

Representation of Social Criticism of Cyberbullying in Drama *3 Nen A Gumi*

Dewi Ayu Putri Budinuljanto Zainul*, Dindin Dimiyati

Universitas Telkom, Indonesia

Email: dewiayuputribz@gmail.com*, rakeanwastu@telkomuniversity.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Cyberbullying;
John Fiske's Semiotics;
Japanese Drama;
Social Criticism;
Individualism

Background: As the rapid growth of digital technology intensified social problems, among them cyberbullying, it has become a very pressing issue in modern society. **Objective:** This study investigated how *3 Nen A Gumi*, a television drama from Japan, depicts and highlights criticism of cyberbullying. **Methods:** By means of qualitative research within John Fiske's semiotic framework, there were worked out three different levels of codes: reality, representation, and ideology. With regard to the reality level, cyberbullying is indicated through the appearances, behaviors, and emotional expressions of characters. **Results:** In representation, the means include camera techniques, narrative conflicts, and dialogues. At the ideological level, these show individualism in the drama, where egoism, poor empathy, and weak self-control are highlighted. **Conclusion:** The findings show that *3 Nen A Gumi* condemns not only digital crimes but also broader social issues like youth vulnerability and family disorganization, compounded by the slow response of educational institutions. At last, the drama becomes both entertainment and almost a reflection of society inspiring collective awareness, empathy, and shared responsibility towards cyberbullying.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the criticisms naturally transformed communication patterns from offline to wholly online exchanges due to the rapid advancement of digital technologies. The phenomenal rise of this new cyber society has seen social media used as a platform for self-expression (Carreta et al., 2019). In a report by We Are Social, it was stated that the number of internet users around the world, as of January 2024, was at 5.35 billion (Annur, 2024a). In Indonesia, the growth of internet users increased by 0.8% to reach 185 million users in the same timeline (Annur, 2024b). The massive growth of internet usage has generated various social issues, some being termed cybercrimes. Of these, cyberbullying emerges as a most chilling concern. Findings from the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that 45% of students between 14 and 24 years of age in Indonesia reported being victims of cyberbullying (UNICEF, 2020).

The effect of cyberbullying can sometimes be delayed, but it can take a heavy toll on the victim. The consequences of cyberbullying worldwide often occur in social contexts,

especially in education and work (Legi & Darius Kainara, 2022). These consequences may also include various dire considerations such as decreased self-worth, depression (Hartanto & Johassan, 2021), social withdrawal, and in extreme cases, suicidal behavior (Chen et al., 2016; Wijayanti et al., 2021). According to UNICEF (2020), the incidence of cyberbullying accounts for about 40% of suicide cases among children in Indonesia. Common methods of cyberbullying that take place among adolescent youth involve flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation (Rospita, 2022), identity theft, and spreading false information in this post-truth age (Carreta et al., 2019). The spread of cyberbullying among adolescents in many forms, in turn, has triggered social criticism as a form of public reaction to this worsening issue.

The rise of social criticism has resulted from the rising concern in society over the growth of cyberbullying among children. The issue herein is a conglomerate of many facets; several variables contribute to its progression: absence of empathy (Renati et al., 2012, in Rospita, 2022), rapid changes in technological environments, lack of self-control (Antama & Zuhdy, 2021): followed by empathy fatigue (Garcia, 2020) and a total lack of adult guidance or supervision which aggravates the problem further (Antama & Zuhdy, 2021). The mass media has a role to play here, particularly via the television drama empathically portraying some social issue. An important consideration is that a drama entertains and provides a venue for social critique of some pressing phenomena affecting society (Marcelina, 2018).

The representation in media is the rendering of reality through symbols, narration, and images (Gani & Nuraeni, 2019). Hence, drama could make emotional and intellectual impacts on audiences. According to Soerjono Soekanto (2010), eight social problems are commonly occurring in society, namely those related to the bureaucracy, environment, family disorganization, crime, poverty, population, religions and belief systems, and youth (Salim & Sukendro, 2021).

Hall (1997) views representation as an effect of three approaches: reflective, intentional, and constructionist. At the same time, the reflective perspective understands the media as mirroring real life; the intentional view states that media are a tool through which communicators can express their intentions. The constructionist approach elaborates that meaning is produced through convoluted interactions among language, culture, and audiences (Gani & Nuraeni, 2019). Hence, the culture and media that people take in can shape perceptions of circumstances they have never experienced themselves. As creative beings, humans will use their understanding and patterns of cognition to create meanings that are different from the original ones and undergo acculturation in terms of culture. One significant Japanese drama that maliciously attacks cyberbullying would be *3 Nen A Gumi* (2019). The story revolves around a teacher called Hiiragi Ibuki, who took 29 students' hostages in a quest to find out the truth behind the suicide case of Kageyama Reina, a student who, just 10 days before her graduation, became a victim of cyberbullying. It is the drama that won the Best Drama award in the 100th Television Drama Academy Awards. It examines victimization and perpetration deeply and not just in the standard binary of roles. It critically looks at the educational system and exposes its failures in fostering self-control and the antagonizing spirit that social media fosters as a catalyst for increased digital crimes.

Hall (1997) states that representation is produced by means of three approaches, which are reflective, intentional, and constructionist. The media are a mirror of the real world

according to the reflective approach, whereas the intentional approach claims that the media are the instrument through which a communicator expresses his or her intention. This is in contrast to the constructionist approach, which insists that meaning comes about through complex interactions among language, culture, and audiences (Gani & Nuraeni, 2019). Therefore, the culture and media audiences consume may well influence how they scrutinize situations that they have not experienced firsthand. As creative beings, they employ their understanding and cognitive patterns to create new meanings and to process their cultural acculturation.

One representative Japanese drama that intensely criticizes cyberbullying is *3 Nen A Gumi*, released initially in 2019. It revolves around a teacher named Hiiragi Ibuki, who takes hostage 29 students in her objective to get to the bottom of the facts that surround the suicide case of her student Kageyama Reina, who herself was a victim of cyberbullying, a mere ten days before their graduation. The winner of the Best Drama title at the just concluded 100th Television Drama Academy Awards, this drama cuts across more nuanced topics in victimization and perpetration, not just limited to the common binary of roles. It sharpens its critical lens over the education system, which has not ever succeeded in nurturing self-control to avoid possible harm jointly caused by unholy influences that social media harbors as the enabler of growing digital crimes.

Cyberbullying has attracted so much academic interest that researchers were able to use various methods in analyzing media representations of the phenomenon. One of these is semiotics, which looks at how signs and codes create meaning. John Fiske's semiotics includes three analytical levels reality, representation, and ideology into a comprehensive set for studying how media texts produce messages (Fiske, 2010). This study uses Fiske's semiotic framework to analyze how the *3 Nen A Gumi* represents social criticism of cyberbullying through its narrative and filmic elements.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to address a critical question: In what way does *3 Nen A Gumi* serve as an instrument of social critique with respect to cyberbullying? The current study uses Fiske's semiotic analysis to show the ways in which signs and codes within the drama mirror larger social meanings related to cyberbullying, youth, family dynamics, and education systems. Results are expected to further enrich the discipline of communication studies by providing perspectives into the ways media not only represent but also contest social realities that are complex and contorted.

METHOD

This study used John Fiske's semiotic theory as its principal analytical framework and adopts a qualitative research approach. The qualitative technique was chosen because it is well-suited for analyzing media texts, such as television dramas, where the emphasis is on interpretation, meaning-making, and contextual knowledge rather than quantitative data. This method prioritizes processes over outcomes and emphasizes the use of words, images, and symbols as primary data sources (Sugiono, 2013, in Khoerunnisa, 2022).

A further dimension of the study operates within a critical paradigm with a view to examining and exposing embedded inequalities within the media texts (Widiastuti, 2022). The critical paradigm is particularly pertinent here, as it recognizes that ideology crystallized in media acts in shaping public understandings while either reinforcing or challenging existing

social structures. Using the theoretical framework as a scaffolding for the research, it is shown how media texts are representations of social realities and communication phenomena with a sharp focus on power, control, and social critique.

The data under this study emanated from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data consisted of a set of screenshots of scenes of the Japanese drama *3 Nen A Gumi*. These scenes for consideration were painstakingly selected on the basis of some criteria deliberately conformed to the objectives of the study. Secondary data were collected from relevant literature, including books, journal articles, and past studies related to semiotics, social criticism, and cyberbullying.

The data collection techniques employed for this study were observation, documentation, and literature review. The observation lasted for repeated viewings and analyses of the drama, with an aim to support valid interpretation. By documentation, relevant screenshots were taken and subjected to semiotic analysis. The literature review constituted prior theoretical background and assisted in the interpretation of findings. To ensure that the findings at any one point in time are valid, triangulation was employed in that the findings from all possible sources of data and all theoretical perspectives were compared against one another.

The present study applies the three levels of semiotic analysis proposed by Fiske: reality, representation and ideology, through which it systematically probes the ways in which *3 Nen A Gumi* makes social criticism of cyberbullying.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Social Criticism on Cyberbullying: Mr. Hiiragi and Kaho

In the beginning of this drama, Mr. Hiiragi sets up his plan to confine class 3A in a search for answers regarding the suicide of Kageyama Reina, which took place shortly before the graduation ceremony. He blocked off the exit for the classroom and, in effect, began his presentation.

With respect to substance, Mr. Hiiragi wears a brown teacher's suit. As suggested by Alnasuan (2016), brown is used in colour psychology to symbolize dullness and boredom. This impression somewhat fits his slightly awkward figure, made somewhat worse by his round glasses. On the flip side, brown can be a symbol of strength, resilience, and hard work (Alnasuan, 2016). This once again serves as a duality in Mr. Hiiragi's actions: he demonstrates great strength in many things, including deploying explosives and catching his students all by himself, in spite of being diagnosed with cancer.

It is in this scene where Hiiragi showcased the screen shots of abusive posts from the SNS known as "Mind Voice" that were made by the anonymous account named "Yarinige X." These abusive posts were such messages directed at Kageyama: "Go to hell; Watching you suffer makes me happy; You should never have been born." The most widely talked-about post contains false claims of Reina having misused drugs during the nationals. Willard (2007) describes such behaviour as cyberbullying by way of victimization through the continued sending of obnoxious vulgar or threatening messages (Rospita, 2022).

Kaho, who was referred to as the former close friend of Reina, is now revealed to be the owner of "Yarinige X." In terms of evidence of the fact, Kaho is shown dressed in the standard school uniform which consists of a gray blazer, a white shirt, and a blue tartan skirt, black socks, and white shoes. Most important is the fact that this character is shown without a

tie, which is otherwise worn in formal wear. This missing piece of clothing places her, then, in the rank of a "problem student." In the context of colour psychology, the blue skirt is related with meaning such as love, emotion, truth and mourning (Alnasuan, 2016). The meanings are reflected by the manners and faces of Kaho: she loved Reina, she was disappointed when Reina became close with other people, and finally she did emotional-rich actions.

On the representational level, the drama uses long shots to cover the tense atmosphere of the entire classroom, while medium shots put emphasis on emotional confrontations mostly taking place between Hiiragi and Kaho. To Putra (2015), using these techniques, the audience witnesses Kaho confessing. She recognizes that she disseminated the abusive stuff out of jealousy and feeling neglected, but defensively says, "Why are you blaming me? You haven't done anything up until now!".

The ideological level indicates an individualism pattern. Individualistic thinking resorts to the idea that human beings act only in the interests of their desires and that they do so with complete disregard for the needs and actions of others (Carreta et al., 2019). Kaho sees Reina as the cause of their relationship breaking down but refuses to look into herself and rationalizes that her abusive behaviour was just her letting off steam. That shows a clear lack of empathy and restraint, which goes hand in hand with the existing research about the psychology behind cyberbullying (Antama & Zuhdy 2021).

It also carries multifaceted social critiques. First, on the matter of identifying the criminality of cyberbullying, the case of Kaho's online harassment aptly serves as an example. Secondly, the text assesses youth behaviour specifically, Kaho's opting for cruelty instead of reconciliation. Lastly, it critiques bureaucratic indifference, as Reina suffered unnoticed by teachers who did not heed her plight until it was far too late. Even the late arrival of Hiiragi was met with a disinterested 'The objective here is, as your instructor, that the purpose for my presence,' clearly showing the weight of the matter. More on this aspect becomes the duty of the teacher to guide students 'to the right path'. In the whole educational system, the same has great weight in terms of responsibility in guidance and timely counselling. This layered view holds that *3 Nen A Gumi* sees cyberbullying not just as an individual moral sin, but as a systemic social problem cutting through peers, families, and institutional structures.

Representation of Social Criticism on Cyberbullying: Mr. Hiiragi and Satomi

Unravelling the more atmospheric plot, Kaho has never been the one who made the fake video, which shows Reina to be a substance abuser. Instead, she insists that someone has slipped a DVD of unsent provenance into her bag with unfathomable intent to implicate more than one unidentified assailant. It is now leading to a climatic denouement where Satomi, haggard by all means, agrees to give up to confession.

Satomi is portrayed by the narrative as a popular student and a member of the soccer club. As such, he frequently wears the whole school uniform nuanced by the blue tartan skirt that stands for Kaho's attire. According to colour psychology, blue is usually associated with love, truth, and grief (Alnasuan, 2016). This phenomenon is coherent with Satomi's dual character since his peer group adores him but he is subject to an inner conflict after Reina denied his love. His outward appearance of a confident admired athlete contrasts with the inner vulnerability beneath his wounded pride.

This includes dramatic long and medium-long shots that represent the tension of the

moment (Putra, 2015). Long shots represent the whole classroom while medium-long shots focus on Satomi, who is feeling uncomfortable during Hiiragi's interrogation. The editing and cinematography effectively describe Satomi's transit from being a revered athlete into a figure of resentment and aggression.

In this case, the anti-protagonist Reina's refuting of the love confession made by that character raises the problem. The aftereffects of Reina's rejection reign upon Satomi, who comes to the point of taking it as though another person had caught her favour. Satomi is possessed by jealousy driving him to secretly record Reina in a locker room. Later, this recording becomes the very source of the doping video which would turn out fraudulent when made public. Willard (2007) opines that such behaviours may be defined as cyberbullying, referring to the form in which personal information or images gained by deceit do harm to the victim (Rospita, 2022).

At the ideological level, it means Satomi's action indicates Individualism. His entire discussion with Hiiragi clears his motivations: Hiiragi asked Satomi, "*Did you record the whole thing from the start so that she could be included in the footage of the doping case?*" Satomi shook his head and added that it was meant to destroy Kageyama. This clearly shows where Satomi stands in importance: the dignity of Reina vs that personal pride, the pain of which Satomi seems now to be nursing.

Views marked with individualism in this case are impulsive and self-centred since an individual forms a slight disappointment into deliberate actions that harm others (Bevarlia & Christin, 2018). The subject's apparent desire to "*destroy*" Reina implies an absence of sympathy combined with a rejection of social responsibility and thus rather points to a search for personal emotional gratification than anything less personal or responsible.

Satomi expresses her anger on an online page concerning purely so-called friends, after being rejected by her peers. The behaviour of teenagers is hence being judged for self-centred egotism and loss of self-control, which, if unchecked, leads to dire consequences. While the first part alludes to the psychological aspect of cyberbullying, the second one deals with the criminal aspect: the act of humiliating and slandering someone via the illicit use of private recordings. Satomi symbolises the end result of all adolescent vulnerability, glitching technology, and the general lack of proper supervision. The critique extends to individuals and social organisations for being unable to provide adequate emotional support and control mechanisms for the youth.

Representation of Social Criticism on Cyberbullying: Mr. Hiiragi and Kai

As the story develops, it becomes clear that Satomi was not the only one responsible for the humiliation of Reina; rather, he was pointedly misused by Kai, an aspiring dancer whose ambition was hindered by the misfortunes of his family.

On the reality plane, Kai emerges as the rebellious, yet charismatic-looking dyed brown hair paired with a full school uniform and black tartan pants. As far as colour psychology is concerned, black is predominantly associated with sin, evil, or death (Alnasuan, 2016), and thus serves to highlight Kai's role as the chief agent of Reina's downfall. This seemingly friendly and intelligent boy nurtures a dark and unexplained resentment of terrible proportions stemming from the pressures inflicted by his personal life: the death of his father, the illness of his mother, and the feeding and clothing of his younger siblings.

The drama, at the representational level, makes full use of close-ups to exploit the contrast between Kai's supposedly innocent demeanour while confessing to Hiiragi, and his breezy admission that provoked great reaction from the class, as opposed to Hiiragi's generally stern treatment. As noted by Putra (2015), the medium and long shots during the physical confrontation highlight Kai as both a victim of circumstance but also a wielder of cruelty. The altercation between Hiiragi and Kai is deftly interwoven with a series of dialogues that effectively elevate the physical conflict into a serious moral study.

Kai's manipulation of Satomi and Kaho, which entails cyberbullying, outing, and deceit, embodies the definition of denigration. He has been seen recording Reina surreptitiously, spreading misinformation, and exploiting the weaknesses of his peers to benefit himself (Willard, 2007 in Rospita, 2022). This action does not derive from a single grievance but rather from the accumulation of many grievances. Mainly, the subject envies Reina, who follows her dreams without anything impairing her, while he himself sacrificed his dreams for the sake of making a living. The following part of his conversation reflects this sentiment:

"Why? She has no burdens at all, so she can pursue her dreams without any restraint. Whereas I have to restrain myself in every aspect of my life. Why is it just me who has to go through all this suffering?"

On an ideological level, it is an individualistic persona wherein he views his own suffering as a valid reason to hurt another. The individual in question, therefore, believes that he is acting ethically by trying to avenge his sense of unfairness, no matter if it involves taking the life of another person. As Mangunhardjana (1997) says, actions are oftentimes viewed as "true" in moral sense when it brings personal solace, irrespective of its consequences on other individuals (Bevarlia & Christin, 2018).

This series brings multiple social critiques into the picture. First, it critiques juvenile behaviours strongly considering envy and impulsivity to be the two forces that tend to justify acts of harm done to others. A second critique involves the ramifications of family disorganization: Kai's lived experience with family disorganization compels him to take on premature responsibility, therefore cultivating poor choices that were possibly avoidable. A third critique is levelled against cyberbullying: this crime that explains how lying and manipulating in cyberspace can lead to life-death consequences.

In the representation of the Kai character, *3 Nen A Gumi* epitomizes a sequence of destruction that involves systemic failures-financial issues, absence of parental figures, and ill-equipped adult caretakers-being laid upon personal vulnerabilities, all of which finally catalyse perceived cyberbullying. This phenomenon, as described in the story, has an enormous capacity to wreak devastation on both the victim and the perpetrator.

Representation of Social Criticism on Cyberbullying: Reina and Sakura

This part will explore the character of Reina, considered the most notable victim of cyberbullying, and her relations with Sakura, an outcast that enjoyed a few miserable moments of being her classmate. The nature of the relationship between these two subjects under study highlights the immense psychological implications of bullying and the inadequate system of social support confronting such problems.

In terms of actuality, Reina is first drawn as the school's famous girl who is confident,

cheerful, and admired for her swimming talents. She is clad in school by a standard uniform, including a blue tartan skirt. According to colour psychology, blue often signifies ideas of love, truth, and mourning (Alnasuan, 2016), thereby suggesting a surrogate explanation for Reina's transition from glory to despair. As bullying began to gather steam, her body language began to change from one of an easy smile to an upright posture to evident signs of increasing anxiety and self-hate in her face.

By contrast, Sakura is portrayed to the introverted and socially obtuse type, one of whose tasks became the impossible burden of being class president without freewill. The subject's attire consists of dark red blue tartan skirt, red signifying sacrifice, vigilance, and resilience (Alnasuan, 2016). Her actions correspond symbolically to the narrative in the delicate balance of strength and selflessness. Sakura, despite being ostracized and made a "servant," still proudly voices everything, including offering to confess guilt for her classmates.

This play dramatically employs close-up shots to show Reina's mental disintegration. Her monologues, although directed towards an audience, expose themselves to long shots involving self-dialogue. These scenes indicate symptoms identified by Vaghchipawala (2023), such as anxiety, paranoia, depression, and suicidal ideation, which are common consequences of cyberbullying. This marks an iconic scene in the story when Reina begs of Sakura, denoting utter despair:

"Everybody sees me as a threat, and that weighs heavy in my mind. I can't handle it. Help me unload this weight."

At the end, there will be a long shot of Reina going to the rooftop fence before eventually hanging herself.

At the ideological level, Reina's suicide symbolizes an extreme form of individualism. Mangunhardjana (1997) claimed that one usually justifies one's act as true: *"I feel less pain if this happens"* (Bevarlia & Christin, 2018). For Reina, this indeed means that her death would lead to the only peace. This decision reveals the nature of severe isolation brought about by extensive bullying and a lack of support.

What this portrayal, hence, accomplishes is a very subtle social critique on very convoluted issues in a very profound and discerning way. First, the text interrogates youth culture by putting peer aggression and lack of compassion as the main causes that induce individuals into hopelessness. Second, the pretentiousness of social control mechanisms was highlighted: in the case of Reina, educators, parents and peers provided ineffective rate of intervention, thus leaving her to face her harassment in solitude. Third, the text denounces cyberbullying as a crime, demonstrating how incessant digital abuse may actually entail irreversible consequences.

Through Reina's tragic narrative, *3 Nen A Gumi* made an appeal to its audience. It urgently calls for the establishment of stronger support networks, systemic intervention, and, needless to say, empathy. This drama is beyond the definition of cyberbullying; indeed, it stands to condemn a culture of neglect enabling such calamities to happen.

CONCLUSION

The research used John Fiske's theory of semiotic analysis to study some of the social critiques on cyberbullying as depicted in the Japanese drama *3 Nen A Gumi*. Three codes (reality, representation, and ideology) are used in the drama to depict the dynamics of bullying

and wider social implications. Real-world signs in the drama comprise a character's appearances, behaviors, and expressions that indicate possible victimization, perpetration, or mediation. The technical aspects like camera angles, dialogues, and plot structure enhance the representation level's emotional charge of the bullying scenes. The ideological base shows the prevalent individualism theme, which indicates that self-interest and lack of empathy motivate destructive behaviors. From this, it is evident that *3 Nen A Gumi* provides nuanced societal commentaries. It also condemns cyberbullying as a criminal offense, emphasizing the pernicious use of technology in humiliating and destroying friends, but emphasizes instead the common susceptibility of youth, who often lack emotional maturity and self-control, thus making him the sword and victim at that point. The play also discusses issues related to incoherent family relationships and gaps in institutional responses, such as bureaucratic negligence, which allude to technical failures in systems that allow bullying to get out of hand and go unchecked. Therefore, In the end, the drama, *3 Nen A Gumi*, goes beyond being mere entertainment. It serves as a cultural text, capturing the various aspects of cyberbullying. With realistic portrayals of moral quandaries, the play encourages viewers to think critically about the importance of fostering empathy, establishing social control mechanisms, and developing collective responsibility in preventing cyberbullying.

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