

CONSENT NARRATIVES IN ANIME AND MANGA: HOW THEY
SHAPE IMPRESSIONABLE ADOLESCENTS' ATTITUDES
TOWARDS RELATIONSHIPS

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This thesis explores how consent narratives in anime and manga with younger target audiences influence adolescents' perceptions of romantic relationships. Many popular series depict non-consensual romantic interactions through the framing of humor or harmless misunderstandings. This can normalize boundary violations and reduce acts of sexual harassment or coercion to comedic tropes. If impressionable audiences encounter these narratives as their first impression of consent, it could set a problematic standard for what consent and relationships look like for younger consumers. Through a mixed-methods survey of college-aged consumers, this study investigates consumption patterns, perceptions of influence, and how responses to non-consensual portrayals shift as audiences mature. Shonen (young male demographic) emerged as the genre most associated with non-consensual behavior, raising important questions about how gender expectations and romantic ideals are communicated through media. Findings suggest that participants who encountered these narratives during impressionable stages were more likely to initially overlook or normalize boundary violations, but their reactions became increasingly critical as they aged. At an older age, respondents largely took a negotiated perspective to these portrayals, disliking but accepting them. Drawing on feminist media theory, including Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and Yuka Nishiyama's analysis of manga's gender

hierarchies, the study highlights how female characters are often stripped of agency and framed as passive objects of male desire. These findings suggest that when media targeted at youth trivializes consent, harmful relationship expectations can emerge unless they are challenged through critical media literacy. Understanding how audiences interpret and internalize consent portrayals is key to addressing broader questions about media influence, gender socialization, and ethical media production.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	8
Background	12
Brief History of Anime and Manga	12
Genre Breakdown	15
Role of Eroticism in Japanese Art	19
Dangers of Consuming Sexualized and Violent Content	20
Methodology	24
Manga and Anime Consumption	27
Perceptions of Influence: Lowered vs. Heightened Expectations for Romantic Relationships	30
Reactions to Ignoring Boundaries and Harmful Behavior at a Young Age	32
Reactions to Ignoring Boundaries and Harmful Behavior at an Older Age	35
Discussion	37
Conclusion	41
Appendix	44
References	47

List of Figures

Figure 1. Manga and anime genres consumed by respondents 28

Figure 2. Manga and anime genres respondents remember containing nonconsensual behaviors growing up 29

Introduction

Growing up, comic books were always one of my favorite forms of literature. I would go to the library just to sit and read in the comic book section for hours. The simple yet clever humor and the touch of whimsy have resonated with me my whole life. I would watch all sorts of animated TV shows and began to appreciate the unique creative elements enabled by animated art. As I grew older, I lost touch with my interest in comics and animation until a friend introduced me to anime in high school. I fell back in love with the creativity of animated art and soon found that most of these shows were created based on Japanese comics known as manga. I began to get back into reading comics and even decided to become a comics and cartoon studies minor in college. As I transitioned to college, I got busier and stopped consuming anime and manga for pleasure, but I still loved learning about the medium. Through the media studies and comics and cartoon studies programs, I learned how to consume media more critically and began questioning some of the portrayals and narratives in the anime and manga I had enjoyed growing up. I recognized how media narratives consumed by children can make an impression on the formation of their attitudes (Kirsh, 2006). The convergence of these interests sparked my curiosity in researching how consent narratives in anime and manga may shape adolescents' attitudes on relationships.

In recent years, the study of the impact of sexual themes in anime and manga has begun to garner significant attention (Choo, 2008; Ellsworth, 2018; Greenwood, 2007; Gül, 2023; Perper & Cornog, 2002; Reysen et al., 2017; Rodriguez, 2015). In contemporary discourse, the primary focus of research has largely been focused on the sexualization of minors as well as using boys' love manga as a lens to explore queer studies (Eelmaa, 2022; Gül, 2023; McLelland & Yoo, 2007; Ng & Li, 2020; Walker et al., 2016; Wood, 2006; Zanghellini, 2009a; Zanghellini,

2009b; Zhao et al., 2017). While these topics are undoubtedly important, the narrow concentration on them has inadvertently diverted attention away from other important aspects of anime storytelling. Specifically, how romantic pursuit is portrayed to young audiences.

In certain genres of manga and anime, often targeted to younger males, the female characters are overly sexualized and made targets of romantic pursuit. Series will often put these characters in situations where they are either accidentally or purposefully molested, creating an opportunity for visual pleasure disguised within a comedic framing. Specifically, these series leverage a common narrative where a heroic yet perverted protagonist casually assaults their love interest over the course of the story. Their actions are framed in a way that allows the protagonist to eschew responsibility, by either making their perversion an immutable characteristic of the character's nature, or by making the character shy and their actions accidental. By the end of the story, these actions often lead to the protagonist winning over the affection of their love interest, retroactively justifying their actions. These narratives, in which protagonists are rewarded for nonconsensual behavior, could give younger consumers the wrong impression of what constitutes appropriate romantic pursuit.

For this study, I will use the following definition of consent used by Indiana University: "Consent is agreement or permission expressed through affirmative, voluntary words or actions that are mutually understandable to all parties involved, to engage in a specific sexual act at a specific time." Consent, a fundamental ethical concept, plays a pivotal role in interpersonal interactions, romantic relationships, and sexual encounters (Shi et al., 2025). Examining audience attitudes toward the complexities and variations in how consent is portrayed across different anime and manga genres, narratives, and character dynamics remain largely unexplored

within academic literature. In this study, I examine how exposure to narratives where consent is disregarded in anime and manga have shaped consumers views on relationship dynamics.

Most American media targeted toward younger audiences seek to avoid sexualization. However, in Japanese media such as anime and manga, this is not the case. If impressionable adolescents look up to these heroes, as I did, who sometimes disregard consent as a method to garner romantic attention, they may conclude that this is how people are supposed to gain romantic and/or sexual attention. It has already been found that in the anime and manga community, women frequently face sexual assault and harassment, often in open public spaces (Rodriguez, 2015). Still, there has been limited research on the way audiences perceive consent narratives. This research aims to contribute to the growing field of comic studies and aid in understanding the perceptions consumers have of this content and its relation to their perceptions of relationships.

In what follows, I offer a brief history of manga focusing on the different genres that correspond with target audiences, examine the historical role of eroticism in Japanese art and the ways it formed the cultural underpinnings of manga, as well as discuss previous research on the dangers of violent and sexualized content. Through my research, I explore the following questions: What are the genres that these audiences grew up consuming? To what extent do consumers of anime/manga targeted towards younger audiences believe that the portrayal of romantic relationships in these series influenced their perceptions of relationships? What are audiences' thoughts or feelings on how these anime/manga represent romantic relationships when consent is questionable? How has the reaction to this content differed as consumers have aged? To examine these questions, I surveyed people who grew up consuming anime/manga and asked

them about their perceptions of this content and how they believe it may or may not have impacted them.

Background

Brief History of Anime and Manga

The origins of Manga are complex and deeply rooted in Japan's rich tradition of graphic art, with significant influences from both indigenous and external sources. Early forms of graphic art that could be described as manga can be traced to the 12th century, particularly through narrative scrolls such as the *Chô-jûgiga* (Animal Scrolls), which combined humor, grotesque imagery, and social satire (Bouissou, 2010). During the Edo period (1603–1867), Japan's urban culture flourished, contributing to manga's development through *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, kabuki theater, and illustrated novels. These art forms shared a common trait of blending text with imagery, which significantly influenced manga's visual storytelling techniques (Bouissou, 2010).

Manga, as we know it today, originated in Japan during the late 19th century in the Meiji era (1868–1912), a period characterized by rapid modernization and increased Western influence. With the introduction of Western printing technologies, manga began to take on a more formalized structure, incorporating techniques like lithography and offset printing (Bouissou, 2010). The term "manga" emerged during this period, initially applied to satirical illustrations that blended humor with social commentary. Initially, the term "manga" encompassed a variety of visual narratives, including caricatures, political cartoons, and "punch pictures," primarily published in newspapers and magazines. These early forms of manga served as vehicles for social commentary and satire, utilizing simplified illustrations and sequential art to convey complex ideas within the constraints of government censorship (Duus, 2001). The introduction of "koma-manga" (panel manga) during this period established the foundational

format that continues to define manga today, emphasizing the sequential presentation of narratives through a series of illustrated panels (Stewart, 2014).

The aftermath of World War II marked a significant period of expansion and diversification for manga. Japan's reconstruction efforts and economic recovery created a fertile environment for cultural production, including manga (Hartzheim, 2015; Bouissou, 2010). Manga's post-war popularity was further driven by the trauma of Japan's defeat, which introduced themes of survival, hope, and the tension between traditional values and Western ideals. These themes, alongside an increasingly sophisticated publishing industry, allowed manga to resonate with a broad audience (Bainbridge & Norris, 2010; Bouissou, 2010; Bryce & Davis, 2010).

A pivotal development in this era was the rise of akahon, or "red book" manga, which played a crucial role in shaping the modern manga industry. Emerging in the black markets of Osaka, akahon were cheaply produced, staple-bound booklets with red covers, ranging from ten to thirty-six pages in length (Hartzheim, 2015). Initially used for children's adventure stories and detective fiction, these booklets quickly evolved into a medium for longer, more elaborate narratives. Akahon was instrumental in popularizing story manga, shifting away from the short gag strips that had previously dominated the medium. It was within this format that Tezuka Osamu, often hailed as the "Godfather of Manga," revolutionized the medium with his innovative storytelling and artistic techniques. Growing up on Disney animations, Tezuka introduced cinematic elements such as motion lines, extreme angles, and eyeline matches, which enhanced the dynamism and emotional depth of manga narratives (Bouissou, 2010; Bryce & Davis, 2010; Hartzheim, 2015; Shimizu, 2001).

Technological advancements, particularly the advent of television in the early 1950s, influenced the development of manga by further introducing new storytelling techniques and visual styles. More importantly, this era marked the rise of professionally published, demographic-focused manga magazines (Bryce & Davis, 2010; Shimizu, 2001). The establishment of professional manga publications, with the first shonen magazines emerging in 1959, laid the groundwork for manga to really take off. These publications featured even longer, serialized stories that encouraged readers to keep coming back to learn what happened next. The publications also made clever use of fan competitions. By inviting fans to submit their work for a chance to be published, they encouraged aspiring artists to innovate and brought new creativity and artistic development to the scene. Additionally, these competitions provided a great place for publishers to find emerging talent to bring onto the team (Hartzheim, 2015).

As television continued to grow through the early 1960's, the similarities between manga and the emerging popularity of animation laid the groundwork for the first anime series. This period saw the rise of Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy* (1963), Japan's first domestically produced anime television series, which set the precedent for the animation industry's reliance on manga as a source of adaptable content. With its limited animation techniques, designed to cut production costs while maintaining visual appeal, *Astro Boy* became a template for future anime productions and solidified the direct relationship between manga and television anime (Ruh, 2012).

The success of this and other adaptations also led to a shift in manga publishing strategies, with editors and creators increasingly tailoring content to fit the format of television anime, ensuring that stories were episodic, visually dynamic, and engaging for younger audiences. By the 1970s and 1980s, the synergy between manga and anime had become a

dominant force in Japan's entertainment industry, establishing a system where manga frequently served as blueprints for animated productions, a practice that continues to define the industry today (Hartzheim, 2015).

Genre Breakdown

In Japanese publishing, works are initially broken down by target demographic based on the magazines in which they appear. Within each demographic magazine, a wide variety of thematic genres coexist. In English-language discussions of manga the terms genre and demographic often blur. Demographic labels such as have come to connote storytelling and visual conventions that are common in the demographic magazines (Bryce & Davis, 2010). In this breakdown, genre is used broadly to cover both the demographic category and the narrative/visual conventions typically associated with that category. This dual usage aligns with prevailing practices in English-language scholarship and fan discourse, even though in Japanese publishing demographic and thematic classifications remain distinct.

Shonen

The 1950s and 1960s also witnessed the diversification of manga into distinct genres targeting specific demographics. Shonen manga, derived from the Japanese word for "young boy," emerged as a prominent category aimed at boys aged approximately 9-18. (Bryce & Davis, 2010). These stories predominantly portray young male protagonists who encounter and overcome substantial obstacles and, in the process, experience significant personal development. *Shonen Jump*, the most popular shonen magazine, focuses its stories around three specific themes designed to create a consistent and appropriate experience for the children who read it; those themes are friendship, effort, and victory (Cho et al., 2020). While the magazine focuses on creating age-appropriate content for its readers, one area that is often problematic is sexual

harassment. The incorporation of sexual content, while not ubiquitous, is a prevalent element within many shonen manga. This has been a part of the genre from series like *Dragon Ball* all the way back in 1986 through the modern day in series like *Seven Deadly Sins*. While this is meant to provide comedy to the young male audience, this inclusion also often complicates the narrative, introducing mature themes and ethical dilemmas related to relationships and consent. Such content can profoundly impact young readers, and risks leaving them with the impression that they have no responsibilities related to consent.

Shojo

Parallel to the development of shonen manga, shojo manga (aimed at young girls) also began to develop. The term shojo, derived from the Japanese word for "young girl," emerged as a foil to the popular shonen genre, similarly targeted at girls aged 9-18. The protagonist in shojo manga is almost always a young girl, and the stories largely revolve around the heroine and her group of friends. Thematically, shojo manga primarily revolves around romance, personal growth, and the emotional lives of its characters. Central to shojo narratives are the romantic entanglements and emotional bonds between characters, exploring complexities such as unrequited love, first love, and the challenges of maintaining relationships (Bryce & Davis, 2010). Shojo exists not only as a genre but also as a set of desirable characteristics the protagonist usually embodies. A good shojo is naturally obedient, reserved, cute, kind, ethical, frail, and, most importantly, innocent (Choo, 2008). In contemporary Japan, the concept of cuteness in shojo manga extends beyond mere innocence to include elements of sexualization. Female protagonists are portrayed as desirable yet passive in their romantic and sexual interactions. Despite their innocence, "others may sexually desire the shojo" (Treat, 1996: 281), emphasizing the objectification of these characters by external forces. The combination of

cuteness and perceived weakness in female characters is utilized by media to depict sexual images that are less threatening to men (McVeigh, 2000).

The interplay of cuteness and sexualization in shojo manga has significant implications for young readers' perceptions of consent and relationships. Traditional shojo narratives often reinforce stereotypical expectations of femininity and dependency, which can be problematic in the context of modern discussions about gender equality and consent. By presenting cute characters as both attractive and passive, these narratives may normalize the lack of agency in sexual interactions, influencing readers' understanding of consent and interpersonal dynamics (Bryce & Davis, 2010; Choo, 2008).

Yaoi

During the 1970s, yaoi, also known as Boys Love, emerged as part of the broader diversification of shojo manga, introducing homoerotic narratives that appealed to female readers. The genre is characterized by male/male homoerotic stories that are created primarily by female artists for female consumers. In the 1980s, yaoi gained momentum as Japanese fans began creating amateur male/male homoerotic comics that romantically and sexually paired male characters from popular anime and manga. This form of parody was often more humorous and explicit, appropriating copyright-protected characters to fulfill the audience's romantic and sexual fantasies. The term "yaoi" is commonly understood as an acronym for "yama nashi ochi nashi imi nashi," translating to "no climax, no ending, no meaning," highlighting the genre's focus on sexual content over intricate plots or character development (Mizoguchi, 2003; Zsila et al., 2018).

While yaoi is often celebrated for its exploration of romantic and sexual relationships between males in a largely heteronormative space, it also raises critical concerns about its

potential impact on impressionable audiences, particularly regarding its depiction of consent and erotic material. A recurring theme within yaoi manga involves relationships characterized by stark power imbalances, often marked by age, experience, or hierarchical dynamics such as the seme (dominant) and uke (submissive) roles. These portrayals frequently blur the lines of consent, with narratives occasionally featuring nonconsensual acts presented as a precursor to romantic or sexual commitment (Wood, 2006; Zanghellini, 2009b). Such portrayals risk normalizing nonconsensual behaviors and reinforcing problematic narratives about power and submission. The framing of nonconsensual encounters as gateways to emotional intimacy can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, potentially desensitizing audiences to the importance of mutual consent in relationships. Furthermore, the visual aesthetics of BL manga, particularly its emphasis on cute or bishounen (beautiful boy) characters, often leads to the depiction of underage or child-like figures in erotic contexts. This raises ethical concerns, as it may inadvertently trivialize the boundaries between appropriate and exploitative depictions of sexuality (Zanghellini, 2009).

Seinen & Josei

As manga continued to diversify through the 1970s and 1980s, the medium expanded to include narratives aimed at adult audiences, leading to the emergence of seinen and josei manga. These categories cater specifically to mature readers, with seinen manga targeting adult men and josei manga designed to appeal to adult women. Unlike their shonen and shojo counterparts, which often prioritize coming-of-age themes and idealized romance, seinen and josei narratives frequently explore complex social issues, psychological depth, and nuanced portrayals of relationships, including those involving power dynamics and sexuality (Bouissou, 2010; Bryce & Davis, 2010; Lynch, 2022).

A common theme within seinen manga is the normalization of hypersexualized imagery. Seinen manga, in its attempt to cater to male fantasies, often includes scenes where female characters are placed in situations that obscure or outright violate consent, sometimes under the justification of plot necessity (Lynch, 2022). This trend can be traced to broader cultural aesthetics in Japanese media, which have historically blended eroticism with mainstream storytelling. However, the impact of such depictions on audiences—particularly their influence on gender perceptions—has been widely debated (Perper & Cornog, 2020). Scholars argue that these portrayals contribute to the reinforcement of problematic gender norms, where women are positioned primarily as passive recipients of male attention rather than as autonomous agents (Lynch, 2022).

In contrast, josei manga, while similarly addressing mature themes, often provides a platform for exploring female sexuality and relationships from a female perspective (Lynch, 2022). Unlike shojo manga, which frequently idealizes romance through a lens of innocence and passivity, josei narratives tend to depict more realistic and sometimes subversive representations of female desire (Lynch, 2022; Shamoan, 2004). Despite this, josei manga has faced criticism for occasionally reinforcing gendered stereotypes, particularly through narratives that emphasize traditional expectations of romance, marriage, and domestic life (Lynch, 2022).

Role of Eroticism in Japanese Art

Eroticism has been a prominent aspect of Japanese art and culture for centuries, with sexuality historically regarded as a legitimate and even celebrated subject for artistic expression. Scholars Perper & Cornog describe how these roots continue to influence manga today as “sexuality has always been a legitimate subject for art, which forms the cultural underpinnings of manga” (2020, p. 3). One of the earliest and most significant expressions of this tradition is

shunga, a genre of erotic woodblock prints that flourished during the Edo period (1603–1868). Shunga prints, produced by some of Japan’s most renowned artists of the time, depicted explicit sexual scenes alongside themes of love, intimacy, and humor (Berry, 2004). Unlike Western artistic traditions that often associated eroticism with taboo, shunga was widely accepted and even collected across social classes. (Keukelaar, 2022).

This tradition continues in contemporary manga, where erotic content extends beyond merely creating room for adult excitement; rather, it invites the reader to engage with the character's emotions and motivations. These emotional connections enhance the reader’s feelings of intimacy and empathy toward the characters (Perper & Cornog, 2020). Further, the sexual underpinnings of aesthetic choices in manga—such as idealized feminine forms, exaggerated expressions, and hyper-stylized intimacy— further deepen audience identification with the characters. These choices are not arbitrary but rather reflect historical conventions of performative femininity in Japanese visual culture. As Lynch (2022) notes, the portrayal of female characters in shonen and seinen manga often mirrors traditional representations of women in Japanese art, blending innocence with sensuality to create an idealized form of femininity (p. 280). The duality of the role of sexuality within anime and manga—creating room for both identification and intimacy—reflects broader cultural attitudes toward eroticism and visual media (Gül, 2023).

Dangers of Consuming Sexualized and Violent Content

While sexual imagery can be a powerful form of expression, it is still important to examine the notable intersection between violence, sexualized media, and their impact on aggressive behaviors. This is a critical area of inquiry surrounding my research and is especially important when examining content targeted toward younger, more impressionable audiences. In

a comparative meta-analysis by Burnay et al. (2022), which compared results from 166 studies with a total sample of 124,236 participants, they were able to find that sexualized media with violent content has measurably increased aggression by 19%, while sexualized media without violent content still increased aggression by a significant 11%. Further, they found that exposure to sexualized media increased aggressive thoughts by 8% and increased aggressive attitudes by 7% (Burnay et al., 2022). Moreover, a critical examination of aggressive content within graphic novels, particularly best-selling manga aimed at adolescent audiences, finds that aggression was not only common but also frequently portrayed in ways that could potentially influence subsequent behavior among young readers (Coyne et al., 2015). They found that the visual representation of physical violence may have a more significant impact on the viewer due to the explicit nature of the images, as well as the opportunity for consumers to identify with the characters committing acts of violence, potentially reinforcing these aggressive behaviors among adolescents. Past research has already shown that individuals are more likely to imitate media characters that they identify as similar to themselves (Greenwood, 2007; Potter, 1988). Since many consumers identify with these protagonists, they have a higher propensity to replicate these behaviors. In addition, most instances of aggression depicted in manga are portrayed without subsequent consequences, conveying the notion that aggressive actions often carry minimal, if any, repercussions for the perpetrator, contributing to the dangers of these portrayals (Coyne et al., 2015). Scholars Potter & Warren (1998) found that the justification, even retroactively through lack of consequence, for an act of violence directly influences the perceived seriousness of that act. They have also found that acts that are met with consequences are viewed as more serious, and acts that are legitimized are perceived as more moral (Kirsh, 2006; Potter & Warren, 1998). Consequently, findings indicated that adolescents who frequently read manga exhibited

higher levels of physical aggression compared to their peers who did not engage with such media. Importantly, this association persisted even after accounting for exposure to violence through other media channels, suggesting a unique and direct influence of manga on adolescent aggression (Coyne et al., 2015).

The influence of anime and manga on real-world attitudes and behaviors has already been found to have significant real-world consequences, impacting both individual attitudes and subcultural norms. A study by Reysen et al. (2017) has found a positive correlation between anime consumption and both benevolent and hostile sexism, suggesting that self-identified anime fans are more sexist than other populations. As mentioned previously, it has been found that in the anime and manga community, women frequently face sexual assault and harassment, often taking place in public spaces. A study by Rodriguez (2015) found that 75% of women surveyed had been sexually assaulted at some point during an anime and comic convention, while 17% of men surveyed had a similar experience. Some of the anime and comic conventions even had staff, volunteers, or owners who participated in sexual assault and harassment. Interestingly, the study also found that women who cosplayed, or dressed up as, anime characters were more likely to be sexually harassed and assaulted in public, whereas participants who had been dressed normally often experienced sexual harassment and assault in less public areas, suggesting that cosplayers were perceived as the characters they were cosplaying, and no longer as themselves, which created a sense of entitlement to their bodies by perpetrators (Rodriguez, 2015).

This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on anime and manga by examining the intersection of media consumption and perceptions of gender, consent, and romantic pursuit. While prior research has established links between media consumption and increased aggression (Burnay et al., 2022) as well as linked anime consumption to heightened

sexist attitudes (Reysen et al., 2017), there remains a gap in understanding how visual portrayals of consent narratives in mainstream anime and manga influence audience perceptions of relationships and acceptable behavior. This research will build upon these findings by offering a more focused analysis of how consent portrayal within anime and manga may shape individual and collective behaviors. To achieve this, the research is guided by the following questions:

RQ 1: What are the genres that these audiences grew up consuming?

RQ 2: To what extent do consumers of anime/manga targeted towards younger audiences believe that the portrayal of romantic relationships in these series influenced their perceptions of relationships?

RQ 3: What are audiences' thoughts or feelings on how these anime/manga represent romantic relationships when consent is questionable?

RQ 4: How has the reaction to this content differed as consumers have aged?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to assess how exposure to specific media narratives influences audience perspectives on consent, gender dynamics, and romantic pursuit. Asking these questions to consumers with varying amounts of experience will assist in understanding how viewers internalize and interpret these portrayals. This study seeks to provide insight into the impact this specific content may have and contribute to the greater discourse around gender and consent in media. Consent dynamics in anime and manga are an underexplored area of scholarship, and this research could open the door for further investigation into this subject. Given the smaller scale of this study, additional research will be necessary to understand the nuanced dynamics of this content.

Methodology

An online survey was conducted to answer the aforementioned research questions. Potential survey participants were recruited primarily from the University of Oregon through class visits in the School of Journalism and Communications and the Comics and Cartoon Studies program. The age requirement to participate in the study was 18, and qualifying participants were asked to take a 10–15-minute online survey. Basic demographic information was collected, but no identifiable information was included.

The survey utilized seven multiple-choice questions. Three of these questions collected demographic data, including current age, gender, and age of initial contact with anime or manga. One question inquired into consumption habits and asked respondents to select the anime or manga genres they preferred growing up. Two questions asked respondents if they recall encountering series where consent was unclear or disregarded, with one concerning a younger age and the other at an older age. The last multiple-choice question was an opt-in to allow participants to elaborate on how anime and manga portrayals may have influenced their real-world perceptions of romantic relationships. These questions were designed to examine any patterns that may emerge between the age at which people began consuming this content, the genres they consumed, and their level of contact with nonconsensual portrayals.

The survey also contained seven Likert-scale questions with a five-point scale. Four of these questions concerned the frequency of consumption, asking participants about their level of contact with anime and manga growing up and as an adult. The remaining three questions asked participants to agree or disagree with various statements. One of these questions asked about the presence of romantic or intimate content in the media consumed. The remaining two questions centered around audience attitudes towards characters and relationships, inquiring about their

admiration for characters and the extent to which they believe anime and manga portrayals of romantic relationships influenced their perceptions. These questions were designed to provide further insight into respondents' consumption habits and their overarching sentiments towards characters and romantic portrayals. Data from the multiple-choice and Likert Scale questions were imported into SPSS and analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Eight open-ended questions were also included in the survey. Such questions allowed respondents to reflect on their perceptions of and reactions to anime and manga in their youth and adulthood. For example, respondents were asked how anime and manga influenced their perceptions of romantic relationships growing up, and how they reacted to content where consent seemed unclear or disregarded. Follow-up questions, such as asking if they interact with it differently now, provided the opportunity to examine if these perceptions have changed over time. Additionally, respondents were given space to describe male characters' behavior in anime and manga when pursuing a romantic interest. This allowed respondents to reflect on the portrayals they've encountered and allowed the study to explore any patterns of consensual or nonconsensual behaviors observed by consumers.

Thematic analysis was used to examine open-ended responses. The data was first imported into Dedoose and then subject to inductive coding. Responses to questions concerning overarching sentiments were initially coded by positive or negative perceptions and then further sub-coded by more specific sentiments as patterns emerged. Questions regarding characters' behavior were coded based on whether the behavior described was consensual or nonconsensual, before also being broken down into more specific subcodes as patterns emerged. In cases where questions were asked about specific series that included non-consensual behavior, responses

were coded and compiled based on the genre of the mentioned series. After the responses were coded, patterns in the data were categorized, and themes were generated.

Survey Respondents

Out of 109 respondents, 36.7% (N=40) of respondents were male, 46.8% (N=51) of respondents were female, 11.0% (N=12) were non-binary, and 5.6% (N=06) responded with other / prefer not to say. 92.7% (N=101) of respondents were between the ages of 18-24, 4.6% (N=05) of respondents were between the ages of 25-34, and the remaining 2.8% (N=03) of respondents were over 35. This demographic addresses a variety of perspectives while ensuring respondents are old enough to recognize and reflect upon their evolving relationship with these narratives.

Manga and Anime Consumption

Survey respondents were asked questions about their consumption of anime and manga. First, respondents were asked when they began consuming anime and/or manga. Data showed that 40.2% (N=43) of respondents started consuming this content between the ages of 10 and 14, 30.8% (N=33) started between the ages of 15 and 19, 22.7% (N=25) started before the age of 10, and the remaining 5.6% (N=6) started after the age of 20. When compiled, this data shows that around 95% of survey respondents started consuming anime and manga before the age of 20, and over 60% started before the age of 15. The data confirms that respondents began consuming this media at an impressionable age.

Next, respondents were asked about the frequency at which they consumed manga and anime growing up. Respondents were asked to describe their consumption using one of five categories: often (almost every day), regularly (a few times a week), sometimes (a few times a month), rarely (a few times a year), or never. Unsurprisingly, anime was more popular than manga; 15.6% (N=17) of respondents consumed it often, 22.9% (N=25) consumed it regularly, 24.8% (N=27) consumed it sometimes, 21.1% (N=23) consumed it rarely, and 15.6% (N=17) never consumed it growing up. In comparison, 6.4% (N=7) of respondents consumed manga often while growing up, 10.1% (N=11) consumed it regularly, 21.1% (N=23) consumed it sometimes, 25.7% (N=28) consumed it rarely, and 36.7% (N=40) never consumed it. This could be for several reasons. Manga is less accessible than anime in the West, and translations can be hard to find if they even exist. Additionally, younger consumers may not have the financial means to purchase multiple volumes of a series, which are much more expensive than a subscription to an anime service, or they may just prefer watching television over reading. This data illustrates that respondents had varying levels of exposure to anime and manga while

growing up and confirms that a majority of the research population consumed this content in some form at a young age.

Genres Consumed

The first research question inquired about what manga and anime genres were most consumed while growing up. Respondents were asked to select from the list of genres. The results (see *Figure 1*) reveal that Shonen was the most popular, being marked in 62.4% (N=58) of cases, followed closely by shojo, which was marked in 55.9% (N=52) of cases, yaoi was marked in 32.3% (N=30) of cases, seinen was marked in 29.0% (N=27) of cases, and josei was the least popular, only being marked in 19.4% (N=18) of cases.

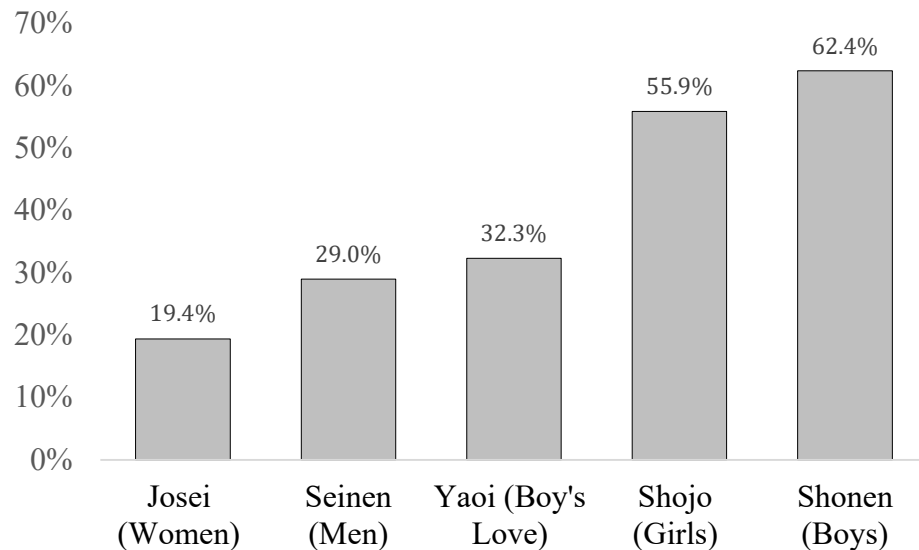


Figure 1. Manga and anime genres consumed by respondents.

Respondents were also asked to indicate which series they remember seeing examples of nonconsensual behaviors while growing up. The series were then categorized by genre, and the number of series noted in each genre is shown in *Figure 2*.



Figure 2. Manga and anime genres respondents remember containing nonconsensual behaviors growing up

This distribution shows that nearly half of the respondents (N=48) noted instances of nonconsensual behavior in shonen manga and/or anime, which is natural, given that it also emerged as the most popular genre. However, it far outranked the other genres in nonconsensual behaviors, much more than in popularity. This suggests that this difference does not stem exclusively from increased manga and/or anime consumption. Since this content targets a younger audience (9-18), nonconsensual acts are less likely to be presented seriously (Bouissou, 2010; Bryce & Davis, 2010). When acts of violence are trivialized and met without consequences, they are perceived as more moral and are consequently more likely to be replicated by consumers (Coyne et al., 2015; Kirsh, 2006; Potter & Warren, 1998).

Perceptions of Influence: Lowered vs. Heightened Expectations for Romantic Relationships

The second research question for this study centered on the extent to which consumers of anime and manga believe that the portrayal of romantic relationships in these series influenced their own perceptions of romantic relationships. The survey respondents were asked about their admiration for characters, and their own perceptions of how anime and/or manga portrayals of relationships may have influenced them. Initially, respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the following statement: Anime and manga portrayals of romantic relationships influenced my real-world perceptions of romantic relationships growing up. 31.1% (N=28) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 25.6% (N=23) were neutral/unsure, and 43.4% (N=49) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Respondents were given the chance to elaborate on their answers. Interestingly, out of the eighteen respondents who elaborated, only four stated that the portrayals did not influence their romantic expectations, with the majority citing their view of anime/manga portrayals as unrealistic. Instead, the most prominent theme that emerged from the free responses was that these portrayals did influence their expectations for how a partner should act (N=12). This can be explained by the fact that respondents who cited that they weren't influenced likely had less to say and felt no need to elaborate. However, the limited answers from participating respondents still highlight an interesting dynamic around perceived influence. The perception of the influence of anime and manga as either negative or positive on their own perceptions of romantic relationship was split; 50% of respondents (N=6) indicated that this influence was positive, 33% of respondents (N=4) indicated that this influence was negative, and 16% of respondents

mentioned both positive and negative influences. This can likely be explained by a difference in the specific media artifacts consumed.

One respondent wrote, “I think it overall set my standards and expectations a little lower, because most of the anime’s I watched didn’t show ideal relationships.” Conversely, another respondent wrote that anime “showed me how I want to treat my partner and how I wanted to be treated. That small acts of love are to talk, to understand, and be gentle.” A smaller subset of these respondents directly noted this duality, with one responding, “Anime/manga affected my perception of what a healthy relationship should be like in a good and bad way. In a bad way, because sometimes I’d glorify toxic relationships because the couple seemed to win despite the problems, but good on the other hand, as it raised my standards in order to get into the relationship.”

Respondents were also asked to what extent they agree with the following statement: I looked up to anime protagonists growing up. 23.3% (N=21) strongly agreed, 34.4% (N=31) agreed, 21.1% (N=17) were neutral/unsure, 11.1% (N=10) disagreed, and 10.0% (N=9) strongly disagreed. Despite more respondents noting that they don’t believe anime and manga have influenced their real-world perceptions of romantic relationships, over 50% indicated that they looked up to these characters growing up. Past research has shown that individuals are likelier to imitate media characters that they identify with (Greenwood, 2007; Potter, 1988). This suggests that even consumers who may not directly identify any influence from this media may have a higher propensity to replicate these behaviors. Coyne (2015) notes that the opportunity for consumers to identify with the characters committing acts of violence in manga increased the influence on subsequent behavior among young readers.

Reactions to Ignoring Boundaries and Harmful Behavior at a Young Age

Research question three inquired into audiences' thoughts or feelings on how anime/manga represent romantic relationships when consent is questionable. Survey respondents were asked how they would describe male characters' actions when pursuing romantic interest, and their reactions to this content when first encountering it. 41.2% (N=45) of respondents classified the behavior as potentially harmful. Behaviors described ranged from overly sexual comments toward women to sexual assault. One respondent made an interesting comparison to the real world, describing the behavior as, "Not nice, of course this is not every character, but if a man in real life acted this way we would run away!" Regardless of the specific actions and wording, a common thread emerged. One respondent put it well: "There's definitely a lack of boundaries that's very typical in anime. Typically, 'no' is treated more as a suggestion than a hard boundary." This calls back to the behaviors at anime conventions studied by Rodriguez (2015) and emerges as a factor that could contribute to the sense of entitlement perpetrators of sexual harassment have to the bodies of female cosplayers. When characters ignore boundaries without consequences, as these respondents noted, they are perceived as less harmful (Potter & Warren, 1998), which makes them more likely to be replicated by consumers (Coyne et al., 2015; Kirsh, 2006).

Similarly to the previous section, a duality emerged, with another subset of respondents (N=27) describing more appropriate methods of romantic pursuit. While harmful behaviors were often described as aggressive, pushy, and lacking boundaries, the non-harmful behaviors were primarily classified as awkward, reserved, and sweet. Even without having the data to look at, some respondents directly mentioned this.

One respondent wrote,

“Sometimes really sweet and romantic. Oftentimes, though, the female characters were objectified and sexualized to no end, and the male characters would take advantage of it.”

Some respondents attributed it to the age of the material, with one writing,

“In earlier anime, it definitely feels like male characters will commit acts of sexual assault, such as trying to peek in the girls’ bath or looking at their underwear. While this still happens in modern anime, shows like ‘Skip and Loafer’ or ‘DandaDan’ have the male love interest being much more respectful of their female counterpart.”

Interestingly, one respondent made a direct tie to the target audience, writing,

“In anime directed toward females, males act kindly and chivalrously. In ones with a target male audience, the males always get their way with the women and don’t seem to respect them.”

Respondents were also asked how they reacted to this content when first encountering it.

Many respondents expressed negative sentiments, with most noting feeling uncomfortable (N=29) or surprised (N=11). A split emerged between people who recognized this content as harmful at a young age and a smaller subset who accepted or even enjoyed these moments (N=13). Most of these people attributed it to being younger. One respondent wrote, “I was confused, but as someone who had no previous exposure to romance, there was no one there to say that it was inappropriate.” Another respondent wrote, “I didn’t really understand it, so [I reacted with] humor/laughter.” This, again, suggests that these actions are portrayed casually,

with a lack of attention paid to the impact they would have in the real world. As noted previously, actions portrayed without consequence, or even positive reinforcement in the form of humor, are more likely to be replicated (Coyne et al., 2015; Kirsh, 2006; Potter & Warren, 1998).

Some respondents expressed how their attitudes changed between the two. One respondent wrote, “I was disgusted and uncomfortable. I had never encountered media like that before, but I enjoyed anime and the plots of these anime, so I soon accepted it.” They noted that they could accept this as a norm over time and negotiate a relationship with this content.

Interestingly, it happened both ways. Another respondent felt differently, writing, “I was curious because I didn’t see this behavior in real life. After I learned, it was more upsetting.” They highlighted a lack of understanding that, once understood, changed their relationship with the content.

Reactions to Ignoring Boundaries and Harmful Behavior at an Older Age

The fourth research question in this study focused on how reactions to nonconsensual behaviors in anime/manga differed as consumers aged. Survey respondents were asked how they felt when encountering these narratives in manga or anime at an older age. Open ended responses revealed that once again uncomfortable emerged as the dominant theme (N=23) among respondents. However, confusion decreased, with only two respondents reporting feeling surprised by this content. This makes sense as respondents were more likely to have previous exposure to this content at an older age. Respondents were also better able to reflect on their relationship with this content. One respondent wrote about how this content affected them personally: “It makes me super uncomfortable. For a while, it played a role in making me believe my body is how I’m supposed to feel love.” Another respondent noted the odd presence of these narratives in stories targeted toward a younger audience, calling back to the negative influence expressed in the previous quote, writing, “It was weird to have those things in shows marketed to children and young adults. Especially since so many young boys and girls take those to be examples for a real relationship.” These respondents noted that these narratives can have tangible impacts. Interestingly, many of these perspectives came from female respondents. While most research centers around the impacts these narratives have on younger males potentially replicating acts of violence, not much attention is paid to the adverse effects these narratives can have on female audiences who observe their role in a relationship as one lacking sexual agency. This is an area that requires further study to be understood more accurately.

A smaller subset of respondents (N=6) indicated an acceptance of this content at an older age. However, most of these respondents still expressed negative feelings toward its inclusion. One respondent described their annoyed resignation to this content, writing, “Fan service exists

in anime, and it is an annoying thing you just deal with to watch it.” This reinforces the idea that this content is often accepted as a norm within this media, a sentiment that can distract from its problematic influence.

Discussion

The findings of this research align with feminist media theory concerning representations of women, particularly Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey (1975) argues that mainstream media, particularly film, often constructs women as passive recipients of the male gaze, positioning them as objects to be looked at rather than subjects with agency. Her critique is especially relevant concerning common portrayals in anime and manga, where female characters are often portrayed as passive and weak, and lack control in sexual interactions (Choo, 2008; Bouissou, 2010). These portrayals, typically framed for humor, align with Mulvey's assertion that the female form in media exists primarily for visual consumption, rather than for exercising will or consent. In the context of this research, this theory offers a powerful lens through which to understand ways objectification and nonconsensual behavior are constructed and normalized in anime and manga.

Yuka Nishiyama's (2022) examination of gender in manga highlights how portrayals of femininity function in service of a broader power dynamic. Female characters are routinely framed as sites of male erotic investment, and their desires are subordinated to the narrative function of serving male pleasure. According to Nishiyama, male characters are afforded the role of initiators and boundary-setters in romantic and sexual contexts, while female characters are expected to respond positively, submissively, or not at all. This creates a recurring narrative pattern in which aggressive male sexual behavior is normalized, even celebrated, and female resistance is either absent or treated as part of the game of pursuit.

Awareness of this framing was reflected across numerous responses in the survey, with a significant number of respondents echoing these critiques. When describing female characters, respondents regularly noted the power dynamics that emerged through the construction of

women as sexual objects with little opportunity for genuine autonomy or agency. Respondents described scenarios in which female characters' boundaries were ignored, and their reactions to harassment were either minimized or framed for comedic effect. They noted the lack of boundaries, and, importantly, the lack of will or power from the female characters to escape or challenge these situations, aligning with Mulvey's description of the male gaze in which male characters are active agents and female characters are acted upon. Respondents' overall recognition of this dynamic demonstrates how the male gaze and existing power dynamics continue to shape media portrayals and, potentially, audience expectations of gender roles in romantic relationships.

To further understand the range of individual responses to consent portrayals in anime and manga, Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model provides a critical lens for understanding how media texts are embedded with meaning by producers and interpreted by audiences. Hall argues that media producers encode messages with preferred meanings, often reflecting dominant ideologies, but audiences do not passively absorb these meanings. Instead, they decode content through three primary positions: dominant-hegemonic (accepting the encoded message), negotiated (accepting some aspects while questioning others), and oppositional (actively resisting the encoded message).

The dominant-hegemonic decoding position was only prominent among respondents reflecting on their attitudes at a younger age. 11.9% (N=13) of respondents noting accepting these portrayals as enjoyable or humorous, which aligns with the intended framing of these interactions within the texts. Most respondents retroactively cited a lack of education on relationships and consent dynamics, leading them to blindly accept the dominant reading. This suggests that in the absence of educational frameworks or guidance, young audiences are more

likely to accept media portrayals at face value. Female respondents emphasized a retrospective awareness of having absorbed problematic messaging about consent, to varying levels of influence. While this study does not claim that all respondents' attitudes toward relationships were shaped by these portrayals in a uniform way, the prevalence of dominant readings during formative years suggests the importance of media literacy and consent education, especially when youth media frames boundary-crossing behaviors as benign or comedic.

The negotiated position was the most common decoding position, with 38.5% (N=42) of respondents acknowledging that the portrayals were problematic but making no mention of outright rejection. Respondents in this category demonstrated varying degrees of awareness surrounding the ethical concerns of nonconsensual behavior in anime and manga. Still, they expressed that this recognition did not necessarily cause them to disengage from the medium. Many respondents attempted to negotiate the presence of these narratives, viewing them as a product of genre conventions or outdated materials, rather than as behaviors that should be outright rejected. These findings point to a growing critical awareness among consumers, particularly with age, yet also reveal the limits of critique when it does not lead to disengagement or broader media accountability. The prevalence of this position raises questions about media influence, especially when problematic portrayals are acknowledged but still normalized through continued consumption.

9.2% (N=10) of respondents expressed an oppositional decoding positionality, primarily at an older age. For these respondents, encountering nonconsensual romantic or sexual behavior in anime and manga was not merely a source of discomfort but a reason for outright disengagement. Respondents refused to accept the encoded narrative and often mentioned withdrawing from specific series or the medium altogether. One respondent described their

response to such content bluntly: “I hated it. I stopped watching the show.” This shift from uncritical acceptance to active resistance and disengagement from these manga and anime narratives reflects the transition from a negotiated to an oppositional positionality. Despite the overall lack of oppositional decoding, the increased instances of oppositional positionality observed at an older age suggest that for some respondents, enhanced media literacy, personal growth, or deeper reflection on issues of consent prompted a reevaluation of their relationship with this content. While this content may potentially influence young consumers, these responses imply that the negative influence can be mitigated through further education. The remaining respondents did not provide enough data to discern an accurate decoding position.

It is clear from the responses to the survey that each individual had their own unique way of interpreting consent narratives in anime/manga, and rather than attempting to generalize attitudes toward this media, it is important to recognize the nuance present in individual decoding. The diversity of responses to these portrayals, ranging from dismissal and rationalization to critique and disengagement, speaks to the range of meaning that can be extracted from the same portrayals. Acknowledging this range allows the study to move beyond the binary question of whether this media is harmful or harmless, and instead consider how meaning is made, contextualized, and internalized by consumers. These findings provide a small window into how romantic and sexual portrayals in youth media intersect with real-world attitudes toward consent but ultimately highlight the importance of further research.

Conclusion

This study examined how consent narratives within anime and manga influence adolescents' perceptions of romantic relationships. While media consumption is widely recognized as a critical factor in shaping social attitudes (Kirsh, 2006), prior research has predominantly focused on violence and sexualization in anime and manga (Choo, 2008; Ellsworth, 2018; Greenwood, 2007; Gül, 2023; Perper & Cornog, 2002; Reysen et al., 2017), rather than the nuances of consensual and nonconsensual interactions in romantic storylines. By directly engaging with anime and manga consumers, this study investigated the ways consumers of this content interact with these nonconsensual romantic tropes, offering insights into how these portrayals may be internalized, challenged, or rationalized by audiences. This research contributes to the underexplored area of consent dynamics in anime and manga, offering a framework for how audiences negotiate complex, ethically questionable content at younger and older ages.

The findings reaffirm the relevance and importance of examining consent portrayals in youth-targeted media. Many respondents encountered these narratives during formative years, and, while responses varied, most respondents continued to engage with the content despite acknowledging its problematic elements. Further, the presence of dominant-hegemonic decoding at a young age points to an increased need for greater media literacy and education on consent, especially given the blurred lines between humor, fantasy, and sexual assault in anime and manga.

This study is not without limitations. One significant limitation of this research is the exclusive use of survey methodology, which, while effective for gathering a range of perspectives, limited the possible depth of engagement with individual respondents. Given the

format, there was no opportunity to ask follow-up questions, clarify responses, or explore respondents' experiences and perceptions in more detail. As a result, the study could not fully capture the complexity of how some respondents may have negotiated or reassessed their relationship with this content over time. Future research could build upon these findings by incorporating more personal data collection methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to allow for deeper engagement with respondents' experiences and greater insight into the emotional and cognitive processes underlying their interpretations of consent portrayals.

As a qualitative and self-reported investigation, the data relies heavily on self-reflection and subjective recall, which may be influenced by memory, personal ideologies, or social desirability biases.¹ This is particularly important given the focus on childhood and adolescent media consumption, as many respondents were asked to reflect on content they had encountered years earlier. As a result, some responses may have been shaped more by current perspectives than by accurate recollections of past experiences. Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, some respondents may have been motivated to alter or minimize their experiences, whether consciously or subconsciously, to align with cultural norms or to avoid personal discomfort. This may have impacted the sincerity of certain responses, particularly in questions related to admiration for problematic characters or early acceptance of nonconsensual behaviors.

The sample was also limited in scope, drawn primarily from a college-age population, which may not reflect the experiences or attitudes of broader or more diverse audiences. As a result, the findings are most applicable to young adults within a specific age range, potentially overlooking variations in media engagement and interpretation that might emerge across

¹ DeMaio (1985), describes social desirability biases as answers which attempt to either enhance socially desirable characteristics or minimize the presence of socially undesirable characteristics.

different age groups, educational backgrounds, or cultural contexts. Given the importance of education in understanding these portrayals as problematic, this limitation may have skewed the research toward a more critical perspective. Future research should incorporate a broader and more representative demographic to better understand the implications of consent narratives in anime and manga.

Despite these limitations, this study offers a valuable perspective for understanding how consent narratives in anime and manga are navigated by audiences. It calls attention to the complex interplay between gender portrayals, media decoding, and identity formation within an important framework of content targeted at younger viewers. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader conversation around media accountability and the role of entertainment in shaping real-world perceptions of gender, consent, and romantic relationships.

Appendix

Gender: How do you identify?

Male

Female

Non-binary

Other

Prefer not to say

How old are you?

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55+

At what age did you begin exploring anime and manga?

Under 10

10-14

15-19

20 and above

Growing up, I watched anime:

Never

Rarely (a few times a year)

Sometimes (a few times a month)

Regularly (a few times a week)

Often (Almost every day)

Growing up, I read manga

Never

Rarely (a few times a year)

Sometimes (a few times a month)

Regularly (a few times a week)

Often (Almost every day)

Currently, I watch anime:

Never

Rarely (a few times a year)

Sometimes (a few times a month)

Regularly (a few times a week)

Often (Almost every day)

Currently, I read manga:

Never
Rarely (a few times a year)
Sometimes (a few times a month)
Regularly (a few times a week)
Often (Almost every day)

What genre(s) of anime or manga did you prefer growing up

Shonen (Boys')
Shojo (Girls')
Seinen (Men)
Josei (Women)
Yaoi (Boys' Love)

The anime and manga that I consume often includes scenes with romantic or intimate content

Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly disagree

Anime and manga portrayals of romantic relationships influenced my real-world perceptions of romantic relationships growing up

Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly disagree

Would you like to elaborate on how they influenced your perceptions growing up?

Yes
No

If yes:

Please elaborate below: [Reminder: Please do not include any names or other directly identifiable information in your open-ended responses]

[Text Box]

I looked up to anime protagonists growing up

Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly disagree

How would you describe male characters behavior in anime and manga when pursuing romantic interest? [Reminder: Please do not include any names or other directly identifiable information in your open-ended responses]

[Text Box]

Did you ever come across stories in anime or manga where the concept of consent seemed unclear or disregarded while growing up? [Reminder: Please do not include any names or other directly identifiable information in your open-ended responses]

Yes

No

Unsure

If yes:

In what specific anime/manga do you recall examples of non-consensual activities?

[Text Box]

What are some specific examples of non-consensual activities you've seen exhibited in these series?

[Text Box]

How did you react to this content while first encountering it?

[Text Box]

Have you ever encountered a character who you perceived as engaging in non-consensual activities at an older age? [Reminder: Please do not include any names or other directly identifiable information in your open-ended responses]

Yes

No

Unsure

If yes:

In what specific anime/manga do you recall examples of non-consensual activities?

[Text Box]

What are some specific examples of non-consensual activities you've seen exhibited in these series?

[Text Box]

How did you feel about these character's actions?

[Text Box]

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