experts alike due to sheer fascination towards the complexity of this phenomenon.

The emergence of kabedon that went mainstream as well as the trope's usage in the Japanese government-issued information technology advertisements are quite recent, although the popularity within the genre had been established from way earlier times. The emergence of fandom as an exertive group of engaging individuals driven by passion, eagerness and devotion to their respective idols in online communities are boiling heatedly with fervent activities, of particularly the BL-loving subcultures had also inspired this research that is hoped to reveal and explore certain subjects further, by employing academic frameworks and models as the aids.

2. Problems of Study

Based on the background of the study, this researchaims to answer the following problems:

1) What are the significations of icons, indices, and symbols found in the four common types of *kabedon*featured in a tweet posted on October 12th 2012 that went viral?

2) How do the conventional *manga* tropes affect the signification of the symbols found in the four common types of *kabedon*?

3. Aims of Study

1) To describe the significations of icons and indices found in the four common types of kabedon.

2) To explain the signification of the symbols found in the four types of kabedon according to the conventional manga tropes.

4. Research Method

An academic study requires a fixed guideline on how certain researches could be conducted, in which the research method is required in order to determine the appropriate procedures of the study which mainly consists of three aspects, namely (1) Data Source, (2) Method and Technique of Collecting Data and (3) method and Technique of Analyzing Data. In order to conduct a scientific study, certain academic procedures must be followed.

4.1   Data Source

The data used for this study was taken from a certain Twitter user's post, or most appropriately known as "tweet" that went viral, in which the tweet itself is featured in a website with Japanese-related news and stories as its niche where a vast quantity of information from the Japanese version is readily available for English speaking audience, reporting the daily happenings in Japan and the Japanese netizens.

4.2   Method and Technique of Collecting Data

The method of collecting data was documentation that consists of reading and note taking. *Kabedon* is a phenomenon and a meme widely known in the Japanese pop culture enthusiasts where the communities communicate avidly online. Twitter as one of the most popular microblogging platform in Japan is a resourceful asset. First, several articles were discovered through web search. Articles in Japancrush.com featured quite extensive visual resources on the topic of *kabedon*. It featured the four most common types of *kabedon* with Twitter as its source. Afterwards, the twitter post is observed along with the tweet's caption which is available in Japanese. Then, it is deemed a translation is necessary. The English translation of the caption is readily available in the aforementioned website. After the image and the basic translation are obtained, the data was ready for analysis.

4.3   Method and Technique of Analyzing Data

This study utilizes the qualitative descriptive method for data analysis. This method is by far, one of the most ideal ones in the analysis of this type of study, particularly with regards to the form the data takes, visual data with captions to compliment it. Firstly, the visual of the data was described in details in order to obtain the distinct characteristics of each *kabedon* category. Secondly, the categorization of the signifiers into the three major categories of signs known as icon, index and symbol. The classification of the signs is not exclusive. Third, after the data were classified into their proper categories, the process of decoding the significations was executed. The signified or the concepts behind the signifiers were analyzed. The analysis of the significations was conducted through Saussurean's dyadic framework with subculture studies applied in deciphering the elements of the signs according to the eyes of the fan culture community.

5. **Semiotic Analysis of Kabedon as a Product of Fan Culture**

Generally, there are four main types of kabedon that are widely known today, mainly from the internet's influence due to its expansion and spread, essentially turning kabedon into one of the most viral tropes to date. In this journal only one of them was featured for discussion.

Figure 1. The Classic Wall-smack or the Standard *Kabedon*

	Sign	
	Signifier	**Signified**
Icon		The figures 　a.　Pictorial representation of humans 　b.　Characters (Fictional Entities)
		Facial expression (a person's physical state of "blushing" due to embarrassment, anger, or romantic stimulation)
	(The Straight Line)	Environment/Setting: by the wall *(kabe)*
Index		Gender distinction
Symbol		Numerical indication
		Establishment of roles in the relationship.

1) Icons

a. **Representations of Human Figures**

There exist two human figures that could be identified in this picture. These two human figures are in no way a realistic illustration work. A series of basic shapes

arranged in such a way that it resembles what people could instinctively identify as humans, or, in this particular case, characters that takes the form of humans.

b.   Facial Expressions

The picture depicting four general types of commonly recurring *kabedon* depicts a simplified image of something it portrays. One of the elements managed to be iconographed by this particular meme is the human's facial expression that is known as "blushing." In Japanese storytelling and culture, emotion is the key to all stories, and the eyes are the most important way to determine any character's emotional state (Brenner, 2007:41). It is said that the Japanese consider themselves a "wet" culture, or generally put "emotional" compared to the dry (cerebral) Western point of view. As cited in Brenner (2007; 41) manga and anime characters tear up, blush, and generally burst with emotion far more dramatically than Western comics characters; no clenched jaw will suffice in Japanese manga.

c.   Environment/Setting

There is not much that could be identified from the picture with regard to the background, or any indications about the detailed location as to where it happens. The standard wall-smack picture, as observed, consists of a single, straight, horizontal line at the bottom illustrating the division between the wall (kabe) and the floor.

2)   Index: Gender Identification

This point of discussion elaborates the iconographical assertion of the gender distinction found in the standard *kabedon* image. The rectangular shape with vertical strokes is the iconographical representation of a skirt, which is the human figure on the viewers' left, is wearing a skirt, and is therefore, could be identified as female. This is particularly applicable in Japan, where this meme originated, in which several vertical lines depict a certain type of skirt commonly used by most of the Japanese school's uniform known as the pleated skirt, in which the skirt is known for its type of fold formed by doubling fabric back upon itself and securing it in place. These skirts could come with the checkered or plaid pattern, or otherwise plain. As for the male figure of the picture, it is represented by a simplified human illustration that could be identified to be wearing pants. It could be observed from the filled-out, two bold black lines where one is bent for approximately 90 degree and another is kept straight, indicating the one

of the legs is bent in position. The pants, as opposed to shorts, are commonly worn by the Japanese high school students.Aside from the usage of dress code in the iconography to differentiate between genders, the size of each human figure is also differentiated. The differentiation is very apparent, indicating that the difference between the two human figures is several inches in height.

Figure 2: Both female and male highschool uniforms in Japan in two versions; Summer and Winter.Source: http://www.allinjapan.org/japanese-school-uniforms/

3)   Symbol

a.   Numerical indication

As Chandler had cited from Peirce; all words, sentences, books and other conventional signs are symbols. The first as well as the most obvious symbol that could be observed from the standard form of *kabedon* is the numerical sign, circled with the same black line the numerical sign is written with (see figure 1).One (1) also referred to as "unit", "unity", and "(multiplicative) identity") is a number, a numeral, and the name of the glyph representing that number. The number itself represents a single entity, and it could also serve as the unit of counting or measurement. This is also one of the obvious indication (as opposed to the reason) that this particular form of *kabedon*, among the others, is the "standard" or the "classic" form.

b.   Establishment of Roles in a Relationship

It was previously addressed in the iconographical discussion about gender distinction that the icons themselves could also serve as symbol, when interpreted using certain approach. This discussion will serve as an elaboration concerning the dynamics in relationship, and how gender is not the sole determining factor. The depiction itself is in fact, the portrayal of role dynamics between two characters regardless of genders; it could be done to male and male, female and female, and even a role reversal between

female and male (in which the female takes on the more dominating role). Substantially, the one depicted as male here in the classic *kabedon* meme is often described as "*seme*" or "attacker". An overriding characteristic of the *seme* is masculinity; he is always gendered as male. To reflect this overt masculinity, the *seme* is often drawn tall and muscular. Contrastingly, he is still rendered as a *bishounen*, youthful character, but is still given characteristics that make him recognizable as an older youth or young man. Similarly, while the *seme* is drawn with masculine ideals, he is still far removed from the men of *shounen* boys' comics, whose hyper masculinity approaches comedy at times. (Frennea, 2011:7).

As for the submissive role in the relationship, or as the *kabedon* meme suggests, "The one that wears the skirt in the relationship" as opposed to the dominant one, the *yaoi* readers largely label these characters as *"uke"*. The word *uke* itself is derived from the verb "*ukeru*" meaning to receive. These terms originated in the Japanese martial arts. *Seme* derives from the verb "to attack", while *uke* is taken from the verb "to receive". To adequately contrast, the *uke* is not only feminized, but depicted as hyper-youthful, more so than their dominant counterpart. This constant youthfulness may be superficial; a young man who appears younger than reality, or may be real (Frennea, 2011: page 9). It is also noteworthy that the roles can be reversed in the artworks portraying the dynamics of certain characters, as it is not something fixed in nature, although it is a stereotype and a classic, it is never a rule.

6.   Conclusion

This research has addressed the signs found in all four types of *kabedon* in which its analysis is done using Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic theory. Prior to the elaboration of the signs' significations, the signs themselves are divided into the three categories of signs that are commonly known as icons, indices, and symbols. Each type of *kabedon* has its own distinct characteristics, however, in all types of *kabedon*, several signs are found to have the same signified. The same signified found on each *kabedon* type are the significations of icons and indices. The aforementioned icons are the representation of the human figures, and environment or setting, whereas the signification of the index is the gender identification.

The symbolic value obtained from the analysis of *kabedon* is a particularly intriguing point of discussion. Gender distinction found in the indexical signification is one thing; however there is an extensively more complex phenomenon beyond mere physical differences suggested by the seemingly simplistic meme that sometimes went unexplored. The symbols found in *kabedon* memes generate meanings beyond mere surface-value. The symbolical value of the signified of the four types of *kabedon* as a product of fan culture clearly reflect the relationship dynamics between two characters involved in the *kabedon* act. This relationship dynamics, often depicted romantically, is not exclusive to the heterosexual couples, as products of fan cultures covers huge and diverse genre for different target audience, particularly in the Japanese media. Art in itself afterall, regardless of being classical or contemporary, is a form of reflection, a vessel for expression, and often, an escape for the repressed.

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