

Naruto: A Study of Resilience and Growth in Japanese Animation

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Abstract

Resilience is a fundamental psychological trait that enables individuals to overcome difficulty and grow stronger through challenges. *Naruto*, one of the most influential Japanese anime series, presents a compelling portrayal of resilience through its protagonist, Naruto Uzumaki. This study explores *Naruto* as a narrative model of resilience, analysing his character development through psychological, cultural, and narrative frameworks. Drawing upon post-traumatic growth theory, the Hero's Journey, and Japanese cultural values, this research examines how *Naruto*'s journey—from an outcast to a respected leader—exemplifies emotional intelligence, perseverance, and adaptive coping mechanisms. The findings suggest that *Naruto* provides a unique representation of resilience as a dynamic and socially influenced process, shaped by mentorship, emotional regulation, and a strong sense of purpose. Furthermore, the global appeal of *Naruto* underscores the universal relevance of resilience narratives, demonstrating how anime serves as a powerful medium for psychological and cultural storytelling. By bridging psychological theories with anime studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how media influences personal development and social identity across cultures.

Keywords: Resilience; *Naruto*; Post-traumatic growth; Cultural Narratives

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1. Introduction

Japanese animation, commonly known as anime, has become a global phenomenon, captivating audiences with its intricate storytelling, deep character development, and exploration of universal human experiences. One of the most influential anime series in this regard is *Naruto* (Kishimoto, 1999), a long-running story that follows the journey of Naruto Uzumaki, a young ninja striving to gain recognition and achieve his dream of becoming the Hokage, the leader of his village. *Naruto* is much more than a simple coming-of-age story; it is a narrative deeply rooted in themes of resilience, perseverance, and personal growth. Through the struggles and triumphs of its protagonist and supporting characters, *Naruto* provides an

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insightful study of how individuals navigate hardship, transform adversity into strength, and evolve over time.

Japanese society has known the concept of courage from their traditional values, one of which is from the ethics of chivalry in the feudal era called *Bushido* (Rahman & Purnomo, 2023). The values of *Bushido* were not widely disseminated until the 16th century, but in the Kamakura period the ethical values of the samurai had already emerged in the form of actions and attitudes such as courage, humility, obedience, resilience, willingness to sacrifice oneself, and so on. The concept of resilience—defined as the ability to adapt, recover, and grow stronger in the face of adversity—is at the core of Naruto’s narrative. Psychological studies define resilience as a dynamic process involving positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Masten, 2001; Luthar et al., 2000). Throughout the series, Naruto and other characters demonstrate various forms of resilience, whether emotional, psychological, or physical. Despite experiencing isolation, discrimination, and repeated failures, Naruto continuously pushes forward, embodying the principles of perseverance, mentorship, and self-improvement. His journey is a reflection of *ganbaru* (persistence) and *nintai* (endurance), core values in Japanese culture that emphasize diligence and an unwavering spirit (Lebra, 1976).

The protagonist, Naruto Uzumaki, is introduced as a mischievous and lonely orphan who is ridiculed and ostracized by his village due to the presence of the Nine-Tailed Fox (*Kurama*) sealed within him. This rejection forms the foundation of his struggles, as he constantly seeks acknowledgment and validation. Unlike many traditional hero narratives where the protagonist is naturally gifted or destined for greatness, Naruto’s growth is gradual and hard-earned. His early failures and setbacks, such as struggling to perform basic ninja techniques and being outclassed by his peers, only reinforce his initial underdog status. However, his defining trait is his refusal to give up, an attitude that aligns with psychological theories on resilience that emphasize persistence and positive adaptation.

Some scholars have debated whether resilience is a trait developed exclusively through difficulty or whether it can also emerge independently of traumatic experiences (Jiang et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2013; Philippe et al., 2011; Wagnild & Collins, 2009). Naruto’s resilience is not merely physical but also emotional and psychological. He faces intense loneliness, yet he transforms this pain into motivation. Instead of succumbing to bitterness or resentment, he channels his energy into training, forming bonds, and proving his worth. This aligns with psychological research that suggests social connections and personal goals serve as protective factors in resilience (Masten et al., 2021). His strong support system—including figures like Iruka Umino, Kakashi Hatake, and Jiraiya—plays a crucial role in shaping his character, reinforcing the idea that resilience is not developed in isolation but through relationships and mentorship (Southwick et al., 2014).

In addition to his resilience, mentorship is another significant factor in Naruto’s development, highlighting the importance of positive role models in fostering growth. Early in the series, Naruto is guided by Iruka, his teacher who acts as a surrogate older brother and the first person to acknowledge him. Iruka’s support provides Naruto with the emotional stability needed to begin his journey of self-discovery. Masten and Reed (2002) suggested that the presence of a stable, supportive figure is one of the most critical factors in fostering resilience among individuals facing adversity. As the series progresses, Naruto gains new mentors, each contributing to his development in unique ways. Kakashi instils discipline and strategy, while

Jiraiya teaches Naruto not only powerful techniques but also life lessons about perseverance, self-awareness, and leadership. The loss of Jiraiya, a pivotal moment in the series, tests Naruto's emotional resilience. Instead of falling into despair, Naruto honours his mentor's legacy by pushing forward, reinforcing the idea that resilience is often built through hardships and the ability to find meaning in loss (Frankl, 2017).

The themes of resilience and growth in Naruto are also deeply rooted in Japanese cultural philosophy. The concept of *ganbaru*, which means “to persist and endure despite difficulties,” is a recurring motif in the series. Naruto's journey exemplifies this philosophy as he continuously strives for self-improvement, regardless of the obstacles in his path. According to Lebra (1976), *ganbaru* is a fundamental part of Japanese identity, emphasizing effort over innate talent. Naruto's persistence, even in the face of overwhelming odds, reflects this cultural ethos. Another related cultural concept is *nintai*, which translates to patience and endurance. In many ways, Naruto's growth is not instantaneous but the result of long-term perseverance. His repeated failures—whether in battles, training, or personal relationships—are essential parts of his development. This mirrors the Japanese belief that success is achieved through hard work, patience, and resilience, rather than through inherent ability alone (Doi, 1981).

Additionally, Naruto incorporates themes of redemption and second chances, particularly through characters like Gaara, Nagato (Pain), and even Sasuke Uchiha. These characters, initially consumed by pain and vengeance, eventually find a path to redemption through resilience and personal growth. This aligns with studies on post-traumatic growth, which suggest that individuals who experience adversity can develop greater emotional strength, deeper relationships, and a clearer sense of purpose (Tedeschi et al., 2015).

The study of resilience and personal growth in Naruto is relevant not only in the field of anime studies but also in psychology, cultural studies, and media analysis. By examining how characters navigate adversity, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how fictional narratives can inspire real-world perseverance and motivation. The depiction of resilience in Naruto resonates with audiences globally, particularly young viewers who identify with the struggles and triumphs of the characters.

Furthermore, by comparing Naruto's themes with other anime and Western hero narratives, this study will highlight universal patterns of heroic resilience. Whether in Western literature (e.g., Harry Potter, Spider-Man) or contemporary anime (e.g., My Hero Academia), the journey of overcoming challenges and achieving self-actualization remains a central theme in storytelling. Therefore, this article will explore how Naruto serves as a compelling case study for resilience and growth, demonstrating the power of perseverance, mentorship, and cultural values in shaping character development.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to explore how Naruto portrays resilience and personal growth through its characters, themes, and narrative structures. Qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically interpreting textual data through theme identification, allowing researchers to explore underlying meanings and contextual insights (Schreier, 2012; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is an effective method for examining

textual and visual media, as it allows for an in-depth interpretation of recurring themes, symbols, and character developments (Krippendorff, 2018). By analysing the character arcs, key narrative events, dialogue, and cultural motifs, this study identifies how resilience is depicted within the series. Particular attention is given to Naruto Uzumaki's journey from an outcast to a revered leader, as well as the struggles and transformations of supporting characters such as Sasuke Uchiha, Rock Lee, and Gaara. The study also considers how Naruto integrates elements of Japanese cultural philosophy, such as *ganbaru* (persistence) and *intai* (endurance), into its narrative, reinforcing the idea that resilience is not only an individual trait but also a reflection of societal values (Lebra, 1976). Furthermore, this analysis is guided by psychological resilience theory, which posits that individuals who encounter significant adversity can adapt and grow stronger through perseverance and support systems (Masten et al., 2021; Southwick et al., 2014). By examining how Naruto and other characters overcome hardships, this study demonstrates how anime can serve as a medium for portraying and reinforcing psychological resilience.

In addition to qualitative content analysis, this study employs a comparative analysis to position Naruto within the broader context of global hero narratives. Comparative analysis is a valuable tool in literary and media studies, as it enables researchers to identify common patterns and cultural distinctions across different storytelling traditions (Todorov, 1975). This study compares Naruto with other anime protagonists, such as Izuku Midoriya from *My Hero Academia* and Tanjiro Kamado from *Demon Slayer*, to highlight shared themes of perseverance and personal growth. Additionally, parallels are drawn between Naruto's journey and Western hero figures, such as Harry Potter and Spider-Man, to examine how different cultural traditions depict resilience in their protagonists. This analysis is informed by Joseph Campbell's (1949) *Hero's Journey*, a widely recognized narrative framework that outlines a hero's transformation through trials, mentorship, and ultimate self-actualization. By integrating insights from psychological resilience theory, Japanese cultural philosophy, and global hero narratives, this study provides a comprehensive examination of Naruto as a case study of resilience and personal growth in Japanese animation.

3. Result and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study, focusing on how Naruto portrays resilience and personal growth through character development, narrative structure, and cultural and psychological themes. The results are drawn from qualitative content analysis of the manga and anime series, supplemented by secondary sources on resilience, Japanese cultural philosophy, and narrative theory.

3.1 Result

3.1.1 Character Development and Resilience

Naruto Uzumaki's character arc exemplifies resilience, as he transforms from an outcast into the Hokage, the highest-ranking ninja in the village. Initially, Naruto is ostracized due to being the vessel of the Nine-Tailed Fox (*Kurama*), yet he persistently seeks recognition. His journey is marked by relentless hard work, mentorship from figures like Jiraiya, and unwavering optimism despite adversity. Psychological resilience research suggests that

individuals who form strong mentor relationships and maintain optimism are more likely to overcome adversity (Masten et al., 2021). Naruto's perseverance mirrors the Japanese concept of *ganbaru*—the cultural expectation to endure hardship with determination (Lebra, 1976).

Naruto has a close friend namely Sasuke Uchiha. Although they are in the same group, Team 7, Sasuke Uchiha's journey contrasts with Naruto's, demonstrating a different form of resilience shaped by trauma and revenge. After witnessing the annihilation of his clan by his brother, Itachi, Sasuke becomes consumed by vengeance. Unlike Naruto, whose resilience is fuelled by social bonds, Sasuke isolates himself, displaying traits of what psychologists call maladaptive resilience, where survival mechanisms are driven by negative emotions (Southwick et al., 2014). However, through his interactions with Naruto and Sakura, Sasuke gradually redefines his sense of purpose, aligning with research on post-traumatic growth, where individuals find meaning beyond their suffering (Tedeschi et al., 2015).

Having other point of view how resilience is portrayed though this anime, there are Rock Lee and Gaara. Rock Lee and Gaara serve as additional case studies of resilience. Rock Lee, unlike many ninjas, lacks natural talent and cannot use *ninjutsu* (chakra or energy to achieve supernatural effects) or *genjutsu* (manipulating the target's chakra flow to create illusions), yet he compensates with extreme physical training and unwavering perseverance. His mentor, Might Guy, reinforces the philosophy that hard work surpasses innate ability, reinforcing *ganbaru* as a central theme. Gaara, on the other hand, starts as a character consumed by hatred and loneliness but later finds redemption through empathy and leadership. His transformation parallels Naruto's, demonstrating how resilience is fostered through social connections and emotional growth (Masten et al., 2021).

3.1.2 Narrative Structure and Growth

The *Chunin Exams Arc* functions as an early test of resilience for young *ninjas*. Characters face gruelling physical and psychological challenges, emphasizing endurance, adaptability, and teamwork. Notably, Naruto's perseverance against Neji Hyuga, who believes in fate over effort, symbolizes the victory of resilience over fatalism. The arc illustrates the psychological concept that belief in one's ability to improve (growth mindset) is crucial for overcoming difficulty (Yeager & Dweck, 2020; Molden & Dweck, 2006; Dweck, 2006).

Another arc that contributes to the narrative structure and Naruto's character growth is the war against The Pain, the villain in Naruto. The Pain Arc serves as a pivotal moment in Naruto's character development, forcing him to confront grief and moral dilemmas. Pain (Nagato) destroys Naruto's home, mirroring real-world trauma survivors who must rebuild their lives after devastation (Southwick et al., 2014). Naruto ultimately rejects the cycle of revenge, choosing instead to seek understanding and peace—aligning with psychological theories that emphasize meaning-making as a resilience factor (Tedeschi et al., 2015).

In the end, the final battle between Naruto and Sasuke encapsulates their respective paths to resilience. Naruto, fuelled by bonds and perseverance, refuses to give up on Sasuke, while Sasuke, shaped by pain, struggles to redefine his purpose. Their confrontation represents the dual nature of resilience—one shaped by connection and another by solitude—highlighting how personal growth can emerge from both paths.

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3.1.3 Cultural and Psychological Themes in Naruto

The anime incorporates the role of *ganbaru* (persistence) and *nintai* (endurance) throughout the plot. They are Japanese cultural philosophy which portrays as essential traits in overcoming obstacles (Lebra, 1976). Naruto embodies these principles through his unwavering determination despite hardships. Similarly, the narrative discourages the idea of innate talent as a determinant of success, reinforcing a cultural belief that effort leads to mastery. This contrasts with Western narratives that often emphasize individual destiny and inherent giftedness (Condry, 2013; Napier, 2007).

Naruto's journey aligns with modern psychological resilience frameworks, which emphasize support systems, adaptive coping mechanisms, and cognitive reframing (Masten et al., 2021; Southwick et al., 2014). Characters who receive mentorship, maintain optimism, and reframe their hardships—such as Naruto and Gaara—exhibit greater psychological resilience than those who isolate themselves, like Sasuke. This reinforces existing research that social bonds and self-perception play a critical role in resilience-building.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Naruto as a Psychological Model of Resilience

The findings demonstrate that Naruto's journey aligns closely with psychological models of resilience, particularly post-traumatic growth theory, which suggests that individuals who experience significant adversity can emerge stronger when they develop a sense of meaning and purpose (Tedeschi et al., 2015). Naruto's hardships—such as childhood ostracization, the loss of Jiraiya, and the pressures of leadership—serve as catalysts for personal growth rather than as impediments. His ability to reframe adversity as motivation rather than despair is a key characteristic of adaptive resilience, a process where individuals develop mental toughness and emotional intelligence in response to challenges (Southwick et al., 2014). Furthermore, his reliance on mentorship and social bonds is in line with resilience research, which emphasizes the role of external support systems in fostering emotional stability (Masten et al., 2021). Unlike Sasuke, who isolates himself and struggles with negative coping mechanisms, Naruto thrives through interpersonal connections, highlighting how resilience is not just an internal trait but also a socially constructed process (Ungar & Theron, 2020; Ungar, 2011).

Another critical aspect of Naruto's resilience is his capacity for emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility. Studies indicate that individuals who exhibit self-regulation and the ability to shift perspectives are better equipped to handle adversity and stress (Troy et al., 2023; Bonanno, 2004). Naruto exemplifies this when he transitions from a reckless, impulsive fighter to a strategic leader capable of making difficult moral decisions, such as his decision to forgive Nagato despite the destruction he caused. This transformation illustrates that resilience is not merely about enduring hardship but about adapting and evolving in response to it. In this way, Naruto serves as an animated case study of how resilience is cultivated through social support, emotional intelligence, and cognitive reframing, making his character a valuable model for understanding psychological resilience in both fiction and reality.

3.2.2 Comparing Naruto's Journey with the Hero's Journey Framework

Naruto's character arc follows the Hero's Journey as outlined by Campbell (1949), but with cultural variations that distinguish it from Western narratives. The traditional hero's journey involves stages such as the call to adventure, the mentor's guidance, trials and tribulations, and the ultimate transformation. Naruto's path follows these stages, with Iruka, Kakashi, and Jiraiya acting as mentors, and his trials taking the form of battles and personal losses. However, a key distinction between Naruto and many Western protagonists is the emphasis on collective growth rather than individual destiny. In Western hero narratives like Harry Potter or *The Lord of the Rings*, the protagonist often fulfills a preordained fate, while Naruto's success is portrayed as a result of persistent effort and mentorship rather than divine selection (Condry, 2013; Napier, 2007). This reflects Japanese cultural values of hard work over innate talent, reinforcing the *ganbaru* ethic (Lebra, 1976).

Another significant departure from Western narratives is the absence of a clear, final "victory." While many Western heroes achieve a definitive triumph over evil, Naruto's journey does not end in the conventional sense. His final confrontation with Sasuke is not about domination but about understanding and redemption. This aligns with Japanese storytelling traditions, which often emphasize moral ambiguity, redemption, and the ongoing nature of personal growth rather than absolute good versus evil (Condry, 2013; Allison, 2006). Moreover, Naruto's refusal to kill Sasuke contrasts with Western hero narratives that often culminate in the hero vanquishing their adversary (Todorov, 1975). This distinction underscores how Eastern storytelling tends to focus on balance and reconciliation rather than conquest, making Naruto's journey a compelling case for examining how cultural values shape resilience narratives.

3.2.3 Naruto's Impact on Global Audiences and Popular Culture

The global impact of Naruto is a testament to its universal themes of perseverance, friendship, and self-discovery. Unlike many anime that primarily cater to domestic audiences, Naruto has resonated deeply with international viewers, in part due to its relatable themes of struggle and personal growth. Studies on anime and globalization indicate that narratives revolved around overcoming adversity and finding belonging are cross-culturally appealing, particularly among younger audiences who see themselves reflected in Naruto's journey (Condry, 2013; Napier, 2007). His struggles—whether dealing with rejection, proving himself to others, or navigating moral dilemmas—mirror real-life challenges that many viewers experience, making his story both emotionally engaging and psychologically relevant.

Naruto has greatly influenced the evolution of anime protagonists, especially in later shonen series like *My Hero Academia* and *Demon Slayer*. Both Izuku Midoriya and Tanjiro Kamado share Naruto's core traits of perseverance, moral complexity, and the impact of mentorship. Like Naruto, Midoriya and Tanjiro begin their journeys as underdogs, striving to overcome personal limitations and tragic losses. Their mentors, All Might and Urokoaki, echo Naruto's bond with Jiraiya, reinforcing themes of guidance and growth. These protagonists, while powerful, also exhibit emotional vulnerability, introspection, and empathy, much like Naruto, highlighting a shift in shonen protagonists toward deeper moral complexity and human connection (Bolton, 2018). In short, these newer protagonists follow Naruto's model of

resilience, demonstrating that his character has left a lasting imprint on the genre. Additionally, Naruto's success has contributed to the broader acceptance and recognition of anime in Western media, helping to bridge cultural gaps between Japan and global audiences (Allison, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2002). This highlights how media narratives can serve as powerful vehicles for transmitting cultural values, reinforcing the idea that resilience and personal growth are not just fictional ideals but aspirational principles that audiences can apply in their own lives.

4. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that Naruto serves as a compelling case study of resilience and personal growth in Japanese animation. Through the lens of post-traumatic growth theory and resilience research, Naruto's journey illustrates how adversity can be transformed into strength when supported by mentorship, emotional intelligence, and perseverance. His story also aligns with the Hero's Journey, the typical adventure of the hero, their transformation, and the lessons they learn along the way, but with key cultural distinctions—emphasizing self-improvement over fate and redemption over conquest. These elements reflect broader Japanese values, reinforcing the idea that resilience is not an individual trait but a social and cultural process. Beyond its narrative and psychological dimensions, Naruto has made a significant impact on global audiences, influencing subsequent anime protagonists and reinforcing anime's role as a medium for psychological and cultural storytelling. Its universal themes of perseverance, identity, and overcoming adversity resonate across cultures, illustrating how anime can shape personal and social identity on a global scale. By analysing Naruto through multiple frameworks, this research highlights the power of animation to inspire, educate, and foster resilience, making it a valuable subject for further study in media and psychology.

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