The Moral Compass of Attack on Titan: A Semiotic Analysis of War and Ethics in Anime

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the representation of war and ethics in the anime *Attack on Titan*, particularly in episode 53 of its third season, with a focus on how it influences the moral perspectives of Generation Z. The research aims to explore the impact of war depiction in popular media on young viewers' ethical understanding and moral reasoning. Previous studies have explored various aspects of representation in *Attack on Titan*, but none have specifically addressed the influence of war representation on the moral views of Generation Z. To fill this gap, this study employs a qualitative research method using John Fiske's semiotic analysis, focusing on codes of reality, representation, and ideology. Data were collected through structured interviews with selected Generation Z participants who are fans of the anime. The results reveal that the anime effectively communicates complex moral dilemmas through its narrative and visual elements, prompting viewers to reflect on values such as courage, sacrifice, and solidarity. The study concludes that *Attack on Titan* serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for moral education, influencing the ethical perspectives of its audience. This research contributes to the broader discourse on how media shapes moral and ethical understanding, especially among younger generations.

1. Introduction

In the continuously evolving digital age, mass media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of various social, cultural, and political issues. Media such as television, films, and animation can influence how viewers perceive and respond to complex life topics like war and conflict (Zahra, Mustaqimmah, & Hendra, 2020). Attack on Titan, as one of the leading Japanese anime series, provides a complex portrayal of war that has captivated global audiences, especially Generation Z. Due to its widespread popularity, this series has emerged as a cultural phenomenon that warrants a thorough analysis of its impact on the moral and ethical understanding of young viewers.

Mass media holds a significant role as an effective communication tool and a source of information capable of shaping social realities (Hadiwijaya, 2023). Far from merely entertaining its audience, particularly younger viewers, the representation of war in media such as films, television, and animation can influence how they perceive armed conflict. Through its portrayal of war, media not only communicates reality but also affects complex social and moral understandings. In this context, media is not simply a source of entertainment but also plays a vital role in addressing serious issues such as war, conflict, morality, and ethics. Animation, in particular, has garnered increasing attention as a medium that is no longer perceived merely as light entertainment, but as a vehicle to convey deep and complex messages.

Attack on Titan provides a compelling example in this regard, as it presents a highly complex narrative with moral and ethical themes where war serves as a primary element in testing the values and principles of each character (Maulana, 2023). The series portrays a world where humans live behind massive walls to protect themselves from the dangerous Titans, giant creatures that threaten their existence. By focusing its story on key characters such as Eren Yeager, Mikasa Ackerman, and Armin Arlert, Attack on Titan presents various moral dilemmas confronted by these characters as they face external threats and ongoing uncertainty (Liang, 2023). These characters not only battle physical enemies, but also grapple with internal conflicts that lead them to question their values of humanity, loyalty, sacrifice, and justice. Thus, Attack on Titan is not just an action-adventure series but also offers profound reflections on how moral decisions are made in extremely difficult situations.

Although numerous studies have examined various aspects of representation in Attack on Titan, such as moral analysis and power struggles, there remains a gap in research that addresses how war is represented in this anime and its impact on the moral perspectives of viewers (Meilani, 2024). Previous research has examined the background of conflicts in this anime from a semiotic perspective. Attack on Titan portrays conflict and oppression, with a complex scenario involving elements of power, suppression, struggle, and discrimination, which resemble historical events such as the Holocaust and the conflict between the Nazis and Jews (Tampubolon & ABIDIN, 2023). Additionally, the violence depicted in the series contains complex and ambiguous elements, which could lead to multiple interpretations by viewers. However, there is still a limitation in research that specifically explores the influence of war representation in Attack on Titan on the moral views of young audiences, particularly in understanding how the series shapes the ethical and moral thinking of Generation Z, who often constitute the primary audience for anime.

In previous research Haqqi, Abbas, & Faza (2024) evaluated the Attack on Titan film from the perspective of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, which emphasizes individual freedom and human responsibility for existence. The results showed that while there is alignment between Sartre's philosophy and the narrative in Attack on Titan, Sartre's concept of absolute freedom contrasts with Islamic teachings that emphasize obedience to God. This article fills a research gap by analyzing how Sartre's secular philosophy can be applied in the context of culture and religion, particularly Islam, which has not been extensively studied in prior research.

Other research Tampubolon & Abidin (2023) discusses how the conflict between the Nazis and Jews is represented in Attack on Titan using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Similar prior research has explored the topic of historical representation in popular media but usually focused more on film or literature rather than anime. Findings from this article reveal a strong similarity between the treatment of Jews by Nazis and the treatment of Eldians by Marley in the anime, which has not been extensively discussed in previous anime studies. The research gap identified in this study is the lack of thorough investigation into how anime as a popular medium can reflect historical events, particularly the Holocaust, and its impact on viewers' understanding of identity and power conflicts.

Another study Faradilla & Ahmad (2023) emphasizes the sociocultural elements in Attack on Titan using content analysis methods, incorporating previous studies on the depiction of culture in Japanese animation. This research found that although Attack on Titan does not directly depict Japan, social elements such as racism, politics, and Japanese history are still present in the story. The identified research gap is the lack of studies that explore how this anime uses its fictional world to symbolically convey social critique of both global and Japanese sociocultural conditions.

In another study Muhammad Khairul Nizam (2020) also analyzed the moral messages in Attack on Titan: The Final Season using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis. This article found that Attack on Titan communicates important moral messages such as tolerance, appreciation of differences, and the consequences of warfare. The research gap identified is the lack of studies specifically linking the symbols in Attack on Titan to contemporary moral relevance, particularly in the context of modern global conflicts and broader social issues.

Therefore, there remains a significant opportunity for further research on how Attack on Titan portrays war and its impact on viewers' understanding of complex moral concepts. The series offers a valuable platform to explore how young viewers, particularly Generation Z, respond to a narrative filled with moral dilemmas and internal conflicts. Additionally, it raises the question of how their

views on war and violence may shift after watching specific episodes that are emotionally intense and ethically challenging.

To address this research gap, the focus of the study will be on Episode 53 from the third season of Attack on Titan. This episode was selected due to its narrative richness in terms of conflict and moral contradictions, providing an opportunity to investigate how the characters in this animation deal with high-pressure situations and conflicts. Using the media representation theory popularized by John Fiske, this research will examine how media influences and reflects societal norms, values, and social perspectives (Rizky & Kusnarto, 2024).

The research question is: How does the representation of war in the anime Attack on Titan influence the moral views of Gen Z audiences? This study aims to evaluate the impact of war representation in the anime on the ethical and moral understanding of young viewers. In addition, the research will investigate whether Gen Z viewers experience a shift in their moral perspectives after watching Episode 53 of Attack on Titan's third season.

The objective of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of how media, particularly animation, influences the moral and ethical perceptions of young audiences. In a global situation that is continuously evolving, and with the increasing complexity of moral issues in the real world, a deeper understanding of how media impacts viewers' thinking and perspectives becomes increasingly crucial (Jamin et al., 2024). This research is expected to make a meaningful contribution to communication and media studies, while also shedding light on how media shapes the moral views of today's youth.

Hence, this study has the potential to provide significant benefits in academic, social, and personal contexts. It could offer valuable insights for parents, educators, and media practitioners in understanding the influence of media on young audiences, particularly in relation to their moral development.

2. Massage Appeal Theory

This study employs John Fiske's semiotic theory, which provides a critical framework for understanding how meaning is created and conveyed through signs in media, including anime. Fiske views semiotics as a field of study that examines how signs function in mass communication (Wijaya, 2022). He distinguishes between two primary levels of meaning-making: the denotative level and the connotative level. At the denotative level, the signs in media directly refer to the physical or concrete realities they represent. In the context of the anime Attack on Titan, the characters, settings, and battles can be analyzed literally. For example, the battle scenes in this anime can be interpreted as direct representations of large-scale wars or military conflicts in the real world.

However, Fiske asserts that meaning does not stop at the denotative level. At the connotative level, signs take on deeper roles by generating meanings related to social, cultural, and ideological values (Tarigan, Riza, & Harahap, 2022). In the context of Attack on Titan, the portrayal of Eldia and Marley goes beyond being mere factions in conflict. On a connotative level, they reflect broader moral conflicts, such as the ethical dilemmas inherent in warfare or the social injustices that frequently arise in armed conflicts. Fiske's theory becomes essential here for understanding how this anime, beyond its entertainment value, conveys complex ethical and moral messages (Fadillah, Atmantika, & Nuryana, 2023). By applying Fiske's semiotic analysis, this research aims to reveal how the signs in Attack on Titan contribute to a deeper understanding of moral and ethical issues, particularly in the depiction of war and social injustice. This approach allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the anime's narrative elements, recognizing how its symbolic representations engage with and reflect broader societal and ideological concerns.

3. Method

The research method employed in this study is qualitative, which allows for an in-depth investigation of the audience's views and experiences regarding the representation of war in the animation "Attack on Titan." Through structured interviews and document analysis, this study will examine how Generation Z responds to the portrayal of war in this animation and how it affects their perspective on complex moral issues. This method enables a more complex and nuanced analysis of

how characters and events in the episodes influence the viewers' moral outlook. The choice of this method stems from its flexibility and its ability to capture the subtle nuances in the audience's moral and ethical perspectives (Assyakurrohim, Ikhram, Sirodj, & Afgani, 2022). By utilizing a qualitative approach, the researcher can explore deeper meanings in the interaction between media and audience, especially in the context of complex themes such as war and morality.

The research method used is a case study focusing on episode 53 of season three of "Attack on Titan." The selection of this episode is based on its complex narrative and moral conflicts, making it suitable for analyzing how the characters and events in the animation influence viewers' perceptions. A case study allows the researcher to investigate phenomena in real-life situations, providing a more detailed understanding of how the representation of war in media can influence Generation Z's moral viewpoints (Abdullah, Nanda, & Ayuningtyas, 2020).

Strategic steps are involved in the research process to ensure that the data obtained is accurate and relevant. First, the researchers conducted purposive sampling by identifying Generation Z participants who are fans of "Attack on Titan" through online forums and fan communities. Second, data was collected through in-depth interviews with participants, designed to gain an understanding of their perspectives on the moral conflicts in the episode. Data processing was conducted using thematic analysis, where key themes emerging from the interviews were identified and analyzed (Fadillah & Huiquan, 2024). This process enables the researchers to construct a comprehensive picture of how the representation of war in this animation influences the audience's moral perspectives.

4. Result and Discussion

This research applies John Fiske's semiotic analysis to investigate how war is represented in episode 53 of season 3 of "Attack on Titan." Focusing on the codes of reality, representation, and ideology, the study explores how the animation influences the moral and ethical views of Generation Z audiences. By analyzing the narrative and visual elements, we can gain a deeper understanding of the significant impact this series has on the younger generation.

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Codes of Reality

Setting and Environment. In this section, the open battlefield in Shiganshina creates a tense and dangerous atmosphere. The visuals of debris and smoke depict characters surrounded by destruction and uncertainty. The detailed portrayal of the damage and gloomy atmosphere highlights the constant threat and emphasizes the brutal consequences of war.

The combination of dark colors and deep contrasts supports this visual narrative, generating a sense of isolation and vulnerability. This environment not only encompasses the physical aspects but also reflects the emotional states of the characters, reinforcing the feelings of despair and courage they experience.

Characters and Costumes. Main characters like Eren Yeager and Levi Ackerman appear in military uniforms, symbolizing courage and resilience. These costumes affirm their identities as determined warriors and highlight their roles as protectors of humanity. This visual representation helps the audience understand the characters' positions and responsibilities within the conflict.

Details in the costumes, such as insignias and combat gear, add dimension to character development, reflecting the military nature and hierarchical structure of the Scout Regiment. These elements provide a deeper understanding of the environment in which they operate and the challenges they face.

4.1.2. Codes of Representation

Dialogue and Storytelling. The dialogue in this episode illustrates the moral and existential dilemmas faced by the characters. Questions about the meaning of life and death on the battlefield prompt viewers to reflect on the notions of courage and sacrifice. For instance, conversations like, "Are we all heading towards death? Yes, we are," demonstrate an awareness of the risks taken and acceptance of fate. This statement underscores the conflict between hope and despair, compelling the audience to consider the consequences of the characters' actions.

Another dialogue emphasizes the importance of memory and legacy, stating, "Their lives have meaning because we, the living, refuse to forget them." This highlights how past actions impact the present, giving meaning and purpose to the ongoing struggle.

Action and Movement. The battle scenes display intense choreography, with fast-paced movements and brutal attacks. These actions depict the chaos of war and convey the tension and urgency felt by the characters. The physical and emotional impacts of these confrontations are traced through dynamic and energetic visual imagery.

The characters' movements using ODM gear showcase dynamism and speed, creating a sense of constant pressure and danger. These visuals help the audience understand the complexity and risks the characters face with each decision, thereby adding depth to the viewing experience.

4.1.3. Ideological Codes

The Theme of Struggle and Sacrifice. This episode focuses on the theme of struggle and sacrifice, particularly through the characters' decisions to face danger with courage. This ideology is expressed through a narrative that emphasizes the importance of fighting for something larger than oneself. This perspective portrays the characters as heroes willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, encouraging the audience to reflect on values of courage and sacrifice in their own lives. It creates a powerful story about human strength and resilience in overcoming adversity.

Perception of the Enemy. The representation of Titans as unfeeling threats underscores the importance of clearly distinguishing between 'us' and 'them.' This creates a situation where others are perceived as the primary threat to be confronted. This ideology frames war as a battle between good and evil, prompting the audience to contemplate the moral complexity of such conflicts. This portrayal invites viewers to rethink their views on enemies and threats within a broader context.

> *"The war here seems really complicated. It's not just about fighting. There are so many tough decisions that have to be made. It made me realize that war is incredibly complex."* (Alex Sandres, 19, Viewer)

Alex, a 19-year-old viewer, expressed that episode 53 of Attack on Titan Season 3 gave him a deeper understanding of the complexities of war. He realized that war is not just about physical battles but also involves a multitude of difficult decisions made by leaders and individuals involved. Through this episode, Alex understood that war is far more intricate than mere confrontation. It encompasses various factors such as politics, morality, and social issues, all of which are interconnected and influence the course of the conflict. In other words, episode 53 successfully made Alex aware that war is a multidimensional issue and cannot be viewed simplistically.

> *"Yeah, I realized that conflict is never simple. There are so many motivations behind every action. It made me more understanding and less quick to judge."* (Bella, 21, Viewer)

Bella, a 21-year-old viewer, stated that episode 53 of Attack on Titan Season 3 made her aware of the complexity of conflicts. She realized that each character in the story has different backgrounds and motivations, leading to varied actions. Watching this episode gave her an experience that made her more thoughtful in making decisions and avoiding being too quick to judge a situation. In other words, through episode 53, Bella learned to view issues from multiple perspectives and understand that conflicts are not always polarized into right and wrong.

> *"I've become more understanding and try to see things from other people's perspectives. This episode taught me the importance of solidarity and support, especially when facing challenges together."* (Adam, 23, Viewer)

Adam, a 23-year-old viewer, mentioned that watching episode 53 of Attack on Titan Season 3 made him more sensitive to others' perspectives and encouraged him to be more empathetic. According to Adam, the episode emphasized the importance of solidarity and support when facing difficulties. Watching the episode inspired Adam to better understand that everyone has different viewpoints and that it is crucial to support each other, especially when dealing with shared challenges. In essence, through this episode, Adam not only enjoyed the show but also gained a deeper understanding of human values such as empathy and solidarity.

4.2. Discussion

This study offers a new perspective on how animated media influences moral and ethical understanding among the younger generation. The findings contribute significantly to the academic literature on media and moral education.

4.2.1. Analysis of Findings

Representation of War. This episode portrays war as a complex arena involving deep moral dilemmas. It is not solely about military action but also about the profound emotional and psychological impacts of war. This demonstrates that animated media can serve as a medium to explore heavy themes like war and morality.

This research adds to the growing body of literature on how war is represented in media by emphasizing how animation is capable of conveying the moral complexities often overlooked in other genres. It reinforces the notion that popular media can act as an effective educational tool, delivering profound moral messages and stimulating critical reflection among its audience.

Emotional and Psychological Impact on Generation Z. The study reveals that Generation Z viewers responded to this episode with deep reflections on values such as courage and sacrifice. The episode sparked conversations about empathy and bravery, encouraging viewers to avoid oversimplifying enemies and conflicts. This shows how media can influence young people's perspectives on complex issues. This research enhances our understanding of the media's influence on the moral and ethical development of young people. By presenting empirical evidence of the emotional and psychological impact of animated media, it helps explain how media plays a role in shaping the identity and values of Generation Z.

Viewer Response to Episode 53 of Attack on Titan Season 3. The study uncovered several interesting insights into how this episode affects viewers' understanding of the complexities of war and conflict.

First, the episode successfully made viewers aware of the moral dilemmas often faced in war situations. The main characters are forced to make difficult choices without any perfect solutions. This prompts viewers to think critically about the consequences of each action taken, both within the story and in real life. Second, Episode 53 significantly influences character development. Through the conflicts and challenges they face, the characters undergo important growth and transformation. They learn from their mistakes, understand the consequences of their actions, and deepen their understanding of the complexities of war. This character growth not only enriches the storyline but also provides a concrete example for the audience of how individuals can change and learn from their experiences.

Third, the episode effectively connects fictional storytelling with social reality. The messages about the complexities of war, moral dilemmas, and the importance of solidarity conveyed in this episode strongly resonate with real-world conflicts. Viewers can see how fictional narratives reflect societal issues and inspire them to think more deeply about these problems. Fourth, Episode 53 highlights the importance of collaboration and unity in facing common challenges. The moments when the main characters must join forces to combat a greater threat evoke a strong sense of empathy in viewers. This demonstrates that fictional stories can be an effective tool for introducing positive values such as solidarity and support.

Finally, analyzing the responses of the viewers reveals that Episode 53 of Attack on Titan Season 3 not only entertains but also plays a role in shaping viewers' understanding of complex issues like war and conflict. The episode successfully encourages viewers to engage in critical thinking, feel empathy, and grasp the importance of human values.

4.2.2. Implications and Applications

This episode serves as a moral learning tool that encourages viewers to reflect on their perspectives on conflict and sacrifice. It demonstrates that animated media has the potential to be an effective non-traditional source of learning, capable of conveying moral values. This research provides a foundation for educators to incorporate popular media into curricula as a tool for teaching ethical and moral values. It also opens the door for further research into how media can be used as an educational tool,

adding variety to teaching methods in a way that is more interactive and suited to the needs of the younger generation.

Social and Cultural Reflection. By depicting battles in a realistic and humanizing manner, this episode allows viewers to understand conflict within a broader social and cultural framework. It highlights how media plays a role in shaping societal narratives about war and peace, and how it influences young people's views on global issues. This study provides insights into how media influences and reflects social and cultural values. It is crucial in academic discussions about the role of media in shaping social and cultural dynamics, particularly in the context of younger generations. This study highlights the importance of understanding media representation in the context of globalization and cultural exchange.of study as a whole (shows how progress from the latest knowledge). A common mistake in this section is to repeat the results of an experiment, abstract, or be presented with a very list. The concluding section must provide clear scientific truths. In addition, the conclusions can also provide suggestions for future experiments. show research contributions, and provide suggestions for further research. Research conclusions must also be written clearly, concisely and logically. and contains all the data from the introduction to your discussion.

5. Conclusion

This study examines how war and ethics are represented in the anime Attack on Titan, particularly in episode 53 of the third season, with the aim of evaluating its impact on the morality of Generation Z. By employing a qualitative method and John Fiske's semiotic approach, this research concludes that the anime successfully communicates complex moral dilemmas through its deep narrative and visuals. The moral conflicts faced by the characters in the series invite viewers to reconsider values such as courage, sacrifice, and solidarity, ultimately prompting critical reflection on real-world war issues.The study also reveals that Attack on Titan is not merely a source of entertainment but also an effective tool for conveying moral messages and shaping the ethical perspectives of the younger generation. Responses from Generation Z indicate that they are more aware of the complexities of conflict and war, as well as more concerned with the humanitarian aspects of making difficult decisions in crisis situations. This suggests that popular media, particularly animation, holds great potential for enhancing moral and ethical understanding among its audience. Therefore, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature regarding the role of media in moral education and the shaping of social values. The findings open the door for further research on how animated media can be used as an effective teaching tool, as well as its impact on ethics education and moral communication in the digital age. Moreover, this research emphasizes the importance of understanding how media is represented within a broader social and cultural framework, especially in addressing increasingly complex global moral challenges.

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