

# The Use of Anthropomorphic Representation of Earth as an Environmental Campaign Icon: A Study Regarding Character Ideas and Design of Earth-Chan

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Climate change is a real condition that is happening now. The environmental conditions cannot be neglected or ignored. Many attempts for this condition to improve are being implemented. Many campaigns are also being carried out to spread awareness of climate change; one of them is the anthropomorphic representation of earth into Earth-Chan. This study describes the design and purpose of Earth-Chan, as well as the spread of information on social media and microblogging sites. This study uses the qualitative descriptive approach of semiotics analysis. The Earth-Chan design breakdown shows that the designs allude to real-world problems, such as environmental destruction and the ever-growing flat earth believers. The simplistic and straightforward design is also utilised to reach a wider audience.

**Key words:** *Digital Campaign, Environment, Anthropomorphic Representation, microblogging and art-based sites.*

## Introduction

The growth of technology and new media has given birth to new forms of entertainment and sources of information (Skoric et al., 2016; Cuc, 2014). The most affected aspect is how mass media grows. The technological advancement of media improves the population's exposure to mass media. Therefore, information is regarded as a common commodity in this digital era (Khairil et al., 2018). High exposure not only brings positive effects on the population, but also



creates new opportunities of information monopoly and biased publication (Khairil et al., 2017).

With the existence of and access to the internet, people can search for any information they want. The flow and reach of information is increased dramatically. Most internet users are accessing social media, where people can anonymously represent themselves (Weaver et al., 2018).

One of the most discussed points is climate change and the environmental condition in general. The fact that the global surface temperature is rising ever so slightly every year (Hansen et al., 2010) cannot be neglected or ignored, especially where this fact can easily be confirmed (Kor et al., 2019).

The response to climate change should not be limited to scientists or a scientific focused society (Irwansyah, 2016), governments and the political arena need to be active in the application of environmentally friendly programs. Such programs may vary from location to location, but in essence, the government should implement policies to regulate the affecting factors for the environment (Broto & Bulkeley, 2013). One example of implementation is the Climate Change Act by the UK Parliament on November 2008 to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions (Lockwood, 2013).

To spread awareness of climate change and environmental conditions, many campaigns are rolled out. The campaigns are varied, from the divestment of fossil fuel to interdisciplinary efforts from various studies (Carrington, 2015, Klink et al., 2017).

### ***New Media Communication and the Evolution of Message Delivery***

The birth of the internet brought with it the rapid development of new media communication. With the help of the internet, the flow of information between people/groups is considerably increased (Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015). The way people communicate is also evolving, not only in daily life but also in more specific areas, such as education (Cuc, 2014). Yet, the evolution of communication media does not change the general theory of communication (Morissan, 2014).

As an optimal message delivery, social media is one of the new media of communication which has evolved into what users' need (Chantananarungpak, 2015). The needs of user's tailored social media into specific types, such as microblogging based sites (e.g. 9GAG) and art-based sites (e.g. DeviantART). The trend for sites to suit users' needs has resulted in the development of many sites, each with their respective pros and cons, and all further engaging the users with their services and limitations (Yadav et al., 2015).

As more and more people seek new media, not only as sources of information but also to fulfil entertainment needs, new media that focuses on fulfilment of user needs is created. One such media is *video games*. Video games are developed to be one of many media to convey messages by the communicators (in this case, the game developers) with emphasis on more involvement of communicant (the audience or *video game players*) in the message deciphering process. This involvement not only creates superior media compared to conventional films, but also is considered more engaging. Thus, video game developers can have more freedom and authority in developing the message which results in vast categories of genre (Khairil et al., 2019).

The digital era has modernised every aspect of life. One of the effected aspects is the boom of digital arts (Pender, 1998), which offer ease of use and significant cost difference compared to their non-digital counterparts. The boom of digital arts and the popularity of social media has opened up new opportunities and purposes (Adiloglu, 2011). By utilising digital arts, people can convey what they have in mind in a more creative way and reach wider audiences (Cornish et al., 2015).

The availability of modern technologies for the masses has made significant increases in visual design. The increase of visual design implementation forges new modes for communicators to convey messages to communicants (Syahputra, 2018). This new media of communication lifts the limitations that exists on conventional communication (Stoica et al., 2014).

### ***The Environmental Condition and Climate Change***

There is growing interests on climate change and environmental conditions in general. However, most of the engagement is still confined within the scientific world (Irwansyah, 2016). Due to complexity regarding climate change, many opinions arise within debates which split into two main groups; those who agrees with the scientists regarding the real condition of climate change and those who disagree (Tvinnereim et al., 2017). Given the different opinions backed with specific interests, the discourse of climate change not only becomes a common debate focus, but also becomes a political interests influencing aspect (Lockwood, 2013).

The higher rate of information flow and the ease of information access could easily increase people's knowledge on climate change (Tvinnereim et al., 2017). Raising public awareness of the threat of climate change is increasing in importance. Campaign after campaigns are being carried out in order to spread the awareness on climate change. One of many attempts to spread awareness on climate change to people, is by publishing photographs that reveal the real conditions of the environment through print and digital media. The use of photographs has great effect on the basis of "seeing is believing" as people are more easily moved by visual facts rather than verbal (Abdullah et al., 2014).

To increase public awareness is a delicate process; whereby a fear-based approach could result in denial, apathy or maladaptation. Thus, a fear-based approach should strongly be avoided. A positive motivations based approach should be preferred, as it fosters more self-empowerment, personal control and support (Hitayezu et al., 2017). For this approach to be an effective implementation model, the ease of information dissemination and feedback data should be firmly established, based on geopolitical and socioeconomic aspects of a region (Madumere, 2017; Luneva, 2018)).

## **Research Methodology**

This study utilises a qualitative descriptive approach. This study focuses on the idea of using an anthropomorphic representation of earth, named Earth-Chan, to spread awareness of dire environment conditions and climate change and its spread on social media/microblogging sites. This study uses semiotics analysis based on Charles S. Peirce's triadic relation of semiotics. The analytical stages start with a breakdown of the Earth-Chan character design. Each design breakdown is then analysed and described to deepen the understanding of Earth-Chan character design and its purpose.

## **Results and Discussions**

### ***The Anthropomorphic Representation Breakdown of Earth-Chan***

Earth-Chan originated as a joke posted by user @Trinimortal on Twitter (2017) which then resulted in responses by many users with their depiction of the idea. Most notable design was posted in Twitter by @felipecunhaeloi (2017) in response to @Trinimortal's tweet which unofficially started the Earth-Chan boom. The Earth-Chan boom is not only spread in Twitter, but also other design hosting sites such as DeviantART (Milk-Addicc, 2017) and other microblogging sites such as 9GAG in early 2018.

**Figure 1.** Milk-Addic's depiction of Earth-Chan in DeviantART (Milk-Addicc, 2017).



Most Earth-Chan designs from various artists are based on typical anime girls or drawn in an anime style. This style is chosen widely for its *cute* appearance and the possibility of reaching a wider audience. The anthropomorphic depiction of earth into a girl or female revolves around the idea of *mother earth*. The designs of Earth-Chan by various artists have a few things in common, such as the blue and green hair design which depicts the surface of the earth, while using universe/galaxy based colours as the accent on the apparel. This simplistic and straightforward design is also built with the aforementioned purpose; to reach a wider audience.

As mentioned above, Earth-Chan originated as a joke which evolved into a satirical and parodic content. Earth-Chan itself is depicted as a sickly girl. The sickly condition of Earth-Chan represents destruction to the environment and climate change caused by humans. In other depictions by other artists, this condition is depicted by Earth-Chan in her deathbed. This depiction of Earth-Chan in particular focuses on the current dire condition of the environment. Most designs portray Earth-Chan with a cough or flu. The sickness in the designs is representing the increase in air pollution, especially within the accelerated growth of heavy industries. Ironically, this accelerated growth of heavy industries is also tied to rapid technological advancement.

The Earth-Chan character design as female is based on the ideas revolving around *mother earth*. *Mother earth* exists as a product of a feminine depiction of our earth since ancient times. The depiction of *mother earth* into a girl named Earth-Chan is mainly to describe the reality of our earth. Also, the anthropomorphic representation of a sickly girl is also to bring sympathy and empathy to the viewers/readers by utilising a *guilt trip*. The effect of this guilt trip strategy can be seen, especially in reactions of the viewers/reader.

One line that's also popular in the Earth-Chan depiction is "*I'm not flat!*". The "*I'm not flat!*" line is based on typical self-conscious small-chested *anime* (Japanese cartoon) girls which Earth-Chan is based on. This satirical and parodic line refers to the existence of the Flat Earth Society and its believers. The artists touch this particular point to oppose the flat earth idea in this digital era, where flat earth theory was proven to be false.

### ***Digital Campaign as an Effort to Increase the Awareness of Climate Change***

Climate change is real and happening (Carrington, 2015). The global surface temperature is one of many strong indications of climate change (Hansen et al., 2010). However, many people doubt climate change.

The birth of Earth-Chan, even as it started as a joke, openly opposes such doubt. Earth-Chan began trending in many sites, such as Twitter and 9GAG, in early 2018. Many Earth-Chan posts mostly got positive comments and many of commenters were moved to initiate even the smallest environmental act. Based on the commenter's reactions, Earth-Chan is considered a success on conveying environmental messages.

This success cannot be separated from the aforementioned purpose of the Earth-Chan design which is to entice people and stimulate sympathy and empathy of the readers. The *guilt tripping* strategy, backed with the *cute* designs, also effects the design success.

Earth-Chan is one example of the utilisation of unique and light campaign designs, compared to other environmental campaign design ideas. This characters unique, simple yet complex, idea brings forth straightforward, yet deep messages. The character's general design, the sickly schoolgirl, describes how bad the school environment in a industrial district of a city may get. In developing countries where regulations are considered more lax and not strict enough, so that pollution levels and environmental conditions on a particular day become a deciding factor in allowing the learning process to go ahead (Derycke et al., 2018; Pazzi et al., 2016). This environmental issue needs immediate attention from the government. In this case, the government needs to put more effort into city and policy planning, to adapt sustainable development plans and to decrease the pollution level that a city/country produces (Broto & Bulkeley, 2013; Di Giulio et al., 2018; Carter et al., 2015).

Some character designs describe a grim situation in a light way, in contrast to many environmental campaign designs, where the dominant focus is directed towards framing the situation into darkness and despair (Anderson, 2013). This kind of design is often overlooked by environmental based NGOs and the governments, as most of the campaigns produced push public figures to take the spotlight. Whereas in the digital era, creative approaches to difficult subject matter is more likely to be easily noticed and spark discussions. This way, unique and light design approaches to environmental issues can emphasis sustainability and the effect of the campaign according to Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) (Madumere, 2017; Wabnitz et al., 2018; Ali et al., 2017).

Amidst monopolised and commercialised mass media, where most environmental issues are deemed not newsworthy, (Anderson, 2013), the dissemination of information via the internet (especially social medias and forums), is mostly based on the user. The users freedom to choose, effects a reliance on mass media, as more and more people migrate to the internet as their main source of information (Doni, 2017).

Earth-Chan's popularity on sites and forums could produce a significant influence on the population's attitudes towards the problem of climate change and environmental degradation. Earth-Chan's popularity is proof that knowledge of environmental issues could spread easily and *trend* with the right approach, even if the issues are considered not newsworthy enough by mass media (Anderson, 2013). Earth-Chan's popularity may not be long-lived; but during the time that the character is popular, it can spark environmental awareness and debates on online forums.

Earth-Chan's popularity is also causing an anthropomorphic design boom on forums (such as Reddit). Anthropomorphism is used to create a variety of arts regarding environmental issues or science, from parodic to satirical arts. Similar examples are the creation of Solar-Sis (or Solar System Girls), where artists depict celestial bodies in our solar system into anthropomorphic designs, that occasionally make a point on space explorations or space sciences in general.

## **Conclusion**

The existence of internet and social media, also the ease of access to digital technology improves people's quality of life, especially how people chose to fulfil their information needs. This ease of access to digital information, in turn assists awareness of climate change campaigns and ideas. Various approaches to increasing awareness of climate change hold various results. One of the unique approaches in increasing awareness on climate change is through the anthropomorphic representation of earth in Earth-Chan.



The simplistic and straightforward design of Earth-Chan contributes to popularity of this character, as one of climate change's unique icons that reaches wider audiences. The simplistic and straightforward design not only simplifies the way people comprehend and decipher the purpose and the message behind Earth-Chan, but also holds satirical and parodic content, such as opposing the flat earth theory that is proven to be false. This means that Earth-Chan not only has entertainment values, but also has become an icon that promotes scientifically factual information.

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