



The Importance of Deaf Representation In Animated Media

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Abstract. Representation in media has diversified, thanks to continuous efforts from minorities who expressed the need for more portrayals of their people and culture. However, representation of disabled people, specifically deafness, is still a work in progress. Deaf portrayals on screen over the years have been changing for the better since it started many decades ago, with a few noteworthy examples being the Oscar-winning drama film, CODA (2021), A Quiet Place (2018) and Hush (2016). Despite these breakthroughs, those films were not free from any criticisms due to several inaccuracies and reliance on stereotypes. Within Malaysia, there are some visible deaf portrayals in live action films, the most well known examples being Pekak (2016) and Talentime (2009), which both had deaf characters playing prominent roles in the story. However, in both of these films, there are several aspects of the portrayals that leave rooms for improvements in terms of storytelling and characterization. In summation, disability representation overall is still limited in Malaysia, with some noteworthy examples emerging mostly in live action formats. For the countries with the highest numbers of animation that is accessible to Malaysian audiences, Japan and the United States, representations of minorities in animation are growing at an exponential rate with the proliferation of social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Pride Month. This research will dive into the knowledge of deaf representation in animated media from Japan and the US, to learn what can be implemented into the Malaysian animation industry and to discover the importance of deaf representation.

Keyword: *Deaf representation, animated media, disabilities*

1. Introduction

Representation of minorities in media has always been an ongoing debate among filmmakers and critics throughout the years. Since several decades ago, there have been many attempts to be inclusive in films and television shows, but on several occasions, it was in favour of entertaining but offensive portrayals, such as the depiction of a Japanese man, Mr Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* [1]. As society became more diverse due to multiple ethnicities and cultures living together, social equality and equity became more of a priority and more awareness has been made on the offensiveness and hurtfulness of these stereotypes that were conceptualised from portrayals in older films and other media. Subsequently because of these movements, a tremendous amount of effort over the years have been made to ameliorate minority representations in mainstream media like films and television [4].

Among these many groups of underrepresented minorities, those with disabilities are one of the least represented in mainstream media according to the report made by the National Research Group from Hollywood in 2022 with deaf representation being seen the least together with blind representation, both categorised under disability representations. As stated in the report, 44% of the participants who are both deaf and non-disabled audience, see less of these representations than they do with any other minority representation [8]. Of course, these statistics do not represent the quantity of deaf representations in media, but rather, the numbers that are accessible or generally known to a regular audience. Similarly with representation of racial minorities, disability representations in films and television since several decades ago are still developing for the better since they first started out in the early 1900s [18].

Like other portrayals of minorities in the media, deaf representation wasn't always done respectfully and accurately. In a film titled *Children of a Lesser God* (Randa Haines, USA, 1986), a female janitor named Sarah is portrayed to be deaf, mostly communicating with sign language. To the credit of the filmmaker, Marlee Matlin who played Sarah was actually deaf in real life. Sign language was also included as part of the communication between the characters and added more authenticity in the portrayal. However, one major issue that was brought up was the general treatment of Sarah by another character who is non-disabled, James, a teacher at the speech therapy school where Sarah worked [9]. He viewed Sarah as someone who was weak and incapable, and often criticised Sarah's actions and choices, wanting to make her "better", from his perspective. At the end of the film, he ended up persuading Sarah to assimilate with society and become just like everyone else, just because it would be more convenient for everyone else without considering Sarah's own feelings and thoughts about how she felt about the whole situation, which is a reflection of how the general society sometimes perceive the deaf and other disabled communities.

Since then, deaf representation has significantly progressed beyond what it was decades ago, with inclusions in more films and other media and a diligent effort to create positive portrayals of deaf characters, but similarly to other minority representations, audiences, especially those from the deaf community, constantly vouch for improvements in the portrayal of the characters. The biggest criticism from those who are passionate about inclusivity and representation is to simply increase the quantity of deaf characters and give them more important roles aside from just being a minor or background character. There is still a huge lack of deaf representation within animated media as a whole, but over the past five to ten years, there has been an increasing amount of inclusion of animated deaf characters in the USA, not only as an effort to portray the deaf, but also to place them in a more important role within the context of the story. Some examples of animated media from the US that display this very attribute are *Madagascar: A Little Wild* (Dana Starfield, 2020), *Craig of the Creek* (Matt Burnett, Ben Levin, Shauna McGarry, 2018) and Netflix's *The Dragon Prince* (Aaron Ehasz, Justin Richmond, 2018). In comparison, in Japan, there are also some efforts to showcase deaf people as the main characters and even tackling some serious issues that are intended for a more mature audience. The most well known examples include the feature film, *A Silent Voice*, (Naoko Yamada, 2017) a fantasy series titled *Ranking of Kings* (Yosuke Hatta, 2021) and an action series called *Gangsta* (Shuko Murase, 2015).

2. Background

Within Malaysia, representations of minority groups in animated media have been developing a lot further since the start of the animation industry over five decades ago, with more characters of racial minorities making up the main roster of characters of these animated projects. However, when it comes to disability representation, disabled communities including the deaf who make up a small minority of the overall population of the nation are still being underrepresented in mainstream media. Similarly with how American animation studios are trying to make an effort to improve representation in their own work, the animation studios in Malaysia are putting in some effort to include more representations of minorities as well, although not at the large scale as American animation is doing currently. One example being one of the recently popular animated shows, *Ejen Ali*, by Studio Wau, that has a diverse ensemble of characters and even included a physically disabled character, Mika who goes beyond her physical limitations to help fight in the agency. It is interesting to note that while the ethnicities of the characters in animated shows like *Ejen Ali* and *Boboiboy* were never specified, supporting characters like General Rama and Victor from *Ejen Ali*, or Gopal and Mei Lee from *Boboiboy* can clearly be coded as Indian and Chinese respectively, judging by their names, their physicalities and their accents when they speak.

In terms of deaf representations specifically, within Malaysia, there are some portrayals that have existed in several live action films. The two most prominent examples being *Pekak*, a film by Mohd Khairul Azri Md Noor that was released in 2016, and *Talentine*, a film by Yasmin Ahmad, released in 2009. The filmmaker for the film “*Pekak*”, has received backlash from several organisations associated with the deaf community, including HEAR ME (Malaysian Association of Deaf Children’s Parents), for the inaccuracies of depicting deaf folks in real life, and was called out for tarnishing the dignity of people of disabilities by relating the story of the main character with immoral scenes such as violence, drug dealing, theft and even graphic sexual scenes [26]. As for *Talentine*, the depiction of the deaf character, Mahesh, was done with more respect, but the focus of the story was more towards the cultural difference and interracial relationships that occur within Malaysia [13].

But for the most part, representations in Malaysian animated media are explored mostly through the different ethnicities and cultures that co-exist together in Malaysia. In terms of disability representation, the Malaysian animation industry still has the potential to expand a lot more, as there are many different people with various disabilities out there who could benefit a lot from portrayals of a character that is similar to them in different animated projects, especially younger children of this modern era who are still developing as a person and consume a lot of entertainment through animation [2]. A major question of this research is to learn from the American and Japanese animation on portraying deaf characters so that it can be applied to Malaysian animation, in addition to learning the importance of deaf representation within animation towards those who are deaf and those who do not have disabilities.

3. Literature

For this research, a close reading of journal papers covering the topic of representations of the deaf in films and animation has been undertaken to go through the analysis of deaf portrayals in live action films that has existed. In one paper, McKenzie Wolfe-Webb in their research on deaf representation in mainstream films, covered the positive and negative attributes that contribute to the overall portrayal of deaf representations in three major films of their choice, which was *Children of a Lesser God*, *Hush* and *a Quiet Place* [9]. Some aspects of the findings are compared and mapped with the deaf representations that are present in animated media. Adrian Pang in his research on the anime, *Gangsta*, which has deaf representation, covers the technical sound design that reflects the experience of deafness [11]. Interview transcripts of the creators of the animations that have deaf portrayals (*Craig of the Creek*, *Madagascar: A Little Wild*, *The Dragon Prince*, *Ranking of Kings*) have been read through as well to acquire an understanding of the ideation process in the conception of the deaf characters and their stories.

Moreover, to obtain a general idea of what the reality of the deaf in Malaysia is like, some journal papers researching on the experiences that the deaf community goes through within the country have been studied. Wan Ying Lee, Joanna Tjin Ai Tan & Jin Kuan Kok in their research published in 2022 to investigate the struggles that

deaf generally experience, concluded that some challenges that they went through is lack of communication and understanding from society and even their own family members and friends, mostly contributed by little awareness and support system [6]. Khairul Farhah Khairuddin, Susie Miles and Wendy McCracken in their research in 2018 investigates the experience of school for deaf people, especially for younger children and their parents. A common factor that they theorised that attributed to the better experience for the deaf in school is a general access to a better education system that specialises for deaf and disabled, which mostly is influenced by their own financial capabilities as well as encouragement and support from their own family members, especially their own parents [7].

In addition, an analysis has been done towards the full-length report of audience reception towards deaf representations in films over the years done by the National Research Group based in the United States in collaboration with the Deaf West Theatre done in 2022. According to the report, despite the breakthroughs of deaf portrayals from Oscar winning film, CODA, there is still a lack of portrayals in films and televisions that could be seen by the general audience [8]. Furthermore, according to the report, between most and least representation that is seen in any genre of film and television, animation is included in the category of least, and this potentially leads to a problem of underrepresentation targeting a younger audience.

Percentage of visibility in media in Hollywood

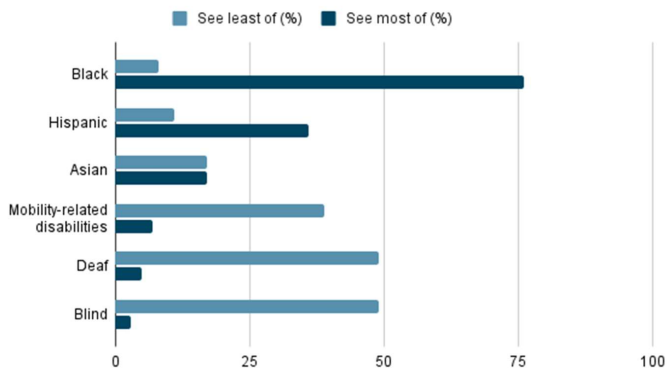


Fig. 1 Statistics taken from the National Research Group’s report of deaf representation, with mostly disabled representations having a lower percentage of visibility in media, including deafness.

Most deaf representations seen	Least deaf representations seen
Drama Documentaries Reality Romance Comedy	<u>Animation</u> Superhero/Comic Book Action/Adventure Horror Science Fiction

Fig. 2 Survey data summarised from the Deaf Representation Report of deaf representations in specific genres, categorised in most and least seen. Animation is included under the least seen.

Several animations and live action films that include deaf representations from within the past ten years have been looked through as well to study the elements and attributes that contribute to the portrayal of deafness that is effective and respectful enough towards the audience. There were six animations released in the span of the last ten years containing deaf representations that have been selected specifically to be studied for this research: three from the United States and three from Japan. The reason that both of these countries were chosen as the case

studies for deaf representation in animation is that they constitute most of animated media content globally, with Japan producing the most, followed by the United States, and statistically, both countries' animated media are the most accessible and most popular to Malaysian audience, aside from the local animated media, through theatrical release, television and online streaming service like Netflix. According to a report on audience demand done by Parrot Analytics, Japanese animation or anime is the most sought after content within the medium of online streaming in Malaysia [23], and a majority of the animated films released globally and by extension, in Malaysian cinemas are produced and imported from the United States [24]. Interviews with the creators of these animated projects from Japan and USA that contain deaf representation were also read through, to acquire the thought process behind the production of their works and ideas of deaf representation that they wanted to present in their animation.

Table 1. Animations with deaf representations from Japan and the USA for the case study

Country	Titles	Year of Release	Production
Japan	A Silent Voice	2017	Kyoto Animation
	Gangsta	2015	Manglobe
	Ranking of Kings	2021	WIT Studios
USA	Madagascar: A Little Wild	2020	Dreamworks
	Craig of the Creek	2018	Cartoon Network
	The Dragon Prince	2018	Bardel Entertainment

4. Methods

For this research, the method that is primarily used is the qualitative method. Published journal articles pertaining to the topic of representation in general, deaf representation in films, the impact of animation and cartoon towards the audience and the study of representation of minorities as influenced by the historical landscape throughout the years undergo a close reading and examination to pinpoint the aspects of representation that shape the portrayal of minorities as well deaf representations that is present in today's animated media. Several animated media from the US and Japan that include deaf representation have been analysed and studied, to research the aspects of deaf representation that are present in the animation. These animated works are studied through content analysis. Characteristics of the deaf character, to the roles they play within the story, and the technical side that goes behind the scene in production has been studied. These animated media from both of these countries have been selected due to the portrayal of the deaf in the story and the importance of the roles they play in the story.

5. Findings

5.1 Aspects of Deaf Representation

In terms of communication, sign language is mainly used by the hearing impaired to communicate with other deaf people and those without disabilities. Aside from the accuracy of the sign language, filmmakers must take into account the setting where the story takes place as each country develops their own sign language. The British sign language differs from American Sign Language (ASL) and even Malaysian sign language has its own special sets of signs. Within the United States, a different dialect of ASL is developed by the African American community called the Black American Sign Language (BASL). This was appropriately displayed in an American animated television series called *Craig of the Creek* (Matt Burnett, Ben Levin, US, 2018). In the show, a deaf African American boy named Jackie was shown to be using Black American sign language to communicate with his father and his friends. Interestingly enough, there is an inclusive effort to have a non-disabled character named Keun-Sup, communicate with Jackie with sign language and assume the role of the translator within their social circle. It is important to note that Jackie is the first recorded representation of a black deaf character in animation.

According to Matt Burnett, one of the creators of the show, the studio felt it was important for them to provide an opportunity for kids who don't normally see themselves on screen be represented. As for how BASL was utilised in the show, the storyboard supervisor, Dave Alegre, who collaborated with the South California Black Deaf Advocates, stated that it was not only important to get the signing correct, but to include other small aspects that contribute to communication of the emotions such as eye expressions, head tilt, eyebrows inflection and the speed of the hands when they are signing [16].

One of the most recent films to showcase sign language was a live action film, *Avatar 2: Ways of the Water* (James Cameron, US, 2022). In fact, a different variation of sign language was specifically created for the film called Na'vi Sign Language. It was developed by deaf actor and writer, CJ Jones, in collaboration with linguistic professor, Paul Frommer, who had worked in the first film to develop the Na'vi language used by the Na'vi tribe members to communicate with each other [17]. The sign language is used in the second film when the characters are underwater and aren't able to vocalise or audibly sense each other, which in a way, simulates deafness experienced by those who aren't able to hear or speak. Paying attention to the cultural landscape of where the story takes place is as equally important as simply displaying sign language to provide the most accurate representation of sign language the characters should be using within the context of their environment. This in turn, creates a deeper immersion for the audience to connect with the deaf characters and the place where the story takes place in.

However, even with the inclusion of sign language in mainstream films, there was another revelation about society that concerns the deaf community in real life. The reality is, within Malaysia, not all deaf people are able to communicate properly in real life due to having no exposure to sign language education and speech therapy to help them verbalise their words better [6]. Some people with hearing disabilities couldn't understand sign language when they watch a scene with deaf characters signing and require subtitles as much as those who are not disabled [8]. Other common forms of communication used by deaf characters in animation are writing and lip reading. This would be accurate to a certain extent, but in many cases, a lot of filmmakers would resort to lip reading and writing instead of sign language due to a lack of budget and time to do proper research on sign language and other forms of communication used by the deaf. And in most of those cases, whenever deaf characters do talk, their voices are usually impaired and aren't able to enunciate their words properly, which does reflect the reality of how some deaf people talk [5]. In the Japanese animated media that have been brought up in the literature review, which are *A Silent Voice*, *Gangsta* and *Ranking of Kings*, this particular characteristic of communication can be observed through the deaf characters and how they vocalise whenever they need to speak with the other characters.

A lot of deaf representation in animated media explores the relationships between the deaf and non-disabled. In most cases, there are a lot of stereotypes shown where the deaf character gets bullied by non-disabled characters in the story as a way to generate compassion from the audience towards the character. In the critically acclaimed Japanese animated film, *A Silent Voice*, a deaf girl named Shoko, was relentlessly bullied by a boy named Shoya in her school. Because of the constant harassment, Shoko ended up moving away to another school. As a result of his terrible actions, Shoya himself was bullied by the other kids in school. Both Shoya and Shoko were reunited in a different school, and Shoya was given a chance to redeem himself and become a better person towards Shoko. Generating empathy towards the deaf community can be seen as a positive thing, but the portrayal of Shoko as someone who is weak and submissive creates a negative stereotype that deaf people constantly need help and are dependent on others, when in reality, this is not the case. As stated by Colin Barnes in *Disabling Imagery and Media*, this type of trope falls under treating disabled people as someone who is pitiable and pathetic [10]. Moreover, the film also provides more screen time to Shoya who is non-disabled as opposed to Shoko, who is the deaf character in the story. In addition, he was only motivated to change after he himself was put in Shoko's shoes and was bullied by his peers. However, showing an initially antagonistic character like Shoya who was a bully to Shoko in the beginning turning over a new leaf builds encouragement in the audience to treat deaf people with respect and tolerance, especially those who might have had negative views of deaf people initially. Subsequently, when people change their attitudes to be better, they will put in more effort to be more compassionate and tolerant towards those who are different.

In the anime, *Gangsta*, the deaf are portrayed by the character, Nicolas Brown. Him and his friend, Worick, are vigilantes that help control the terrible crimes that occur within the city that they reside in. Nicolas as a character, though shown to have some sociopathic, violent tendencies and a drug addiction problem, is kind and caring to those around him and even shows empathy due to his own struggles with drugs and abuse in his past. An excessive positive portrayal of deaf people could set a narrative that deaf people are inherently faultless due to their disability, and puts a high expectation on them as a person. So, deaf characters need to be shown to have flaws to them to create relatability with the audience and make them more human essentially. However, displaying flaws in a deaf character should be done with care without villainizing them, especially those who might be more on the violent side, like Nicolas. Under Colin Barnes studies on disabled representation stereotypes, Nicolas' character could potentially fall under Disability as Sinister and Evil, a trope that depicts disabled people as someone sinful and associated with crime [10], but there is enough depth to his characterization in giving him positive character attributes to make him sympathetic and relatable that he doesn't strongly portray this trope in a negative light.

Having a disability like a deafness in a story gives a chance for the character to overcome the struggle of their disability to achieve something great in their life. In the animated series, *Ranking of Kings*, the main character, Bojji, is a young deaf prince who, despite the setbacks of having a disability like deafness, still did his best to prove himself and learn what it means to be a great king in his adventures. Initially when he was young, he was constantly told by everyone he knew that he was weak and wasn't capable of being a king. Even his own people looked down on him due to his smaller stature and his disability. Eventually, he went off on an adventure on his own and grew stronger as a person, proving his worth as a future king. According to the original manga creator, Sosuke Toka, in an interview with the Anime News Network, it was not his original intention to specifically choose deafness to convey disability through the main character, Bojji, but rather, to create a general sense of relatability when it comes to portraying strength and weaknesses of a character [20]. Despite the lack of specificity in the intentions of the character's creation, the portrayal of Bojji as a disabled and deaf character was well-loved by audiences alike and the anime grew in popularity for the past two years and is still releasing new episodes in 2023 [19].

Similarly, showing a disabled character as a strong character can be a source of inspiration as well to those who are deaf or have similar challenges in their lives. In the Netflix animated series, *The Dragon Prince*, the show's co-creator, Aaron Ehasz, stated that the inclusion of deafness towards the character, General Amaya, was a deliberate choice on their part. In fact, the disability can be considered an advantage for Amaya in the battlefield, as everyone is distracted with noises in their surroundings whilst Amaya's lack of hearing enables her to be more focused in the moment. The conception of the character proved to be a challenge for the staff working on the show to provide an authenticity to the character whilst retaining a sense of strength and positivity in her portrayal. For that very reason, the showrunners made sure to apply as much research as they could into her portrayal, from the usage of American Sign Language in her communication to how Amaya needs to pick up any messages from other characters by having to see their facial expressions and body language visually with her eyes [25].

Aside from the storytelling, characterization and sign language accuracy, animators also have to take into account the cinematography and the placement of the deaf characters within the shot. Because sign language is a visual-based form of communication, the communication showcased on screen has to be made clear to the audience, not just towards those without hearing disabilities, but also towards the deaf as well. Some things to consider when showing a sign language scene is the position of the signing character in the shot, the clarity of the angle, the accuracy of the sign language and suitability of the character's facial expressions with the signing. As mentioned by Whetter, co-creator of the show *Madagascar: A Little Wild*, the portrayal of Dave the deaf chimp was carefully planned, even from the preproduction stage when they had ASL performers, who became the references for the animation in the show, show the signing to the camera and had to adjust their positions when their hands left the camera [15]. And because animated media would sometimes have stylized characters that have different numbers of fingers, animators would also have to consider improvising and changing certain signs to fit the stylized character. One example is from an animated show called *Bluey* where Dougie, a deaf character, only

has four fingers on each of his hands and uses sign language, so animators had to improvise certain gestures to fit the physical attributes of the character [21].

In addition, another aspect of deaf representation that needs to be taken care of is audio design to convey what the deaf experiences in terms of their sense of hearing, or lack thereof. According to the analytical research on the anime done by Adrian Pang in 2022, deafness in Japanese TV is often associated with how the disabled is forced to suffer in silence, in a term known as “gaman” in Japanese, and that the character in question must often hold all responsibilities of what they have to endure alone, and this is far from what is showcased with Nicolas’s character, when the audio design helps to simulate to the audience what Nicolas himself as a character could sense auditorily. Nicolas as a deaf character is not completely incapable of hearing any sound, as the audio design shows that his ears could pick up the deep bass while the rest of the audio like other characters’ voices and even the music that accompanies the scene is drowned out and muffled, to mimic the auditory senses that Nicolas himself is able to pick up, thus creating a sense of connection with the audience who watches the scene [11].

5.2 Importance of Deaf Representation

Deaf representation can be introduced to children from an early age through animation. The show *Madagascar: A Little Wild* generally targets younger children and has a deaf character, Dave, a mischievous chimpanzee who communicates with his sister, Pickles, through sign language. A character like Dave helps in introducing children to the deaf community in a fun and positive way. An early exposure to the deaf community through a positive representation in animated media can help children learn to tolerate, accept and even appreciate those who are not the same as them. In the long run, it will help to normalise the presence of deaf people within society as well. At the same time, portraying more deaf characters in a more authentic manner will also help to clear any misconceptions that society would have about the deaf, such as the idea that deaf people are usually silent [18].

Seeing how non-disabled people treat the deaf can also be a big influence to how children and young people can behave towards deaf people in real life. Young and developing minds of children are easily influenced by what they see, especially in the modern age where children spend more time watching animated media on smartphones, televisions and other devices. Children are more prone to copy what they observe to develop their own behaviours and personalities when they lack parenting and education from their own parents and school [3]. Inclusion of good treatment of deaf characters by the non-disabled in animated media will help shape a more positive behaviour of children towards deaf people that develops into their adulthood.

For the deaf community itself, seeing themselves being represented in a positive light in animated media brings a huge benefit to their confidence within a society where most people are not disabled. For someone who is deaf, having a character like Bojji in *Ranking of Kings* who can overcome the struggle of deafness and be able to achieve his dream to become the king can be an inspiration to them, and shows that they can do more than what society expects them to be or what they expected themselves to be due to societal pressure. Even just having more inclusion of deaf representation can already boost the confidence of deaf people to feel more comfortable within the society and socialising with the normal hearing people [2]. Matt Burnett, the co-creator for *Craig of the Creek*, explains that they wanted to give an opportunity for children who are underrepresented in mainstream media to be able to see themselves on screen in animation, and that was the general idea of their creation of Jackie, the black, deaf character in their show. [16]

Deaf representation in animated media can also be a good foundation for primary education of deaf culture to those who are unfamiliar with it. Education of sign language, how deaf people live their lives and what kind of support system they might need in society can be shown early on in these types of educational content and prepare young children to be more educated about the deaf community as well to planting a seed of tolerance and empathy within them towards those who are deaf and by extension, others who might have other types of disabilities too [8].

5.3 The Challenges of the Malaysian Animation Industry in Representation

In terms of growth of local animation in Malaysia, the industry has witnessed a massive amount of success for the past ten years, with the most popular and well-received animated projects being Upin Ipin, Boboiboy and Ejen Ali, making a big name among the audience within the country. It is important to note, there are similar themes between each of these three projects: having young male characters being the main protagonists, an ensemble of supporting diverse characters, spoken language being mainly Malay, and each of these originally being a series that eventually earned their own theatrical film releases in cinema due to the financial and critical success, inside and outside of Malaysia. In addition, the industry has also found some semblance of similar success with their smaller animation studios that are making a name for themselves in international film festivals and achieving accolades and gaining a reputation for the Malaysian animation industry, whilst showcasing various unique cultures in Malaysia. Some examples of these smaller animations include Batik Girl by RnD Studios (2019), Kring! By Brainy Bones Studios (2019), Legend of Ancient Borneo by All For One Productions (2020) and the Pillar of Strength by Creatvtoon Studios (2021).

Major animated films from Malaysia that have been released since the past ten years from the year 2013 to 2023 have been listed down in a table chronologically from latest to the oldest. This is also to pinpoint whether any of them have any form of disability representation in recent times. This is not only including deafness, but also any other form of disabilities, to see whether Malaysian animated studios in the past ten years in the industry have made any effort to be inclusive towards the disabled. From the table below, it can be concluded that there is a lack of support towards any form of disability representations in major animated films. Moreover, most of the animated films in this list have been established from their own television shows prior to their theatrical release, implying that they already had gathered an audience before the movie’s release. Examples being Didi and Friends, Boboiboy, Ejen Ali, Upin & Ipin and Bola Kampung.

Table 2. List of Malaysian animated films released from 2013-2023

No.	Title	Year	Production	Disability Representation	Role (Major/ Supporting)
1.	Didi and Friends: the Movie	2023	Digital Durian	No	-
2.	Mechamoto: the Movie	2022	Animonsta Studios	Yes	Supporting
3.	Boboiboy: the Movie 2	2019	Animonsta Studios	No	-
4.	Ejen Ali: the Movie	2019	Wau Animation	Yes	Supporting
5.	Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal	2019	Les’ Copaque	No	-
6.	Wheely	2018	Kartun Studios	No	-
7.	Upin & Ipin: Jeng Jeng Jeng	2016	Les’ Copaque	No	-
8.	Boboiboy: the Movie	2016	Animonsta Studios	No	-
9.	Oh! La la	2015	Infinite Motion	No	-
10.	Ribbit	2014	KRU Studios	No	-
11.	Super Squad: The Movie	2014	NetCarbon	No	-
12.	Bola Kampung: The Movie	2013	Animasia Studios	No	-

The exploration of racial cultures is certainly one of the most important focus grappled on by these animation creators, with an example being Monsta Studios with their latest success branching off Boboiboy, Mechamoto, which not only has gained a series of 26 episodes, but also a theatrical film release in 2022 that achieved success in the local box office as well as internationally through cinema and online streaming (Netflix). In an interview with Nizam Razak, the CEO of Monsta Studios with Gempak, he stressed the pivotal role of showcasing Malaysian cultures to the other countries overseas to put them on the map alongside other iconic characters and cultures [22]. He made a comparison with how Korean culture is popular in Malaysia, that

television shows, food and even some cultural traditions originating from South Korea have become somewhat of a norm to Malaysians and that he is optimistic in showcasing Malaysian cultures similarly on a global scale. With that said, because more focus is being channelled into showing the diverse racial cultures that exist in Malaysia, the inclusion of any disability representation becomes more of an afterthought rather than a sincere intention to spotlight these groups of people, which is not necessarily a negative thing, but the mindsets need to evolve so that disability representation can be put in the centre stage rather than as just an accompaniment.

Another important factor to consider is the Malaysian animation industry faces a lot of setbacks before they can have more diversity in representations, as it is relatively newer compared to the American and Japanese animation industry which have both existed for almost a century since the early 1900s. One of the biggest challenges faced by the animation studios in Malaysia is distribution and funding, in addition to meeting the requirement of quantity and quality of animated works, even though there is no shortage of local and foreign talents [12]. Because most fundings are done through grants provided by agencies such as Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) and National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS), the animation studios constantly have to compete with each other to put out their content towards the audience and this means there are quite a lot of stories of representations out there still waiting to be told but never had the opportunity due to a lack of financial budget that would have assisted in increasing manpower and marketing their projects to the audience in Malaysia and overseas. With the age of the Internet where everyone can upload their content, the barrier of marketing has been cut down, but the hurdle of content creation due to financial constraints is constantly an issue faced by Malaysian creatives. Because of the lack of funding towards their original content that can have more representations towards minorities, a lot of smaller animation companies who didn't receive any grants or fundings from these agencies often need to work for bigger companies' projects instead of their own to sustain themselves and thus, not having enough time and resources to work on their own productions.

Despite these obstacles, this is not to say that there has not been any effort to showcase any portrayal of disabilities in animation locally. Brainy Bones Studios, one of the companies who managed to acquire a grant from MDEC to create an animated short, managed to portray a disabled character in a positive light through their short film, *Kring!*. Mael, the main character, has dyslexia which prevents him from being able to learn in school properly. Through the guidance and hard work of his teacher, Cikgu Suraya, he persevered and managed to overcome his hurdles and obtained a good grade for the subject that she taught, which was Mathematics. The success of this short film was attributed by the good moral values applied to the story as well as the heartwarming story that encapsulated the entire film's theme, with the final scene showing Mael treating Cikgu Suraya as a parental figure because of her efforts to help him throughout the story [14]. Although there is no obvious deaf representation that exists in Malaysian animated media so far, the existence of an animated short like *Kring!* and showcasing disability front and centre with moral values does show a possibility for more of it in the future.

6. Conclusion

Deaf representations in animation can be an important step to making society a better place of understanding and tolerance of those who are deaf to include in mainstream media. As children consume a lot of animation daily, it is a great opportunity to take advantage of the medium and utilise it for education and influence of their behaviour. With that said, it is also imperative to do a respectful and accurate deaf representation in animated media, aside from simply including them within the story. The existence of stereotypes that plagued the minds of society due to past, problematic depictions in older films as well as the lack of portrayals and representations of the deaf in media have caused some damage towards the treatment of the deaf in society due to little awareness and knowledge about them, especially within Malaysia, where there is a lack of deaf representation in live action and animation. There are many aspects in representing the deaf, from execution of the storytelling and characterization of the deaf characters, to the technical side like cinematography, framing of the shots that showcases the deaf character and sound design to emulate the experience of deafness.

With representations of minorities becoming more on trend with filmmakers and content creators in the modern age, there is an increasing amount of positive deaf representations in animation that can leave a more

positive impact towards the deaf and general society. Animation, being a growing phenomenon in Malaysia, achieving financial and critical success in television, cinema and online streaming for the past few years, has the potential to raise more awareness of the deaf community within Malaysia and increase better treatment of them. However, despite achieving a lot of success in recent years with series like Ejen Ali, Boboiboy and Upin Ipin, in addition to films like Ejen Ali the Movie and Mechamato, the animation industry is still cementing its mark in the industry internationally before it can reach to the level of the US or Japan. Because Malaysia is filled with diverse racial and religious cultures, there are many potential ways to showcase deafness in animation, alongside the rich plethora of cultures and traditions that have already existed in Malaysia for a long time.

Because the US and Japan have the highest numbers of imported animated media in Malaysia, a lot of local animation creators do need to compete with these imported animations as well as each other to showcase their work to the audience, more so with the digital age of Internet, where content from all over the world is made more obtainable here in Malaysia. However, through the studies and analysis of the media content from both live action and animation, that contains deaf portrayals and other forms of cultural representations, done through this research as well as many other studies in the past from both local and non-local researchers, future animation content creators as well those who are still active in the industry can take inspiration and learn about deaf representations that has been showcased in both American and Japanese animation and the potential positive impacts it can generate towards the deaf community and Malaysian society in general. By learning and applying it to their works, the local animation industry can open up more doors to deaf representation and other disabilities in the future to enhance the reflection of the multicultural, diverse nation that is Malaysia.

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