Semiotic Analysis of Art Drawing–House–Tree–Person (AD-HTP) Drawings as a Pedagogical Approach in Art Education: A Study of Foundation Art Students at the University of Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Drawing is an important component of visual arts education, functioning not only as a creative output but also as a visual text through which students construct and communicate meaning. Beyond aesthetic representation, drawings may reflect students' cognitive processes, emotional expressions, cultural references, and individual experiences. However, drawing activities in art education are often evaluated primarily in terms of technical proficiency and aesthetic qualities, with limited attention given to the systematic interpretation of their symbolic meanings. This study aims to investigate the pedagogical potential of semiotic readings of Art Drawing–House–Tree–Person (AD-HTP) drawings created by university foundation art students in Malaysia. Although AD-HTP tasks have traditionally been associated with psychological and projective drawing assessments (Buck, 1948), this research approaches them as visual artefacts for educational interpretation rather than as clinical diagnostic instruments. Guided by semiotic theory, particularly the concepts of signs, signifiers, and signified meanings, the study seeks to identify and categorise the visual signs and symbolic features present in students' drawings, interpret their potential relationships with students' cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences, and examine the implications of semiotic analysis for teaching and learning. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study will employ systematic visual analysis and contextual interpretation to explore how meaning is constructed through visual elements, symbolic representations, and compositional relationships. The findings are expected to contribute to a pedagogically grounded framework for interpreting AD-HTP drawings, enabling art educators to develop more reflective, culturally responsive, and student-centred teaching practices. By addressing the limited research on semiotic approaches to structured drawing activities in Malaysian higher education, this study seeks to expand the pedagogical applications of drawing, strengthen visual literacy, and inform future approaches to art education, assessment, and curriculum development.

Keywords: Semiotics; AD-HTP drawings; visual arts education; foundation art students; visual literacy; pedagogical framework

INTRODUCTION

Drawing is more than an artistic product; it is also a visual form through which students communicate ideas, experiences, and meanings. In art education, students' choices of symbols, shapes, colours, lines, and composition can provide opportunities to explore how they understand and represent the world (Eisner, 2002). However, drawing activities are often assessed mainly through technical skills and aesthetic qualities, while the meanings behind students' visual choices receive less systematic attention.

The Art Drawing–House–Tree–Person (AD-HTP) task offers a structured drawing activity involving representations of a house, a tree, and a person. Although related tasks have commonly been used in

psychological settings, this study approaches AD-HTP drawings as visual texts for educational exploration, not as tools for clinical diagnosis. Semiotic theory provides a framework for examining how visual signs and symbols may communicate meaning. The interpretation of these signs will be informed by students' own explanations and relevant personal and cultural contexts.

In Malaysian foundation art education, students enter university with different levels of visual literacy, artistic experience, and cultural knowledge. A structured approach to interpreting their drawings may help educators better understand students' visual communication and support reflective, student-centred teaching. However, research on the pedagogical application of semiotic analysis to AD-HTP drawings in Malaysian higher education remains limited. This study therefore examines the visual signs and symbolic features in students' AD-HTP drawings, explores the meanings they may communicate, and considers how semiotic analysis can inform teaching and learning.

Research Objective

- To identify and categorise the semiotic elements and symbolic features present in AD-HTP drawings produced by foundation art students.
- To interpret how these semiotic elements relate to students' cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences, drawing on students' explanations and relevant context.
- To examine the implications of semiotic analysis of AD-HTP drawings for teaching and learning in foundation art education.

Research Question

- What semiotic elements and symbolic features are present in the AD-HTP drawings produced by foundation art students?
- How do the semiotic elements in AD-HTP drawings relate to students' cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences?
- What are the implications of semiotic analysis of AD-HTP drawings for teaching and learning in foundation art education?

Problem Statement

Art is increasingly recognised as a valuable part of teaching and learning because it supports creativity, engagement, and meaning-making.

Nevertheless, the educational value of students' drawings is not always explored through systematic analysis of their visual signs and symbols. Drawing activities may be assessed primarily in terms of technical ability or aesthetic quality, leaving the meanings students intend to communicate less fully understood.

This issue is relevant to foundation art students, whose drawings may reflect varied experiences, cultural references, and ways of understanding the world. Although AD-HTP-style tasks have been associated with psychological assessment, their potential as a non-clinical pedagogical resource in Malaysian higher education requires further investigation. Educators need an appropriate interpretive approach that considers visual evidence alongside students' own accounts and contexts, rather than assuming that a particular symbol has a fixed meaning.

The gap addressed by this study is the limited exploration of how semiotic analysis of AD-HTP drawings can be applied to teaching and learning in Malaysian foundation art education. The study will identify visual signs and symbolic features, explore the meanings students associate with them, and examine the potential educational applications of this analysis. It will not use drawings to diagnose psychological conditions or make definitive claims about students' internal states.

Significance of the Study

This concept paper positions AD-HTP drawings as visual texts that can be explored through semiotic analysis in art education. It proposes an approach that extends discussion beyond technical proficiency and aesthetic outcomes to include the signs, representations, and meanings students communicate through drawing.

For teaching practice, the proposed framework may support reflective dialogue, student self-explanation, and culturally responsive discussion of artwork. It may also help students recognise and articulate relationships between their visual decisions and intended meanings, informing formative assessment and curriculum development in foundation art programmes.

At the scholarly level, the paper addresses the intersection of semiotics, structured drawing activities, and art pedagogy in Malaysian higher education. Its contribution is a contextual, non-diagnostic framework that brings visual evidence together with students' own accounts when interpreting AD-HTP drawings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study draws on three complementary perspectives to examine House–Tree–Person (HTP) drawings as visual artefacts in foundation art education: Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Semiotic Theory, Roland Barthes's theory of signification, and Schwarz and Clore's Affect-as-Information Theory.

Together, these perspectives support the analysis of visible signs, the meanings attached to them, and the possible role of affect in students' interpretations. The theories are used to guide educational inquiry rather than to diagnose students' psychological conditions.

Peirce's Triadic Semiotic Theory

Peirce's semiotic theory explains meaning through the relationship between the representamen (the sign), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning produced through interpretation). His categories of icon, index, and symbol provide a framework for examining how visual features may signify or suggest meaning.

In this study, the framework will guide the identification and interpretation of visual elements in students' HTP drawings, while recognising that meaning depends on context and cannot be inferred from a visual feature alone.

Barthes's Theory of Signification

Barthes's approach distinguishes denotation, or the apparent and descriptive meaning of an image, from connotation, or the cultural, personal, and associative meanings that may be attached to it. This distinction allows the study to consider both what is visibly represented in an HTP drawing and how its features may be interpreted in relation to students' experiences and cultural contexts. Students' explanations and reflections will help contextualise these interpretations.

AD-HTP Drawing Activity

The House–Tree–Person drawing activity asks students to represent three familiar subjects: a house, a tree, and a person. In this research, the drawings are treated as visual artefacts for exploring representation, meaning-making, and visual decision-making in art education, rather than as diagnostic instruments.

Analysis will focus on observable features—such as line, form, composition, detail, and spatial arrangement—and will consider these alongside students' own accounts of their drawing choices.

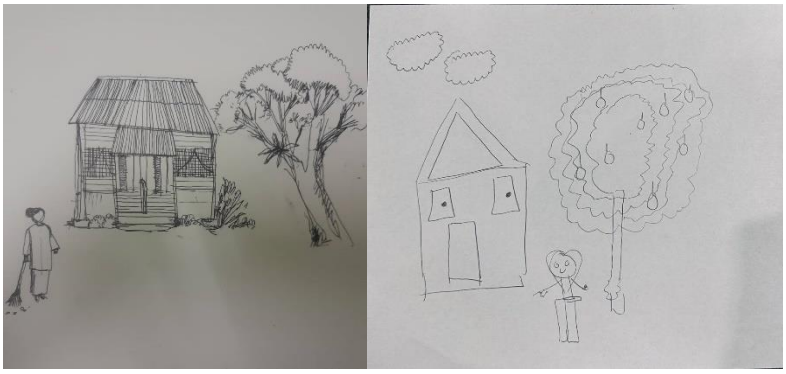


Figure 1. The drawing of AD-HTP (Art Drawing-House Tree Person)

Affect-as-Information Theory

Schwarz and Clore's Affect-as-Information Theory proposes that people may use their feelings as information when making judgements. Applied cautiously to this study, the theory offers a way to consider how students' reported feelings or emotional responses may inform their explanations of visual choices and drawing experiences. Feelings will not be inferred solely from the drawings; instead, they will be considered only where supported by students' own reflections and the study's data.

Integration of the Theoretical Perspectives

The three perspectives serve complementary purposes. Peirce's theory supports the identification and classification of signs; Barthes's framework helps distinguish descriptive features from possible cultural or personal meanings; and Affect-as-Information Theory provides a cautious lens for considering students' reported feelings in their interpretations. Integrated, these perspectives establish a framework for examining HTP drawings as visual texts and for considering how semiotic analysis may inform reflective, context-sensitive teaching and learning in foundation art education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study proposes a qualitative-dominant sequential mixed-methods design. The qualitative component will comprise systematic analysis of students' AD-HTP drawings and semi-structured interviews. A short questionnaire will provide descriptive information about students' perceptions of the drawing activity and their self-reported affective responses. The design brings visual evidence and students' accounts into dialogue; questionnaire results will contextualise, not diagnose, participants' experiences.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population is foundation-level art students enrolled at the selected Malaysian university. The proposed sample will be drawn from an accessible foundation art cohort using purposive, criterion-based sampling. Students will be eligible if they are enrolled in the relevant foundation art programme, are able to participate in the drawing activity, and provide informed consent. The final number of participants will be determined in consultation with the programme, cohort size, access arrangements, and institutional requirements. The achieved sample and reasons for non-participation will be reported; the sample will not be presented as statistically representative.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Three instruments are proposed. First, the AD-HTP drawing task will invite each participant to produce a drawing representing a house, a tree, and a person under consistent classroom instructions. The task sheet will record the instructions, time allocation, materials, and relevant procedural notes. Drawings will be

coded using observable features such as line, form, colour, scale, detail, composition, and spatial arrangement.

Second, a semi-structured interview guide will invite participants to explain their drawing choices, the meanings they associate with particular features, the references or experiences informing those choices, and their reflections on the drawing process. Prompts will be open-ended and non-leading; students will not be asked to disclose sensitive personal information. Interviews will be audio-recorded only with separate permission and transcribed for analysis.

Third, a brief questionnaire will collect task-related feedback and self-reported perceptions or feelings associated with the activity. Where Likert-scale items are used, response options and item wording will be clearly defined. The questionnaire will not function as a psychological or clinical test. The instruments will be reviewed for clarity and piloted with a small group of students who are not included in the main analysis, subject to access and ethical approval. Revisions following the pilot will be documented.

Data Analysis

Drawing data will first be catalogued and described systematically. Peirce's representamen–object–interpretant relationship will guide the identification of signs and possible sign relations. Barthes's denotation–connotation distinction will structure the movement from literal visual description to contextual interpretation. Students' interview accounts will be coded thematically to identify explanations, cultural references, intended meanings, and reflections on visual decisions. Affect-as-Information Theory will inform analysis only of feelings and judgements explicitly reported by participants in interviews or questionnaires.

Closed questionnaire responses will be summarised using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, and, where appropriate, item means. Open-ended questionnaire responses will be included in the thematic analysis. A case matrix will bring together each drawing's visual features, semiotic reading, student explanation, and reported affective response. Cross-case comparison will identify recurring patterns and differences. The researcher will maintain an audit trail of coding decisions and use participant explanations to check interpretations. Ambiguity will be retained and reported rather than forced into a single reading.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional committee before recruitment or data collection. Participation will be voluntary and based on informed consent; students will be told that they may decline to answer any question or withdraw without academic penalty. Participation or non-participation will not affect course grades or relationships with teaching staff. Where the researcher has a teaching role, recruitment and consent procedures should, where practicable, be managed by a person who is not responsible for assessing the students.

Participants will be assigned codes, and identifying details will be removed from transcripts and research records. Drawings, recordings, transcripts, and questionnaire data will be stored securely and accessed only by the research team. The study will explain how drawings may be reproduced in publications or presentations and obtain specific permission for identifiable reproduction. Findings will be presented in aggregate or anonymised form. The study is educational and non-clinical: no diagnosis will be made, and visual features will not be treated as evidence of a mental-health condition. If a participant becomes uncomfortable, the activity or interview will be paused or stopped, and appropriate institutional support information will be made available.

DISCUSSION

The conceptual framework is designed as a practical sequence for analysing each AD-HTP drawing alongside the student's account of the drawing process. It moves from observable visual evidence, to sign interpretation, to students' reported affective responses, and finally to pedagogical reflection. The three

theories perform distinct but connected analytical functions; none is used to assign a fixed meaning to a symbol or to infer a student's psychological condition.

First, Peirce's triadic model provides the initial coding structure. The researcher records the representamen (the visible sign or feature), considers its possible object (what it refers to within the drawing or the student's account), and documents the interpretant (the meaning produced through interpretation). Peirce's icon, index, and symbol categories can be used where appropriate to describe how a feature operates as a sign. At this stage, the analysis remains close to the drawing: for example, it records the depicted form, line quality, scale, placement, repetition, colour, and spatial relationships before proposing an interpretation.

Second, Barthes's distinction between denotation and connotation deepens the reading. Denotation records what is visibly present in the house, tree, or person representation, using descriptive language. Connotation considers possible personal, social, or cultural associations. These interpretations are checked against the student's explanation and relevant context. A visual feature is therefore not treated as having one universal meaning; alternative readings and uncertainty are documented where the evidence does not support a firm interpretation.

Third, Affect-as-Information Theory is applied to the students' reported feelings and judgements about the task and their own visual decisions. The researcher considers questionnaire responses and interview statements about the drawing experience, including feelings students explicitly identify and the ways they say those feelings informed their choices. Emotion is not diagnosed or inferred from colour, form, pressure, or imagery alone. This stage connects affective self-report with the visual analysis while keeping the two sources of evidence distinguishable.

The analytical process can be operationalised through a case-by-case matrix with four linked fields: (1) visual evidence and Peircean sign relation; (2) denotative description and possible connotative reading; (3) the student's stated interpretation and affective response; and (4) a pedagogical implication or question for further dialogue. The drawing task supplies the visual artefact, a semi-structured interview elicits students' explanations, and a short questionnaire records their perceptions of the task and self-reported affective responses. Qualitative data are analysed thematically, while closed questionnaire items are summarised descriptively. The findings are then compared across sources to identify convergence, difference, and cases where interpretation remains uncertain. The framework's practical value lies in making interpretation transparent and teachable. It gives educators a structured way to move from description to contextual interpretation without treating students' drawings as diagnostic evidence. It also encourages educators to ask students what their visual decisions mean to them, making the learner's voice an essential part of the analysis.

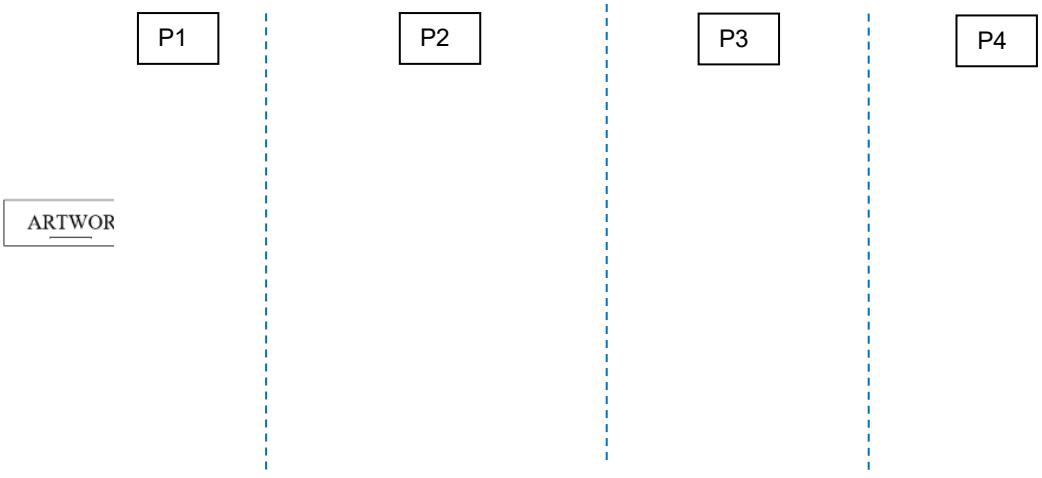


Figure 2. Proposed conceptual framework integrating Peirce's Triadic Semiotic Theory, Barthes's Two Orders of Signification, and Schwarz and Clore's Affect-as-Information Theory.

CONCLUSION

This concept paper proposes an integrated framework for understanding AD-HTP drawings as visual texts in foundation art education. By combining Peirce's Triadic Semiotic Theory, Barthes's Two Orders of Signification, and Schwarz and Clore's Affect-as-Information Theory, the framework connects the identification of visual signs with the interpretation of denotative and connotative meanings and with students' explicitly reported affective responses.

The conceptual contribution is a practical, context-sensitive sequence for reading drawings without assigning fixed meanings to visual symbols or making clinical claims. It places observable features, students' explanations, and relevant personal and cultural contexts in dialogue. In doing so, it offers art educators a structured basis for reflective discussion, formative feedback, and the development of students' visual literacy.

For researchers, the framework provides an adaptable analytical structure for studying meaning-making in structured drawing activities. Its emphasis on triangulating visual analysis with student accounts and self-reported responses makes the interpretive process more transparent and supports careful consideration of both shared patterns and individual differences. The framework therefore contributes a non-diagnostic pedagogical perspective to scholarship on semiotics and visual arts education.

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