



American films as an educational tool for character development of teenagers

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ABSTRACT

American superhero-themed films can represent good characteristics and they could be a good way of developing one's characteristics. By utilizing American animation, superhero and fantasy films as the main data such as *Fantastic 4* (2005), *Fantastic 4: Rise of Silver Surfer* (2007), *Frozen* (2013), *Black Panther* (2018), *Frozen II* (2019), and *Aladdin* (2019), this qualitative research focuses on the significance of character development and the representations of good characteristics depicted in the films which can be used as a tool for character education. The process of analysis involved the use of Stuart Hall's representation theory. The results of study suggested that character is something that is essential to develop, especially in teenagers and it is not only about having a good attitude, but it also involves living a good life. In addition, this study showed that at least five good characteristics such as caring, tolerance, politeness, solidarity and kindness frequently appeared in the observed films which can be used as media for teaching about characters at schools or informal educational institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Character is something that can be formed and developed. One example which can be seen clearly is the change in character among teenagers. There is a lot of evidence reveal that educating children to develop good characters will produce the next generation of the nation with good quality. In Indonesia, for example, there is a lot of news about juvenile delinquency such as fights, abuse of friends or family members, involvement in violent acts, etc almost every day. Many of them do not show good attitudes, for example bullying their classmates, being rude to their parents and teachers, involving in fights, using drugs, etc. (Sudrajat, 2011; Suyitno, 2012) This condition surely makes parents worry and frustrated. Therefore developing a good character for teenagers has become something significant for every parent and educational institution.

Formal and informal educational institutions organize character development education programs for their students (Chowdhury, 2016). Regarding the importance of building characters, Sudrajat (2011) explained that character building is considered a way of educating children so that they can learn good morals through family, schools, community and country. Additionally, educating children to develop characters should be a well-planned effort so that it will help form their characters which are accordance with ethical values (Dalmeri, 2014). This tells that good characters need to be developed and it can be done anywhere, particularly at schools.

There are many ways to use in shaping a person's character, for instance, the use of entertainment media to develop one's character. One of the most influential entertainment media is film (Cloete, 2017; Stanley, Setyadi & Rudy, 2021). People often do not realize that films can indirectly affect the audience (Adi, 2011). This is also agreed by Cloete (2017) who explained that in fact film can show various kinds of things such as thoughts, phenomena, etc. in societies. There is a lot of evidence showing that films can have an impact on a person's attitude (Cortés, 2000). For this reason, watching movies is both important and fascinating. Watching films has become a popular culture in today's society. Since technology in the field of cinema has progressed rapidly, movies have become a significant means of entertainment. This is seen through the phenomenon that there are a lot of people like to watch films, especially teenagers nowadays. Turner (1999) added that this is what makes many people examine films from different kinds of views. From this phenomenon, this study involves film observation by relating the images depicted in films to the the development of teenagers' character. Teenagers are a valuable asset because they are the next generation of the nation. Therefore, educational institutions of many countries emphasize the importance of learning system that can improve the character quality of students. This is important because the young generations with good characters will create a good, peaceful and harmonious life in society (Rudy et al., 2021).

Films can bring an impact to the audience. So, apart from being a source of entertainment, it actually makes people gain knowledge (Adi, 2011). Thus, by examining the use of films as a medium to teach character development of teenagers, it will generate useful views in terms of character building. This study shows the relationship between films and teenagers character development which can pave a way to see the use of movies in educating teenagers or students about characters. In other words, it emphasizes that films may be seen as a choice in terms of learning character development. Films can bring an impact to the audience. So, apart from being a source of entertainment, it actually makes people gain knowledge (Adi, 2011). This research is expected to be beneficial in theoretical and practical purposes. Theoretically, this study is useful for complementing theories in the fields of cultural studies, literature, and media, as well as other related sciences so that it can be utilized by researchers. Additionally, this study can practically provide an understanding to people that films can be used in the world of education, especially to help students (youths) learn about character development in the daily life.

Objectives

This study intends to identify the importance of character development as well as to figure out the types of good characteristics depicted in American films that teenagers can learn. To link the object of research to the application of the theory used in this study, the explanation started by clarifying some significant terms used as the main

concepts in this study. Firstly, the concept of film needs to be explained to avoid misunderstanding. Films can mean movies. The meaning of film used in this study is a moving picture with sound that is shown in a cinema and it has actors who play the characters in the film based on the storyline and are involved in scenes arranged by a film director. As a product of fiction, films function as one of the most popular means of entertainment nowadays (Adi, 2011; Rudy et al, 2021; Stanley, Setyadi & Rudy, 2021). However, the various contexts or events presented in films cannot be separated from social, cultural, political, economic, psychological, and other experiences in life. It is not surprising that Buckland (2003) agreed that film has an essential position in society and for that reason, it is necessary to study about films.

Another important term is character development. People may often use the term character building. The two terms have almost the same meaning. However, in this study, the term character development is used on the grounds that an individual basically has an inherent character that may be obtained through family, surroundings, experience, etc. So, with the emergence of movie influence, the individual can learn something to develop his or her character. Character has a wide range of definition. Suyitno (2012) pointed out that character can mean as an innate heart, soul, or personality that focuses on good values in the form of behaviour. According to Lickona (1997) to create a better life, an individual must be able to respect, to be responsible, to think wisely, to practice discipline, to have courage, to practice kindness, and to have a pure mind.

The explanation above emphasizes that the characters refer to values that are considered good and ethically acceptable by society. Thus, to relate the images shown in films to the values that shape the characters, this study used representation theory to analyze the dialogues and scenes that appeared in the films as has been mentioned above. Everything that is seen or observed can be perceived as a symbol which can produce a meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 19). Everything can symbolize something. In other words, there is a meaning behind something that is observed. Everyone can construct meaning by using this representation technique.

METHODS

This library research was conducted by observing American films which attracted teenagers, such as animations, superhero-themed films, and fantasy films which were popular in theatres. Since the primary data of this research were in the form of statements, it would be known as a qualitative research. This kind of research is suitable for identifying various kinds of events, problems or social life (Hancock et al., 2007). It fits the film observation conducted in this study. American films were chosen in this study because they are usually more popular and are able to attract many audiences in various countries. This study explores and identifies why character development is significant and what kinds of good characteristics are portrayed in American superhero films.

The main data for analysis were obtained from reviewing of American films that teenagers tend to watch, such as *Fantastic 4* (2005), *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), *Frozen* (2013), *Black Panther* (2018), *Frozen II* (2019), and *Aladdin* (2019). These films were considered good enough to represent the tastes of teenagers in terms of learning about character development. In general, the films of the 2000s were taken as consideration that more social and cultural issued as well as the complexities of society could be linked to the films. Because the films have become popular among Indonesian youth and have also been shown by Indonesian TV stations, these films were suitable to be studied. Superhero-themed movies have undergone many significant changes. So, it will show more informative findings when the primary data will be supported by secondary data from relevant references to serve as a basis for analysis and interpretation.

The technique of data collection was through film reviewing conducted by watching the films and noting the pictures shown by them, for example the dialogues or scenes that conveyed ethical elements or values of people's lives to be related to teenager character development. The next step, the dialogues are transcribed and certain film scenes portraying the elements related to characteristics based on ethical values were carefully described for the purpose of analysis.

As this study used film observation as a way to collect data, the type of analysis applied is content analysis which according to Adi (2011) could be utilized to research or examine information. There are many phenomena that can be studied and one of them is the aspect of characteristic quality. So with this content analysis, issues, complexities and human values contained in the films could be explored and discussed by using the right theory. The transcribed dialogs and the description of the scenes in the films were treated as a set of symbols which was interpreted by the applying theory of representation to form meanings. That way, these symbols would indicate something that could be understood by readers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the results obtained through data collection and data analysis, there are several findings that are significant to discuss. The first part of the discussion describes the results of the study that show the reasons why character development of an individual is considered significant.

The Importance of Character Development

In the explanations at the beginning, this study made an essential point that character development, especially the character of teenagers, is necessary. This is said to be crucial because in everyday life character becomes the main concern in various aspects of life (Dalmeri, 2014). Basically, a person's character determines many things in his or her life, for example in terms of social interacting, working, studying, etc. In other words, the character of an individual has a great influence on his life. For this reason, many educational institutions have designed certain educational programs that can help students understand and learn the significance of forming good characters.

This situation makes learning about character development become vital. In Indonesia, for instance, character education is necessary because many teenagers have often been involved in crimes, acts of violence, drugs, free-sex, and so on (Muassomah et al., 2020). This can be seen from the media that often report cases of crime committed by teenagers. For most people, this situation is certainly worrying and disappointing. It can be connected to a person's character. Thus, if a teenager is educated to understand the importance of character development, it will help him or her to filter out the bad things he or she sees, so that they do not become part of him or her. This has led many countries to take actions in terms of educating youths about the character building. Entering the 1990, the US began an educational program to teach characters to students (Bohlin, 2005). This can show that all parties need to pay attention to the character development, particularly those who are involved in the field of education. Therefore, Agung (2011) explained that character education that emphasizes on developing students' quality to be intelligent and to have good characters need to be implemented in both formal and non-formal education. Even though there are any ways that can be done in terms of character development, basically this can start from raising awareness and learning from experience (Suyitno, 2012). Each individual gets good and bad influences from various conditions, for example from family members or friends. Such circumstances can have an impact on the individual. A good influence will make him learn good thing things. On the other hand, if he gets a bad influence, then he will learn bad things. This point explains that in fact the formation of an individual's character is acquired from various sources, for instance, from interactions with family members, school friends, teachers, or the larger community including social rules and culture (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009). Thus, to develop it, the individual must be guided to be aware of the importance of having a good character. This takes time because it is a process.

In carrying out this process the individual needs to be stimulated through some methods for instance, learning from books, participating in seminars, listening to lectures, reading guide books, learning from entertainment media such as films and television, etc. Every individual who reads a novel or watches a film will see experience contained in it. According to Otten (2002) the individual will show a response toward the imaginative characters appear in the books and films, and it shows that there is an influence on the individual who reads the book and watches the film. This is the reason teachers always encourage their students to get used to reading books,

novels or short stories. Themes such as detective, romance, friendship, family, crime, etc. found in novels could somehow attract readers. This indicates that although the reading is fictitious, the experiences, events, and conflicts presented by the authors in the novels can actually reflect the society – the living conditions, people’s ways of thinking, their dreams and hopes, and so on. Good character is a precious asset in life. For this reason, character development is something that cannot be underestimated and all parents want their children to learn good characters so that they can have good lives (Proctor, 2013). This explanation shows that person’s character is quite complicated. This is seen through Lexmond’s idea (2009) that basically, character does not only include behaviors, habits, emotions or morality, but can also involve skills or expertise related to life. In other words, an individual with good characters will show behaviour that is accordance with social ethics and has the abilities to live a good life.

Good Characteristics Depicted in American Films

Another significant result from the study was to find out good characteristics depicted in American films. From the observation of the films and through the process of data analysis carried out in this study, the results showed that there are at least five good characteristics represented in the films: caring, tolerance, kindness, politeness, and solidarity. These five characteristics frequently appeared in the films observed in this study. These characteristics are also important traits that everyone must have in society and they can be used to educate teenagers about having good characteristics. So, in this sections, each of the five characteristics are explained in detail. The five good characteristics are arranged as follows:

Table 1. Frequently appeared characteristics in the observed films

Good characteristics				
caring	tolerance	politeness	solidarity	kindness

Caring

Showing care is a characteristic needed in society. For instance, in *Aladdin* (2019), Aladdin and Genie are depicted as two friends who showed mutual care. Genie who helped Aladdin in getting love from Princess Jasmine can reflect that showing care will bring good things. In the film, Aladdin used his last wish to set Genie free to live a life as a human being. This point reflects that caring is a sincere trait. The term of care according to Otten (2002) is actually closely related to the sense of love that everyone has for their fellow human beings because caring will not be present if there is no love in the individual’s heart. This explanation seems to be similar to the idea of Sapountzi-krepia (2013) which suggested that care basically comes from understanding and loving.

The animated film *Frozen* (2013) and its second sequel *Frozen II* (2019) also often depicted the main characters showing care for the people around them. One of the examples, there was a scene portraying the character Kristoff expressed his care for Anna by protecting her from wolves. This picture may look simple, however, this is actually useful to show the audience that care is a good characteristic and it is an indispensable attitude for everyone to have. So, if someone shows care for others, it will reflect a good and valuable moral (Noddings, 2005). Thus, the portrait of care found from the film observation can be categorized as one of the good characteristics that need to be learned by teenagers.

Tolerance

The next characteristic that was frequently found through the film observation conducted in this study is tolerance. It seems to be an endless discussion and remains significant (Stanley, Setyadi & Rudy, 2021), especially in multicultural countries. For many people being tolerant is not easy to do. Therefore discrimination, prejudice, and unfair treatment are still often found in societies. Thus, tolerance is often seen as something that is fought for and achieved after the emergence of problems such as issues, disputes, etc. (Doorn, 2012). This shows that

tolerance should be taught to every individual from an early age. Teenagers are a group that needs to understand about tolerance so that in the future they will become people who can appreciate and respect differences in society. In simple terms, tolerance can be interpreted as an attitude that show acceptance that people have the rights to own different beliefs and opinions (Furedi, 2012). In addition, the term tolerance is always connected to respect for differences and everyone should indeed show respect for each other (Stanley, Setyadi & Rudy, 2021). Regarding this, portraits of tolerance are depicted in American superhero films such as *Fantastic 4* and its second sequel as well as *Black Panther* by presenting black (African-American) characters and female characters as main heroes in fighting for peace.

The audience can clearly see that American movies with superhero genre do not only depict white heroes. Black heroes also appear as the main characters to eradicate crime. For example, the main character T'Challa in the film *Black Panther* was played by an African-American actor Chadwick Boseman. More interestingly, all of the main characters in this superhero movie were played by African-American actors. Besides, Black superheroes are also found in the Marvel production films, for instance African-American actors such as Don Cheadle and Anthony Mackie who had main roles in *The Avengers*, *Iron Man*, and *Captain America*. In addition, tolerance in terms of gender is also reflected in the films. Superheroes are not always identical with men. Women can also be portrayed as brave heroes in films. Black female superheroes such as Nakia and Okoye in *Black Panther* played by actresses Lupita Nyong'o and Danai Gurira show that female superheroes do not have to be portrayed as white women only. So, films can serve as a good medium to impart knowledge about tolerance to youth. Especially in a multicultural society, tolerance must be the priority so that discriminatory and hateful actions behavior toward a certain race, religion, skin colour, gender and sexual orientation can be eliminated. By understanding the picture of tolerance in films, teenagers can practice tolerance and make it a habit so that young generation can create a harmonious society without any discrimination and stereotypes.

Politeness

The analysis of the films in this study also revealed that the politeness was also depicted. Being polite is a positive attitude that is necessarily needed by teenagers today. Politeness is related to ethics. In everyday life, every individual cannot be separated from interacting with each other. Thus, being polite is very essential. Ryabova (2015) suggested that politeness is associated with social norms and ethics and it has an influence on a person's communication attitude and will reflect his or her social status and class as well. This explanation shows that politeness can be seen through someone's attitude that he or she shows when interacting with other people, for instance, speaking. This point was also emphasized by Brown (2015) that politeness is about how someone treats others, in other words, one must consider the feelings of others.

Politeness is a characteristic that should always be taught by families and schools. Today, many teenagers do not understand the importance of etiquette in speaking and behaving. As a result, their words and behavior can cause people to be offended. Therefore, politeness needs to be included in character development. In regard to politeness, it was found that American animated films also portrayed scenes and dialogs showing politeness. Conversations showing politeness were often found in animated films *Frozen* and *Frozen II*. For example the dialog between Olaf and Anna which reflected their politeness when introducing themselves to each other. This is something good that young people need to learn today. Politeness can also sometimes be seen from the way someone convey praises to others. For instance, in *Frozen*, Anna praised her sister Elsa for her amazing abilities. This kind of compliment may contain an element of politeness as well because people who listen to the praise will feel happy and appreciated. This means, understanding other people's feeling. If someone's hard work is praised and appreciated, he or she will be glad.

Solidarity

Another characteristic often depicted in films was solidarity. This can be classified as a necessary quality. People who share the same goals and missions of life tend to view solidarity as a valuable trait to unite them.

Solidarity is perceived as a value that is closely related to society. In other words, a strong and safe society can be created if its people have solidarity. A community is considered to have solidarity, if each individual shows feelings and attitudes that reflect togetherness (Evans, 1977). Additionally, this was also mentioned by Derpmann (2009) that every individual who belong to the same place can feel the significance of shared values. They believe that the values they share can unite them.

Solidarity appeared in almost all the films observed in this study. Superhero genre films, for example, often portrayed the heroes showing solidarity in any kinds of circumstances because they have the same goal – saving the world. Even though these heroes have different physical appearance, skin colour, cultural background, and gender, they still united to defeat evils. They were all united by the same mission. Every individual is a part of society. Furthermore, solidarity in society can serve as a principle for effective and mutually beneficial interactions among individuals in the community (Naletova et al., 2016). For that reason, a sense of solidarity needs to be taught at school so that in the future, these young people will grow solidarity for the sake of society and country. So, the depiction of solidarity that appeared in the movies can be used as an example to explain the concept as well as significance of solidarity in social life.

Kindness

The results of analysis also suggested that kindness is frequently depicted in the films observed in this study. Kindness can be considered as the most essential trait that every person must possess. Everyone would want others to be kind to him anytime and anywhere. Every family teaches their children about being kind since childhood so that the values of kindness are embedded in the hearts of their children. Not only in the family, at schools they are also encouraged by their teachers to show kindness. This is also supported by the opinion of Binfet (2015) that the urge to show kindness to others can have a good impact on children's psychology. This means, the more often teenage students are educated to do good and encouraged to instil kindness in their hearts, the stronger the root of kindness is within them.

However, kindness can be viewed from different perspectives. Something that a person considers as kindness is not necessarily considered kind in other people's mind. Every individual has his or her own version of kindness. Although it has a broad meaning, it is not difficult to see kindness in someone. There are some perceptions that can be used to conceptualize kindness. According to Knafo & Israel (2012) kindness can be interpreted as a pro-social act based on motivation. Malti (2020) added that kindness is a part of ethical values that comes from love for others and understanding the feelings of others. The explanations above show that true kindness comes from a sincere heart and does not require anything in return. For example, superhero movies such as *Fantastic 4*, *Fantastic 4: The Rise of Silver Surfer*, and *Black Panthers* portrayed kindness by showing that the superheroes in the movies were willing to fight sincerely to save the world and mankind from the evil. In animated film such as *Frozen* and *Frozen II* there are scenes depicting the main characters of the films showed kindness to everyone – the way they treated others, the way they talked and having kind intentions in everything they did.

There are many films indeed that can be used media to show the meaning and significance of having kindness. With kindness, all the bad things can be removed. Of course this may still sound a bit exaggerated because many will think that reality is not as good as expectation. However, if all families and schools gradually encourage their children and students to show kindness, these young people will clearly see the benefits of the sense of kindness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The conclusion of the study covers several essential points from the results of analysis. The study revealed that character is an important thing to develop and for that reason, many formal and non-formal educational institutions keep designing character education programs for their students, particularly teenagers because character

development is essentially needed. Character development is not only related to the attitude, behaviour or an emotion of an individual, a good character also involves skills to live a good life. This means, the ability to have a good life can be a part of character development. The result of study suggested that although there are many ways to learn to develop good character, a fascinating way to apply is through activities or programs of watching films that contain many elements of forming good characteristics. This can be useful because most teenagers enjoy watching movies, especially animated, superhero, and fantasy genre films. American films observed in this study depicted five good characteristics that frequently appeared such as caring, tolerance, politeness, solidarity and kindness which are needed in character development. The superhero-themed films analyzed in this study can be suggested to be used as learning media in terms of learning about character building for teenagers.

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