

Cross-Cultural Narratives in Animation: A Comparative Analysis of Eastern and Western Representations and their Impact on Cultural Integrity

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a focused comparative analysis of cultural narratives in Eastern and Western animation, examining their impact on cultural integrity and audience reception. Through the lens of selected animations *Upin & Ipin*, *Boboiboy*, *Mulan*, and *Moana* the research investigates how these media preserve or distort cultural identities, especially in the context of global distribution via streaming platforms. A qualitative methodology is employed, utilising content, case study, and semiotic analysis to investigate the representation and interpretation of cultural elements in animation. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model provides the theoretical framework, allowing for a detailed examination of how cultural messages are embedded by animators and decoded by diverse audiences. The findings reveal significant differences between Eastern and Western animations regarding narrative structure, character design, and thematic emphasis. Eastern animations, mainly from Malaysia, prioritise local cultural elements and community values, while Western animations often adapt cultural symbols for broader appeal, sometimes at the expense of accuracy. This study contributes to the discourse on cultural representation in global media by offering insights into best practices for culturally sensitive animation. It advocates for a balanced approach that maintains cultural integrity while engaging a global audience. It emphasises the importance of thoughtful cultural adaptation in animation to support cultural preservation and cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: cultural narratives, cultural representation, animation, cultural integrity, comparative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, known for its rich and diverse cultural tapestry, celebrates many festivals and holidays that highlights the significance of cultural identity among its many ethnic groups. Culture plays a vital role in the identity formation of these groups, serving as a medium for cultural preservation and expression. One of the powerful tools for this cultural expression is animation. As an art form and storytelling medium, animation transcends cultural boundaries, offering diverse narratives and representations that can effectively portray a culture's character, settings, and customs. The strong correlation between animation and culture is evident in how animated stories often draw inspiration from various cultural elements, making animation a potent medium for disseminating cultural knowledge to the broader public (Haji Mohamad Rafik, M., Alimom, N., & Firdaus, N., 2020). In Malaysia, this relationship between animation and culture is exemplified by works like *Upin & Ipin* (2007), which have successfully promoted Malaysian folkloric culture. The series has notably depicted Malaysian values, especially Islamic ones, creating a platform fostering amicable relationships across various societal, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Abdul, D., 2015). This success illustrates the potential of animation as a tool for cultural representation and preservation. However, the portrayal of cultures in animation has its challenges. Animated works are often criticised for perpetuating stereotypes, engaging in cultural misappropriation, or oversimplifying complex identities. This research aims to explore these intricacies, examining how animators navigate the delicate balance between celebrating cultural diversity and avoiding the reinforcement of biases or misconceptions. An example of cultural misrepresentation can be seen

in Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), where the character's design and age were altered to suit romanticised Western ideals, leading to significant misinformation about Native American attire and heritage (Travers, B., 2019). Such instances highlight the potential consequences of cultural misrepresentation in animation. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the representation of culture in animated films to understand how animation can be a tool for cultural preservation and accurate cultural reference.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The global animation industry serves as a mirror reflecting social values, beliefs, and traditions, making it a powerful vehicle for cultural representation. The amalgamation of cultural elements in animated films often mirrors a country's rich cultural legacy, making studying cultural adaptation in animation crucial. This research comprehensively analyses how culture is depicted in animated films and series, focusing on the importance of accurate cultural representation. In the realm of Western media, films such as *Mulan* (1998) and *Pocahontas* (1995) are often compared with Malaysian animated works like *Upin & Ipin* (2007) and *Boboiboy* (2011) for their portrayal of cultural representation. The scope of this research is confined to animated media, comparing the depiction of cultural elements in Malaysian and Western animation industries. This study employs qualitative research methods, such as observing characters' attire and cultural contexts and utilising case studies. This research aims to discern between genuine cultural representation and cultural misrepresentation. The ultimate goal is to assess the accuracy of cultural portrayal in Eastern and Western animation and establish guidelines for proper cultural representation as a means of cultural preservation.

An Overview of Cultural Representation in Animated Media

The study by (Glăveanu & Tanggaard, 2014) *Creativity, Identity, and Representation: Towards a Socio-Cultural Theory of Creative Identity*, highlight the significance of identity theory in understanding creativity within a socio-cultural framework. This research highlights the complex relationship between the creator, the audience, and societal discourses on creativity, emphasising the evolving nature of creative identities. This framework is crucial for understanding how cultural representation in animation evolves and influences societal perceptions over time. Similarly, (Enfield, 2000) explores the challenges industries face in balancing global influences with the preservation of cultural identity. This tension is particularly evident in the animation industry, where the influx of global content often necessitates adjustments to maintain cultural integrity. Scholarly works by (Omar & Ishak, 2011) provide a deeper analysis of individual films, examining the degree to which visual elements, storylines, and thematic content accurately represent Malaysian culture. These studies emphasise the role of cultural representation in shaping societal perceptions and identity formation on a broader scale. The research highlights the impact of authentic cultural representation in animation on promoting cultural awareness and appreciation among audiences.

The Importance of Accurate Cultural Portrayal

The critical importance of authentic cultural representation in animation is further discussed in works like "Race and Ethnicity" (Springer, 2014) and "Cultural Identity, Representation, and Offering" (Dervin, 2012). These sources explore theoretical frameworks that emphasise the need for truthful representation to maintain cultural heritage, promote inclusivity, and engage diverse audiences. The integration of these academic perspectives highlights the complexities of cultural representation in Malaysian animation, revealing that while progress has been made, challenges remain in accurately portraying cultural nuances in animated media.

Analysing Cultural Representation in Animated Media

Comparing Eastern and Western animation reveals distinct approaches to cultural representation. In Malaysian animation, such as *Upin & Ipin* (2007), the narrative structures, visual semiotics, and character features symbolise a unified Malaysian identity, mainly focusing on rural life and the interconnectedness of various ethnic groups (Abdul, D., 2015). This reflects extensive research and a deep commitment to accurately portraying Malaysian culture. In contrast, Western animated media often takes creative liberties, sometimes at the expense of cultural accuracy. For example, *Mulan* (1998), intended to depict Chinese culture, has been criticised for its "Americanized" story and character design, failing to capture the essence of Chinese cultural identity (Abdullah, A., 2020).

This research highlights the importance of understanding cultural representation differences between Eastern and Western animation, considering how historical, social, and cultural contexts influence story and character portrayal. While Western animation often incorporates universal themes for a global audience, Eastern animation, mainly from Japan and Malaysia, tends to emphasise local cultural elements, folklore, and societal values. Establishing accurate cultural representation in animated media is essential for challenging stereotypes and misconceptions, promoting inclusivity, and fostering cultural pride and engagement among audiences. By analysing these cultural portrayals, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how animated media can serve as a tool for cultural preservation and cross-cultural communication. The study aims to provide insights into the best practices for achieving accurate and respectful cultural representation in animation, ultimately enhancing the medium's role in promoting cultural integrity.

Stuart Hall Encoding and Decoding Model

As articulated in his 1973 essay "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model revolutionised the understanding of communication processes within media and cultural studies. Hall challenged the traditional linear communication model by emphasising that meaning is not passively absorbed by audiences but is actively constructed (Hall, 1973). He proposed that media messages are encoded by producers with intended meanings, which audiences then decode based on their cultural backgrounds and social contexts. The model outlines three potential decoding positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, where the audience accepts the preferred reading; the negotiated position, where the audience partially accepts and partially resists the message; and the oppositional position, where the audience interprets the message in a contrary way (Hall, 1973). This framework has been instrumental in understanding how different groups interpret media texts, particularly in popular culture studies and media reception.

Hall's model has found broad application, especially in examining how various demographic groups engage with media content (Morley, 1980; Fiske, 1987). Researchers have used the model to explore how audiences interpret television programs, news, and advertisements, often highlighting the role of ideology in shaping media consumption. Despite its influence, Hall's model has faced criticism. Some scholars argue that it overemphasises ideological factors and is too rigid in categorising audience interpretations (McQuail, 2010). The model's applicability in the digital age has also been questioned, given the blurred lines between media producers and consumers in contemporary media environments (Livingstone, 2003). Nevertheless, Hall's encoding/decoding model remains a foundational concept, particularly for its emphasis on audience agency and its critique of media power. The model continues to be relevant in analysing how media messages are interpreted across different cultural contexts, underscoring its enduring significance in media and cultural studies.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a rigorous qualitative methodology, focusing on a comparative analysis of cultural representation in Eastern and Western animation. The study integrates content analysis, case study analysis, and semiotic analysis to comprehensively understand how cultural narratives are constructed and interpreted in animated media. Content analysis is applied to selected animations through a systematic framework to identify and evaluate the representation of cultural elements such as symbols, values, and narratives. This framework is designed to assess both the depth of cultural portrayal and the accuracy of cultural symbols embedded within the animated content. Following this, a case study analysis is conducted using four representative examples: *Upin & Ipin* (2007) and *Boboiboy* (2011) from Malaysia, and *Mulan* (1998) and *Moana* (2016) from the United States. These cases are selected based on their cultural prominence, accessibility through global streaming platforms such as Netflix Disney, YouTube and their widespread reception. While this selection provides insight into East-West cultural representation, it is acknowledged that the binary classification of "Eastern" and "Western" is reductive. The study does not account for subregional diversity or emerging industries such as South Korea and India, which are suggested for inclusion in future research.

The semiotic analysis decodes signs and symbols used in the animations, paying particular attention to how these elements convey cultural meanings. This approach enables a deeper examination of the cultural messages encoded by the creators and the likely interpretations by audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds. The

analysis is anchored in Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model to understand the dynamic interaction between media production and reception. Data is collected from both primary and secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and online databases. Primary data consists of direct content from the animations, while secondary data includes literature reviews, prior studies, and theoretical frameworks. Thematic coding is used to analyse the data, identifying recurring themes related to cultural representation. Comparative analysis techniques highlight differences and similarities between Eastern and Western approaches to cultural narratives. To ensure robustness, triangulation is employed to cross-validate findings across methodologies and sources. Expert review is also used to validate the thematic analysis. Furthermore, inter-coder reliability is assessed to ensure consistency in the coding process. Although this study does not include direct audience feedback, it recognises the value of empirical audience reception research. Future studies could incorporate focus groups, viewer commentary analysis, or surveys to gain deeper insight into how different cultural audiences interpret and respond to these narratives. Additionally, steps were taken to mitigate researcher bias by drawing from peer-reviewed sources and integrating multiple analytical lenses.

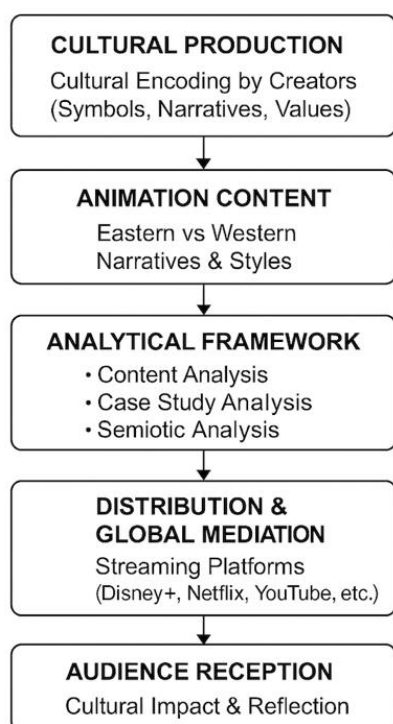


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Cross-Cultural Analysis of Animation Representations and Reception

RESULT AND FINDING

Cultural Dimensions in Animation and Art: A Thematic Analysis of Key Influences

This section analyses various scholarly sources that examine the influence of culture on animation and art. The findings are organised into four key themes: physical attributes and environment, symbols and historical context, values and beliefs, and narrative and global cultural impact. Research by (Mohd Khalis & Mustaffa, 2017) in *Cultural Inspiration Towards Malaysian Animation Character Design* highlights the significant role that cultural element, such as traditional clothing and environmental settings, play in animation character design. Their study highlight that physical attributes, narrative structures, language, and environmental contexts are integral to imbuing animated works with cultural depth and meaning.

Several studies emphasise the importance of symbols and historical context in animation and art. Li (2020), in *Exploration of the Application of Chinese Traditional Culture Elements to Animation Design*, highlight how traditional Chinese symbols enhance the atmosphere and historical resonance within animations. Similarly, (Muhamad et al., 2023) in *The Visual Representation of Malaysian Cultural Identity in 1950s Printmaking Artworks*, discusses how visual symbols in printmaking serve to document and understand cultural identity. Furthermore, (Violita Shafira & Rui, 2023) analyse the representation of Chinese culture in the animated film

Wish Dragon, illustrating how iconic cultural symbols, such as traditional dishes and Paifang architectural structures, are employed to convey cultural significance.

The examination of values and beliefs as reflected in animation and art reveals a focus on culture's spiritual and philosophical dimensions. Wang (2021), in *The Application of Traditional Cultural Elements in the Creative Design of Chinese Characters*, explores how national cultural elements are utilised to express spiritual values, mainly through geometric forms that retain the essence of traditional character designs. Al-Zadjali (2020), in *The Significance of Art in Revealing a Culture's Identity and Multiculturalism*, argues that various forms of art, including visual arts, dance, music, theatre, and literature, are vital in expressing and understanding cultural identity and diversity. Iqbal (2019), in *The Representation of Mexican Cultures in the Animation Film "The Book of Life"*, examines the influence of Roman Catholicism on Mexican culture, specifically focusing on the representation of religious symbols like the Virgin of Guadalupe. Additionally, Mangoensong and Yanuartuti (2018), in *Art as the Medium for Cultural Preservation Across Cultures*, reflect on the role of rituals, symbols, and artwork in preserving and communicating cultural values across different societies.

The analysis of narrative and its global cultural impact is explored in Abdullah's (2020) work, *An Initial Attempt: A Synthesis of Cultural Adaptation and Representation in Animation*. This study discusses how cultural elements are adapted and passed down through generations, maintaining relevance by evolving within various narrative contexts. Additionally, the study by Arena Animation (2024) titled *Cultural Impact of Animation Across the Globe* highlights the dominance of Western animation and its potential to overshadow diverse storytelling traditions and artistic styles from other cultures.

The Result of Analysis: The Case Studies on Physical Attributes and Environment, Symbols and Historical Context, Values and Beliefs, and Narrative and Global Cultural Impact

Physical Attributes and Environment

The animated series *Upin & Ipin* (2007) offers a detailed representation of "kampung" life in Malaysia, effectively capturing traditional Malay architecture and community interactions. The settings, including the "warung" (a local food stall) and the "masjid" (mosque), authentically depict rural life and social dynamics within Malaysian culture. This attention to environmental detail enhances the series' cultural authenticity, grounding its narrative in a realistic portrayal of Malaysian rural life. *Moana* (2016) begins with an authentic depiction of a Polynesian village, showcasing traditional living spaces and community structures. As the film progresses, however, it diverges from realism, introducing fantastical elements such as the "land of monsters," which do not have a direct basis in Polynesian mythology. This blend of accurate cultural depiction with creative fantasy reflects a deliberate narrative strategy to engage a global audience while introducing them to Polynesian culture.

Symbols and Historical Context

In *Upin & Ipin* (2007), cultural symbols such as traditional clothing and food are important in representing Malay culture. For example, episodes centered around Eid-al-Fitr feature traditional Malay dishes, symbolising celebration and cultural identity. The characters' attire, specifically the "Baju Melayu," highlight the importance of traditional dress in Malay society. These culturally specific symbols contribute to the series' authenticity and resonate with its audience by reflecting genuine Malaysian cultural practices. The *Mulan* (1998) incorporates symbols central to Chinese culture such as the dragon and ancestral tablets, though with significant creative modifications. Mushu, portrayed as a small, comedic dragon, contrasts sharply with the traditional Chinese dragon, typically depicted as a powerful and majestic creature. This alteration highlights the film's attempt to balance cultural elements with the expectations of a global audience, though it sometimes does so at the expense of cultural accuracy. In *Moana* (2016) uses Polynesian symbols, such as the designs on sails and body tattoos which traditionally hold protective significance. However, these symbols are frequently adapted or stylised for aesthetic appeal rather than cultural fidelity. This approach reflects the film's broader strategy of making Polynesian culture accessible and visually engaging to a worldwide audience, albeit with some compromises in cultural authenticity.

Values and Beliefs

Boboiboy (2011) emphasises values such as teamwork, friendship, and bravery that are deeply ingrained in Eastern cultures, including Malaysia. These values underscore the cultural importance of group cohesion and mutual respect, which are prevalent in many Asian societies. The series effectively integrates these cultural norms into its narrative, making it relatable and educational for its audience. *Mulan* (1998) explores values such as individualism, courage, and self-discovery, which align more closely with Western cultural ideals, particularly as reinterpreted by Disney. *Mulan* is seen to resolve her choice to become a soldier in order to not make her aging father join the war ultimately culminating in saving her father and finding and accepting her struggles and overcoming it. Her action also shows her courage to break societal norm where women cannot participate in war in ancient China. Although the story originates from a Chinese ballad that traditionally emphasises Confucian values, the film adapts these themes, blending Eastern and Western values to craft a narrative with broad appeal. This hybrid approach has contributed to the film's global success but also raises questions about the authenticity of its cultural portrayal. The series *Upin & Ipin* (2007) is deeply rooted in Islamic values, particularly evident in episodes that focus on Eid-al-Fitr celebrations. The series' accurate representation of religious practices and its educational approach to explaining the significance of Islamic rituals reflect the integration of religious and cultural values into its narrative, making it a culturally resonant piece for its audience. While *Moana* (2016) seeks to show the Polynesian beliefs, particularly the close relationship between humans and nature it often prioritises narrative and visual appeal over strict cultural accuracy. The film's creative liberties with Polynesian mythology illustrate a balance between cultural representation and storytelling demands for a global audience. This strategy, while successfully engaging viewers worldwide, may dilute the cultural specificity of the narrative.

DISCUSSION

Narrative and global cultural impact had been seen in *Boboiboy* (2011) reflects Eastern values that resonate with a broad audience across Asia. Its emphasis on friendship and teamwork speaks to universal themes, but these are particularly significant in cultures prioritising collective well-being over individualism. The series' ability to weave these values into its narrative has contributed to its regional popularity. In a case study of *Mulan* (1998) rooted in a Chinese legend, *Mulan*'s narrative is heavily influenced by Western storytelling conventions. This cultural blending has facilitated the film's global success but also prompts critical reflection on the representation of non-Western cultures in global media. The film's approach raises important questions about cultural authenticity and the potential consequences of adapting traditional stories for a worldwide audience. As in *Moana* (2016) has had a significant impact globally by bringing Polynesian culture into the mainstream media spotlight. However, the film's narrative choices reflect a compromise between accurate cultural representation and the goal of appealing to a broad audience. While this approach has broadened the film's appeal, it may also contribute to a diluted understanding of Polynesian culture.

Analysing physical attributes and environment within animated works significantly emphasises cultural authenticity and representation as in Fig 8. This aligns with the findings of Khalis and Mustaffah (2021), who highlighted the crucial role that cultural element, including traditional clothing and environmental settings, play in the design of animation characters. Their research demonstrates that these physical attributes are not merely aesthetic choices but are integral to embedding cultural depth and meaning within animated narratives. The detailed depiction of settings such as the traditional Malay "kampung" in *Upin & Ipin* and the Polynesian village in *Moana* exemplifies how environmental contexts are employed to ground the narrative in a culturally specific reality. However, the creative liberties taken in *Moana* also indicate a balancing act between cultural representation and universal appeal, a theme consistent across various animated works.

The use of symbols and historical context in animation is another area where cultural representation is critically examined. Studies by Li (2020) and Muhamad (2019) emphasise that traditional symbols in Chinese and Malaysian cultures enhance the atmosphere and historical resonance within artistic works, including animation. The visual representation of cultural identity through symbols is a method of storytelling and a way of preserving and communicating cultural heritage. In *Mulan* and *Moana*, cultural symbols such as the Chinese dragon or Polynesian tattoos illustrate how these elements are adapted for global audiences. However, as Shafira and Rui (2021) point out in their analysis of *Wish Dragon*, the stylisation of these symbols can

sometimes lead to a loss of cultural specificity, raising questions about the fidelity of cultural representations in global media.

Exploration of values and beliefs in animated works reflects culture's more profound philosophical and spiritual dimensions. Wang (2021) discusses how traditional cultural elements in Chinese character design are used to express national spiritual values. This is mirrored in the representation of Islamic values in *Upin & Ipin* and the Confucian ideals in *Mulan*. The emphasis on teamwork, bravery, and respect in these narratives aligns with the cultural norms of their respective societies. It demonstrates how animation serves as a medium for transmitting cultural values. Furthermore, the works of Al-Zadjali (2020) and Iqbal (2019) suggest that animation, like other forms of art, plays a vital role in expressing and understanding cultural identity, making it a powerful tool for cultural preservation and education.

Finally, the narrative structure and its global cultural impact are crucial in understanding how animated works transcend their cultural origins to resonate with a broader audience. Abdullah (2020) and the study by Arena Animation (2021) highlight the dual nature of this process. While cultural elements are adapted and maintained within new narrative contexts, there is also the risk of overshadowing diverse storytelling traditions with dominant Western narratives. This tension is evident in the global success of films like *Mulan* and *Moana*, where blending Eastern and Western values and narrative techniques has resulted in widespread appeal but also sparked debates about cultural authenticity. The global impact of these narratives underscores the importance of maintaining cultural integrity while adapting stories for universal consumption. The findings from the case studies, supported by the academic research discussed, illustrate the complexities involved in cultural representation within animated works. While these animations successfully introduce diverse cultures to a global audience, they also highlight the challenges of balancing cultural accuracy with the demands of universal storytelling. This discussion underscores the importance of thoughtful cultural adaptation in animation, ensuring that the rich tapestry of global cultures is represented authentically and respectfully.

Integrating Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model into the analysis of these findings provides a deeper understanding of how cultural representation in animation is constructed and interpreted. According to Hall, media producers encode messages within their cultural products, which audiences then decode based on their cultural experiences (Hall, 1980). In the context of the above findings in *Upin dan Ipin* (2007). The creators encode Malay cultural values, symbols, and physical environments within the series, which the Malaysian audience decodes as familiar and representative of their cultural experiences. This reinforces cultural identity and ensures resonance with the audience (Hall, 1980). Looking at the *Mulan* (1998) and *Moana* (2016): These films blend cultural encoding, infusing traditional elements with Western narrative structures. The global audience decodes these films through a lens shaped by their cultural contexts, which might differ from the original cultural encoding, leading to varying interpretations and potential misrepresentations (Hall, 1980). From Malaysian perspective *Boboiboy* (2011) By encoding values such as teamwork and respect, which are central to Eastern cultures, Boboiboy's creators ensure that the audience decodes these themes in a way that resonates with their cultural understanding, fostering a connection between the viewers and the content (Hall, 1980). By applying Hall's model, we can better understand the interaction between production (encoding) and reception (decoding) in the global dissemination of animation. This model also highlights the potential for systematic distortion in cross-cultural communication, where the intended encoded message may be decoded differently by diverse global audiences, leading to varying interpretations of cultural representations (Hall, 1980).

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Eastern and Western animated media presented in this study underscores the crucial role that animation plays in cultural representation and preservation. By examining four selected case studies *Upin & Ipin*, *Boboiboy*, *Mulan*, and *Moana* the research reveals significant differences in how cultural narratives are constructed, visualised, and interpreted across regional contexts. Malaysian animations tend to emphasise authenticity, local values, and communal identity, whereas their Western counterparts frequently adapt cultural elements for broader, often commercial, global appeal. These patterns reflect broader tensions between cultural specificity and the pressures of universal storytelling. Using Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model as a theoretical lens, this study illustrates how cultural messages in animation are intentionally

embedded by creators and actively interpreted by audiences. The model provides a nuanced framework for understanding the dynamic process of meaning-making and highlights how audience background and platform context especially in the age of digital streaming influence reception. While this research offers meaningful insight into cultural representation in animation, it is not without limitations. The binary categorisation of “Eastern” and “Western” simplifies a complex landscape of regional and subcultural diversity. For instance, emerging animation industries in countries like South Korea, India, and Indonesia were not deeply explored but represent fertile ground for further comparative analysis. Expanding the scope to include these emerging animation industries could enrich the comparative framework by incorporating a broader array of visual styles, narrative traditions, and cultural priorities. Another limitation is the absence of direct audience reception data. Although the study draws on established theories and existing literature, future research should incorporate empirical audience perspectives through surveys, interviews, or digital ethnography. This would help validate interpretations of cultural messages and better understand how global viewers respond to cultural narratives across different sociocultural contexts. Additionally, collaboration with animators, cultural experts, and media scholars from diverse backgrounds could enhance the authenticity and depth of analysis. As global streaming platforms continue to shape the production, distribution, and reception of animated content, further research is needed to understand how these technological intermediaries influence cultural transmission.

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