

The State of the Art(s): A Semiotic and Thematic Exploration of Senior High School Art for Art Education and Cultural Policy

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Abstract

In the Philippines, the creative expressions of Senior High School students are shaping new narratives in contemporary art and culture. This study tries to examine the status of contemporary art(s) in the Philippines through a semiotic and thematic analysis of artworks created by Senior High School students. In this study, "art(s)" refers to creative expression's individual and communal character. Each artwork is unique yet collectively represents broader cultural, societal, and personal narratives. This study analyzes selected paintings, sculptures, and mixed-media works using a qualitative research approach. A semiotic analysis evaluates the signs and symbols found in the artworks, while a thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns that reflect personal, cultural, and social narratives. The findings of this study revealed four main themes: (1) Identity, Emotions, and Self- Perception; (2) Nature, Renewal, and Transience; (3) Society, Culture, and Critique; and (4) Artistic Freedom and Experimentation. The first theme tells that artworks portray inner conflicts, duality, and self-image. Theme number two emphasizes that natural elements used in artworks symbolize hope, growth, and transformation. Third theme. Third theme, on the other hand, explores Filipino customs, social realities, and sustainability. And lastly, theme four, highlights non-traditional methods and imaginative self-expression. The study shows art perceptions of students, including its role in contemporary society, are developed by their use of visual symbols for narrative purposes, both individually and collectively. These results add to conversations on the changing importance of modern art in cultural representation, semiotics in art education, and the artistic abilities of young Filipinos. The study emphasizes the value of encouraging artistic inquiry in the classroom since it helps students cultivate their critical thinking, cultural knowledge, and sense of self while allowing them to express themselves artistically. It also recommends how schools, cultural institutions, and legislators might include modern topics in art curricula, encouraging a more vibrant and inclusive method of teaching art. It contributes to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Quality Education) and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by advocating for inclusive and meaningful artistic engagement among young Filipino artists.

Key Words

contemporary art; semiotic analysis; thematic analysis; Filipino visual arts; Philippines

Introduction

For ages, art has been used as a tool for societal criticism, cultural identification, and self-expression. Across history, creative achievements became reflections of our cultural values, our histories, and our deepest emotions (Berger, 1972).

In the Philippines, art is embedded and intertwined with the country's cultural heritage. According to Del Mundo-Angeles (2020), this helps tie together generations, adapting to historical shifts, globalization, and technological advancements. Filipino artists continually explore themes of identity, resilience, and social change through their traditional indigenous crafts to a more contemporary digital and mixed media artworks.

Several academics have studied the function of art in social and cultural expression. Dewey (1934) maintained that art is intimately connected to living events and highlighted its sensory and communicative aspects. Hall (1997) first used semiotics in cultural studies, highlighting how visual symbols may express meaning that goes beyond their literal form. Meanwhile, in art education, Smith-Shank (1995) discussed the role of semiotics in understanding how young artists use visual language to communicate ideas, emotions, and cultural narratives.

Using modern art as a means of self-expression and societal critique, Filipino youth today lead a vibrant artistic movement. Art programs and initiatives increasingly encourage young talent, creativity, and critical thinking. The Philippine Daily Inquirer (2012) noted that national art competitions and school programs encourage young artists to develop their unique styles and perspectives. Moreover, platforms like *Artekultura* (Xavier University, 2018) emphasize the importance of contemporary art in preserving Filipino heritage while adapting to modern influences.

In education, senior high school students are an important group that will influence Philippine art in the future. As they negotiate social, intellectual, and personal influences, their artworks accurately capture young people's viewpoints, goals, and challenges. By looking at their artistic creations, we may learn more about how young Filipinos view the world, communicate their experiences, and interact with current events.

Despite the increasing visibility of young Filipino artists, there remains a gap in scholarly research exploring how their artworks convey meaning. Much of the existing discourse on Philippine contemporary art focuses on established artists, leaving the voices of student artists underexplored (Del Mundo-Angeles, 2020). Additionally, while previous studies have analyzed artistic techniques and themes, fewer have applied semiotic and thematic analysis to examine the deeper cultural and personal narratives embedded in student-created artworks (Türkcan, 2013).

With the growing integration of internet platforms, ethnic influences, and expanding artistic expressions, it is vital to examine how young artists use symbols, narratives, and creative approaches to communicate their thoughts. This study aims to fill that gap by undertaking a semiotic and thematic analysis of Senior High School students' artworks, examining the more significant implications of their artistic expressions.

This study analyzes the state of the art(s) in the Philippines through the lens of Senior High School student artworks. The use of the parenthetical "(s)" in "art(s)" acknowledges both the individual and collective significance of artistic expression. It considers the unique perspectives embedded in each artwork while also identifying emerging patterns that reflect the current state of Philippine art.

The study employs a qualitative methodology, incorporating semiotic and thematic analysis to achieve this aim. The semiotic study examines artworks' signs, symbols, and visual language, while the thematic analysis identifies recurring themes and social reflections. This dual approach investigates: 1.) What recurring symbols and visual elements emerge in Senior High School students' artworks? 2.) What thematic patterns can be identified in their artistic expressions? 3.) How do these artworks reflect contemporary Filipino youth's perspectives on self, society, and culture? And 4.) What do these findings suggest about the evolving landscape of Philippine art?

By addressing these questions, the study sheds light on young artistic expression, art education, and the larger cultural significance of modern student artworks. It also adds to existing conversations in visual arts, cultural studies, and art education by emphasizing the importance of young Filipino artists in determining the future of Philippine art.

Methods

This study used a qualitative research approach, combining semiotic and thematic analysis, to investigate the symbolic and thematic aspects of artworks that Senior High School students generated. This technique allowed for a thorough examination of visual representations, revealing the underlying meanings and societal consequences hidden in the artworks. Using semiotic and thematic analysis, the research sought to shed light on how young Filipino artists connect with contemporary cultural, societal, and personal narratives via their artistic expression.

The study focused on ten (10) Senior High School student artists across different strands in a selected educational institution. Purposive sampling was used to select student artworks that demonstrated a range of artistic styles, mediums, and thematic significance.

The inclusion criteria required that each artwork be original, accompanied by an artist statement, and reflective of personal, social, or cultural themes. The final selection consisted of paintings, sculptures, and mixed media pieces, ensuring a diverse and representative sample for analysis.

The data-gathering procedure was carried out in stages. Students first submitted their original artwork with a written artist statement explaining their creative decisions, sources of inspiration, and intended message. Good quality photography was used to capture these artworks to guarantee precision and clarity in visual analysis.

A preliminary evaluation was conducted to acquaint the researcher with the gathered artworks. Each item was analyzed in conjunction with its accompanying artist statement to gain an initial grasp of the intended meanings. The basis for the analytical procedure was established by classifying the artworks according to their media, creative style, and subject focus.

The collected artworks were analyzed using semiotic and thematic analysis, offering complementary perspectives on their symbolic and thematic dimensions.

Following Barthes' (1967) framework, the semiotic analysis examined the signs, symbols, and visual themes found in each piece of art. This examination identified the denotative (literal) and connotative (implied/cultural) interpretations of the artworks. Visual components such as color, form, spatial composition, and contrast were analyzed to uncover deeper narratives and ideological underpinnings.

The thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, sought to identify overarching themes across the artworks. The analysis began with data familiarization, where the artworks and artist statements were reviewed multiple times. Initial

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coding was conducted by grouping

similar visual and textual elements. These codes were then refined into broader themes, capturing the collective concerns and perspectives reflected in the artworks. The final themes were established by synthesizing the semiotic findings and the personal narratives expressed in the artist's statements.

Results

This study analyzed ten artworks created by Senior High School students. These artworks, which include paintings, sculptures, and mixed-media pieces, vary in size, medium, and artistic style. Each piece was accompanied by an artist statement, providing insight into the student's inspiration, intended message, and creative process.

The semiotic analysis identified the artworks' recurring signs, symbols, and visual elements, reflecting students' cultural, social, and personal narratives. Table 1 shows the key symbols, visual elements, and interpretation of each artwork.

Table 1

Semiotic Analysis of Artworks

Artwork Title	Key Symbols and Visual Elements	Interpretation
Golden Scenery of Tomorrow	Sunset, sea	Symbolizes peace, renewal, and hope for the future
The Branch of Life	Cherry blossoms, nature	Represents fleeting beauty, transformation, and personal growth

Artwork Title	Key Symbols and Visual Elements	Interpretation
Colorful Skin	Vivid colors, expressive eyes	facial masking with external happiness
The Darkness in the Light	Silhouette in figure, bright background	Highlights internal struggles amidst an outwardly bright world
Anak ni Tatay	Chicken traditional clothing	Critiques in misplaced priorities in Filipino culture
The Potato Tower	Skyscraper carved from a potato	Challenges rigid artistic norms, emphasizes creativity
Flawsome	Soap sculpture of a woman's body	Advocates for body positivity and self-acceptance
Dream	Architectural model, eco-friendly materials	Represents aspirations and sustainable design
Kanji Peace	Swaying trees, birds, Japanese "peace" symbol	Represents harmony, serenity, and cultural inspiration

The Two opposing Depicts duality,
Faces faces, inverted hidden
imagery emotions, and

Based on the interpretation of symbols and visual elements shown in table 1, the key findings include:

- Symbolism of Nature and Renewal – Several artworks incorporate natural elements such as trees, birds, cherry blossoms, and the sea, symbolizing peace, change, and resilience (*Golden Scenery of Tomorrow, The Branch of Life*).
- Duality and Hidden Emotions – The contrast between external appearance and inner struggles is evident in works that depict two-faced imagery (*The Two Faces*), vivid masks hiding emotional distress (*Colorful Skin*), and somber figures amid bright surroundings (*The Darkness in the Light*).
- Cultural and Social Commentary – Certain artworks critique Filipino traditions and societal values, as seen in *Anak ni Tatay*, where a chicken in formal clothing symbolizes misplaced priorities. *The Potato Tower* challenges conventional artistic norms by promoting creativity over rigid artistic expectations.
- Exploration of Dreams and Aspirations – Some artworks express personal ambitions and self-acceptance. *Flawsome* promotes body positivity, while *Dream* represents architectural

Theme Artworks	Key Ideas Represented
Identity, Emotions, and Self-Perception	Flawsome, Self-Colorful Skin, The acceptance, and Two Faces, emotional struggles, hidden feelings in the Light Golden Scenery of
Nature, Renewal, and Transience	Tomorrow, Change, hope, personal and The Branch of Life, growth, fleeting beauty Kanji Peace
Society, Culture, and Critique	Social commentary, cultural criticism, artistic freedom Anak ni Tatay, The Potato Tower
Artistic Freedom and Experimentation	Unconventional materials, Dream, The Potato personal expression, innovation Tower

aspirations through an eco-friendly house model.

The thematic analysis revealed four overarching themes, as can be seen in Table 2, that connect the artworks.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis of Artworks

Table 2 shows that artworks such as *Flawsome* and *Colorful Skin* explore self-acceptance and personal struggles, reflecting how young artists grapple with body image and emotional vulnerability. *The Two Faces* and *The Darkness in the Light* highlight the duality of human emotions, showing how individuals mask their inner pain behind bright facades.

Scenery of Tomorrow and *The Branch of Life* incorporate natural elements to symbolize growth, transformation, and fleeting beauty, reflecting the transient nature of human experiences. The recurring use of sunsets, trees, and flowers suggests that young artists associate nature with hope and personal renewal.

Anak ni Tatay presents a satirical take on cultural values, critiquing the prioritization of cockfighting over family relationships. *The Potato Tower* challenges traditional artistic expectations, advocating for creative freedom and individual artistic expression.

Several students showed creativity in selecting materials and ideas by departing from conventional approaches. Works like *Dream* and *The Potato Tower* reflect non-traditional approaches to art, emphasizing the importance of personal expression over technical perfection.

The results show that young Filipino artists express societal concerns, cultural perspectives, and personal experiences by using visual symbols. While the theme analysis finds important creative tendencies and emotional expressions, the semiotic analysis draws attention to recurrent imagery

communicating identity, resilience, and critique. These results comprehensively understand how students perceive and engage with contemporary issues through art.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the evolving landscape of contemporary art(s) in the Philippines, as expressed by Senior High School students through various visual mediums. This research has identified key recurring symbols, thematic patterns, and underlying narratives in their artworks by employing semiotic and thematic analysis. This section contextualizes these findings about existing studies and discusses their implications for art education, youth expression, and the broader Philippine art scene.

Interpretation of Recurring Symbols and Visual Elements

Recurring symbols that function as metaphors for societal, cultural, and personal experiences were identified through the semiotic examination of the student's artwork. Trees, rivers, and heavenly bodies are examples of environmental imagery frequently used in artwork to represent themes of rebirth, connectivity, and existential contemplation (Türkcan, 2013). These results are consistent with other research that highlights nature as a potent metaphor for human identity and resiliency in visual art (Smith-Shank, 1995). Furthermore, using open hands, broken faces, and abstract shapes alluded to introspective themes of emotional complexity and self-discovery, which aligned with Hall's (1997) idea that symbols have deeper, culturally established meanings.

With the use of indigenous motifs, local folklore figures, and traditional Filipino fabrics throughout the artworks, cultural allusions were also prevalent. According to Xavier University (2018), these visual indicators demonstrate how new Filipino artists explore modern artistic techniques while

still connecting with their past. This reflects the trend in modern Filipino art, where artists blend traditional influences with contemporary themes to navigate their evolving cultural identities (Del Mundo- Angeles, 2020).

Thematic Patterns in Artistic Expressions

The thematic analysis identified four overarching themes: (1) Identity, Emotions, and Self-Perception; (2) Nature, Renewal, and Transience; (3) Society, Culture, and Critique; and (4) Artistic Freedom and Experimentation.

Many students explored themes of self-perception, personal struggles, and emotional introspection. Artworks depicting dual faces, distorted reflections, and symbolic representations of inner conflict align with the idea that young artists use visual language to process their emotions and identity (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2012).

Several artworks paid homage to Filipino traditions, myths, and indigenous symbols, reflecting an awareness of cultural roots. These findings are consistent with

Artekultura (Xavier University, 2018), which emphasizes the role of contemporary Filipino artists in preserving cultural heritage.

Many artworks addressed social issues such as poverty, environmental destruction, and political concerns. These pieces align with the broader discourse on youth activism in art, demonstrating how young artists use visual media to challenge societal norms and advocate for change (Del Mundo-Angeles, 2020).

Many students incorporated unconventional materials and mixed-media techniques, reflecting a willingness to break artistic norms. The growing integration of non-traditional materials in student artworks suggests an evolving perspective on artistic freedom and self-expression in the digital age (Taas Noo Pilipino, 2024).

Contemporary Filipino Youth's Perspectives on Self, Society, and Culture

The findings of this study suggest that contemporary Filipino youth use art as both a mirror and a lens—reflecting their personal experiences while also critically engaging with societal and cultural themes. Their engagement with traditional symbols demonstrates an appreciation for heritage, while their willingness to explore unconventional themes and materials highlights an openness to innovation.

This supports Del Mundo-Angeles' (2020) finding that modern Filipino artists frequently strike a balance between their local identity and international creative inspirations. Similarly, the Philippine Daily Inquirer (2012) noticed that this study's varied tales and experimental techniques demonstrate the growing encouragement for young Filipino artists to express their identity via art.

Implications for Art Education and Philippine Art

The study's results demonstrate the value of incorporating semiotic and thematic analysis into art education. Educators may assist students in grasping the underlying meanings behind their artistic choices, which will promote more purposeful artistic expression and critical thinking (Smith-Shank, 1995). Furthermore, the inclusion of social critique in student artworks supports the idea that art may serve as a forum for action and discussion, implying that modern art education needs to address pertinent political and cultural concerns (Del Mundo-Angeles, 2020).

Furthermore, the increasing experimentation with non-traditional materials calls for a more flexible and interdisciplinary approach to art instruction. According to Artekultura (Xavier University, 2018), modern Filipino artists must balance

innovation and preservation to maintain the

relevance of ancient artistic ideals while welcoming fresh creative opportunities.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is limited by its small sample size and subjective interpretation methods, even if it provides valuable insights into the artistic expressions of Senior High School students. The ten artworks selected may not fully capture the variety of artistic pursuits among young Filipinos, despite their diversity. Thematic and semiotic analyses are also interpretive by nature, and their meanings can change depending on the cultural and individual environment. This study might be expanded in the future by examining a bigger and more varied sample, adding longitudinal research to monitor changing creative trends, or using quantitative techniques to support qualitative conclusions. Exploring the perspectives of art educators and professionals could also provide further depth to understanding the role of contemporary art(s) in youth development. Additionally, future research could incorporate digital and interactive art forms, reflecting the increasing role of technology in contemporary artistic practices (Taas Noo Pilipino, 2024).

Conclusion

This study offers focused exploration into how the Filipino youth use visual art to express their personal, cultural and societal narratives. By analyzing the artworks of the SHS students using semiotic and thematic analyses, the research found out how these young artists use symbolism and themes in navigating identity, critiquing social realities, and experimenting their creative freedom.

The findings of the study showed that the analyzed artworks do not only reflect students' individual experiences but they also serve as mirrors of broader cultural and societal shifts in the country.

Also, the study reveals that art could

be a vital medium for self-expression, social commentary, and cultural continuity among the youth. It also offers unique perspectives that are often ignored by the art discourses in the mainstream.

The research may have been limited by the small and localized number of analyzed artworks, it still highlighted the potential of student artworks in informing art education, cultural policy, and community engagement.

Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal how young Filipino express their questions of identity, social expectations, cultural critique, and personal aspirations artworks. Specifically, by employing semiotic and thematic analysis, the artworks said to have incorporated rich symbolic language and thematic depth. In view of these insights, there are several recommendations that emerge that could potentially help further harness and nurture the creative potential of our youth:

For educators, the need to move beyond technical instruction in art classes is highlighted in this study with the prevalence of themes such as emotional duality, social critique and self-perception in the analyzed artworks. Integrating semiotic and thematic in to the art curriculum could also help to better develop sharper and visual literacy of the students, as well as a deeper awareness of how their creative choices communicate meaning. Teachers should encourage students to explore both personal and societal themes, which can be applied beyond making art, they can foster both technical skill and reflective thinking.

For schools and administrators, they should learn from the findings of this study that students thrive when given opportunities to utilize diverse mediums, and to be bold as they can in experimenting and trying new things in their art. Hence, organizing and supporting platforms such as exhibitions, competitions, and workshops that showcase student artworks

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addressing contemporary issues could be considered. In this way, the institutions can instill confidence to students, and promote dialogue about issues that are relevant to the youth today.

For policy makers and cultural institutions, this research's documentation of different youth perspectives through art proves that student artworks are not only creative outputs but can also serve as an important cultural resources. They should recognize and include youth perspectives and voices in cultural programs and policies. This is because student artworks can serve as valuable resources for understanding emerging cultural trends, as well as societal concerns towards a more responsive and inclusive cultural strategies.

For future researchers, they can expand the number of participant pool or artworks to be analyzed for broader and more inclusive investigations. They could consider including students or artists from diverse regions or backgrounds, using mixed methods or utilizing a longitudinal approach. Moreover, a comparative study with other age group or nationality could further enrich the understanding of Filipino youth art.

For the community, the student artworks analyzed in the study emphasized the power of art in bridging generational and cultural divides. Members of the community should continue to engage with student artworks as a means of fostering conversations on identity, environment, and social change. Art can be a bridge for intergenerational and intercultural understanding, which promotes a more inclusive and dynamic cultural environment.

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