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# Stereotyped Image Creation: An Act of Copying or Not?

Chung Yim Lau

Assistant Professor

The Hong Kong Institute of Education

E-mail: chungyim@ied.edu.hk

## Abstract

Early studies related to creativity emphasize the value of originality and see the act of copying as an indication of a lack of self-confidence and self-expression. However, evidence from recent studies has revealed that drawings created by young adolescents carry particular meanings closely related to their everyday life experiences, and suggests that their drawings may thus be considered as socio-cultural products. Therefore, we cannot simply conclude that young adolescents' copying is nothing but mere imitation. This article aims to answer one essential question regarding stereotyped image creation: Is stereotyped drawing just an act of copying? According to this question, I will examine the key issues related to the imitation phenomenon and stereotyped image creation from the stereotyped ideological perspective and the psychological and socio-cultural perspectives. In the article, I will use manga, one of the most popular forms in the popular visual cultural context, as an example in order to explicate the various ways in which stereotyped image creation may be interpreted, and argue that stereotyped image creation is not just imitation, but that it also has psychological, socio-cultural and educational underpinnings.

**Keywords: Creativity, Imitation, Visual Culture and Art Education, Stereotyped Image Creation**

A case meeting about a junior secondary student, Lily (a pseudonym), was held by senior art teachers at a Hong Kong secondary school. The main issue for the meeting was to discuss Lily's complaint about the fail grade she had been given by her art teacher in an assessment. The art teacher affirmed that a series of Lily's artworks about puppy love was directly copied from a Japanese manga romance. He emphasized the fact that "copying was a serious offence" against creativity and therefore should be strictly forbidden. However, Lily completely denied copying, insisting that she had changed the form and context of the original manga and recreated something new, rather than just imitating. This is a real case that arose last year and I was invited to be an external consultant for the meeting. I believe that this is not an isolated case and that it will happen again in the future. It is not my intention to report the case in detail here. Rather, I am very concerned about one essential question arising from the argument between Lily and the art teacher. This question is: Is stereotyped manga creation just an act of copying?

In art education, copying is regarded as a non-creative act opposed to originality. According to Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987), "children should not copy anything. The arts are supposed to be a means of one's own expression and not a superficial copy of someone else's thoughts and ideas. Copies for the most part are done with no understanding of the structure or meaning of what is imitated" (p. 179). In a real school context, in art classes art teachers invariably come across stereotyped drawings made by their students. Students love to read and create manga. They intentionally repeatedly practise creating images by imitating the original manga images, although such imitation is generally accepted to be impermissible in art education since it goes against the assumption concerning creative learning in the arts (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987).

Early studies related to creativity emphasize the importance of originality and see the act of copying as an indication of a lack of self-confidence. However, evidence from recent studies has proved that manga drawings created by children are socio-cultural products. Therefore,

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we cannot simply conclude that young adolescents' copying is mere imitation. The aim of this article is thus to answer the above one essential question regarding stereotyped image creation. According to this question, I will examine the key issues related to the imitation phenomenon and stereotyped image creation from the stereotyped ideological perspective and the psychological and socio-cultural perspectives. I will use manga, one of the most popular forms in the popular visual cultural context, as an example in order to explicate the various ways in which stereotyped image creation may be interpreted, and argue that stereotyped image creation is not just imitation, but that it also has psychological, socio-cultural and educational implications.

## **Stereotyped Ideology and Expressions in Manga**

In an increasingly globalized visual cultural context, manga (also known as comics) has become one of the most powerful visual forms and popular art expressions emerging from everyday life. This particular type of visual cultural form is widely accepted by young adolescents – they are enthusiastic about imitating stereotyped images from various resources of popular visual culture such as manga books and computer games, producing a new notion of stereotyped beauty.

Reading manga involves a process of transforming, giving an object a new meaning with reference to the creator's lived experience. In the world of manga, "some nonlife objects can be shaped to have life" (Ren, 1985, p. 85). Xiao (2002) attempts to classify the characters that emerge in manga into two major stereotypes: the first of these he calls the "stereotypic character" (p. 81), in which all characteristics are assembled in a single character; the second is the "individual character" that symbolizes the salient aspects of the individual (p. 81). The stereotypic character represents the point of contact between the reader's actual life experience and the characteristics of the manga character. The individual character shows more concern with the conflict between the salient characteristics of the individual and the real world in which the real individual operates. Some characters are actually

unacceptable within the established customs of the society. They typically rebel against the existing society and its institutions. Because of their lively, fierce and rebellious natures, young adolescents are easily attracted by such characters (Xiao, 2002).

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The content of manga seems to follow a stereotyped principle. In a study of a young girls' romance manga, Baker (1989) showed that the development of a manga story always has a four-phased structure, including an introduction, a struggle, the resolution of the conflict, and the ending. Although Xiao (2002) argues that the formalized popular culture can offer creators a ready-made model for creating, the structure of the manga story follows the rules of stereotyping. These rules not only imply the formalized structure of the manga story, they are also reflected in the established rules or symbols that usually govern the choice of the sex of the main manga character.

Manga reading is governed by the established rules and symbols often used by different genders. According to the established rules and symbols in young boys' and girls' manga, each gender has its own interests in terms of what they choose to read. Besides reading, different categories of manga may help readers to become integrated in the social relationship between themselves and the text (Baker, 1989). Xiao (2002) examines Baker's contention that there is a connection between the different sexes and the category of manga; for example, boys are shown in a favorable light in simple manga stories containing strong images of the manly man, full of challenges and excitement, and that include many scenes of combat, while the ones girls prefer are about romance, love and beauty.

The sexual stereotyping ideology distinctly emerges in both boys' and girls' manga. As mentioned previously, the stereotyped ideological concept dominates the characteristics of the protagonists who appear in young boys' and girls' manga, which are constituted by established rules and symbols. In these rules and symbols, there is an accepted system for each gender and different ways of representing them mythically. Male characters and male combats are accorded high importance in young boys' manga, while young

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girls' manga project strong images of the ideology that love is the greatest consideration of all, and in which the female is expected to sacrifice her career and even her life to pursue the love that she believes will lead her to eternal happiness (Lin, 2000).

In the late 1960s, Streicher (1967) demonstrated how female images in American comics were presented as stereotypes. In a similar vein, Glasberg (1992) conducted a study of a manga story about a love triangle relationship in a metropolis. He found that some of the representations of both genders were imbued with formalism. In the love triangle relationship, the male images were those of individuals capable of acting independently and who had the power to choose love, while female images were presented as either passive and dependent individuals who were sexually attractive or as miserable individuals who possessed no attraction for males.

The hero character who emerges in manga represents a stereotyping phenomenon, reflecting the fact that the gender stereotyping ideology is socially constructed. Pecora (1992) studied a series of Superman hero comics and discovered that the hero is always playing the role of "socializing agent" in a world confronting violence that is constantly waiting for a white male to arrive in order to restore social order and solve the problem (pp. 65). In these stories, the female appears either as a victim, or as a loathsome individual, or as an incomplete being who may be successful in business but who is entirely lacking in warmth and love.

This stereotypical concept of both genders can also be found in Japanese manga. It seems to have become a cross-cultural phenomenon that exists in both Eastern and Western society. Liu (1996) studied the implications of the female image in one of the most popular Japanese manga distributed in Taiwan, and obtained similar findings to Pecora: the female is represented as a sexual object designed to satisfy the male's gaze in a patriarchal society (Liu, 1996). He criticizes the fact that the relationships between family members strictly follow the rules of patriarchy. In a male-dominated society, romantic love stories summon females to reproduce the imbalance of power in gender relationships (Liu, 1996).

Japanese manga are permeated with ideologies of class consciousness, feudalistic ideas and nationalism.

In summary, the stereotyped expressions in manga are reflected not just in the visual forms but also in the content of the manga stories. They both address a particular ideology. The themes and types of manga range from romantic comic stories to comic stories about fighting. In manga, the process of creating meanings involves reading the connections between the images; the reader needs to be psychologically involved in order to interpret the images, and the act of reading can be viewed as satisfying the readers' psychological needs and at the same time providing them with enjoyment (Xiao, 2002). Meaning construction requires the involvement of the participant's imagination. Readers may not necessarily be following the code or the symbols or the messages hidden in the manga text when reading it; instead, they may be playing an active role in creating a new meaning that is related to their everyday life.

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## **Psychological and Socio-cultural Accounts of Copying**

The stereotyped image and the act of imitation can be explicated from both psychological and socio-cultural perspectives. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) commented negatively on copying, stating that "copies for the most part are done with no understanding of the structure or meaning of what is imitated", and that rather, "the arts are supposed to be a means of one's own expression and not a superficial copy of someone else's thought and ideas" (pp. 179-180). Artistic spontaneity in creative activity can be seen as a reflection of a person's feelings and thoughts, which also demonstrates the ability to mobilize logical thoughts (Naumburg, 1973). From this perspective, stereotypic modes of expression in creation are considered to be non-spontaneous.

Other researchers have seen the act of imitation as reflecting the wish to possess something, and emulation itself as a necessary process of gaining identity from a form of high quality (Case, 2000, p. 37). McNiff (1981) remarks that the stereotypic form of expression denotes a particular pattern

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of repetitive, ritualistic and highly controlled expressions, reflecting an insecure state of mind and indicating “a lack of self-confidence with the particular mode of expression and a need to defend oneself against the anxiety provoked by being exposed to experiences outside the pattern of daily routines” (p. 50). The stereotypic mode of expression, understood as a form of conscious control, is seen to stand in contrast to ‘genuine’ creative expression (McNiff, 1981). Moreover, as a reflection of conscious control, stereotypic expression is indicative of the tendency to follow an ideal. McNiff (1981) described this phenomenon as “excessive perfectionism” (p. 52), caused by doubt about one’s ability to express oneself spontaneously. As a result, people tend “to place unrealistic demands on themselves to achieve idealized goals” (McNiff, 1981, p. 52). The stereotype thus appears to be a negative phenomenon occurring in artistic creation. When the expressive ability is blocked, a person becomes gradually “withdrawn or dependent on stereotypic forms of communication” (McNiff, 1981, p. 53). In the creative process, the creator’s free will to express himself is emphasized as a symbol of escaping beyond social boundaries. If the creator is unsuccessful in transcending the stereotypic obstacles, a phenomenon of regression emerges. According to McNiff (1988), this reflects the relationship between the transcending process and the importance of releasing the person’s conscious control.

In her case studies of children’s drawing, Case (2000) demonstrates an idea similar to that of McNiff that a child’s copying images represents “some deficiency or lack in himself” (p. 37). Another point made by Case (2000) is that the copying phenomenon is caused by a lack of originality. In a report on the emulating behavior which occurred in an art therapy group, Case (2000) further discovered that children felt a need to imitate in order to be “as good as one another” even if they did not learn about “what it is that they are drawing” (p. 37). From her observation, children would first imitate the image exactly before gaining sufficient confidence and feeling capable of having an idea of their own (Case, 2000). Children seeking the ideal model to imitate reflects their recognition of social identity, since “social recognition for the

artist appears to lie in the acceptance and acknowledgement of a personal artistic identity as expressed through creative work...social recognition is but another manifestation of the need to create a positive sense of self that is accepted by others” (McNiff, 1981, p. 44).

This recognition also represents a symbolic form of acceptance by the society. However, at the same time, it reflects a resistant attitude against the stereotypic socio-cultural identity, because the personality and image of the artist symbolize the fact that “the artist is not content with the stereotypic social identities that are attached to people who fill more conventional and standardized roles in society” (McNiff, 1981, p. 44). From this perspective, there is a contradiction inherent in the theory that children imitate in order to produce symbolic and stereotypic forms so that the society will accept their identities, but at the same time the image of the artist is elevated to that of a creative, isolated identity, and the standardized society is rejected. This theory is close to Kaltenbeck’s (2003) suggestion that “the innovating artist works for culture, helping to refine it, but at the same time he works against culture and civilization, trying to revolutionize them” (p. 106). Although the motivation to imitate seems like normal behavior, it can have a negative impact on psychological development. The imitation of images can be viewed as an unconscious and spontaneous defense against the self (McNeilly, 1989). It relates to the projection mechanism of ready-made images. For the purpose of integrating art and psychotherapy, the concept of “spontaneous art” has been employed as a “means of orientation and deeper self-knowledge” (Naumbury, 2001, p. 46).

The projection mechanism is also a belief in which people use powerful symbols to communicate with each other. The method adopted is to encourage people to use visual symbols spontaneously to express their feelings in order to achieve “fresh forms of human adjustment” (Naumburg, 2001, p. 46). Nevertheless, not all images are selected to be emulated: there is a criterion for this selection that good quality images may fail to meet (McNeilly, 1989). Case (2000) adds that this projection saves “good



qualities” from the destructive feelings inside, and the person’s good qualities are located outside for safety (p. 38).

## **Where We Go from Here**

In art education, Duncum (1987) identifies five positions on copying, stating that copying is: 1) always undesirable for expression; 2) always undesirable for expression, though influence is acceptable; 3) antithetical to expression, but can contribute to learning; 4) a substantial contribution to learning, and 5) necessary for learning (p. 205). The above-mentioned positions may offer a different and more positive perspective from which to examine stereotyped image creation in the educational context. Indeed, early literature in relation to stereotyped drawings is full of discussions surrounding the phenomenon of children’s copying. Copying is a critical issue that has been widely discussed in great detail with relation to stereotyped drawings, since stereotyped drawings reflect copying behaviors and such behaviors may result in a decrease in creativity. Cizek (Viola, 1936), Harrison (1960) and Lowenfeld and Brittain (1964) declare that copying cannot contribute to children’s mental growth, and that it even diminishes self-expression and creativity. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) also complain that “a copy is merely a duplication from one surface to another without the involvement of the problem-solving capacities of the mind” (p. 180).

Later, over the past few decades, the focus of the discussion has shifted from an emphasis on the negative effect of children’s copying to attention to the potential benefits of copying. Psychologists and contemporary art educators hold contradictory views on stereotyped creation. The former negatively assert that stereotyped expression is a symptom of self-deficiency, while the latter see it as a reflection of real life. Thus, although from a psychological perspective stereotypic expression reveals a psychological deficiency, however, from an educational perspective it is connected to learning.

Smith (1985) claims that most children invent their own imagery and their own themes in cartoon strip image creation according to their real lived experiences; there are few children who maintain the stereotyped types of expression. Stereotypic expression emerges in a particular pattern. Wilson and Wilson (1982) see the advantage of imitation in art creation as inevitable, since it can provide children with an artistic method of focusing on depicting the details of an object. Eisner (1972) rejected the theory of Lowenfeld and Brittain, claiming that children's art does not necessarily have a direct effect on their growth. He attempts to revise the theory of artistic development by pointing to other important effects of molding children's art. Viewing art as a learning process in children's artistic development instead of as an instrument, Eisner (1972) and Kindler and Darras (1997) emphasize the interrelationships and interactions among children's perception and their related experiences.

Recent studies of young adolescents' drawings show evidence that young adolescents present their social life and problems they have in reality in their drawings (Duncum, 1987, 1993; Freedman, 1997, 2000; Wilson & Litgvoet, 1992, Wilson & Wilson, 1985). In art education, students may benefit from copying, since copying is regarded as a learning process (Eisner, 1972; Duncum, 1987; Lau, 2013; Pariser, 1980). Some studies have focused more on investigating the meaning of the stereotyped form of expression from a cross-cultural educational perspective (Wilson & Litgvoet, 1992; Wilson & Wilson, 1982, 1985). On the other hand, evidence from current research into stereotyped image creation has indicated that students' self-identity is both a socio-cultural and a personal issue influenced by the concept of the stereotyped and the counter-stereotyped aesthetics (Lau, 2013). Stereotyped image creation has become an important part of Asian ethnic group creativity from the micro perspective on creativity (Lau, 2011, 2012).

Going back to Lily's case, it is understandable that for most art teachers children should not be encouraged to copy, since it rejects the fundamental idea that art making is/should be/must be original, and that copying is an

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indication of a lack of self-confidence in children. However, this is only one of the five positions suggested by Duncum that art teachers can assume. So, the question related to the topic of copying is not one of 'to be or not to be'. Instead, we should be asking ourselves, as art educators, how we should understand the topic. As art educators, we should be making good use of the positive aspects of copying. In art education, stereotyped image creation could be an effective learning tool for students seeking to establish their identities. Imitation could also provide a practical way for students with low levels of self-confidence to improve their abilities. In designing an art curriculum, teachers should reconsider using stereotyped image creation to devise teaching strategies. Teachers could encourage their students to exhibit their artworks and to collect constructive feedback from their peers. Finally, systematic study of the notion of teaching through stereotyped image creation would provide a more solid basis for putting the concept into practice.

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