

# **MERIDIAN CRITIC**

## ***GRAPHIC NOVEL***

“ȘTEFAN CEL MARE” UNIVERSITY OF SUCEAVA

## **ANNALS**

**PHILOLOGY SERIES**

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# Anime as a Universal Language: The Zenith of Manga

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**Abstract:** Literature's qualities can be highlighted by combining it with other forms of art. Manga, which is a Japanese traditional literary genre that involves visual art, has gained worldwide popularity in the last few decades. Subsequently, it was adapted into anime. This study explores the legitimacy of manga in literature, its global influence among notable figures such as prime ministers or presidents, and the zenith it attained in anime, which is a universal language. Are manga and anime universal solely due to their graphics and stories? Or is it rather because of their ability to connect people to the sacred? Is image universal? If so, what kind of image? Static one? Moving one? Which, manga or anime, can rather be considered universal? What does the future hold for literature and its various adaptations?

**Keywords:** *Naruto's universality, 700 responses survey, graphics, literature, light novel.*

## Introduction

Long before the novels emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Watt 2000), Japan had already invented this literary genre. The first novel in the world, *Genji Monogatari* (Barrow 2012), has been written in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by a Japanese woman, Murasaki Shikibu, and consists of over a thousand pages and four hundred characters. It has received several live-action movie adaptations, and two notable animated adaptations, a film, and a series.

Japan invented several original or innovative literary genres besides the novel, such as Haiku or Takarazuka Revue, which is unique and completely opposite to the British drama in which in the beginning only men used to play. In Takarazuka, only single women can perform, so the writing is slightly different. Japan has a unique way to communicate things. In 1999, the Japanese Shigetaka Kurita invented *Emoji* (Grosz *et al.* 2023), this global language, that will likely replace stage directions in drama in the near future. The existence of so many image-based means of communication and of plays exemplifies mankind's desire to adapt text into images, or into something more visually.

Manga (Japanese comics) is another special literary genre that has a very long tradition in Japan.

Japanese comics do not exist in a vacuum; they are closely connected to Japanese history and culture, including such areas as politics, economy, family, religion, and gender. Therefore, they reflect both the reality of Japanese society and the myths, beliefs, and fantasies that Japanese have about themselves, their culture, and the world. (Ito 2015)

It is believed that Buddhist monks introduced a precursor of manga to Japan in the eighth century. The late Edo period (c. 1780) is considered to be the founding period of a more modern form of manga (Buljan and Cusack 2015: 14). Of course, after the Second World War, modern manga developed and became one of the widely read literary genres in Japan and in the entire world. In a scientific bookchapter, a great comics fan and researcher states out that the first comics in the world was published by a Swiss in 1827 (Manolescu 2021: 297). Considering only the modern comics as we know them today, he is right. The modern manga arose around 1891 (Exner 2022: 185). Japanese manga is a little different from the western comics (Ingulsrud, Allen 2009: 27), and probably this is why Manolescu never mentions Asian manga in that study.

### **The contemporary impact of manga and anime**

Nevertheless, manga has such a long tradition in Japan that everyone reads it, regardless of their age or social status. “Manga (漫画), or Japanese comics, are today a globally recognised art form” (Neofitou, Sell 2016). Calling manga and anime a subculture is a proof of ignorance and a real insult to the Japanese culture and to all *otakus* around the world. Even the former Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, publicly declared himself a manga fan and supported manga production and reading (Beck 2007). The current Prime Minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, which was ordering Weekly Shōnen Jumpmanga from Japan to America when he was studying there, declared that he read all the volumes of Koyoharu Gotouge’s *Demon Slayer*, so he is a manga fan (even now, as an adult, since *Demon Slayer* is a new manga, that premiered in 2016. The anime series is still ongoing and a new *Kimetsu no Yaiba* movie has just premiered in Romanian cinemas on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023.). The Prime Minister added that manga will play a great role in Japan’s growth, because most people interested in learning Japanese language are inspired by manga and anime and learning a person’s language facilitates intercultural understanding (Madillo 2022). Indeed, Japanese is one of the most studied languages in the world (Blanco 2022). It is also learned by Japanese culture fans from Romania in various ways (anime, manga, martial arts, tea ceremony etc), including formally, in Universities, Japanese Language being one of the most sought-after departments for the 2019 enrolment at the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca (UBB 2019). Kishida also stated that he will bring up the subject of manga in his upcoming meetings with the French president, Emmanuel Macron, who is also a manga fan (Baseel 2021). France offered the €300 ‘Culture Pass’ to young citizens aged 18 years old in 2021 and this resulted in a substantial increase in Japanese manga purchases among the cultural pass’s recipients (Animehunch 2021).

There are all kinds of manga, from practical ones like Manga Introduction to Philosophy, or adaptation of Kant’s *Pure Reason’s Critic*, to slice-of-life manga and to complex fantasy, horror, psychological, medical, economical, religious, spiritual, *isekai* manga for all ages and on all topics. Even so, the best sold mangas among the beneficiaries of the ‘French Cultural Pass’ were *Jujutsu*

*Kaisen*, *Attack on Titan*, *One Piece* and *Demon Slayer* (Animehunch 2021). Between 23 May – 26 August 2019, the British Museum held a Manga exhibition (Wagner 2019), which was very popular, because people of all ages and nationalities read Japanese comics; even in North America, Japanese manga is a top pick (Pawuk, Serchay 2017).

Not just manga, but anime is also an already old global phenomenon, with the most widely accepted date of origin in 1917 (Patten 2004: 369). All that is related to the “J-Cult (Japanese culture) has become so appealing to international audiences that some will consume any- and everything Japanese. Their brand loyalty is peerless.” (Atkins 2017: 208). From manga and anime to *kawaii* culture (of cuteness), tea ceremony, calligraphy, or the romanticized samurai and martial arts, Japanophiles have something to love. And this is what makes Japan a global soft power, a soft global empire.

In 2019, Romanian researchers such as Alice Teodorescu and Crînguța-Irina Pelea published their doctoral theses (Pelea 2019; Teodorescu 2019) about anime, manga and the influence of Japan’s popular culture on the Romanian space. In 2021, Alice Books Publisher started to massively translate famous Japanese writers like Osamu Dazai. In 2022, Nemira Publisher started to translate Japanese mangas in Romanian language. Manga is very expensive for Romanians’ income, so they might not buy it as much as people in other countries, a true *otaku* (manga/anime nerd) always finds a way to read it online. Sites like Comic Walker provide legal, free access to manga, but written in Japanese or English. Crunchyroll has a free-trial period for watching anime, after which the price is affordable. But Crunchyroll is an option only available for English speakers. Netflix started to broadcast animes with Romanian subtitle, at an affordable price, and more and more people use it. Even so, most teenagers with no income still resort to piracy. Happily, anime feature films have been screened in Romanian cinemas more often and we developed a tradition with Izanagi, the anime festival that is at its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition in Bucharest, now, in March 2023. Even Japan’s Embassy supported the event, which was attended by professors, researchers, and, of course, ma(i)n(l)y anime aficionados.

In addition, some anime streaming sites have created Discord servers with bot-operated chat rooms where anime fans can demonstrate their knowledge of the phenomenon by answering questions about manga and anime in general and about the most popular animes in particular. This ensures that the fandom has a thorough understanding of what it venerates.

### **Philology, manga and anime**

Since J-Cult is venerated (even with pilgrimages), it seems almost sacred. Also, literature and mythology are believed to share a common origin because both reflect the tragedies, hopes, values, expectations, and sense of humanity. The fantastic literature can be considered a new mythology (and sometimes it really is if we think of Kishimoto’s *Naruto* or Colin’s *Legendele țării lui Vam*). It has cognizable and existential value, revealing the world’s foundations and modes of being (Dancă 2022: 416-418). Furthermore, good literature has the alchemical power to transform natures through the use of figurative language. Sometimes,

figures of speech such as metaphor recreate realities transforming them into myths, and other times, they simply say something new about reality (Șerban 2011: 38-41), offering a new perspective on it. Therefore, from a theological standpoint, any text that can do these is a valuable literary work. Including manga. And manga does it wonderfully, approaching such a high level of syncretic mythological and spiritual content that this is what most Westerners associate it with. The same holds true for anime.

In addition to the opportunity of acquiring Japanese language skills (Chan *et al.* 2017) and of English (most animes receive English subtitles on the day of release in Japan, and, later, some of them receive dubbed version), animes provide a vast amount of access to literature. *Pollyanna*, the book that is nowadays sold in many bookstores in Romania, has anime adaptation since 1986! Studio Ghibli has animated outstanding novels such as Diana Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle*. Many classic novels, including *Les Misérables*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Romeo and Juliet* (and other Shakespeare plays), have been adapted into animes (and mangas). Even more, some of these great works have been originally blended before adapted into animes. Here I mention *Requiem of the Rose King* (based on the Shakespearean plays *Henry VI*, Part 3 and *Richard III*) or *Blast of the Tempest* (based on *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*) (Teodorescu 2015) while others are only proving elements of intertextuality and transtextuality. The particularities of discourse in manga and anime provide specialists with excellent material for analysis.

But these are not the only benefits anime can provide to philology. Many animes are based on mangas or light novels written especially for animes or based on them. *Naruto*, which was initially based on a manga has later received light novel spin-offs.

Moreover, *Chihayafuru* or *Choyaku Hyakunin Isshu: Uta Koi* are based on the anthology *One Hundred Poets of Mount Ogura* (Hyakunin Isshu), on which *Karuta*, the Japanese card game, is also based. *World Masterpiece Theatre* is a series that animates various great works of world literature. *Bungō Stray Dogs* and *Bungou to Alchemist* have characters inspired by several brilliant authors (Osamu Dazai, Natsume Sōseki, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, Fyodor Dostoyevsky) including western ones such as Howard Phillips Lovecraft, one of the greatest horror and fantasy writers of all times.

### **The universality of graphics**

Music, mathematics, love, and a few others are accepted as universal languages, but what about the image? Is image universal? If so, what kind of image? Hockney and Gayford (2017: 22), sharing a phenomenological and constructivist view, state out that the image is a description of the perspective someone sees something from, thus reality does not exist apart from us; it exists within our minds. Images contribute to our understanding. Therefore, the image is universal, as everyone uses and benefits from it.

A good question to ask about Japanese manga would be whether it integrates text to images or images to text, because they are so well-integrated and complement each other that it is impossible to tell which is presenting the main story. Ion Manolescu talks about the universal aesthetics of the comics'



narrativity, pleading for comics as a legitim literary genre more than any other art form (Manolescu 2021: 298). Other scientists prove that the silent scenes in manga represent a universal language (Ahmad 2015). They might both be right, but the main problem is that people nowadays read less and less. “People like pictures. They have powerful effects on the way we see things around us. Most people have always preferred to look at pictures instead of reading, and probably always will.” (Hockney and Gayford 2017: 19)

Indeed, adding text to some images can clarify them, and adding images to a text makes it easier to read and less ‘boring’ because it requires you to constantly shift your focus from text comprehension to image comprehension. It compels the reader to think in two distinct ways and understand two distinct languages. Manga is always read from the back to the front, regardless of the language it is translated into, leading western readers to think from an entirely new angle.

In brief, reading comics, and especially reading manga is a very beneficial mental exercise with many advantages. However, we cannot consider it universal, because it requires reading knowledge, and the exercise of understanding a story with sequential images read from back to front (which might be difficult in the beginning for westerners). Besides, to properly understand a manga, one must know the sound language (onomatopoeias transliteration which in Japanese are very specific and different than in western languages) and other particularities like these. Thereby, even if the multimodality of manga (Schwartz, Rubinstein-Ávila 2006) can be useful in various ways such as teaching and learning, manga is still something more for the initiated ones.

What can be simpler to understand than images? Moving images! “65% of the population is visual learners. Visual learners learn by visual reinforcements, such as video contents.” (Jawed *et al.* 2019). Scientists emphasize the power of video content more than the one of simple images. In our era, video content (and soon, probably holographic reality) is the most appealing to younger generation. What makes a sign intriguing is its motion, the alchemy of art, and the artist’s capacity to transform one thing into another (Hockney and Gayford 2017: 36). Thereby, I consider that anime is more universal than manga.

Firstly, it is easier to understand videos. Even if complex philosophical, metaphorical, and mythological matters are accessible only to cultured people, everyone can understand the basic action in an anime without much effort, and even without knowing the language, which makes anime more of a universal language than manga is.

Secondly, it is more beautiful (Japanese manga is black and white, while anime is colourful). Even if a part of the story from manga is sometimes skipped in an anime adaptation, and some character designs are slightly modified, anime is still more appealing to most young people today. There are indeed mangas like the ones of Junji Ito that are terribly hard to adapt well as animes. Those are legendary mangas, that has incommensurable value exactly because they cannot be adapted well enough. But those are isolated cases. Besides these, in Japanese traditional visual art, shadows and lights are rendered differently than in European art. European art contains many shadows, whereas old Japanese art does not. But in manga, everything is black and white and sometimes shadows

are incorporated, whilst in anime, an intriguing combination of shadows and colourful exposure is utilised, one that makes anime so mesmerizing.

Thirdly, anime can more easily evoke a sense of the sacred. An image from a manga always appears to have occurred in the past because it is static and does not move. Even if the depicted action suggests motion, the image is still static. This evokes a sense of the past. To experience the sacred, one must be fully present in the present ('here and now') in order to access the *coincidentia oppositorum* of time, which occurs when the future and the past are united in the present. This is something that a video can rather establish, as opposed to a black-and-white static image. The sacred is universal. Everyone desires to access it in various ways. Literature and art (and anime) have an especially significant part to play in this sense.

Fourthly, in a survey based on Naruto, the anime that I conducted, most people said they can well find themselves in the Narutoanime. I did not do similar research on manga because I could not find other 700 Naruto manga readers to answer it. But it was quite easy to find, among anime fans, 700 Naruto anime aficionados to respond to my survey.

### **Is anime perceived as universal? A case study of Naruto**

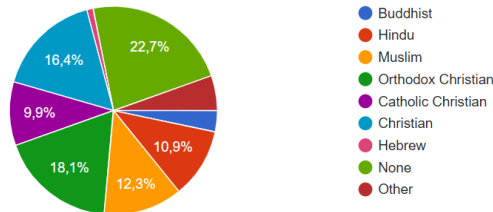
Naruto is an anime (and manga) with an abundance of religious themes. It has a great spiritual and religious vibe (Minea 2021), incorporating aspects from various real religions to create a syncretic blend of elements for the Narutian Mythological Universe. Other scholars have also identified the universality of Narutian mythology (Costa and Bastos 2020, 2022) and not only of mythology, but also of teachings to which people of all religions can relate, as we will see in the questionnaire below. And, even more, because anime has indeed universal characteristics, it can be used in religious mission, and might even become a religion one day (Minea 2022b), a universal one.

To determine the impact of one of the most popular anime series of all time on people from various cultures, I created a questionnaire, the results of which I will interpret below. The questionnaire has 700 answers provided by fans from all over the world. It received answers through Google Forms between 28.12.2018 – 06.05.2019. It has been promoted through Facebook in many fan groups, but also on field forums, YouTube, and streaming sites. The screenshots below are the graphic representations of the original results (raw data) that were automatically generated by Google Forms.

## Interpretation of the survey's results

What's your religion?

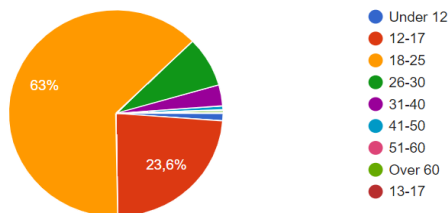
700 de răspunsuri



As evidenced by the charts attached to this article, Naruto has fans from a diverse range of ages and religions. Considering the total number of adherents to each religion, we can say that the fans represent a balanced and diverse religious spectrum. The aspect of this situation that fascinates me the most is that even adherents of so-called conservative religions can relate to the series, and some of them have even written articles about how rich in (Islamic) values Naruto is (Istiqomah, Sholeh 2019). A Christian can find many Christian values in Naruto (and there are several scientific papers and videos on this topic, from love, to sacrifice, to the universal tree of life), a Daoist can find their own symbols and values (Yin and Yang references, for instance), and so on.

How old are you?

700 de răspunsuri



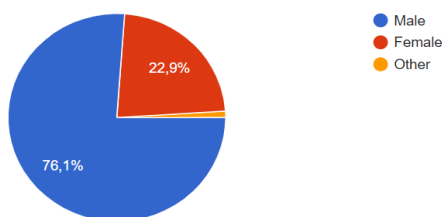
The age group that received the most responses was '18-25 years old', most likely because Naruto was created in 1999 and received an animated adaptation in 2002 (Clements, McCarthy 2015: 1600), when those in this age

group were young, so they regard it as one of the most endearing childhood anime, whose characters have grown alongside them.

Broadly speaking, watching a *shōnen* (anime for young boys), and especially such a long one, you improve yourself alongside with the characters from several points of view: you gain wisdom and life experience, because the situations characters go through are possible in real life and they present useful solutions, tips, and thoughts. You also grow intellectually through the acquisition of new concepts, words, and cultural elements. Anime simultaneously satisfies and positively engages people's need for metaphysics by presenting the various spiritualities in which they find themselves.

What gender are you?

700 de răspunsuri

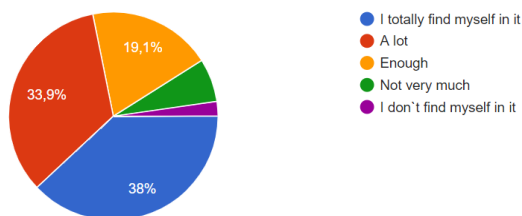


The respondents to the questionnaire came from all continents, with a large share of the states: Romania (153), United States of America (122), India (85), Philippines (40), Indonesia (26), Malaysia (20), Japan and the rest of the countries offering answers from less than 20 representants each.

Their professions are very diversified. Even though the majority of respondents were students, I have also received answers from the ologians, journalists, professors, medical staff, engineers, programmers, philosophers, psychologists, artists, bakers, soldiers, sellers, accountants, managers and so on.

How much do you find yourself in the Naruto anime?

700 de răspunsuri

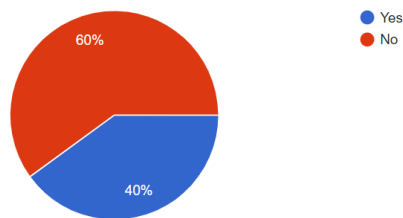


Interestingly, the majority (over 90%) of them said that they find themselves in this anime very much, or enough, and only 2.3% said that they do not relate at all.

Most of them were helped by this anime to feel better, especially in depressive cases. Interacting on the forums I found that many anime fans had existential crises (family, health, social, personal issues etc.) that they solved by watching the anime. In another research that I conducted (still unpublished), animes proved useful for those with Dyslexia and ADHD. Recent studies prove that the expressivity of manga (Rozema 2015) is actually useful for people with Autism (Guénoun *et al.* 2021), which makes this J-Cult phenomenon to be even more universal.

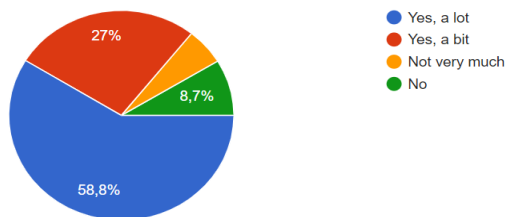
Were you in a sad or depressed mood when you watched Naruto?

700 de răspunsuri



If you were depressed when you watched it, did it help you to feel better?

497 de răspunsuri

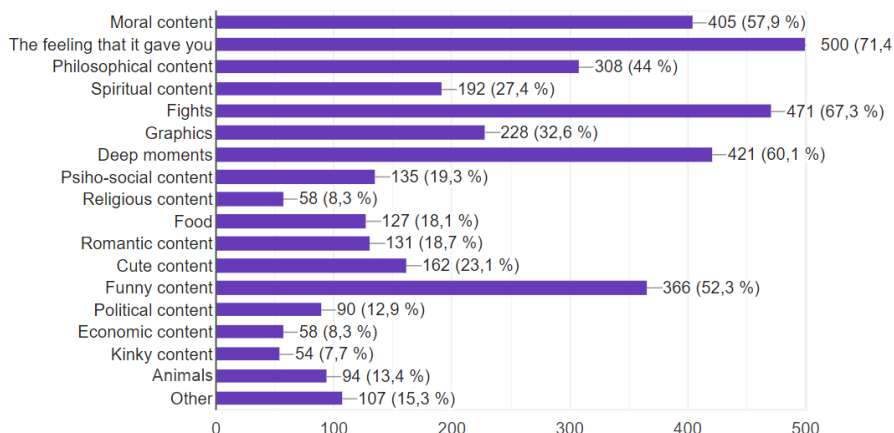


The most appreciated thing in an anime is the feeling it gives, and in Naruto's case we talk about a very warm (almost maternal) feeling. At times, those who are afflicted require a parallel virtual existence to escape a reality that is too difficult to bear. Unlike other addictions that rob people of consciousness, animes are less harmful and even beneficial, aiding in the healing process by depicting the action and life philosophy of the models, who are also experiencing adversity in the script. Obviously, they experience profound moments, the effect of suspense and events such as "first kiss" or the death of a

loved one being well-known as alleviating factors. It lasts much less time than in real life, but the emotions are just as intense, with the audience empathising with the characters and releasing their pent-up sadness.

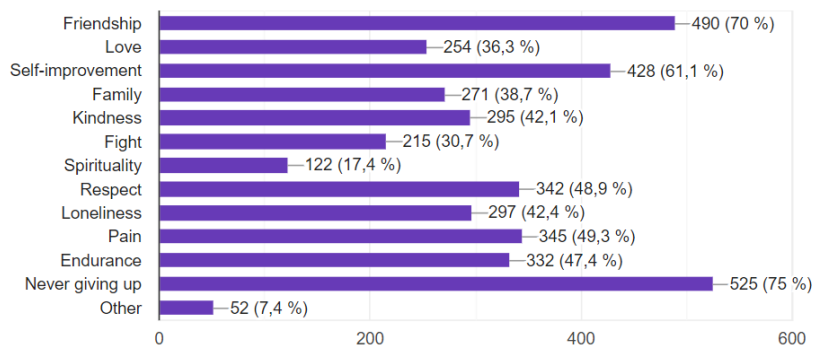
### You most liked about this anime...

700 de răspunsuri



### Of all that Naruto taught us, you most liked his opinion and acts about..

700 de răspunsuri



One of the most appreciated things in Naruto is the moral content, even more appreciated than in other animes. The main character is a moral example of true love, which manages to stop the cycle of revenge and hatred between people.

According to the results, *Naruto* is an anime mainly about ‘never giving up’, ‘friendship’, ‘personal development’, but other elements are appreciated as well.

Fighting is a very popular and appreciated theme in anime, whether it involves fighting for personal development or social good, fighting in war, or ninja fighting. This is true regardless of the circumstances surrounding the fight. Due to the fact that anime creators tend to be extremely well-documented and depict very realistic methods of combat, the subject of war is one of the most discussed and sought-after topics. The strategy is extremely realistic, even more than in live-action movies, because it is much easier to draw characters performing specific actions than it is to find actors capable of performing them correctly. In *Naruto*, however, there is an additional reason for the fight’s popularity: through the touching that occurs during combat, everyone involved is able to transmit and absorb each other’s states and memories, thereby creating unique bonds between the combatants. This is one of the reasons why the fight is so revered in *Naruto*. Despite their appearance, the conflicts are nearly always amicable.

The competition is also friendly and aims to aid in the development of the characters so that each can become his best and see how far he has come in comparison to his previous self and to the others. However, the purpose of the competition is not to be superior to the other participants in order to inspire envy. Instead, the competition is designed to help the characters grow. Envy does not appear frequently in anime, and when it does, it is typically seen as pitiful.

Many people enjoy *Naruto* because it contains a great deal of humour, which can be either overt or subtle depending on the age of the viewer. This is another reason why people report feeling better after watching it. When discussing this topic, it is essential to consider Kishimoto’s gender-typed storytelling. Surprisingly, he combines humorous elements with profound philosophical issues while simultaneously developing and explicating a magnificent mythology. This contributes significantly to *Naruto*’s status as the most admired anime in the entire world. In her research on the art of storytelling, Kiliánová demonstrates that men are more likely to tell humorous tales, whereas women are more likely to tell serious life experiences and mythological stories (Kiliánová 1999: 4, 6). *Naruto* uses mainly the feminine type of discourse (Minea 2022a), which we might consider rare for *shōnen* (with a lot of fighting and funny content), but it adds great value and universality to *Naruto*, making it the target of a wide audience that includes girls too. Even more, visual storytelling, or, more exactly, the silent sequences in manga (and anime), are considered by scientists to be a universal language (Ahmad 2015). I consent to this opinion since images, and sequential images, are easy to understand for everyone, regardless their language or ability to read. It is an ancient way of graphic (written) communication whose potential is explored in manga and fully unveiled in anime.

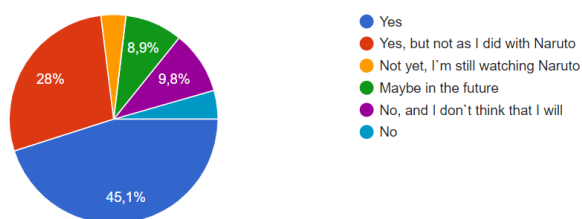
Although at the time I was collecting answers, among the *Naruto* fans, on blogs, *Boruto* was considerably degraded, not being considered anything special compared to the previous series that had a very well thought progressive growth, the result of my statistics shows that *Boruto* has not dropped the franchise too much, being watched by most of *Naruto* fans. Nearly half of those

who answered the questionnaire said they are watching Boruto as fans, and 28% of the respondents said they do not watch at the same heartbeat that they watched at Naruto, but they are still watching it. The remaining 25% said they were not watching, or not yet.

Through ethnographic research, I discovered that many of them watch Boruto specifically to feel connected to the characters from Naruto, with whom they grew up. Along with the action that respects the manga, the moral content of Boruto also begins to take shape. Now that the series is about to take a break from broadcasting for the next few months, it is appreciated to such extent that some fans have even declared the 79<sup>th</sup> chapter of Boruto to be superior to the entirety of One Piece manga (Senpai 2023)

Are you watching Boruto too?

697 de răspunsuri



As we can see, most of the respondents declared that they can well-find themselves in Naruto even if they have different religious and cultural backgrounds. What they enjoyed most about this anime was how it made them feel, as well as Naruto's desire for friendship. The way something makes you feel and the desire for friendship (recalling that for Naruto, friendship was so important that he lost an arm to save a friend and willed to die for saving him) emphasizes the concept of communion.

Therefore, we can conclude that Naruto is perceived as a universal anime because it brings people together and makes them realize that they share numerous common values. Naruto used to converse frequently and on a wide range of topics to avoid unnecessary fights. This is also considered specific to a feminine type of discourse that proved to be successful in the series, especially during the Great Ninja War (with The Infinite Tsukuyomi threat) when Naruto's speeches and actions contributed to the world's salvation by bringing people from all regions and religions together, exhorting intercultural and interreligious harmony and cooperation.

### **Epilogue: the possible future of graphic novels**

Regardless of the fact that their histories are not necessarily related, the journey from simple novel to manga was intriguing. Then, aided by technology,



specialists transformed them into anime: the current zenith of manga. What now? Will this art form evolve into holograms and virtual realities or revert to plain text? A new trend, the Light Novel (LN) was created shortly before the turn of the new millennium. A light novel contains few manga-style illustrations or no illustrations at all. What makes it light is the simple language, very conversational, dialogical, with very few complex descriptions. They are primarily based on characters who inhabit a fantasy world, which is sometimes distinct from the real world. "Light novels are a new genre of postmodern literature based on not reality but on fictional elements embedded in Japanese subcultures." (Sugimoto 2019: 144) It is the ideal lecture for night-time, when you are tired, and the most suitable genre for adolescents who become bored and quit reading if a book is too difficult. Numerous of them are subsequently adapted into videogames or animes. Some of them are spin-offs of an anime. But the idea here is that even if some of them are very intelligent (e.g. Classroom of the elite), the popularity of this new literary genre reflects a lack of ability or desire of contemporary people to comprehend complex manga or novel language. Or people may simply have a strong affinity for plain text and felt to return to it. In any case, manga's popularity did not decline after the rise of light novels, and will stay an important literary genre, but anime has increased even more. Therefore, it is possible that we do not know where literature is headed, but we can say that it is diversifying, and many new branches and adaptations of it will emerge.

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