

Research Article

# The Stigma of the Yutori Generation in the Drama Series “*Yutori desu ga nani ka*”

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Received: 25-01-2025; Revised: 14-05-2025; Accepted: 15-05-2025  
Available online: 30-06-2025; Published: 30-06-2025

## Abstract

*Yutori* education is an educational system designed to reduce student pressure. This relaxed approach has led to the emergence of a new generation known as the “*Yutori* Generation,” which includes individuals born between 1987 and 1996. This generation is depicted in the television drama series “*Yutori Desu Ga Nani Ka*,” directed by Nobuo Mizuta. The objective of this research is to analyze the characteristics of the show's three main characters and to evaluate whether the stigma associated with them is accurate. The writer employed a qualitative research methodology. For data gathering, a library research method was used, and the analysis was conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach. The theoretical framework for this study includes the *Yutori* education concept by Paivi Poukka, the characteristics of the *Yutori* generation as explained by Hironobu Fujiwara, and Erving Goffman's theory of stigma. The data analysis results indicated that the community's stigmatization of the three characters in the play was not entirely accurate. The characters in this drama also show his empathy and responsibility.

**Keywords:** Japanese; Drama, *Yutori*; Stigma; Generation

## 1. Introduction

A stigma refers to the negative attributes assigned to a person based on societal and environmental perceptions. This concept has existed since ancient Greek times, where stigma was associated with individuals who deviated whether in appearance or behaviour from the prevailing standards of normality and moral acceptability (Coleman, 2023). Certain generations, such as Generation Z (Gen Z), often face stigmatization. Gen Z is frequently perceived as lazy, disrespectful, individualistic, and spoiled, largely due to their upbringing in an era of rapid technological advancement that makes many tasks easier (Artanti, 2024). In Japan, a similar stigma exists surrounding the “*yutori* generation,” which is connected to “*yutori* education.” In 1977, the Japanese government-initiated reforms to lighten the

education system by reducing the academic workload in schools. This approach, known as “*yutori no jikan*,” aimed to create a more relaxed educational environment. By 2002, *yutori* education, or the *yutori* curriculum, was implemented, giving rise to a new generation referred to as the *yutori* generation (*yutori sedai*). According to Fahey (2017), a professor at Waseda University, in his article “Japan's Worsening Social Divide: A Looming Political Risk”, the *yutori* generation comprises those who received their education during the *yutori* educational reform in the late 1980s. Until the 1990s, the *yutori* curriculum did not gain legal status until 2002. This educational reform aimed to reduce the academic burden on students in schools. The *yutori* generation is often characterized as lacking ambition and achievement and is sometimes labelled

as lazy. Additionally, this generation is frequently blamed for Japan's declining ethics and morals, decreasing birthrate, and struggling economy. The *yutori* phenomenon is also depicted in the Japanese drama "*Yutori Desu ga Nani ka.*" Released in 2016, this series explores the impact of the *yutori* education system on three characters in this drama, highlighting how they differ from previous generations, the challenges they encounter in their lives, and their efforts to overcome these challenges.

The drama series "*Yutori Desu Ga Nani Ka*" tells the story of three main characters, all born in 1987, who are part of the first generation affected by the *yutori* (pressure-free) education system. The first character, Masakazu Sakama, faced significant challenges after his father's death. He lives with his mother, elder brother, brother's wife, and younger sister. Masakazu works as a salaryman but has recently been demoted from a position at the head office to an employee at a branch store due to his inability to deliver maximum results. The second character, Kazutoyo Yamaji, is an elementary school teacher under pressure from colleagues and parents regarding his *yutori* teaching style. He also struggles to communicate with a student who is interning as a teacher's assistant at his school. The third character, Maribu Michigami, was born into an elite family and was considered a child prodigy, excelling in academics and sports. However, following his parents' divorce, Maribu's mother exerted immense pressure on him to gain admission to Tokyo University and secure a promising future. Unable to cope with these expectations, Maribu has grown into someone who is the opposite of what his mother envisioned. Now, after ten years, he lives with his children and wife, facing numerous financial difficulties.

This research aims to explore a generation of Japanese society that is not widely recognized outside of Japan.

Although Japanese society is often characterized by discipline, hard work, and resilience under pressure, there exists a generation that contradicts these traits—the *yutori* generation. This paper will examine how Japanese society stigmatizes this group. The chosen data corpus for this study is the drama series "*Yutori Desu Ga Nani Ka,*" as it effectively reflects the characteristics and challenges faced by the *yutori* generation. The drama illustrates the difficulties the characters encounter in various aspects of life, including work, personal relationships, and communication skills. These factors make this drama series an ideal source for this research.

Research related to the theme of *yutori* has been conducted by Sakurai (2016) in a study entitled *Impacts of Recent Education Reforms in Japan: Voices from Junior High Schools in Japan* in Japan, Desyderia (2017), with the title "Characteristics of *Yutori Sedai* in the World of Work," Ishiko et al. (2021).

## 2. Methods

The method used in this research is qualitative content analysis. In the perspective of qualitative methodology, content analysis is adjacent to data analysis methods and text interpretation methods (Ahmad, 2018). The author starts this research with problem identification. The problem studied by the author is to analyze the characteristics of the three main characters of the *yutori* generation in the drama series entitled *Yutori Desu Ga Nani Ka* through the stigma they receive. The author uses the drama series by Nobuo Mizuta released in 2016 as the research data corpus. The theoretical foundations used by the author are, first, the concept of *yutori* generation by Fujiwara et al. (2017), and stigma theory by (Goffman, 2009).

## 3. Result and Discussion

This paper will highlight three figures who represent the *Yutori* generation (*yutori sedai*). This drama tells the story of three

characters who get negative stigmas from people around them. Masakazu is stigmatized by his boss, and Kazutoyo Yamaji, a teacher. He also received negative stigma from his coworkers and students' parents because he was born in 1987, which is considered the first generation of *yutori*. Likewise, the character Maribu is considered the first generation of *yutori*.

### 3.1 Stigmatization of the Character Masakazu Sakama

The following quotation is a conversation between Iwao Asou and Masakazu in a café. In this scene, Asou works as a rental-*ojisan* who provides counseling services. He is the first character to say that Masakazu is a *yutori*. At first, Masakazu, one of the characters representing the *yutori* generation, does not realize that he is of the *Yutori* generation.

正和：ええ！？ゆとりなんっすか？  
 麻生：1987年生まれの29歳？  
 正和：はい。  
 麻生：うん、が一般的にゆとりの第一世代と呼ばれていますね。  
 正和：妹の世代だとてつきり思っていました。  
 麻生：うーん、2003年高校入学してから、学習指導要領の改訂が実施されました。高校は？公立？  
 正和：ですね。  
 麻生：週休二日か？  
 正和：ですね。  
 麻生：ゆとりですね。

Masakazu: What, I'm a *yutori*?  
 Asou: You were really born in 1987 and are 29 years old?  
 Masakazu: That's right.  
 Asou: Yes, you are generally referred to as a first generation *yutori*.  
 Masakazu: I guess it was my younger sister's generation.

Asou: uhmm, after you entered high school in 2003, reforms to the education system were implemented. Your school was a public school?

Masakazu: Yes.

Asou: 2 days off a week?

Masakazu: Yes.

Asou: You are a *yutori*.

Based on the quote in episode one, Masakazu himself previously did not realize that he was a *yutori*, indicating that he had no self-awareness that he was a *yutori*. Asou later confirmed that Masakazu was born in 1987 and was 29 years old at the time, he also added that people born in that year are generally known as first generation *yutori*. According to Fujiwara et al. (2017), the *yutori* generation is the generation born from 1987 to 1995 and is approximately 20 to 30 years old. After that, Asou explains again that the reform of the education system began when Masakazu entered high school in 2003, as Wada and Burnet (2011) that 2003 was the year when *yutori* education was formalized as the official curriculum in Japanese schools. Some of the changes brought about by the *yutori* curriculum were a reduction in the volume of lessons, and the permanent removal of Saturdays. In Asou's next question, she asked if Masakazu's school had two days off each week. Masakazu confirmed the question. In accordance with the explanation of *yutori kyoiku*, Saturday is a permanent holiday and a reduction in the volume of lessons taught. Through Masakazu's personal data, we can conclude that Masakazu is a first generation of *yutori*.

Masakazu Sakama is negatively stigmatized by those around him. The stigma is usually given when he makes a mistake. Then, the mistake is considered as his characteristic as a *yutori*.

The following excerpt describes the dialog between Masakazu and his superiors in the company. The division Masakazu works in has just had a new member named

Yamagishi. Masakazu was assigned as Yamagishi's supervisor. As a tradition in Japanese offices, Yamagishi was required to introduce himself to his company's clients. However, there was a problem on that day, so Masakazu who oversaw Yamagishi received a reprimand from his superiors.

正和：一様、G-Mapsのリンクを張って送ったんですけど

上司：それでも初めてうかがうときは念のため駅で待ち合わせして、10分前に着くように行くんだよかった…これだからゆとりは。

Masakazu : just in case, I've sent you the G-maps link anyway.

Boss : Even so, when meeting for the first time, just in case, you should meet at the station so that you can arrive at your destination 10 minutes earlier! What a *yutori*!

In the context of episode one's conversation, Masakazu was assigned to notify his subordinates or juniors to meet with clients for the first time. But he only sent the location link to Yamagishi (his subordinate), so Yamagishi who had never visited before was late for his first meeting. Because Masakazu's work was deemed unsatisfactory by his superiors and immediately labeled him a *yutori*.

According to Fujiwara et al. (2017), one of the characteristics of the *yutori* generation is to look for quick ways and short-term conclusions. In this situation, Masakazu showed the characteristic of always looking for an easy and short-term way by only sending a link to the destination location without considering whether Yamagishi could arrive at the place on time. Masakazu as the person in charge of Yamagishi was reprimanded by his superior, if meeting with a client for the first time, Masakazu should first meet with his junior at the station to make sure they can

get to the client's place 10 minutes earlier. At the end of the reprimand, his boss said, "what a *yutori*" and sometimes depersonalization of others into stereotypical caricatures.

Fedor (2014), stereotyping is defined through the beliefs, knowledge, and expectations associated with a social group. In this case, Masakazu's boss has the expectation that Masakazu, being part of the *yutori* generation, will not perform well. As a result, Masakazu is viewed as lacking capability due to the characteristics attributed to the *yutori* generation by his boss. Goffman (2009) refers to individuals like Masakazu's boss as "normal," who believe they are justified in their views and often discriminate against those with stigmas. Novick (2011) further explains that the generation educated before the introduction of *yutori* had higher academic abilities and skills and emphasized hard work and discipline compared to the *yutori* generation.

There are several characteristics that are in accordance with the characteristics of the *yutori* generation, such as poor implementation of work, lack of ability to communicate and weak of pressure (Fujiwara et al., 2017). In episode one where Masakazu did not make sure about the stock inventory in the shop and sales reports on his first day working as a manager. It is also found that Masakazu's characteristics are weak to pressure and look for quick ways to solve problems. One of the characteristics of the *yutori* generation described by Fujiwara as weak to pressure (2017) is seen in the character Masakazu as he explains his grievances to Yamaji. On his first day of work, Masakazu had made so many mistakes while working at the shop that his subordinates were annoyed with Masakazu's reckless way of working. Masakazu stated that from the start, he felt that he was ostracized or not considered as one of them, felt unnecessary and underestimated by his coworkers. What Masakazu feels is characteristic of someone

who is negatively stigmatized. A stigmatized person is someone whose social identity or membership in a social category question their full humanity, they are marginalized, spoiled, or defective in the eyes of society.

However, Masakazu also shows some positive characteristics such as being honest and upright in his work where he still follows the rules and ethics of working in a Japanese company. He is also able to control himself when he is humiliated by his own junior, he can hold back his emotions and self so as not to involve other shop workers. In addition to having a sense of responsibility for the work that has been given, Masakazu has a sense of responsibility to guide his juniors who do not have a good attitude and discipline at work, this can be seen through the following quote.

山岸：先輩、やっちゃいました。山岸受注ミス。フフ、早めに気付いてよかったです。ルート配送のトラックに回ってもらうように段取りしましたんで。え？なんっすか？

正和：お前が取りに來いよ。

山岸：え？いやいや、無理っす。あの自分も手配とか。。

正和：いいから來いって。

山岸：えっどこでしたっけ。

正和：高円寺。

山岸：冗談っしょ！

正和：なんだその口の利き方は！テメのミスでこう言うことになってんだろ！

山岸：す。。すいません。

正和：すいませんじゃねえよ立て！これ担いでついて來い。泥仕事させてやるよ！

Yamagishi: Senpai, I did it. Order error by Yamagishi. Luckily, I realized it right away. I already asked

the delivery truck to pick it up. eh? What?

Masakazu: You go get it.

Yamagishi: Eh? No no no, I can't. I also have a duty...

Masakazu: Let it go, go get it.

Yamagishi: Uh, where is the place.

Masakazu: Kouenji.

Yamagishi: Senpai is kidding!

Masakazu: What's with that mouth of yours! It's all your fault that it's like this!

Yamagishi: Sorry.

Masakazu: Not sorry, stand up! Take this meat and follow me! Let you feel what dirty work is like!

After that, Masakazu accompanied Yamagishi (his junior) to approach their client and apologized for the mistake made by Yamagishi. Since Yamagishi is his junior, Masakazu also feels responsible for the mistakes made by Yamagishi. Some of these characteristics are in accordance with human values which are the main purpose of *yutori* education (Poukka, 2011).

### 3.2 Stigmatization of the Character Yamaji Kazutoyo

The second character is Yamaji Kazutoyo. Like Masakazu, Yamaji is also a first-generation *yutori*. He works as a teacher at an elementary school in Japan. The quote below illustrates that Yamaji Kazutoyo belongs to this generation.

山路：はい、大きいな声で読んでみて、せーの！

子供たち：ゆとり教育！

山路：そう。聞いたことある人？

子供たちは混乱に見える

山路：ないかな。これは、テストの成績を上げるために知識が頭に詰め込むんじゃなくて、興味があることを自習的に学んだり、体験したりする時間を増やそう、



という考え方。何を隠そう先生はね、ゆとり教育を受けた最初の学年です、ゆとり第一世代と言われている。うーん例えばそうだな、みんな土曜日と日曜日学校休みだよ。

子供たち：うん！

山路：でもね、先生より上の大人は土曜日学校に来てたんです。

Yamaji: Okay, try reading out loud, one, two...

Children: *Yutori* education!

Yamaji: Right, has anyone heard of this? The kids look confused.

Yamaji: No, this education system is a system that does not aim to improve grades by putting as much knowledge into the head, but rather an education system to allow more time for children to study or pursue things that they are interested in. My batch was the first batch of students to go through the *yutori* curriculum. We are called the first generation of *yutori*. Uhm, for example, you all have Saturdays and Sundays off, right?

Kids: yes!

Yamaji: However, the older generation of sensei still goes to school on Saturdays.

In this scene, Yamaji explains a little about *yutori* education to the children in his class. According to Yamaji, the purpose of *yutori* education is not to condense the number of lessons or knowledge to students, but to give more time for students to try or pursue things that interest them. Yamaji later stated that he was the first batch of students to receive the *yutori* curriculum at school. This indicates that he is a first generation *yutori*. In Yamaji's explanation that the generation before Yamaji's generation entered on Saturday, indicating that Yamaji followed the *yutori* curriculum where on Saturdays the school

was closed in accordance with research by Wada and Burnet (2011).

This quote is a continuation of Yamaji's conversation with his students in class when explaining *yutori* education. In the dialog, Yamaji asked the children what the impact of the application of *yutori* education was on the children at that time. Spontaneously, one of the students answered, "Of course they became stupid". The answer was greeted with laughter from the other students. Yamaji who also laughed replied, "Right, they became stupid".

山路：はいはいはいはい、ゆとり教育を受けた結果子供たちはどうなったと思う

子供：馬鹿になった（みんな笑ってる）

山路：正解です！

こどもたちはびっくりした

山路：うん、学力が低下して社会問題となりました。おまけに社会に出たら、使えない、覇気がない、ガッツがない、言われたことしかやらない、ライバル意識もない、危機感がない、緊張感がない、予期せんのアクシデントに対応できない、全部言いがかりです。国が勝手に土曜日休みにして、教科書を薄くして、それがテストの成績が下がったからってポンコツ扱いしてるんです僕たちは。でもね、ゆとり世代にも長所あるんです。他人の足を引っ張らない、周囲に惑わされずベストを尽くす、個性を尊重する。

Yamaji: alright, what do you think happens to children who get *yutori* education?

Student A: Of course, they will become stupid!

Yamaji: You're right!

All the students are surprised.

Yamaji: Yes, academic ability decreases and becomes a social problem. In addition, if you go into society, you will be considered useless, lacking passion, having no guts, only doing what you are told, no sense of competition, no alertness, no sense of tension, unable to solve problems that arise suddenly, all of these are just excuses. The government arbitrarily reduces the volume of lessons and when grades drop, we are treated like trash. However, the *yutori* generation also has its strengths. Not hindering the progress of others, doing their best without being influenced by the environment, and respecting people.

In the two scenes above, the author finds the stigma received by Yamaji's character through his experience when he was still studying. In the first scene, Yamaji says that He used to take extra lessons on Saturdays and Sundays, where both days are holidays.

According to Wada and Burnet (2011), after the implementation of *yutori* education in schools, students' academic abilities have decreased, one example is the

drastic decline in PISA (Programme for International Students Assessment) test results from 2000 to 2003. In math, Japan's ranking

dropped from first to sixth, and in reading, from eighth to fourteenth (2011).

The Yamaji generation is often viewed as a failed product by the preceding generation. According to the stigma theory proposed by Crocker as referenced by Heatherton et al. (2003), the belief that the *yutori* generation is a failure stems from stereotypical judgments related to a decline in academic performance. One Yamaji teacher expressed that this generation was a product of failure produced by the Ministry

of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

Fedor (2014) argue that stereotypical judgments are the starting point of stigmatization, leading to the development of knowledge and expectations about a social group. In the second scene, after Yamaji explains *yutori* education, one of his students makes a stereotypical remark, suggesting that individuals who receive *yutori* education must be stupid. Yamaji himself acknowledges this stereotype, indicating that children exposed to *yutori* education may experience a decrease in academic performance, effectively becoming less knowledgeable. Hsieh (2015), explains that this decline is attributed to a 30% reduction in lessons from the previous curriculum, resulting in children lacking sufficient knowledge to achieve high scores on exams.

The stigma received by Yamaji through the experience when he was still studying. Yamaji said that he himself previously had no self-awareness as a *yutori*. on Saturdays and Sundays, he also had to attend additional lessons or tutoring. Yamaji added that their generation was considered a "failed product" born by the education board (MEXT).

山路：僕だって。。精いっぱいやってるんですから。何も。。何も。。あんな風に言うことないじゃないですか。

麻生：あの山路さんちょっと落ち着きましょうか。お水飲みましょうか。

山路：すいません。いやだって教頭からは、運動会の練習を優先するように言われ、保護者からは勉強が遅れてると言われ、子供たちは。。話し聞いてくれない。

麻生：あの一、誰が聞いているか分からないから、少し冷静。。

山路：ほんで、リレーで負けたらどうせ先生のせいだとか言うし。

ナンバーワンにならなくてもいいとか言っというてさ、ビリだとバッシングってさおかしくないですか。

Translation:

Yamaji: I, too, have tried hard. But there's no need to say things like that.

Asou: Yamaji, please calm down a bit, how about drinking some water first.

Yamaji: Sorry. But the principal asked me to prioritize the sports meeting practice, the parents are saying that the lessons are lagging, and the children are not listening to me.

Asou: uhm, we don't know who will listen to you, just calm down a little...

Yamaji: Then, if you lose during the relay, many will say it's all the teacher's fault. Even though I've said it's not important to be number one, it's strange if when I lose, I'm the one who gets blamed.

Yamaji's co-worker, a student intern named Etsuko, suspected that a student named Inoue Ayaka was bullying another student, Shimoyama Eren. Etsuko urged Yamaji to promptly address the issue by contacting the parents of both students. However, Etsuko felt that Yamaji was slow to make decisions as a teacher. Although he believed he had done his best, those around him did not feel that Yamaji had tried.

### 3.3 Stigmatization of the Character Maribu Michigami

On the night when Masakazu and Yamaji were consulting with Asou at a restaurant, Maribu sat behind them listening to all their conversations. After leaving the restaurant, Maribu, who was working as a scout for the *muryou-annai sho* at the time, confessed that she was an old friend of Yamaji's and managed to trick him into entering a tavern run by yakuza. On that night, Yamaji and Masakazu lost up to 120,000 yen for just two jasmine teas. The next day, Yamaji

accidentally saw Maribu meeting with Asou. Then they both immediately went to Asou to ask for clarification about his relationship with Maribu. Asou admitted that Maribu was his son and was also a first generation *yutori*, just like Masakazu and Yamaji. According to Asou, he was born in 1987 and now he does not have a steady job.

In this situation, the author can find out that the character Maribu Michigami is also a *yutori*. Just like the two previous characters, she is also the first generation born in 1987. Maribu is stated to be a ronin or someone who has not passed the college entrance examination several times. According to Nakai (2014), after *yutori* graduate from school or college, some students are unable to find a job and become NEET which means "Not in Education, Employment, or Training". Maribu's reason for not having a steady job was because she was busy studying for university entrance exams, so at the age of 29, she was still a ronin. This reason is consistent with the cause of the *yutori* generation becoming NEETs according to a survey from the Japanese cabinet office, which is studying to prepare for college or job applications.

In this drama series, the author also found that just like the other two main characters, Maribu is also negatively stigmatized as a *yutori*. After being inspired by Masakazu, Maribu decides to stop working as a con artist or at a girl's bar and now works as a gardener. In this scene, Maribu's boss tells him to buy less bitter coffee. The following is an excerpt of the conversation between Maribu and his boss.

親方 : どれがあつまり甘くねコーヒだよ！これか？

マリブ : 無糖っす

親方 : これか？

マリブ : 微糖っす

親方 : これか？

マリブ : 加糖っす。すいません、どれかわかなかったんで、つい一本ずつ買っちゃいました。



親方 : たく、これだからゆとりわ  
よ！

Translation:

Boss: Which coffee is less sweet! This one?

Maribu: It's without sugar.

Boss: This one?

Maribu: That's the one with low sugar.

Boss: This one?

Maribu: That's the sweet one. Sorry, I didn't know which one, so I bought one bottle each.

Boss: What a yutori!

In the situation described, the author observes that Maribu's boss is stigmatizing him. The phrase "indeed, you are *yutori*" is used by Maribu's superior, who, being from an older generation, perceives Maribu as unable to execute his orders effectively. This mirrors Fujiwara et al. (2017) perspective on the characteristics of the *yutori* generation. Maribu's behavior exemplifies these traits, particularly his lack of effective work implementation. As a result, he is labeled as *yutori*, reflecting the characteristics associated with that generation.

In some scenes in this drama, the author can see some characteristics of Maribu's character through his actions. In episode two, the author found one of the characteristics of the *yutori* generation according to Fujiwara, which is weak to pressure and characteristics that look for quick ways to solve problems (2017). Unable to withstand the pressure and expectations of his mother, Maribu turns into a thug and works as a con artist to support her family. However, Maribu also shows characteristics that are unyielding, responsible, and have a heart that can empathize with others. where in episode three he can show empathy for Masakazu's younger brother and try to help him. Then in episode eight, Maribu, who was motivated by Masakazu, felt that she also had to work hard for her family's life by making a legal living.

#### 4. Conclusion

After conducting research on the drama *Yutori Desu Ga Nani Ka*, we found a negative stigma from the characters of the generation before *yutori* to the three main characters in this drama, Masakazu Sakama, Kazuyoto Yamaji, and Michigami Maribu. Negative stigmas such as "*kore dakara yutori wa*" which means "you are *yutori*" or "*yutori no kuse ni*" which means "even though you are *yutori*", are remarks to show that the *yutori* generation is negative. The stigma is expressed because the *yutori* generation is often seen as abnormal and useless, having no work ethic, no passion, no guts, only doing what they are told, no sense of competition, no vigilance, no sense of tension, and unable to cope with problems that arise suddenly.

*Yutori* education is considered influential in shaping the characteristics of the *yutori* generation. With the aim of easing the burden and reducing pressure on children, they have grown into a generation that is vulnerable to pressure if they enter the workforce. In addition, the stigma given to these three figures only generalizes that all *yutori* generations fit the existing stigma in general. Although it is evident that some of their characteristics fit the stigma of the *yutori* generation, there are also stigmas that do not fit their characteristics. From this drama, the stigma given to the characters of the *yutori* generation is not entirely appropriate. Because the characteristics of these characters do not all reflect what is stigmatized to the *yutori* generation. As we can see in episode 3, where Maribu's character shows his empathy and responsibility.

#### 5. Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Bina Nusantara for supporting this research. We also appreciate the use of Mendeley for reference management, which greatly aided in the preparation of this manuscript. Special thanks to Sicesa for assisting with the formatting process

and ensuring that the document's structure met the required standards. Finally, we sincerely thank the reviewers for their invaluable feedback and constructive comments, which have significantly enhanced the quality of this work.

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