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Exploring Challenges of Animation Product Distribution in Malaysia

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Abstract

The animated TV series of *Upin & Ipin*, broadcast for the first time in 2007, was an enormous sensation. It was created by Les' Copaque Production Sdn. Bhd. This success was further amplified by their movie titled *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal*, which collected more than RM25 million in the box office collection in 2019. DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd is the creator of *Didi & Friends* and *Omar & Hana* - Malaysia's animation with more than 1 billion views on YouTube. This meant a welcome response from the local audience towards Malaysian animation arena. Malaysia has produced many animated movies such as *Bawang Putih*

Bawang Merah (2001) and *Silat Lagenda* (1998). Qualitatively, this study discusses the challenges of distributing animated products in Malaysia. Four significant challenges were found: challenges in the production of animation, challenges in the delivery of media with children related content (animation audience), challenges in marketing and distribution, and challenges in the competition between local and foreign animation. It can be concluded that there are many challenges in the marketing and distribution of animation products, in particular the introduction of animation products to both local and international market.

Keywords: Animation, Movie Distribution, DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd, Les' Copaque Production Sdn. Bhd

Introduction

Animation movies in Malaysia have garnered a lot of viewership as several movies gained a fascinating profit in 2019. However, getting all these animation movies to a profitable level is not easy. According to Ariffin (2019), the main obstacle in the production of an animated movie is the large amount of its costs. The creation of an animation movie can cost about RM40,000 for 30 minutes of a single screening.

This expensive cost of production is why cinemas in Malaysia tend to acquire animated movies produced overseas into the market in Malaysia due to its comparatively lower price. Most Malaysian animation productions are now looking for markets abroad like Indonesia that are now interested in Malaysian animation. According to Saidon (2013), another challenge in animation production is to overcome the shortage of skilled and quality animation workers because even though there are many workers in the animation sector, the required quality has not yet been met.

Reviews of Literature

According to Ashaari (2019), Malaysian animation viewers already know the most popular and well known animation from abroad. Thus, Les' Copaque Production Sdn. Bhd must ensure that the movie *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019) meets the standards and can reach the viewers' attention because when a TV series is brought on screen, the character will undergo significant changes. Frequent viewers who are familiar with the TV series will quickly recognize the characters in the movie. This audience challenge is one of the most troubling obstacles to overcome because the *Upin & Ipin* TV series is targeted for children, but it's different when it comes to cinema as a public of all ages will see it.

Animation companies have many marketing and distribution challenges for their products, especially in regards to TV stations. For example, *Didi & Friends* had troubles to penetrate into television station. But the marketing strategies and the strengths of DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd that introduce their products through the YouTube site made their products known all over the country. Marketing and distribution challenges are one of the hurdles every animation production company has to overcome. The marketing and distribution of animated products

are different from ordinary movies because they need to be introduced in series and take some time to be known (Amanz, 2016).

Furthermore, the other challenge in the production of animated movies is the challenge of domestic and foreign animation competition. According to Ariffin (2019), a number of well-known animation companies closed their operations due to competitions. Only three local animated movies released in 2019, which are *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal*, *BoBoiBoy Movie 2* and *Ejen Ali The Movie*. Not to mention the fact that animation movies from overseas is also one of the biggest challenges for Malaysian animation and movie production.

Malaysia's most significant challenges were animation production challenges, animation viewership challenges, animation marketing, and distribution challenges as well as domestic and foreign animation competition challenges. These challenges occurred to DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd as TV stations had turned down their products. The transformation and marketing efforts the company was able to make at the time was to introduce their animated products through the YouTube platform as television stations were still skeptical of local animation products. The company's products later became famous on YouTube and gained popularity. And now the company products are available in Astro (Amanz, 2016).

According to Jefri (2019), the animated movie *Upin and Ipin: Siamang Tunggal* reached the collection of RM25 million in three weeks. According to Muhammad Miqdam bin Abdul Adzis (personal communication, 2020), *Didi & Friends* first interactive concert titled *Konsert Hora Horey Didi & Friends* recorded RM3 million sales despite being broadcast by one cinema company. It made the show grow the following year.

Roslan (2019) says the success of three local animated movies, *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019), *BoBoiBoy Movie 2* (2019), and *Ejen Ali The Movie* (2019) created a phenomenon in the domestic movie industry. *Ejen Ali The Movie* (2019) made history by earning RM8 million on the show's first day. The most exciting thing is when the animated movie *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019) recorded RM 26 million of sold tickets. It shows that the Malaysian animation industry is growing not only in the content of the movie, but also in the genre aspect. This shows an increasing interest in animation movies in Malaysia.

A box office movie is judged in terms of total ticket sold throughout Malaysia. With such a good response to these animated movies, it has also transformed the country's movie production into a better landscape. There are several critical challenges in making a successful animation movie. This study seeks to explore what are the challenges of the distribution of animation products in Malaysia.

Method

This study uses qualitative research design. According to Jasmi (2012), qualitative research needs to understand something in-depth and close enough to the person or situation to be studied to facilitate a comprehensive finding. In addition to past literature, interviews were conducted with Muhammad Miqdam bin Abdul Adzis, the Creative Producer from DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd (subsequently will be known as Informant 1 in this study) and Nor' Anira Haris, Former Script Writer, Les' Copaque Production Sdn. Bhd (subsequently will be known as Informant 2 in this study). Data were then transcribed verbatim and findings were discussed in the result section.

Results

Challenges in The Production of Animation

In today's technological era, the making of animation has become faster and easier. However, the production of animation in Malaysia has been particularly challenging. According to Hanif (2017), local animated character's creator and founder admires Hassan Muthalib, a pioneer of animation who is not only creative, but can offer high-impact ideas. Animations was once done without digital technology, only with the technique of using standard film cameras and paper sheets to record. This type of animation is categorized as 2D animation. Between 1983 and 1987, Hassan Muthalib and his animation team produced five animation movies, one of which was the well-known '*Hikayat Sang Kancil and Buaya*', produced in 1993.

Meanwhile, Informant 1 stated that he and his group are new-age computer-generated animators. At this point, in DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd itself, there are already many animators who can share their skills within the company. He believes that doing animation is a big challenge because the pace in the making of the product as it involves a lot of continuous process and very time consuming. As early members of the DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd, animation production is not an easy task because they have to think about the concept that the audience loves and understands who their target audience is.

For Informant 2, as a former script writer of *Upin & Ipin*, one of the first to be involved in animation production in 2010, she sees first-hand how strong the animation industry has grown. A script writer had to make sure that the script was relevant to a general audience. When the content and script is ready, the animator will animate it. For her, the introduction of the world of animation to the public was not an easy task.

Many of the challenges they have to face are due to society's stereotypes about Malaysian products. It was only after five years that it was said that the animated series *Upin & Ipin* received a great response among the children and the Malaysian community in general. The ongoing effort to introduce animation by injecting various elements into the content of animation is the biggest challenge for Malaysia's animation industry.

Challenges in the Delivery of Media With Children Related Content (Animation Audience)

According to Informant 1, the production of quality animations for children is very important. Presenting an animated show is an advantage because of its appeal to children. As they learn a lot of new things, they must be well educated, and content must be carefully planned because children can quickly imitate what they see. Therefore, what is highlighted in the animation must be carefully considered.

Didi & Friends and Omar & Hana Animation

DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd's two main animation products are *Didi & Friends* and *Omar & Hana*, both of which are now popular TV series with children's audience. They feature positive messages through songs, and is easily accessible to children. According to Gun (2017), *Didi & Friends* animation was introduced in 2010, where chickens were used as 3D characters and models, but the role was in storage and production thought that one day, the characters would be widely known. In 2011, this character's presentation was rejected by TV stations, but in 2012, the idea was accepted after being presented with a theme of learning. At the time, *Didi & Friends* was known as *The Science Explorer*.

After receiving positive feedback, the name of *The Science Explorer* was changed to *Didi & Friends*. Later, the characters were enhanced by a dress and a hat, giving quite its unique image. In addition to this character's image, it also had to sing a variety of songs. Among the songs known throughout this animated series are *Lompat Si Katak Lompat* and *Bingo*. *Omar & Hana's* animation series is no less impressive as it has a record of 16 million views with 11 million on YouTube platform and 5 million views on television in two weeks' time.

Meanwhile, Informant 1 stated that these two animated series were still new when he joined DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd. Later, he had the opportunity to come up with ideas and collaborate with the animation team in the production of *Didi & Friends* and *Omar & Hana*. The main challenge here is to introduce these animated series to television. His main job as a creative producer is to look for the formulas and specialties of these two series. There are limited animation series in Malaysia featuring exemplary characters (hence *Didi & Friends* was created) and Islamic characters (hence, *Omar & Hana* was created). DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd is the pioneer of this type of animation in Malaysia.

In addition, Informant 1 stated that the introduction of suitable animated characters are essential. Some examples can be seen from strong characters such as in *Spongebob SquarePants*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Frozen* and *Toy Story* animations. To add, most animations in Malaysia use character names as product titles as *Upin & Ipin*, *Ejen Ali*, *BoBoiBoy*, *Omar & Hana* and *Didi & Friends*.

DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd's Contents

In addition, according to Informant 1, producing animated contents is not easy. It is because the team consists of adult while the target audience of the animation are children. However, this issue were overcome, and the animated series produced by DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd received a particularly good response due to advises received from consultants hired specifically by the company. The content of the animated series includes child-friendly playlists, easy-to-understand beats, and compelling and entertaining songs for children. *Didi & Friends* animations' main strength is in the songs, and the selection of children's songs is critical. *Didi & Friends* animations uses a wide selection of songs and music, which helps to maintain their branding. DD Animation Studio Sdn Bhd also uses public domain songs to avoid plagiarism issues.

Challenges in Songs and Copyrights

Didi & Friends founder Sinan Ismail said, another challenge of the company was dealing with content and songwriting - which raises the question of how to sell a 2 minute song and the medium that will receive it. Nonetheless, DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd positively uses YouTube as its medium for broadcasting. It should be mentioned that the other issue is copyright because most of the songs are traditional songs (Amanz, 2016).

According to Informant 1, the company also produced an animated product titled *Konsert Hora Horey Didi & Friends* (2018). However, only one cinema accepted the product, which was the TGV Cinemas Sdn Bhd (TGV). The product had no storyline and features animated concerts. However, due to the influence of the media, the product collected millions of Ringgit. Later, the promotion of animated movies on YouTube also helps to introduce animation movies to the public.

Challenges in Distribution and Marketing for Movies in Malaysia

For Hisham (2015), one of the significant challenges in the local movie industry in marketing and distribution. Marketing of local movies is generally welcomed, but less marketing efforts were found despite the fact that marketing is an essential factor in the success of movies. In addition, distribution of movies is also crucial for local movies. Most of the local movies are not further distributed to foreign countries.

The Market Demand for Didi & Friends and Omar & Hana

Informant 1 believes DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd's strategy by focusing on TV series will make their two animated series; *Didi & Friends* and *Omar & Hana* a success. The main focus of the two animations are the songs. *Didi & Friends* animated series has received a lot of attention from children for their friendly and easy-to-follow songs, as well as cute animation characters who made the children join in dancing together with animation. *Omar & Hana's* animated series is full of exemplary teachings and Islamic values.

Didi & Friends and Omar & Hana on YouTube

YouTube is a vital social medium in the current technological age. According to Informant 1, the existence of these two animated series on the YouTube site are as an exposure for children to see examples of good values and for the purpose of branding. Although the two animated series is produced from the same animation company, two separate YouTube accounts are created for each animation, respectively. *Omar & Hana* has more than 3.02 million followers, while *Didi & Friends* have more than 3.48 million followers. In addition to generating revenue via YouTube, the brand image of these characters is essential due to current trends. Nowadays, television dramas will also broadcast the shows produced on their television stations in their respective YouTube accounts so that the public will not miss out episodes in that series. With the advent of YouTube, free marketing is possible without any cost.

DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd mentioned that the company began to introduce its animations via YouTube by sharing songs easily recognizable to the public. He added that with the advent of *Didi & Friends*, they needed to create an animation that was known in advance, and once it was known, it would be easy to distribute further. YouTube is important when it comes to finding children's songs, but there are mostly English songs available.

Searching for Malay animated children's songs used to be quite tricky; besides, the quality of the animation is usually obscure, and the readily rhythmic songs are mostly lengthy. Children's songs were widely sought after by the local community, but there was a lack of new material and children's songs. It was concluded that children's animation and singing were virtually non-existent in Malaysia. *Didi & Friends* were created by discussions with mentors and friends (Inspirasi, 2016).

Didi & Friends' Product as a Brand

Instead of merely focusing on the digital platform, DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd also produces a range of children's products. Among the most popular are the school bags based on the characters in the *Didi & Friends* series. According to Informant 1, the marketing through products such as bags and others is to reach the target market for children and be seen by the public. The purpose of an animation product is not simply to make profit, but rather as a way of marketing the animation itself. That's why every animation in Malaysia will usually have its own range of products, which all focus on products for children such as bags, shoes, school clothes, stationery, food or drinks.

Challenges in The Competition Between Local and Foreign Animation

According to Alias (2004), locals are more exposed to foreign 3D animation, leading to a lack of acceptance and confidence in local 3D animation. Furthermore, the audiences also questioned the local animation's identity that was heavily influenced by American and Japanese animations. This challenge faced by local animation made locally is a stereotype of a society that underestimates local animation.

Some commented that if the animation is too good, it will be said to imitate foreign animation, but if the animation is not engaging, it is said to be due to the lack of expertise. Challenges like this are the challenges that cause the animation industry to be underdeveloped. According to Radzi (2020), *Upin Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal*'s nomination for the prestigious Oscar is a great compliment for Malaysia. The nomination of the movie is enough to prove that the local animation world is in a league of its own. In 2019, two movies; *Ejen Ali: The Movie* and *BoBoiBoy The Movie 2* earn millions in theatres.

For Informant 1, these stereotypes are difficult to eradicate as the world of animation is still new to the local movie industry. Still, the sales figures for animated movie tickets throughout 2019 show that animation movies are among the best-selling movies in Malaysia at the moment. This fact is supported by Informant 2, who states that the animation industry was now very different from the animation industry 20 years ago. The innovations and exposures to the animation industry are huge and that more and more young people are embracing the animation world because of their deep interest in animation. She believes that the animation industry will grow further in the future as the community begins to accept local animations with their unique identity.

Informant 1 also notes that most popular western animated movies do not start with television series. They began with movies such as *Frozen*, *Kung Fu Panda* and *The Boss Baby*. If the movie is well received, then they will do a TV show, and this is the strategy used by western animation companies. But not all Western animations are like this, and some start with the series. However, it depends on an animation producer's planning in introducing the animated character to the audience. The Malaysian public is not ready to accept that the locals are also capable of producing animated movies first and followed by serial animation. To ensure that the Malaysian public accepts the animation movie, the animation series must first come out to see the acceptance of the public.

Conclusion

In general, DD Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd and Les' Copaque Sdn. Bhd has a considerable challenge, especially in marketing, distribution and production of animation products in Malaysia. The Malaysian audience is generally more exposed to foreign 3D animations, which are considered more attractive and up to date. Stereotypes like these are difficult to eradicate because the local 3D animation is still new. With the support and acceptance of Malaysians, the progress of local animation will certainly reach a higher level. In fact, the Malaysian animation industry is now at a stage that we can be proud of.

It is hoped that all the challenges faced by the animation sector will be solved in the future, making Malaysian animation known not only loved locally but also abroad. Local animation may be decades behind international animations such as Pixar Animation Studios, Walt Disney Animation Studios and DreamWorks Animation.

The Malaysian animation industry can achieve such an exciting future if we continue to persevere. Animation creators and newcomers who immerse themselves in animation need to produce high-quality animations and not just new animations for numbers. If the quality of the animation produced is good, our local animation movie can be celebrated at both local and international levels.

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