# A Paradigm Shift in the Malaysian Animation Industry: Inclusive Transmedia Storytelling and Cultural Preservation Contrary to Global Trends

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## ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the evolving consumption culture within the Malaysian animation industry, focusing on the shift from child-specific to familial viewership. Over the past two decades, the industry has experienced substantial growth in viewership and box office revenues, largely driven by local producers' strategic adoption of transmedia storytelling. Through qualitative analysis of two prominent Malaysian animation franchises, *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali*, this study explores how interconnected narratives and cross-generational references across multiple platforms attract a wider audience while preserving cultural integrity. The methodology involves content analysis and audience reception studies to assess the impact of transmedia strategies on viewership patterns. Results indicate that a pan-family perspective in storytelling, which integrates diverse audience interests, contributes significantly to broadening the viewership base without compromising Malaysian cultural values. The findings demonstrate that adherence to local cultural aspirations remains a critical factor in distinguishing Malaysian animation from the global trend of adult-oriented content. The study concludes that transmedia storytelling offers a powerful framework for developing family-oriented animation that appeals to both children and adults while safeguarding local traditions. Implications suggest that this model may serve as a blueprint for future productions aiming to balance market competitiveness with cultural preservation.

**Keywords:** *Transmedia storytelling, Malaysia, animation industry, consumption culture, cultural preservation.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the evolving consumption culture within the Malaysian animation industry. It is noted that the Malaysian animation industry has experienced significant growth in viewership and box office revenue over the last two decades. The driving force behind this sought-after expansion is the widespread adoption of a multi-platform storytelling strategy, specifically transmedia storytelling, by local animation producers. This strategic approach aims to exert influence over the narrative entertainment market, specifically in the film industry. The study demonstrates that the adoption of this approach informs the storytelling process, making it more accessible to a diverse audience as it is developed and disseminated for public consumption. This strategic shift has effectively transformed the consumption culture of local animation products, transitioning from a focus on child-specific viewership to a more inclusive familial viewership. Importantly, this expansion does not compromise the core objective of nurturing and preserving Malaysian culture and values.

This paper also observes the current trend in the global animation industry, wherein producers are motivated to develop animation content tailored for adult audiences. This approach is particularly evident in both the American entertainment sectors and the Japanese anime-manga industry, where economic motivations play a pivotal role. Notable titles such as Attack on Titan, Death Note, and Tokyo Ghoul from the Japanese animation scene, along with programs like Family Guy, Rick and Morty, and American Dad from Adult Swim in the West, exemplify the deliberate creation of animation for adult consumption. The Malaysian animation industry also adopted the same approach. However, while the global trend leans towards catering to adult viewers, the Malaysian animation sector distinguishes itself by adhering to a local aspiration of using animation as a platform for promoting and portraying local culture and values.

Transmedia storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool for cultural preservation, spanning various domains such as museum education, tourism, and the film industry (Song, Gilardi, & Lam, 2024; Gambaratto & Heuman, 2023; Molho, 2023). By employing multiple media platforms, this storytelling approach allows cultural elements to be presented in diverse formats and modes, offering a richer and more engaging experience (Adams & Barbour, 2022). This multi-platform strategy not only enhances audience engagement but also ensures that cultural narratives can reach a broader audience, reinforcing the cultural heritage in contemporary contexts.

In Malaysia, transmedia storytelling has been particularly significant in the animation industry. Mohd Hasri, Md Syed and Runnel (2020) argue that the use of this strategy reflects producers' efforts to maintain content relevance in an ever-evolving market while aligning with governmental aspirations. The Malaysian government encourages the creation of local animation content that both preserves and promotes national culture and values. Consequently, transmedia storytelling in the Malaysian context serves a dual purpose: it sustains the economic viability of creative content while simultaneously promoting and preserving cultural identity. This synergy between media strategy and cultural preservation highlights the unique role of this approach in safeguarding and showcasing national heritage.

Rather than creating adult-specific content, Malaysian producers engage in multi-platform storytelling, in the form of transmedia storytelling, that remains true to its local cultural roles while catering to both children and adult audiences. Consequently, this study argues that this strategy, through the example of Malaysian animations like *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali*, is a functional approach for extending the cultural value of animation from children-centric viewership to cross-generational and familial viewership in the cinematic industry. This paradigm shift in storytelling aims not solely to capture adult viewership but to suggest the possibility that animation films are meant for familial viewing, captivating both children and their parents.

## INDUSTRIAL PROGRESS IN THE MALAYSIAN ANIMATION INDUSTRY

Since its inception in the Malaysian media atmosphere, the animation industry has undergone several significant changes. Arguably, these changes are fuelled by technology and foreign influence. The first significant change, or rather, the emergence of animation, occurred in the early 1950s. During this period, the animation sector began as part of the Malayan Film Unit (MFU), whereby a foreign national, Gillie Potter, was recruited to head the art department, which

was tasked with handling the animation production of the company (Muthalib, 2013), noting the first influence from the foreign entity on the animation sector. Additionally, the role of technology can also be seen in the fact that MFU already had access to film equipment specific for animation production, which evidently used the same technology that was utilized to make animated diagrams during World War II (Azmi *et al.*, 2014). At this emergence stage, animation was utilized only to create title pages for numerous films (produced by the MFU) and as a means of commercial service to private and public organizations (Lent, 2003; Muthalib, 2013).

It was not until the 1980s that the animation industry began to toy around with the idea of embedding storytelling into animation products, eventually releasing the first animated short film called Hikayat Sang Kancil in 1984 (Lent, 2003; Muthalib, 2013; Mohamad Razeef et al., 2020). This effort to pioneer animated works through storytelling has been attributed to the cultivation of local values among national audiences (Mohamad Razeef et al., 2020). In the period of the 1990s until the early 2000s, which we may posit as a growth period (the second industrial change), the animation industry, once again, was affected by foreign influences and technological adaptations. The growth period marked the mushrooming of local fiction in the animation format as well as acceptance among national consumers towards animation content as a form of entertainment (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). With the help of cell animation technology in the 1990s, production cost was minimized, and the animation quality was improved, resulting in numerous notable animated TV series broadcasted for public consumption, like *Anak-Anak Sidek* (1997), *Usop Sontorian* (1995), and *Kampung Boy* (1998) (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Mohd Amir & Md Sidin, 2011).

Amidst the increasing productions within the industry during the growth period, there was a concern that the influx of foreign animated content in Malaysia might challenge the status quo of local culture and value among Malaysian audiences, at least in terms of representation in the animation sectors (Lent, 2003; Rafik et al., 2020). Because of this, the Malaysian government has begun to campaign for a better portrayal of Malaysian culture and values in local animation works (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). Muthalib (2013) states that local producers have been relying on the national budget (through the national television station RTM) to stay afloat in the animation industry. With that, the government has a degree of influence over which content to fund, which, in this period, promotes local culture and values. This was the primary factor for which the majority of popular animated works in the 90s, like *Anak-Anak Sidek* (1997), *Usop Sontorian* (1995), and *Kampung Boy* (1998), strongly portrayed local culture and values (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Muthalib, 2007).

The most current era of the Malaysian animation industry, which we describe as the popularization period, began in 2007 with *Upin dan Ipin*, an animated work by Les' Copaque Production Sdn. Bhd., which was the first animation to be released to the public. This animation was considered a phenomenon in Malaysia as it managed to gain substantial popularity in the domestic market (Abdul Ghani, 2015; Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Muthalib, 2013). *Upin dan Ipin* utilized cutting-edge digital-based 3D technology, arguably an upgrade from cell animation technology used by producers in the growth period (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). Following the success of *Upin dan Ipin*, other 3D animations began to pop out within the industry and ultimately succeeded in becoming popular in domestic and overseas markets. *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali* are the two prominent animated fictions that have been dominating the storytelling business in Malaysia

with numerous awards and phenomenal blockbuster collections (Atak, 2019; Bernama, 2018; Chua, 2019; Malay Mail, 2017; mStar, 2019; Shim, 2020; Zainudin, 2016).

The popularization period marked a new milestone in the animation industry, as local productions were widely popular among local consumers. Relative to the previous period of the animation industry, while technological adoption (digital-based 3D rendition) remains influential in the production aspect, foreign influence once again has some form of role in the development of the industry. As more foreign content has been bombarded in Malaysia, local producers (who are producing animation content with Malaysian culture and values) are incentivized to improve their quality and competitive advantage in the market. The government realized that the global animation and VFX industry had grown significantly, reaching USD 270 billion in 2020; thus, it was ripe with opportunities to increase national revenue while promoting Malaysian culture overseas (Bernama, 2019). Improving the track record of animation works in the popularization period might indicate that the animation industry is not only expected to be a medium of cultural cultivation but also a means of commodification for economic gain.

## CONSUMPTION CULTURE WITHIN THE MALAYSIAN ANIMATION INDUSTRY

Dröge et al. (1993) argue that consumption culture can be seen as an economic system in which the determination of value toward any kind of product as it is disseminated in the mass market is taken into consideration. Dröge et al. (1993) even proceed to posit that consumption culture can be analysed through the lens of micro (personal and individual level of analysis) and macro (external level analysis that takes into account facilitating factors and socioenvironmental factors). The value of an object of consumption is the driving force behind consumption culture, and analysing said value, whether at the micro or macro level, can uncover cultural patterns of consumption among consumers. Dröge et al. (1993) also proposed characteristics of consumption culture that are worth noting. Features that qualify the phenomenon of consumption culture should (1) involve a means of exchange between production and consumption, (2) be in mass production or mass markets, and (3) include the ceaseless introduction of new products and/or services (Dröge et al., 1993).

The Malaysian animation industry has seen a phenomenon wherein there is a shift in consumption culture due to the strategic movement of industry players. In the previous discussion on the industrialization of the animation industry, we made the argument that a significant improvement in the acceptance of local animation products can be seen in the popularization period (2007–present) compared to the growth period (1990–2007). Phenomenal blockbuster results are much more probable for animation products in the film industry in the popularization period, with three flagship animation brands (*Upin dan Ipin, BoBoiBoy*, and *Ejen Ali*) spearheading the industry and dominating the media market. Proceeding forward, we are attempting to claim that this transition is due to the shifting consumption culture among Malaysian audiences towards animation products, motivated by the strategic storytelling business model employed by animation producers.

Starting from the debut of the *Upin dan Ipin* TV series in 2007, the animation industry in Malaysia has begun to receive much attention from the public (Aziz, Mustaffa, & Hamzah, 2021). While numerous productions have been made available to the public within the industry since then, some animation works, particularly *BoBoiBoy, Ejen Ali*, and *Upin dan Ipin*, have managed to

become mainstream cultural products in Malaysia. Advertising materials, merchandise, conventions, theme parks, and gamifications utilizing their brands are flowing into the mass consumer market. The scenery and atmosphere of the animation industry have become livelier in the popularization period than in the growth period. Consistent with the government's advocation in its national policies, such as the National Culture Policy (DKN: *Dasar Kebudayaan Negara*) and the National Creative Industry Policy (DIKN: *Dasar Industri Kebudayaan Negara*), the growing reception of local products among local consumers is highly desirable as it can preserve national culture as well as generate revenue.

In our attempt to explore the 'why' factor of the positive outlook of the animation industry in the popularization period as opposed to the growth period, we made the decision to utilize consumption culture theory in our assessment of the animation industry to comprehend the growing support among local consumers towards locally produced animation products. We believe that this is justifiable because consumption surrounding the animation product fits three characteristics outlined by Dröge et al. (1993). As for the first characteristic, animation, especially involving storytelling, is an economically driven product available to be consumed through the means of monetary transactions supported by various commercial outlets such as television (paid by TV stations), online channels (YouTube, Netflix, Disney Hotstar), and cinema.

Furthermore, the majority of the cultural products in the animation industry are prepared for mass consumption and, therefore, exist in the mass market rather than made available for a select few, thus satisfying the second characteristic of the consumption culture phenomenon. Lastly, it is a common practice for animation houses to produce animation works in serial format and release them in parts periodically to keep on introducing new productions for public consumption. Additionally, major cinematic productions are also being premiered to the public from time to time, showing consistency with the third characteristic of the consumption culture phenomenon. Fitting all three requirements of a consumption culture phenomenon supports our claim that consumption culture theory might provide profound insight into the assessment of the present growth in popularity of local animation products in the domestic market.

The Malaysian animation industry does not solely produce animation works in cinematic film format. Animation works also include short films and TV series (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Muthalib, 2007). The compilation by Mohd Khalis et al. (2019) shows that the majority of production among animation producers was in serial format (TV series). Specifically, from the 1950s until 2020, 118 TV series were produced, as opposed to just 17 films produced by local producers (Shah et al., 2021). Despite this imbalance, the success of the animation industry is often attributed to the ability of local animation films to obtain significant blockbuster collections and place themselves among the top-grossing films in Malaysia (Begum, 2019; Chua, 2016; Malay Mail, 2020; mStar, 2016, 2019). Perhaps consumers' response towards film instalments from local animation houses is much more apparent compared to TV series, whereby grossing revenues (both domestic and international) obtained from films are generally exposed to the public as opposed to the TV series; hence, it is much easier to gauge the success of animation films compared to TV series.

Narrowing the scope of the animation industry into its film sector offers the chance to understand how consumption culture affects the performance of animation works in Malaysia. Particularly, we want to make the case that the consumption culture, specific to the pattern of

viewership among local audiences, between the growth period and the popularization period is unique from one another. By analysing the historical progress of the animation industry, it can be deduced that animation productions during the growth period were geared toward children's consumption. As a result, a nationwide mentality was built that animation is only for children. While maintaining the ideology that animation is for children, producers in the popularization process begin to employ a storytelling model that is friendly and inviting for adult consumption, thus challenging the notion that animation is only for children. The result of this employment seems to be fruitful, as local animation works receive phenomenal reception among Malaysian audiences, propelling the animation industry onto the international stage.

Global animation has seen a trend whereby the production of content is drawn to satisfy adult viewers. It is argued that the American entertainment sectors, as well as the Japanese anime and manga industry, adopt this paradigm due to economic reasons, as catering to adult viewers might provide further opportunities to gain more profits in the merchandising business (Lee, 2013; Maier, 2019). Catering to adult viewers can be seen in two ways. The first perspective is that animation is developed specifically for adult consumption. In the Japanese animation industry, there are numerous animation titles that are R-rated and unsuitable for children's consumption. Animations like Attack on Titan (2013–2021), Death Note (2006–2007), and Tokyo Ghoul (2014–2018) contain portrayals of violence, dark fantasy, nudity, and vulgar language that are not intended for the consumption of minors. A similar approach was also adopted in the West through the establishment of Adult Swim, a programming block catered to adult audiences who seek animated content. Adult Swim shared with its children-centric counterparts, Cartoon Network. Taking a different approach to providing animation as an entertainment outlet for children, Adult Swim broadcasts adult animated sitcoms for adults like Family Guy (1999–present), Rick and Morty (2013–present), and American Dad (2005–present).

The second perspective acknowledged the ambiguous lines between animation for kids and animation for adults. Maier (2019) argued that it is evident that animation programs, although initially developed for children, are trying to cater to adult viewers. Catering to adult viewers, in the form of cross-generational animation proves to be functional because it can help animation brands stay relevant in the market, and it substantially helps producers gain more profit from merchandising (Maier, 2019). The Powerpuff Girls (1998–2005), for example, is an animated series that is produced for children's consumption yet has received popularity among adult viewers. While this popularity might be attributed to the aging fan (as this show has run for close to two decades), it is also the result of the producer's efforts to welcome adult viewers through the double-coding method, a technique of providing references in the animated show that might relate well to adult viewers compared to juvenile viewers (Maier, 2019). Taking a similar approach to The Powerpuff Girls, more recent cross-generational animation like Adventure Time (2010–2018) is prepared so that it can be enjoyed by children yet provide entertainment value to adults. However, adventure time has been critiqued as inappropriate for children as it contains moderate violence, sexual situations, infrequent coarse language, and/or suggestive dialogue (Jane, 2015; Rosenbaum, 2013; Zulfiqar et al., 2021).

Following global trends, animation viewership in Malaysia is also becoming more cross-generational. However, we argue that, unlike American and Japanese animation, the Malaysian animation sector still adheres to the local aspiration that animation is a platform for the

promotion and portrayal of local culture and values. Further, in this regard, Malaysian animation takes a different approach to catering to adult viewership. Instead of producing adult-specific animation (like those broadcasted in the Adult Swim program or adult-rated animation in the Japanese anime industry) or using the double-double code method (such as in the case of Adventure Time), Malaysian animation producers engage in multi-platform storytelling. This venture provides space for local producers to increase their brand awareness among adult viewers, at the same time providing space for complex storytelling that caters to juvenile viewers yet is enjoyable for adult consumption. This makes Malaysian animation unique; producers cater to adult viewers without having to compromise their social roles of advocating local culture and values among their audience.

FROM CHILD-SPECIFIC VIEWERSHIP TO CROSS-GENERATIONAL VIEWERSHIP
We are inclined to adopt the proposal by Dröge et al. (1993) that the consumption culture phenomenon can be analysed through the lens of a macro perspective, in which external facilitating factors and socioenvironmental factors are taken into consideration. With that in mind, indicators in the form of strategic productions by animation producers (facilitating factor), national policies and incentives by the government (facilitating factor), and performance of animation products in the mass market (socio-environmental factor) are usable and relevant to unearth consumption culture toward animation products in Malaysia. In terms of viewership, during the emergence and growth period of the animation industry, animation works in the creative sector were heavily targeted toward children (Abdul Ghani, 2015; Daud, 2020; Muthalib, 2007). Therefore, the ongoing dogma that animation is for children has started to become prevalent in Malaysia (Chong, 2008; Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2013; Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Muthalib, 2007).

The culture of consumption, in which children's audiences are the majority of viewers of local animated content in Malaysia, is arguably catalysed by three facilitating factors. The first factor is the deeply embedded doctrine within the industry that animation is an outlet for informal education for children. Since its emergence in Malaysia, animation has been prepared and produced for children's consumption. The earliest animation in Malaysia, *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (1983), is an animated rendition of local folklore that was commonly used as informal teaching material for children (Mamat, 2019; Saad et al., 2009). Similar ideology can also be seen in the 1990s, specifically in the production of *Anak-Anak Sidek* (TV series Sidek's Kids, 1999–2003), in which its narrative was based on a biographical account of Malaysian badminton athletes that promotes family value while at the same time cultivating a local sense of identity (Mohd Izani & Aishah, 2003; Muthalib, 2013). The same goes for another animation, *Usop Sontorian* (1996–1998), that promotes multi-racial harmony in local society to its audience (Nasir, 2021).

The second facilitating factor for the children-centric consumption of local animation is the government's policies to preserve and promote Malaysian culture and values. The production of *Hikayat Sang Kancil* as a short film was conducted by *Filem Negara Malaysia* (FNM, National Film Department of Malaysia), which was a state-owned organization, indicating that animation in Malaysia had been pioneered by a government agency (Nasir, 2021). Added to Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (DKK, National Culture Policy) in the 1970s, animation, as a byproduct of creative production, was called upon to cultivate a national culture for a young audience

(Halim & Abdullah, 2020). Further into the 1990s, this ideology that animation is for children was strengthened due to the government's insistence that local animation should be produced to combat the influx of foreign animations that were targeted towards kids (Muthalib, 2007; Nasir, 2021). Because of these government interventions, animation production has been encouraged to be prepared for younger audiences. For example, popular animation in the 90s like *Usop Sontorian* (1996–1997), *Kampung Boy* (1997–2000), and *Anak-Anak Sidek* (1998–2003) all incorporated young teenagers or children as their main protagonists, arguably in an attempt to connect with the targeted young audience.

The last facilitating factor that contributes to the child-centric consumption culture is the limited access to resources and expertise among local producers. Animation has been a costly venture for local producers since its beginning, both in terms of technological access and human resources (Abu Bakar et al., 2020; Muthalib, 2007). Catering to adult audiences might be challenging for animation producers because it would demand more resources allocated for the creative process to build comprehensive narratives and develop even more seamless and quality animation. Moreover, the lack of interest among adults in settling for animation over other genres in the TV and film sectors of the creative industry hinders producers from investing more in targeting adults. In the film sector, animated films were simple in treatment because they were specifically made for children (Muthalib, 2013).

Even though animation was among the preferred entertainment outlets among children in the growth period, with well-known productions like *Usop Sontorian, Kampung Boy*, and *Anak-Anak Sidek,* the popularity was only unique to the TV sector and not shared with the film sector. Unfortunately for animation producers, during the growth period, venturing into the film sector, numerous film productions in animation format suffered losses as a result of failing to attract sufficient viewings among cinemagoers. The first animation film by local producer *Silat Lagenda* (1998) was made with RM 5 million in production costs and only managed to collect RM 141,700 in cinema ticket sales (Misfar, 1998; Asyraff, 2017). Similar failures also happened with other animation productions, like the film Putih (2001), which gained about RM 400,000 as opposed to the RM 2.21 million production cost; the film *Cheritera* (2001), which obtained RM 2,000 with the RM 1 million production cost, and the film *Budak Lapok* (2007), which collected RM 161,000 with the RM 2.59 million production cost (Budiey, 2007; Ibrahim, 2001; Noob, n.d.; Asyraff, 2017).

An apparent change can be observed in the popularization period of the Malaysian animation industry, where local animation films gained substantial traction in cinematic revenue collection and popularity. Four animation brands in Malaysia, namely *Upin dan Ipin* (2007 - present), *BoBoiBoy* (2011 - 2016), *Ejen Ali* (2016 - 2023), and *Mechamoto* (2021 - present), recorded their own phenomenal blockbuster collections in the film sector, topping domestic film production (Begum, 2019, 2023; Chua, 2019; Malay Mail, 2020; Shim, 2020). We believe that the storytelling format employed by producers in the popularization period played an even more critical role in determining their product success in the media market. Specifically, producers in the popularization period have been aware that having a sustainable consumption culture revolving around their product might increase the value of their animation brand, thus increasing the odds of success of their animation content in the mass consumer market.

Efforts by producers engaging with multi-platform storytelling, as a way of transmedia storytelling, to build an animation franchise in the animation industry serve as a facilitating factor that changed the consumption culture revolving around animation film. Consistent with Jenkins's (2007) thought in the pursuit of theorizing transmedia storytelling, the availability of multiple products (spanning across various media platforms) creates the potential for multiple points of entry for general media consumers to engage with the franchise, thus increasing the exposure of the content. This exposure, arguably, invites a wider set of consumer groups other than children, particularly parents, to become acquainted with the brand of the franchise. For instance, in the case of *Upin dan Ipin*, the initial exposure to the TV series format motivated the audience, which arguably is a familial setting (both children and adults), to engage further with the franchise, catalysing the popularity of the upcoming instalment in film format (Kamarudin & Sajilan, 2013).

For the purpose of extending the cultural value of animation works from children-specific viewership to cross-generational and familial viewership in the cinematic industry, venturing into transmedia storytelling might be the most functional approach. In the case of *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali*, we believe that this feat is achieved through (1) engaging the audience with interconnected plots and (2) embedding cross-generational references in the storylines that are relatable to adults and children. We argue that the purpose of this change in the storytelling paradigm is not primarily to gain, specifically, adult viewership. Rather, the new storytelling format is intended to recommend the possibility that animation films are for familial viewings to consumers, capturing juvenile audiences as well as their parents (the adults). The selection of the *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali* animation franchises in the is justified by their exemplary use of transmedia storytelling. Both franchises have successfully expanded their content across various media formats, including films, TV series, comic books, and games. This interconnected content structure aligns with transmedia storytelling practices, as described by Mohd Hasri and Md Syed (2021), where narratives are distributed across multiple platforms, each contributing uniquely to the overarching story.

## ENGAGING AUDIENCE WITH INTERCONNECTED PLOTS: THE CASE OF BOBOIBOY

Venturing into a transmedia storytelling strategy provides space for animation producers to write more stories and plots for the franchise. Ideally, in transmedia storytelling settings, each storyline created for each instalment must be standalone yet have a contribution to the whole franchise (Jenkins, 2006; Menard, 2015). We argue that Malaysian animation uses this space to provide depth to narrative elements in their franchise so that, while children might enjoy individual instalments, adult viewers would appreciate the depth and the growth of the story plot. Additionally, Malaysian animation that ventures into transmedia strategies often maintains its core ideology of promoting local culture and value to its audience (Mohd Hasri et al., 2020).

*BoBoiBoy* tells a story about a young Malaysian named BoBoiBoy who visited his grandfather, Tok Aba, in a small fictional town called Rintis Island in Malaysia. There, he meets with the other main supporting characters of the series, as well as his comrades in his hero journey, which are Yaya, Yin, Gopal, and Fang. BoBoiBoy and his friends obtain supernatural abilities from a ball-like robot called the Ochobot that comes from outer space. With these supernatural abilities, BoBoiBoy and his teammates fight villainous entities. *BoBoiBoy* is an animation franchise developed by Animosta Studio (alternatively, Monsta Studio).

*BoBoiBoy* began as a TV series that started to air in 2011. The show ended with three seasons encompassing 52 episodes, only to be continued with its sequel TV series, *BoBoiBoy Galaxy,* which currently consists of a single season with 26 episodes (Othman, 2016; Razak & Aziz, 2016). The film instalment of the franchise includes two cinematic movies titled *BoBoiBoy*: *The Movie* (2016) and *BoBoiBoy*: *The Movie 2* (2019), both of which achieved among the top-grossing domestic films during their premiering (Begum, 2019; Mazalan, 2016). As a franchise, *BoBoiBoy* encompasses creative products made available across several media formats, including comic books, digital games, card games, and theme parks (Digital News Asia, 2018; Chin, 2015; Hanif, 2017; The Star, 2022).

Storytelling in *BoBoiBoy* can be engaging for adults due to the interconnectedness between one instalment and another, particularly between its films and TV series. Jenkins (2006) argues that consumers of transmedia narratives can be motivated to find bits of information from multiple media to make sense of the story world. Consistent with Jenkins (2006), although each instalment is developed as a standalone, the interconnectedness between them enhances the entertainment experience among viewers as they consume *BoBoiBoy* content across media platforms. At the same time, young children can enjoy individual instalments (whether it is a film streamed online or a single episode on a weekly broadcast on a satellite network), and older teenagers and adult fans might appreciate how varying storylines from the films and TV series might be intertwined with one another.

Mohd Hasri and Md Syed (2021) discussed interconnectedness by visiting the supernatural growth of the main hero of the story, BoBoiBoy. It was depicted in *The Rise of BoBoiBoy* (episode 1, season 1, *BoBoiBoy* TV series, 2011) that BoBoiBoy received a supernatural ability that allowed him to utilize natural elements like earth, lightning, and wind for various purposes. BoBoiBoy can control each element by transforming it into a specified elemental version. For example, BoBoiBoy Wind can control wind energy, BoBoiBoy Lightning can control lightning energy, and BoBoiBoy Earth can control earth energy.

As the TV series progresses in season 1, it is revealed that each version of BoBoiBoy can be evolved into a better and stronger version. For example, BoBoiBoy Lightning can evolve into BoBoiBoy Thunderstorm, BoBoiBoy Earth can evolve into BoBoiBoy Quake, and BoBoiBoy Wind can evolve into BoBoiBoy Cyclone. Interestingly, this progression continues further into the second season of the TV series, the first season of *BoBoiBoy Galaxy*, the *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* film, and the *BoBoiBoy*: *The Movie 2* film. The subsequent debut of the BoBoiBoy versions is organized in Figure 1.
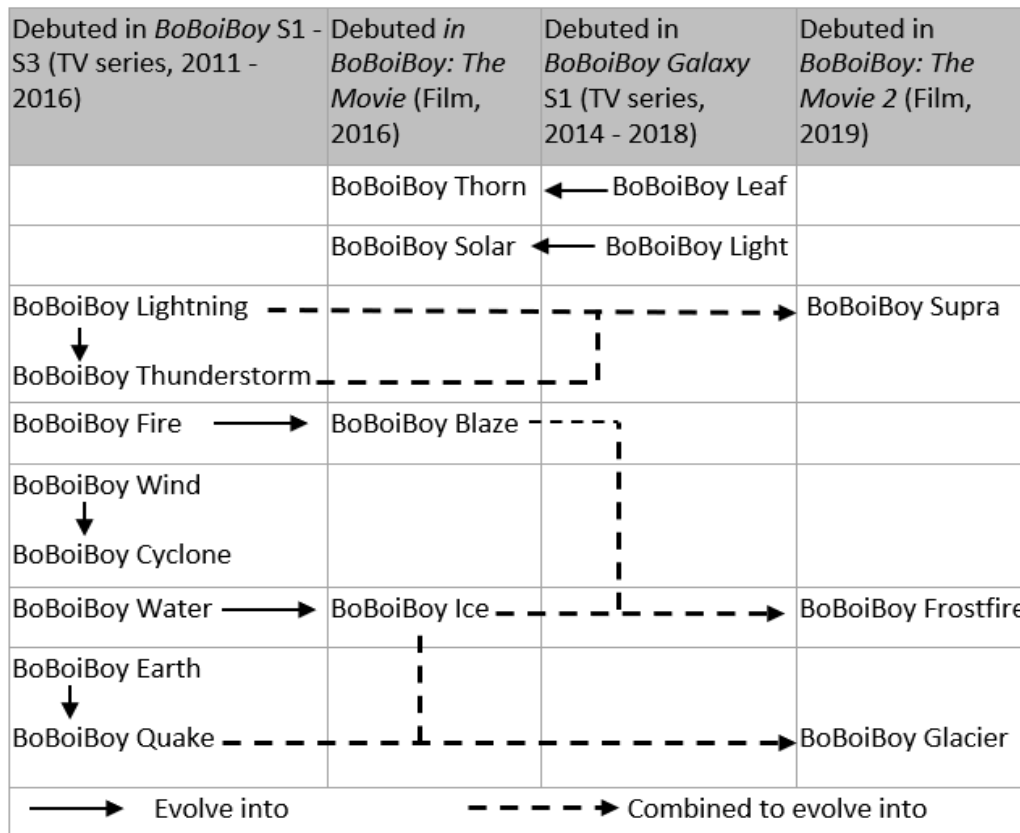
Figure 1: Illustration on how BoBoiBoy versions debuted across TV series and film.

Although each of the instalments has its own storyline, the growth progression of the main character as a superhero is separated in different locations throughout the animation brand. Not only that but the diversity with which the superhero evolves is also embedded throughout the films and TV series, making the animation interesting to piece together. A normal evolution can be seen when BoBoiBoy Lightning debuted in season 1 of the *BoBoiBoy* TV series, and its evolved version, BoBoiBoy Thunderstorm, subsequently debuted later in the same season.

However, in the case of BoBoiBoy Leaf and BoBoiBoy Light, their respective evolved versions, which are BoBoiBoy Thorn and BoBoiBoy Solar, debuted first in *BoBoiBoy*: *The Movie* (2016) before their debut in season 1 of *BoBoiBoy Galaxy* TV series. Additionally, there also evolved versions in the form of combinations, which are BoBoiBoy Supra, BoBoiBoy Glacier, and BoBoiBoy Frostfire, which debuted in the recent film *BoBoiBoy*: *The Movie 2* (2019). The way the main character's abilities are developed and progressed throughout the animation franchise forms a mysterious puzzle that fans can enjoy regardless of age, making the *BoBoiBoy* animation franchise a cross-generational animation without compromising its core paradigm of providing entertainment while promoting local culture and value to their audience.

Nizam Razak, chief executive officer of Monsta Studio, admitted that establishing a fan base from the *BoBoiBoy* TV series helped them manage the risk of a steep investment in producing their first animation film in 2016 (Harian Metro, 2012). The result of this method of exposure arguably contributes to the diversity of the audience in terms of age group.

Interestingly, for *BoBoiBoy,* 60 percent of its viewers are aged 14 to 35 years (Astro AWANI, 2019). Industry players are now confident that the idea that animation is for adult consumption might increase the demand for animation products in the film sector. An agency known as the Malaysian Animation Educators Society (*Persatuan Pendidik Animasi Malaysia*, PPAM) has launched a motto, "animation for all", signifying their campaign to instil the idea that animation should not be restricted to children to local consumers (The Star, 2022).

## EMBEDDING CROSS-GENERATIONAL REFERENCES IN EJEN ALI

*Ejen Ali* is produced by Wau Animation and Primeworks Studio, a media firm specializing in content business (Gun, 2016). Different from Monsta Studio (with *BoBoiBoy*), *Ejen Ali* is the first animation franchise owned by a large media conglomerate known as Media Prima Berhad, signifying the lucrativeness of the animation business in Malaysia, particularly with the multi-platform storytelling format. Like its predecessor, *Ejen Ali* begins with its TV series, which first aired in 2016 and is currently available for three seasons with 39 episodes. Apart from the TV series instalment, *Ejen Ali* is also available in cinematic film format, titled *Ejen Ali*: *The Movie*, which premiered in 2019 (Shim, 2020). The franchise also includes several other media formats, such as comic books, trading cards, board games, and mobile games (Singh, 2016; The Star, 2020). Interestingly, *Ejen Ali* is the first to include an e-sport program, Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena Tournament, into its franchise, indicating the producers' commitment to a multi-platform storytelling format (Bots Team, 2021).

Similar to *BoBoiBoy, Ejen Ali* was also developed for children's consumption. This is particularly evident as the main characters, Ali and his comrade, are portrayed as elementary school students who are chosen to become spy agents under a secretive agency known as Meta Advance Tactical Agency (M.A.T.A.). As a spy agent, Ali and his friend are tasked with protecting their technologically advanced city, Cyberaya, from falling into the hands of multiple villainous organizations. Unlike *BoBoiBoy*, the abilities of spy agents in the *Ejen Ali* animation are enhanced by the devices that they are given rather than the supernatural. With that in mind, the majority of spy agents possess high-tech devices that enhance their dexterity and intelligence to conduct their tasks.

While the animation is intended for children's consumption, *Ejen Ali* is also enjoyed by older generations of viewers. We argue that Wau Animation Studio embeds cross-generational references and plot conflict in *Ejen Ali* storylines that relate well to local audiences despite age group. This is different from the double-coding method employed in American animation, particularly the Power Puff Girls animation, as discussed previously. The double-coding method is intended to attract older viewers, as the creator includes references that might be more meaningful to adult viewers yet do not have a similar impact on children's viewers. Reflecting cultural identity during consumption of content is prevalent among audiences in the local setting (Syed & Hamzah, 2012). In the case of *Ejen Ali,* cross-generational references are meaningful for both children and adults as they are relatable despite being in different generations. An illustration of cross-generational reference can be found in *Ejen Ali*: *The Movie* (2019), particularly in its portrayal of a "Mamak" restaurant. In Malaysian culture, "Mamak" denotes a restaurant typically run by Indian Muslims, serving local cuisine with a South Indian influence. It serves as a popular spot for Malaysians of all ages to savour local delicacies while socializing with

friends and family (Abu Bakar & Farinda, 2012). In the film, there is a humorous dance sequence featuring minor characters, who are depicted as workers of the Mamak restaurant, grooving to the tune of "Mamak Maju", a song named after the restaurant itself. The dance incorporates various cross-generational elements, including depictions of common Malaysian dishes like *Teh Tarik* (hot milk tea) and *Roti Canai* (flattened bread), along with their preparation methods.

While the main characters, Ali and his friend Alicia, are portrayed as elementary school children, the scene also includes numerous extras, predominantly adults, enjoying the dance performance. This portrayal suggests that the spectacle of Mamak workers dancing holds particular appeal for Malaysians of all ages. The comedic scene gained significant traction on social media following the film's premiere, underscoring its resonance within Malaysian society (Azuar, 2019). This underscores how the incorporation of cross-generational references in *Ejen Ali* ensures its appeal across different age groups.

This transmedia approach not only enhances the entertainment value of the animation but also contributes to its success in the film industry, potentially surpassing other domestic productions. Case in point, *Ejen Ali*: *The Movie* managed to win best box office film awards in Malaysia's 31st Festival Film Award Ceremony (Anugerah Festival Filem Malaysia ke-31, 2021), indicating that animation, although known for children's viewing, managed to be mainstreamed as a family consumption preference for Malaysian audiences (Mahmud, 2020; Penaklasik, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In the growth phase of the Malaysian animation industry's industrialization, films like *Silat Lagenda* (1998) and *Putih* (2001) challenged the prevailing notion that animation is solely for children, as previously discussed. However, the industry's reliance on folklore and local scenery for storytelling, aimed at informal education, fostered a consumption culture favouring TV series over cinematic films, with children as the primary audience. To counter declining interest in local animated films, producers during the popularization period initiated a shift by promoting animation works as franchises rather than standalone films, thereby reshaping consumer habits.

By framing animation as a multi-platform franchise, producers have successfully broadened their reach, moving from child-centric to family-inclusive viewership. The strategic use of interconnected TV series, films, and cross-generational references has enabled diverse audience engagement across multiple media outlets. The success of franchises like *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali*, which adopt this transmedia storytelling model, reflects the potential for this approach to dominate future production strategies.

Looking ahead, the Malaysian animation industry may continue to evolve by adopting cutting-edge technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, to further immerse audiences in transmedia universes. Additionally, leveraging global streaming platforms and international partnerships could expand the market reach, promoting Malaysian culture while staying competitive in the rapidly shifting global entertainment landscape.

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