



Research Article

Malaysian Animated TV Series: *Upin & Ipin* through Piaget's Cognitive Development

Nor'Anira HARIS

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

anira.haris@gmail.com

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Abstract

Malaysia's animated TV series, *Upin & Ipin* is one of the biggest names when it comes to the animation industry. *Upin & Ipin*'s ability to attract a large number of local and international fans has inspired an investigation into the internal workings of the elements that contribute to its success. This research aims to identify the content development of the *Upin & Ipin* series in association with notions of child psychology. By framing Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, this research explores the development of a child's psychology in efforts to formulate animation content best suited for a young viewership. The research identifies young children below the age of twelve with regards to their preference and interests through observation and questionnaire survey. Furthermore, this research paper debates Livingstone (2000) who disagrees with Davies's (1989) view that television is an important medium for children. Although they use different media in their everyday life, television remains the most popular medium and occupies a significant proportion of children's time. And up until 2003, Kaiser Family Foundation has revealed the how's and why's of children watching television. Finally, this research paper has discussed the content and type of stories that psychologically impact and appeal to children.

Keywords: *Upin & Ipin*, children's TV Series, Jean Piaget, cognitive development

Introduction

Nowadays, media plays an important role as an educational tool in children's intellectual development. Television is one of the media that is synonym to early age of children, and parents' attitudes towards this phenomenon appear to be positive

since some of the programs watched by their children are helping in a way to develop language acquisition. Few studies have shown how young children's language acquisition can benefit from watching television since 80s, a study made by Lemish and Rice (1986) and continues until recently. Some programs, such as *Blue's*

Clues, and *Dora the Explorer*, include on-screen characters talking to the child, encourage participation, label objects and invite children to respond, were positively related to expressive language production and vocabulary. Naigles and Mayeux (2001) in *Television as Incidental Language Teacher* also find that in certain circumstances, children can learn words and their meanings from educational programs specifically designed for them.

This research is an effort to study and determine the suitable elements in creating language style for our local production in order to produce high-quality TV programs for children in the future. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in 2014 reported that children learn many things from what they watched on the television. Despite that, they often cannot tell the difference between the fantasies presented on the television and reality. In Malaysia, there are several famous children's TV programs. However, *Upin & Ipin* series has been chosen as the subject matter for this research due to its popularity both locally and internationally. This is proven through its popularity by social media, Facebook's likes at 12,448,837 and YouTube's followers at 3,867,598 subscribers by 2019, January.

From here, this research paper is also taking a consideration of *Upin & Ipin* as one of the most popular ASEAN animated TV series, hence suitable to be analysed. The *Upin & Ipin* series is reported by WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) in 2014 as the most appealing stories and characters. *Upin & Ipin*, Season 3 included 42 episodes with seven-minute for each episode and is aired on Disney Channel Asia with English and Mandarin dubbing. This first effort at global inclusiveness brought in millions of new viewers in the form of Disney Channel Asia subscribers from countries within the Southeast Asian region, and this paved the way for Les' Copaque Production's international presence.

Research Methodology

This research applied mixed-method, both qualitative and quantitative methods. They are observation surveys for the qualitative method and questionnaire as for the quantitative method. In order to gather and analyze the mixed-method data, this research is designed to use the interpretative method where it explains a phenomenon by using verbal descriptive data. The research begins with a qualitative approach and shifts to a quantitative mode, in which case, at a later phase, reverts back to a qualitative method. The qualitative approach applies observation as a means of obtaining more precise information. The quantitative approach obtains data from questionnaires which are designed to address variables assorted according to Piaget's category division that are based on the children's age. This method is recognized as the triangulation method.

The interpretative method for this paper is the observation survey, where the verbal descriptive data will be emphasized more than the numerical data from the questionnaire survey. A screening or preview session is conducted towards a focus group to observe children's behavior and reactions. The observation method is useful to assess non-verbal expressions such as emotions, to determine children interactions with *Upin & Ipin*, as well as, the manner in which the children communicate and act. Sampling is directly observed and every act that occurs is taken into account. Observation is the most important method for this research as it assesses children's reactions and reflects their cognitive development as identified by Piaget.

The research further uses a set of structured questionnaires with dichotomous questions. Dichotomous questions are when a question has two possible responses or called as closed-ended-question with a choice of the answer, 'Yes' or 'No'. Responses from the questionnaire are measured based on a nominal scale divided according to its

respective categories. While basic demographic information is obtained, the questions are formulated according to 'Yes' or 'No' answers. In addition, another reason is because children cannot understand complicated questions and so, answering is kept as simple as possible.

0 – 2 years old	-
2 – 7 years old	-
7 – 12 years old	-
12 – Adulthood	-

These four age groups are narrowed down to only two groups; those related to the: Pre-Operational stage, as well as children who fit into the age group of the Concrete Operational stage. These two groups of children were concentrated on due to the scope and limitation of the study. As for the Pre-Operational stage, only children starting from age 4 are selected as samples and range to 12 years old based on the age requirement of the Concrete Operational stage.

Identification of children as the population for this research is based on the popularity *Upin & Ipin's* fan in Malaysia only. For this research, the principle of voluntary participation is used in obtaining responses for the questionnaire. This voluntary participation requires the respondents not to be forced into participating in the research, namely; during the event of *Upin & Ipin's Clubhouse Day*. Secondly, the ethic of informed consent is used for the observation method. Essentially, this means respondents from the observation session are all fully informed about the procedures and purposes of the screening held on that day. A letter is sent to the two schools in Selangor, Malaysia and also to Les Copaque Production. After both sides agreed with the terms and conditions, only then is the screening session executed. The ethical standards also require that the participants are not in a situation where they might be at risk of harm as a result of their participation. These are the two standard procedures applied in order to

The sample of this research comes from the children population. From the population, the sample is selected based on the four stages of Jean Piaget's theory. From the theory of cognitive development, there are four age groups:

Sensorimotor stage
Pre-Operational stage
Concrete Operational stage
Formal Operational stage

collect data. The data about participants are treated with confidentiality to help protect their privacy. Parents, as legal guardians, are assured that identifying information will not be made public to anyone who is not directly involved in the study.

To establish the connection between child psychology and a TV program, the theory of cognitive development is chosen to test the hypothesis. The approach for this research is through deductive reasoning because the theory used is to be proved at the end of the research, or informally referred to as the "top-down" approach. The research begins by considering the application of a theory towards a specific area of research and then narrows that down into more specific hypotheses.

Literature Review

The framework of the research is based on the theoretical framework because of what this research is using based on the theory of Cognitive Development from Jean Piaget. This theory explains the children's behavior and reception during learning process at the childhood stage. Jean Piaget was a French-Swiss developmental psychologist and philosopher known for his epistemological studies with children. Piaget was the Director of the International Bureau of Education from 1929 until 1968 in Geneva, Switzerland. In 1955, Piaget created the International Center for Genetic Epistemology in Geneva and directed it until 1980. Piaget started his career as a biologist, specifically on mollusk studies

but his interest is focused more on the history of science.

Piaget's reputation is also based on his written books toward child psychology and his study is accepted internationally. Most of his books are translated into at least seven different languages especially *Children and Adolescents: Interpretive Essays on Jean Piaget* (1970). Piaget's essay explains the theory on children's cognitive development that consists of four primary stages: Sensorimotor, Pre-Operational, Concrete Operational and Formal Operational. These are the stages of children's behavior according to their age. The four stages of Piaget's theory as discussed by Elkind (1970) in *Children and Adolescents: Interpretive Essays on Jean Piaget*, mentioned that the normal intellectual development starts from infancy through adulthood. This includes thought, judgment, and knowledge. The goal of the theory is to explain the mechanisms and processes by which the infant, and then the child, develops into an individual who can reason and think using hypotheses. Piaget acknowledges that some children may pass through the stages at different ages and some children may show characteristics of more than one stage at a given time.

But, Piaget insists that cognitive development always follow the sequence, it cannot be skipped, and that each stage is marked by new intellectual abilities and a more complex understanding of the world. To establish the connection between child psychology and a TV programs, the theory of cognitive development is chosen to test the hypothesis; *Upin & Ipin* is a series that is watched by multiple levels of children's age and the message has positively impacted many children. Piaget's theories continue to be studied in the areas of psychology, sociology, education, and genetics. His work contributed to our understanding of the cognitive development of children. While earlier researchers had often viewed children simply as a smaller version of adults, Piaget helped demonstrate that childhood is a unique and important period of human development.

Children are identified as a special audience with distinctive characteristics and needs. Their behavior can reflect what they have seen on television, especially when children nowadays spend more time in front of the television. As Buckingham (1996) said, "The identification of children as a special audience for television is not simply a matter of viewing figures. On the contrary, it invokes all sorts of moral and ideological assumptions about what we believe children – and, by extension, adults – to be". (p. 468). This shows that television programs can damage children's psychology by showing certain shows that contain violence, political, sex and many more. On the other hand, as television is the closest medium to reach children, it can also be used as an educational tool that is beneficial and knowledgeable.

According to Piaget, children experience four stages of cognitive development where these stages can be applied to animated TV series, *Upin & Ipin*. Children aged between 0 – 24 months will experience a Sensory-motor stage, where their senses and actions may be developed through what they see through *Upin & Ipin*. During Pre-operational stage between 2 – 7 years old, they are now acquiring language and thinking skills are developing at this stage. By watching *Upin & Ipin*, this will lead them to develop understanding through minimal dialogues and effective actions or gestures. Meanwhile, for 7 – 12 years old children, they will step into the next stage, Concrete operational, where children begin to engage in abstract thoughts which allow them to understand the storylines of *Upin & Ipin*. Lastly, the Formal operational stage aged twelve and onwards, they are assumed to be able understand the story of *Upin & Ipin* similar to how adults understand.

The theory appeals to *Upin & Ipin* based on the research it has made, and this has answered one of the objectives of this research. From there, the researcher has found a few elements that strengthen the series which has been taken out according to the theory of cognitive development. These elements did not only appeal to any

stages in cognitive development by Piaget, it also appeals to all four stages in a different perception. Although, every stage has its boundaries in developing the cognitive skills but the core of it is basically the elements stated in all the four stages. Clearly, *Upin & Ipin* can enhance children's academic skills by teaching learning and memorising skills using the two adorable characters, Upin and Ipin. From here, this paper will focus on the element of dialogue in *Upin & Ipin* to deepen the understanding of the suitable language style in dialogues for children's TV series.

Story and Concept of *Upin & Ipin*

The story of *Upin & Ipin* is simply about the twins going through their daily lives while learning from their experiences and mistakes. Technically, Nur Naquyah Burhanuddin, the Creative Content Director from Les' Copaque Production, explained in an interview that there is no particular reason why a twin is used in their first animated series. At first, they just planned to make a story of a naughty boy in a family and no friends were included. But it will be hard to develop a story of how a boy is going to communicate by himself and how far can a boy being naughty.

The duration for each episode is only seven minutes. From this process, the scriptwriter will determine the momentum of the story to build the climax in every episode. It can be suggested that the right momentum of the story is also part of the elements that makes the story of *Upin & Ipin* successful. It is important to every storyline to have its momentum or in another meaning to build the climax and resolution. In *Upin & Ipin*, a story consists of three episodes with duration of 7 minutes for each episode. This is similar to the three-act-structure; beginning, middle, ending. The difference in *Upin & Ipin* is that every episode has its own beginning, middle and ending before it reaches the third episode which also has its own three-act-structure. For every seven minutes, the audience will encounter the beginning, middle and end while watching the series. This element gives the audience time to

think, react and digest the information in the series.

According to the observation session, there is a momentum of reactions as indicated by the respondents. There are parts where these children stay relaxed and then laughed and then calmed down before laughing again. Children will direct their attention to what surprises them, either to an image or sound. These elements of momentum in *Upin & Ipin* are the suspense through action or dialogue and twist between scenes or characters that help to captivate the children.

Although the *Upin & Ipin* series is technically proven popular in Malaysia, it is also clear that the storyline and story development remain as the priority each time they were going to make a new story. The team believes that the 'Asian qualities' have certainly helped to position the series as a unique and progressive one. This quality is identified as the local content such as 'kampung boy' playing at the river, traditional games, local dishes and 'kampong' appearance.

Lesser (1974) also suggested that the reappearance of a familiar character, episode or format will often capture a child whole attention. Familiarity such as their own culture in the *Upin & Ipin* can definitely be accepted by any age level of audiences. Content like this is usually easy to be accepted by the local audience because it plays with the sentimental value and the sense of 'closeness' to themselves. The content inserted in the series can also be translated as the journey of a Malay-Muslim heritage and a Malay 'kampung' setting. These elements make them different from any other previously made animated TV series, dated before the *Upin & Ipin's* releasing.

There are lots more of local culture being represented in *Upin & Ipin's* series and this example is just one of them. They effortlessly portray the local culture of ours in the *Upin & Ipin* to the local audience and eventually to the international viewers as this series was showed in a few foreign countries as well. It is a combination of the

global with the local, as Burhanuddin Md Radzi mentioned in the e-zine, *Majalah Niaga*. Hence, this is the reason why *Upin & Ipin* was so famous for their uniqueness because the audience will always feel 'close' to this series. Content such as this needs to be carefully preserved and accommodated to enable *Upin & Ipin* to continuously captivate the attention of the audience.

Dialogue: Language Style in *Upin & Ipin*

Dialogue is important in every story unless it is a silent movie. In *Upin & Ipin*, each dialogue, especially for the children's character such as Upin, Ipin, Mail, Mei Mei, Ehsan, Jarjit and other friends are constructed short and simple. No difficult vocabularies are used by these characters in order to make the characters realistic and relevant as a child will only speak in a very simple way using the familiar words around them. And the style of language is minimalist based on the grammar used.

The *Upin & Ipin* series ability to teach and help children to memorize words and language is supported by Hilliard (2000). He says that one of the techniques in creating children's programs is to be simple and clear when writing the dialogues. Relevant to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, where he says that children at the Pre-Operational stage starts to develop language, *Upin & Ipin* played a big role as an education medium for children to start learning simple words and language. As Jean Piaget's *Children and Adolescents* (1968) mentioned, children learn through surroundings starting at a very early age and more often when they encounter schools and within the community, so, watching an animation TV series is one of the learning fields to develop the cognitive skill.

To maintain the realistic speech of real life conversation, *Upin & Ipin* is willing to take a risk and maintain the daily conversation style in the series. However, this step is limited to where a dialogue may sound short as compared to complete sentences, but the usage of grammar is still in a proper way. The rules of grammar: subject and

predicate in constructing a sentence are preserved well, including other grammar rules. Again, this is purposely constructed to make the proper local language sound more attractive to children's ears and later, help them to memorize and learn the vocabulary. Even though there are comments and feedbacks from parents saying that the *Upin & Ipin* is not using a proper language and parents are concerned that their children may not be able to speak in a correct language, the positive responses outweigh this negative aspect. Based on emails shared by Nur Naquyah Burhanuddin sent to Les' Copaque Production, some parents from a foreign country mention that their child learns Bahasa Melayu through *Upin & Ipin*. Few classes teaching Bahasa Melayu for foreigners also used the *Upin & Ipin* as a reference in class to make the student understand the local language. This proved that the technique of *Upin & Ipin* worked not only for local children but also for children from international countries. It shows that the usage of dialogues in *Upin & Ipin* reflects the true culture and essence of Malaysia.

The researcher also concludes that the humor in this series is one of the elements that contribute to the key content. Humor here means the part where the characters say or acts and those actions made the audience smile and laugh. That is the only explanation why *Upin & Ipin* appealed to different age groups of audiences. It is simple and yet realistic for the audience to digest the content of the story. Their cute appearance, voice, laughter and simple dialogue emerged as a good humorous entertainment. In *Upin & Ipin*, the humor shown by the characters is the most memorable aspect from audience's perspective when being asked randomly.

The phrase "Betul, betul, betul" (True, true, true!) said by the Ipin's character in an adorable action is well-known among children, as well as the adults. This also shows that, despite a good storyline and characters, humour element plays an important role as *Upin & Ipin's* success. Additionally, the reaction of the audience towards this element can be seen through

observation sessions where most of the respondents give positive response to every humorous scenes or dialogue. This can be seen through the observation session as well where the recorded session has shown the respondents reaction towards humorous sequences.

From here, the humour in *Upin & Ipin* usually derives into a twist in the story. Basically, the children's story is simple and predictable as in *Upin & Ipin*, the story is predictable but the series is incorporated with unpredictable actions and dialogues. The audience will have a hard time expecting response from the characters because it was intentionally constructed to be memorable by the humorous dialogue and action. For an example, one of the scenes in episode *Kembara Kecil-Kecilan*, where Ros and Uncle Muthu are having a conversation at the stall. This strategy built up in the series is mainly to avoid the cliché. Cliché is a very serious problem in every story telling because it can drive the audience into a monotonous feeling. In *Upin & Ipin*, they are trying to avoid cliché and come out with a new and fresh idea in order to capture interest among the audience.

Another example that portrays Upin and Ipin's characters can be referred from the same episode, *Kembara Kecil-Kecilan*, whereby the conversation may sounds like the children are fighting and answering back to the adults. However, the scene is intentionally made to develop the story. During the observation session, children at a young age may not give much response since this is considered as a talking scene when compared to older children where they understand what is happening. Some of them are smiling because they find it amusing to hear the answer from Upin and Ipin.

Nonetheless, the unexpected humor dialogues are never overdone, as they know where to stop and they understand the limits. Thus, this series is acceptable and appeals to all stages of audiences. A child has a difficulty in understanding heavy issues, but when it is described in a simple way, children are able to

understand the message. This storyline concept of keeping it as simple as possible is used in almost every episode of *Upin & Ipin* and is proven successful in helping children understand.

These findings are important to determine the criteria behind the success and sustainability of *Upin & Ipin's* series. Language style especially for the dialogues is the main key in order to create understanding in children's perspective and later, develop a memorable scene or story for them. At this rate, it is proven that children's development on televisual skills must be in line with their cognitive development. This is because children do not perceive television in the same way adults do. Age and linguistic maturity determine how a child will respond to and engage with television. According to Piaget's four stages of cognitive development, it can be applied to television experience. 2 - 7 years old children during the Pre-Operational stage are acquiring language. Thus, they develop representational thinking skills which allow them to talk about their experience of television. Between 7 - 12 years old; the Concrete Operational stage, children begin to engage in abstract thoughts which allow them to understand the medium's codes and conventions which enable them to follow storylines. They develop level of perception which is called televisual literacy. Televisual literacy refers to allowing them to understand the chunks and segments that constitute a television program and how they are linked.

However, it is undeniable that there is also a negative effect that comes along with the shows such as a man and a woman kissing in front of the public. This scene is normal to other foreign cultures but not here, in Malaysia. If a child continuously watches a program that contains this scene repeatedly, this child may assume the idea that kissing each other in front of the public is acceptable. This is where we need more locally produced children's programs with proper guidelines and content that suit and balance the educational and entertainment components.

Conclusion

Television programs are not specifically produced for educational purposes but it can teach them about society and its values. In evaluating programs, they are developing their own identities and critical thinking skills. Nonetheless, the impact is complex in a way it affects children's knowledge, beliefs, and values. Although children rarely seek out 'educational' content, through *Upin & Ipin* they can derive both pleasure and learning.

There is indeed no question that children are affected by the cultures in which they grow up, and watching television especially animated series is a part from it. With television programs designed and marketed specifically for babies, whether kids under two years of age should be watching television or not becomes an important question. This is where parents and teachers still need to assist in guiding

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