

Unveiling Narrative: A Visual Analysis of Muslimah (Female Muslim) Characters in Monsta Animation

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of Muslimah (female Muslim) characters in animation often grapples with a complex interplay of stereotypes, cultural representation, and societal expectations. While there has been a notable increase in the visibility of Muslimah characters in recent years, several Muslimah characters have appeared in Malaysian animation. From international characters to local Malaysian Muslimah characters, this paper discusses their roles and the importance of this representation in animation. This paper presents a study of the representation of women in superhero archetypes, specifically female Muslim (Muslimah) figures in Monsta's IPs: BoBoiBoy, Mechamato, and PapaPipi. Monsta is the mastermind behind numerous engaging and acclaimed creative works suitable for all ages. These animations have captivated audiences worldwide, entertaining millions through compelling storytelling. This research offers a comprehensive analysis of three female characters: Yaya from Boboiboy, Tamara from Mechamato, and Pipi from PapaPipi. Adopting a qualitative approach, this study utilizes visual analysis methodologies inspired by Gillian Rose. Through triangulation analysis, the research questions focus on three key aspects: syntactic analysis (visual form), pragmatic analysis (context and interpretation), and semantic analysis (content and meaning). The study suggests that such nuanced representation is essential for fostering broader societal understanding and proving that religious identity is not a hindrance to heroism, but rather a source of strength and integrity.

Keywords: Female Representation, Female Muslim Representation, Muslimah Superheroes, Malaysian Animation, Semiotics



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1 INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of female Muslim (Muslimah) characters in animation often grapples with a complex interplay of stereotypes, cultural representation, and societal expectations. While there has been a notable increase in the visibility of Muslimah characters in recent years, many of these portrayals still

perpetuate harmful stereotypes that can undermine the authentic representation of Muslim women. Female superheroes are often portrayed as muscular, overly sexualized, and frequently appear to appeal to the male gaze, which has become a norm portrayed in pop culture. When portraying Muslimah superheroes, various visual styles aim to challenge stereotypes about how women are depicted. As the industry evolves, animation portrayals and narratives are changing to reflect contemporary values, modern aesthetics, and advanced animation technologies (Li et al. 2019). This research will dive into how Monsta portrayed their female superheroes on screen.

1.1 Female Muslim (Muslimah) Appearance

Muslim women wear a diverse range of clothing, with styles varying worldwide due to cultural and traditional influences. The fundamental principle of dress for women in Islam is modesty. The term "hijab" signifies covering, screening, or curtaining, and it refers both to a specific type of veil worn by some Muslim women and to the general modest Islamic style of dress. Therefore, the hijab worn by a woman is the most apparent visual connotation that she is, in fact, a Muslim. One of the key aspects of hijab fashion is its capacity to convey personal identity and self-expression. Research shows that many Muslim women choose hijab fashion to express their individuality while remaining true to their cultural and religious values. This duality enables them to navigate their identities in an authentic and stylish manner (Hassan & Ara, 2021; Hassan & Harun, 2016).

It is important to understand that mere representation is not enough; the quality and authenticity of that representation are crucial. There is an increasing need for Muslim women to have a role in shaping their own narratives, ensuring that their voices and experiences are genuinely reflected (Al-Mutawa, 2013; Hosein, 2024). One of the key issues surrounding the portrayal of Muslim women is the frequent depiction of these women as oppressed and powerless. Another significant concern is the sexualization of these characters. For instance, characters like Dust from Marvel Comics have faced criticism for transitioning from veiled figures to sexualized representations upon assuming superhero identities (Hosseini, 2024; Davis & Westerfelhaus, 2012). This transformation not only objectifies the characters but also reinforces the notion that liberation for Muslim women requires abandoning their cultural and religious identities. Such portrayals can contribute to a misunderstanding of the hijab and other forms of modest dress, which are often misinterpreted as symbols of oppression rather than expressions of personal choice and empowerment (Wagner et al., 2012; Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012).

1.2 Monsta's Female Characters

Monsta is a Malaysian animation studio founded in 2009 that creates innovative visual content for both Malaysian and international markets. Monsta is recognized for its numerous family-friendly, award-winning intellectual properties, enjoyed by millions of viewers worldwide. They are known for their animation, like BoBoiBoy, Mechamato, and PapaPipi. Monsta is known for its superhero storytelling. In Malaysia, Monsta has actively showcased Muslimah characters across their various intellectual properties, highlighting their commitment to diverse representation.

Monsta believes that entertaining content should also have positive aspirations. This is why they are unafraid to portray Muslimah characters as superheroes, emphasizing their vital roles in narratives and providing diverse representation. By doing so, they not only challenge stereotypes but also celebrate the strength and resilience of these figures, enriching the storytelling landscape with their unique perspectives and experiences. According to Monsta, their principle in creating is known as the 3Ms: Modest, Moderate, and Modern. This principle applies to creativity, decision-making, and business strategy.

Realizing that parents are concerned about the safety of content for their children these days, Monsta is committed to creating content that prioritizes the safety and well-being of its viewers. Their characters' modest appearance and positive behaviour serve as a model for others to emulate. Through these representations, viewers can see the value of embracing modesty while embodying strength and

integrity, encouraging them to adopt similar traits in their own lives. This portrayal not only champions diversity but also reinforces the idea that one can be both a superhero and a role model, promoting both personal and cultural values in a relatable and uplifting manner.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Female Muslim (Muslimah) Appearance

The portrayal of female characters in animation has evolved significantly over the years, reflecting broader societal changes regarding gender roles and expectations. Historically, animated films, particularly those produced by Disney, have been criticized for reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. For instance, characters like Cinderella exemplify a narrative where physical beauty is paramount for female acceptance and success, which can be interpreted as disempowering from a contemporary feminist perspective (Fathy & Fahmy, 2020). This portrayal is indicative of a broader trend where female characters are often depicted as passive, needing protection or validation from their male counterparts (Maity, 2014).

Research indicates that animated films frequently perpetuate the “beauty-goodness” stereotype, where female characters are not only more numerous but are also more likely to be associated with beauty and moral virtue compared to their male counterparts (Bazzini et al., 2010). This trend is evident in the Disney canon, where a significant percentage of characters are female, yet they often embody stereotypical traits that align with traditional femininity, such as submissiveness and emotional sensitivity (Baker & Raney, 2007). The implications of these portrayals are profound, as they shape children’s perceptions of gender roles from a young age, influencing their understanding of social values and expectations (Ahmed & Wahab, 2014; Batool et al., 2017).

2.2 Muslimah Superhero Portrayal in Pop Culture

There are several Muslim superheroes portrayed in Pop Culture, such as the Kismet (Man of Fate), Simon Baz (Green Lantern), Bilal Alsselah (Nightrunner), etc. However, Muslimah has also appeared in comics and on the silver screen. One of the most notable examples of a Muslimah superhero is Kamala Khan, also known as Ms. Marvel. Introduced by Marvel Comics in 2023, Kamala Khan is a Pakistani American teenager living in New Jersey who grapples with her cultural identity while navigating the challenges of adolescence and superhero responsibilities. Kamala Khan’s character representation is a significant shift in the superhero genre, moving towards greater diversity and inclusion (Andreassen (2019).

Even so, Kamala Khan is not the first Muslimah to appear in Western pop culture. Dust, who makes her debut in the "New X-Men" series shortly after the September 11 attacks, serves as a significant representation of Muslimah superheroes in comic book culture. Her real name is Sooraya Qodir, and she is portrayed as a devout Sunni Muslim. Dust is easily recognizable by her striking black hijab and niqab, which she wears as a symbol of her faith and identity. What makes her character particularly compelling is how she seamlessly weaves her religious beliefs into her role as a superhero. Unlike traditional portrayals, she challenges the norms of superhero narratives, showcasing that one's faith can coexist with the responsibilities and challenges of being a hero rather than a hindrance (Davis & Westerfelhaus, 2012). However, Dust also has been critiqued for their transformation from veiled figures to sexualized representations. Such portrayals can lead to a misunderstanding of the hijab and other forms of modest dress, which are often misinterpreted as symbols of oppression rather than personal choice and empowerment (Wagner et al., 2012; Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012).

Notable mentions include the female characters in Ejen Ali, an animation series created by Wau Animation Studios. Iman, Dayang, and Aliya are three female characters believed to be Muslimahs based on their appearance. Iman and Dayang were introduced in the series, while Aliya was introduced

later in the Ejen Ali Movie. Iman is a young agent at the MATA Academy, the daughter of a Wushu master, and is recognized for her flowy scarf adorned with darts and her exceptional combat skills. Dayang serves as the chief pillar of TEKNO and is distinctive for styling her hijab as a turban. Aliya, who is Ali's late mother, is celebrated for her inventions, courage, and kindness. Each of these female characters embodies the spirit of female empowerment, demonstrating that wearing a hijab is never an obstacle. The practice of wearing a headscarf or hijab is consistent with the prevailing social expectation of modest dress among Muslim women in Malaysia. (Abdul Wahab et al. 2025; Halim, 2011).

2.3 Muslimah Superheroes Challenging Stereotypes

The portrayal of Muslimah superheroes in contemporary media serves as a critical lens through which to examine and challenge stereotypes associated with Muslim women. The emergence of characters such as Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) and Sooraya Qodir (Dust) reflects a significant shift in the representation of Muslim women in popular culture, particularly in the context of a post-9/11 world. These characters not only embody the complexities of their identities but also serve as vehicles for broader discussions about faith, empowerment, and agency.

Moreover, the narrative surrounding these Muslimah superheroes often serves to alleviate societal anxieties and misconceptions about Islam and Muslim women. As noted by Hosein, the introduction of Muslim superheroines during the War on Terror can be seen as a response to the need for more nuanced representations that counteract negative stereotypes (Hosein, 2024). This dual function of representation – both as a means of empowerment for Muslim women and as a tool for broader societal understanding – underscores the importance of diverse narratives in media.

The empowerment of Muslimah superheroes also resonates with the broader feminist discourse, as these characters challenge not only gender stereotypes but also cultural misconceptions. By asserting their agency and autonomy, they encourage audiences to reconsider the narratives surrounding Muslim women and their roles in society (Medina, 2014). This shift is particularly significant in a media landscape that has historically marginalized or misinterpreted these identities.

3 METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative approach using a semiotic and visual analysis (Rose, 2016) framework (refer to Figure 1). By applying the triangulation model, the Muslimah characters in Monsta were analysed through three distinct lenses: Syntax (form) and Pragmatics (user/audience relationship). And Semantics (meaning). The analysis comprises two phases, with the first focusing on visual observation. This phase aims to examine the representation of Muslimah characters depicted in Monsta's animation. Three main characters have been intentionally selected for in-depth analysis based on this visual examination.

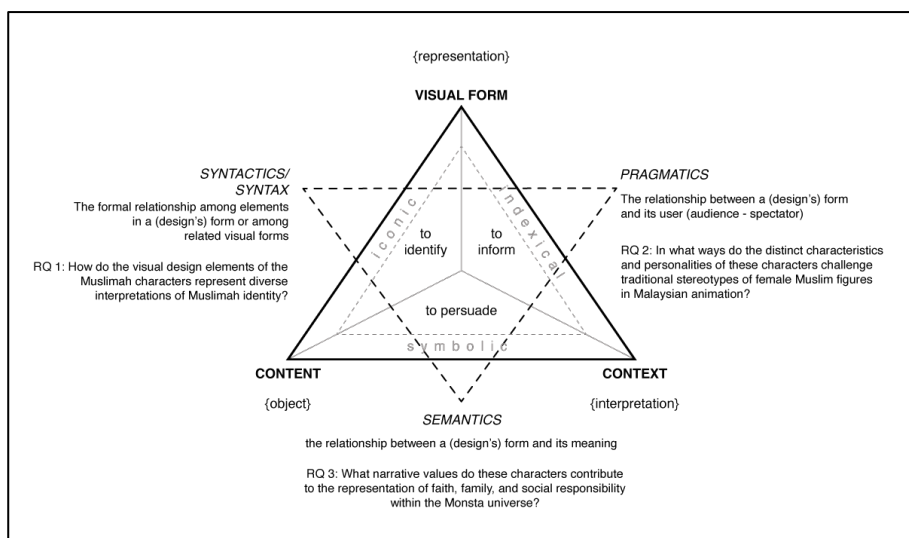



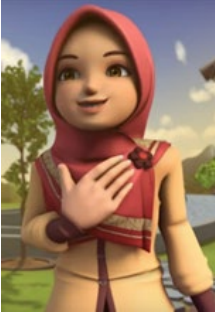
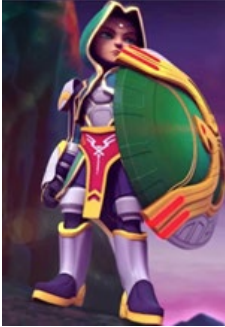


Figure 1 Visual analysis triangulation to analyse the Muslimah characters in Monsta’s animation



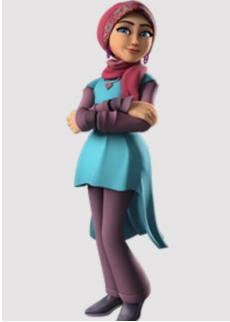


3.2 Visual Observation Analysis



The first phase of this study is to observe the Muslimah characters in Monsta’s film, series, and mini-series. The objective of this method is to investigate how Muslimah characters are visually represented, and all the female characters representing Muslimah from Monsta’s animation series: BoBoiBoy, Mechamato, and PapaPipi are listed (Table 1). Monsta’s characters are intertwined within its storytelling universe; each character is related across series. In the world of animated series, four notable Muslimah characters are featured in BoBoiBoy, each with unique traits and stories. Additionally, Mechamato introduces two strong Muslimah characters who play pivotal roles in the narrative. Finally, PapaPipi showcases another two Muslimah characters, adding diversity and representation to its storyline.

Visually, not all the characters wear the same style of hijab. Culturally, Malaysian Muslim women commonly wear the signature *tudung awal*, shawls, and various other hijab styles. Monsta typically begins with a concept of how a character should look, followed by a creative design of appealing costumes that suit the character's personality. An animated character's race is typically depicted through their character design. This includes their face characteristics, typical body proportions, clothing, and props. These elements represent the character's race (Rizalman, Azri Hilmi, et al.). Research is important in character design. Due to restrictions on portraying hijab in some regions, character designers will use their creativity to express it in various ways.

Table 1 List of female characters from the Monsta animated series

No.	Animation	Name	Role	Character	Character Description
1	<i>Boboiboy</i>	Yaya	Deuteragonist		The first female character appears in the series. Yaya is the second most favoured character in the series after BoBoiBoy.
2		Makcik Wawa (Yaya's Mother)	Minor Character		Yaya's mother. She shares the same trait as Yaya: competitiveness.
3		Shielda	Side Character		Shielda is Sai's twin sister. She is believed not to be human because she mocks Boboiboy as a weak earthling during an endurance test.
4		Kuputeri	Deuteragonist		Tuanku Kuputeri is a humanoid extraterrestrial character from Windara. Her first debut in the Windara arc for Boboiboy Galaxy. She is the only character who wears a turban.
5	<i>Mechamoto</i>	Mara (Maskmara)	Deuteragonist		Mara is one of close friends of Amato and is the first disabled character introduced in the entire franchise.

No.	Animation	Name	Role	Character	Character Description
6		Umi	Minor Character		Amato's mother. She appeared several times, but her role is not as prominent as Aba/ Tok Aba.
7	<i>PapaPipi</i>	Pipi Zola	Protagonist		Pipi Zola is the cheerful daughter of Papa Zola and Mama Zila. Pipi has a doll named Joya.
8		Mama Zila	Side Character		Mama Zila is Papa Zola's wife and Pipi's mother. Unlike Papa Zola, she is a perfectionist.
9		Nekpi	Side Character		NekPi is Pipi's grandmother, which makes her Papa Zola's mother. She is as energetic and vibrant as the rest of the family.
10		Melur	Minor Character		Melur is one of Pipi's classmates and sits next to Pipi in class. She once offered her <i>karipap</i> when Pipi did not bring food to school.




No.	Animation	Name	Role	Character	Character Description
11		Teacher Warni	Minor Character		Teacher Warni is Pipi’s class teacher. She is a caring person who knows how to interact with children effectively.
12		Cik D/ Doktor, Newsreader,	Extra		This unknown female character is an extra. She appeared several times in the series as a doctor and a newsreader.

The female characters depicted are often assumed to be Muslim based on their appearance. While many may not overtly express their beliefs, they typically embrace modest fashion by wearing loose-fitting clothing and head coverings, including hijabs, except for Pipi Zola. These characters exemplify positive qualities that reflect the values associated with being Muslim. Additionally, the hijab serves not only as a visible marker of Muslim identity but also as a powerful tool to challenge and reshape the stereotypes that frequently surround Muslim women (Almansori, 2023).

3.3 In-Depth Visual Analysis

From 12 Muslimah characters, three main female superheroes from each animation were selected: Yaya (BoBoiBoy), Mara (Mechamato), and Pipi Zola (PapaPipi) (Table 2). These three characters were analysed, and their narratives were later unveiled by the animation practitioners during the focus group discussion.

Table 2 Character Analysis of Yaya, Mara, and Pipi Zola

Character	Yaya	Mara	Pipi Zola
Visual			
Series	BoBoiBoy, Fly with Yaya	Mechamato	PapaPipi
Film	BoBoiBoy The Movie (2016), BoBoiBoy the Movie 2 (2019)	Mechamato Movie (2022)	BoBoiBoy Movie 2 (2019), PapaZola The Movie: Game On (2025)

Character	Yaya	Mara	Pipi Zola
First Appearance	Season 1, Episode 1: The Beginning, The Rise of BoBoiBoy	Season 1, Episode 2: King of the Chill (Di Bawah Paras Beku)	BoBoiBoy Movie 2
Name	Yaya	Mara (Tamara)	Pipi Zola (Puteri Intan Payung Indah Zulaikha Odelia Ladasyia Absyari)
Date of Birth	5 th August	–	27 th July
Age	Not specified (but an early teenager)	Not specified (but an early teenager)	Not specified (around 4 – 6 years old)
Alignment	Good	Good	Good
School	Sekolah Rendah Pulau Rintis	Sekolah Kota Hilir	Tadika Warni
Occupation	TAPOPS Lance corporal (BoBoiBoy Galaxy) Secondary school student Primary school student (BoBoiBoy season 1 – season 3), BoBoiBoy the Movie	Secondary school student, secretly a superhero – Maskmara	Kindergartener
Role	Deuteragonist	Deuteragonist	Papa Zola's sidekick/ Confidante
Catchphrase	–	–	Daughter of Justice! Cousin to cuteness! (<i>Anak kebenaran! Saudara kecomelan!</i>)
Superpowers/ Weapon	Strength, Gravity Manipulation	Suit of armour	Power Sphera Eggabot
Costume Design	Long sleeve peplum top, paired with long pants, hijab, five petals flower pin, a pair of goggles, boots, and a power watch	Long-sleeve purple hoodie jacket with floral patterns, a yellow baseball cap, gold-and-yellow mafla, cat-eared headphones, and sitting in a wheelchair.	Double bun hairstyle with pink bows, white short-sleeve shirt paired with knee-length blue pinafore, blue and yellow striped leggings, a bib with P initial,
Colour Palette	Fuchsia pink, magenta, and yellow	Purple and pink	Vibrant light blue and pink
Personality	Very reliable in the team, gentle, empathetic, and competitive.	The smartest, analytical, courageous, responsible, and strong-willed.	Cheeky, vibrant, talkative, and quick-witted.
Back Story	Yaya is Tok Aba's neighbour. She is the first female character to appear in the BoBoiBoy series, helping BoBoiBoy look for Tok Aba's Kokotiam when he first arrived in Kota Hilir.	In the 10th episode of Mechamato's first season, it is revealed that Mara saves a girl from a fire, and her bravery becomes the talk of the town. Unfortunately, she is paralyzed after the incident.	
Trivia	Yaya is not very good at baking cookies.	Mara can sing very well.	Highly imaginative and very good at mathematics.
Product Placement	Yakult	–	Prego Malaysia, Eco-Shop

4 ANALYSIS & RESULTS

4.1 Yaya: The Empowering Superhero

Yaya is the first female character introduced in the BoBoiBoy series, and her character design has undergone many changes (Figure 2). Her true name has never been revealed; she is known as Yaya and will remain so. Yaya's primary aesthetic is pink, symbolizing femininity, and her floral signature is present in all her character designs. In the first season of BoBoiBoy, Yaya is portrayed as a primary school girl studying at Sekolah Rendah Pulau Rintis. The new Yaya now resembles a teenager, and her story focuses on her role as a member of the TAPOPS (Tracker and Protector of Power Sphera). According to Monsta, Yaya is the most favoured female character and the second most famous character after BoBoiBoy.

When creating Yaya, Monsta wanted to create a Muslimah superhero that would inspire the audience. Being a superhero is not just about superpowers; it is also about being kind to others. Understanding the importance of influence, they have set a good example. Yaya is portrayed as kind and empathetic. Even so, Yaya has a competitive side to her. Although Ying is her best friend, they both always want to be the best on the test.

In the earlier series, Yaya received a power watch from Ochobot, which granted her the ability to manipulate gravity; as a result, she could fly. Although she was a small girl at that time, she demonstrated strength and helped her friends. Being a reliable team member, Yaya never let her teammates down and always helped as much as she could. Her gravity manipulation allows her to lift or carry her friends and fight bad guys without touching them. This aligns with what a devout Muslimah should do, and her beliefs do not hinder her from becoming a superhero.



Figure 2 One of the earliest versions of Yaya

Yaya has her own spin-off show titled "Fly with Yaya." According to Monsta, when they initially presented the concept to the Tohoku Tourism Board, they were pleasantly surprised by the Japanese audience's acceptance of Yaya wearing her hijab. They demonstrated a deep understanding and respect for her decision to wear the hijab for religious reasons. Following the positive reception of the first season of "Fly with Yaya," the second season follows Yaya as she travels alongside her Japanese friend, Tomoyo. Notably, Yaya speaks Bahasa Malaysia, while Tomoyo speaks Japanese.

4.2 Mara: The Secret Superhero

Mara is one of Amato's best friends, alongside Pian, and Deep in the Mechamoto series. In Bahasa Malaysia, "mara" is a verb meaning "to move forward". However, her real name is Tamara, derived from the word "Tamar," meaning "date." One of the key strengths of the date palm is its resilience to harsh climatic conditions. The tree is well-adapted to harsh environments, demonstrating a remarkable

ability to survive with minimal water. This resilience is attributed to its deep root system, which allows it to access groundwater and withstand drought conditions (Abu-Soad et al., 2017). The character's name is a metaphor for their personality, reflecting who they are.



Figure 3 Screenshot of Mara saving a girl in episode 10: The Arsonist (Api Jadi Lawan)

Mara is the first disabled character introduced by Monsta. Mara's outfit draws inspiration from streetwear fashion, showcasing a unique interpretation of modesty. Instead of wearing a traditional hijab, she opts for a cap and a hoodie to cover her hair, blending contemporary style with her values. Mara relies on her wheelchair to navigate her surroundings, but that doesn't deter her adventurous spirit. With her friends by her side, she embraces every opportunity for exploration, whether it's solving a mystery, catching bad robots, or embarking on a camping trip. Mara's determination and enthusiasm inspire her friends, as they seamlessly adapt their adventures to ensure everyone can participate and enjoy the experience together.

In episode 10 of season 1: The Arsonist, it is revealed that Mara was once a normal girl who could walk. Mara recalls a time when she tried to save a little girl trapped in a house due to a fire. Unfortunately, she was hit by falling debris, which is why she is now paralyzed. However, this incident never breaks her spirit; in fact, she is portrayed as someone who always moves forward and views everything positively. This representation is essential for fostering a deeper understanding of disability and promoting empathy among audiences (Shaji, 2023).

In the later episodes, it becomes clear that Mara is one of the secret superheroes known as Maskmana. This incredible suit of Armor is worn by multiple individuals, effectively concealing the wearer's true identity and adding an intriguing layer of mystery to the character. When Mara puts on the suit, she becomes Maskmara and regains the ability to walk.

4.3 Pipi Zola: The Cute Superhero

Pipi Zola is the only child of Papa Zola and Mama Zila. The name Pipi Zola is an abbreviation for *Puteri Intan Payung Indah Zulaikha Odelia Ladasyia Absyari*. This name confidently reflects the trend among modern parents in Malaysia who favour elaborate, lengthy names for their children. She is affectionately called Pipi, a name that translates to "cheek" in Bahasa Malaysia, which perfectly captures her playful, cheeky personality. Pipi is first introduced in BoBoiBoy Movie 2 and has her own Power Sphera, Eggabot. Although Pipi's appearance on screen may not be as heroic as that of other characters, she left a significant mark on the film.



Figure 3 Screenshot of Pipi in her school uniform

Pipi has a very close relationship with her father, Papa Zola. They star in their own animated series called "PapaPipi." Unlike other animated titles produced in Malaysia, this title has no gaps or conjunctions. This choice is intentional, reflecting the strong bond between father and daughter. PapaPipi is a series of family-friendly short animations featuring the adventures of Papa Zola and Pipi Zola. Together, they embark on small quests that sometimes grow into larger experiences.

In PapaPipi, Pipi is always shown alongside others on screen, emphasizing the importance of children's safety. This reflects the idea that children should never be left unattended and must always have guardians by their side to ensure they remain in a secure and nurturing environment. It's essential to communicate this subliminal message thoughtfully and unobtrusively to the audience. This approach will ensure that the message is received positively and effectively in a more entertaining way.

Among all of Monsta's Muslimah characters, Pipi is the only one portrayed without a hijab. But Pipi is the one who practices her faith, evidently on screen. In the series, Pipi reminded her father about the upcoming month of Ramadhan, reciting the Quran, and fasting during Ramadhan. Ramadan is challenging for a child like her, but she makes it an enjoyable journey.

In addition to being a Muslimah, Pipi also symbolizes the children of Generation Alpha. She is quick-witted, yet she never talks back to her parents. She exemplifies how a child can be smart and spontaneous while remaining polite and obedient.

5 CONCLUSION

Yaya, Mara, and PipiZola showcase diversity by challenging global stereotypes. The research concludes that Monsta's animation serves as a critical tool for reclaiming the narrative of Muslimah. Through Yaya, the narrative offers a traditional yet empowered superhero; through Mara, it provides an inclusive representation of disability and modern modesty; and through PipiZola, she demonstrates the joyful practice of faith and family values. By depicting these characters as superheroes and role models who are simultaneously devout and empowered, Monsta alleviates societal misconceptions about Islam. The study suggests that such nuanced representation is essential for fostering broader societal understanding and proving that religious identity is not a hindrance to heroism, but rather a source of strength and integrity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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