

COMPLETION REPORT

Growing up with Japanese Superheroes: A Comparative Study of Children's Media Cultures in South East Asia

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Children are often fascinated and captivated by superheroes as they offer them thrilling encounters and understanding of the social, cultural and moral facets of the world. The interface between superheroes, narratives and cultural practices enable children to construct imaginative ideas they enjoy with their fantasies and creativity in their lives. Japanese superheroes have captured the attention of many children and this study has found out that children in Malaysia and Singapore enjoy the ideas and values as well as significance of these Japanese icons as stories, characters and commodities in their lives.

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 Japan culture 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. The study suggests that young Malaysians may be more familiar with Japanese superheroes than their Singaporean counterparts. 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.

Further, the 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.

The Japanese media and its offerings of Japanese superheroes have a role to play in developing greater critical media awareness. The Japanese media plays a huge role in our children's lives, shaping their values and developing their awareness of the outside world. Through creative constructions, this study also revealed that the children are actively dealing with images and stories of superheroes and are able to apply to values in their everyday lives. The children have successfully used Japanese media artefacts as a platform for inspiring media work where they planned, designed and constructed their own stories and images.

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