

MALAYSIANS' CONTINUED CONSUMPTION OF JAPANESE TOKUSATSU WITHOUT OFFICIAL DISTRIBUTION

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Abstract: The Japanese brand of special effects otherwise known as '*Tokusatsu*' encompasses a genre of filmworks characterized by the usage of special effects techniques. *Tokusatsu* is associated with consumerism, with many productions serving primarily as promotional platforms for children's merchandise. Officially distributed since the 1970s, *Tokusatsu* in Malaysia came to an abrupt halt in the mid-2010s. Curiously, Malaysia's community of *Tokusatsu* fans actively persists to this day. Through qualitative interviews carried out with self-proclaimed Malaysian fans of *Tokusatsu*, the reasons behind the continued consumption of *Tokusatsu* in Malaysia were identified; their level of engagement, their attitudes, and their perceived control over accessing *Tokusatsu*. On the other hand, the social norms aspect was revealed to have little influence over the fans' continued consumption of Japanese *Tokusatsu*. Despite the lack of official distribution and attention from relevant industries, consumption of *Tokusatsu* remains among these fans due to self-perceived benefits they receive from consumption.

Keywords: *Tokusatsu*, Official Distribution, Malaysians, Fandom, Fans, Limited Distribution

INTRODUCTION

'*Tokusatsu*', a derivative of the Japanese word '*Tokushu Satsuei*' translates to 'special effects', referring to the visual techniques in filmmaking used to invoke illusions of actions that would be difficult to film (Longo, 2023; MasterClass, 2021). Examples include pyrotechnics, miniatures, prosthetic makeup, stop-motion animation and motion-capture photography (MasterClass, 2021). Special effects are most notable for their reliance on analogue craftsmanship compared to other filmmaking techniques such as digital effects. In the context of Japan however, the term 'special effects' or '*Tokusatsu*' in particular has developed its own unique interpretation.

In Japan, '*Tokusatsu*' refers not just to the analogue techniques in filmmaking, but an entire genre of film media that rely on such techniques to tell their stories; beginning with Ishiro Honda's *Gojira* (1954), leading into franchises such as Tsuburaya Productions' *Ultra* franchise, and many more productions produced to this day (Longo, 2023). This genre of works, characterized by excessive pyrotechnics, miniature sets, bulky spandex and rubber costumes and energetic

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movements, has developed its own niche audience who find comfort in the balance of its earnest storytelling and wacky productions (Yang, 2017).

These fans do not exist solely in Japan, but also extend globally; of interest to this study being Malaysia. Malaysia, similarly to the rest of Southeast Asia, received *Tokusatsu* shows through local television broadcasting companies importing Japanese television shows to air on their channels, from which *Tokusatsu*'s entry into Malaysia can be traced to the *Ultraman* series of shows first aired locally in the 1970s (Chua, 2021). These shows captivated the children with their 'realistic' special effects, endearing characters and story, and even the violence (Patrick, 2024; Zohdi, 2021). The reception of Malaysia's children towards *Tokusatsu*-styled shows encouraged importation of similar shows throughout the years all up to the 2000s. Malaysia being an English-speaking country also made it easy for 90s sensation *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993) and its subsequent installments to be imported and aired in Malaysia, with the series being Americanized adaptations of the Japanese *Super Sentai* franchise that was easier to resonate with larger global audiences (Kangas, 2023; Kevin, 2024).

The continued positive reception of Malaysians toward *Tokusatsu* culminated in efforts from Japan's *Tokusatsu* industry beginning in the late 2000s, with them officially marketing *Tokusatsu* products in the country by collaborating with Malaysian distributing company Litt Tak Sdn. Bhd. to bring in merchandise to toy retailers coinciding with official broadcasts of shows on Malaysian television channels (The Star, 2014). These efforts signified that the future for *Tokusatsu* in Malaysia (and the Southeast Asian region) was bright, though the official distribution of *Tokusatsu* merchandise and broadcasting faced a sudden halt in the middle of the 2010s, possibly owing to the industry's shift towards China which had emerged as the largest market for *Tokusatsu* products outside of Japan in the early 2000s (Koyama, 2022).

With the decline in official *Tokusatsu* distribution, it could be assumed that Malaysia's *Tokusatsu* fans would have declined too. However, Malaysia's community of *Tokusatsu* fans is livelier than ever, with fan communities on social media such as Facebook consisting of up to 38,000 individuals. These communities actively participate in community events such as meetups, photoshoots, merchandise trading and even discussion of airing shows. While *Tokusatsu* shows' audience may be children, the fans are grown adults who cling to the shows they were introduced to as children. By interviewing self-proclaimed *Tokusatsu* fans within Malaysia, this study seeks to contribute to the field of *Tokusatsu* and fandom by understanding these overseas fans and the rationale behind their persistence in consuming Japanese *Tokusatsu*, basing itself on the Psychological Continuum Model and the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) by Funk and James (2001) builds on Lavidge and Steiner's (1961) Hierarchy of Effects theory, suggesting that individuals' intensity towards an item of attachment occurs in stages from initial exposure, attachment, attraction and finally allegiance. Each stage represents increases in psychological attachment to their item of attachment, by which scholars such as Schroy et al. (2016) explain the varying degrees of behaviours by individuals based on how deeply they feel connected to the item of attachment (Laffan, 2020). Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) on the other hand asserts that an individual's behaviour is based on several key antecedent factors, including their attitude to the behaviour, the subjective norms of the environment, and the individual's perceived behavioural control over the behaviour to be undertaken. In application to the subject matter of *Tokusatsu* fans in Malaysia, this study attempts to identify the relevance of the PCM and TPB's assertions with regards to why individual fans of a restricted 'commodity' (referring to *Tokusatsu* in Malaysia) remain persistently devoted to the commodity.

By confirming the relevance of the PCM and TPB in the contexts of consumer consumption behaviours toward restricted commodities, this study additionally facilitates greater understanding on the emergence of fans of commodities facing great restrictions and the measures they undertake to continue their enjoyment. Subsequently, this may provide industry players relevant understanding on how they could benefit from fans of their commodities that emerge under circumstances that should have prevented their emergence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review of this study could be divided into three main themes, the first being the concepts of fandom, second being the study of Japanese Popular Culture products, and lastly the study on limited distribution.

Obiegbu et al. (2019) define a fan as an individual possessing a special relationship with a particular object of affection (Hao, 2020). In Hao's (2020) study, he denotes that fans are intrinsically linked to a community-like structure by which individual fans form a network of like-minded individuals with similar interests and passions, referred to as a 'fandom'. The concepts of 'fandom' have greatly been explored in reference to Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory (SIT), where Hao (2020) observed that a fandom is primarily provides individuals means to socialization in favourable social environments, and also an outlet for the expression of one's self and desire to stick out among day-to-day peers. Laffan's (2020) study found similarly, denoting that a fan's identity is formed by self-categorization into groups where they would likely experience positive psychosocial outcomes such as happiness, self-esteem and social connectedness.

Hao (2020) also noted the connection between a fan's sense of connectedness to a fandom with the level of devotion towards his object of affection. According to Hao, given that levels of devotion between individuals differ, their varying actions are thus the manifestation of distinct behaviours among fans towards the object of affection. Highlighting studies by Hyatt & Andrijew (2008) and Pu & James (2017), Hao noted that the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) based on Lavidge & Steiner's (1961) Hierarchy of Effects Theory was a valid method of understanding this phenomenon; a fan's intensity of attachment occurs in stages from first exposure to allegiance. Quoting Schroy et al. (2016), Laffan (2020) similarly refers to such phenomenon as the concept of 'fanship'; the individual's psychological attachment to their interest.

Traditionally, fandoms have been associated with the creative process driven by members of the fandom themselves, but recent studies propose the emergence of a new type of fandom driven by capitalist-style consumerism; the Brand Fandom (Todd and Armstrong, 2020). They define the Brand Fandom as a congregation of individual consumers who center around a commercialized product of a corporate entity, and a Brand Fandom supposedly distinguishes itself from traditional fandoms by having a looser relationship between its members. On the same concept, Guerra & Sousa (2021) add that these fandoms are also driven by the acquisition of physical memorabilia and collectibles put out by the brand owners.

Studies on Japanese Popular Culture have notably explored the propagation of Japanese Popular Culture extensively. Many studies have covered the phenomenon of the spread of Japanese Popular Culture in absence of official support from the Japanese Government and industries. Iwabuchi's (2015) findings were that Japan remains content with the domestic profits they make and thus have little desire to formally export their products overseas. With this inaction, Finlay & Furman (2014) and Chua (2021) note the emergence of 'grey markets' for Japanese Popular Culture products, where consumers outside Japan resorted to pirating products and consuming

them in markets where no action could be taken against them due to a lack of coordination between Japan and the host country of the ‘grey market’. Chua’s (2021) study additionally explains how grey markets in Southeast Asian countries facilitated the legitimate penetration of Japanese Popular Culture products into those countries as they developed audiences willing to continue consuming the products even legally.

Yamato et al. (2011) notably pointed out the notion of Japanese Popular Culture becoming a lifestyle for its fans. They observed that in the case of Malaysian fans, most if not all view Japanese Popular Culture as integral to their lives, as their fandom towards them defines their whole identity. Yamato’s 2014 study also reinforced those findings, denoting that some fans view reinforcement of consuming those products as essential to their daily functionings. These findings were similarly found by Hashimoto’s (2018), where it was discovered that fans are willing to shape their entire identity surrounding their interests in Japanese Popular Culture.

With regards to Japanese *Tokusatsu* as a Japanese Popular Culture product, only few studies on *Tokusatsu* have been carried out, and fewer published in English. Longo’s 2023 study found that most studies on *Tokusatsu* primarily study technical aspects such as its blend of traditional and modern filming techniques. Quoting Hikawa & Higuchi et al., Longo (2024) opines that *Tokusatsu* is often attributed to a *low art* status that is enjoyed by the masses but thus not as respected as an art, hence it receives little academic preservation efforts. Very few studies have focused on the fans of Japanese *Tokusatsu* and their opinions on the art.

When it comes to the limitation of access to a commodity, scholars found that such restrictions will not significantly hinder the existing consumption behaviours of most consumers. Haraguchi’s (2021) study proposes that a consumer’s investment towards the commodity plays a significant role in determining their behaviours in response to such reactions. Individuals with high involvement showcase personal relevance or attachment to the commodity, similar to the concepts of SIT and PCM mentioned above.

Subsequently, Haraguchi’s (2021) study brings up the role of Ajzen’s (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) whereby components such as utilitarian attraction, derived pleasure, risk probability and consequence all influence an individual’s continued involvement towards a commodity. The TPB has also been used by many other scholars in reference to limited distributions and specifically the act of piracy. Arli et al.’s (2015) study found that while Indonesians acknowledged that their actions of piracy were illegal, they still carried out piracy to access restricted commodities. They found that for them, the outcomes of their actions to circumvent restrictions outweighed the moral nature of those actions. Their piracy was also found to be linked to a sense of moral justness, whereby they view it is their moral right to consume the commodities they desire when a discriminatory entity, the distributors of said commodity, were hindering their access. This interpretation of moral justification was also affirmed by Koay et al.’s (2022) study where it was found that fans view piracy as a consumer’s moral and even natural right to access media that has been restricted to them.

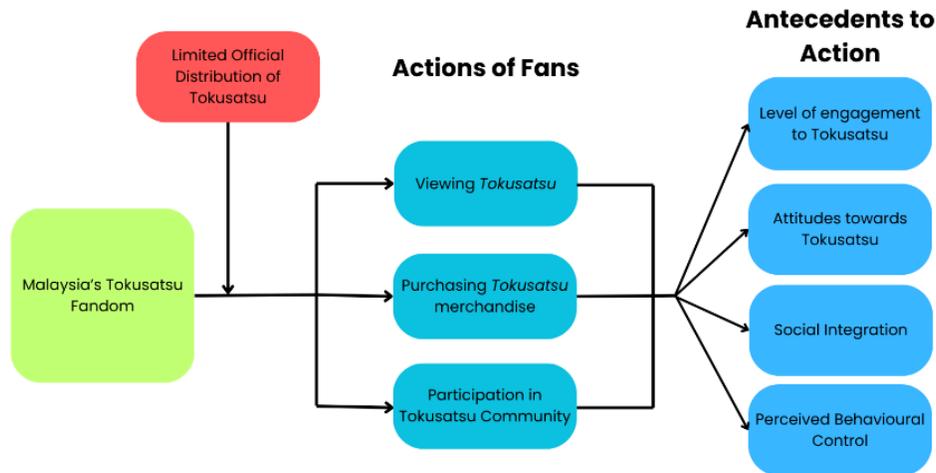
METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative approach to phenomenological research, with an end goal of understanding the reasoning behind Malaysian *Tokusatsu* fans’ continued consumption of *Tokusatsu* without official distribution. In conducting the study, open-ended interviews were held with 30 individuals identified to be Malaysian fans of Japanese *Tokusatsu* from events such as Japanese Animation, Comics and Games (ACG) events, collectors’ markets, with some identified

through *Tokusatsu*-related social media groups. The data of this study was collected throughout April 2025.

This study was conducted by adapting an alternative perspective to a framework for the study of consumer fandoms initially proposed by Hao (2020), with greater emphasis on understanding the antecedents behind a fandom's actions, rather than predicting the actions of a fandom as had been initially proposed by Hao. To that end, the interview questions were structured around Funk & James' (2001) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) and Ajzen's (1981) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB); after noting down participants' actions in response to the limited official distribution of *Tokusatsu*, the rationale behind their actions were analyzed based on their level of engagement, their attitudes, the element of social integration, and their perceived behavioural control towards consuming *Tokusatsu*. For analysis, notable keywords were identified to showcase the fans' general beliefs on certain topics. The alternative framework for this study is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Framework adapted and modified from Hao's (2020) conceptual framework for consumer fandom studies (p.26)



RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In structuring this study, a set of interview questions were created and categorized according to several main themes. The interview questions posed to the participants can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview Questions

Profile of Respondents
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Age range? 2. Where are you from? 3. First exposure to Tokusatsu? 4. How long have you been a vendor for Tokusatsu merchandise?
Actions of Fans
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you still watch Tokusatsu shows? 2. How do you access Tokusatsu shows? 3. Have you bought any Tokusatsu merchandise? 4. How do you access Tokusatsu merchandise?

5. Do you discuss Tokusatsu with your peers and friends?
6. Do you spread Tokusatsu to others?
7. Do you participate in any Tokusatsu community or community events?
8. As a vendor, how do you determine what Tokusatsu merchandise to sell?
Level of Engagement
1. How often do you watch Tokusatsu shows?
2. Can you provide an estimate on how often or how much Tokusatsu merchandise you have?
3. How involved are you with the Tokusatsu community in Malaysia?
Attitudes toward Tokusatsu
1. What meaning does Tokusatsu have to your life?
2. What was your first impression of Tokusatsu?
3. Why do you continue to consume Tokusatsu?
4. Is it difficult for you to consume Tokusatsu in Malaysia?
Social Integration
1. Would you say you are apart of Malaysia's Tokusatsu community?
2. Does membership in the community give you any personal effects?
3. What do the people around you feel or say about your interest in Tokusatsu?
4. Do you feel discouraged by how society views Tokusatsu solely as childrens television?
Official Distribution

Conducted within the urban Klang Valley area, a total of 30 participants were interviewed. Out of the 30, 23 participants were male whereas the remaining 7 were female. The participants' ages ranged from 17 years old to the early 40s. While most participants Klang valley residents, few participants were from the states of Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Perak and Penang respectively; these individuals had traveled to the Klang Valley area to participate in *Tokusatsu*-related events. The profiles of the participants can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' Information

Participant	Nickname	Age	Residence
A1	Ali	40s	Kuala Lumpur
L1	Luna	18	Selangor
A2	Anjul	21	Kuala Lumpur
M1	Mat	21	Kuala Lumpur
K1	Khalid	22	Kuala Lumpur
A3	Aman	23	Selangor
K2	Kian	22	Selangor
H1	Hew	32	Selangor
Z1	Zack	19	Perak
M2	Mai	24	Selangor

Participant	Nickname	Age	Residence
J1	Joshua	31	Selangor
S1	Sofea	26	Selangor
N1	Nurul	25	Malacca
H4	Haziq	17	Kuala Lumpur
L2	Lau	24	Selangor
T2	Tan	33	Penang
N2	Nabil	17	Selangor
D1	Derrick	22	Malacca
A5	Airin	19	Selangor
Z2	Zarif	22	Kuala Lumpur

R1	Razak	26	Kuala Lumpur	M3	May	23	Selangor
H2	Hakeem	22	Kuala Lumpur	N3	Ness	21	Penang
H3	Harith	22	Selangor	A6	A6 Akram	40s	Negeri Sembilan
A4	Akmal	24	Kelantan	H5	H5 Haznirul	30s	Selangor
T1	Terrence	29	Selangor	D2	D2 Divesh	23	Kuala Lumpur

ACTIONS OF FANS AND LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

This study found that most participants confidently admitted to watching *Tokusatsu* shows at present, with a large majority admitting usage of unofficial sources to access those shows; citing unofficial streaming websites, file-sharing websites and social media such as Facebook and Telegram. Only six participants expressed their utilization of official sources to access the shows, notably mentioning the *Bilibili* video sharing platform which receives several officially distributed Japanese *Tokusatsu* shows, in addition to YouTube where two participants enjoy official uploads of the *Ultra* franchise's shows. The viewing habits of the participants were also notably consistent, with 15 individuals confidently saying that they watch *Tokusatsu* shows on a weekly basis; attributed to the weekly releases of shows under the *Kamen Rider*, *Super Sentai*, and *Ultraman* series on Japanese broadcasting networks such as TV Asahi and TV Tokyo. Other than the 15, eight participants expressed their habit of keeping up with *Tokusatsu* developments even without watching the shows weekly, suggesting extensive participation in a *Tokusatsu*-filled environment. Two participants, vendors of *Tokusatsu* merchandise in Malaysia, viewed keeping up with *Tokusatsu* developments as crucial to the health of their *Tokusatsu* merchandise selling businesses. Their confidence in admitting reliance on unofficial sources for accessing *Tokusatsu* and their devotion to keeping up with the shows imply a perceived lack of concern to the legality of their actions in utilizing unofficial sources. The consistency of their actions also brings to light the fan-driven subtitling of these shows; with subtitled videos by certain fan groups often being shared freely through unofficial sources within the very same day of release of an episode. In the absence of official distribution, these fans take it upon themselves to 'arrange' the distribution of shows for their peers, suggesting a perceived responsibility among some fans to carry out the distribution of their beloved shows that they take over from the industries that appear unable to provide for them.

Tokusatsu merchandise can be divided into four categories; roleplaying toys, collectibles, figures and other products which do not fit under the prior categories. When asked regarding their experience with *Tokusatsu* merchandise, all participants recorded having experience acquiring said merchandises. The participants revealed they primarily utilized online and physical stores of local vendors who imported *Tokusatsu* merchandise to acquire their desired merchandise, but 12 participants also expressed they acquired such merchandise directly from Japan by themselves as well; whether it be using proxy shipping services or through direct interactions with sellers in Japan. Of note were also the participants who utilized community-based trading to acquire the merchandise they desired, with three participants mentioning purchasing second-hand merchandise and three others relying on trade discussion in social media-based *Tokusatsu* community groups. Of the participants, a significant number admitted to owning numerous *Tokusatsu* merchandise. In fact, only two participants admitted to only owning a single item of

merchandise. Three participants shared that they had amassed complete or near-complete collections of *Tokusatsu* merchandise from certain series'. For one of the participants, their investment of roughly RM1000 was considered as 'not much', suggesting collections of far greater value among other *Tokusatsu* fans in Malaysia. Around eight participants were creatives themselves and produced unofficial merchandise themselves in the form of illustrations and even *cosplay* costumes of *Tokusatsu* characters, investing significant sums of money themselves into putting out their creative merchandise. With *Tokusatsu* merchandises being key to the industry as a whole, it becomes evident that merchandises are not entirely purchased or traded around for individualistic satisfaction. Rather, the acquisition of merchandise becomes essential to the fans' own social identities; with merchandise collections often starting in the first place out of a desire to express their individual devotion towards a particular show, while also to be shared around within the community. The *Kamen Rider & Toy Trading Malaysia* Facebook group, Malaysia's largest *Tokusatsu*-themed social media community, is not just a platform for the trading of merchandise to be carried out, but numerous fans showcase their collections daily in attempts to derive validation from their peers and even engage in social discussions on their beloved shows. Merchandise collection thus becomes not just a part of individual satisfaction and desire, but also a means to prove to themselves and other peers of the 'strength' of their devotion.

The interviewed participants also largely reported having experience with discussing Japanese *Tokusatsu* with their peers and family, though the success and extents of such discussions varied. For two participants, they elaborate that they only participate in such discussions with fellow friends who were already interested in *Tokusatsu*, while four others expressed that their attempts to discuss *Tokusatsu* with those around them ended up unfruitful. Interestingly, 15 participants confidently expressed their success in introducing *Tokusatsu* to the people around them, with participant N1 managing to get her friends interested after recommending some shows, and participant A1 successfully encouraging his nephews and nieces to be invested in the shows as well by playing the shows on the television while they came over and visited him.

ATTITUDES TOWARD TOKUSATSU

Information on attitude, being one of the components in Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour, was also gathered as part of this study. The participants were asked regarding how they felt about *Tokusatsu*, the meaning of *Tokusatsu* to them personally and why they continued consuming *Tokusatsu* products. Due to the nature of *Tokusatsu* productions primarily being entertainment, it is no surprise that the most common meaning of *Tokusatsu* to the participants' was a source of entertainment and leisure. The participants' description of *Tokusatsu* as such included terms such as "...stress-relief entertainment" and "...a break from work life". For eight participants however, *Tokusatsu* goes beyond merely an interest, rather they explicitly view it as their main interest in life. Quoting participant H4,

"It is definitely one of the things I most have interest in my life. Everyone has something that they like, but this is mine. ...like how some are into K-Pop or K-Drama, this is my version..."

Some participants even go as far as stating that *Tokusatsu* was fundamental to their identities and defined who they are as people. Based on the answers provided, it was clear that such extent of attachment stemmed out of *Tokusatsu* being seen as a crucial support for them during troubled personal times. Around 14 participants also expressed their interpretation of *Tokusatsu* as inspirations for them, motivated by the strong morals and messages contained within them to better themselves as adults. For six out of the 14, *Tokusatsu* shows became creative inspirations for them, as some get inspired by "...all the artistic elements like the compositions, monster designs,...".

Participant H2 was also proud to proclaim his inspiration from *Tokusatsu*, stating that the art itself has inspired many artistic creators outside of Japan in filmmaking, bringing up Hollywood film director Guillermo Del Toro as an example.

With *Tokusatsu* being seen as leisure entertainment for many of the participants, it was no surprise that many participants continued to watch *Tokusatsu* shows because they found the shows fun and enjoyable to watch. While ‘fun’ was a vague term, the participants further supplemented their reasonings by describing *Tokusatsu* shows as ‘unique’. The participants described *Tokusatsu* shows’ productions as incredibly unique; from their visual effects, character and set designs and even performances of the actors which were distinct from what some would see in overseas media productions. ‘Quality’ was also another reasoning some participants provided, stating that *Tokusatsu* productions, contrary to the general belief that they were low-budget and campy, had genuine production qualities that could be comparable to big-budget Hollywood productions. Two participants in particular also expressed admiration at the actors of *Tokusatsu* productions, with participant L2 saying

“...moving that they [the actors] can take the acting so seriously when it [*Tokusatsu*] looks so silly...”

Only six participants mentioned nostalgia towards their childhood being a reason as to why they kept consuming *Tokusatsu* products well into their adulthood, with participant H5 calling *Tokusatsu* characters as ‘role models of the 1990s and 2000s’, which kept him coming back to relive his youth.

The participants largely felt no significant difficulty in accessing *Tokusatsu* in Malaysia, even despite the lack of official distribution of shows and merchandise in the country. Due to the mass spread of the internet, *Tokusatsu* shows were simply “...one click away,” according to participant R1. With that being said, four participants recalled that it used to be much more difficult to access *Tokusatsu* in Malaysia in the past, even when the shows were officially being distributed in the country.

“Initially when starting out, yes [it was difficult]. But now it is so much easier with all the connections online and internet” according to participant T2.

“Now, no [it is not difficult]. Before, it was more difficult, but also still easy and okay. There were many pirated DVDs and CDs sold at night markets... if you put in a little effort, you could access it [*Tokusatsu*]” according to participant A6.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

The participants largely felt themselves as part of Malaysia’s community of *Tokusatsu* fans, with a rather even split between those who considered themselves as active and passive members of the community respectively. The passive participants mainly described their actions in the community as being ‘observers’ or ‘lurkers’ in discussions and merchandise trading. However, the active participants expressed much greater willingness and experience in participating in community events such as community meetups, *Tokusatsu*-related discussions and even community *cosplay* photoshoots. One of the active members, participant A6, himself was an admin of a *Tokusatsu* fan page on Facebook, and described himself as an *orang kuat* or ‘strongman’ for Malaysia’s *Tokusatsu* fan community, greatly engaging with the community and planning community events. The six vendors interviewed also viewed themselves as active members of the community, often engaging with potential customers and fellow fans to sell their products. When asked about any benefits they may have gained from participating in the *Tokusatsu* fan community, 17 participants expressed being able to develop their interpersonal skills and connections by forging new friendships with

fellow fans, with four of them even finding a sense of belonging within the community. Eight participants report that being in the community allowed them an audience to market the merchandise and products they wished to sell to others, such as M2 who receives great patronage as an illustrator from other fellow *Tokusatsu* fans. Participant T2 even recalls how the community once banded together to provide him emergency support and assistance after he had been involved in an accident and needed to sell off his *Tokusatsu* merchandise to pay medical bills.

From the perspectives of the participants, the larger society around them seemed to be able to respect their interest in *Tokusatsu*, even if they did not entirely understand said interest. Participant N3's experience is "...supportive, but they [her family] don't get the appeal". Only few (eight) participants recalled negative reactions to their interest in *Tokusatsu*, with them often facing words such as 'childish' and 'weird' being thrown their way by family members and peers who did not understand how they could be fans of shows that were primarily marketed to children. Despite those negative reactions however, participants largely expressed nonchalance towards the reactions and many expressed determination to continue enjoying their interest without being influenced by others. In their defence, three participants defend their interest in *Tokusatsu* by viewing it as just another interest among many that other individuals may hold themselves. Participant A5 likens those who like *Tokusatsu* to those who have interests in cars, saying that they are both sides of the same coin.

OFFICIAL DISTRIBUTION OF *TOKUSATSU*

When asked about the official distribution of *Tokusatsu* in Malaysia, few participants felt that the recent small resurgence of *Tokusatsu* show broadcasting on local channels were good efforts to reintroduce *Tokusatsu* to the public, especially the children. However, even more were concerned regarding the relevance of such broadcasting. They pointed out how television broadcasts are now irrelevant compared to the internet due to the changed environment of entertainment in the world. Participant H1 points out that children nowadays all have access to internet and smartphones themselves and rarely watch television. Three participants even make critiques to the quality of the broadcasts themselves, noting that they have been edited poorly and cut significantly to accommodate the local channels' advertisement slots. Not to mention, the shows brought in recently have often been aired in Japan for years prior and can easily be found on the internet in an instant, in contrast to television broadcasts for the shows which will only air once a week. The official distribution of *Tokusatsu* merchandise that occurred in Malaysian retail from the late 2000s to the mid-2010s were also received poorly by the participants who found the merchandises to be overpriced due to retail charges and taxes. Participants expressed that rather than shell out exorbitant amounts of money to purchase the merchandise at retail, it was possible for them to acquire the same merchandise from local independent importers who would be able to offer the merchandise for much cheaper.

When asked about the *Tokusatsu* industry as a whole, no participants were confident enough to admit that the industry was paying attention to Malaysia as a market. Only 11 participants found that the industry was somewhat paying attention to the country, citing *Tokusatsu* events held in the country such as the *Ultra Heroes Tour* and *Kamen Rider Exhibition*, along with the occasional screenings of Japanese *Tokusatsu* movies at select cinemas throughout the year. Participant R1 opined that only one industry player was truly paying attention to Malaysia.

"If we really take a look at it, it is only Tsuburaya which pays attention to Malaysia. They are the only ones who sub [subtitle] and dub [voice dubbing] their shows into Malay and English. And they're the only ones who put their toys on sale at retail now."

Participants A1 and H5 being vendors themselves, mention that the *Tokusatsu* industry is too 'Japan-centric', with their focus being entirely on their domestic businesses and profits, making Malaysia an 'impenetrable' market if they remain with their 'Japan-centric' sales strategies.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study suggest that for Malaysia's *Tokusatsu* fandom and its fans, the lack of official distribution of *Tokusatsu* products in Malaysia does not even significantly affect their consumption habits toward Japanese *Tokusatsu*. This study instead found several factors or reasonings that enable and encourage the Malaysian fans' continued consumption of Japanese *Tokusatsu* from individual and collective perspectives.

From the perspective of Funk & James' (2001) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), an individual's psychological connection with a particular item can be divided into four stages beginning with awareness of the object, subsequently attraction, then attachment and lastly allegiance where individuals wholly revolve their lives around the object. When the PCM is applied to the participants and the answers they provided regarding their personal habits toward consuming *Tokusatsu* products, it can be observed that Malaysia's *Tokusatsu* fans largely fall under the attachment stage of the PCM. Individuals under the attachment stage are at the point where they have internalized the item of affection within themselves in a manner whereby the connection is entirely based on how the individual may benefit from the product.

This was shown with the participants' actions of frequently keeping up with developments in *Tokusatsu* shows even to a weekly basis, and the widespread willingness of the participants to spend large sums of money on *Tokusatsu* merchandise, which by itself is not cheap as well taking into account the import duties and other costs added on by the vendors who sell such merchandise. Their display of such willingness to commit to their interest signifies great depths of psychological and emotional connection between the participants and *Tokusatsu* as a product. Not to mention, the participants seemingly derived individual satisfaction from their connection to *Tokusatsu*, not remotely consuming *Tokusatsu* for the sake of satisfying others, which ties into the attachment stage of the PCM which denotes internalized satisfaction without being bothered by external factors such as societal norms (Funk & James, 2001). While a minority of participants could be classified under the PCM's allegiance stage due to how *Tokusatsu* had shaped their lives, the majority of the participants did not showcase such extents and primarily viewed *Tokusatsu* as an interest rather than part of their individual selves.

Furthermore, this study found that most fans had a positive attitude toward Japanese *Tokusatsu* because of numerous personal benefits they perceived to obtain. The leisure entertainment, break from stress, and even the inspirations that *Tokusatsu* productions gave to the fans were seemingly enough to convince the fans that *Tokusatsu* was beneficial to their personal lives in one way or another to keep accessing and consuming. The perceived benefits subsequently drive the fans to willingly resort to unofficial or illegal means to access the *Tokusatsu* shows they believed would be beneficial to them. This is in line with Arli et al.'s (2015) study which found that Asians were likelier to base any decisions they undertake based on the outcomes of the decision rather than the nature of the decision itself, highlighting a utilitarian viewpoint on behaviours.

Oddly, while being unwilling (or unable) to access *Tokusatsu* shows legally, the participants were all found to be greatly willing to financially invest in *Tokusatsu* merchandise legally. They willingly spend even up to thousands of Malaysian Ringgit to legally acquire merchandise, whether it be from vendors who import them into Malaysia, or even by directly purchasing them

from Japan. This creates a phenomenon of duality whereby the fans utilize illicit sources to watch *Tokusatsu*, but supposedly make up for their ‘moral wrongs’ and balance it out by willingly spending money on *Tokusatsu* merchandise legally. This balancing act had previously been mentioned by Arli et al. (2015) and Amirullah & Ravindran (2018) as moral equity, whereby individuals are naturally determined to achieve equity in social exchanges; individuals will subconsciously make efforts to ‘fix’ any moral wrongs that they commit to lessen their guilt. This phenomenon demonstrates that dedicated consumers are likely aware on how they may ethically support their interests. In the context of a multimedia-based product, individually streaming the product unofficially would not hurt the producing industry, especially when they are not the audience of the product in the first place. Instead, they identify the product that would truly support the continuation of the industry and purchase those products legally to ensure the industry productions in the future. This was demonstrated with the purchases of costly *Tokusatsu* merchandise as mentioned before, and can also be seen in other cases such as how K-Pop fans support their idols by purchasing physical merchandises from their idols while often unofficially streaming the idols’ music (Badrul, 2024).

With regards to social integration, this study found that social norms or societal pressure had little effect on Malaysian *Tokusatsu* fans’ habits of consuming Japanese *Tokusatsu*, as participants were found to not be bothered by any negative viewpoints on *Tokusatsu* by larger society, and maintained their autonomy to enjoy their interest in *Tokusatsu* regardless of any external pressure. What is interesting however is that while the sense of community was found to be very strong in the Malaysian *Tokusatsu* fandom, the fans within the community themselves did not appear to be influenced by the norms of the community itself. This study found that the *Tokusatsu* fandom itself only served as a platform to accommodate the *Tokusatsu* fans of Malaysia, and did not impose any internal beliefs or behaviours upon the members. Members of the fandom are encouraged to interact with the fandom’s events, though based on the even split between active and passive members in this study, there existed little impositions of one against another. This could possibly be linked to the nature of *Tokusatsu* fandoms revolving around media which produces merchandises that are greatly traded, thus causing an unending an active flow of participants in the fandom, inhibiting any particular hierarchies or internal norms to develop. While fandoms have traditionally been characterized by tight-knit communities with defined hierarchies and understood norms, the *Tokusatsu* fandom’s absence of such is much more in line to the newer ‘Brand Fandom’ concept; looser collections of individuals who share interests in a commercialized products and primarily participate to continually achieve individual satisfaction (Todd and Armstrong, 2020; Guerra and Sousa, 2021). This suggests a departure from traditional understandings of fandoms, with the ‘Brand Fandom’ concept already distinct in terms of structure from traditional fandoms and even becoming more prominent as more and more corporate entities attempt to artificially develop a ‘Brand Fandom’ for their products (Guerra and Sousa, 2021).

Interestingly however, this study also found that a majority of larger society appeared to not hold negative views on *Tokusatsu*, which contradicts the preestablished connotation of *Tokusatsu* in society as media that is only enjoyed by children and adults that do enjoy it are seen as social outliers (Patrick, 2024; Thee, 2020). This possibly suggests that larger society’s view of *Tokusatsu* has undergone a paradigm shift from the present negative connotation that it holds, though this study is unable to confirm this.

Participants of this study, based on their confidence in admitting their utilization of unofficial and illegal sources to access *Tokusatsu*, showcase that Malaysia’s *Tokusatsu* fans viewed themselves to have great control over their actions of consuming *Tokusatsu* products. Through the

internet, it became especially easy for them to access *Tokusatsu* shows via file-sharing websites or unofficial streaming websites, and their behaviour is only enabled by a clear lack of enforcement against the distributors of the illicit *Tokusatsu* shows and even the consumers themselves. Abdullah et al. (2021) denoted that enforcement of copyright by authorities in Malaysia would be impossible faced against distributors who distribute pirated contents from outside Malaysian jurisdiction, and a lack of engagement from the Japanese authorities and industries as noted by Schroff (2020) only serves to enable the growth of such unofficial access. Due to this, Malaysian *Tokusatsu* fans who so willingly gain unofficial access to *Tokusatsu* shows feel that their actions have no consequences at all, putting solely them in the front seat with control and justification over watching *Tokusatsu* however they see fit. It is also worth mentioning the perceived industrial stagnation that Malaysian fans have of the *Tokusatsu* industry. The fans view that since Malaysia would never be a proper target market for *Tokusatsu* again, they are once again reaffirmed in their right to access *Tokusatsu* unofficially if no official means are going to be provided to them in the first place.

These findings highlight that when faced with a lack of official distribution, Malaysia's fans of Japanese *Tokusatsu* end up continuing to consume Japanese *Tokusatsu* due to their strong level of engagement to *Tokusatsu* products, their positive attitude towards *Tokusatsu* and their great degree of perceived behavioural control over the act of consuming *Tokusatsu* products from Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Malaysia's fans of Japanese *Tokusatsu* are dedicated individuals who are willing to go to significant lengths and extents for enjoying *Tokusatsu* productions that have developed into more than just simple entertainment to them. The lack of official distribution of Japanese *Tokusatsu* products did not prevent these fans from enjoying their interest. Driven by their deep engagement, positive attitude and ability to control the action of consuming *Tokusatsu* thanks to modern technological advancements, they perceive that consuming *Tokusatsu* shows and merchandise is still possible and necessary to enjoy several benefits such as leisure, inspirations, connections, a place to belong, and even stepping stones towards entrepreneurial ventures. The fandom and its fans themselves also appear resistant to societal pressure, suggesting that their end goals are driven by personal, individualistic benefits they believe are obtainable.

To that end, future strategies by the Japanese *Tokusatsu* industry and any relevant others should consider the following natures and realities of Malaysia's *Tokusatsu* fandom should profits from Malaysia be tapped into in the future. First and foremost, these fans have clear purchasing power and the intent to continually acquire *Tokusatsu* merchandise legally, though they will always be attracted to lower and cheaper prices for the same merchandises. If local independent importers and vendors are able to procure and sell the same merchandise for much cheaper than retail price, it is a given that the fans will be more attracted by the cheaper prices. These independent vendors thus should be considered as potential partners for any future expansions in the country. Additionally, the means of distributing *Tokusatsu* broadcasting should be relevant with the society of the present. With television holding less and less relevance in modern society, new means of broadcasting *Tokusatsu* shows should be considered, such as the measures undertaken by Tsuburaya Productions' *Ultra* franchise which has their own official YouTube channel airing currently-running shows with numerous subtitles to appeal to large audiences.

At the time of this initial study, *Tokusatsu* industry players have slowly started making new approaches to Malaysia and the Southeast Asian region as a whole, with *Godzilla* parent company Toho Co. Ltd. establishing a new regional subsidiary in Singapore and Toei Company Ltd.

advertising its *Kamen Rider* franchise to Southeast Asia through official 'KAMEN RIDER Global' social media presence (Malay Mail, 2025).

Future research in this field could consider engaging *Tokusatsu* industry representatives to obtain their viewpoints on the subject, carrying out studies with more balanced age group ratios, and refer to more firsthand Japanese sources on the topic which would enrich the quality of the study significantly.

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