

Perception and Construction of Children's Perspectives on Japanese Superheroes: A Comparative Study on the Ways Children in Singapore and Malaysia Appropriate Media Cultures

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Abstract

Japan has emerged as one of the global players in media content, and many of Japanese media artifacts enjoy immense popularity in many Asian countries, including Malaysia and Singapore. A study was designed to understand and document the perception and construction of children's perspectives on Japanese superheroes that will reveal the ways children understand their own media cultures, the difficulties and pleasures that they encounter in their desires to engage with the superhero narratives. Furthermore, the study provides insights on how Japanese media plays a significant role in our children's lives, shaping their values and developing their awareness of the outside world. The study adopts a cross-sectional, comparative approach, looking across different media in two geographical locations: Singapore and Malaysia. These two countries have experienced significant impacts in terms of cultural and economic power with Japan. Arising from diverse cultural contexts in terms of religious and ethnic orientations, it will be interesting to note the trends in children's engagement with the Japanese superhero narrative in these neighboring countries. In this paper, we present a comparative understanding on the ways children in Singapore and Malaysia appropriate media cultures related to Japan in their everyday lives. The study reveals that the Singaporean and Malaysian children converged on several points; nevertheless, there were notable differences between the two groups. They identify with these characters and believe these series have helped them develop socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

Keywords: Media Culture, Media Literacy, Japanese Superheroes & Young People.

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Introduction

In this new digital media age, children face significant new opportunities of encountering different cultures. Engagement with global media texts and artefacts not only involves a complex intersection of visual images and information, ideas and narratives across an array of multimodal formats, but also offers opportunities for children to be creative and knowledge producers. In other words, children are not merely consumers of media texts; they are actively engaged in a range of activities - fantasies, make believe play, drawing, writing and other forms of meaning-making – reflecting, incorporating and commenting on these media texts. Some of these activities involve the purchase of particular media products – for example branded toys or games – others such as role-play, drawing or storytelling. Children as storytellers, players and artists draw upon familiar elements from media narratives to create their own meanings.

The world of Japan is one that attracts them and they are exposed to Japanese initiatives through superheroes to face the challenges posed by this new mediated global environment. Japanese cultural products can shape not only how the child thinks about herself, but how she relates to others and the Japanese society at large. Interestingly, Japan has a segment of her popular culture devoted to fantastic stories about individuals or characters with superhuman powers. These stories tell of heroes with strengths that children may identify with in the hope becoming as successful as these characters. It then becomes imperative to understand how these heroes play an important role in shaping children's media cultures. To understand this phenomenon, a study was designed to provide evidence-based insights to inform current understanding on children's media cultures in Malaysia and Singapore with regard to favourite and influential Japanese superheroes. This study gave insights on the ways Japanese Superheroes were incorporated in their growth as young people.

Project Framework and Design

This study addresses the various ways in which children engage with the Japanese superhero narrative that cross media boundaries - comic books (manga), animated television shows and films (anime), video games, toys and other design products (stickers, posters, accessories, stationery). The work of Buckingham (2008) and Fox (1993) are helpful in developing our understanding of how children use superhero stories to make sense of their world and how these stories develop skills that are key to their social-cultural development. Paley (1984) argues that young children construct stories based on superheroes in order to explore inner fantasies of control and empowerment over their environment. Media culture can further be a site for exploring some of the most powerful elements of our psyches (Kress, 2003, Muramatsu, 2002) and the discourses of superheroes can be particularly appealing for young children who are constantly involved in exploring oppositional binaries of right and wrong, good and evil, male and female (Dyson, 1996; Davies, 1997).

The research works by Clerkin (2012), Yamato et al (2011) and Martin (2007) highlight that other than ideological values and mythic elements, research on superhero narratives also reveal three main impacts on the children's media cultures:

- (i) Bringing children from different countries and cultural contexts together;

- (ii) Allowing superhero narratives and media practices to cross borders to children's other lifestyle interests in fashion, design, music and toys products;
- (iii) Enhancing intellectual and creative development, helping children in their learning, specifically as creators and meaning-makers in media literacy and skills development.

The superhero genre in very broad terms can be seen as narratives, encompassing stories of action and adventure in which the main protagonist uses some form of supernatural power in order to overcome one or several antagonists. In many ways they are similar to stories about heroes of mythology and fairy tales, as found in many cultures. Essentially, superhero stories are about the struggle of good over evil and the striving for identity (Buckingham, 2002). Superheroes may be represented in many different modes, in films, animated series, comic books, in children's toys and video games. Superheroes as a cross-media genre can be defined by certain characteristics in terms of story and plot, characters and iconography and their essence may be summed up in specific icons (Dyson, 1997). Like any other genre, the superhero genre is flexible, open ended and ever changing. (Cupit, 1989)

Within the framework of a social theory of media literacy, children's engagement with superheroes and activities such as viewing, reading, talking, playing and drawing can be understood as actions where children "seek to define their social identities, both in relation to their peers and in relation to adults" (Buckingham 2003: 48). David Buckingham's works with children and media provides some insights into children's diverse views and their sophisticated understanding of media texts and cultural practices. His work asserted that, as an audience, children brought very diverse readings to any given media text and used complex criteria of judgments and distinction situated somewhere between the actual text and the social context. Children's talk could not be understood just at face value, but had to be also understood as a social practice.

There are many ways and methods of harnessing young children's fascination with superheroes through creative activities in order to facilitate the understanding of children's media cultures (Cupit, 1989; Dyson, 1997). Storytelling, narration, drawing, acting, writing can unveil children's expressions as well as present innovative ways of seeing children as active meaning makers.

More specifically, this study was interested about children's captivation with Japanese superheroes with a focus on the following objectives:

- To chart children's favourite Japanese superheroes and the forms of enjoyment derived from these icons.
- To explore how and why children identify with superheroes as icons representing cherished values of Japanese culture.
- To examine how children use Japanese superhero stories to develop media literacy skills and creativity.

The study draws from existing theories in literacy studies, media and cultural studies and childhood studies to focus on social and cultural context in understanding the superhero narrative in children's lives as well as the ways accommodate this

experience into their play and imagination. Drawing from the insights of the projects conducted by the scholars above, the present study offers a comparative international understanding on the ways children in Malaysia and Singapore appropriate media cultures related to Japan in their everyday lives.

Methodology

The study draws on quantitative methods for the empirical framework – who is interested in what superheroes, how is the superhero narrative relevant to their everyday lives, for what purposes and the forms of social impact and enjoyment. The research design then shifts the focus towards the contextual and the interpretative in exploring the significance, the awareness and management on values, beliefs and ideas derived from these superhero narratives and the ways children use media literacy skills in making sense of their surrounding world. Other techniques include photography, audio and video recordings as compilation of materials produced by respondents in documenting their consumption and enjoyment of the Japanese superhero narrative. The study offers a rich cultural documentation of media experiences and practices related to Japan.

Questionnaire surveys were implemented to examine Japanese superhero popularity, significance and perception of values, ideas and beliefs among children in a face-to-face random location quota sample of 250 children (150 children from Malaysia and 100 children from Singapore) from 14 - 16 year old children. Following, the quantitative phase of data collection, this study also embarked on the creative, where the works of children in visual representations were explored to give deeper insights in the ways children make sense of their media and cultural experiences.

Analysis & Discussion

The purpose of this study was three-fold; not only were we interested in understanding the most liked Japanese superheroes by Malaysians and Singaporeans, we also aimed to explore how and why children identify with these characters and whether these series might contribute to their social-cultural development, emotional skills, and ability to creatively solve problems. In general, the Singaporean and Malaysian respondents converged on several points, namely the age at which they started showing interest in Japanese superheroes, their general attitudes toward helping others, their preference for preventing conflict rather than indulging in fights, and their perceptions of the extent superheroes facilitate social, emotional and cognitive development. Nevertheless, there were notable differences between the two groups, including their familiarity with Japanese superheroes, relative comfort (or discomfort) with sexy characters, reasons for liking an animated character, perceptions of the values portrayed by Japanese superhero series and how superheroes solve conflict, and attitudes toward female characters.

In many ways, our study showed that young Singaporeans and Malaysians are similar. Both groups reported showing an interest in Japanese animated superhero programmes and comics at an early age, often between 6 and 10 years old. Very few became engaged with these shows after they were 16 or 20 years old. Apart from that, both groups shared positive attitudes toward helping others. For example, the majority of respondents reported feeling happy to be able to help others solve their problems. Despite this, a large proportion of all respondents preferred to prevent conflict, rather than take active

measures to resolve an issue. The majority did not feel they were brave enough to fight, and very rarely wrote to their authorities about social problems. Furthermore, almost all respondents recognised that animated Japanese superhero shows have made a positive impact on their social, emotional, and cognitive development. In particular, both groups agreed that Japanese characters have helped them understand other cultures and the concept of justice, how to build self-confidence, creatively solve problems, distinguish good from bad and fantasy from reality, and consider a variety of perspectives before reaching a conclusion. Moreover, our results suggest that young Malaysians and Singaporeans are empathetic toward victims of cruelty in both real-life and fictional situations. Many would also concede in a losing battle. Based on these results, we can conclude that young Singaporeans and Malaysians overlap on many levels when it comes to viewing Japanese superhero comics and programmes, and deriving social and emotional benefits from these media.

At the same time, there were significant differences between the Malaysians and Singaporeans in our sample. Most notably, the ethnic profile of the two groups differed; almost all respondents in the Singaporean sample identified themselves as Chinese, whereas the Malaysian sample was more heterogenous and consisted mainly of Malay respondents. Besides that, our study suggests that young Malaysians may be more familiar with Japanese superheroes than their Singaporean counterparts; while the majority of the Malaysian respondents were unfamiliar with three animated series (i.e., Akira, Cyborg 009, Mazinger Z), most Singaporeans were unfamiliar with five Japanese cartoons, including those listed above. The groups also differed on their reasons for liking an animated character. Although looks were an important factor for both Malaysians and Singaporeans, the Singaporean participants were more likely to think that props, power, and intelligence influence the preference for a character. In contrast, the Malaysian group was more likely to value a character's charisma and self-defence skills. For the most part, both groups recognised that positive values were portrayed in Japanese animated shows, but felt more strongly about some values than others. In particular, young Singaporeans were more likely to perceive teamwork and responsibility in Japanese superhero media, while young Malaysians were more likely to perceive friendship and strong traditional values.

Although both groups generally had positive attitudes toward helping others, young Malaysians were more likely to feel that helping those in need was their responsibility. The groups also differed on how they perceived the ways superheroes solve conflicts. Even though more than half of the Malaysian sample thought Japanese superheroes use masculinity to overcome conflict, about a quarter of Singaporeans disagreed with the same statement. Conversely, more than a quarter of the Malaysian respondents disagreed that Japanese superheroes could solve conflicts by being gentle or feminine. These results are in line with a general trend of differences between the groups. Our data suggest that the young Malaysians in our study hold more traditional and patriarchal conceptions of gender roles, compared to young Singaporeans. While about half of the Malaysian respondents agreed that female characters should be gentle and responsible for domestic chores, about one-third of the Singaporean sample was unsure or disagreed with these statements. Still, the majority of both groups expressed that female characters need to be aggressive and respect powerful men in order to overcome conflict. Another point of divergence in the data lies in the participants' relative comfort with revealing appearances. The vast majority of young Malaysians reported feeling unsure or shy to see sexy Japanese animated characters, or to be too sexy themselves. In

contrast, the majority of young Singaporeans did not report feeling shy to see Japanese characters with revealing outfits.

Despite the precautions taken to control extraneous variables in this study, there are several limitations that we wish to recognise and hope to overcome in future iterations of this research. One limitation of our study is the inability to attribute the differences between the Malaysian and Singaporean groups to culture alone. Because the ethnic makeup of the groups were sharply distinct, we are unable to definitively say that cultural differences exist with regard to attitudes toward Japanese superheroes. However, we can be certain that a difference exists between the groups we have surveyed. Another limitation of the study is that we are relying on survey data and the retrospective evaluations of respondents to understand how Japanese superheroes have influenced social, cognitive, and emotional development. Although we have obtained clear results from asking participants direct questions about animated Japanese characters, there is the risk that their answers have been influenced by more recent experiences in their life, or by the desire to appear socially acceptable. Furthermore, we did not evaluate whether participants were still active consumers of Japanese comics and shows. In the future, researchers should continue to explore the social and cognitive benefits of Japanese superhero shows by comparing individuals who have spent little time with these characters, to those who consider themselves active fans.

Children's Creative Construction

Engagement with media involves a complex intersection of visual images and information, ideas, research and references across an array of digital and print formats. Children can no longer be framed as a group of docile, passive receivers of media content but rather as a group of people who harness creativity, knowledge and skills in producing media and visual material themselves. This work builds upon the research on media audiences and media literacy and brings focus to media activities that form a significant part of everyday thinking and learning of children today.

In this part of the study, the children formed groups of 5-6 and developed stories and characters based on their favourite Japanese heroes. Creative media activity provides a framework and pedagogy for living, learning and working towards cultural understanding. The project amplifies children's creative voice, provides a means of expression and allows children to build stories, inspired by Japanese superheroes. Selected children in Malaysia and Singapore used the visual medium as a tool for expression and reflection in developing stories on Japanese superheroes. This part of the project revealed how children in Malaysia and Singapore developed stories that reflected local concerns as they built on Japanese superhero characters in constructing creative media cultures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Malaysians and Singaporeans tend to begin showing interest in Japanese superheroes at a young age, but show different patterns of engagement with the content of Japanese animated series later on. Our results suggest that young Malaysians may be more familiar with Japanese superheroes in general than young Singaporeans, and both groups perceive different values within these animated shows. In general, young Malaysians seem to have a more traditional view of gender roles than Singaporeans,

even as they pertain to female characters in Japanese fiction. Malaysians also tend to be more uncomfortable with the sexy appearance of these female characters. Nevertheless, the majority of both groups agreed that Japanese superheroes have helped them become more inclusive and sensitive toward the needs of others; become more self-confident; and become better problem solvers who are able to tell right from wrong. As a whole, this suggests that Japanese superheroes overcome cultural boundaries and can be helpful in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children from diverse backgrounds.

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