



Anime Viewing and Media Literacy among Adolescents: A Study on the Ability to Differentiate Between Positive and Negative Values

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ABSTRACT

Anime has become a significant part of Malaysian adolescents' daily media diet. This study examines how adolescents understand and interpret the values embedded in anime, focusing on their ability to distinguish between positive and negative moral content. Using a qualitative focus group discussion (FGD) involving seven adolescents aged 13 to 16, the findings show that participants could identify positive values such as courage, friendship, cooperation, and justice, while also recognising negative ones including aggression, inappropriate language, bullying, laziness, and selfishness. Most participants showed basic moral reasoning when evaluating character behaviour, though some tended to excuse negative content as comedy. The study concludes that anime is more than entertainment but it is a space for value learning that calls for family guidance and structured media literacy education. Implications include strengthening media literacy in schools and encouraging parental involvement in adolescents' media consumption.

Keywords: Anime, Media Literacy, Adolescents, Moral Values, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Anime has grown into one of the most dominant forms of popular culture among Malaysian adolescents. The spread of digital platforms from YouTube and Netflix to Astro and Bilibili has made anime easily accessible across age groups. As early as the 1990s, Japanese anime was already gaining traction among secondary school students in Malaysia (Mamat et al., 2014), and its reach has only expanded since then.

Beyond its entertainment value, anime is a narrative medium that deals with complex moral themes like courage and perseverance in *Naruto*, friendship and struggle in *One Piece*, and intelligence alongside justice in *Detective Conan*. These storylines shape how young viewers understand social relationships and moral concepts. As Yusof et al. (2023) note, anime also influences how students interpret Japanese popular culture through visual style and cultural symbolism.

With this growing exposure, media literacy becomes increasingly important. UNESCO defines media literacy as the capacity to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media messages critically (Wilson et al., 2011). Studies in the Malaysian context suggest that students' media literacy is still developing and that critical analysis skills need strengthening (Abdul Rashid & Mamat, 2016; Chin & Zainuddin, 2019; Elvionita & Sannusi, 2022). Without it, adolescents may struggle to separate fiction from reality or miss the value messages woven into anime narratives.

This matters because anime carries both positive and negative content. Comedy series like *Shin Chan* feature humour that many consider inappropriate, while action anime like *Naruto* or *Attack on Titan* portray violence and revenge. Yusof et al. (2024) found that heavy exposure to content with mixed moral messages may affect adolescents' moral development especially without proper guidance.

Although prior studies have explored anime's influence on Malaysian youth (Yusof, 2019; Yusof et al., 2022), fewer have looked at how adolescents actively interpret and evaluate moral messages in anime. This study addresses that gap through a qualitative FGD approach. The objectives are:

1. To identify the types of anime watched and viewing patterns among Malaysian adolescents.
2. To analyse the positive and negative values in anime as perceived by adolescents.
3. To evaluate adolescents' ability to differentiate between positive and negative values through character reflection.
4. To explore how moral media literacy surfaces through adolescents' critical evaluation of anime content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anime as Popular Culture

Anime has shifted from being a niche form of Japanese entertainment to a global cultural phenomenon. In Malaysia, studies show that anime alongside manga and the broader ACG (anime, comics, games) ecosystem is deeply embedded in adolescent and youth culture. Mamat et al. (2014) found that anime contains 'fantasy, beliefs, values, and myths of Japanese society,' which fans worldwide, including in Malaysia, absorb and adapt. Interest among Malaysian secondary school students has grown steadily since the 1990s, reinforced by digital access and streaming platforms. More recent data shows anime remains among the most popular Japanese cultural products among university students (Mamat et al., 2022).

Today, anime is not just something young people watch but it shapes their identities and lifestyles. Participation in ACG communities, cosplay, fan art, and Japanese cultural events reflects a deeper engagement (Hidayat & Hidayat, 2020; Putra & Khasan, 2024). For Muslim adolescents in Malaysia, Yusof et al. (2024) note that while anime is widely accepted, uncritical consumption of content with controversial moral messages poses risks to moral development. Anime, therefore, functions as a space where cultural dialogue and value negotiation happen continuously.

Values in Anime

Positive Elements

Anime regularly portrays constructive moral values like courage, friendship, justice, perseverance, and cooperation. Characters in popular series like *Naruto* and *One Piece* often embody these traits in ways that resonate with young viewers. Rachmadani et al. (2023) note that *One Piece* reflects classical ethical values such as friendship, virtue, and perseverance akin to Aristotelian ethics. Beyond shonen anime, even general animation has been shown to instil prosocial values: a study of preschool children in Kuala Lumpur found that watching *Doraemon* encouraged imitation of helping behaviour and respect (Abdullah, 2023). Anime's potential as informal moral education is therefore real for young viewers learn through character identification, conflict, and narrative resolution.

Negative Elements

Animation also carries risks. Prolonged exposure to violence, crude humour, and inappropriate language in cartoons can influence thoughts and behaviour in young viewers (Zhang et al., 2019). A quasi-experimental study in Malaysia found that cartoons with violent or crude content can reduce focus, encourage aggression, and lead children to imitate inappropriate language (Ong & Amran, 2023; Bahri et al., 2019). In the anime context, while large-scale studies on specific titles remain limited locally, the broader evidence suggests that young viewers without sufficient media literacy or moral guidance face a real risk of absorbing negative content uncritically.



Value Internalization Through Animation

Empirical studies confirm that animation can serve as a medium for internalising both positive and negative values especially when combined with family guidance. Abdullah (2023) found that Doraemon helps instil helpfulness and social morality among preschool children when parents explain the values after viewing. In Islamic contexts, locally produced animations have been used as moral education tools, conveying tolerance and ethical conduct through characters and storylines (Fadlan et al., 2025). Ong and Amran (2023) showed that positive-content animation reduces aggression and builds prosocial behaviour among primary school students. Ultimately, animation's influence on values varies, depending heavily on the specific programs watched and the social environment of the viewer

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method. FGD is particularly useful for exploring meaning-making and group interpretation of shared experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Since anime is typically discussed and consumed in social settings rather than in isolation, FGD allows researchers to observe how adolescents evaluate moral values through natural dialogue capturing moral reasoning, peer influence, and shared frames of reference (Morgan, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

Seven adolescents aged 13 to 16 were selected through purposive sampling. All were active anime viewers, watching at least five times per week via platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and Bilibili. Participants included four males and three females, representing a mix of genres primarily shonen (Naruto, One Piece, Attack on Titan) and comedy/slice-of-life (Shin Chan, Blue Period). Three participants had been regular viewers since primary school. Parental consent was obtained for all participants. Group size (6–8) aligns with best practice for FGD depth and manageability (Krueger & Casey, 2015; McLafferty, 2004).

Data Collection

A single FGD session was held face-to-face in a school discussion room, lasting approximately 90 minutes. The session followed a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions such as: What anime do you watch most, and why? Which characters do you see as good or bad? How do you tell positive values apart from negative ones? Have you ever imitated anime characters? The session was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and group dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase model: familiarisation, initial coding, theme searching, reviewing, defining, and reporting. Codes were derived from participants' dialogue on values, character judgments, and media awareness. Initial themes included 'positive values,' 'normalization of crude humour,' 'justification of violence,' and 'reflective moral thinking.' Analysis was guided by the media literacy framework (Kellner & Share, 2007) and Kohlberg's (1981) moral development theory, examining how adolescents interpret, evaluate, and rationalize values encountered in anime.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Theme 1: Anime Viewing Patterns Among Adolescents

The transcript analysis indicates that adolescents in this study demonstrate consistent and intensive anime viewing patterns, influenced by various factors such as daily routines, media access, and family dynamics. Overall, participants reported watching anime between 6 hours to more than 10 hours per week, through platforms such as television, YouTube, and Astro.

Weekly Viewing Duration: 6–10+ Hours per Week

Several participants explicitly stated their estimated viewing duration.

Lia reported watching approximately 6 hours per week:

“I think around 6 hours... maybe more, haha...”

Isma confirmed a similar pattern:

“Same for me, about 6 hours because I watch it on TV every day.”

In contrast, male participants such as Sasuke demonstrated higher intensity, acknowledging that their viewing may exceed 10 hours per week, especially due to watching anime on both television and YouTube:

“I don’t really count... whenever there’s anime on TV, I watch it... online too? ... yeah, I watch... I usually watch on YouTube... Naruto... One Piece...”

When asked whether it exceeded 10 hours per week, Sasuke responded:

“Hmm... yeah, I guess so?”

Fadzli also reported watching anime “almost every day,” indicating a similarly intensive pattern:

“I also watch these cartoons almost every day...”

Overall, these responses suggest that anime viewing is embedded in daily routines rather than being an occasional activity.

Viewing Platforms: Television, YouTube, and Astro

Media access plays a significant role in shaping adolescents’ viewing habits.

The main platforms identified in the FGD include:

- Television (TV)
- YouTube
- Astro

For example, Azman stated:

“After finishing my homework, I usually watch YouTube... or Astro.”

Sasuke confirmed that, besides TV, YouTube is his primary platform:

“I usually watch on YouTube... mostly Naruto... sometimes I also watch One Piece...”

Meanwhile, participants such as Leha and Isma relied more on television:

“Same for me, about 6 hours because I watch it on TV every day.” - Isma

Leha noted that her viewing was influenced by her younger sibling:

“Every day as well because my younger sibling usually controls the TV.”



In summary, television appears to be the primary medium for female participants, while YouTube is the dominant platform among male participants, particularly those who prefer action-oriented anime such as *Naruto* and *One Piece*.

Influence of Siblings and Family

A key finding is the strong influence of siblings and family members, which shapes not only anime preferences but also viewing decisions.

Leha explained that her interest in anime began at an early age through exposure from her siblings:

“I followed my older brother and sister... I’ve been watching since I was young.”

Zahar similarly stated that his preference for anime such as *One Piece* was influenced by his older brother:

“I like Naruto and One Piece because my brother likes them too.”

He also mentioned that his 17-year-old brother influenced his interest in *Kenshin Himura*:

“My brother really likes Kenshin Himura... because he’s strong but kind.”

Leha further acknowledged that her younger sibling significantly influences her viewing frequency:

“Every day because my younger sibling usually controls the TV.”

Some participants also indicated that parental control plays a role in shaping viewing patterns:

“My father doesn’t allow me to watch until my homework is done.” - Azman

Leha added:

“Sometimes my father watches as well.”

These findings indicate that anime viewing occurs within a shared family social environment, rather than being solely an individual activity.

Age of Initial Exposure: Very Early (5–7 Years Old)

The transcripts reveal that anime exposure begins at a very early age, suggesting that it is not exclusively a teenage phenomenon.

“I started watching when I was 5 years old.” - Azman

“I think since kindergarten, I’ve been watching these cartoons...” - Sasuke

“I think since Year 1... back then Doraemon was the best...” - Isma

The fact that anime viewing begins at such an early stage indicates that anime plays a role in early socialization, not merely in adolescent identity formation.

Overall, the viewing patterns among adolescents in this study indicate relatively intensive anime consumption, ranging from approximately six to more than ten hours per week. In terms of platforms, female adolescents tend to rely more on television, whereas male adolescents predominantly use YouTube and Astro. These viewing behaviors are also shaped by family dynamics, particularly through exposure from siblings and shared viewing practices with parents. Furthermore, most participants began watching anime at an early age, typically between five and seven years old, making anime a significant part of their early media socialization experiences. These



patterns suggest that anime is not merely a form of entertainment, but an integral component of the daily media ecology and family media routines within the household.

Theme 2: Favorite Characters and Rationale for Selection

Heroic Characters: Naruto and Sasuke.

Male adolescents tend to prefer characters who possess special powers, physical strength, and narratives of struggle.

The participant Sasuke chose the character Sasuke because:

“Sasuke is great and intelligent... he has principles and he will fight and defeat his enemies.”

Fadzli associated his interest with the heroic values embodied by Naruto and Goku:

“Naruto is brave and strong... just like Goku... his fighting spirit...”

Intelligent and Analytical Characters: Detective Conan.

Adolescents expressed admiration for Conan due to his intellectual traits and sense of justice.

“Conan is a genius... he’s smart and intelligent.” — Azman

Zahar added:

“Conan always upholds justice... he speaks the truth.”

This indicates that adolescents value intelligence, logic, honesty, and problem-solving as core attributes.

Caring and Polite Characters: Usagi & Sakura.

From the *Cardcaptor Sakura* genre, Isma stated:

“Usagi is beautiful, friendly, polite, and firm... I often imagine being like her.”

This reflects elements of gender identification and aspiration toward feminine moral ideals.

Humorous Characters: Doraemon & Shin Chan.

Some adolescents showed preference for comedic anime.

Lia stated:

“Doraemon is fun, funny... Doraemon always helps Nobita.”

Leha expressed her interest in *Shin Chan*:

“Shin Chan is even better... really funny... very cute.”

This genre fulfills the need for light entertainment, humor, and positive emotional experiences.

Motivation for Interest in Anime:

Entertainment and Humor

Comedy anime such as *Doraemon* and *Shin Chan* provide enjoyment and amusement.



“I like watching Doraemon... because it’s funny.” - Lia

“Shin Chan is really funny... the story is great.” - Leha

Entertainment is the most universal motivating factor, cutting across gender and age.

Special Powers and Fantasy

Male adolescents are clearly attracted to powerful characters and fantasy elements.

“Naruto has many great heroes... their powers are all really cool.” – Sasuke

They expressed interest in abilities such as Chidori, Amaterasu, Naruto’s power-ups, Goku’s powers, and mecha robots (*Gundam*). This suggests that anime serves as an aspirational fantasy space where adolescents imagine strength and extraordinary abilities.

Heroic Values and Positive Morality

Among the values that motivate interest are:

- Courage
- Justice
- Honesty
- Friendship
- Perseverance
- Responsibility

Azman described *One Piece* as:

“They help each other... they are loyal, capable, and cooperative.”

Zahar stated regarding Conan:

“Conan upholds justice.”

Fadzli added about Naruto:

“Naruto is honest... he is responsible.”

These findings suggest that the positive moral values portrayed and often romanticized in anime directly inspire adolescents.

Identification and Imitation Process

Adolescents frequently imitate or imagine becoming the characters they admire.

The participant Sasuke even asked his friends to call him “Sasuke”:

“I really like Sasuke... I asked them to call me Sasuke.”

Isma similarly admitted:

“I often imagine being like Usagi.”

This indicates that anime functions as a source of symbolic identity, particularly during the adolescent phase of self-concept formation.

The findings from Theme 2 indicate that adolescents' interest in anime is not solely driven by entertainment. Rather, anime attracts them through charismatic characters with unique powers and compelling narratives. At the same time, anime presents various positive moral values such as courage, loyalty, justice, and responsibility, making it a medium that influences both emotional and cognitive dimensions of young viewers.

In addition to offering a fantasy space that stimulates imagination and personal aspirations, anime also serves as a form of light entertainment that helps relieve daily stress. More importantly, adolescents often identify with specific characters, making their viewing experience more personal and meaningful. Overall, the motivation for engaging with anime reflects a combination of emotions, values, aspirations, and humor, positioning anime as a significant cultural medium in the lives of Malaysian adolescents.

Theme 3: Recognition of Positive Values in Anime

The focus group findings indicate that adolescents do not merely consume anime as entertainment, but are also able to identify positive moral values embedded within storylines and characters. These values appear to influence how they evaluate characters' behaviors and serve as reference points in their daily lives. Overall, adolescents identified five main values: friendship, courage, intelligence and justice, trustworthiness and responsibility, as well as cooperation and perseverance.

Friendship (One Piece and Naruto)

One of the most dominant values discussed was friendship, particularly through anime such as *One Piece* and *Naruto*. Adolescents demonstrated a clear understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationships in overcoming challenges.

Azman emphasized the strong sense of friendship in *One Piece*:

"In *One Piece*, they help each other... they are loyal, capable, and cooperative."

This statement shows that adolescents are able to recognize collective values such as mutual support, loyalty, and solidarity. These values are often used as moral benchmarks when evaluating characters' actions.

Similarly, the narrative of *Naruto* reinforces participants' understanding of friendship, especially through the relationships between Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. Although respondents did not explicitly use the term "friendship," their appreciation of character dynamics reflects a strong recognition of teamwork and relational bonds within the series.

Courage (Naruto, Dragon Ball)

Courage emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned moral themes when participants explained their preference for certain characters.

Fadzli, for instance, associated courage with Naruto and Goku:

"Naruto is brave and strong... just like Goku... his fighting spirit..."

This suggests that adolescents perceive courage not merely as physical strength, but as the willingness to face challenges and uphold one's principles. Characters in *shōnen* anime function as mental models for how individuals should confront conflict and adversity.

Intelligence and Justice (Detective Conan)

Detective Conan is widely perceived by participants as a symbol of intelligence, wisdom, and justice.



Azman stated:

“Conan is a genius... he’s smart and intelligent.”

Zahar highlighted the moral dimension:

“Conan always upholds justice... he speaks the truth.”

These responses indicate that adolescents are able to interpret implicit moral messages that justice requires intelligence, integrity, and the courage to speak the truth. Such values form part of the participants’ moral framework when comparing heroic and antagonistic characters.

Trustworthiness and Responsibility (Naruto, Gundam)

Values related to trustworthiness and responsibility emerged when adolescents described characters they admired. Responsibility was evaluated based on characters’ commitment to missions, loyalty to teammates, and ability to fulfill promises.

Fadzli noted:

“Naruto is honest... he is responsible.”

In addition, anime such as *Gundam* reflects responsibility toward teams, peace, and roles such as mecha pilots. Although participants did not elaborate extensively on *Gundam*, its mention suggests that responsibility toward missions and comrades is recognized as a positive element in action-oriented anime.

Cooperation and Perseverance

The values of cooperation and perseverance are evident in anime such as *One Piece*, *Naruto*, *Inazuma Eleven*, and *Slam Dunk*.

Azman emphasized teamwork:

“They help each other... they cooperate.”

Meanwhile, series such as *Naruto* and *Dragon Ball* portray characters who train, struggle, and rise after failure reflecting perseverance. Although participants did not explicitly label this value, their anime preferences reveal a strong inclination toward narratives centered on struggle and growth.

Overall, adolescents in this study demonstrate a clear ability to identify positive moral values from the anime they watch. Values such as justice, courage, cooperation, perseverance, and friendship form the basis of how they interpret characters’ actions. This reflects the presence of basic to moderate levels of moral media literacy, where adolescents are not merely passive viewers but are capable of classifying values that are worth emulating. This theme reinforces the finding that anime functions not only as entertainment but also as a space for value learning, although the depth of understanding varies among participants.

Theme 4: Recognition of Negative Values in Anime

In addition to identifying positive values, adolescents in this study also demonstrated the ability to recognize negative values present in anime. This indicates that they are not passive viewers, but are capable of making moral judgments regarding characters’ behaviors. The negative values identified include rudeness, inappropriate language, laziness, bullying, revenge, aggressiveness, and excessive dependency. These findings suggest the presence of basic-level moral media literacy, reflected in their ability to recognize inappropriate elements, even though they continue to consume such content.



Shin Chan: Rudeness, Inappropriate Humor, and Crude Behavior

Shin Chan was the anime most frequently associated with negative values by participants. Although some watched it for its humor, they were aware that the character exhibits inappropriate behavior.

Most participants described *Shin Chan* as:

“Rude... inappropriate... he does weird things.”

Lia and Leha agreed that *Shin Chan*’s behavior often crosses acceptable boundaries:

“*Shin Chan* is inappropriate and very naughty... he likes to expose himself...”

Several participants also highlighted his stubbornness and rude manner of speaking, particularly toward his mother. These criticisms indicate that adolescents understand that comedic elements are not necessarily positive and that they are able to distinguish between entertainment and inappropriate behavior.

Doraemon: Laziness and Dependency (Nobita)

Nobita from *Doraemon* was frequently cited as a character with problematic moral traits. Adolescents associated him with laziness, dependence, and lack of initiative.

Lia stated:

“Nobita is lazy... he always asks Doraemon for everything.”

Azman added:

“He is spoiled and dependent... he doesn’t make any effort.”

This suggests that adolescents are able to recognize that, although *Doraemon* is generally a positive, family-oriented anime, certain characters embody negative values that should not be emulated.

Giant and Suneo: Bullying, Arrogance, and Stinginess

Within *Doraemon*, the characters Giant and Suneo were identified as representations of negative behavior.

Participants described Giant as:

“Giant is a bully.”

Suneo was described as:

“Arrogant and stingy.”

These responses demonstrate that adolescents clearly recognize behaviors such as bullying, arrogance, and selfishness as negative values. They also noted that such antagonistic characters help them understand the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Naruto and Sasuke: Revenge and Violence

Although *Naruto* was praised for its values of courage and friendship, participants also identified negative elements within the series, including revenge, violence in combat, and intense emotional conflict.

The participant Sasuke stated:

“Sasuke sometimes seeks revenge... his character can be a bit dark.”

Fadzli acknowledged:

“Naruto can also be violent during fights... there are many fighting scenes.”

This indicates that participants are capable of recognizing that action-oriented anime contains negative elements related to violence and revenge, even when presented within an entertainment context.

Overall, Theme 4 demonstrates that adolescents possess a clear and accurate ability to identify negative values, including rudeness, laziness, bullying, revenge, and violence. They also show an understanding of narrative context, as they are able to distinguish between humor and genuinely inappropriate behavior, as seen in series such as *Shin Chan*. Furthermore, adolescents evaluate characters based on moral considerations rather than passively accepting narratives without critique.

These findings indicate that adolescents exhibit basic-level moral media literacy, particularly in their ability to recognize behaviors that should not be emulated. However, this theme also raises an important question regarding the extent to which exposure to such negative values may contribute to the normalization of certain behaviors, an issue that will be further explored in Theme 5.

Theme 5: Adolescents’ Ability to Differentiate Between Positive and Negative Values (Moral Media Literacy)

This theme represents the core component in addressing the research question: *To what extent are adolescents able to differentiate between positive and negative values in anime?* Transcript analysis indicates that adolescents demonstrate a basic to moderate level of moral media literacy. They are not only able to identify values, but also exhibit moral reasoning when evaluating characters and behaviors in anime. Overall, four main indicators of media literacy emerged from the findings:

Ability to Accurately Identify Negative Characters and Behaviors

Adolescents demonstrated a clear ability to identify negative elements in anime. They described negative traits confidently and provided concrete examples from familiar characters.

For instance, *Shin Chan* was labeled as:

“Rude... inappropriate... stubborn... does weird things.”

Nobita was identified as lazy and overly dependent:

“Nobita is lazy... he always asks Doraemon for everything.”

Giant was described as a bully:

“Giant is a bully.”

This ability to articulate negative traits reflects a strong foundational moral understanding and the capacity to categorize values.

Understanding the Distinction Between Entertainment and Reality

Adolescents showed awareness that behaviors portrayed in anime should not be replicated in real life. This demonstrates the presence of a fiction–reality distinction mechanism, which is a key component of media literacy.

For example, some participants noted that imitating *Shin Chan*’s behavior is inappropriate:

“My mother scolds me if I talk like *Shin Chan*.”



They also acknowledged that while characters such as Naruto or Sasuke may display violence, such behavior is only acceptable within the fictional context of anime.

Clear Moral Evaluation of Character Behavior

In several instances, adolescents made explicit moral judgments rather than merely identifying values.

For example, regarding “upholding truth” (*Detective Conan*), Zahar stated:

“Conan always upholds justice... he speaks the truth.”

This indicates that they recognize such actions as morally commendable and worth emulating.

Additionally, adolescents demonstrated an understanding of moral transformation, as seen in their interpretation of Kenshin:

“Kenshin used to be bad... but he repented and became good.”

This reflects an awareness of moral redemption and character development.

Evaluation of Independence and Responsibility (Nobita)

Participants evaluated laziness and dependency as negative values with broader implications.

“Nobita is weak because he is not independent.”

This demonstrates their ability to assess not only actions but also the moral consequences of those actions on character development.

Awareness of the Inappropriateness of Crude Language

Adolescents showed sensitivity toward the impact of inappropriate language, particularly when younger children imitate it.

One participant noted:

“My younger sibling, who is 7, imitates how Shin Chan speaks... it’s not good.”

This reflects moral awareness not only of personal behavior but also of the influence of media on younger audiences and the risks of normalizing inappropriate language.

Despite demonstrating the ability to identify values, the transcripts also reveal that adolescents’ moral evaluation processes are not fully mature.

Normalization of Negative Humor

Adolescents often continue to enjoy and laugh at negative humor, even when they recognize it as inappropriate.

For example, when discussing *Shin Chan*, participants added:

“But he’s funny.”

This reflects a value conflict, where they recognize the behavior as inappropriate but rationalize it as entertainment. This suggests that their moral evaluation is not yet fully stable.



Admiration for Negative Traits (e.g., Sasuke's Revenge)

Some participants expressed admiration for negative traits such as revenge, interpreting them as signs of strength or determination.

For instance:

“Sasuke sometimes seeks revenge... his character is a bit dark... but he is strong.”

This indicates that adolescents may equate negative emotions such as anger and revenge with power and assertiveness, which may influence their moral understanding.

The analysis indicates that adolescents possess a relatively strong level of moral awareness, particularly in identifying positive and negative values, distinguishing between fiction and reality, and evaluating appropriate versus inappropriate behavior. They also demonstrate the ability to engage in reflective moral judgment when assessing characters.

However, instances of value ambiguity remain, particularly when humor or admiration for certain characters influences their moral judgment. Overall, these findings suggest that adolescents possess moral media literacy at a basic to intermediate level, but still require guidance from parents and structured media literacy education to support more mature and critical evaluation of media content.

DISCUSSION

Foundational Moral Media Literacy Is Present

The findings confirm that adolescents can identify positive values (courage, cooperation, justice) and negative ones (laziness, bullying, violence, crude language) consistent with UNESCO's definition of critical media evaluation (Wilson et al., 2011). This aligns with Yusof et al. (2019), who found that Malaysian secondary school students can identify moral messages in media but need further training for deeper contextual analysis. A basic moral evaluation framework exists, but it needs strengthening.

Normalization of Negative Humor Is a Key Gap

Although participants recognised inappropriate humour and mild violence, they continued to enjoy and excuse it as entertainment. Describing Shin Chan as "rude and inappropriate" while still finding him "funny" illustrates a disconnect between knowing something is wrong and critically rejecting it. Yusof et al. (2024) identify this as normalization a pattern where mixed-value media content is accepted despite awareness of its inappropriateness. This is the most important gap this study surfaces.

Anime as Informal Learning Space

A consistent finding is that anime functions as informal moral education. Adolescents use characters like Conan, Naruto, and Luffy as reference points for thinking about justice, courage, and responsibility. This echoes Mamat (2014) and Yusof et al. (2022), who found that anime shapes cultural imagination and moral understanding through heroic narratives and ethical dilemmas. Anime acts as a visual moral text influential precisely because it is emotionally engaging and voluntarily consumed.

Family as a Mediating Factor

The role of family emerged strongly. Parental reprimands about imitating Shin Chan's language, shared viewing with parents, and older siblings shaping preferences all point to family as a filter for media influence. Yusof et al. (2023) similarly found that family control acts as a protective factor. Moral media literacy does not develop in isolation but it is shaped by the conversations, rules, and values experienced at home.



Social Learning Theory

The findings are consistent with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. Positive characters like Conan and Naruto model prosocial behaviour, while negative characters like Shin Chan and Giant model antisocial behaviour. Adolescents do not automatically imitate negative models, as their developed moral reasoning provides a level of resistance against such influences. However, elements like revenge (Sasuke) and crude humour (Shin Chan) illustrate disinhibition: when negative behaviour is made appealing or funny, its acceptability rises. Bandura's framework, which comprises active observation, internal moral evaluation, and social supervision, is central to understanding this phenomenon. Without consistent family and educational guidance, normalization becomes more likely.

Implications Of The Study

For Education

Media literacy should be formally integrated into subjects like Moral Education, Islamic Education, and Civic Education. By leveraging students' familiarity with anime, teachers can utilize it as an effective pedagogical tool to facilitate discussions on values, ethical dilemmas, and the boundary between entertainment and reality. Activities such as character analysis, value identification, and classroom discussions on how humor can mask inappropriate behaviour directly address the gaps this study identifies. This approach supports 21st-century skills: critical thinking, digital ethics, and responsible media use.

For Parents

The normalization of negative values, exemplified by the language used in Shin Chan and the vengeful motives in Naruto, is particularly evident in younger children who adopt these behaviors through imitation. Parents can counteract this through co-viewing, where they watch alongside their children, explain inappropriate elements, and connect positive values to real-life situations. Monitoring age-appropriate content, using platform controls, and setting screen-time limits are practical steps that go beyond simply restricting access.

For the Media Industry

Local animation producers are encouraged to develop content that balances entertainment with moral coherence. This can be achieved by featuring consistent positive characters, narratives centered on friendship and responsibility, and humor that avoids crude or inappropriate behavior. Collaboration between studios, educators, and developmental psychologists could improve content quality and ensure it meets the social and moral needs of young Malaysian audiences.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Malaysian adolescents engage with anime at more than just an entertainment level, but they draw moral meaning from what they watch. They can identify positive values like courage, friendship, justice, and responsibility, as well as negative ones such as inappropriate language, laziness, revenge, and aggression. This reflects a foundational level of moral media literacy, evident in how they reason about characters and judge their behaviour.

However, this literacy remains nascent. Adolescents occasionally normalize negative humor or find themselves admiring morally ambiguous traits without critically examining their broader implications. The distinction between fiction and real life is well-recognized, yet it often becomes obscured when negative values are masked by humor or engaging action sequences.

Anime has genuine potential as an informal space for moral learning. Realising that potential, however, requires structured media literacy education in schools, consistent parental engagement, and more responsible content production. This study contributes to the local literature by tracing the nuances of adolescents' moral evaluation processes through popular media. Furthermore, it offers a foundation for future research exploring the intersections of media consumption, values, and moral development among younger generations.



Ethics Statements

Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all minor participants (aged 13–16) prior to the focus group discussions. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study through the use of pseudonyms.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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