

PERCEPTION AND CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON JAPANESE SUPERHEROES: A STUDY ON THE WAYS CHILDREN IN SINGAPORE APPROPRIATE MEDIA CULTURES RELATED TO JAPAN

Dr. Nunna Venkata Prasad,

Associate Professor,
Department of Communication Studies & Languages
College of Arts & Sciences, Abu Dhabi University, United Arab Emirates

Dr. Shanthi Balraj,

Associate Professor, School of the Arts
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Dr. Ambigapathy Pandian,

Professor, School of Languages,
Literacies and Translation
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Japan has emerged as one of the global players in media content, and many of Japanese media artefacts enjoy immense popularity in many Asian countries, including Malaysia and Singapore. As a cultural super power in this region, well known for its drama, anime, manga and other media modes, these cultural products and social practices can serve as a child's window to the world of Japan, shaping how they view reality and those who live in it. 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 huge role in our children's lives, shaping their values and developing their awareness of the outside world. The purpose of this study was three-fold; not only were we interested in understanding the most liked Japanese superheroes by Singapore children, 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. The study reveals that children from Singapore identify with these characters and believe these series have helped them develop socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

Keywords: Media culture, media literacy, Japanese superheroes & children.

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 D. , 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 A. H., 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.

DATA ANALYSIS:

The study is designed to 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. Our focus on children-centered media practices locates issues on children's own aspirations, interests, and passions in two different country contexts. The study collected survey data from Singapore and Malaysia; however, in this paper we discuss the results from the analysis of data obtained from Singapore. A total of 100 students comprising of 52% male and 48% female students participated in the survey conducted in Singapore. In terms of ethnicity, most participants identified themselves as Chinese (93%), and the minority came from Indian (2%), Malay (1%), and other ethnic backgrounds (4%).

Given below is the analysis of the data collected from the questionnaire survey from children in Singapore.

ATTITUDES TOWARD HELPING OTHERS:

Our survey suggests that most of the respondents care about other people. The majority agreed (68%) or strongly agreed (18%) that they feel happy when they get to work with other people to solve a problem. In

addition, more than half (51%) agreed that they would feel proud if they managed to solve another person’s problem. At the same time, 51%of the respondents agreed that they would feel sorry to see their friends being fooled. Almost all of the respondents (53% agreed; 39% totally agreed) claimed that they would feel sad seeing victims of cruelty, while 53% agreed they would feel angry in such a situation. More than half (53%) also claimed that they would feel disappointed if they were unable to help their friends. Indeed, 37% respondents agreed that helping those who face hardships is their responsibility, though an almost equal proportion of respondents (36%) were also unsure about this statement. More than one-third (35%) of respondents were unsure that they would feel shy if their appearance were too sexy, although an equal number agreed that they would feel shy in that situation.

Personal values and characteristics:	Totally Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)	Valid Percent (%)
I am happy when I get to work with other people to solve problems	0	3.0	11.0	68.0	18.0	100.0
I am proud if I manage to solve other people’s problem	0	2.0	16.0	51.0	31.0	100.0
I feel sorry when I see my friends being fooled	0	0	18.0	51.0	31.0	100.0
I feel shy if my appearance is too sexy	7.0	10.0	35.0	35.0	13.0	100.0
I concede with any results if I lose a fight with others	1.0	18.0	31.0	42.0	8.0	100.0
I will miss my team mate if he/she is absent during a battle with other teams	2.0	5.0	26.0	49.0	18.0	100.0
I feel sad when I see victims when cruelty happens	0	0	8.0	53.0	39.0	100.0
I feel angry when I am not able to help people who are treated cruelly	0	2.0	22.0	52.0	24.0	100.0
I feel disappointed if I am not able to help my friends	2.0	3.0	14.0	52.0	29.0	100.00
It is my responsibility to help those who encounter hardship in life	5.0	11.0	36.0	37.0	11.0	100.0

LIKELIHOOD OF TAKING ACTION TO SOLVE CONFLICT:

Nearly half (41%) of respondents were unsure if they would be brave enough to fight and help victims in difficult situations. Only 8% of respondents claimed that they would indulge in such fights. Furthermore, only about one-third (35%) of respondents said they were often good at using tricks to save themselves or their friends from challenging situations. On the other hand, the majority (57%) of respondents said that they respect the opinions of others often, while only 1% did so very rarely. Similarly, many (58%) respondents often attempt to stop their friends from being involved in unbeneficial activities, while 43% of the participants often keep themselves away from social problems. Moreover, about 57% respondents said that they often work with others to make their work or study place safe. In contrast, when it comes to social issues like theft, drugs, murder, and robbery, most of the respondents (43%) very rarely write letters to the police or authorities. Only a small number of respondents (3%) reported writing such letters very often. On a similar note, the majority of respondents (33%) said they rarely write comments about social problems on social media.

Personal values and characteristics:	Very Rarely (%)	Rarely (%)	Not Sure (%)	Often (%)	Very Often (%)	Valid Percent (%)
I am brave enough to indulge in fights to help victims in difficulties	1.0	11.0	41.0	39.0	8.0	100.0
I am good in using tricks to save myself or my friend in difficulties	0	20.0	33.0	35.0	12.0	100.0
I respect differing opinions from others	1.0	2.0	9.0	57.0	31.0	100.0
I stop my friends from being involved in activities that are not beneficial	1.0	14.0	20.0	58.0	7.0	100.0
I stay away from social problems	1.0	7.0	33.0	43.0	16.0	100.0
I write letters to police and other related authorities with regard to social issues. (theft, drugs, murder, robbery and illegal street race)	43.0	24.0	18.0	12.0	3.0	100.0
I can work with others to make my work/ study place safe	3.0	5.0	25.0	57.0	10.0	100.0
I write comments in social media with regard to social problems in the society	23.0	33.0	21.0	20.0	3.0	100.0

FAVOURITE JAPANESE SUPERHEROES:

The survey clearly suggests that the respondents (41%) like Japanese superhero, One Piece, the most. The next most liked characters were Digimon (34%), Pokemon (34%), Gundam (28%), and Shin Chan (28%). The majority of participants also liked Ultraman (60%), Power Rangers (56%), Doraemon (56%), Detective Conan (43%), Sailor Moon (41%), and Naruto (40%). At the same time, a high percentage of respondents claimed that they are unfamiliar with Mazinger Z (71%), Akira (68%), Cyborg 009 (55%), Chibi Maruko Chan (58%), Astroboy (49%), and Yugioh (39%).

Japanese superhero that I like	Dislike the most (%)	Dislike (%)	Don't Know (%)	Like (%)	Like the most (%)	Valid Percent (%)
Naruto	3.0	11.0	21.0	40.0	25.0	100.0
Doraemon	0	8.0	13.0	56.0	23.0	100.0
Power Rangers	5.0	12.0	16.0	56.0	11.0	100.0
Astroboy	4.0	17.0	49.0	28.0	2.0	100.0
Chibi Maruko Chan	12.0	9.0	58.0	20.0	1.0	100.0
Akira	12.0	5.0	68.0	14.0	1.0	100.0
Beyblade	11.0	12.0	37.0	29.0	11.0	100.0
Sailor Moon	7.0	15.0	19.0	41.0	18.0	100.0
Ultraman	3.0	7.0	22.0	60.0	8.0	100.0
Mazinger Z	5.0	10.0	71.0	12.0	2.0	100.0
Shin Chan	6.0	12.0	26.0	28.0	28.0	100.0
Cyborg 009	9.0	12.0	55.0	17.0	7.0	100.0
Dragon Ball Z	3.0	8.0	24.0	32.0	33.0	100.0
Gundam	2.0	7.0	30.0	33.0	28.0	100.0
Detective Conan	1.0	5.0	33.0	43.0	18.0	100.0
One Piece	4.0	4.0	27.0	24.0	41.0	100.0
Hello Kitty	12.0	22.0	31.0	24.0	11.0	100.0
Pokemon	5.0	2.0	16.0	43.0	34.0	100.0
Yugioh	4.0	8.0	39.0	29.0	20.0	100.0
Bleach	4.0	6.0	33.0	34.0	23.0	100.0
Digimon	4.0	6.0	19.0	37.0	34.0	100.0

FEELINGS TOWARD JAPANESE SUPERHEROES:

Almost all respondents (66% agreed; 26% totally agreed) said they would feel happy seeing Japanese characters working together to solve problems. Many participants (57%) also claimed that they feel proud to see lead female characters solving problems. Moreover, the majority (36%) of respondents feel disappointed when female characters are weak in the storyline. Most participants reported being upset when seeing victims or cruel acts portrayed in the media; about half (51%) agreed that they feel sorry to see victims or the lead character being fooled, while 52% agreed they feel sad and 49% agreed they feel angry when they observe victims of cruelty. When fights take place between the superhero and his or her opponent, almost all respondents (50% agreed; 33% totally agreed) said that they would feel anxious. Many (37%) also agreed that they would concede with the results after a battle between the superhero and the opponent. With regard to the sexy appearance of some Japanese superheroes, most respondents said they do not feel shy about the appearance of these characters (22% disagreed; 24% totally disagreed). Only about 23% agreed that they feel shy watching characters with a sexy appearance.

Personal Feelings	Totally Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)	Valid Percent (%)
I am happy to see the Japanese characters/superheroes working together to solve problems	0	0	8.0	66.0	26.0	100.0
I am proud to see the lead female characters solving problems	0	4.0	12.0	57.0	27.0	100.0
I feel sorry to see victims or the lead character being fooled	0	12.0	24.0	51.0	13.0	100.0
I feel shy seeing sexy appearance of the characters	24.0	22.0	25.0	23.0	6.0	100.0
I concede with the results after a fight between the superhero and the opponent	4.0	10.0	39.0	37.0	10.0	100.0
I will miss my group friends if he/she is not with me when I am watching Superhero fights	16.0	16.0	21.0	37.0	10.0	100.0
I feel sad to see victims when cruelty happens	0	8.0	22.0	52.0	18.0	100.0
I feel angry to see other people being treated cruelly when I watch media programmes	3.0	8.0	24.0	49.0	16.0	100.0
I feel disappointed when the female characters are weak in the story line	2.0	12.0	23.0	36.0	27.0	100.0
I feel anxious when fights take place with exciting action	0	6.0	11.0	50.0	33.0	100.0

VALUES PORTRAYED BY JAPANESE ANIMATED SUPERHERO SHOWS:

The data suggest that the majority of participants (49% totally agreed, 48% agreed) see teamwork as a value portrayed by animated Japanese superhero shows. Most respondents also agreed that responsibility (59%), honesty (53%), courtesy (53%), independence (53%), and truth-seeking (53%), love (49%), respect (49%), and helpfulness (49%) are also widely portrayed in these shows. On the other hand, many participants were unsure if animated shows portray systematic behaviors (41%), punctuality (35%), strong traditional values (31%), or a strong work culture (29%).

Values that are portrayed by the Japanese Superhero Animation	Totally Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)	Valid Percent (%)
Teamwork	0	0	3.0	48.0	49.0	100.0
Loving	0	1.0	15.0	49.0	35.0	100.0
Respect	0	1.0	9.0	49.0	41.0	100.0
Hardworking	0	5.0	8.0	47.0	40.0	100.0
Punctuality	2.0	12.0	35.0	38.0	13.0	100.0
Honesty	0	3.0	19.0	53.0	25.0	100.0
Helpful	0	0	17.0	49.0	34.0	100.0
Strong traditional values	0	8.0	31.0	38.0	23.0	100.0
Systematic	5.0	13.0	41.0	31.0	10.0	100.0
Top working culture (hardworking)	1.0	9.0	29.0	49.0	12.0	100.0
Responsible	2.0	6.0	10.0	59.0	23.0	100.0
Friendly	0	1.0	16.0	55.0	28.0	100.0
Defending justice	0	1.0	10.0	45.0	44.0	100.0
Courtesy	0	4.0	23.0	53.0	20.0	100.0
Independent	3.0	2.0	14.0	53.0	28.0	100.0
Leadership	0	0	9.0	50.0	41.0	100.0
Truth seeking	0	0	6.0	53.0	41.0	100.0

REASONS FOR LIKING AN ANIMATED CHARACTER:

When asked their reasons for liking an animated character, the majority of respondents (62%) agreed that the physical appearance of a character, including his or her costume, influenced their preferences. Other popular reasons for liking a character included the usage of props (59%), and whether the character is powerful (59%), intelligent (59%), has a tagline (57%) and self-defense skills (57%), and is unique (55%; e.g. a female superhero). A small number of participants (15%) disagreed that being futuristic was a reason for liking an animated character.

Reasons for liking an animated character	Totally Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)	Valid Percent (%)
Physical appearance/display and costume (pretty/cute)	0	6.0	6.0	62.0	26.0	100.0
Nature of characters (kind / naughty / shrewd) Charisma (superhero / brave)	2.0	0	4.0	46.0	48.0	100.0
Every characters has a different nature and attitude	0	4.0	8.0	50.0	38.0	100.0
Good values	0	6.0	25.0	43.0	26.0	100.0
Background (setting)	0	7.0	24.0	41.0	28.0	100.0
Tagline / identity	2.0	4.0	20.0	57.0	17.0	100.0
Usage of props (sources of power)	1.0	5.0	13.0	59.0	22.0	100.0
Uniqueness (female as superhero)	2.0	6.0	11.0	55.0	26.0	100.0
Futuristic towards a modern world	3.0	15.0	26.0	39.0	17.0	100.0
Powerful	3.0	4.0	19.0	59.0	15.0	100.0
Intelligent	2.0	2.0	7.0	59.0	30.0	100.0
Hardworking	0	3.0	24.0	55.0	18.0	100.0
Fighting against evil and upholding goodness	4.0	4.0	19.0	47.0	26.0	100.0

Reasons for liking an animated character	Totally Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)	Valid Percent (%)
Self-defending skills	0	10.0	13.0	57.0	20.0	100.0
Significant Japanese culture	5.0	11.0	28.0	39.0	17.0	100.0
Positive attitude	0	5.0	17.0	54.0	24.0	100.0
Inquisitive	0	3.0	32.0	54.0	11.0	100.0
Rational	4.0	4.0	35.0	45.0	12.0	100.0
Wisdom	2.0	3.0	20.0	50.0	25.0	100.0

ATTITUDES TOWARD FEMALE CHARACTERS IN JAPANESE ANIMATED SHOWS:

The majority of respondents (40%) agreed that a female character in an animated Japanese superhero programme must be aggressive in order to defend herself. Despite this, the majority of respondents (34%) said they were unsure if these female characters should adopt masculine roles in daily life. Moreover, 30% of respondents disagreed that female characters should adopt these masculine roles. Similarly, most participants (35%) were unsure if female characters should maintain a traditionally feminine nature or not. Furthermore, 33% of the respondents disagreed that female characters in these shows should be responsible for domestic chores. Nevertheless, 32% of respondents also agreed that these female characters must respect men who are more powerful when solving conflicts. Some respondents (17%) disagreed with this statement.

Views on Female characters in Japanese Superhero programs and animation	Totally Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)	Valid Percent (%)
Must be aggressive to defend herself	0	24.0	25.0	40.0	11.0	100.0
Must take masculine roles in daily life	6.0	30.0	34.0	22.0	8.0	100.0
Must be responsible for domestic chores	10.0	33.0	24.0	26.0	7.0	100.0
Must maintain gentle traditional nature (feminism)	7.0	20.0	35.0	31.0	7.0	100.0
Must respect men who are more powerful in solving conflicts	15.0	17.0	30.0	32.0	6.0	100.0

Japanese Superhero Characters Aid Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Development:

Social Development:

Most (70%) of respondents agreed that Japanese superhero characters help them interact with friends of other races. About 66% also agreed that these characters help increase their cultural knowledge and communication with other races. Apart from interaction with and knowledge of other races, respondents also agreed that Japanese superheroes deepen their understanding of justice and fairness (63%), and strengthen their view that females can solve conflicts (60%).

Emotional Development:

The majority (70%) of respondents agreed that Japanese superheroes in the media have helped them build up their confidence in handling daily problems. In fact, more than half (55%) of respondents agreed that these characters help them conquer their fear of opponents; in contrast, only 2% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. In addition, half of the respondents (50%) agreed that Japanese superheroes have nurtured their interest in power and prestige.

Cognitive Development:

Almost two-thirds of respondents (59%) said that they gained creative problem solving skills from watching Japanese superhero characters in the media. Another 60% of respondents agreed that these characters encourage them to understand a variety of perspectives to find truth in life. Most participants also agreed that Japanese superhero characters help them distinguish between good and bad conduct (57%), and reality and fantasy (62%).

Japanese Superhero characters in media can help me in the following ways:	Totally Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)	Valid Percent (%)
Social Development						
Help in interaction with friends of other races	0	4.0	16.0	70.0	10.0	100.0
Increase cultural knowledge in social communication with other races	1.0	3.0	18.0	66.0	12.0	100.0
Expand my understanding towards elements of justice and fairness	0	2.0	18.0	63.0	17.0	100.0
Strengthen my view that female can solve conflicts	0	6.0	14.0	60.0	20.0	100.0
Emotional Development						
Conquer my fear towards opponent team members	2.0	13.0	17.0	55.0	13.0	100.0
Build my self-confidence in handling daily problems	0	6.0	14.0	70.0	10.0	100.0
Nurture my interest for elements of power and prestige in life	4.0	14.0	17.0	50.0	15.0	100.0
Cognitive Development						
Creative problem-solving	0	6.0	15.0	59.0	20.0	100.0
Understanding a variety of perspective in seeking truth in life	0	5.0	12.0	60.0	23.0	100.0
Identifying the difference between good and bad conduct	0	8.0	16.0	57.0	19.0	100.0
Facing life by identifying the difference between reality and fantasy	1.0	7.0	16.0	62.0	14.0	100.0

WAYS JAPANESE SUPERHEROES SOLVE CONFLICT:

More than half of the respondents (64%) agreed that Japanese superheroes use super powers to solve conflict. Apart from that, the majority of respondents agreed that scientific and technological tools (57%), super weapons (52%), femininity (48%), and masculinity (41%) help these fictional characters overcome powerful enemies and solve problems. Nevertheless, more than a quarter of the sample (21% disagreed, 5% totally disagreed) did not perceive masculinity as a way Japanese superheroes resolve conflict.

The characters of Japanese Superhero show that power and conflict can be solved by:	Totally Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)	Valid Percent (%)
Element of 'super power' in a person	0	8.0	11.0	64.0	17.0	100.0
Feminine (gentle)	3.0	12.0	26.0	48.0	11.0	100.0
Masculinity	5.0	21.0	29.0	41.0	4.0	100.0
Super weapon	4.0	9.0	18.0	52.0	17.0	100.0
Scientific and technological tools in the society	3.0	8.0	13.0	57.0	19.0	100.0

COLLECTIONS OF JAPANESE SUPERHERO MERCHANDISE:

In this sample, more than half of respondents owned toys (70%), books and magazines (67%), and T-shirts (54%) featuring characters from Japanese animated shows. Respondents collected lunch boxes (86%), water

bottles (81%), stickers (64%), dolls (63%), and stationery (63%) the least.

Collections of Japanese characters that I own	Yes (%)	No (%)	Valid Percent (%)
T-Shirt	54.0	46.0	100.0
Toy	70.0	30.0	100.0
Dolls	37.0	63.0	100.0
Stationery	37.0	63.0	100.0
Water bottle	19.0	81.0	100.0
Sticker	36.0	64.0	100.0
Lunch box	14.0	86.0	100.0
Books/Magazine	67.0	33.0	100.0
Others	39.0	61.0	100.0

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION:

In our survey of young Singaporeans and their perceptions of Japanese superhero comics and animated shows, the majority of respondents were Chinese children. The data suggest that young Singaporeans are engaged with a variety of Japanese animated series. Most begin showing interest in these characters at a young age. As a whole, young Singaporeans have eclectic tastes in Japanese superhero characters, liking everything from cute cartoons about everyday struggles, to series that involve robots and creatures with super powers. Their favorite characters from this genre are One Piece, Digimon, and Pokemon, while many also enjoy watching Gundam, Shin Chan, Ultraman, the Power Rangers, and Doraemon. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents were unfamiliar with popular series, such as Mazinger Z, Akira, Cyborg 009, Chibi Maruko Chan, and Astroboy. Besides that, the majority of participants have collected merchandise associated with these comics and shows. Many own toys (70%), books and magazines (67%), and T-shirts (54%) featuring Japanese superheroes. As a whole, the Singaporeans in our study have been engaged with animated Japanese characters since young, enjoy watching series with varied narratives, and have collected toys, books, magazines, and T-shirts depicting these fantasy worlds.

Through this study, we gained a clearer picture of why and how children identify with Japanese superheroes. For many young Singaporeans, Japanese superheroes are liked because they look good, use props, have catchy taglines, and are powerful and intelligent. From a social development standpoint, these Japanese characters may help encourage positive values, helping behaviours, cross-cultural communication, understanding of justice and fairness, and inclusive views toward females in society. Along the lines of (Buckingham, 2008) and (Fox, 1993) research, the participants in our study are aware of many positive values portrayed in Japanese animated series. At least half of the sample saw teamwork, responsibility, honesty, courtesy, independence, and truth seeking as values portrayed in Japanese comics and animated shows. However, they were less likely to agree that systematic behaviors, punctuality, and strong traditional values are promoted through these series. In short, young Singaporeans like and identify with Japanese superheroes because they are smart, powerful, and look good. The evidence also suggests Japanese superheroes portray values that are necessary for social development, primarily teamwork and responsibility.

Apart from that, young Singaporeans in our study seemed to understand the importance of helping those in need, either in their own lives or in the lives of Japanese superheroes. The majority of participants agreed that they feel happy when they have the opportunity to work with others to solve a problem (68%), or when they observe a Japanese superhero doing the same (66%). Furthermore, more than half said they would feel proud if they managed to solve another person’s problem, though more than one-third were also unsure if it is their responsibility to help those in need. In animated shows, the majority of respondents agreed that Japanese superheroes solve conflict by using super powers (64%), scientific tools (57%), and super weapons (52%). Young Singaporeans were slightly more likely to see femininity, rather than masculinity, as a way Japanese superheroes could overcome powerful enemies. In fact, more than a quarter (26%) of participants did not perceive masculinity as a way superheroes resolve conflict. On the other hand, the results are mixed on whether young Singaporeans would take action themselves to solve a real conflict or problem. The survey suggests that most Singaporeans would be more likely to engage in preventive measures to overcome conflict. The majority (57%) said they respect the opinions of others often, stop their friends from being involved in harmful activities (58%), or stay away from social problems (43%). Often, many (57%) work with others to keep their work or

study place safe. However, nearly half were unsure if they would be brave enough to fight in difficult situations, and only about a third were often good at using tricks to save themselves from these situations. Moreover, the majority of respondents very rarely write letters to the authorities on social issues (43%), or write comments about these issues on social media (33%). Thus, it seems that although most respondents agree that helping others is important in real life and in a fictional world, this may or may not translate into civic action.

Besides that, the majority of young Singaporeans in our survey agreed that animated Japanese superheroes aid social development by helping them interact with friends of other races and better understand justice and the role of females in society. In line with the findings of (Clerkin, 2012), (Yamato, et al., 2011), and (Martin, 2007), almost three-quarters of the sample (70%) agreed that Japanese superheroes have helped them interact with friends of different races and increased their cultural knowledge and communication (66%). Moreover, almost two-thirds agreed that these characters have deepened their understanding of justice and fairness. Interestingly, the majority (60%) of respondents also said that animated Japanese superheroes have strengthened their view that females can solve conflicts. Indeed, the rest of our survey suggests that young Singaporeans tend to have neutral, rather than traditional, conceptions of gender roles. Although the majority agreed that female characters in Japanese animated series must be aggressive to defend themselves, most were unsure or against female characters adopting masculine traits. At the same time, more than one-third were unsure if female characters should be feminine, or be responsible for domestic chores. Nevertheless, many (32%) also agreed that female characters must respect men in power. In addition, at least 70% of the sample said they were unsure or that they would feel shy if their appearance were too sexy, but about half also claimed they do not feel shy seeing sexy characters on animated Japanese shows. Taken together, these results suggest that Japanese superheroes may be able to foster cross-cultural understanding and strengthen positive, non-traditional views of women in society. The question still remains if the neutral conception of gender roles is a result of the Singaporean culture, of watching Japanese superhero shows, or of something else entirely.

Aside from social development, our survey suggests that Japanese animated superhero programmes aid emotional and cognitive development as well. At least half of the participants said that Japanese superheroes have helped them build self-confidence (70%) and conquer their fear of opponents (55%). Similar to arguments presented by Paley (1984), our study shows that Japanese superhero media have piqued young Singaporeans' interest in power, control over the environment, and prestige. Moreover, our survey reveals that many respondents are empathetic and tend to react to cruelty in real life in the same way as when it is portrayed in an animated programme or comic. About half said they would feel sad, angry, and disappointed to see others being fooled or treated cruelly in reality or on a fictional show. Apart from that, most respondents reported showing conceding behaviours, both when losing battles in real life (42%) or observing losing battles in an animated series (37%). In terms of cognitive development, the majority (59%) of young Singaporeans in our study claimed to have gained creative problem solving skills from watching Japanese superheroes. These characters have clearly helped the majority of respondents distinguish good from bad conduct and reality from fantasy. Not only that, Japanese superhero characters have encouraged most of the participants to seek truth by understanding a variety of perspectives. As a whole, our data supports the view that Japanese superhero comics help a young Singaporean build emotional and cognitive skills.

In conclusion, young Singaporeans in our sample began showing interest in animated Japanese superheroes early on, between the ages of 6 and 10. Even though many have been engaged with various series for at least a decade, it is clear that our respondents still identify with these characters and have positive opinions of how these series have contributed to their social, emotional, and cognitive development.

REFERENCES:

- Buckingham, D. (. (2008). *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Buckingham, D. (2002). *Small Screens. Television for Children*. London and New York: Leicester University Press.
- Clerkin, F. (2012). Superheroes know where they are going: Views from children's cultural worlds. *The Boolean. University College of York*, 6-9.
- Cupit, C. G. (1989). *Socializing Superheroes. Australian Early Childhood Resources* . Warson: Australian Early Childhood Association.
- Davies, B. (1997). Constructing and deconstructing masculinities through critical literacy. *Gender in Education*, 9(1), 9-30.
- Dyson, A. (1996). Cultural constellations and childhood identities: on Greek gods, cartoon heroes, and the social lives of schoolchildren. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66, 471-495.

- Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing Superheroes. Contemporary Childhood, Popular*. Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Fox, C. (1993). *At the Very Edge of the Forest: the influence of literature on storytelling by children*. London: Cassell.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Martin, J. (2007). Children's attitudes toward superheroes as a potential indicator of their moral understanding. *Journal of Moral Education, 36*(2), 239-250.
- Muramatsu, Y. (2002). Gender construction through interactions between the media and audience in Japan. *International Journal of Japanese Sociology, 11*, 72-87.
- Yamato, Eriko, E., K. S., Tamam, E., Hasan, H., & Osman, M. N. (2011). It's part of our lifestyle: exploring young Malaysians' experiences with Japanese popular culture. *Keio Communication Review, 119-223*.
