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Exploring Character Aesthetics and Role in Anime

Payal Navale
Student, Department of Animation
Dr. D.Y. Patil School Of Design

Shreya Bhujbal
Student, Department of Animation
Dr. D.Y. Patil School Of Design

Purva Kajare
Student, Department of Animation
Dr. D.Y. Patil School Of Design

Shivam Pawar
Student, Department of Animation
Dr. D.Y. Patil School Of Design

Sushil Pawar
Student, Department of Animation
Dr. D.Y. Patil School Of Design

Dr. Siddhant Wadmare
Vice Dean/HOD, Department of
Animation Dr. D.Y. Patil School Of Design

***Abstract*—Character design in anime can be conveyed visually through many aspects including colour, shape, hair style, clothing, facial features and props. This essay will investigate how such factors contribute to the identity of characters within anime, and how they relate to the character's role within the narrative. It will also consider the limitations of forming opinions on characters based purely on their visual design. Using a qualitative, descriptive and comparative methodology, this study looked at literature relating to the topic. Five characters were analysed: Naruto Uzumaki, Sasuke Uchiha, Light Yagami, L Lawliet and Tanjiro Kamado. Each of their visual design features were examined in conjunction with their actions and narrative context. It was found that characters are given identities using multiple design features, however we understand what role characters play in narratives through their actions, interactions and progression.**

Keywords: anime, character aesthetics, character design, visual communication, narrative role, animation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Visual design plays an important role in character design. Often, viewers begin to formulate opinions of characters based on visual design elements, including hair style, clothing, colour, expression and stance. In anime, these elements combine to create easily identifiable characters, and fit the visual style of the series. However, visual design should not always be assumed to reflect character traits. A character with a dark visual style may be assumed to be a 'bad' character, however, this is not necessarily accurate. This research looks into visual design, and character roles within stories.

1.1 Background of the Study

Considerations must be made for visual design to create effective character designs. Characteristics such as face, eyes, hair, clothing, accessories, colour, scale and shape must be taken into consideration to create easily identifiable characters. In animation, research has been conducted into the relationship between colour schemes in characters, character types and audience preferences. Jang and Eom [3] looked into colour schemes in anime characters and relationships with audience colour preferences. Kim and Jo [4] also looked into colour in characters, but in first generation Pok´emon characters. This demonstrates that colour in characters can be researched in a systematic way, instead of being a subjective choice for character designers. However, the meanings given to colour depend on the character, culture and story.

1.2 Research Problem and Aim

Often, characters in anime are discussed in terms of popularity, character traits and development. This research looks more specifically into how visual design elements work together to give characters identities and suggest character roles. Although characters with dark clothing and sharp shapes may be assumed to be 'bad', and bright colour schemes assumed to be 'good', this is not necessarily true. Opinions on characters should take into account the events and relationships in the story. Rationale: How do chosen visual design elements in anime characters create visual identity, audience opinions and narrative roles? To what extent can narrative roles be assumed based solely on appearance? Aim: To understand how visual design in chosen anime characters create character identities and relate to the narrative role. To also understand how audience opinions may be formed.

1.3 Objectives of the Research

- To identify major visual elements used to establish anime character identity.

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- To examine how colour, costume, hairstyle, facial design, silhouette and accessories contribute to character recognition.
- To analyse five selected anime characters using a consistent visual-analysis framework.
- To develop practical insights that may be useful to animation students and character designers.

1.4 Research Questions

- Which visual elements are most noticeable and distinctive in the selected anime character designs?
- How do colour, costume, hairstyle, facial features and silhouette contribute to visual identity?
- How do the selected characters' visual designs relate to their established narrative functions?
- Which visual design choices help distinguish characters who share a story world or narrative relationship?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Character design can be seen as visual communication. Within visual communication, elements combine to create meaning [1]. When considering character design, it can be useful to consider the overall combination of design. Shape, scale, stance and expression in characters aid identification [2].

2.1 Key Elements of Character Aesthetics

Shape and silhouettes aid identification of characters [2]. The shape can be altered by hair, clothing, props and stance. Rounded, angular and rectangular shapes can create different impressions. However, these variations in shape are stylistic choices, and not set rules. Colour can also help with identification. It can provide contrast and affect the mood. Jang and Eom [3] analysed colour schemes in animation characters. Kim and Jo [4] looked into how colour was expressed in Pok´emon characters. This demonstrates that colour can be analysed in a systematic way. However, meaning depends on character, culture and story. Clothing and accessories can indicate where the character is from, what group they belong to and any history they have as a character [1], [2]. Naruto wears a forehead protector which indicates he belongs to the Hidden Leaf Village. Tanjiro's hanafuda earrings have significance related to the story. Hair and facial design also help characters to be distinctive, and enable expressive animation [2], [6].

2.2 Character Design and Narrative Meaning

Character performance and body language can give insight into character traits and narrative meaning [12]. Wilde [11] considers how characters from anime and manga can have multiple narrative roles. This means that character design and performance should be considered. While character visual design may create expectation in a viewer, the story may either confirm or refute this. Liu et al [5] looked into common visual design trends in characters in anime, and common character personality types. This means that visual design and audience preferences can be linked. It also shows the value in researching trends in character design. Pellitteri [14] notes that cultural assumptions may affect interpretation of visual design in Japanese animation. Therefore in this research, no colour or shape has one fixed meaning.

2.3 Research Gap and Conceptual Approach

There is existing research into visual communication in characters, character design, colour, style in anime and audience interpretation [1]-[5], [9]-[14]. This research combines these considerations to make comparative analysis of 5 characters. It looks specifically into how initial impressions from visual design do not always match narrative roles. A simple framework has been applied. Visual design in characters creates identification. Initial impressions may be formed. Viewers may interpret these visual design features depending on their personal and cultural experiences. The narrative context and development of characters can confirm, modify or challenge these initial opinions.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach and Design

This research is a qualitative type. As this research is looking into interpretation of visual design, audience responses are not measured. The design is descriptive and comparative. Observations on each character have been made using the same categories. It cannot be claimed that certain visual design elements cause a certain audience response.

3.2 Selection of Characters

5 characters from 3 different anime series have been chosen. They have distinctive visual designs and contrasting narrative roles.

- Naruto Uzumaki / Sasuke Uchiha – Naruto/Naruto Shippuden
- Light Yagami and L Lawliet — Death Note.
- Tanjiro Kamado — Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba. This means that characters from different series can be compared. Two pairs of characters are from the same fictional universe, and can be meaningfully compared.

3.3 Material and Analysis Procedure

Published research and visible visual design of the characters in the chosen animes have been used. Face, eyes, hair style, colour scheme, clothing, shape, accessories, scale, expression, and stance have been analysed. If the design of a character changes throughout the story, the appropriate version/clothing should be considered. The visual design has been analysed in 3 parts.

1. Description of visual design without interpretation.
2. Discussion of possible impressions from this design.
3. Consideration of visual design in relation to character actions, relationships and development. This method separates objective description from subjective opinion.

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3.4 Consistency, Ethics and Limitations

Using the same categories for all 5 characters makes this research more consistent. This research uses materials from existing animes and published research. No personal information is collected from participants. If images of characters are reproduced, credit must be given and images used in accordance with institutional guidelines. Only 5 characters from 3 different series are looked at. The research cannot represent all styles and genres of anime. Interpretation of visuals may be somewhat subjective, meaning that different viewers may interpret the same visual design differently. Therefore, this research gives a focused view, but cannot be said to be universally applicable to all anime characters.

IV. VISUAL CASE STUDIES

4.1 Naruto Uzumaki — Protagonist

Naruto has distinctive visual design due to his spiky blonde hair, whisker-like markings on his cheeks, orange based clothing and forehead protector representing the Hidden Leaf Village. This creates a distinctive silhouette. Brightly coloured clothing and expressive features give a lively initial impression. However, the fact that Naruto is a protagonist is determined from his actions, relationships and development, and not just the colour or clothing.

4.2 Sasuke Uchiha — Rival / Deuteragonist

Sasuke has dark hair, simple colours, and changing clothing throughout the story. Therefore, visually he contrasts significantly from Naruto (who has brightly coloured orange based clothing). The changing clothing can be related to his changes in situation and allegiances. The fact that Sasuke is a rival to Naruto and a central character in the story is determined by his relationship with Naruto and the events in the story.

4.3 Light Yagami — Central Protagonist / Antagonistic

Light has a simple and standard visual design. He often appears as a typical student, meaning that it is not immediately apparent that he may be an antagonist. As the story progresses, his expressions and controlled body language becomes more significant. However, as the character has a standard appearance, but increasingly extreme actions, it cannot be accurately assumed that visual design indicates character morality. The Death Note is very significant in the narrative but is not a permanent clothing design.

4.4 L Lawliet — Investigator

L can be identified by messy black hair, simple clothing, pale skin, and unusual posture in sitting. This demonstrates that characters do not need to have complex clothing or many accessories to be distinctive. However, body language, gestures and expression are very distinctive. This creates a very unusual for this character. His role as an investigator is determined by his actions, and relationship with Light. His minimalistic appearance reflects his intelligent, analytical, and mysterious personality. This shows how posture and facial expressions can play an important role in effective character design.

4.5 Tanjiro Kamado — Protagonist

Tanjiro has dark red hair, a scar on his forehead, a green and black checkered haori, Demon Slayer uniform, and hanafuda earrings. The checkered pattern creates a distinctive visual design. The earrings indicate connections to his family history. The uniform indicates that he is part of the Demon Slayer organisation. The clothing, pattern and accessories all contribute to his character identity.

4.6 Comparative Visual Analysis

Visual design features in the 5 characters have been combined in different ways to create distinctive characters. Naruto has a very distinctive visual design from the colour, hair and facial design. Sasuke has distinctive visual design from darker colours and changing clothing. Light shows that visual design may not indicate character morality. L shows that posture can be very distinctive. Tanjiro shows the importance of patterned clothing and meaningful accessories. Below shows a summary TABLE of the characters.

TABLE I: Character Analysis

Character	Distinctive features	What the example shows
Naruto	Orange clothing, spiky hair, cheek marks, headband	Combined identifiers and group affiliation.
Sasuke	Dark hair, restrained palette, changing costumes	Visual contrast and design development.
Light	Conventional clothing, controlled presentation	Appearance does not determine morality.
L	Messy hair, simple clothes, unusual posture	Body language can define identity.
Tanjiro	Checkered haori, earrings, forehead scar	Costume and accessories carry story meaning.



Fig. 1: Anime Character Visual Comparison

V. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

It can be seen from these examples that multiple visual design elements contribute to character identification. No one

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element completely describes character design. Contrast in visual design helps to create distinctive characters (Naruto and Sasuke). Posture is important in L's character, and costume and accessories in the Tanjiro. Although visual design may create initial opinions, it cannot completely describe a character's true personality and role. Light has a very standard visual appearance, however he carries out extreme actions in the story. To understand character actions and roles in the story, it is important to consider the narrative context.

5.1 Main Findings

• A combination of visual design elements create distinctive character identities.

• Colour contributes to character identification and contrast. However, meaning depends on context.

• Clothing and accessories can indicate group/ location and personal history.

• Shape, hair, facial design, posture and expression are important for identification.

• Initial expectations may be formed from visual design. However, character roles can be fully understood by considering character actions and relationships.

• If a character's clothing or visual design changes, this should be considered in relation to the point in the story.

5.2 Critical Evaluation

It cannot be said that there is one way to create effective character design. The design should be appropriate to the character, story, genre and practical aspects of animation. While visually appealing designs may be desirable, they may not be effective for storytelling. Visual design features should be easy to read and create an appropriate character identity. Designers should also not rely on set visual design stereotypes to indicate character morality / personality. Comparing the characters enables clear distinction between objective visual design evidence and subjective interpretation. However, different details may be noticed by another researcher or a different interpretation may be made. The findings in this research should be viewed as logical interpretations of these examples, rather than audience responses.

5.3 Practical Relevance for Animation Students

This research emphasises the importance of having distinctive silhouettes, easy to recognise features, meaningful costume details, and consistent visual design in characters. Decisions in visual design should be made for a reason. This may make character identification easier, indicate group membership, create expressiveness, or link character to story. Designs should be tested in different positions and from different distances.

VI. CONCLUSION

6.1 Conclusion

Through research and visual comparison, this research has looked into how visual design in characters relates to character roles in anime. Visual design features including colour, hair, face, clothing, shape, accessories, body language and repeated features were considered. It can be seen from these examples that character identities are created from multiple visual design features. Naruto and Sasuke show how contrasting visual design can create distinctive characters from characters in relation to each other. Light shows that character morality cannot be assumed from visual design. Posture and expression are highlighted in L, and patterned clothing and meaningful accessories in Tanjiro. Overall, visual design in anime characters aids identification of characters and initial opinions. However, to understand character roles, it is important to consider the narrative context. The actions, relationships, and development of characters must be considered to fully understand character roles. Therefore, visual design and storytelling work together.

VII. FUTURE SCOPE

Further research may be carried out to compare anime character design to Indian or other styles of animation. Alternatively, research may be carried out to consider how visual design in characters has changed over decades. Or research may be carried out to understand how visual design is interpreted by people from different cultural backgrounds. To make claims about audience responses, a larger sample size and approved research involving participants would be required.

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