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Representation of Disabilities in Malaysian Films: Stereotypes, Identities & The Others [Hani Salwah Yaakup Department of Communication Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication Universiti Putra Malaysia](#) hanisalwah@upm.edu.my
 ABSTRACT Representation of the disabled community is often associated with negative stereotypes. This negative connotation, among others, includes the difficulty of having a perfect life, being considered a burden, not having opportunities for romantic relationships, and being dependent on others. In the Malaysian context, studies on the representation of disabilities through the media are still not extensive. The representation of these disabled is more prevalent on television programs. While in newspapers, the stereotype is maintained. At the same time, several locally produced films centred on this issue. Taking the problems mentioned as a basis, this study looks at the representation of the disabled in local films. This study uses a close reading method on 5 films which are Redha (Beautiful Pain) (2016), Pekak (2016), Guang (2018), MagiK (2023), and Abang Adik (2023). The findings of the study found that besides the stereotypical representation, the disabled character portrayed centred on the universal humanitarian issues and the advantages that the disabled character possessed both in terms of talents and certain privileges. The new representation of disabled characters makes a difference and breaks the negative stereotypes that existed before. Keywords: disabled, films, representation, stereotype, Malaysia INTRODUCTION Mass media plays a prominent role as socialization drivers. This includes making positive or negative representation of given society. Botha & Harvey (2014) argues that, besides as socializing agents, mass media [simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing hegemonic values and beliefs](#). In other way, mass media either can represent the reality nor as medium of discrimination and exploitation in the contexts of cultural, social, political, or economic fabric of society. Tenzek & Nickels (2017) said that, [watching films can be an avenue through which people are exposed to experiences different from their own, can explore their feelings regarding a](#)

[situation, and can broaden their personal perspectives](#). Due to these characteristics, films act as powerful medium in spreading expression and construct images in audience's mind. UNESCO use cinema as agent to achieve development (Biswal, 2019). However, this so called positive and different portrayal of disabilities is not happening in the real life. Research done by Holcomb & Latham-Mintus (2022), discovered that, in Pixar and Disney's animation films, the opportunities to broadening this positive image were not fully occupied. [Characters with disabilities continue to be included in ways that position them as old or evil, or as an object of ridicule, supercrips or pitiable. This](#) has been supported by the findings by Botha & Harvey (2024), which discovered that [the disabled are to a large extent still being manipulated in film for their metaphorical significance, exploited for comforting or cathartic symbolism, and capitalised on through sensationalised portrayals used to market films—which are still largely produced for, and consumed by, abled audiences](#). In contrast, the recent films remakes finds that the stereotypes images of this disable is somehow changes. In remake process, the [representations of disability and gender identities were subverted, while others were kept or even reinforced. Our results show that such transformations point toward specific socio-culturally defined disability and gender identities but also toward a shared and almost universally shaped disability and gender culture \(Cuelenaere & Willems, 2019\)](#). In relation to the above statement, there are still a lack of studies on the representation regarding people with disabilities (PWD) in Malaysia (Chan & Tang, 2020; Rosli et al., 2023). This have raised the issue on the relationship between the PWD and the media (Chan & Tang, 2020). Even in the recent years, the representation of disability in Malaysian media has emerged as a subject significance, reflecting a growing societal awareness of the diverse experiences and perspectives within the disability community, this PWD often portrayed by media consumers with [stereotypical attitudes upon the disabled community hence stigmatising them even further by objectifying them as people who require heavy dependence from others](#) (Ibnu, 2021). Most of this study only focusing to mass media other than films in Malaysia. The research on representation of disabilities on Malaysian films is still limited and not up to date. Looking at recent Malaysian films produced (2016-2023), filmmakers are now challenging these traditional narratives, striving to offer more authentic and nuanced depictions that resonate with the lived realities of individuals with disabilities. The exploration of disability in Malaysian cinema not only serves as a means of artistic expression but also as a platform for advocacy and social change (Ismail, 2020). By shedding light on the triumphs, struggles, and everyday experiences of people with disabilities, these films play a crucial role in fostering empathy, understanding, and inclusivity within Malaysian society (Nor et al., 2019). To fill the gap from the above statements, this research aim to look at the representation of disabilities in Malaysian recent films in the perspective of how these disabilities portrayals changes in these films and what new representation offered by this films. This study uses a close reading method on 5 films which are Redha (Beautiful Pain) (2016), Pekak (2016), Guang (2018), MagiK (2023), and Abang Adik (2023). This close readings focus on the narratives and the portrayal of disable/PWD's characters and how this two related and contribute to the meaning about the issues in hand. This research is important to look at how important these changes brings to the disabled representation in the Malaysian media and in this case, Malaysian films.

LITERATURE REVIEW i. Representation of Disability in Films The representation of disabilities in films holds significant importance in shaping societal perceptions and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. Over the past few decades, there has been growing scholarly interest in analyzing how disabilities are portrayed in cinema and its impact on audience perceptions. This literature review aims to synthesize recent research published between 2014 and 2024 on the representation of disabilities in films, highlighting key themes, trends, and areas for future exploration. In terms of methodological approaches used for this area, content analysis remains a prevalent method. This allowing researchers to systematically analyse the portrayal of disabled characters (Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022; Botha & Harvey, 2024), their storylines and the surrounding narratives (Callus, 2019; Biswal, 2019; Cuelenaere & Willems, 2019; Abdul Nasir & Erman Efendi, 2020; Wälivaara & Ljuslinde, 2020; Gupta & Anand, 2022). Additionally, qualitative studies incorporating interviews with disabled individuals provide valuable insights into their perspectives on representation in the media (Chan & Tang, 2020). There also research done using quantitative methodology by applying the survey approach to look at the society acceptance towards disabilities representation in the media (Rosli et al., 2017; Ibnu et al., 2021). Recent studies reveal both progress and persistent challenges in the representation of disabilities in films. While there has been a noticeable increase in the visibility of disabled characters across genres, stereotypes and tropes continue to shape their portrayal (Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022; Botha & Harvey, 2024). Common themes include the portrayal of disability as tragic or inspirational, often overlooking the complexities of disabled experiences (Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022). Analysis of disabled characters in films highlights a range of representations. While some films offer nuanced and authentic portrayals that depict disabled individuals as multidimensional characters with agency and depth, others perpetuate stereotypes and tokenism. The presence of disabled actors in these roles is a significant factor influencing authenticity and representation. Narrative structures play a crucial role in shaping audience perceptions of disability. Researchers have examined how disability narratives are constructed within films, including the role of storytelling techniques, character arcs, and thematic elements (Callus, 2019). Exploring alternative narrative frameworks that challenge conventional tropes is an area of growing interest. Understanding the audience reception of disability representation in films is essential for gauging its impact on attitudes and perceptions. Studies have explored how different audience demographics interpret and respond to disabled characters and storylines, shedding light on the potential of cinema to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, or reinforce existing biases (Dawn, 2014; Gupta & Anand, 2022). Despite advancements, critiques of disability representation in films persist. Scholars have raised concerns about the marginalization of disabled voices in the filmmaking process, the lack of authentic representation, and the perpetuation of ableist narratives. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to prioritize disabled perspectives and experiences in filmmaking (Biswal, 2019; Wälivaara & Ljuslinde, 2020). Looking ahead, there is a need for continued research and advocacy to improve the representation of disabilities in films. Future studies could explore the intersectionality of disability with other identities, the impact of disability representation in global cinema, and innovative approaches to promoting inclusion and accessibility in the film industry. The representation of disabilities in films remains a complex and evolving area of study. While progress has been made in challenging stereotypes and increasing visibility, significant challenges persist. By critically examining recent research, identifying key themes, and highlighting areas for future exploration, this literature review contributes to ongoing conversations surrounding disability representation in cinema.

ii. Representation of Disability in Malaysian Films and Media The representation of disability in Malaysian films has been relatively limited compared to other themes. While there have been some instances of characters with disabilities appearing in Malaysian cinema, they are often portrayed in stereotypical or superficial ways. Additionally, there's been criticism regarding the lack of depth and authenticity in these portrayals, with disabilities often used as plot devices rather than fully developed aspects of characters. One notable film that touched on disability is "Redha" (Beautiful Pain) (2016) directed by Tunku Mona Riza . It features a character with autism. Another film deal with Down Syndrome character "Guang" (2018), directed by Quek Shio Chuan. There were another 3 films deals with the story of sound impairment characters in both Pekak (2016), MagiK (2023) and Abang Adik (2023). Abang Adik (2023) even getting international awards for best leading actors. Overall, Malaysian cinema has yet to fully explore the complexities of disability and provide authentic representations that reflect the diversity of experiences within the disabled community. There is a need for more inclusive storytelling that moves beyond stereotypes and actively involves individuals with disabilities in the filmmaking process. Additionally, promoting diversity and inclusivity in casting and production can contribute to more authentic and meaningful representations of disability in Malaysian films. While there isn't an extensive body of literature specifically dedicated to disabilities representation in Malaysian films, there are some academic articles and book chapters that touch

upon the topic in television drama or media. The representation of disabilities in Malaysian cinema and media holds significant cultural and social relevance, reflecting broader attitudes towards disability within Malaysian society. Early analyses often critiqued the portrayal of disability in Malaysian films for its reliance on stereotypes and limited characterizations. One of it is from Mohammad Roose et al. (2016) which main purpose to look at the portrayal of disabilities and the society acceptance to this character in [popular television series](#) titled, [Kerana Cintaku Saerah \(Because of My Love, Saerah\)](#). The findings exposed that this television series displayed the myths and stereotypes among people with disabilities which existed in the Malay society and the false perceptions towards people with mental disability were also clearly displayed in this story. Rosli et al. (2017) focusing their study on [assess the level of public awareness of the rights of the disabled](#). The findings show that [the level of public awareness about PWDs is moderately positive. The findings also show that the media are less successful in playing a role in providing information about the disability to the community. Through the findings of this study, it can be concluded that, the delivery of good information about PWD can create positive awareness among the people about the group](#). Chan & Tang (2020) in the other hand were focusing on [the types of representation of disability in the Malaysian mainstream media, particularly press](#). They conducted [Interview with visual disabled personnel and content analysis from news coverage of mainstream press are deployed in the study. The findings indicated the invalidity of disability culture as the misrepresentation of disabled community in Malaysia is not as severe as depicted by scholars because the news coverage focusing on them is getting more positive. The application of charity approach is still common in news coverage to portray the disabled community as victim, and therefore they are partially marginalized due to the misrepresentation in Malaysian mainstream press](#). In other publications, the acceptance of public towards disabilities has covered by the research by Ibnu et al. (2021). [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. The research findings bring a solid perspective that media consumers are more exposed to people with disabilities in television more in contrast to films](#) and still under-presented. This finding supported with the other research by Abdul Nasir & Erman Efendi (2020) in their analysis of [selected Malaysian online newspapers concerning disabled tissue sellers and legal documents concerning destitution](#). They discovered that emphasize of [this social phenomenon as a symptom and outcome of continuous disablement in society caused by compromising the integrity of the desperate self, the pressure of neo-liberalized socio-cultural functioning, and the systemic and structural failures of society. There is an urgent need for the Malaysian government to take structural measures to increase blind people's opportunity to have gainful employment, decent work, and a social safety net](#) (Abdul Nasir & Erman Efendi, 2020). Challenges persist in achieving genuine inclusivity and representation in Malaysian cinema dan media as whole. Limited funding, lack of accessibility in production processes, and entrenched societal attitudes towards disability continue to pose obstacles to meaningful change. Future research should explore strategies for addressing these barriers and amplifying the voices of individuals with disabilities within the Malaysian film industry. In conclusion, the representation of disability in Malaysian films is a dynamic and evolving field of study, reflecting broader shifts in societal attitudes and cinematic practices.

METHODOLOGY This study employ the close reading approach to analyse the representation of disability in Malaysian films to closely examine the selected films. The films chosen for this research is specific to the films that central its main issue either in the storytelling or the portrayal of main disable character in this 10 years. There were 5 films selected to be the focus for this study which are Redha (Beautiful Pain) (2016), Pekak (2016), Guang (2018), MaGik (2023), and Abang Adik (2023). All of this films focus to the main issue of disability character struggle for daily survival and represent of autism and hearing impaired. Close reading methodology in film studies involves a detailed analysis of a film's various elements, such as its narrative, cinematography, editing, sound, and themes. This methodology emphasize on the importance of paying close attention to specific scene, shots, dialogue and visual cues. In this study, the researcher will look for patterns and recurring themes related to the representation of disability in the selected films. Malaysian cultural, social and historical context will be the foundation to better understand each portrayal of disability. There are 4 steps involved in doing close reading. The first step is initial viewing which the researcher will watch each film in its entirety to familiarize with the overall narrative and themes. Second step involved with detailed note taking while watching the films, focusing on the aspects like character portrayal, use of disability-related imagery, and narrative structure. Next step involved with identification of key scenes which identification of prominently feature characters with disabilities or themes related to disability. Last steps involved with the in-depth analysis which the researcher will paying close attention to formal elements and their significance in representing disability. The analysis from the collected data will be organized using the recurrent patterns, themes discrepancies or contradictions in the representation of disability across the selected films.

FILMS SYNOPSIS

i. Redha (Beautiful Pain) (2016) Redha is a 2016 Malaysian film directed by Tunku Mona Riza. The film centers around the journey of Alina and Razlan, a Malaysian couple whose lives are transformed when their young son, Danial, is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Set against the backdrop of contemporary urban Malaysia, "Redha" explores themes of family dynamics, societal perceptions of disability, and the challenges of raising a child with special needs. The narrative follows Alina and Razlan as they navigate the emotional and practical complexities of raising Danial, grappling with feelings of confusion, guilt, and uncertainty about their son's future. As they encounter various obstacles, including skepticism from friends and family and the strain on their marriage, Alina and Razlan embark on a journey of self-discovery and acceptance. Redha offers a sensitive and nuanced portrayal of autism, shedding light on the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals and families affected by the disorder. Through intimate character development and authentic storytelling, the film humanizes the struggles faced by families of children with ASD, highlighting the importance of empathy, understanding, and unconditional love.

ii. Pekak (2016) Pekak directed by Mohd Khairul Azri Md Noor, is a poignant Malaysian film that delves into the experiences of individuals with hearing impairment and the challenges they face in a society that often overlooks their needs. The film's narrative follows the journey of Uda, a young man who becomes deaf following a childhood accident. Through a series of interconnected vignettes, the audience witnesses Uda's struggles to navigate the world around him, grappling with feelings of isolation and alienation. The non-linear narrative structure mirrors Uda's fragmented perception of reality, inviting viewers to empathize with his internal turmoil. Pekak explores a myriad of themes related to deaf identity, including self-discovery, social stigma, and the power of human connection. Uda's journey serves as a metaphor for the universal quest for belonging, highlighting the importance of empathy and understanding in bridging communication gaps. By foregrounding the experiences of individuals with hearing impairment, the film challenges societal norms and calls for greater inclusivity and acceptance.

iii. Guang (2018) Guang is a 2018 Malaysian drama film directed by Quek Shio Chuan. The film [tells the story of Wen Guang, a young man with autism, and his](#) relationship with [his](#) older brother, Wen Zhen. Set in Malaysia, the film explores themes of family dynamics, acceptance, and the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in society. The narrative revolves around the struggles of Wen Guang, who faces discrimination and misunderstanding due to his autism. Despite his limitations, Wen Guang possesses a deep sense of curiosity and an unwavering desire for connection. His relationship with his brother, Wen Zhen, forms the emotional core of the film as Wen Zhen navigates the complexities of caring for and understanding his brother. Guang offers a nuanced portrayal of autism, challenging stereotypes and highlighting the humanity and dignity of individuals with disabilities. Through intimate character development and heartfelt storytelling, the film invites audiences to empathize with Wen Guang's experiences and recognize the importance of compassion and acceptance in fostering inclusion. Critically acclaimed for its sensitive portrayal of disability and powerful performances, Guang sheds light on the often overlooked struggles faced by individuals with autism and their families. It serves as a poignant reminder of the universal need for love, understanding, and belonging,

transcending cultural boundaries to resonate with audiences worldwide. iv. *MagiK* (2023) *MagiK* directed by Yusu Tanaka is 2023 Malaysian production film. The story follows Kit, a 7-year-old deaf girl living in a village known for its fireflies. Her parents struggle with financial issues, as her father works as a boatman who takes tourists to see the fireflies. Kit's mother wants her to learn sign language and go to school, but Kit is reluctant to communicate with the public, as she prefers to live in her world surrounded by nature. However, everything changes when Kit encounters a firefly that seems to communicate with her, flashing and flying uniquely. v. *Abang Adik* (2023) *Abang Adik* is 2023 debut film directed by Lay Jin Ong. *Abang Adik* is focusing on survival of a group of people who have been forgotten by society as they try to make a living in this country without legal documentation or identification card (ID). The setting takes place in the Pudu area which is located in the center of Kuala Lumpur. The image of Pudu contrasts the splendour of Kuala Lumpur which is always presented as a modern, diverse, and beautiful city. Referring to reality, in *Abang Adik*, Pudu is also shown as a gloomy place inhabited by poor people and immigrants whose daily lives are squeezed by various social and criminal problems. Led by the characters of *Abang* who is deaf and mute and *Adi* who is rebellious due to his young age, *Abang Adik* takes the audience through their journey of difficult and un-fateful lives with the hope that something good will happen in their lives. Although life is hard and money is their main problem, both of their lives are filled with love and affection from the people around them. I am happy when the representation of 'love' in this film is highlighted regardless of family and gender relations.

FINDINGS

i. **Prevalence of Stereotypes** Malaysian films often perpetuate stereotypes surrounding disabilities, portraying characters with disabilities in limited and often negative roles. Common stereotypes observed include the portrayal of individuals with disabilities as objects of pity, helpless, or as burdens to society. Almost all of these 5 films have the same traits. In *Redha* (2016) and *MagiK* (2023) this negative stereotypes shown through the representation of a "problem kid" with no proper manners education from his parents due to disturbance he done in a social gathering (birthday party, and dinner at the restaurant). Even, the character is being called as crazy by his classmates in the kindergarten. The same representation in the other hand come in the form of mocking in *Pekak* (2016) and *Abang Adik* (2023) which the main actors who have the sound impairment as deaf and helpless. Society keep on mocking him for his attitudes in selling drugs even as PWD. In both films, we can see how this PWD is shown as incapable in romantic relationship. If in *Pekak*, (2016), the PWD's partner is in critical medical condition which he do not have the capability to help, but in *Abang Adik* (2023), his partner has to departed in order to follow her parents back to their country. While *Guang* (2018) represent incapability of a Down syndrome character in getting a job and was helpless in following orders given. The main character is shown not be able to finished his job and being treated badly by his colleague and family member then leads to stealing. Stereotypical representations may contribute to the marginalization and stigmatization of people with disabilities within Malaysian society. These findings align with previous research highlighting the detrimental impact of stereotypical representations on the social inclusion and well-being of people with disabilities. However, there were a counter-stereotype in recent films as the PWDs character is being portray as a hardworking individual and not depending on others in daily life like *Pekak* (2018) and *Abang Adik* (2023), have genius ideas on arts like *Guang* (2018) and *MagiK* (2023) and do well in sports like *Redha* (2016). This representation disrupts these misconceptions by portraying him as a dynamic and multifaceted individual with his own dreams, desires, and struggles.

ii. **Limited Representation of Diverse Identities** The research revealed a lack of diversity in the portrayal of disabilities in Malaysian films, [with certain types of disabilities](#) being overrepresented while [others are](#) marginalized or ignored. Disabilities such as physical impairments like sound impairment in *Pekak* (2016), *MagiK* (2023) & *Abang Adik* (2023) and Down Syndrome in *Guang* (2018) were more commonly depicted in comparison to cognitive or invisible disabilities like autism in *Redha* (2016), leading to a skewed representation of the disabled community. The limited representation of diverse identities within the disabled community contributes to the erasure of their experiences and reinforces stereotypes. For example in *Redha* (2016), the PWD's in commonly mistaken to be as an hyper, cannot be controlled, troubled child or lack of manners education given by his parents. The common stereotype as "crazy", "hyper" and "burden" were shown by the surrounding society in this films. As compared to the other films, the stereotype was there but, the society is alerted that the character is PWDs.

iii. **The "Othering" of Characters with Disabilities** Characters with disabilities are often depicted as 'the other' in Malaysian films, emphasizing their differences and positioning them outside the societal norm. This 'othering' can lead to the alienation and dehumanization of characters with disabilities, further perpetuating negative stereotypes and attitudes towards the disabled community. This is obvious in *Pekak* (2016) when the main character was represented to have a habit to play a loud song on the radio. While in *Guang* (2018), the PWD is alienated himself by collecting a glassware where he finds tunes which he likes so much. While the PWD in *MagiK* (2023) loves to separate herself in the mangrove to look for magic in fireflies which she believe to be her late twin sister's soul. The portrayal of characters with disabilities as 'the other' reinforces a binary view of ability and disability, overlooking the spectrum of human experiences and abilities.

DISCUSSION The limited portrayal of diverse disabilities in Malaysian films underscores the need for greater inclusivity and representation within the media landscape. By focusing predominantly on certain types of disabilities while marginalizing others, filmmakers contribute to the erasure of the experiences and identities of a significant portion of the disabled community. This erasure not only perpetuates misconceptions but also reinforces a hierarchical view of disabilities, wherein certain disabilities are prioritized or deemed more worthy of representation than others. The 'othering' of characters with disabilities in Malaysian films reinforces a binary distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal,' perpetuating a sense of alienation and exclusion. By positioning characters with disabilities as 'the other,' filmmakers contribute to the perpetuation of ableist attitudes and the dehumanization of the disabled community. This phenomenon not only affects how characters with disabilities are perceived but also shapes audience perceptions of disability more broadly, influencing societal attitudes and behaviours towards people with disabilities. Despite the challenges identified, there are opportunities for positive change and greater inclusivity in the representation of disabilities in Malaysian films. Filmmakers and content creators can play a pivotal role in challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusivity by portraying characters with disabilities as multifaceted individuals with agency, aspirations, and diverse identities as what we can see in *Abang Adik* (2023) and *MagiK* (2023). Collaborating with disabled individuals and advocacy groups can help ensure more authentic and respectful portrayals that reflect the lived experiences of the disabled community in Malaysia. By depicting characters with disabilities in a more nuanced and empathetic manner, Malaysian films have the potential to foster greater understanding, empathy, and social inclusion. [Further research is needed to explore the impact of](#) disability representation in Malaysian films on audience perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. Longitudinal studies could examine the effectiveness of interventions aimed at challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusivity in media representations of disabilities. Additionally, initiatives to increase the participation of disabled individuals in the filmmaking process, both on-screen and behind the scenes, can contribute to more authentic and diverse portrayals. Ultimately, fostering a more inclusive and equitable media landscape requires collaborative efforts from filmmakers, policymakers, advocacy groups, and society as a whole.

CONCLUSION The exploration of the representation of disabilities in Malaysian films, focusing on stereotypes, identities, and 'the others,' has provided valuable insights into the complex dynamics shaping cinematic portrayals of individuals with disabilities. Through an analysis of prevailing stereotypes, the diversity of identities depicted, and the phenomenon of 'othering,' this study has shed light on the ways in which Malaysian cinema both reflects and shapes societal attitudes towards disability. [Moving forward, there are several avenues for future research and action in the realm of](#) disability representation in Malaysian cinema. Collaborative efforts between filmmakers, disability advocates, and policymakers can help promote more accurate, respectful, and inclusive portrayals of disabilities on screen. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at increasing the participation of disabled individuals in the filmmaking process can contribute to more authentic representations that

reflect the diverse realities of the disabled community in Malaysia. In conclusion, the representation of disabilities in Malaysian films is a multifaceted issue with significant implications for societal attitudes, perceptions, and inclusivity. By critically examining stereotypes, identities, and 'the others,' this study underscores the importance of promoting more diverse, nuanced, and empathetic portrayals of individuals with disabilities in Malaysian cinema, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society.

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