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Revitalising Malaysian Superhero: A Study of Live-Action Adaptation and Intellectual Property (IP) Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores *Keluang Man*, a uniquely Malaysian superhero, as a case study in reimagining legacy intellectual property (IP) through contemporary transmedia storytelling. Originally broadcast in the late 1990s as an animated series, *Keluang Man* follows a mentally ill vigilante who fights crime in a small town, blending satire with social commentary. The recent release of a live-action adaptation has reignited public interest, presenting a timely opportunity to reposition the character from nostalgic icon to dynamic cultural asset. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's theory of nostalgia, this study examines how the adaptation functions as both a revival and a cultural intervention. It further applies Henry Jenkins' framework of transmedia storytelling to outline strategic pathways for expanding *Keluang Man* into a multi-platform franchise encompassing films, series, merchandise, and immersive experiences. By analysing the character's cultural resonance and commercial potential, this research argues for a strategic revitalisation of *Keluang Man* as a sustainable IP within Malaysia's creative economy.

Keywords: *Malaysian Superhero, Live-Action Adaptation, Intellectual Property (IP), Svetlana Boym, Henry Jenkins*

INTRODUCTION

Widely regarded as Malaysia's first superhero animated series, *Keluang Man* holds a significant place in the collective memory of those who came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While I was not a die-hard fan in my childhood, my recent involvement in the marketing and publicity of its 2025 live-action adaptation renewed my appreciation for its cultural significance. This experience inspired a deeper examination of local intellectual property (IP) like *Keluang Man*, not simply as consumable content but as immersive experiences with the capacity to resonate across generations.

There is immense potential in leveraging Malaysian IPs for strategic expansion across multiple media platforms, like how Hollywood has developed franchises such as Marvel and DC. These global superhero IPs often began with a strong foundation in print media, particularly comics, where Marvel and DC Comics spent decades building expansive storytelling universes through serialized narratives. This long-term approach cultivated iconic characters such as *Spider-Man, Iron Man, Batman*, and *Superman,* which were later adapted into animated series and blockbuster films, significantly expanding their audience reach and cultural impact (Coleman, 2023).

As a media practitioner, this dissertation reflects both my professional interests and academic inquiry, exploring how legacy characters like *Keluang Man* can be reimagined and repositioned through transmedia storytelling and commercial innovation. Through this study, I aim to establish a foundational framework for future industry applications, offering a strategic roadmap for how local IPs can thrive within an increasingly competitive media landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nostalgia has increasingly been understood not as a longing to reproduce the past, but as a process of cultural negotiation within contemporary media industries. Leitch (2018) argues that Hollywood mobilizes nostalgia to balance audiences' desire for familiarity with their anxieties about change, privileging emotional continuity over historical accuracy. This affective strategy allows media texts to remain recognisable while adapting to new cultural contexts.

Within the superhero genre, nostalgia functions as both a formal and ideological device. Brown (2017) suggests that superheroes deploy nostalgia through self-reflexive genre conventions such as meta-humour, intertextual references, and narrative callbacks, enabling franchises to sustain longevity while continually redefining cultural ideals of heroism, morality, and identity. This process allows legacy characters to remain culturally relevant by reinterpreting their symbolic meanings for new generations.

The role of nostalgia is further intensified within transmedia franchise structures. Proctor (2021) identifies nostalgia as a structural component of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), where interconnected films rely on continuity, self-reference, and long-term narrative payoffs to maintain emotional investment. Beyond Hollywood, similar dynamics are evident in Southeast Asian media. Saptanto and Dewi (2020) highlight how Indonesian superhero franchises such as *Gundala* and *Gatotkaca* reconstruct an idealized cultural past while modernizing it for contemporary audiences.

Together, these studies suggest that nostalgia, when strategically combined with transmedia storytelling, can enable local IPs to retain cultural specificity while competing within globalized media landscapes.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the reimagining and transmedia expansion of *Keluang Man* within a contemporary media landscape. The methodology integrates multiple qualitative approaches to provide a holistic understanding of how legacy IP can be revitalized through adaptation and strategic storytelling.

The primary research component consists of text-based analysis and semi-structured interviews. The text-based analysis focuses on the 2025 live-action adaptation of *Keluang Man*, examining how narrative, aesthetic, and thematic elements are translated from animation into live-action form. Complementing this analysis, two semi-structured interviews are conducted with key creative stakeholders involved in the adaptation process: the Executive Producer and the Writer/Director. These interviews are guided by questions that explore decision-making

processes related to live-action adaptation, transmedia expansion, and the balancing of nostalgia with contemporary audience expectations.

In addition to primary data, the study draws on secondary resources to contextualize the findings within broader industry and scholarly discourses. These sources include academic journals, press articles, and commercial performance metrics, which provide insights into transmedia strategies, audience reception, and market viability.

All data are analysed through a theoretical framework grounded in Svetlana Boym's theory of nostalgia and Henry Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling. Together, these frameworks enable the study to examine how nostalgia functions as both a cultural and commercial strategy, and how transmedia storytelling facilitates the expansion of IPs across multiple platforms while maintaining narrative coherence and cultural resonance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The live-action *Keluang Man* employs Svetlana Boym's restorative nostalgia theory as a foundational strategy by deliberately reconstructing the narrative world of the original animated series. Iconic locations are reintroduced; alongside the revival of central characters whose mannerisms, speech rhythms, and behavioural quirks closely mirror their animated counterparts. In several instances, key scenes are recreated almost frame by frame, enabling audiences to relive collective memories formed during the series' original broadcast. The careful preservation of character essence positions the adaptation as an authentic continuation rather than a radical reinvention.

At the same time, the film mobilises reflective nostalgia by acknowledging temporal distance and evolving social values. The opening sequence foregrounds a familiar radio voice from the early 2000s before any visual imagery appears, creating an acousmatic moment that privileges memory and emotional resonance over literal reconstruction. This auditory cue, together with the use of Malaysian popular music from the same period and cameo appearances by recognisable pop-culture figures, situates the film within a broader network of shared cultural memory.

Reflective nostalgia is further evident in the reworking of Borhan's mental health narrative, shifting from caricatured representations of "orang gila" in the original animation to a more empathetic and psychologically nuanced portrayal. This narrative shift, combined with the incorporation of silat choreography and an emphasis on vulnerability rather than invincibility, localises the superhero archetype within Malaysian cultural and social realities. Consequently, nostalgia functions not merely as commemoration but as a structural engine that enables *Keluang Man* to evolve while remaining culturally specific and emotionally resonant.

While nostalgia functions as the emotional anchor drawing audiences back to the IP, the application of Henry Jenkins' transmedia storytelling principles provides the mechanism through which this affective attachment is transformed into sustained engagement, participatory culture, and commercial scalability.

The live-action campaign strongly exemplifies spreadability through high-velocity social media circulation and extensive fan participation. High levels of user-generated content, online discourse, and press amplification indicate that audiences functioned not merely as consumers

but as active distributors of meaning and visibility. This participatory circulation effectively extended community engagement into the marketing strategy itself. At a deeper level, drillability was activated through layered narrative construction, callbacks, and intertextual references that encouraged audiences to explore the story world beyond the primary text.

In addition, the campaign demonstrates extractability, immersion, seriality, and worldbuilding as key drivers of long-term franchise viability. Merchandise collaborations and branded consumer products allowed audiences to integrate elements of the IP into everyday life, reinforcing emotional affiliation while generating measurable commercial value. Immersive real-world activations enabled embodied participation, strengthening audience identification with the franchise, while the confirmation of long-form serialized content signalled narrative continuity beyond a single film. The expansion of fictional locations further consolidated a cohesive story universe, enhancing scalability and future development potential.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how the strategic integration of nostalgia and transmedia principles can future-proof a Malaysian IP, positioning *Keluang Man* as both culturally grounded and competitively viable within a contemporary franchise-driven media ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the significant potential of *Keluang Man* as a model for repositioning Malaysian IPs within contemporary media ecosystems. The live-action adaptation functions not merely as a standalone revival but as the foundational pillar for a broader *Keluang Man* Universe, encompassing serialized content, immersive experiences, and interconnected narratives. By transforming nostalgia into sustained engagement rather than momentary hype, the franchise exemplifies how intentional transmedia expansion - designed from the outset rather than as an afterthought - can ensure narrative coherence, creative flexibility, and diversified revenue streams across platforms. More broadly, the findings reaffirm the creative and cultural value of Malaysian stories while highlighting both the opportunities and structural challenges involved in building sustainable local IPs. They underscore the need for Malaysia's media industry to move beyond short-term content cycles and toward long-term IP cultivation grounded in global-standard storytelling, strategic planning, and cultural specificity.

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