

Transformative Printing: Communication in Visual Arts of Awareness for Educating Malaysia's Street Children

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Received: November 10th, 2025

Accepted: December 12th, 2025

Published: December 22nd, 2025

ABSTRACT

This studio-based research examines the use of visual communication arts to highlight the exclusion of street children in Malaysia from formal education due to the absence of essential identification documents. While government agencies such as SUHAKAM play an important role, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become key advocates in improving educational access. The study focuses on two NGOs, Yayasan Chow Kit and SUKA Society, both of which provide educational opportunities for marginalized and undocumented children. The project adopts a structured four-step studio methodology based on Wallas (2014), comprising: (i) Theme, (ii) Concept, (iii) Screen, and (iv) Print. Art Trivium students from UiTM Shah Alam applied this framework to produce screen-printed designs on functional items and translating complex social issues into visually accessible narratives. The findings indicate that this methodological approach effectively enhanced students' critical awareness and ability to communicate social issues through visual means. The resulting artworks demonstrated the potential of visual communication as a tool for advocacy fostering empathy and public discourse on educational inequality. Overall, the study confirms that visual communication transcends aesthetic expression to function as a medium for social engagement. The initiative aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4: Quality Education, 5: Gender Equality and 10: Reduced Inequalities, highlighting the role of visual arts in promoting inclusivity, equity and social resilience.

Keywords: Studio based research, Children Education, Visual Communication, Art Product

1.INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, access to formal education is dependent upon possessing official identification documents, such as birth certificates or national identity cards. However, numerous street children lack these vital documents owing to circumstances such as unregistered births, abandonment, or being born to undocumented or stateless parents. Without verification of citizenship, they are prohibited from accessing public education and are excluded from the formal educational system. This exclusion

sustains cycles of poverty and social marginalization, as these children frequently engage in informal employment or street activities to survive. Their undocumented status further obscures their presence in national records and policy frameworks, thereby necessitating non-governmental and community organizations to address the educational deficit through informal or alternative learning initiatives.

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) in its 2023 report highlight the government duty to ensure children basic rights are protected. These rights encompass protection, survival, participation and integration within society. All these duties are established and acknowledged through international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which affirms that children are entitled to safety, protection, and opportunities. One of the most important of these basic right to receive education. The report additionally emphasizes a range of initiatives, activities, and programs that have been undertaken to enhance public awareness of children's rights. One of the primary concerns identified is the issue of statelessness in Peninsular Malaysia. Several recommendations were proposed, including the elimination of gender discrimination in nationality legislation, the safeguarding of educational rights for stateless children, and the implementation of a Statelessness Determination Procedure. In this regard, the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) received 92 complaints concerning children's rights, including cases involving stateless children and individuals denied access to education (SUHAKAM, 2023). Preedep Nambiar (2025) stated that recent data showed more than 2,000 children are being held in immigration depots. SUHAKAM's Chief Children's Commissioner, Farah Nini Dusuki, asserted that such practices are fundamentally inconsistent with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which Malaysia has formally ratified.

Numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been founded in Malaysia with a particular focus on education. The SUKA Society also known as Persatuan Kebajikan Suara Kanak-kanak Malaysia was established to protect and encourage the most valuable interests of children. As of this year, the organization has successfully established five preschools in Sarawak, employing a staff of ten qualified educators (SUKA, 2025). Additionally, Yayasan Chow Kit (YCK) is a non-governmental organization dedicated to creating a secure environment for children and offering them a wide range of positive opportunities. The organization actively engages in initiatives with street children in the Chow Kit road. For instance, on 22 October 2025, YCK hosted the Blackout Cookies Program, during which 18 children were provided with the opportunity to engage in cookie-making activities.

Visual communication through art initiatives provides an impactful method for highlighting the issues encountered by street and undocumented children in Malaysia. In this study, Art Trivium students utilize screen printing techniques on canvas bags, T-shirts and book covers to transform social issues particularly children's right into tangible and visually engaging representations. By converting children's stories and social messages into wearable and commonplace items, these screen-printed designs expand their reach to a wider audience, fostering public engagement and contemplation. Such initiatives not only empower children by amplifying their voices and sharing their experiences but also serve to educate society, promoting empathy and stimulating dialogue concerning inclusion, identity and the right to education. The

application of screen printing as a medium enhances both accessibility and visibility, transforming art into a versatile, portable advocacy instrument that incorporates social awareness into everyday life. This initiative supports closely with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly in promoting inclusive education, equity, and fostering empathy within the community. The project also demonstrates how studio-based practices can serve as innovative tools for advocacy, raising awareness, and strengthening social resilience.

2. NGO-LED EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES

Established in 2010, Yayasan Chow Kit supports the rights of street children, protecting them from abuse and facilitating their access to essential services including shelter, education, and healthcare. In 2024, the organization set up the One Stop Children's Centre at 19 Jalan Belia, Chow Kit Kuala Lumpur a three-story establishment that consolidates YCK, PAKK and KLKP to deliver comprehensive care, encompassing education, extracurricular activities, protection and counselling services in collaboration with Humankind. The organization also runs a monthly Art and Craft Class throughout the year. The class is designed to help children grow their creativity and improve motor skills through fun and engaging learning. In these sessions, children learn art techniques, show their imagination, and become more confident in their creative abilities (YCK Annual Report, 2024). Looking at the data from 2021, Yayasan Chow Kit has documented a total of 3,383 cases. The largest number of these cases was for food aid (1,916 cases). Other key needs included financial assistance (219 cases), and sanitation packs (195 cases). Smaller numbers were recorded for medical/dental (76 cases) and education support (33 cases), while other support (like clothing and counselling) accounted for 944 cases (YCK Annual Report, 2021).

Conversely, SUKA Society has initiated the Empowered2Teach project to enable the indigenous population to have enhanced access to education. The primary objective of the effort is to empower Orang Asal educators with the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to serve as catalysts for educational and community advancement in their villages. The project enhances the capabilities of schools in indigenous regions by training local educators, thereby promoting sustainable development through culturally relevant, community-driven and accessible education. Empowered2Teach confronts structural educational impediments, fosters leadership among local educators and cultivates a generation of students with improved learning prospects and future aspirations (SUKA Annual Report, 2021/22, 2023). Both groups' actions demonstrate with the government, NGOs are essential in securing these children's futures by providing access to education. Nonetheless, enhancing public awareness of this issue must remain a priority. Increased community about the issue faced by street and undocumented children will lead to more support and resources being provided for them.

3.ART AS VISUAL COMMUNICATION

The part that visual arts play in making social changes happen is a major topic studied in many different fields. Research shows that visual art is special because it can break through language barriers, make people feel strong emotions, and encourage deep thinking. When visual arts are used for social campaigns, experts highlight that they can share strong messages, build understanding with empathy and create common experiences that push people to take action on important social problems. Artists play a crucial role in promoting awareness through visual communication by creating compelling artworks. They use diverse mediums such as painting, illustration, sculpture, photography and digital art to highlight urgent social issues, share important messages and build an emotional bond with their audiences (Rachael, 2022). Studies by Murray (2021) show that visual arts are good at getting past language and culture differences because they use universal symbols, signs and metaphors that everyone can relate to. This strong ability makes art a powerful way to advocate for change and promote social improvement (Murray, 2021). Furthermore, Bradshaw (2016) and Rezaei et al. (2023) state that visual arts help build empathy by asking people to think about different perspectives. Participatory art initiatives, as demonstrated in Lee's (2013) case study can cultivate shared experiences that unify various communities, enhancing understanding, social cohesion and bridging social resources.

Visual art serves both representational and expressive purposes; therefore, Osborne (1970) asserts that comprehending the significance of art necessitates an appreciation of the attributes of representation and expression which elucidate the meaning, understanding, and aesthetics of art. Evaluating art is a complex undertaking because it involves a lively interplay between two core elements: subjective interpretation and objective assessment. The challenge of art evaluation often stems from the influence these components have on each other. Subjectivity specifically includes the emotions, personal experiences, and distinct viewpoints that individuals bring to their encounter with a piece of art. To judge how good a piece of art is, objectivity requires using neutral and fact-based standards. These standards include things like the formal elements such as how the art is put together beside its historical setting and its importance to culture (Wan Samiati et al., 2024). In reference to the explanation that was provided earlier, it is essential for artists to not only incorporate children as subjects or content into their works but also to make use of their artwork as a means of bringing attention to the significance of children's rights. For example, the artist Bayu Utomo Rajiki's work was highlighted for addressing serious issues of child abuse and abandonment through evocative artistic imagery. Though not exactly about undocumented children, his themes touch on children's vulnerability and social exclusion.



Figure 3.1: Bayu Utomo Radjikin, *Newspaper*, Mixed media, 1993. (90 x 122 cm).

Bayu Utomo Radjikin, beginning in the early 1990's gains attention viewers with confronting images directly addressing the critical issue of child abuse and abandonment. His work "Newspaper" 1993 uses collages of real objects such as tubes and drips attached to the figure of the child on his work. The figure of the child with burnt hands, a bandaged face and tubes surrounding him are drawn on a collage of newspaper cuttings. The collages of newspaper headlines implying that the suffering of these abused children is acknowledged through media exposure (Abdullah, 2011)



Figure 3.2: Yeow Teck Chai with his illustration for *Let Our Youngsters Dream*

Yeow Teck Chai authored an art book entitled *Let Our Youngsters Dream*, which illustrates nostalgic childhood settings in Malaysia, featuring youngsters from underprivileged origins. Revenue from his endeavors finances philanthropic initiatives for disadvantaged youth. His work exemplifies how art may reflect children's life and promote their education and wellbeing (Jared Wee, 2023)

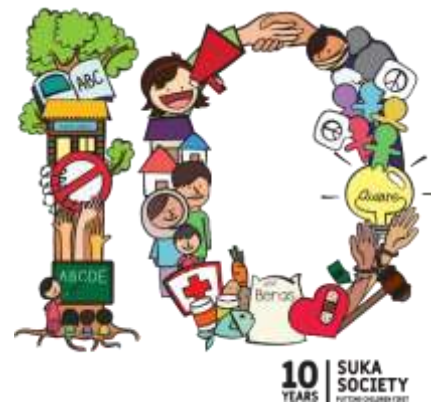


Figure 3.3: Digital poster from Yayasan Chow Kit 2016 (Left)

Figure 3.4: Poster from SUKA Society year 2020 (right)

The images above exemplify visual communication through posters utilized by Yayasan Chow Kit (YCK) and SUKA Society to promote their activities and attract public attention, thereby securing community support and recognition for their programs. These posters function as effective communication instruments that integrate aesthetic allure with significant messages, facilitating the transmission of the organizations' missions and the urgency of their causes. Utilizing striking imagery, typography, and colour such posters not only educate the public about welfare programs but also elicit empathy and promote engagement. Posters emphasizing children's access to education or safety from abuse can evoke emotional responses from audiences, encouraging them to volunteer, donate or campaign for change. Through the amalgamation of design and activism, YCK and SUKA proficiently employ visual communication to enhance community awareness and bolster support for at-risk children in Malaysia.

The significance of this research lies in its reinforcement of visual art as an active agent of social engagement rather than a passive form of representation. By highlighting how art can move beyond depicting children as mere subjects to using art as a platform for advocacy, the study contributes to broader discussions on ethical responsibility within artistic practice. Furthermore, by contextualizing children's vulnerability and exclusion within visual narratives, this research demonstrates how art can amplify marginalized voices and stimulate public discourse.

4.OBJECTIVE

The primary aim of this study is to utilize screen printing as a medium of visual communication to enhance awareness regarding the rights and challenges faced by street children in Malaysia (Yayasan Chow Kit & Suka Society). This project corresponds with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), primarily aimed at fostering inclusive education, equity and community compassion. The research demonstrates how studio-based activities can function as new tools for promotion and social resilience.

5.ISSUE

The lack of public understanding and empathy regarding the challenges faced by underprivileged and undocumented children underscores a critical social concern. In the realm of art and design, creative practices serve as an accessible means to foster empathy, critical awareness, and social responsibility. However, their capacity to tackle these societal concerns remains inadequately investigated. This study utilizes screen printing as a visual communication technique historically associated with advertising and a medium for social activism. The initiative creates useful items like tote bags, T-shirts and book covers, converting societal challenges into daily visual storytelling, thereby enhancing artistic resilience and fostering social awareness and community involvement. The academic literature including works by Milbrant (2010), Gunter (2019), Bhroin & Cleary (2021) and Nyamari (2024), consistently stresses that visual arts are essential for communicating compelling messages designed to inspire change and quick engagement on social issues.

6.METHODOLOGY

This project implemented a studio-based methodology for fostering creativity, which was adapted from Graham Wallas's theoretical framework (2014). Wallas's framework typically delineates four stages in the creative process: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. However, this study focused exclusively on two of these stages: preparation which involved exploring the defined problem and acquiring necessary knowledge and verification which assessed the validity and practical utility of the proposed solution.

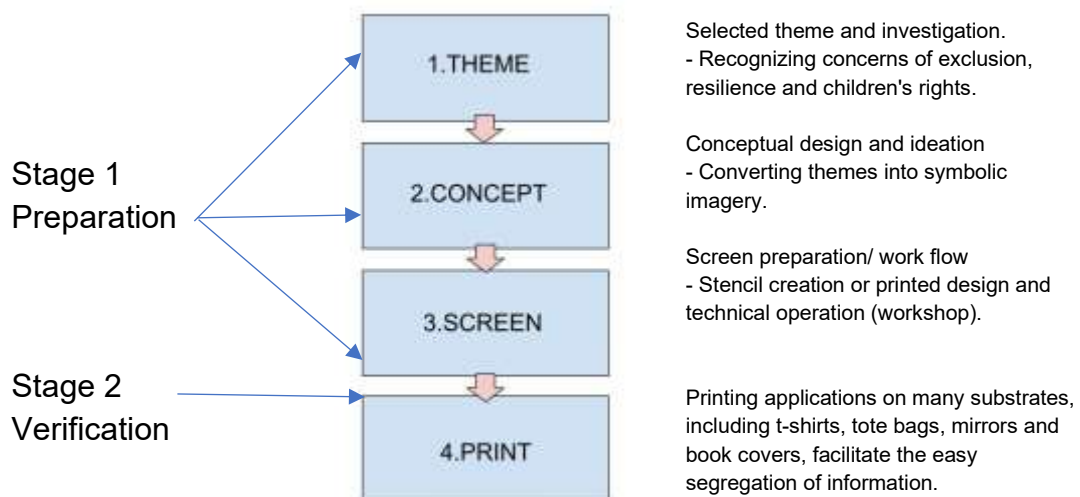


Chart 6.1: Workflow for the project

Screen printing was selected for its accessibility, cost-effectiveness, reproducibility and historical association with activism and advocacy. The following outlines the workflow for generating the design and products. Screen printing on products is a stencil-based printmaking technique in which ink is transferred through a fine mesh screen onto functional or decorative surfaces. Selectively blocked areas control the ink's passage, allowing precise and consistent reproduction of visual

elements with high colour saturation and material durability. Chart 6.1 shows the workflow of the project while the process conducted in the workshop is visually represent in figure 6.2

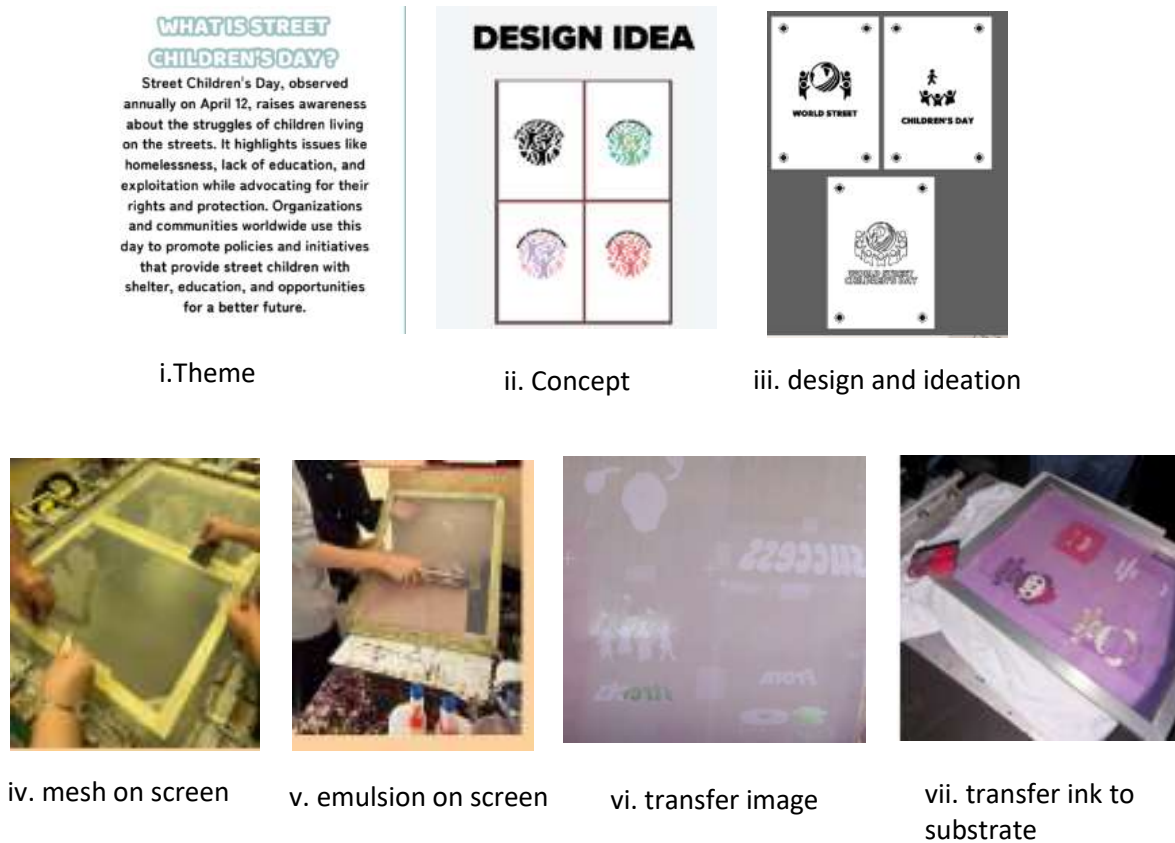


Figure 6.2: the stages (i-vii) of the screen printing process

7.IMPACT OF THE CREATIVE PRODUCT

Impact to:		
Individual	Community	Economic Growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds empathy & creativity Raises awareness on children's rights Inspires advocacy through art 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthens social responsibility Promotes solidarity & dialogue Engages NGOs, schools & policymakers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open social entrepreneurship opportunities. Generate income from creative workable product. Value added to local product.

Table 7.1: Impact from the created product

Art may serve as a catalyst for empathy, creativity and social awareness as this project effort represents. The project enhances public awareness of children's rights and fosters advocacy through visual means so reinforcing social responsibility and

encouraging solidarity and conversation among communities. Collaboration with NGOs and universities will further amplify its influence converting creative practice into a medium for education and social transformation. Furthermore, by creating usable, marketable objects, the effort facilitates avenues for social entrepreneurship, revenue generation and value enhancement of local products, demonstrating that art can concurrently promote advocacy, empowerment and sustainable development.

8.RESULT AND DISCUSSION

These activities involved 40 students from Art Trivium, Faculty of Art & Design UiTM Shah Alam. The outcome establishes that screen printing functions not just as an artistic method but also as an influential medium for campaigns. This attempt enhances the distribution of social messages through the creation of portable and visible products, effectively connecting creative activity with community engagement. Screen printing is a more economical technique than machine-based mass production, rendering it suitable for educational and social initiatives.



Figure 8.1: Example of product

In contrast to traditional advertising like posters or booklets whether in physical or digital form, visual communication through functional art emotionally engages audiences stimulate an empathy and fostering critical reflection. This strategy raises awareness and social responsibility in both artists and consumers in addition to enhancing technical and aesthetic skills. Figure 8.1 and figure 8.2 depicts screen printing products resulting from a studio-based technique that promotes community engagement, consistent with recent studies on the importance of creativity in transdisciplinary collaboration and social resilience.



Figure 8.2: More example on the product.

8.1 Alignments with sustainable development goals

The results are closely aligned to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrating the contribution of visual arts practice to global targets

8.1.1 a SDG 4: Quality Education

The initiative highlighted the exclusion of street children from formal education regarding SDG 4: Quality Education by utilizing screen-printed materials to convey this message.

8.1.2 b SDG 5: Gender Equality

The support has further advanced SDG 5: Gender Equality by ensuring that youngsters, irrespective of gender are represented in the campaign.

8.1.3 c SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

The initiative addressing SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities underscored social injustice and the disparity between street children and their counterparts in mainstream education, utilizing visual outputs such as t-shirts, tote bags and books to enhance community awareness of the significance of inclusion and equity as illustrated in figure 8.2. These results demonstrate how localized creative acts can significantly contribute to global discussions on resilience and justice.

9. CONCLUSION

This studio-based research contributes to the field of visual communication and socially engaged art by demonstrating the efficacy of screen printing as a medium for advocacy and social impact. It provides a systematic, studio-based methodology that integrates artistic practice with social engagement, fostering empathy, critical awareness and common responsibility among participants. The research highlights how visual art can transcend aesthetic purposes to function as a tool for education, activism and community resilience. Furthermore, the project offers a replicable framework for collaboration with NGOs, incorporation into educational curriculum and development of participatory community initiatives. By aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the study underscores the potential of visual arts to promote social sustainability, inclusivity and resilience advancing both theoretical understanding and practical applications in socially responsive art practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI) to help refine and improve the language, clarity, and grammar of this manuscript. This tool was used only to make the writing better and more consistent. All original ideas, data, and results were developed and validated by the authors themselves. The authors are fully responsible for all the information and the final version of this paper.

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