

Representation of Bōsōzoku in Koichi Hatsumi's Anime Tokyo Revengers

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes the representation of the bōsōzoku subculture in the anime Tokyo Revengers by Koichi Hatsumi, focusing on two main aspects: visual representation and public perception. Using a qualitative approach, the research applies Roland Barthes' semiotics to explore denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings, alongside Ikuya Sato's theoretical framework on bōsōzoku to understand their socio-cultural dynamics. The findings reveal that the anime depicts bōsōzoku through distinctive visual elements such as tokkōfuku and sentōfuku uniforms, sarashi and tasuki accessories, and customized motorcycles, which serve as symbols of identity, resistance, and group hierarchy. According to Sato's framework, these portrayals reflect bōsōzoku as a symbolic rebellion and a means of identity exploration. Public perception is shown to be ambivalent: while authorities and adults view them as threats to social order, the group's values of brotherhood and loyalty gain implicit societal recognition. The anime presents bōsōzoku not merely as deviant youth, but as a community with strong internal ethics and identity. This research contributes to the understanding of subcultural representation in Japanese popular media and invites further inquiry into identity transformation in evolving social contexts.

KEYWORDS: bōsōzoku, semiotics, representation

INTRODUCTION

In multicultural societies, subcultures emerge as a response to the dominance of the main culture. Subcultures serve as a space for certain groups to express identities and lifestyles that differ from social norms. Hebdige (1979) views subcultures as a form of symbolic resistance through aesthetics, while Gelder (2007) emphasizes that subcultures create a collective identity that defies social norms. One form of subculture that has been highlighted is street gangs, which according to Klein (1971) are unique, organized groups of adolescents or young adults often associated with illegal activities. These gangs emerge as a form of solidarity and protection, especially in socio-economically vulnerable urban neighborhoods.

In Japan, street gangs flourished after World War II in response to social and economic uncertainty. Youth who felt marginalized found alternative identities through motorcycle gangs that offered brotherhood and economic opportunities (Cleveland, 2008). One of the most iconic motorcycle gangs is the bōsōzoku, known for its outlaw lifestyle, noisy motorcycle convoys, and norm-defying activities. Although often viewed negatively, bōsōzoku have strong solidarity and have become a symbol of Japanese popular culture (Galbraith, 2009).

Koichi Hatsumi's anime Tokyo Revengers prominently represents the bōsōzoku subculture. The anime is not only popular in Japan but also internationally, as evidenced by its achievements as a nominee at the 2021 Crunchyroll Anime Awards and winner of the best shounen award at the 44th Kodansha Manga Award. The story centers on Takemichi Hanagaki who goes back in time to save his ex-girlfriend from a tragedy related to the motorcycle gang "Tokyo Manji." Through this narrative, the anime presents the dynamics of motorcycle gangs, social conflicts, and self-discovery, while reinforcing the image of bōsōzoku as a symbol of teenage resistance.

Research Method

The data source used in this research is the anime Tokyo Revengers which has 3 seasons, namely season 1 which consists of 24 episodes, season 2 which consists of 13 episodes, and season 3 which consists of 12 episodes. Then from the data source, there are two problem formulations that are studied, namely how the representation of bōsōzoku in the Tokyo Revengers anime and how the representation of people's views in the Tokyo Revengers anime towards the bōsōzoku group. The data that has been collected is then classified using literature study method and netnography technique. The informal data presentation method is used to analyze the data to provide an in-depth explanation of the data that has been classified using words in the form of narration.

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Theory

This study uses Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze the representation of bōsōzoku in the anime Tokyo Revengers and the representation of society's views on bōsōzoku groups in Tokyo Revengers. In addition, Ikuya Sato's framework on bōsōzoku is used as a basis for understanding the dynamics of these groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research uses several previous studies as references in conducting the study. First, research by Audria (2019) entitled "Analisis Semiotika Representasi Budaya Jepang dalam Film Anime Barakamon", discusses the representation of traditional Japanese culture in the Barakamon anime, especially the habits of Japanese people visualized in several scenes. Second, research by Vanie and Javiera (2023) entitled "Representasi Kekerasan dan Kenakalan Remaja pada Serial Anime Tokyo Revengers", analyzes scenes of physical and verbal violence in the Tokyo Revengers anime using Peirce semiotics, focusing on juvenile delinquency and symbolic interactionism. Third, research by Prihatna (2023) entitled "Sejarah Munculnya Geng Bōsōzoku dan Gaya Modifikasi Motornya", discusses the origins of the bōsōzoku motorcycle gang in Japan and the distinctive characteristics of its motorcycle modifications inspired by motorcycle culture in England and America.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is used to analyze the representation of bōsōzoku featured in the anime Tokyo Revengers. The analysis methodology is conducted in three stages according to Barthes' semiotic framework, namely denotation, connotation, and myth. Based on these three levels of analysis, the representation of bōsōzoku in the anime Tokyo Revengers will be examined through several physical and non-physical aspects that mark the identity of the bōsōzoku group. In addition to this, what is examined in the Tokyo Revengers anime is the view of society shown in the Tokyo Revengers anime towards the bōsōzoku group.

1. Tokkōfuku

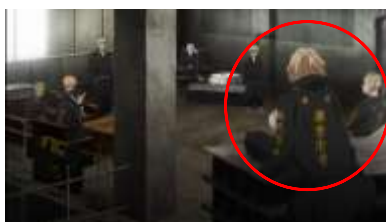


Figure 1 Mikey is having a discussion with the leaders of the Tokyo Manji gang. (Tokyo Revengers Season 2 Ep. 3 min. 17:42)

Denotation Meaning	The tokkōfuku worn by Mikey is a long black jacket with gold kanji embroidery, displaying the name of the gang 東京卍會 (Tōkyō Manji Kai) and the title 初代総長 (shodai sōchō), which means first-generation leader. This uniform is modified from a World War II kamikaze pilot jacket, decorated with nationalist phrases and symbols. Generally, bōsōzoku members wear tokkōfuku with baggy pants embroidered with kanji indicating their group identity, a belt as a fastener, and boots as their standard attire.
Connotation Meaning	Tokkōfuku symbolizes social status, loyalty, and gang identity. It reflects respect, courage, and solidarity between gang members, with special designs for the leader. Tokkōfuku also symbolizes resistance to conservative Japanese social norms, showing a rejection of the conventional rules of society.
Mythical Meaning	Tokkōfuku in the anime Tokyo Revengers builds on the myth of bōsōzoku as a group with principles and a code of conduct, similar to bushidō values such as loyalty and bravery. Japanese media often portray motorcycle gangs as groups with a strong sense of brotherhood and a morality of their own, where characters like Mikey fight for honor and friendship, reinforcing the romanticized image of gangs.

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2. Sarashi



Figure 2 Toman prepares to fight against Valhalla who is their enemy (Tokyo Revengers Season 1 Ep. 18 min 21:52)

Denotation Meaning	Sarashi is a white cloth wrapped around Mikey's abdomen in the Tokyo Revengers anime, serving as light protection and support for the body while fighting. Besides its practical function, sarashi reinforces the impression of a strong and dominant character. Mikey wearing no other underwear underneath the tokkōfuku highlights his courage and confidence.
Connotation Meaning	Sarashi symbolizes strength and toughness in the bōsōzoku subculture. Wearing it without full coverage shows confidence and readiness to face danger. It also connects the gang's identity to the Japanese tradition of bravery and masculinity, and even has historical links to samurai culture that reinforce the symbolic connection between the past and the bōsōzoku lifestyle.
Mythical Meaning	Sarashi constructs an image of bōsōzoku as a group that upholds bravery and toughness. Mikey is portrayed as an invincible leader who reflects old values in a modern figure. This representation reinforces the myth that gang leaders must possess extraordinary courage, linking youth rebellion with traditional values such as bushidō, thus creating a heroic image of the bōsōzoku subculture.

3. Face Mask (Mouth Cover)



Figure 3 One of the Toman members whose identity is unknown picks up Takemichi (Tokyo Revengers Season 3 Ep. 3 minute 20:14)

Denotation Meaning	A face mask is a covering worn by white-haired characters, covering the nose to the chin. They are simple cloth masks commonly used by bōsōzoku members in real life, such as black cloth masks or surgical masks, which serve as part of their visual identity.
Connotation Meaning	Face masks symbolize resistance to social norms and create a collective identity that resists individual recognition. In addition to being a tool of anonymity that reinforces courage and intimidation, masks also function as visual statements that highlight the anti-norm attitudes in bōsōzoku culture.
Mythical Meaning	Face masks represent a structural resistance to the values of openness and harmony in Japanese society. By hiding their faces, bōsōzoku reject established social identities and construct exclusive collective identities, reinforcing their image as a rebellious group that challenges dominant social foundations.

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4. Weapon



Figure 4 Another bōsōzoku gang member holding a baseball bat while evicting Toman from his territory (Tokyo Revengers Season 1 Ep. 16 min 04:31)

Denotation Meaning	A baseball bat is a long cylindrical object, usually used in sports, but by bōsōzoku used as an attack tool in fights. These sticks are often made of strong wood and are capable of striking from long distances.
Connotation Meaning	The baseball bat symbolizes power, aggression, and dominance in bōsōzoku gangs. In addition to being a weapon, it served as an intimidation tool and status symbol in the group's hierarchy, reinforcing its members' image of violence and bravery.
Mythical Meaning	The baseball bat became a symbol of rebellion and disobedience to Japanese social authority. This weapon not only displays physical strength, but also builds the bōsōzoku's collective identity as a community that is strong, solid, and ready to go against the prevailing norms.

5. Modified Vehicles



Figure 5 Members of the bōsōzoku gather on a modified motorcycle (Tokyo Revengers Season 1 Ep. 5 min 19:20)

Denotation Meaning	The bōsōzoku bikes in the picture have high seat backs and bright colors such as purple and red. In the anime Tokyo Revengers, these bikes feature extreme modifications typical of bōsōzoku that highlight symbolism and individual expression through striking designs.
Connotation Meaning	Motorcycle accessories symbolize the expression of individuality and solidarity within the group. Bright colors and high seat backs symbolize loyalty and resistance to Japanese societal values that emphasize uniformity, revealing the motorcycle as both a medium of self-expression and a challenge to authority.
Mythical Meaning	Motorcycle modifications build an image of rebellion that is valued in Japanese subculture. Motorcycles act as symbols of freedom, courage, and brotherhood, reflecting the adaptation of the concept of bushidō in the modern world. Extreme modification emphasizes the principle of rebellion, which has its own code of ethics.

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6. Community Views on the School Environment



Figure 6 Takemichi is surprised by the presence of Mikey and Draken during class (Tokyo Revengers Season 1 Ep. 3 min 13:03)

Denotation Meaning	Mikey entered the class without permission during the lesson. The teacher looked confused and helpless as she reprimanded him, while Mikey casually ignored the school rules and took Takemichi out of the classroom. The other students watched without reaction.
Connotation Meaning	Mikey's actions reflect the anti-authority attitude typical of bōsōzoku. The helplessness of the teacher and the passivity of the students show Mikey's social dominance that transcends the formal system. He appears charismatic and symbolically challenges the social order, potentially even recruiting Takemichi into his gang.
Mythical Meaning	This scene creates the myth that bōsōzoku have informal power capable of intervening in institutional spaces such as schools. The fearful teacher demonstrates the weakness of official authority in the face of the symbolic power of the gang. The bōsōzoku's power is not only through violence, but also through the social legitimacy that society tacitly accepts.

7. General Public Views among Parents



Figure 7 The father of a victim of Moebius gang violence scolds Mikey and Draken for being the perpetrators of the incident (Tokyo Revengers Season 1 Ep. 5 min 19:23)

Denotation Meaning	The scene features Mikey and Draken in the hospital hallway, confronted by the victim's angry father. Draken bows as a sign of apology, while Mikey refuses to apologize because he feels innocent of the violent incident committed by the other gang (Moebius).
Connotation Meaning	Draken shows an attitude of moral responsibility through the bowing gesture, an important symbol in Japanese culture to convey regret. In contrast, Mikey shows a tough attitude and does not bow to social pressure, reflecting the two sides of the bōsōzoku identity: collective responsibility and self-justification.
Mythical Meaning	This scene builds the myth that gang members have their own code of ethics that transcends the image of mere violence. They can show guilt, loyalty, and solidarity, forming the narrative that bōsōzoku also possess a morality and honor that the wider society rarely recognizes.

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CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that bōsōzoku are represented through visual and non-visual elements such as tokkōfuku, sentōfuku, sarashi, tasuki, armbands, masks, helmets, boots, baseball bats, gang flags, modified motorcycles, and distinctive speech patterns. These elements not only mark the group's identity but also contain denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings that reflect loyalty, courage, solidarity, and resistance to social norms. The public's view of bōsōzoku in anime is ambivalent: they are seen as disruptive to order by authorities, yet valued for their sense of brotherhood and fighting spirit. This study shows that bōsōzoku are not merely criminal groups but communities with unique value systems and ethics. Beyond being entertainment, the anime Tokyo Revengers also serves as a narrative medium reflecting social reality, identity dynamics, and forms of youth resistance against dominant norms in contemporary Japan.

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