



THE SENSE OF LOCAL IDENTITY CHARACTERISTIC IN MALAYSIAN ANIMATION

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Animation is a reflection of folks' lifestyle via a set of signs and symbols in the cultural industry which can be a potential platform in contributing to the establishments of national identity. Western countries and Japan seem to be prominent pioneers which are becoming the most influential animation in the creative industry. *Kluang Man* was inspired by *Batman & Robin*, while *anime* style could be identified in *Anak-anak Sidek*, *Yokies* and *Sang Wira* in the late 90's. Apparently, these have proven that Malaysia is also not an exception. Datuk Lat, a well-known local cartoonist, admitted that Malaysian animation lacks a sense of identity in developing character design, especially amongst today's apprentice generation. Therefore, this paper will investigate the development of local identity focusing on the characters' physical design selected from the most prevalent animations in Malaysia. Content Analysis was used to analyze the characteristic differences between the five chosen leading characters. The results found that only *Boboiboy's* character is highly influenced by the Japanese styles especially the facial features and haircut. Nevertheless, *Usop Sontorian*, *Bola Kampung*, *Upin-Ipin* and *Kampung Boy* are still standing strong on their own while sustaining the local identity without the influence from other animations.

Keywords: Local identity, Characteristic, Animation, Visual communication, Character design.

Introduction

Animation is a reflection of folks' lifestyle via a set of signs and symbols in the cultural industry which can be a potential platform to contribute to the establishments of national identity (Shamsudin 2001; Barrett 1982). National identity is represented by language, history, literature, music and other cultural traditions that build a national narrative (Alcoff & Mendieta 2003). Identity, in today's contemporary world, is influenced by numerous sources such as national characteristic, ethnicity, social class, community, and gender. Meanwhile, the key of identity concept can be detected when the focus is on various issues that are related to different uniqueness, for example, the ethnic community is focusing on local context and individual privacy (Hall 1997).

Without identity, a character cannot be recognized or differentiated. Datuk Lat, a well-known local cartoonist, admitted that Malaysia is lacking a sense of identity in producing animation character design. Character design is the second most important criterion after the story line. The word 'character' is defined as personal (Djalle & Zaharudin 2006). Animation character refers to a character that displays the sense of strength, weakness, kindness or bad characteristic and the objective of what it wants to achieve. The combination of a personality and attitudes can make a particular character be easily remembered (Kerlow 2009).

Character styles can be divided into three types:

No	Character Style	Meaning
1	Cartoon Character	The style of a caricature that represents human and animals with some parts of the body being distorted and exaggerated.
2	Stylized Character	The combination of cartoon and realistic styles. It is also known as fantasy imagination.
3	Realistic Character	The character that is similar to the real-life character with high quality of strokes and colors.

A character is considered a success when it is believable to the audience even though it does not exist. The character must be new, unique and fresh. A stereotyped character or a weak identity usually fails to attract the audience. Characters are not necessarily human figures. They can also be presented in other figures like animals, florals, or objects.

Literature Review

Malaysian Animation

In 2009, about 200 companies registered under the Malaysian Technology and Multimedia which is supported by the government as an effort to increase the productions of local animation industry (Fadli & Md Siddin 2010). Compared to previous years, the Malaysian animation industry has become full-fledged due to the advancement of technology that caused the quality of the production to improve remarkably. Bibi Norshuhada (2015) reported that five Malaysian animation studios have signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) to collaborate with established international companies. To illustrate this, Lil' Critter Workshop signed with Grafizix Co. Ltd. (South Korea), Animasia Productions Sdn. Bhd. with Zodiak Kids (France), Funcul Sdn. Bhd. with Semerkand Radyo Ve TV (Turkey), Giggle Garage Animations with Funny Flex (South Korea) and Frogtale Studio Sdn. Bhd. with Kartonrobot Animation Studio (Turkey).

Malaysia can now be proud of the local animation production since *Upin-Ipin* has become a popular character not only in Malaysia but also in Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei. Furthermore, the latest animation, *'Boboiboy The Movie'* which is supported by The Multimedia Development Corporation Malaysia (MDEC), unexpectedly hit RM13 millions after 17 days of showing. This is a good sign for the Malaysian animation industry.


Lent (2004) classified four major themes of animation in Malaysia which are fairytales, lifestyle, fantasy, and superhero to be claimed as locals. For example, *Kluang Man* is a superhero animation series inspired by Batman and has been adapted to the local version. Anandam Xavier produced the first short animation in Malaysia in 1978 entitled *Hikayat Sang Kancil* which portrays a fantasy of animals' life. After his success with the short animation, other series with similar concept were produced such as *Sang Kancil dan Monyet*, *Sang Kancil dan Buaya*, *Gagak yang Bijak*, *Arnab yang Sombong* and *Singa yang Haloba* (Rozianah 2015).


Usop Sontorian was the first Malaysian animation series that reflect numerous ethnicities through the friendship of Chinese, Malay and Indian race. Likewise, *Kampung Boy* by Datuk Lat also depicts the local identity through the village lifestyle, games, physical features and others. The storyline revolves around a village boy named *Lat* who is actually the main character himself. Except political matters, the story also tells about his lifestyle in the village and the current issues that happened in Malaysia. This has become Lat's principle in making artwork (Khalid 2010).


Upin-Ipin was among the latest and the most successful Malaysian animation in 2011 as accredited by Malaysian Books of Record. Les'Copaque Production Sdn Bhd produced it with its first film entitled *Geng Pengembaraan Bermula* (The Journey Begins). *Upin-Ipin* becomes very popular in Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei until the production team decided to produce a series of *Upin-Ipin*. The series reveals Malaysia's village lifestyle and keeping intact with the local identity of human physique, village surroundings and simple themes can be easily understood by children. *Upin-Ipin* series shows a good attitude in life such as being kind, respectful, helpful and honest including performing prayers and fasting during Ramadhan. Not only that the series appeals to the children, but also to the whole family to watch (Rezki 2009).


Although the local animations have become more successful and fun to watch by all ages, do the characters portray the local Malaysian identity? Does the audience notice the Malaysian culture and the identity differences through the animation on the television screen? This research, therefore, will investigate the development of local identity focusing on the characters' physical similarity among the most prevalent animations in Malaysia. It also seeks to find out whether there are local, Japanese or Western style influences in the character design.


The Profile of Malaysia's Most Prevalent Animation Characters

<i>Kampung Boy</i> (1979)		
No	Character	Profile
1.		<p>Name of character: Lat</p> <p>Characteristic: Rounded face, dot eyes, the nose shape is like number 3, no teeth, messy hair, short body and no shoes.</p> <p>Achievements: 1998 – Eisenhower Fellowship 2002 –Asian Fukuoka Cultural Awards 2005 – Petronas Reporter Awards (Special Jury Award) 2007 – Doctorate (Honour) in Anthropology & Sociology 2010 – Civitella Ranieri Visual Arts Fellowship 2015: <i>Kampung Boy</i> Awards for a cartoonist.</p> <p>Producer: Matinee Entertainment</p>

<i>Usop Sontorian</i> (1996)		
No	Character	Profile
2.		<p>Name of character: Usop</p> <p>Characteristic: Oval face, rounded eyes, number 3 nose, gap teeth, no hair, short body and wearing slippers.</p> <p>Achievements: The 1st Malaysian Animation series in Malaysian Book of Records</p> <p>Producer: Kharisma Pictures Sdn Bhd.</p>

Bola Kampung (2007)		
No	Character	Profile
3.		Name of character: <i>Iwan</i>
		Characteristic: Oval face, small rounded eyes, small nose, gap teeth, smart haircut, a little bit bigger head compared to the body.
		Achievements: English translation titled Football Kids on Disney Channel for 16 countries.
		Producer: Animasia Studios.

Upin-Ipin (2007)		
No	Character	Profile
4.		Name of character: <i>Ipin</i>
		Characteristic: Rounded face, big eyes, small nose, big mouth, no hair, short body and small feet wearing slippers.
		Achievements: The most successful animation 2011 awarded by Malaysian Book of Records.
		Producer: Les'Copaque

Boboiboy (2011)		
No	Character	Profile
5.		Name of character: <i>Boboiboy</i>
		Characteristic: heart shaped face, rounded eyes, small nose, thin lips, sharp and flat hair, big head, balanced body and wearing shoes.
		Achievements : - - Has been shown in 45 countries all over the world - Translated into English, Russia, Arabic & Mandarin.
		Producer: Animonsta

Japanese and Western Influences

Japan and Western countries are the most prominent pioneers in the animation industry. Hence, it is much expected that they have influenced the characters' identity of our local animation. As an example, *Kluang Man* was inspired by Batman & Robin, while *anime* style can be seen in *Anak-anak Sidek* as well as *Yokies and Sang Wira* in the late 90's (Hassan 2004). Both require different learning techniques in

drawing. Western education often focuses on basic anatomy figure drawing whereas Japan, through *anime* and *manga*, usually creates simple characters yet stylish which can be easily imitated and admired by their followers (Hafiz & Zpalanzi 2009).

Wilson (2002), through his research entitled ‘Becoming Japanese: Manga, Children’s Drawing and The Construction of National Character’, identified that all Japanese kids started drawing with their national identity in mind since kindergarten. The characteristics are synonymous with *anime* and *manga* styles especially the heart shaped face, big eyes, and haircut. Interestingly, since *anime* entered the Indonesian market in 1990, it has brought positive impacts. Not only that the cartoon has become popular but also the young generation have become so obsessed with it until they started to imitate the *anime* as their style of drawing. Moreover, it has inspired the female comic readers to become comic artists (Hafiz 2012).

Japan	Western
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conquered 60% animation industry in the world. • Two particular animation channels: Animax & NHK World • Influence local animations (Anak-anak Sidek, Yokies & Sang Wira) • Special <i>anime</i> software released: Manga Studio Debut Software & Manga Studio Ex-Professional Illustrators. • Been translated into more than 30 languages for the world shows. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western dominated the Creative Industry since 19 & 20th Century. • Special channels: Disney, Cartoon Network & Nickelodeon. • The world animation pioneer, Walter Elias Disney created Mickey Mouse & Donald Duck in 1901. • Mickey Mouse & Superman can be watched since 1950’s following by Japan in 1970’s. • Influence local animation: <i>Kluang Man</i> was inspired by Batman & Robin.

Japan and Western strength

Source: (Brown 2006; Krikke 2006; Shirong Lu 2008; Chen 2011; Roslina et al. 2012; Yamato et al. 2011)

Anime (Japan)

Anime is derived from a French word that simply means animation. As an appreciation for being the first country to translate the Japanese animation, *anime* is now used as a symbolic word to represent animation from Japan. *Anime* is one of the famous cultures of Japan which started from ‘*manga*’ comics, television series, computer games and cosplay. Japan is famous for its Naruto, Doraemon, and Detective Conan characters. Unfortunately, some scholars justified that *anime* from Japan did not use their own physical figure and identity. Osamu Tezuka, one of the *anime* founders who was inspired by the early Disney Studio, has applied the visual elements of ‘big-eye style’ in his artwork entitled Astro Boy and Princess Knight (Shirong Lu 2008). The unrealistic figure, big-eyed, blonde and fair skinned characters were embellished from a western style thus appropriately named as the *anime* style (Fennell et al. 2012).

Superhero (Western)

Batman, Superman, and Captain America are among the famous superheroes adapted from comic series. A superhero in comics or magazines are incredibly illustrated as good looking, extraordinarily strong, rare, with a perfect figure. Character magnetism is the key point to grab the audience’s trust to follow the series. Besides the costumes’ attraction, most of the characters have a fair skin like the Caucasians. Barbie, for instance, has a perfect body, a different haircut and resembles an European. The same goes for male characters which are always muscular, heroic and have impressive figures. Different from the Japanese style that stands out with clean and flat colors, the Western style has a more realistic stroke and coloring technique in producing animation character design. However, both have their own strengths in building their identities (Kaul 1995).



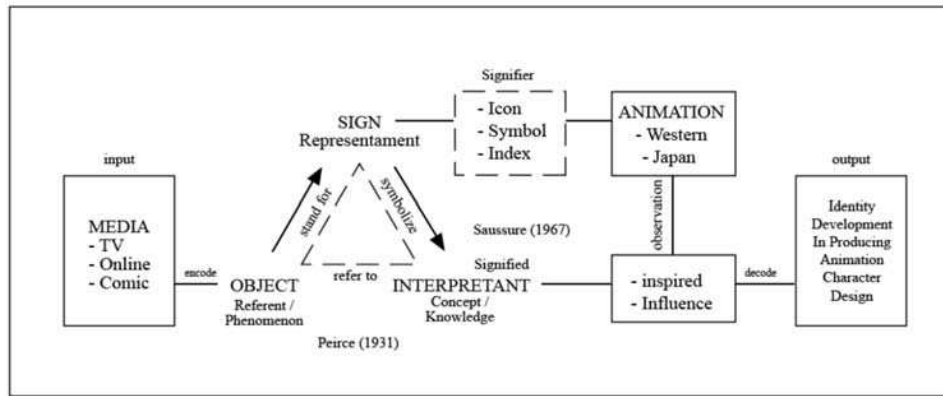
Japan Anatomy (Naschi 2013)



Western Anatomy (Kevin Maguire 2006)

Semiotics Theory

Signs and symbols in the cultural industry are reflections of people's lifestyle that can contribute to the establishments of national identity through animation (Shamsudin 2001; Barrett 1982). It is strongly related to the semiotics theory which interprets the meaning of signs. The signs can be images or objects that bring meaning to something. After understanding the meaning of belongingness, it would be easier to classify and match the similarity that represents where the style actually comes from, either Japan, Western or local identity. The classification depends on the seven criteria that have been listed in analyzing character design. This research employed a qualitative approach to clarify the data collection before elaborating descriptively based on the findings of the analysis. A Content Analysis was conducted whereby five characters were selected to analyze the characteristic differences.



Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework above is referred to the Peirce and Saussure model from the semiotics theory. Through the triangle reciprocal by Peirce, the process begins from the Object as a referent or phenomenon in identifying the source of media such as televisions, online or comics. The pointing arrow towards the Sign stands for a *representament* of what the animators observe and remember from all the signifiers of Japan, Western or local animation by capturing the icon, symbol and index. After that, they start to interpret the character themselves before being inspired and influenced to develop their character design based on what they have seen and being mostly attracted to. The output of the artwork reflects the style that they are influenced by and comfortable with to sketch.

Methodology

The characters were chosen for being the most prevalent animations in Malaysia based on their achievements, histories and impacts to the world. The five characters are *Lat* from *Kampung Boy*, *Usop* from *Usop Sontorian*, *Iwan* from *Bola Kampung*, *Ipin* from *Upin-Ipin*, and *Boboiboy* from the *Boboiboy* animation. This analysis only focused on the male lead characters. The characteristics were categorized into seven items including, face shape, haircut, eyes, nose, mouth, body, and foot. Japanese and Western styles were used as a comparison to check on the similarities in order to find out the influence that has been adapted into Malaysian most prevalent animation character design. Therefore, the artwork was analyzed using Content Analysis to see if there were similarities influenced by the more prominent animations either from Japan or Western. The information on the Japanese and Western characteristics were referred to an encyclopedia published by an expert from the animation industry.


Findings

The Physical Characteristics of Malaysian Characters

Table A shows the guideline in comparing the characteristics of Malaysian animation character identity with the Japanese and Western styles. Table B shows the analysis of the five local characters focusing on their physical anatomies. All the characters were observed to search whether there was any influence by the Japanese (J) or Western (W) characteristics. The main part being concentrated on is the face in which the observations were on the eyes, nose, mouth, hair, body and foot. The first few characters presented in this table are *Lat* from *Kampung Boy*, *Usop* from *Usop Sontorian*, *Iwan* from *Bola Kampung*, and *Ipin* from *Upin-Ipin* and *Boboiboy* in *Boboiboy* series.

Table B. The Data Analysis

Boboiboy Character Design			
Characteristic	Similarity/ Influence		
	Criteria	J	W
- heart shape	Face	/	-
- sharp & flat	Hair	/	-
- medium big eyes	Eyes	/	-
- small nose	Nose	/	-
- thin lips	Mouth	/	-
- balanced & big head	Body	-	-
- balanced foot	Foot	-	-



Boboiboy Character similarity with Japanese (J) style

Based on the content analysis of the five Malaysia’s most prevalent character animations, only *Boboiboy* character has physical traits that are influenced by the Japanese (J) style especially the facial features and haircut. *Boboiboy* has Japanese animation characteristics with sharp and flat hair, medium-sized eyes, small nose, and thin lips. Its body part is slightly smaller than the head. It even has smaller feet too. However, with reference to the Japanese characters in the encyclopedia, most of the anatomical traits are balanced from head to toe.

On the other hand, *Usop Sontorian*, *Bola Kampung*, *Upin-Ipin* and *Kampung Boy* still strongly preserve the local identity without being influenced by other animations. This has proven that Malaysia still upholds local identities that can be represented by our local animation industry. Physical attributes are a reflection of people living in the country which clearly can represent the identity of Malaysia to the world through animation. Although there is a touch of other influences spotted in the character design, but it is still controllable.

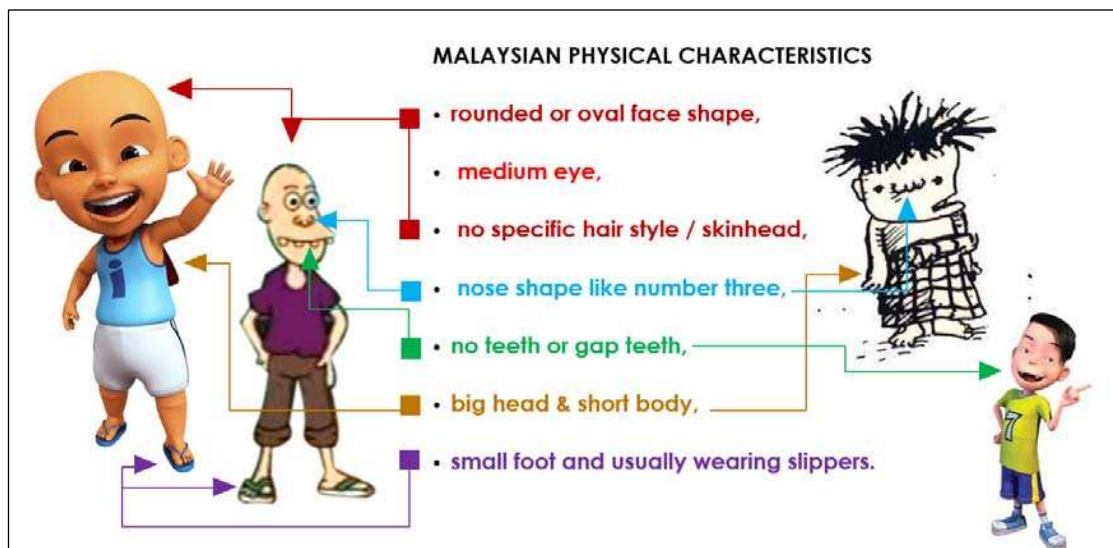
Conclusions

The result found that there are physical differences between Malaysian characters in representing the local identity, the Japanese, and the Western. The differences create a uniqueness that contribute to the local identity in many ways, including the animation industry through the process of developing character design. Therefore, the similarities found in the shape of the face, eyes, hair, nose, mouth, body, and foot, are considered as an influence. Japan is popular with its heart-shaped face, big-eye, sharp and flat hair, small nose, thin lips, fit and a balanced body from head to toe (Shirong Lu 2008). Meanwhile, the Western always portrays sharp features, normal eye size, realistic and detailed hairstyle, sharp nose, small lips and heroic body (Kaul 1995).

The Physical Differences of Malaysian, Japanese and Western characters

Local (Malaysia)	Japanese	Western
Characteristic (Usual Looks)		
Face: Rounded / Oval Eyes: Medium small Hair: No specific hairstyle Nose: Small & shape like number three Mouth: Nose/ gap teeth Body: Short & big head Foot: Wearing slippers	Face: Heart shaped Eyes: Big eyes Hair: Sharp & flat Nose: Small Mouth: Small and thin lips Body: Fit & balanced Foot: Balanced	Face: Sharp features Eyes: Normal size Hair: Detailed & realistic Nose: Sharp Mouth: Small Body: Fit, muscles Foot: Balanced with body

Malaysians’ physical characteristics cannot be considered as one type because of the various ethnicities, for example Chinese, Malay, and Indian. Moreover, they have different skin colors. Nonetheless, since this study did not focus on the coloring criteria of the characters, therefore it would not be further clarified. Through this analysis of the five Malaysia’s most prevalent animation characters, it has shown that local physical characteristics are usually rounded or oval-shaped face, medium eyes, no specific hairstyle and sometimes skinhead, nose shape like number three, no teeth or gap teeth, big head, short body, small feet and wearing slippers.



Malaysian Physical Characteristics

This paper concluded that there are Japanese influences in one of the most prominent animations in Malaysia that is through the *Boboiboy* character design. Other four characters, namely *Usop Sontorian*, *Bola Kampung*, *Kampung Boy* and *Upin-Ipin*, strongly preserve their local identities. Although the Japanese and Western styles are the most influential in the animation industry, Malaysia also has its own strength in creating the character design. For example, the *Kampung Boy* series that carries the *Lat* character is one of the most legendary characters not only in Malaysia but also in German, the United States, and France.

Besides character, the realistic Malaysian village lifestyle is also projected in the *Kampung Boy*, *Usop Sontorian*, *Bola Kampung* and *Upin-Ipin* series. It is considered as a depiction of a fresh environment in comparison to today's modern and digital styles of cartoons. Nevertheless, there is also a cost issue which indicates that Malaysia needs more time to become a competitive animation production of good quality in the future.

Limitations and Recommendations

As stated by Datuk Lat, he fears the future generation of Malaysian animators is so into the Japanese and the Western styles. Hassan Abd Muthalib is also concerned with the final projects of the animation students which have no local identity and are mainly influenced by the *anime* style. The limitation of this paper lies in the sampling of the analysis which merely concentrated on established characters. Therefore, further research can look into the initial stage of the talents' learning process at the universities with regards to the knowledge needed. The undergraduate students of an animation course can be a suitable sample in observing the development of a character design process. There are so many possibilities through the learning process that can be the reasons for why or what style the future Malaysian animators choose to use. It can also be other factors that attract and influence them apart from the animation itself. Finally, other than physical characteristics, further research can also focus on identifying the characters' costume design which signifies the country's local identity besides cultural depiction.

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