

## EXPLORING THE SUCCESS FACTORS OF KRING! (2020) AND BATIK GIRL (2019)

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**Abstract:** The Malaysian animation industry has produced many animated short films and have claimed success through various forms. Among the successful short animations produced, Kring! (2020) created by BrainyBones Studio and Batik Girl (2019) created by R&D Studio are the two short, animated films produced locally that have received a number of notable awards across the world. The development and export of original IPs shows that the Malaysian animation sector, like the rest of the region, is maturing. These well-known works have employed a variety of variables, tactics, and aspects to attain their current popularity, thus the goal of this article is to figure out what factors, strategies, or elements were used in these award-winning films. This study has employed a qualitative research design with the use of semi structured interviews from the producers and creators behind these two films. At the conclusion of this study, it is possible that it will provide achievement for the animation film industry for future short animation film producers, which will be crucial in boosting the number of successful projects in the local sector.

**Keywords:** animation, award winning, the R&D studio, Brainy Bones Studios

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### Introduction

Malaysia's animation industry is on a roll and many local house productions are contributing fresh animation contents toward the industry at present. The rising global popularity has reflected that some of the local animations have fared very well regionally and internationally. Malaysia has been on a steady rise in a number of animation companies with variations of local animation products. The downstream productions of animation in Malaysia has slowly heating up and producing more IPs, such as merchandising, games and advertisements.

However, all these companies grow differently at their own pace and generate various forms of achievements. Recently, local animation studios have produced world class short animation that comes with award winning success. Although many short animated films produced in Malaysia did not pave their way into the cinema, such as The Dalang's Tale (2021), KRING! (2020) and Batik Girl (2019) however these short animated films have garnered great success from film festivals with awards and have brought continuous excellence across the national digital creative industry.

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Among the successes of Kring! is being awarded Best Animated Film for Kids in the ReAnima International Animated Film Festival 2020 in Bergen, Norway. Prior to this award win, Kring! also won Best Animated Film in the International Film Festival on Disabilities 2020 in Lyon, France. Kring! was also chosen as the Official Selection as Festival Internacional de Cine de Lebu in Chile, Mi Primer Festival in Lima, Peru and 5th Animation Marathon 2019 in Athens, Greece. According to Dorall (2020), the animation is clearly slick and well-done, demonstrating the country's degree of talent, but the story is what really drives the film to success. On the other hand, among the successes of Batik Girl is winning the best short animated film at Festival de Largos y Cortos de Santiago in Chile, the Honourable Mention in Audience Favorites award at the Florida Animation Festival, and the Gold Medal in the Regional category at the 20th Digicon6 Asia, Japan. According to Staff (2015), the presence of top animation supervisors on a team is the first step toward an animated short's success.

An award winning animation is generally judged in terms of tone, visual style, and storytelling approach that are widely appreciated by audiences. With such positive response from our locally produced animation shorts, this study seeks to explore what are the successful factors that contribute to these two popular films Kring! and Batik Girl.

Considering Malaysia is currently at the cusp of a technology revolution, the local animation creative industry also keeps growing to march towards a more tech-focused industry as well. More relevant and good film products started blooming at once. The arouse of local animation films in Malaysia in 2019 has become a phenomenon and surprises many. It is believable that all these local animation products have steered Malaysia's animation industry to a new height. According to the official report from the research department of National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS), there were 3 animation films that placed among the top 6 out of all the top 50 feature films listed for year 2019. These 3 films also have achieved the Malaysian Box Office according to the grossing data produced by the Domestic Commercial Department in Finas. Ejen Ali The Movie (RM30.05 Million) was released in November was placed in top 3 most featured films followed by BoboiBoy The Movie 2 (RM29.57 Million) which released in August at 4th placed meanwhile Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal (26.20 Million), released in Mac was placed at 6th.

### ***Malaysian animation in commercialized platforms***

Many years ago, with animations from Japan and the United States overwhelming Malaysian television networks, limited platforms were accessible and local animations heavily relied on these various available networks. However in this latest time, many platforms have now been introduced, giving opportunities for local products to venture further across South East Asia and rise with the global standards. Malaysians who once upon a time grew up watching Mickey Mouse and Dragonball on local channels are now compared to the various new existing platforms such as Netflix, Iflix, Disney+ Hotstar, and YouTube.

In a research conducted by Lee (2018), ever since the birth of these new platforms, more original content for animation are being created. The demand for animation content has bloomed with families preferring to sign up for content that suits their children's needs especially in animation. It can be seen

that this rising potential of commercialisation through viewership domestically and worldwide, can provide opportunities for local animation to reach international audiences. According to Amanz (2016), animated films must be introduced in a series and gain audience awareness over time, their marketing and distribution differ from that of traditional motion pictures.

From Malaysia we can find well renowned local animations on Netflix that hit the box office such as *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019), *BoBoiBoy Movie* (2016), and *Ejen Ali the Movie* (2019). Aside from these, a few local animations have also made their way on this platform such as *Wheely* (2019), *Nuri: Series* (2017), and *Rimba Racer* (2017). Although not having a large fan base on social media, they have successfully provided ready-made content for viewers that sign up with Netflix. Disney+ Hotstar launched in Malaysia on June 1, 2021 which include five content brands: Disney, Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars and National Geographic. Besides, they also streamed local entertainment from local Malaysian studios such WAU animation and Les Copaque Production. (Singh, 2021)

In another platform such as YouTube, *Omar and Hana* and *Didi And Friends* combined have gained a huge success from this platform with having over 4 billion viewers local and internationally. The creator Sinan Ismail, CEO and co-founder of Digital Durian spoke about his intention of creating valuable content for children via cartoon shows. With the success of these animated series on YouTube, he then proceeded to sign up with one of Malaysia's satellite broadcasters Astro, with co-ownership of the intellectual property rights with Digital Durian. Although the success is not measured in net worth and box office, *Omar and Hana* has successfully garnered over 1.5 billion YouTube views and 3.5 million subscribers with the UK and the US being the top countries for their English version.

### ***Critical success factors of animation industry in Malaysia***

*Ejen Ali The Movie* (2019) has become the game changer for Malaysian animation industry and proved to succeed locally and internationally. This movie has also received the most positive reviews from the world's most popular and authoritative source of reviews, IMDb. According to the source from the official Facebook page of Wau Animation Sdn Bhd, this movie has made a history as the highest grossing premier for a local animation with RM1.86 Million itself on the opening day since its release on Nov 28 in Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore. (Wau Animation Sdn. Bhd, 2019). Instead of portraying the cheerful and optimistic contents like norm as *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* or *Boboiboy The Movie*, this film succeeds to wrap up the dark and angsty ambience for the audiences. With the new style of content in this film, it proved that the animation industry in Malaysia is ready to step further in terms of story writing elements.

According to a study, most of the local animated contents produced in 2010, were including the strong Malaysian cultural identity and Malay norms but in 2011, productions started to decrease this kind of style. Most of the animation produced after 2011 started to implement the western ideology and culture within its storytelling elements. Examples are *Seefood* (2012) by Silver Ant production and *War of the World: Goliath* (201) by Tripod Entertainment Sdn Bhd. (Mohamad R., 2020) Thus, *Ejen*

Ali The Movie is just another animated film that is experimenting with a new style of story by introducing more heroes and villain's futuristic concepts.

On the surface, current animation films produced may be just another animation film but the truth is, the Malaysian animation industry is ready to steer the wheel and focus on developing high-level thinking skills, creative and critical thinking in their contents. This will pose a powerful education tool besides purposely focus for entertainment. With the latest animation sensation booming in 2019, our former Education Minister, Maszlee Malik also approved these animation films especially in Ejen Ali The Movie for being a positive inspiration to the children and viewer in general. A good content in terms of a strong philosophical base is a bonus for this film to be liked by many (Alhadri, 2019). The cinematic adventures portrayed in the special effects in Ejen Ali The Movie, is not only proof that local animation production has improved by leaps and bounds but has succeeded to waves locally and internationally. All the explosions in the contents managed to keep the audience stayed and enjoyed the whole.

Dr Wan Azizah, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, agreed that local animation products have a good potential to grow especially when the contents of film wrapped up in an entertaining flick with the prerequisite colorful and exhilarating action that catch the audiences to enjoy the journey (Shahril, 2020). Besides, the current animation produced as Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal (2019) and BoboiBoy The Movie 2 (2019) has spun out the existing few ongoing local productions to sacrifice the good storytelling and character development for fanservice and spectacle. These strategies rang at the right time as both achieved to hit the box office films for the year.

The Malaysian animation industry is heating and starting to grow and heading in the right direction. Many startup local in-house productions begin developing their own IP (intellectual property) and some have already been recognized internationally through their short animation films. The most well-known and well-liked foreign animation is already familiar to Malaysian animation watchers, claims Ashaari (2019). With their ongoing achievements, it is undeniable that although some of the products are not specifically focusing on local cinema and local television, their products do become a success in the form of quality and recognition. According to Rebecca Lai and Jasmine C. (2018) from the New York Times, the film prize and award honours intangible qualities such as originality, technical innovation, cultural relevance and artistic value rather than public appeal.

### ***Critical success factors of animation industry in Malaysia***

Kring! (2020) is a 7 minute short animated film produced by BrainyBone Studios that tells a story about a school boy named Mael who is having a tough time learning simple arithmetics. With the help of his teacher Suraya, they embark on a journey understanding each other's struggles. A struggling student who suffers from dyscalculia, a learning disability that affects his understanding numbers, and a struggling teacher who explores various ways to understand her pupil and make learning as fun and entertaining as possible. This animation short won an award for Cartoon Kids Award 2021 from Du Sur Les Handicap 2020 Film Festival, Italy, making this their 6th award achieved. Prior to this award win, Kring! have also won Best Animated Film for Kids in the ReAnima International Animated Film Festival in 2020, Norway and the Canterbury Anifest Award 2020 in London.

This film has claimed headlines for the portrayal of learning disabilities and a heartwarming story about a teacher’s dedication. This gives a whole new light on storytelling that is popular among animated films in Malaysia such as Ejen Ali and BoBoiBoy that relates more towards a superhero narration. In recent news, with the various successes achieved from this animated film, the director Hilmi Ismail has stated that Brainy Bones Studios will be making an animated series based on it next.

Batik Girl (2019), a 9 minute animated film produced by a collaborative effort between The R&D Studio, writer Heidi Shamsuddin, Tudidut Studio and Universiti Teknologi MARA’s Faculty of Music is also another multiple award winning animation ever since it was published. This film has won Best Short Animated Film at Festival de Largos y Cortos de Santiago in Chile, as well as numerous awards from all around the world such as the United States, India, Greece, Iran, Canada, South Korea, Slovenia and Italy. From this success, a statement made by a senior partner from R&D Studio, Irwan Junaidy mentioned that in comparison to more established nations with a longer history in animation, Malaysia has produced high-quality animation IPs that are ideal for the region. However, looking at it from a global perspective, Malaysian standards are still way behind. To make it huge in the global industry, he mentioned that local animation industries need good business sense, financial muscle, and a bit of luck. Further accomplishments of both production companies can be seen in Table 1 below.

*Table 1: The achievements of KRING! (2020) and Batik Girl (2019)*

Achievements	KRING!	BATIK GIRL
Awards	Winner Cartoon Kids Award 2021 by Cartoon Club at Italy Festival Filem Antarabangsa Du Sur Les Handicap 2020, Lyon, Perancis (Filem Animasi Terbaik) Digicon6 ASIA Malaysia (Anugerah 'Next Generation') COMPANY AWARD Intellectual Property Creators’ Challenge (IPCC) 2018 COMPANY AWARD	Gold Medal 20th DigiCon6 Asia Japan (2018) Winner Best Short Animated Film 5th Felacos Festival de Largos y Cortos de Santiago Chile (2019) Audience Favourite Florida Animation Festival USA (2019) Special Mention 67th Columbus International Film & Animation Festival USA (2019)
Festival	Canterbury Anifest 2020, United Kingdom Festival Internacional de Cine de Lebu, Chile Mi Primer Festival, Lima, Peru Festival Filem Antarabangsa Du Sur Les Handicap 2020, Lyon, Perancis 5th Animation Marathon 2019, Athens, Greece	5th Chianiartoon International Comics and Animation Festival (2021) 48th Roshd International Film Festival Iran (2018) Tbilisi International Animation Festival Georgia (2018) 4th Via Dei Corti Festival Indipendente di Cinema Breve Italy (2018) 4th Animation Marathon Greece (2018) 14th Los Angeles International Children’s Film Festival USA 2018 Betina Film Festival Croatia(2018) Arthouse Asia India (2019) NCCC Film & Animation Festival

		USA 2019 11th CMS Internal Children’s Film Festival India (2019) Animated Arizona Film Festival USA 2019 ZEBRA Animation Friendly Festival Slovenia (2019) Open World Animation Festival USA (2019) 15th Mini Film Festival Malaysia (2019) ANIMAZE Montreal International Animation Festival Canada (2019) International New York Film Festival USA (2019) 4th Toronto Animation Arts Festival International Canada (2019) San Diego International Children’s Film Festival USA (2019) 6th Guro International Kids Film Festival South Korea (2019) 3rd Kingstoon International Animated Film Competition Jamaica (2019) ANIMAFILM Baku International Animation Festival Azerbaijan (2019) Cinemira-Budapest International Children’s Film Festival Hungary (2019) CRAFT International Animation Festival Indonesia (2019)
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**Research Methodology**

This study employed qualitative research design.

In exploring the success factors of KRING! (2020) and Batik Girl (2019), two local animation production companies will be interviewed in semi-structured interview sessions, and their answers will be pinpointed, examined, and recorded to create patterns (or "themes") that will later be grouped. No specific interview questions will be formed; instead, informants will be asked to freely throw their opinions on the subject matter. In addition to past literature, interviews were conducted with the creator and producer of Brainy Bones Studios and R&D Studio.

The researchers have transcribed the recorded audio and their answers are pinpointed, examined, and recorded to create nodes. Answers will be transcribed verbatim. These answers will be framed in a Findings Framework The Success Factors of KRING! (2020) and Batik Girl (2019)

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Gaining Good Portfolio Paves Higher Chances to Success***

For both of the case studies selected, Kring! and Batik Girl have gained success through online platforms. With the ability to attract their audiences, Informant 1 noted that the Malaysian government provides many opportunities through different platforms and grants as the industry is growing. Informant 1 also stated that it takes a couple of rejections and smaller projects to pave their road further along the success journey.

He added that producers are able to also venture into OTT, YouTube, Netflix or Amazon. However, it is stated that money is not only the main factor that drives the success, it is mainly about making something prestigious and gaining a good portfolio.

### ***Attraction From Good Ideation and Storytelling***

According to Informant 2, good storytelling is a critical success factor and with it as a strong element, it will be transmitted through mouth-to-mouth marketing to attract more viewers. Some viewers prefer comedy. A crucial element in making animated films is grabbing the viewers' attention within the first few minutes of the animation. He said that this was a great challenge to construct a strong storyline, but our local industry can always be smart and seek better strategic plans in storytelling.

On the other hand, Informant 2 also said that animation-related workers are increasing in numbers. Animation courses in universities are in high demand. Informant 1 compares the situation to 7 years ago when the animation workers are hard to find. He also added that in this present time, fresh graduates are more focused on certain areas such as modelling, texturing, or concept art.

### **Portraying Cultural and Good Moral Values**

According to Informant 2, the main success story of KRING! (2020) is good moral values. They implement the values in their storyline to produce a better quality short animated film. The values were shown in each personality of the characters. For example, Teacher Suraya is helping Mael with simple arithmetic problems and they embark on a journey of understanding each other's struggle.

The main concept element in Batik Girl (2019) is the batik itself. The design for the Batik is from Terengganu, Malaysia. The inspiration for the storyline comes from the making of the batik and it is very cultural. Informant 1 mentioned that a good universal story should be applicable to all viewers. Therefore, the storyline and setting for Batik Girl is very unique and relatable to all Malaysians. With the strength of these values added into the animation, it is considered a successful factor that made the film appealing to audiences.

## **Conclusion**

Every animation has its own strength to promote success and without a doubt, Batik Girl (2019) and KRING! (2020) rose above by developing their own unique strategies. By identifying the success

factors from these short films, the producers have better hopes and plans for their future projects. Creators of animation and newbies who immerse themselves in the field could start by gaining audiences through online platforms to start a good portfolio. While Malaysia's animation sector has already developed to meet international standards, it can have a promising future by keeping the pace. Recent studies on Southeast Asia's animation industry indicate that our nation is currently the largest producer of local content characters. If the animation generated is of high quality, our local animation film can be praised both nationally and internationally.

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