

How Japanese Popular Culture Has Been Studied in Indonesia, 2003-2023: A Narrative Review and Agenda for Future Research

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Abstract

This paper presents a narrative review of Indonesian academic discourse on Japanese popular culture and examines how this field has developed over the past twenty years. Using selected keyword searches in academic databases and journals, 97 relevant articles published between 2003 and 2023 have been identified. These articles are thematically coded and analyzed to map prevailing research trajectories. The review reveals four dominant themes: (1) cinema and anime, (2) audience and reception, (3) soft power and cultural diplomacy, and (4) representation and identity. This mapping highlights both well-established areas of study and underexplored topics that require further attention. By identifying gaps in the existing literature and suggesting new directions for inquiry, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how Japanese popular culture has been studied in Indonesia. It also provides a foundation for future scholarship and a resource for those seeking to expand this field.

Keywords: Japan; Popular Culture; Indonesia; Narrative review

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1. Introduction

Indonesia is one of the largest markets for Japanese popular cultural products in Asia. Most Indonesians born in the 1980s and beyond are familiar with Japanese pop culture, particularly manga and anime. Various studies have demonstrated how manga and anime, in particular, serve as the gateway for many Indonesians who develop an interest in Japan (Djafri & Wahidati, 2020; Umoro, 2023).

The growing interest in Japanese popular culture has created new opportunities for scholarly research. In the context of Japanese studies programs in Indonesia, popular culture

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appears to have overtaken linguistics and literature as the most desirable research topic among undergraduate students. This observation, based on my experience as a junior lecturer, is anecdotal; however, it aligns with broader trends in global scholarship. Several academics have noted that Japanese pop culture is a primary catalyst driving increased interest in Japanese language learning (Imura, 2018; B. Northwood & Kinoshita Thomson, 2012; B. M. Northwood, 2018). This contrasts sharply with the 1980s and 1990s, when Japanese language learners were primarily motivated by economic factors. Similarly, at the policy level, the Japanese government has recognized the global popularity of its pop culture and has made significant efforts to promote it. One of the most prominent programs is the Cool Japan Project, introduced in the 1980s. The project, inspired by the earlier "Cool Britannia," aimed to spread Japan's cultural appeal and transform it into a potential source of revenue. The Japanese government has recognized the massive earning potential of various popular icons such as Hello Kitty and Doraemon.

Indeed, popular culture tends to attract significant interest among Indonesian students, especially those studying the Japanese language at the university level. These students are familiar with Japanese pop culture products such as manga, anime, video games, and fashion. Despite its growing popularity, Japanese pop culture has received little attention as a serious research field. While topics like manga and anime may appeal to many students, researching pop culture in an academic context can be challenging. Pop culture has long been criticized as frivolous and lacking scholarly depth. Moreover, researching Japanese pop culture requires not only a deep understanding of theoretical knowledge but also a strong command of the Japanese language, making the task particularly tedious. Pop culture as a field is less established compared to linguistics or literature, which have long been favored among Indonesian students studying in Japanese universities. As a result, Indonesian scholars specializing in Japanese pop culture are few and far between. Additionally, as a relatively young field, Japanese pop culture is often examined through theoretical frameworks borrowed from other disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science. For a young student who has just begun writing their first undergraduate thesis, the vast literature combined with the interdisciplinary nature of pop culture research can be overwhelming.

In light of these challenges, this paper aims to investigate how Japanese pop culture has been studied in Indonesia over the past twenty years. I seek to contribute in three ways: (1) to identify the dominant themes and methodological approaches that have prevailed over two decades, (2) to understand how these themes and approaches have changed over time, and (3) to provide substantial and practical implications and offer propositions for the future research agenda. By addressing these goals, this paper aims to shed light on research trends and their development, offering insights for those interested in exploring Japanese pop culture studies in Indonesia

2. Methods

2.1 Defining Popular Culture

Before embarking on the narrative review, it is necessary to define what constitutes pop culture. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs defines pop culture as the culture of everyday

life. At the practical level, Japanese culture is often viewed in a dichotomous manner, traditional versus modern, or high culture versus popular culture. This dichotomy was best represented by a speech given by Taro Aso, a former Japanese Prime Minister, who described traditional culture as those cultural expression that rooted in Japan's classical heritage such as Noh and Bunraku, while positioning pop culture what falls outside this frame. However, this binary view is overly simplistic. Cultural forms like *kabuki* and *ukiyo-e*, while now often labeled "traditional," were once popular entertainment for the urban masses.

Such a dichotomous classification provides a useful starting point for understanding what is considered Japanese pop culture. It helps the audience easily recognize which products may be classified as pop culture and which may not. However, pop culture is a contested concept. The complexity of defining pop culture ranges from questions of what may be considered "popular" to the issue of popular for whom? Williams (1958) insisted that culture is ordinary, while Storey (2018) highlights mass culture to everyday practices. However, some argue that over time, the line between elite and mass culture has become blurry. Moreover, there are forms of so-called "unpopular" or niche culture that nonetheless operate within the logic of popular culture especially in online platforms. This further complicates the task of defining pop culture solely by its audience reach or perceived mainstream appeal.

Building on this debate, I align with the trajectory set by Freedman and Slade (2023), who view pop culture as a "key, creative node of cultural production" (Freedman & Slade, 2023, p. 5). This shift frees us from the burden of determining what is popular based on its audience reach, while acknowledging that manga, anime, and similar forms of expression are creative productions that audiences worldwide recognize through their distinct style and creativity. In this paper, I consider the following as objects of Japanese pop culture: characters, anime, video games, manga, purikura (photo booths), idols and virtual idols, popular music, cosplay, and fashion.

2.2 Literature review as research methodology

In recent years, literature reviews as a research methodology have gained prominence, offering deeper insights into specific research areas (Tando & Hikmah, 2023; Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). Methodologically, I employ a narrative review to track the development of themes in Japanese pop culture research in Indonesia. A narrative review allows researchers to trace the development of a field across time and traditions (Snyder, 2019) and is particularly useful for interdisciplinary fields such as Japanese pop culture, which draw from multiple academic domains. Although less rigid than systematic reviews, a narrative review follows three steps: (1) identification and literature search, (2) screening for relevance, and (3) thematic review (Figure 1).

2.2.1 Literature search

The review focused on journal articles published in Indonesia between 2003 and 2023, written in English or Bahasa Indonesia. Using Google Scholar—chosen for its broad coverage of Indonesian journals, many not indexed in Scopus or DOAJ—my research assistant and I identified 197 articles through keywords such as *Japan*, *popular culture*, *Indonesia*, *budaya pop*, and *anime*. Non-journal materials (theses, conference proceedings, book chapters, graduation papers) were excluded. To ensure quality, only peer-reviewed, open-access articles

from university-affiliated or SINTA-accredited journals were retained, especially those published after 2017, when accreditation became applicable. This review deliberately focuses on journal articles, especially open-access ones, for two main reasons. First, peer-reviewed articles offer methodological consistency and scholarly rigor, making cross-study comparison possible. Second, their accessibility and concise format make them particularly valuable for both researchers and undergraduate students or newcomers to Japanese pop culture studies. While theses, book chapters, conference papers, and monographs are influential, they are less accessible and more uneven in scope. The articles reviewed therefore do not claim to exhaust the field, but they adequately represent its key scholarly conversations in a way that balances rigor and accessibility. After these criteria were applied, **97 articles** remained eligible for analysis.

2.2.2 Screening

The selected articles were analyzed thematically to capture major trends, theoretical orientations, and methodological approaches over the 20-year period. Using an inductive manual coding process, my research assistant and I identified recurring topics such as Japanese media representation, fandom and cultural participation, and soft power, grouping them into broader themes. Articles could fall into more than one category. Reliability was tested by independently coding a 20% sample (19 articles), achieving 90% initial agreement, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. All coding was conducted manually using spreadsheets, as the dataset size allowed for close reading without specialized software. It is important to note that, as a narrative review, while the analysis follows rigorous procedures, it inevitably reflects both the availability of sources and the author's positionality.

2.2.3. Review

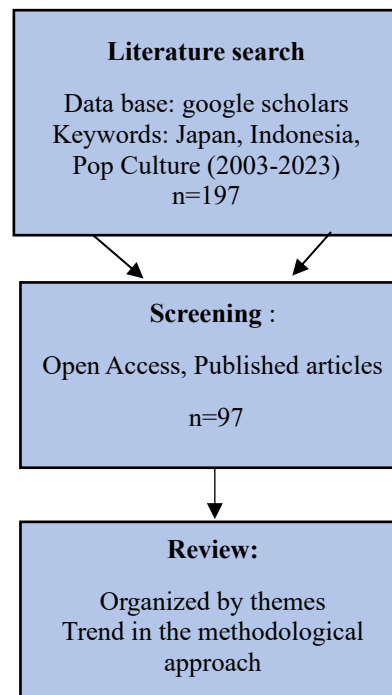


Figure 1. The Flow of literature search, screening, and reviewing process

Each article was classified by (1) thematic focus and discourse development, (2) methodological and theoretical approach, (3) empirical findings, and (4) contextual details (publication year, sample size). This framework enabled historical mapping of the field and informed the proposed research agenda.

3. Result and Discussion

After reviewing two decades of published articles, I identified four dominant themes in the discourse surrounding Japanese pop culture in Indonesia: (1) Cinema and Anime, (2) Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy, (3) Audience and Reception, and (4) Identity and Representation. Notably, these themes are not evenly distributed. Cinema and anime accounted for more than half of the total articles (see Table 1). Additionally, there was a significant increase in the number of published articles between the two decades. From 2003 to 2013, only one article was published, while from 2014 to 2023, the number of articles jumped from 8 to 100. Although this paper does not delve further into the reasons behind this increase, it presents an interesting avenue for future research.

3.1 Four Dominant Narratives

3.1.1 Cinema and Anime

The most prevalent theme in Indonesian studies of Japanese pop culture is what I categorize as "Cinema and Anime." This category includes films, television series, anime, and Japanese popular music (known as J-POP in Indonesia). I grouped film and music together, despite each being a distinct subject of interest, because they are often analyzed similarly. Based on the reviewed literature, I found three primary approaches used by researchers. The first one is linguistic analysis. Examining language structure and usage in films, anime, or music is the most common approach. Researchers often focus on the use of metaphorical speech (Saputra et al., 2016), pragmatic functions in communication, or the use of polite forms in Japanese (Amelia, 2012; Saifudin, 2010). Similar linguistic approaches are applied to song lyrics (N. L. P. A. B. Dewi et al., 2019; Kartika et al., 2020; Wardani et al., 2019).

The second one is gender analysis. Several studies explore gender dynamics in movies, such as differences in spoken Japanese across genders (Fitriana & Ramadhanu, 2022; Salisah & Sunarni, 2020) and how interactions between male and female characters are depicted (Abuda et al., 2022; Andriani & Minandha, 2021; Fairuzzahra, 2021; Kurniawan & Utami, 2021; Mugiyanti & Batis, 2023; Noviana et al., 2023; Putra, 2021; Salisah & Sunarni, 2020). The third analysis is based on socio-cultural analysis. Some studies examine socio-cultural nuances in Japanese films or anime, such as the tension between self-expression and societal expectations (Andayani et al., 2021; Bimantara, 2020; Desfiyadin Nugraha et al., 2021; Fadli, 2019; Faradilla & Ahmad, 2023; Mokharisma et al., 2022; Nilamsari & Nugroho, 2020; Pambudi et al., 2021; M. M. Rahman & Purnomo, 2023; Rakhmadhani et al., 2023; Rosyida, 2022; Satyawan et al., 2022)

However, upon closer inspection, I found that many studies of Japanese cinema and television series focus narrowly on linguistic phenomena, neglecting the broader socio-cultural contexts of production, market circulation, and audience reception. A linguistics-heavy

approach, while rigorous and solid in its own area, risks reducing these works to isolated textual features, overlooking their broader significance in cultural discourse, identity politics, or global consumption. Without engaging these dimensions, the analysis remains descriptive and narrowly text-based, limiting its relevance for contemporary pop culture scholarship.

This trend reflects a broader issue within Japanese studies research in Indonesia, where students often adopt analytical frameworks that may not be well-suited for examining contemporary popular culture. Such tendencies are frequently shaped by academic traditions, in which students follow the methodological paths of their seniors—many of whom are trained in linguistic analysis. As a result, there is often confusion between linguistic analysis and cultural studies, as the boundaries between these fields remain indistinct. As one of my colleagues, a lecturer in the Japanese Program at a prominent university in East Java, explained:

“[Dorama, anime, and manga] remain the most popular topics among my students. However, the students often struggle to determine whether they are conducting linguistic analysis or cultural analysis. This confusion is understandable because, in their minds, they believe they are doing cultural research while analyzing pop culture objects using linguistic or literary theoretical frameworks.”

To address this issue, some authors explicitly mention the type of research they are conducting, helping readers better understand the focus of the study (Wibowo, 2021). Moreover, moving beyond text-centric analysis when investigating anime and cinema opens up opportunities for richer and more dynamic discussions in Japanese popular culture scholarship—especially since this area remains relatively underexplored. In this regard, engaging with cultural studies perspectives (Hall, 1980; Williams, 1977) and Iwabuchi's (2002) concept of cultural proximity may better situate Japanese popular culture research beyond text-centric analysis.

3.1.2 Audience and Reception

The second dominant theme, "Audience and Reception," is explored in 13 articles. Audience studies typically focus on how Japanese entertainment products appeal to specific groups based on socio-cultural background, gender, or age. This theme also examines consumer practices, such as why certain demographics prefer specific genres and how they engage with the content. The theme can be further divided into two main strands:

The first strand of the argument deals on why a certain pop culture product appeal a set of consumers. Research investigates why certain products, such as "boys love" manga, tend to attract female readers or why certain anime or V-tubers are more popular among younger audiences (Hastuti & Mulyadi, 2023; Puspitaningrum & Prasetio, 2019; A. Rahman, 2023; Rahmawati, 2018; Yuniarsih & Putri, 2023). Some studies explore the effects of consuming Japanese pop culture, especially anime and manga, on Indonesian youth (Noviana & Wulandari, 2017; Permana & Suzan, 2018). Reported positive outcomes include increased motivation to learn Japanese (Adzania & Arianingsih, 2022; Novianti, 2007; Wahidati & Kharismawati, 2018), while concerns have also been raised about reduced interest in local media (Faisal et al., 2022)

While these studies are valuable in capturing the audience preference, most offering minimal theoretical reflection on why certain genres resonate with particular groups, or how audiences negotiate meaning and identity through these engagements. As a result, the analytical depth is often confined to who prefers what, rather than interrogating the broader socio cultural drivers behind those preferences. A more fruitful approach would be to delve into the underlying social and cultural logics that shape audience preferences, while simultaneously engaging with broader scholarship on how audiences interpret, internalize, and negotiate identity through their consumption of popular culture.

3.1.3 Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

The third major theme, "Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy," covers 12 articles published between 2003 and 2023. This body of research focuses on the relationship between the Japanese state and pop culture, particularly through the lens of "soft power" and "cultural diplomacy." These studies explore how Japan uses pop culture products—such as anime, manga, and video games—as diplomatic tools to promote its interests abroad (Alifa et al., 2023; Iqbal, 2017; Muslim, 2023; Rastati, 2015; Rijal, 2017; Widiandari, 2019; Yuliani et al., 2021). Although the concept of soft power is frequently applied to pop culture studies, it has faced criticism. Some scholars argue that the term "soft power" is overused, while others critique the effectiveness of pop culture as a tool for diplomacy (Chua, 2012; Mitrović, 2022). Indeed, my main concern with the application of soft power in the context of Japanese popular culture lies in Joseph Nye's original premise: that cultural appeal is tied to political values (Nye, 2004). A close reading of Nye's concept emphasizes attraction over coercion, but that attraction is not solely cultural—it also derives from political values, such as democracy as seen in the case of the United States. Nye himself cautions not to treat soft power as "simply popular cultural power" (Nye, 2004, p.11).

In this light, I question how scholars applying the soft power framework to Japanese pop culture bridge the conceptual gap between Nye's textually grounded definition and cultural products like anime or manga, which often lack explicit political messaging. Unlike the U.S., Japan's political messaging is often subtle or absent in its global cultural export (Lam, 2007). Thus, complicating efforts to frame them as vehicles of soft power in Nye's terms. Many of the studies I encountered in the Indonesian context tend to overlook this tension, offering little critical reflection on how the concept is adapted or reinterpreted. Addressing this gap could provide a more nuanced understanding of how theoretical frameworks evolve and may help enrich the analysis of Japan–Indonesia cultural relations. To capture this nuance, the popularity of anime and manga should be treated as a potential generator of soft power—whose effectiveness requires closer scrutiny—rather than as definitive evidence of Japan's soft power abroad.

3.1.4 Identity and representation

The fourth theme, "Identity and Representation," is the least explored, with twelve published articles. This theme examines the interaction between individuality and community within the Japanese pop culture fanbase in Indonesia, particularly through the lens of cosplay. Five articles focus on surveys of cosplayers aged 17 to 25. These studies reveal that cosplay serves as both a form of self-expression and a means to build community among like-minded

individuals. Cosplayers use fashion to express their identities and gain confidence, especially for those who may be shy or introverted (Latifah Gusri et al., 2021; Sabka et al., 2019; Venus, 2017). Cosplay also provides a platform for fans to create "online identities," especially in communities such as *fujoshi* (female fans of boys' love manga), who may engage in discussions and express support for themes they do not necessarily endorse in real life (P. A. Dewi, 2012; Fitriana et al., 2021; Latifah Gusri et al., 2021). These online spaces offer fans the opportunity to explore and discuss their interests in a safe, anonymous environment. While these studies offer intriguing insights, they are limited by narrow sampling and short research timeframes. Broader comparative studies and deeper ethnographic investigations, framed through participatory culture or 'online identities' creation, would provide a more nuanced understanding of how identity are exercised and represented within fans community.

Table 1. The prevailing themes in Japanese pop culture research in Indonesia, 2003-2013

Theme	Premise	Total Articles
Popular cinema	It analyses (1) Language use and language structure, (2) the dynamic interplay between actors or characters, and (2) socio-cultural nuance portrayed in the movie.	60
Audience and Reception	It explores media audience and reception, (1) Why Japanese pop culture appeals to a specific age group or gender (2) the impact to these products on the audience.	13
Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy	The relationship between the Japanese state and popular culture is a key focus of this research area. The most prominent narrative explores the utilization of Japanese pop culture as a form of (1) soft power and (2) cultural diplomacy.	12
Identity and Representation	It investigates (1) why young individuals express themselves through cosplayer and (2) the emergence of the so-called online identity in an online community.	12
Total		97

Prevailing themes in Japanese pop culture research in Indonesia

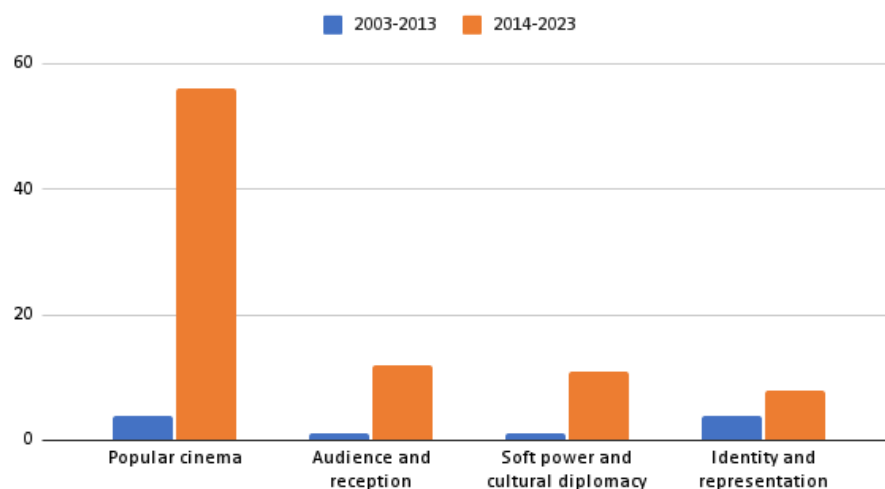


Chart 1. Distribution of themes in Japanese pop culture research in Indonesia, 2003-2013

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The review reveals that research on Japanese popular culture was relatively sparse during the first decade (2003–2013), with only one article published during this period (Chart 1). A significant increase in published articles occurred in 2017, though the reasons behind this surge are not explored in this review. It may have been driven by the emergence of new publishers offering researchers platforms to publish their work.

3.2 Dominant Methodological Approach

In addition to identifying the most prevalent subjects, my review also highlighted the methodological aspects commonly employed in researching Japanese popular culture in Indonesia. Most of the published articles on Japanese popular culture over the past twenty years are primarily descriptive and rely on single case studies. While well-researched case studies can provide deep insights, their analyses often lack robust theoretical discussions, offering limited contributions to broader theoretical discourse. This evaluation aligns with earlier findings regarding methodological issues in Japanese studies conducted in Indonesia (Pratama & Purnomo, 2020).

3.3 Agenda for Future Research

Despite its limitations, the study of popular culture remains a promising field of research, given the significant interest it garners from Indonesian students. To enrich future research on Japanese pop culture, several suggestions are offered:

First, studies conducted over the past twenty years reveal repetitive themes, with cinema and anime being the most commonly examined research materials. However, there has been limited scholarly attention to the creative industry itself—particularly from the perspectives of content creators, producers, and distributors. Furthermore, digitalization has significantly transformed the distribution of anime and, to a similar extent, manga, which no longer dominated by official companies. Fan-driven distribution—known as "scanlation" (a combination of "scanning" and "translating" by fans)—has gained popularity in recent years, raising important issues related to piracy and censorship.

Second, many studies rely on single case studies, which provide snapshots of current trends but may lack broader applicability. Larger sample sizes offer the advantage of greater representativeness, enabling researchers to capture the nuances and dynamics of these topics more effectively. Future research should consider incorporating larger sample sizes and clearer methodologies to provide a more comprehensive picture.

Third, the research on Japanese popular culture in Indonesia would greatly benefit from integrating stronger local content. Rather than treating Japanese pop culture as a one-way cultural influence, future studies should examine how local audiences actively interpret, localize, and blend Japanese cultural products with Indonesian values, aesthetics, and social norms. For instance, the phenomenon of Indonesian Muslim cosplayers who adapt character costumes to conform with *hijab* norms exemplifies the dynamic interplay between Japanese pop culture and local cultural and religious values. Exploring these processes can offer deeper insights into how Japanese pop culture is not merely consumed, but also interpreted, negotiated, and transformed within the Indonesian context—thereby revealing unique cultural expressions that are both global and local. Such analysis would address a current gap in the literature, which

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often focuses more on the origin and popularity of Japanese content than on its localized reinterpretations.

4. Conclusions

This review attempts to map the landscape of Japanese popular culture research in Indonesia by examining published articles from the past twenty years. The findings are twofold. First, The four most dominant themes in this field are cinema and anime, audience and reception, soft power and cultural diplomacy, and identity and representation. Among these, cinema and anime have been the most extensively covered topics from 2003 to 2023.

Second, the findings also highlight some limitations in the current body of research, including a lack of robust theoretical discussions and a tendency to focus on repetitive themes. Despite these shortcomings, the findings offer valuable insights into areas for improvement and potential development in future research.

The proposed agenda for future research aims to stimulate further interest in Japanese pop culture studies, providing practical ideas and guidelines to address existing gaps in the current literature.

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