

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Japan is widely recognized for its technological advancement and cultural influence, yet beneath this global image lies a society characterized by intense social discipline, rigid work ethics, and high expectations for individual contribution. The concept of *gaman* (endurance) and *shōshika* (declining birthrate) are reflections of the pressures faced by many Japanese citizens in maintaining societal stability while grappling with personal well-being. According to Haga et al., (2024), Japan's work culture which emphasizes long working hours, group loyalty, and emotional restraint has contributed to rising mental health issues such as anxiety, burnout, and depression. These conditions are not limited to corporate environments but also affect individuals in creative fields like manga and animation, where competition, deadlines, and emotional labor are deeply intertwined. As a result, many young creators experience psychological pressure that mirrors the broader societal struggles of modern Japan.

In the anime and manga industry, work pressure and understanding of mental health often arise in both creative works and academic discussions. A study by Hajek and König, (2024) on the German population shows that a strong interest in anime and manga is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and social isolation, although it is also associated with positive subjective well-being such as feelings of happiness and enjoyment with others. These findings suggest that engagement with anime and manga

culture involves complex interactions between psychological vulnerability and emotional or social benefits.

Based on this perspective, previous studies have analyzed how Japanese media depicts work culture and social pressure through narratives and character construction. Upik (2021) ,using Stuart Hall's constructive approach, analyzed the anime *Shirobako* and found that it depicts the dedication and passion of creative workers while also revealing structural problems such as long working hours, low wages, job insecurity, and power imbalances in the anime industry. This study demonstrates how representation analysis can reveal broader Japanese social values and workplace realities reflected in media texts, particularly through the experiences of creative characters.

Previous studies have explored how anime represents cultural values and social issues through semiotic and representational approaches. Harsana and Putra (2020) analyzed *Barakamon*, showing how Japanese cultural norms are communicated through visual images and narrative symbols. Vanie & Javiera (2023) researched *Tokyo Revengers*, focusing on the symbolic depiction of violence and juvenile delinquency as forms of social deviance. interpreted the character Omota Uramichi as a satirical representation of adult fatigue, reflecting psychological pressures in working life. Similarly, Upik (2021) highlights the representation of passion and working conditions of creative workers in the anime *Shirobako*, revealing issues such as dedication, power imbalances, and production pressures in the Japanese animation industry.

The study has mostly focused on anime series and analyzed cultural or social issues in a broad context using semiotic or thematic approaches. There is still little research discussing anime movie that specifically depict the psychological struggles of creative individuals, especially in the manga industry. Furthermore, few studies apply a representational framework to analyze how visual and narrative elements build mental pressure and creative anxiety. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing *Look Back* as a representation of the psychological burden and creative pressure experienced by a young manga creator.

Movie *Look Back* was produced by Studio Durian and directed by Kiyotaka Oshiyama, premiering in theaters in 2024, following the huge popularity of Tatsuki Fujimoto's one-shot manga published in 2021. Upon its release, *Look Back* received strong critical acclaim from both audiences and critics, particularly for its emotional depth, minimalist visual style, and honest portrayal of creative struggles. Many viewers interpreted the movie as a realistic and painful reflection on the pressures faced by artists, especially young creators, in the manga industry. This positive reception indicates that the movie resonates with a broader social awareness of mental health issues, aligning with contemporary discussions about emotional vulnerability and burnout in creative professions.

In the real life, manga artists are widely known to work under tight schedules, strict deadlines, and competitive expectations, often leading to chronic stress, exhaustion, and mental health challenges. Reports and

interviews with professional manga artist frequently highlight long working hours, isolation, and pressure to continuously produce successful work, conditions that mirror the psychological struggles depicted in *Look Back*. Therefore, this movie serves as a cultural bridge between academic findings on anime and manga consumption and the realities experienced by creators, paving the way for a deeper analysis of Fujino's character as a representation of creative pressure and mental conflict.

Movie *Look Back* (2024) was adapted from the manga by Tatsuki Fujimoto, tells the story of the main character Fujino, a young girl who dreams of becoming a manga artist. Through an emotional journey marked by guilt and competitive pressure, the movie depicts the harsh realities faced by manga creators. Napier (2018) explains that anime constructs meaning not only through narrative content but also through visual structure, temporal rhythm, and bodily movements and emotions within the frame. Through pauses, silences, and minimalist images, anime is able to express internal psychological tension. In this case, *Look Back* visually represents Fujino's inner struggle as a creator, driven by artistic passion while simultaneously burdened by expectations and creative pressure making her character a symbolic reflection of the psychological conflicts inherent in creative work.

To interpret the meaning of these representations, Hall's theory of representation remains highly relevant. Hall (1997) emphasizes that representation is not simply about reflecting reality but about actively constructing meaning through systems of language, signs, and media practices.

Through this lens, Fujino is not merely a fictional character but also a media construction that reveals the demanding and often invisible labor realities within Japan's creative industries.

B. Research Focus

The focus of this study is to analyze of Fujino's character in the movie *Look Back*, which reflects the reality of life as a manga artist in Japan, particularly in relation to the social and cultural pressures of working in the manga industry.

C. Problems Statement

The problems of the study are to analyze:

1. How is the Fujino's character related to social and cultural pressures of working in the Japanese manga industry?
2. Why does Fujino's character in the movie *Look Back* represent manga artist real life in Japan?

D. Purposes of the study

The purposes of the study are to:

1. Analyze Fujino's characters' relation to social and cultural pressure of working in Japanese manga industry.
2. Analyze the causes of Fujino's character as representation of manga artist real life in Japan.

E. Significance of the study

This study offers several benefits in both theoretical and practical contexts. Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of communication, particularly

in the study of Japanese media and popular culture, by applying Hall's theory of representation to analyze the portrayal of manga artists in animated movie. This study expands the academic discussion on how meaning and identity are constructed through narrative and visual elements in animation.

In practical terms, this research provides insights for movie enthusiasts, cultural critics, and the general public regarding the social realities and professional challenges faced by manga artists in Japan, as depicted through animated movie. In addition, this research supports English language education by demonstrating the use of animated movie as authentic teaching materials in English language classrooms. These findings can help students develop skills related to narrative text comprehension, character analysis, and critical discussion of cultural and social issues in English.

F. Definition of Key Terms

1. Representation

Refers to the process of meaning formation through language and media, in which the media plays an active role in shaping perceptions of social reality.

2. Manga artist

Japanese comic creators who work independently or in production teams and face high work pressure in the Japanese entertainment industry.

3. Japanese Sosial Work Culture and Cultural Pressure

Refers to a system of values and work ethic that emphasizes dedication, long working hours, and individual sacrifice for the success of

the group or company and external demands and expectations imposed by society and cultural norms. In the context of the manga industry, this includes pressure to succeed, fear of failure, and societal views on productivity, which often lead to stress, burnout, and isolation.

4. Movie *Look Back*

Referring to the Japanese animated movie released in 2024, directed by Kiyotaka Oshiyama and adapted from Tatsuki Fujimoto's one-chapter manga, *Look Back*. This movie depicts the emotional journey and creative struggles of a young, ambitious manga artist, and serves as a cultural text representing the psychological pressures, creative work, and job-related challenges within the Japanese manga industry.