



The Representation Of Manga Artist In Japan Through The Character Of Fujino In Movie *Look Back*

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ABSTRACT

This study analysis the portrayal of a manga artist's life in Japan through the character Fujino in the movie *Look Back* (2024), directed by Kiyotaka Oshiyama and adapted from the manga by Tatsuki Fujimoto. The aims of the study are to analyze the relation of Fujino's character to the social and cultural pressures of working in the Japanese manga industry and to find the causes of the representation. Using Hall's theory of representation within a qualitative content analysis framework, primary data were collected through documentation of relevant scenes and dialogues in the movie and supported by secondary data from related literature, then verified through triangulation to strengthen the validity of the interpretation. The findings indicate that Fujino's character reflects the real pressures faced by manga artists, including intense competition, creative anxiety, self-doubt, and social isolation. It also represents broader industry pressures such as an identity entirely tied to one's work, ongoing pressure even after achieving success, and the expectation to continue producing work despite personal suffering. This suggests that *Look Back* serves as a cultural text that reveals the demanding and often unseen realities of work in Japan's creative industries, and that the movie can serve as authentic material to support English language instruction, particularly in developing students' multimodal literacy, character analysis skills, and intercultural understanding.



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1. INTRODUCTION

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. Concepts such as *gaman* (endurance) reflect the pressures faced by many Japanese citizens in maintaining societal stability while managing 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 such as manga and animation, where competition, deadlines, and emotional labor are deeply intertwined.

Interest in anime and manga itself has been linked to complex psychological effects. A study on the German population by Hajek and König (2024) found that a strong interest in anime and manga is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and social isolation, while also being associated with positive subjective well-being such as happiness and enjoyment shared with others. These findings suggest that engagement with anime and manga culture involves an interaction between psychological vulnerability and emotional or social benefit, which motivates further inquiry into how the industry itself is represented in animated media.

Previous studies have examined how Japanese animation represents work culture and social pressure through narrative and visual 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 animation industry. Harsana and Putra (2020) analyzed *Barakamon* to show how Japanese cultural norms are communicated through

visual images and narrative symbols, while Vanie and Javiera (2023) examined Tokyo Revengers, focusing on the symbolic depiction of violence and juvenile delinquency as forms of social deviance. Valentina (2024) interpreted the character Uramichi Oniisan as a satirical representation of adult fatigue, reflecting the psychological pressures of working life.

These studies have mostly focused on anime series and examined cultural or social issues in a broad context using semiotic or thematic approaches. There is still limited research discussing an animated movie that specifically depicts the psychological struggles of creative individuals, particularly in the manga industry, and few studies apply a representational framework to analyze how visual and narrative elements construct creative anxiety and mental pressure. This study addresses that gap by analyzing *Look Back* as a representation of the psychological burden and creative pressure experienced by a young manga creator.

Look Back was produced by Studio Durian and directed by Kiyotaka Oshiyama, released in theatres in 2024 following the popularity of Tatsuki Fujimoto's one-shot manga published in 2021. The movie received strong critical acclaim for its emotional depth, minimalist visual style, and honest portrayal of creative struggle, and many viewers interpreted it as a realistic reflection of the pressures faced by young creators in the manga industry. Napier (2018, as cited in the original research) explains that anime constructs meaning not only through narrative content but also through visual structure, temporal rhythm, and bodily movement, so that *Look Back* visually represents Fujino's inner struggle as a creator through pauses, silences, and minimalist imagery.

To interpret the meaning of these representations, this study relies on Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which holds that representation is not simply about reflecting reality but about actively constructing meaning through systems of language, signs, and media practice. Through this lens, Fujino is understood not merely as a fictional character but as a media construction that reveals the demanding and often invisible labor realities within Japan's creative industries. Based on this background, the present study analyzes: (1) how Fujino's character relates to the social and cultural pressures of working in the Japanese manga industry, and (2) why Fujino's character in *Look Back* represents the real life of a manga artist in Japan.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used qualitative content analysis to examine the representation of Fujino's character in the animated movie *Look Back* (2024). According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning, context, and interpretation rather than measuring variables numerically, and a research approach consists of plans and procedures that guide the researcher from philosophical assumptions to the detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Within this design, qualitative content analysis was applied through Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which views meaning as socially constructed through language, images, and cultural codes; the movie was therefore analyzed not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as a constructed text that represents the life and struggles of a manga artist through the character Fujino.

The primary data of this study consisted of scenes, dialogues, and visual elements in *Look Back* that show how Fujino is represented as a manga artist, including her dialogue, actions, facial expressions, visual composition, background details, and key turning-point scenes (Creswell, 2014). Secondary data were drawn from academic literature on Hall's theory of representation, studies of anime and manga, Japanese work culture, and the creative workforce, as well as relevant media reports, which were used to contextualize the movie's representations within real social and industrial conditions.

Data were collected through documentation, following Miles and Huberman (2014) view that documentation is well suited to qualitative research because it provides stable, rich, and non-reactive data for analyzing cultural texts such as movies. The researcher watched *Look Back* repeatedly, identified scenes relevant to the research focus, recorded dialogues and visual details, and classified the documented material into thematic categories such as creative pressure, competition, guilt, emotional exhaustion, and artistic passion.

To ensure the validity of the findings, this study applied triangulation as the main verification technique. Following Creswell (2014) and the triangulation approach for qualitative content analysis described by Renz et al. (2018), the researcher compared the representational findings from the movie with Hall's theory of representation and with previous research and media reports on Japanese work culture and the manga industry, and evaluated the consistency of interpretations across visual, narrative, and theoretical data. Data analysis itself proceeded through data recognition and selection, coding and thematic grouping, interpretation using Hall's (1997) theory of representation and encoding-decoding model, and finally synthesis with secondary data on the manga industry.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Fujino's Character as a Representation of Manga Artist Real Life in Japan

The first research question examines why Fujino's character in *Look Back* represents the social and cultural pressures experienced by manga artists in Japan. Based on the observation of scenes, dialogues, visual composition, and character actions, three categories of pressure were identified: competitive pressure and the fear of being defeated, creative anxiety and self-doubt, and social isolation as a consequence of creative dedication.

3.1.1 Competitive pressure and the fear of being defeated

In the movie's opening scenes, Fujino is portrayed as a confident and prolific manga artist who draws easily and receives praise from her classmates, reflected in her posture, her energetic drawing style, and the warm lighting of her workspace. This balance is shattered when Fujino first sees Kyomoto's paintings: her expression shifts from curiosity to shock, the color palette changes, and the shadows around her face deepen, while the absence of dialogue underlines what Hall (1997) describes as the construction of meaning through silence. After this scene, Fujino appears listless and withdrawn, staring at her unfinished drawings with obvious dissatisfaction; her slumped shoulders and lowered gaze illustrate the psychological paralysis that competitive pressure can cause, suggesting that competition is not merely an external situation but an ingrained emotional experience that erodes her confidence from within.



Figure 1. Fujino run through the field.

3.1.2 Creative anxiety and self-doubt

The second category of pressure is the recurring tension between Fujino's desire to create and her fear that her work is substandard or unworthy. One key scene shows Fujino anxiously awaiting readers' reactions after submitting a chapter of a collaborative manga series, in which her smallness within a much larger visual frame captures the anxiety of having creative work displayed for judgment. This anxiety reaches its peak after Kyomoto's death, when Fujino, alone and broken, tries to draw but is unable to continue; this moment of paralysis, shown in silence with minimal movement, symbolizes the collapse of the creative self under an unbearable psychological weight and is presented not as personal weakness but as a natural consequence of full creative immersion.

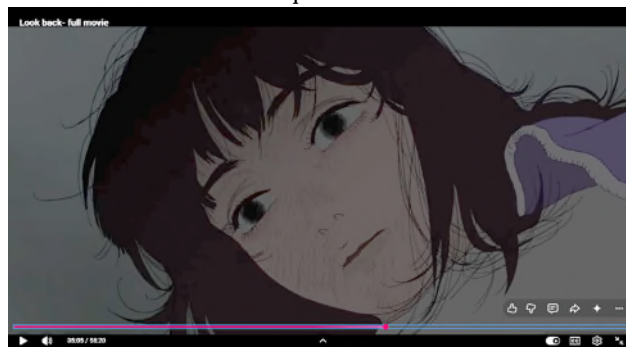


Figure 2. Fujino's paralysis Kyomoto's death news

3.1.3 Social isolation as a consequence of creative dedication

Throughout *Look Back*, Fujino's dedication to her work consistently distances her from everyday social life, a pattern most extreme in Kyomoto, who refuses to attend school because of social anxiety and spends all his time drawing alone. The movie portrays this isolation not as failure but as evidence of extraordinary dedication; Kinoshita (2025) similarly describes how manga artists work under tight deadlines and the pressures of digital production, often at the expense of personal well-being. Even during Fujino and Kyomoto's collaboration, their social lives remain limited almost entirely to each other and their shared project, highlighting how a manga artist's life becomes structured around creative production rather than broader social participation.



Figure 3. Fujino's limited social live

3.2. The causes of Fujino's Character Representation of Manga Artist Real Life in Japan

The second research question examines how Fujino's character relates to the structural and cultural conditions of the Japanese manga industry. The analysis revealed three representational dimensions: identity formation through creative practice, public expectation and the pressure of validation, and creative resilience as a cultural narrative of recovery.

3.2.1 Identity formation through creative practice

From the opening scenes, Fujino's sense of identity is rooted in her ability to draw manga; her self-confidence, social status, and sense of purpose are all expressed through her work, so that when her creative ability is challenged by Kyomoto's superior work, it is her entire identity that feels challenged, not merely her skill. This is consistent with Finkel et al. (2017), who explain that creative workers often develop their personal identity through their creative activity and professional role. The movie encodes this reality by never portraying Fujino in contexts unrelated to drawing, visually illustrating the cultural expectation that creative professionals subordinate all other aspects of themselves to their profession.



Figure 4. Fujino's overwork at her desk

3.2.2 Public expectation and the pressure of validation

The movie shows that public recognition brings its own pressure: the pressure to keep producing work, the anxiety of maintaining quality, and the realization that public enthusiasm is conditional. According to Lee (2017), creative industries place workers under constant pressure to produce valuable work and maintain public recognition, making validation an important source of both motivation and stress; Robbins (2022) similarly argues that commercial success in the manga industry functions as an additional constraint that narrows an artist's creative freedom. This is conveyed visually through Fujino's unchanged workspace and working hours even after achieving success, suggesting that recognition increases pressure rather than reducing it.



Figure 5. The impact of public expectations on the company's revenue.

3.2.3 Creative resilience as a cultural narrative of recovery

In the closing scenes, Fujino picks up her pen and begins drawing again, a moment framed as the most important turning point in her character's journey and as a purposeful act to honor Kyomoto's memory. This act is directly related to the Japanese cultural value of *gaman* (endurance), implying that for manga artists, suffering is not merely endured but transformed into art. This conclusion, however, carries an ideological message: although moving, it simultaneously normalizes the psychological burden depicted throughout the story, reinforcing the cultural expectation that a true artist must continue to create regardless of personal sacrifice.



Figure 6. Fujino's return to drawing.

3.3. Discussion

The two research questions reveal a consistent pattern: *Look Back* systematically encodes the social, cultural, and psychological pressures of Japan's creative industry through visual language, narrative structure, and character behaviour rather than through explicit dialogue. The three pressures identified, competitive pressure, creative anxiety, and social isolation, do not exist in isolation but operate as a mutually reinforcing cycle. The competitive pressure Fujino experiences when confronted with Kyomoto's superior work aligns with Banks and Connor's (2017) argument that creative workers are highly vulnerable to identity disruption when their self-esteem is closely tied to perceptions of their own skill or originality, a disruption the director conveys through shifting color palettes, deepening shadows, and silence rather than verbal explanation.

This instability leads directly to creative anxiety and self-doubt; Fujino's inability to draw after Kyomoto's death illustrates Finkel et al.'s (2017) claim that for creative individuals, the inability to produce work is an existential crisis rather than a mere professional setback. Social isolation, the third dimension, is not portrayed as a problem to be resolved but as a condition considered normal for a serious artist, carrying ideological implications for how audiences understand the relationship between creativity and social life.

At the level of the manga industry, Fujino functions as a symbolic figure whose identity formation, experience of public validation, and eventual resilience portray her not merely as someone who experiences pressure, but as someone who fully embodies it. Her return to drawing after mourning, framed through the cultural value of *ganbaru* (perseverance in the face of suffering), is emotionally resonant but also aestheticizes and glorifies the pressures depicted throughout the movie, presenting suffering as a prerequisite for authentic creative expression. Overall, *Look Back* functions simultaneously as a humanistic tribute to creative dedication and as an ideological text reinforcing the dominant cultural narrative of what it means to be a genuine artist in Japan.

Beyond its value as a cultural and cinematic text, *Look Back* also carries pedagogical potential for English Language Teaching (ELT). Because much of its meaning is conveyed through visual language and silence rather than dialogue, it exemplifies the value of authentic material that exposes learners to natural, culturally contextualized meaning-making (Kaboocha, 2016), consistent with the view that meaning-making today is increasingly multimodal and that literacy pedagogy needs to extend beyond written text (Cope et al., 1996). Its cultural content, including *gaman* and the normalization of social isolation among creative workers, further provides material for developing learners' intercultural communicative competence, which Chaya and Inpin (2020) found to improve alongside speaking skills when movie-based instruction is used in the EFL classroom. Fujino's character can additionally serve as a resource for productive writing and speaking tasks, such as comparative character analysis or debate on the ethics of the manga industry's treatment of creative workers.

4. CONCLUSION

This study found that Fujino's character in *Look Back* represents the real pressures faced by manga artists in Japan through competitive pressure, creative anxiety and self-doubt, and social isolation, each conveyed largely

through visual rather than verbal means, consistent with Hall's (1997) view that meaning can be constructed through silence and absence. The study further found that this representation is rooted in an identity entirely tied to creative work, a pressure of public recognition that persists and even intensifies after success, and a closing act of creative resilience that, while emotionally affirming, also reinforces the expectation that artists must keep creating regardless of personal suffering. Together, these findings indicate that *Look Back* functions as a cultural text that reveals the demanding and often unseen realities of work in Japan's creative industries, and that the movie can serve as authentic material to support English language instruction, particularly in developing students' multimodal literacy, character-analysis skills, and intercultural understanding. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing *Look Back* with other media depicting creative workers, such as *Shirobako* or *Blue Period*, or by examining audience reception of Fujino's character across different cultural contexts.

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