

E-BOOK OF EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE 14TH INTERNATIONAL INVENTION, INNOVATION & DESIGN COMPETITION 2025



14TH **INDES** 2025

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INVENTION, INNOVATION &
DESIGN COMPETITION 2025

Organized by:

Office of Research, Industry,
Community & Alumni Network
UiTM Perak Branch

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

Cataloguing in Publication Data

No e- ISBN: 978-967-2776-52-9

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Typesetting : Georgia

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VISUALIZING EMPATHY: ANIMATION AS A TOOL FOR DEMENTIA AWARENESS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Dementia is an escalating public health concern in Malaysia, driven by the country's rapidly ageing population. Despite the rising number of cases, public awareness remains low, often leading to stigma, delayed diagnoses, and inadequate care. According to the Alzheimer's Disease Foundation Malaysia (ADFM), dementia cases are projected to increase significantly, yet awareness campaigns remain limited and inaccessible to many. This study addresses the gap by using short animation as a medium to raise awareness. The result is *Pok & Gai*, an original animated work that reflects the lived experiences of individuals with dementia and their caregivers. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research incorporates observation and literature review as primary methods. Observational research focused on public perceptions and media portrayals of dementia, while literature review explored communication strategies, animation for social messaging, and empathetic character design. These insights informed the development of *Pok & Gai*, which features culturally grounded storytelling and character-driven narratives. The animation aims to foster empathy, reduce stigma, and improve understanding of dementia among Malaysian audiences. This study demonstrates that creative media, particularly animation can serve as a powerful platform for public health communication, contributing to national efforts in addressing mental health and ageing-related challenges.

Keyword: Animation, Dementia, Empathy, Health Awareness, Stigma

1. INTRODUCTION

Animations often use characters and stories to engage viewers on health topics. By "transporting" audiences into a narrative, animations can reduce resistance to messages and foster empathy (Riley, 2020). By leveraging visual storytelling, animations can simplify complex concepts, reduce stigma, and promote behavioral change. This approach is particularly effective in enhancing understanding and empathy towards individuals with dementia and improving communication strategies with those affected.

Research has demonstrated that older adults experience a substantial decrease in anxiety and an increase in their understanding of brain health when they watch short animated films. The potential of animations to motivate lifestyle changes and reduce the stigma associated with dementia was indicated by the increased likelihood of behavior change reported by participants who engaged with these animations (Brennan et al., 2021). Animations that have been culturally adapted have been effective in enhancing the awareness of dementia prevention among ethnically diverse communities. Animations can considerably enhance comprehension of dementia risk factors and mitigation strategies, emphasizing the significance of cultural adaptation in educational tools (Brijnath et al., 2025).

Animations that illustrate the actions of individuals with moderate cognitive impairment can be beneficial in the instruction of effective communication strategies. These tools assist users in imagining challenging scenarios and comprehending the subtleties of interacting with elderly individuals, thereby reducing stress for family members and carers (Yuasa, 2024).

A lack of culturally relevant and engaging educational tools may hinder efforts to raise dementia awareness and foster empathy. In Malaysia, awareness is low, and dementia is often mistaken for normal ageing (Griffiths, 2020), showing a need for basic education. Animation can help clarify these differences and model supportive family responses. However, not all viewers respond well—about 25–30% of carers in a study found an animation on grief unhelpful or distressing (Scher, 2022). This highlights the need for sensitivity. Additionally, overly cartoonish styles may feel childish to adults, so designs must strike a respectful balance for older audiences.

This study aims to explore the definition and cultural stigma surrounding dementia within the Malaysian context, recognizing that misconceptions and societal attitudes significantly influence how the condition is perceived and addressed. By investigating artistic styles that are most effective in reducing stigma, the research seeks to identify visual and narrative elements that resonate with Malaysian audiences while promoting empathy and understanding. These insights will be applied to the development of a culturally relevant short animation, *Pok & Gai*, which serves as a creative platform to raise dementia awareness and foster more inclusive conversations about ageing and cognitive health in Malaysia.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative methodology, integrating observation and a literature review as principal tools. In addition to reviewing the literature on subjects like dementia communication techniques, animation as a social messaging tool, and the fundamentals of sympathetic character design, an observational study was done on how the public views dementia and how it is portrayed in the media.

3. FINDINGS

Recent data indicates that animated material may effectively engage the audience and raise awareness of health issues such as dementia (Feeley, 2023). The capacity of animation to simplify complex ideas, humanise experiences, and overcome communicative obstacles makes it especially effective for conveying sensitive or stigmatised topics such as dementia. In the context of dementia, where misconceptions and stigma remain prevalent in Malaysia, animation can play a critical role in shaping public perception and understanding. By visualizing the lived experience of individuals with dementia and illustrating the cognitive decline in relatable, culturally appropriate narratives, animated videos can foster empathy, reduce fear, and promote early help-seeking behaviours. Considering the increasing rate of dementia, especially among ageing populations, the integration of animation into national public health initiatives seems promising. It should be seen not as an isolated answer but as a component of a holistic, evidence-based communication plan including community outreach, printed materials, social media campaigns, and professional training.

The animated short film *Pok & Gai* offers a poignant exploration of dementia through the lens of childhood innocence and intergenerational relationships. This analysis examines the film's narrative structure, character development, and cultural resonance, assessing its effectiveness as a tool for dementia awareness and education.



Figure 1 Short Animation *Pok & Gai*

Pok & Gai stands as a commendable example of how animation can be leveraged to address serious health issues like dementia. Its culturally resonant storytelling and emotional depth make it a valuable tool in the ongoing effort to raise awareness and reduce stigma associated with dementia in Malaysia. Future iterations could benefit from expanded distribution channels and integration with broader public health campaigns to maximize their reach and impact.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, while preliminary evidence suggests animated content can engage the public and improve awareness, careful design and further research are needed (Feeley, 2023). Animations should be developed collaboratively with target communities (co-design) and evaluated rigorously. In Malaysia and similar settings, leveraging local languages and cultural narratives will be key. Given the rising dementia burden, animation holds promise as part of a multimedia strategy but must be one piece in an evidence-based approach to public education.

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<https://doi.org/10.20965/jrm.2024.p0871>

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