



e-Journal of Media & Society

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES (OKU)

Ireena Nasiha Ibnu, Nurin Sofiya Binti Hairil Yahri, Nordiyannah Munirah Binti Azian,
Mohd Danial Bin Mohd Azman Qurratu'Aini Binti Jaafar

Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM)

Correspondent email: ireena@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

This research study examined the impact of marginalised groups, particularly people with disabilities, otherwise known as 'Orang Kurang Upaya' (OKU) and their representation in Malaysian media. A structured survey questionnaire was conducted for data collection to identify public perception and attitude towards the members of the disabled community. This paper focused on the depiction of OKU in visual media, primarily television and films in Malaysia. Overall, the report laid out that portrayal of disability in Malaysian media is correlated to individuals belief and perception exposed in the consumed media and hopes to encourage inclusion for disabled people accompanied by a change in the portrayal of disability identity in Malaysia.

Keywords: disability, representation, media, inclusion, stereotype, 'Orang Kurang Upaya' (OKU), television, films, minorities

INTRODUCTION

There are countless facets to the media that most people can see why it has become an entertainment outlet. Today, moving image screen media, specifically television and films, pervades people's lives in which each has their relevance and utility. Both visual mediums have variations in which films reflect time and place that follow a journey that reaches consciousness more efficiently and effectively than other mediums. Like all media, it has the potential to ennoble our expectations. On the other hand, television shows cover a wide range of production such as the news, cartoons, episodic TV series and is often constructed in a smaller scope in contrast to film production. Films and television as visual mediums both tie to commonality in which it is a powerful and versatile medium that affects the public to a large extent.

The media has the prodigious ability to alter public perception and have increasingly become the centralised medium of communication and sources of retaining information for society. The media also can steer attention or set public discourse. They can also determine issues ignored by society as the content presented by the media can shape meaning that is then reinforced in one's mind (Alsagoff, 2015). In this context, it has brought to attention that the media representation of marginalised groups or minorities in visual media production has become a central concern in portraying disabled people.

In Malaysia, the term '*Orang Kurang Upaya*' (OKU) is equivalent to the meaning of 'less-abled person'. According to the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2008, "OKU includes those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society." There has been quite a substantial debate on how well OKU are depicted in the media to a certain extent. The lack of cognising disabled groups in television shows or films suggested that their existence does not matter, therefore marginalising those groups (Anuar, 1994). Thus, it is integral that media consumers fairly represent minorities to avert underestimation of minorities taken into account that the media can generate stereotypes and normalise world views. This research study provides a comprehensive insight into how the portrayal of disability on

broadcast media, primarily television and film correlates to the public's beliefs about the disabled community in Malaysian media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper aims to examine studies conducted in media and disability. To find relevant literature in the context of Malaysian media, extensive research was conducted by searching past publications from scholars to demonstrate how marginalised groups, particularly people with disabilities, correlate with people's perception in the media.

To help provide context to the paper, LK. Norazit (2010) assessed the term '*Orang Kurang Upaya*' (OKU). The acronym OKU in Bahasa Malaysia is a widely understood term equivalent of 'disabled person' in English. Formerly the term was known as '*orang cacat*' used by government officials translated to 'handicapped person.' However, there was a wide controversy over the term OKU as some viewed that the term is imbued with negative connotations predominantly members of the disabled community. As reflected in the study by LK. Norzait, respondents reported that the term was synonymous with '*cacat*', and thus remains offensive and unacceptable. Others interpreted differently on what constitutes a disability, viewing the acronym on a positive note by referring to it as '*orang kelebihan upaya*' (more abled) or '*orang kelainan upaya*' (differently-abled). The study revealed that participants expressed that the word '*kurang*' creates a negative self-image whereby devalues them. The research ultimately elaborated that language around disability was complex and subjective and should be appropriately defined to reduce negative misrepresentation of disabled groups in Malaysia.

The study of Norazit & Awab (2007) investigated how people with disabilities are portrayed in Malaysian local newspapers sourced from News Straits Times, The Star, Malay Mail, and KL Metro. According to the study, the newspaper's sports section primarily shines a light on Malaysian para-athletes' outstanding achievements, connoting that they outdid international athletes at the international sports event. There were also sections in newspapers

that focused on the difficulties faced by people with disabilities, for example highlighting non-governmental organisation (NGOs) requests for aid, improving facilities — broken toilets, lack of '*Orang Kurang Upaya*' (OKU) parking spaces, accessible transportations, and buildings with no elevators. Though this is an effort to constitute an improvement for people of disabilities aiming to change government policies, the way the media portrays them has not been well received by members of the disabled community. It presents them as socially flawed people (C.E Teng & T.M Joo, 2020). Furthermore, on a negative note, several terminologies used in the texts have an unmistakably sentimental tone, thereby implying referring to disabled people as 'needy', 'sympathetic', 'pitiful', 'dependent', 'passive'. This indirectly instils subsequent perception to readers, thus stereotyping them as 'people who are helpless and require special needs.' Overall, it was discovered that the discourse perpetuated the perception of the disabled community as being treated less than normal who requires heavy dependence. The core message of the study emphasises that people with disabilities should not be considered as 'objects' of charity but treat them just as normal as everyone else deserving of equal respect and enjoyment of human rights.

Danica Pirs (2013) explored stereotypes of disabled people by reviewing movies and television. Qualitative content was utilised in the research to investigate the representation of individuals with disabilities. The study revealed that often movies and televisions portray individuals with obvious physical limitations such as the need to use wheelchairs or cane, limping, sign language, and a guide dog whereby it inevitably becomes a symbol of disability as people watch. This perpetuates widespread ignorance that disabilities are not immediately apparent, such as seizure disorders, mental impairments, chronic illnesses, or traumatic brain injuries. The absence of 'invisible' disabilities strongly reinforces stereotype assumptions that disabled people require assistive devices or equipment (Cureton, 2019). It was instead emphasised that disability can be broken down into broad subcategories than just obvious impairments. Movie and television shows also stereotypically present villains as individuals who are unable to adjust or struggle to handle their past trauma enabling audiences to view disability as a weakness (S. Wigham, 2015). The research summarises that such stereotypes

and cliché's in local entertainment production can dramatically reinforce negative perceptions and attitudes towards members of the disabled community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research design is intended to provide an appropriate framework consisting of a well-structured questionnaire designed to identify the public's perception and attitudes towards the OKU community on visual media, specifically in films and television in Malaysia. The study employed a mixed type of qualitative and quantitative method. An online questionnaire survey on 'google form' was circulated to carry out this research. The purpose is to assess the media's impacts using broadcast media evaluated by the recruited audience in supplementing the research study.

Research Approach

The study adopts a survey questionnaire as data collection instruments in a joint qualitative and quantitative approach. Researchers have distributed the survey across social media platforms to cover a wide array of audiences, predominantly family members, colleagues, lecturers, and friends. A total of 153 respondents cooperated in the survey ranging from four age groups. Researchers prioritised age groups 18 - 25, otherwise known as millennials in this research study because the particular age group tends to spend a number of hours consuming the media compared to older generations.

Sampling Method

The participants were asked to participate in the research study voluntarily and informed consent was sought before they begin for academic and research purposes. The intent was to require a minimum reach of 150 respondents to demonstrate a valid and reliable survey. The enclosed survey questionnaire consists of 10 multiple-choice questions that is segregated into four main sections inclusive of the demographics (1), public's acknowledgment of the disabled community in the media (films & television)

(2), representation of disabled community portrayed in films and television (3), and society's perception and misconception towards OKU (4).

Data Collection Method

Both primary and secondary data were used to gather information for this research. Primary data was collected via a questionnaire survey applied through a quantitative data collection method. The percentage would be quantified as a result for researchers to analyse comprehensively. Secondary data are used in the field of research that is dependent on literature or research studies from other scholars to amplify data collected from primary research as evident from the findings and discussion section. To meet the objectives of the study, a qualitative and quantitative research method is apprehended in general to validate research findings and outline exceptional results (Ridzuan, Ridzuan and Ridzuan, 2018)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

a) Demographic

There are a total of 153 respondents that were involved in this research. Their background is addressed by two demographic factors, gender and age:

Table 1: Demographic

Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	51	33.3%
Female	102	66.7%
Age		
< 18 - 25	98	64.1%
26 - 33	25	16.3%
34 - 41 >	30	19.6%

Table 1 shows the profile of respondents from Malaysia. Based on Table 1, female respondents show a higher margin than male respondents. There were 66.7% or 102 female respondents while only 33.3% or 51 were male respondents. Meanwhile, the number of respondents from the ages of 18 - 25 covers the highest percentage, which is 64.1% equal to 98 people from the age range. Followed by 34 - 41-year-olds are 19.6% where it is the same with 30 people and from the ages of 26 - 33, which had only 16.3% or 25 people.

b) Public's acknowledgment of the disabled community in the media (films & television)

Table 2: Public's acknowledgement of the disabled community in the media (films & television)

Question	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1) Do you watch TV programs such as TV shows/dramas that have characters play as a disabled person?		
Yes	137	89.5%
No	16	10.5%
2) Do you think Malaysian media should step up their game plan to deliver more content about OKU?		
Yes	146	95.4%
No	7	4.6%

3) From your point of view, which media platform portrays the best about people with disabilities? Television/films?

Television	92	60.1%
Films	61	39.9%

Table 2 shows the public’s acknowledgement of the disabled community in the media, especially in films and television. The respondents were asked about their awareness and their interpretation of the disabled community represented in television and films. The table above shows that most of the respondents (89.5%) have watched television shows or dramas that have characters played as a disabled person. They were aware that the content about the disabled that are seen on television in terms of television shows or even dramas. This is because people in Malaysia do spend their time watching television and based on a study in 2014 to 2019, Malaysians spent an average amount of time around three hours and 52 minutes (Statista Research Department, 2020). Then, 95.4% which holds the majority of respondents stated that Malaysian media should come out with a good plan in delivering more content about OKU. The respondents believe that Malaysian media must portray more about the disabled in dramas or films. The survey results also show that 60.1% of respondents think that television portrays the best about OKU rather than in films. The findings show that Malaysian film does not play a good role in giving content to the viewers about disabled community in Malaysia.

c) Representation of disabled community portrayed in films and television

Table 3: Representation of Disabled Community in Films and Television

Question	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1) Do you think disabled people are well represented in the media such as films and television programs?		
Yes	65	42.5%
No	88	57.5%
2) On a scale of 1-5, how well do you think OKU are represented in films and television?		
1	6	3.9%
2	25	16.3%
3	62	40.5%
4	33	21.6%
5	27	17.6%
3) Do you think the media (TV & films) portray enough about disabled people?		
Yes	37	24.2%
No	116	75.8%

The data analysis in table 3 illustrates that there are significant impacts on the representation of persons with disabilities in broadcast media in terms of their portrayal. Respondents were asked to evaluate how well-disabled people are represented in films and television programs. According to the result, the majority of 88 respondents (57.5%) strongly believe that the presence of the disabled community is poorly covered in media outlets. To further analyse the respondent's answers on the respective question, a quantitative-based question was then asked

to evaluate on a scale from 1-5 on how well OKUs are represented in films and televisions. On a scale from 1 (minimum/poor coverage) to 5 (sufficient/balanced coverage), 62 respondents (40.5%) evaluated a three (3) proving that respondents have an average view of how well films to craft identities of disabled people. This is supported by a study conducted by Appelbaum (2016) wherein she opined that people with disabilities are under-represented in terms of portrayal in the media as she examined from the study that only 2.4% characters were depicted with disability in American films from 2007-2015. 116 respondents (75.8%) on the other hand, view that media outlets do not portray enough about disabled people. Relative studies discovered that TV, films and news representations do not provide balanced coverage but if they do, they are most commonly covered in newspapers that focus on para-athletes outstanding achievements often found in the sports section with the aim to inspire the public, in which case someone may perceive them as models to others in view that they have outperformed 'normal' people (Wen Ye, 2019).

d) Society's perception and misconception towards OKU

Table 4: Society's Perception and Misconception towards OKU

Question	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1) Do you think disabled people often play an antagonist (villains) role or protagonist?		
Antagonist (villains)	50	32.7%
Protagonist	103	67.3%
2) Do you find disability characters in dramas and movies in Malaysia have portrayals of self-acceptance? Is it a positive or a negative self-acceptance?		
Yes	91	59.5%
Positive	85	55.6%
Negative	44	28.8%
No	29	19%

3) Do you agree that non-disabled people should be playing a disabled role?

Agree	99	64.7%
Disagree	54	35.3%

4) Do television programs portray disabled people as successful, and does the content give inspiring messages or awareness to the public about people with disability?

Yes	112	73.2%
No	41	26.8%

Table 4 presents a significant correlation between television and film portrayal of people with disabilities and the public’s general perception. Based on the result from the first question, a vast number of respondents 103 (67.3%) view that OKU oftentimes plays the role of a protagonist. The results were quite astounding in which we anticipated. The study conducted by Barnes (1992) was in contrast to the above survey findings. He argued that in the records of film and TV shows, physical disabilities that are apparent to media consumers' eye had been depicted as depravity or evil such as pirates having a hook as a hand and eye patches to cover a missing eye. The correlation of villains paired with impairment or disability features, perpetuates negative stereotypes, thus indirectly enabling the disabled community to ruminate on their existence as they are considered abnormal to the general public's eye. The majority of respondents 91 (59.5%) answered ‘yes’ that there is a positive portrayal (55.6%) of self-acceptance. This was proven by a research study conducted by Razlin (2006), based on a popular television series in Malaysia portraying positive self-acceptance by family members, suggesting that depiction of OKU are not constantly negative, but film production does constitute improvement by shedding light to OKU with the aim to counter misconceptions and stereotypes. Next, 99 respondents (64.7%) believe that non-disabled people should not play a disabled role, implying that ‘normal’ people should be casted as characters who play the

disabled. Ng (n.d) believed that this argument is deeply flawed wherein he argued that it dehumanises or devalues the disability community as they deserve the same respect to perform extraordinary acts. The findings from the survey shows that the respective media outlet does portray the group positively by providing aid to victims who are less fortunate and vulnerable. This is due to the fact that television has an enormous impact in educating the public to have a better understanding, positive attitudes towards OKU as evident from the cultivation theory (Ruddock, 2020). Overall, the findings found context matters that the media have the power to influence and inject stereotypes or bias towards OKU despite it to be positive or negative stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the central purpose of this research study is to identify the impact of marginalised groups by comprehensively analysing public's perception towards people with disabilities that is better known or so called "Orang Kurang Upaya" (OKU) in the context of visual media particularly films and television in Malaysia. This research study will support readers from a number of advantages where it can offer insight by enabling readers to grasp a better understanding or knowledge into the issue of this deprived group in Malaysia as they are considered among one of the most vulnerable minority groups that are often neglected by society. Researchers hope that Malaysia will be able to successfully resolve this problem by providing fair justice to OKU.

The research findings bring a solid perspective that media consumers are more exposed to people with disabilities in television more in contrast to films. Yet, in general, people with disabilities are still under-presented indicating that content pertaining to OKU are seldom covered in the media, and if they were featured in the media, media consumers often lay out stereotypical attitudes upon the disabled community hence stigmatising them even further by objectifying them as people who require heavy dependence from others. However, there were several people who interpreted them differently or otherwise so by viewing them positively. This suggests a distinct correlation between the portrayal of disabilities in the media on the

public's perception and attitudes towards the group, howbeit both stereotyped disable people positively and negatively. Media production must constitute an effort to try to work out how to have the contents directly exposed to this group of people. This is to obtain advantages such as supporting and building Malaysians to be grateful. In other words, the media must inspire a person of moral worth.

By exposing such contents in the media, it provides opportunities such as programmes that benefit this disabled community by contributing aids. For example, enhance employment, financial assistance, or a charitable programme to raise awareness about OKU in Malaysia. This research study also emphasises how influential the media is as an instrument in shaping attitudes that may have serious implications on the daily lives of OKU. We can conclude that Malaysian media should heighten their effort in the inclusion of OKU in the media and hopes that Malaysia media can curb this issue effectively by strengthening their content strategies, which not only focuses on their benefit, a contentious topic but must portray them in a way that could dispel stereotypes and treat them with full respect as they deserve to be treated 'normal' to the same degree as everyone else so that Malaysians can live in a prosperous and harmonious world.

REFERENCES

- Alsagoff, Syed Agil and Hassan, Md Salleh and Hamzah, Azizah and Sulaiman, Nor Hissam (2015) Reflecting Media Content Values: Media Industry Attitudes Towards Malaysian Media Self-Regulation Practices. *Department of Communication: Universiti Putra Malaysia*.
- Anuar, M. (1994). The Malaysian Press and Representation of Minority Groups. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 9(2), 200-212.
- Appelbaum, L. (2021). New Report Shows Lack of Representation of People with Disabilities in Film - RespectAbility. Retrieved from: <https://www.respectability.org/2016/09/new-report-shows-lack-of-representation-of-people-with-disabilities-in-film/>

- C.E. Teng, T.M. Joo (2020). Representation of Disabled Community in Mainstream Media. *International Journal of Knowledge Content Development & Technology* Vol.10, No.2, 19-37.
- Danica Pirsl, Solzica Popovska (2013). Media Mediated Disability: How to Avoid Stereotypes. *International Journal of Scientific Engineering and Research (IJSER)*, Volume 1, Issue 4.
- Barnes, C. (1992). An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People. *The British Council of Organisations of Disabled People*. pp. 4-9.
- LK. Norazit (2010). How Much Difference Can One ‘Word’ Make? Changing Perceptions of Disability in Malaysia. *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 3(15): 266-284.
- LK. Norazit and S. Awab (2007). Disabling ‘the disabled’; a Study of Malaysian Perceptions of Disability. Chapter in *Theoretical and Practical Orientations in Language and Literature Studies*. Malaysia: Pearson.
- Levesque, M., Langford, B. (2016). The Role of Disability Groups in the Development and Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. *Canadian Journal Of Disability Studies*, 5(4), 63.
- Ng, J. Heroes, Villains, and Victims: Images of Disability in Movies. Retrieved from: <https://disabledpeoplesassociation.wordpress.com/2014/10/31/disability-in-movies/>
- Ridzuan, A.R., Ridzuan, A.R. and Ridzuan, M. (2018). Research Methods and Communication Research. *Malaysian Journal of Media and Society*. 1, 1-10.
- Ye, W., & Zeldes, G. A. (2019). The Representation of People With Disabilities in an Official Newspaper in China: A Longitudinal Study of the People’s Daily From 2003 to 2013. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 31(1), 26–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207319868783>