The role of visual communication design to increase public literacy on the history of Spice Route in supporting Indonesia's proposal toward UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. Previous studies show that the process of reproduction of nationalism through the reconstruction of national history and national identity is no longer always the elite's initiation. Democratization and globalization also provide space for people to re-interpret the ideal picture of Indonesia. The learning tradition of contemporary society in general is an interesting fundamental issue. Global connectivity and the advancement of information technology have also created new habits in acquiring knowledge. As a result, contemporary society is increasingly ignorant of history and alienated from its cultural roots. This research intends to examine the extent to which visual communication design can increase public literacy, especially about the state efforts in reconstructing national history and Indonesian identity through the cultural-historical narrative of Spice Route. In line with President Joko Widodo's vision to position Indonesia as the global maritime fulcrum in 2045, the legacy of the spice trade route, which is also an intercultural exchange route, will be proposed by the government of Indonesia as a World Cultural Heritage to UNESCO. The methods used in this qualitative study are auto-ethnography, participant-observation, in-depth interviews, and visual communication design methods through analysis of form-content-context, both descriptive and reflective. Through the findings, visual communication design has great potentials in increasing public knowledge on Spice Route narrative, especially in encouraging curiosity and willingness to learn more about Indonesian history and cultures.

Keywords: spice route, visual communication design, literacy, identity, nationalism, heritage

1. Introduction: Increasing knowledge and intellectual traditions through public learning

In 2017, the Ministry of Education and Culture officially initiated the Spice Route proposal as the World Cultural Heritage to UNESCO. This initiative was under the auspices of the Directorate of Cultural Heritage and Diplomacy and the Directorate General of Culture. In line with the vision of President Joko Widodo to position Indonesia as the global maritime fulcrum in 2045, the legacy of the maritime spice route has been acknowledged as the means of cultural exchange and intercultural understanding. It brings together various ideas, concepts, knowledge, and experience between people across nations. This maritime cultural heritage has become increasingly important to be addressed [1]. Spice Route is proposed as a World Cultural Heritage and becomes the theme of Indonesian cultural diplomacy.
Inevitably, the need to conduct comprehensive research increases side-by-side with the need to socialize the Spice Route narrative. In addition to academic studies, one of the factors considered for the approval of the nomination of Spice Route by UNESCO is public knowledge regarding the subject, including its implications in a broader context. This criterion is indicated through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) declared by the United Nations. The cultural heritage of an area should provide benefits in terms of social, culture, and economy for the local communities. Therefore, without proper knowledge, Indonesians cannot obtain optimal benefits from the status of Spice Route as the world heritage.

Meanwhile, the methods in studying subjects of humanities and social science in Indonesian secondary education have not encouraged the curiosity of students to learn more about their history and culture. In many cases, these subjects are delivered in less interesting methods. Sources of information such as humanities and history textbooks are unattractive for today's students with less interest in reading. This condition is exacerbated by the increasingly open access to information, which cable television channels to social media in cyberspace are instant information providers for today's contemporary society. Consequently, this may affect the lacking ability of critical thinking in filtering information. It contributes to a significant change in how students pursue knowledge daily.

Several communication problems to be answered through this visual communication design research are as follows. First, the Spice Route is a great narrative that is not easily communicated since it involves a grand history with an extensive period. It will be necessary to determine the time frame of Spice Route history to achieve a good understanding. Furthermore, the complexity of Spice Route as cultural-historical narratives must go through the process of selecting and sorting information so that it can be socialized to the public in accordance with its segmentation and relevance in a contemporary context. Second, the public tends to regard history and culture as boring because they are often presented in unattractive ways and mediums. With the advancement of information technology, appropriate communication strategies should meet the requirement of today's instant society without reducing the substance of knowledge. Third, further studies are needed to evaluate whether the visual communication design approaches that have been carried out have a significant impact on increasing public literacy of Spice Route, and understanding the importance of nominating the Spice Route as a World Cultural Heritage to UNESCO.

Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich visual communication design studies in various contexts, especially related to the reproduction of nationalism and national identity. Practically, this study also aims to provide a reference for reviewing, reading, and analyzing visual communication design materials, in which previous studies lack a proportionate analysis.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

The Tales of the Lands Beneath the Winds, Tracing the Indonesian Archipelago's Maritime Role in the History of Spice Trade, is the main reference information about Spice Route [2]. It is published by the Negeri Rempah Foundation and supported by the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs. This book reveals different perspectives on interpreting the history of the Spice Route. With a strong emphasis on maritime aspects, Indonesian identity is built through the conception of a maritime archipelagic state. The description is opened by placing the archipelago as a major player in the spice trade since the beginning of the millennium.

2.1. Nationalism and identity

A sovereign nation should have an ideology that is nationalism. However, nationalism is not something that can be inherited. For instance, someone born in Indonesia does not necessarily make him feel as an Indonesian if nationalism is not instilled. Nationalism is a project that must be nurtured now and in the future. Therefore, the reproduction of nationalism is a process that is never finished and must be carried out continuously from generation to generation [3]. As the sustainability of a nation is basically at stake, visual communication design becomes an essential means of constructing narratives to increase people's knowledge in history and culture.
2.2. Museum and public space
The process of shaping Indonesian identity and personality, which leads to the reproduction of nationalism, can also be traced from the visual communication design and cultural-historical narratives inside the museum. I consider previous researchers related to museum studies to reproduce nationalism, and it will be a relevant point of departure for further review. The research on the development of museums in the 19th century as a public space tries to see Foucault's perspective to examine the power relations between the state and society. Like prisons and asylums, museums are built and designed to the people who inhabit them. However, if the process of maintaining order and discipline in prison and mental hospitals are not open in public spaces, museums attempt to instill a sense of compliance in the community by imposing knowledge and power through open exhibition media. Ideas and knowledge conveyed to the public are crafted with visual communication design. Public museum establishments are part of a more extensive process that the government uses culture to civilize its people. So far, culture has been commonly used to symbolize and display the power of rulers. Now, culture is used as a tool, which Foucault called governmentality. It is the power to change behavior and make it automatically work within the society (self-regulating) [4].

Several studies of museums that have been conducted in Indonesia show the significant role of state actors in reconstructing the country's history. The process of construction planning of the National Monument (Monas) museum was pioneered around 1964. Clearly, there was an ideological contestation between two different regimes: Sukarno with his Guided Democracy (1959-65) and Suharto with the New Order (1966-1998). Soekarno and Suharto agreed that the Monas Museum was a media that could strengthen the ideology and legitimacy of power. For Sukarno, the museum represented the vision of Indonesia towards socialism as its major theme, including fostering a spirit of nationalism and the pride of the people as a great nation. The visual communication design and historical narratives were translated into dioramas divided into three parts. The first part described the Archipelago's golden age represented through the achievements in the Sriwijaya and Majapahit eras. The second part stressed the process of struggle against colonialism. The third part also emphasized the vision of the nation's future with socialism as a major theme. On the other hand, Suharto planned to emphasize the nation's fundamental universal values of Pancasila that had been a change in national direction initiated by his new regime with strong nuances of militarism [5].

The reproduction of nationalism represented through historical narratives in museums is also commonly carried out in China. After the Mao regime ended, the People's Republic of China was interested in reconstructing a modern Chinese history that was contextual with globalization and global market reform. The reconstruction was through the historical narrative on display with visual communication technology associated with economic reformation ideology. The historical narrative was presented in visual communication design in the form of multimedia, dioramas, and miniatures. However, typical messages of conservative socialists such as revolutionary liberation and martyrdom had not disappeared altogether. Instead, the presentations were changed to simplify social class issues and legitimize commercial interests, work ethics, ideology, and nationalism [6].

In general, both studies mentioned are still in line with researchers' opinions who agree that museums are a means for the authorities to establish ideology and legitimize it. However, studies about the museum as a public space facilitating communities' participation in interpreting their national identity have not been elaborated too much. Duncan, who focused his research on art museums, even argued skeptical that museums were only part of the broader socio-cultural world. Despite the opportunity to provide enlightenment, museums remained confined within structured social and political boundaries. In other words, the museum was not a free ritual space [7].

Based on previous studies, visual communication design has become a key element. Not only it plays a supporting role in the reproduction of nationalism and national identity, but it also provides literacy in public spaces. This study will analyze to the extent which visual communication design can foster a sustainable learning tradition, which lacks proportionate analysis in previous studies.

3. Methodology
Methods used in this qualitative research are auto-ethnography through comparison, participant-observation, in-depth interviews, and visual communication design analysis of form, content, and context, both descriptive and reflective. The objects of observation will be defined as follows:

- State actors represented by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Non-state actors represented by non-governmental organization volunteers, and public participation;
- Dynamic interactions among the visual communication designers;
- Visual communication design materials;
- Mass and social media publications as sources to illustrate the process and the impact of the Spice Route social campaign.

4. Findings and discussions

The idea to revive the Spice Route narratives was initiated by one of the culture-enthusiast communities that previously had traveling activities in various regions in Indonesia. This cultural trip was more appropriately referred to as educational and cultural tourism by including expert guides such as historians, archeologists, anthropologists, writers, and more. Spice Route was one of its traveling themes. Eventually, this activity shifted into a public learning movement that included volunteers, especially visual communication designers.

4.1. Museum week 2015: Jalur Rempah, the untold story

In 2015, The Jakarta Post, one of the leading national media, facilitated the Spice Route initiative to develop an exhibition at the Museum Week, held at the National Museum. The exhibition was entitled "Jalur Rempah, the Untold Story". The creative development team for this exhibition consisted of visual communication designers. The team was divided according to the tasks: designing the event identity (Figure 1), infographic timeline of spice trade history in several different periods, and a giant map of Spice Route. Despite having enthusiasm for learning and sharing, these designers were more visually orientated. As a result, the briefing process had to be carefully done to not deviate from the constructed Spice Route narratives. Moreover, the interpretation of curatorial statements required further readings of relevant references. However, the exhibition attracted public attention to visit the National Museum. Within two weeks during the event, the number of visitors to the National Museum jumped to 25,000 people.

4.2. New campaign identity: #JalurRempah (Spice Route)

The community's initiative to make Spice Route a public movement continues. Despite no longer supported by sponsors, this movement has triggered volunteers' participation, including visual communication designers, who are passionate about constructing nationalism and identity through the Spice Route narratives. This community is named Jaringan Masyarakat Negeri Rempah (Negeri Rempah Community Network). Its campaign program is identified as #JalurRempah (literally means spice route) written with a hashtag to simplify public usage in social media (Figure 2). Regarding the visual communication strategy, the logotype uses Garamond bold. This typeface is preferred due to its clarity and simplicity. Another criterion is the applied technical availability, especially for those located in different parts of Indonesia with limited design literacy. This strategy is also a compromise anticipating the technical limitations that may still exist in certain regions. As Garamond is generally available on computer devices, anyone can use this identity easily. Thus, the consistency of the campaign identity can be maintained.
4.3. Exhibitions outside the museum

In 2017, another exhibition was held at Jakarta Kota Tua (old town) heritage site. The exhibition venue provided was formerly a post office building in the colonial era, which is now called the Kantor Pos Gallery. This building is also one of the cultural heritage buildings, located at the opposite of the Fatahila Museum, right at the heart of Batavia's old city. Unlike previous exhibitions that were heavy with historical nuance, this exhibition used more illustrative visual communication design, emphasizing spices as the focus. The form, content, and context of the exhibition's visual materials were more adapted to the younger segment, especially students and families. The use of graphic illustrations created a friendly impression (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Infographic Display at *Rempah dan Kita* Exhibition Held at Kantor Pos Gallery, a Heritage Site at Kota Tua (2017).
These popular approaches have invited many parties to offer their spaces as an alternative venue for exhibition outside the museum. Public enthusiasm increases as many community-based exhibitions are informative, easy to understand, entertaining, suitable for those who are more visually oriented. However, the visual communication design requires some changes since the exhibition arenas are public spaces that are architecturally not designated for exhibition activities, unlike the museums. These public spaces include the mall lobbies, class hallways, coffee shops, and outdoor (Figure 4). The form, content, and context of design need to be considered, for instance, a wider range of segmentation with different levels of knowledge in many different places. Instead of focusing on the historical aspect of the spice route, campaign materials begin to address contextual contents such as encouraging people to drink jamu (traditional spice and herbal medicine), getting to know the local culinary traditions, or re-introducing various Indonesian spices which are commonly consumed daily (Figure 5 and Figure 6).
While the Indonesian government is about to propose the Spice Route as world heritage to UNESCO, increasing public knowledge becomes significantly important. Among the most active community movements, there is Negeri Rempah Foundation, a non-profit organization driven by volunteers who previously have involved in campaigning #JalurRempah narrative to the public. Its contributing designers play a significant role in developing a campaign strategy. One of the issues which are considered to be the most fundamental is to build a learning tradition within society since there has been a significant shift in how people obtain information. The virtual realm can no longer be taken for granted because the segmentation of young people is the most active internet user. The implemented visual communication strategy for the #JalurRempah campaign is to allow public participation in reinterpreting the Spice Route narrative. By reducing the distance between the audience with the form, content, and context of the design, one can relate themselves with spices and its great narrative. Thus, the design is a medium of expression to show concerns, enthusiasm, and support towards the Spice Route as a national cultural asset by the public. It allows them to express themselves by taking pictures and selfies, which are uploaded to social media (Figure 7 and Figure 8). Something that is generally unlikely to be done in rigid museum spaces is now possible to be done in public areas without reducing its educational values.

**Figure 6.** Infographic About Various Indonesian Culinary Traditions and Recipes by Kevin Sim.

**Figure 7.** An ‘Instagram’ moment of visitors taken in front of the infographic of Indonesian spices phytogeography exhibited in Asian Agriculture and Food Forum 2020, Jakarta Convention Center. Sample of spices were exhibited in small acrylic boxes.
5. Conclusions

Through findings discussed, I would like to conclude that visual communication design has great potentials in increasing public knowledge on Spice Route narrative, especially in encouraging curiosity and willingness to learn more about Indonesian history and cultures. Literacy is one entry point to shape identity and nationalism needed to support the proposal of the Spice Route as one of World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

5.1. From single-sited to multi-sited: Museum–public space–virtual space

Nationalism and identity constructed through historical narratives in most cases are built through rigid museum spaces. Its visual communication design represents the nation's ideology and may laden with glorification. However, as the context changes, the space for reconstructing identity and nationalism has shifted from a social-political space to a more open socio-cultural space. This social-political space collapses when the public feels they can re-interpret identity and nationalism in their own way. Moving the exhibition arena from museums and historic buildings to public areas such as shopping malls, classrooms, coffee shops, and other specific places requires adjustments in visual communication strategies. With a mission to encourage the public to learn about the history and cultural heritage, visual communication design plays its role in categorizing, selecting, and sorting out information that can be easily understood through visual approaches. Spice Route as cultural-historical narratives should be re-interpreted in a contemporary context, to make it relevant to today’s urban society. History cannot be
changed, but it has to be a reference for the present and the future. Therefore, the design content puts forward contemporary issues of spices such as its application in the culinary industry, medicine, and tourism instead of merely history.

5.2. Interactivity as a learning experience
The process of reconstructing identity and nationalism should allow room for anyone to express themselves. Social media is the most common and easiest means of expressing yourself. Viral public uploads on social media influence the rising number of visitors in museums and public spaces. Therefore, designers may have to consider public interaction by providing photographic angles (which nowadays is popularly called as Instagramable). The feeling of connectedness and curiosity comes after they can give a sense of meaning to what they have seen and experienced. For example, a small sample of spices can bring up memories that are close and personal for the visitors (Figure 9).

5.3. Public awareness of public literacy
From the empirical cases presented, there is a positive tendency that shows people are becoming more aware of the Spice Route. As this awareness grows, people will tend to expand their knowledge regarding the potentiality of spices. These learning traditions will significantly assist the process of proposing the Spice Route to UNESCO, as the cultural heritage of an area should provide benefits in terms of social, culture, and economy for the local communities. Therefore, without good knowledge, Indonesians cannot obtain optimal benefits from the status of Spice Route as the world heritage.

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