

JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE IN THE FORMATION OF MALAYSIAN YOUTH IDENTITY AND ASPIRATIONS

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Received: 17 September 2025

Accepted: 25 September 2025

ABSTRACT: This study explores how Japanese popular culture shapes the identities, relationships, and aspirations of Malaysian youth. While Japanese popular culture is widely consumed, prior research has often been descriptive, with limited focus on how fandom is enacted, recognised, and projected into the future. Using a qualitative approach, twenty university students were interviewed via WhatsApp, and their experiences analysed through thematic coding and quadrant mapping of engagement and future alignment. The analysis was guided by an integrated framework combining Identity Theory, Self-Verification Theory, Narrative Identity Theory, and Future Self-Continuity Theory. Findings show that fandom identities are fluid, socially endorsed, narratively constructed, and future-oriented. The High engagement–High future quadrant dominated, with participants translating practice and recognition into concrete pathways such as creative portfolios, animation degrees, or Japanese language study. Conversely, private leisure characterised the Low engagement–Low future group. The absence of High engagement–Low future participants indicates that sustained engagement rarely exists without future projection.

Keywords: Japanese popular culture, fandom, identity, Malaysian youth

INTRODUCTION

Japanese popular culture, encompassing various forms such as *anime*, *manga*, and J-dramas, has garnered immense popularity among Malaysian youth, significantly influencing their aspirations and cultural identities. The appeal of these cultural products is often described as "faceless," allowing them to transcend national boundaries and integrate into local contexts, leading to a unique form of cultural indigenization in Malaysia (Otmazgin, 2008).

A recent report shows that Malaysia ranks eighth globally for the percentage of its population that watches *anime* movies (feature-length animated films from Japan) with nearly half (48%) of adults and younger audiences enjoying this specific format (Azuar, 2022). While this statistic refers only to movies and not the broader *anime* genre, it is a telling indicator of the strong presence of Japanese animation in Malaysian popular culture. Beyond the big screen, *anime* and *manga* have become part of everyday youth life. Some university students report spending up to 21 hours a week watching *anime* (Yusof et al., 2023), while events such as Comic Fiesta continue to draw massive crowds. In 2023, the event broke records when a single merchandise booth recorded USD 300,000 in sales over one weekend (Astute Analytica, 2024).

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Japanese popular culture in Malaysia goes beyond entertainment. It is a shared language that brings people together, inspires creative expression, and opens doors to cross-cultural understanding. However, despite this growing influence and visibility, research into its deeper impacts has often been limited in scope, leaving important questions about identity and lived experience insufficiently addressed. While existing literature demonstrated that Japanese popular culture influences Malaysian youth by shaping identity traits (Yamato, 2013; Yamato, 2020; Mamat et al., 2022), encouraging cultural negotiation (Pae, Mamat, & Abdul Rashid, 2025), fostering creative skills (Venkata, Balraj, & Pandian, 2017; Pae, Mamat, & Abdul Rashid, 2020), and inspiring career aspirations (Mamat et al., 2018; Yusof et al., 2023), most has been thematic and descriptive in nature. These studies often focus on general patterns, such as the positive reinterpretation of *otaku* identity, moral values gained from media narratives, or the role of fan communities, without capturing the nuanced, first-person processes through which fans negotiate and sustain these identities over time.

In particular, little is known about how fans first come to identify themselves as part of this cultural sphere, how moments of recognition and validation from others reinforce or reshape their self-concept, and how personal challenges are navigated in relation to fandom. The evolution of values and worldviews, the role of both online and offline communities in sustaining identity, and the ways current engagements align with long-term aspirations have also received limited attention. This lack of longitudinal and narrative-focused understanding limits our ability to grasp the full arc of identity development among Malaysian fans of Japanese popular culture.

Research in this area has also faced methodological constraints. Many studies have been limited by small (Yamato, 2012; Lane, 2023) or specialized samples, such as Japanese language learners (Pae, Mamat, & Abdul Rashid, 2025; Pae et al., 2023) or specific fan subgroups (Yamato, 2012; Yamato, 2014) which restrict the generalizability of findings. Scholars consistently recommend broader and more diverse datasets, as well as in-depth qualitative approaches, to capture richer and more representative perspectives (Mamat et al., 2022; Yamato, 2020; Yusof et al., 2023).

Addressing these gaps, the present study examines the lived experiences of Malaysian youth fans from diverse academic backgrounds and institutions. It focuses on three main objectives: first, to explore how fans develop and negotiate their identities through personal experiences, influences, and values shaped by their Japanese popular culture engagement; second, to analyse the role of specific media content and fan communities, both online and offline, in fostering social connections, recognition, and personal growth; and third, to investigate how current engagements align with their future aspirations, goals, and envisioned life trajectories. Through these narratives, the study aims to provide a deeper, more human understanding of how Japanese popular culture becomes embedded in the identities, relationships, and life paths of Malaysian youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of Japanese popular culture in Malaysia sits within broader histories of media globalization and regional cultural exchange. Starting from the late twentieth century, liberalised media policies and expanding broadcast options brought *anime* and J-dramas to local screens, often in subtitled or dubbed form (Yamato, 2011; Yamato, 2013). This coincided with Malaysia's own modernisation and rising household access to digital devices, creating fertile ground for new cultural imports. Regionally, urban middle classes across East and Southeast Asia helped circulate Japanese cultural goods and meanings, engaging Malaysian audiences with conversations about style, values, and taste (Otmazgin, 2008).

Shifts in infrastructure shaped consumption patterns. Early exposure came through terrestrial TV and affordable translated *manga* in Malay, Chinese, and English (Yamato et al.,

2011; Venkata, Balraj, & Pandian, 2017). Widespread broadband availability means youth opted more for online sources; cheaper and more convenient than VCDs, DVDs, or pay-TV, hence expanding time spent searching for and downloading content (Yamato, 2014). Today, streaming platforms and social media enable on-demand viewing, participatory commentary, and fan circulation of clips, memes, and guides (Lane, 2023).

Across studies, *anime*, *manga*, J-pop, and J-dramas remain the core domains, with growing attention to VTubers and voice actors (Mamat et al., 2022). Genre preferences vary by age and training. School pupils and undergraduates gravitate toward fantasy, comedy, romance, and mystery, followed by horror, mecha, and other genre in smaller shares (Mamat et al., 2014; Mamat et al., 2022; Yusof et al., 2018). Design and media students often emphasise visual aesthetics and craft (Yusof et al., 2023). Early “gateway” titles such as *Doraemon*, *Ultraman*, and later franchise hits remain frequently cited points of entry (Lane, 2023).

Motivations are both hedonic and reflective. Youth cite engaging stories, appealing characters, humour, and moral themes such as friendship, loyalty, courage, and perseverance (Pae et al., 2023; Venkata, Balraj, & Pandian, 2017). Many describe *anime* as prompting reflection on personal and social issues, even when narratives are fantastical (Yamato, 2012; Pae, Mamat, & Abdul Rashid, 2025). These meanings help explain continued involvement beyond initial entertainment value.

Evidence links participation to language learning, creativity, and practical skills. *Anime* and *manga* exposure has been associated with gains in Japanese vocabulary and cultural knowledge, and *manga* has been used to support English reading comprehension (Ahmad et al., 2012; Pae et al., 2020). Cosplay communities provide hands-on training in costume construction, performance, and event organisation (Paidi et al., 2014). Among Malaysian undergraduates, especially in media programmes, Japanese content often sparks creative projects and skill building (Abd Razak & Ibnu, 2022).

Identity formation is dynamic, negotiated, and social. Malaysian fans have reworked the term *otaku*, often viewed negatively in Japan, into a local badge of expertise and passion that signals belonging rather than withdrawal (Yamato, 2013; Mamat et al., 2022). Online platforms and peer networks are central for discovering content and finding like-minded others, while local clubs and events provide offline spaces for self-expression and leadership (Yamato, 2013; Venkata, Balraj, & Pandian, 2017). Through activities like cosplay, drawing, singing, streaming, or organising events, youth try out roles and stabilise identities in interaction with audiences and friends (Yamato, 2020; He et al., 2022; Sugihartati, 2019). Participation can also bring everyday cultural practices into view, from punctuality and etiquette to small rituals, reinforcing a felt connection to Japanese culture.

Alongside benefits, studies note potential harms and controversies. Concerns include exposure to violent or sexual content, compulsive or isolating behaviours, and time displacement from study or work (Zuo, 2024; Ikeguchi, 2018). Subgenres such as *isekai* have been critiqued for broader social implications in the Japanese context (Lu, 2020). LGBTQ-themed titles, including *yaoi* or Boys’ Love, attract committed followings yet remain culturally sensitive topics in Malaysia, provoking mixed responses among students (Srimulyani, 2021; Mamat et al., 2023). VTuber consumption can enhance creativity and language skills but may also introduce inappropriate language or encourage excessive time investment (Mamat et al., 2022). Without guidance, anime use may contribute to escapism, unrealistic expectations, or reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Lane, 2023). These tensions underline the need to analyse not only what youth consume but also how they manage boundaries and negotiate norms.

A consistent thread is the link between fandom and imagined futures. Many young Malaysians report *anime* as a catalyst for educational and career interests in animation, games, language teaching, and other culture-related fields (Abd Razak & Ibnu, 2022; FAST OFFER International, 2024). Narratives of perseverance and friendship often resonate with youths’ own

struggles and encourage goal pursuit (Lu & Zhang, 2019). Fandom communities support this trajectory by offering feedback, roles, and opportunities to lead, which build confidence and highlight latent talents (Attamimi, 2022). For some, language study and cultural exchange become concrete pathways, including preparation for JLPT and ambitions for Japan-related work (Parsakia & Jafari, 2023).

Despite a growing body of research, several limitations recur. Many studies characterise themes and attitudes yet do not track how identities are enacted and stabilised over time within specific life contexts. Longitudinal or within-case narratives are comparatively rare. Research often focuses on niche groups such as language learners, club members, or single-genre fans, which limits generalisability to the broader youth population (Yamato, 2012; Yamato, 2014; Pae, Mamat, & Abdul Rashid, 2025). Identity, self-verification, narrative, and future-self perspectives are not often combined to explain movement from present engagement to future planning. Although prominent on-the-ground, literature is relatively scarce for VTubers, streaming-native practices, and hybrid online-offline communities. Particularly in Malaysian contexts with diverse cultural norms, conditions where engagement remains healthy leisure versus becomes problematic are less clear despite well-documented benefits.

This study addresses these gaps using an integrated theoretical framework to connect present enactment, social recognition, personal narratives, and future planning. Qualitative thematic analysis is combined with transparent, within-case scoring to enable cross-case comparison while maintaining complexity. The focus is on how Malaysian youth move from casual consumption to routine identity enactment, how recognition by close circles anchors that identity, and how these processes align with concrete steps toward imagined futures, i.e. education, language credentials, and early professional work. This adds process-level clarity, updates the evidence base for newer subcultures and platforms, and specifies the boundary conditions for fandom categorization as leisure versus pathway for growth.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study brings together four complementary perspectives — Identity Theory, Self-Verification Theory, Narrative Identity Theory, and Future Self-Continuity Theory — to examine how Malaysian youth fans of Japanese popular culture construct, negotiate, and sustain their sense of self over time. From a poststructuralist standpoint, identity is never static; it is multiple, fluid, and shaped by cultural discourses that influence how people think and act (Fu, 2017). In this view, identity is not a fixed label but a dynamic, evolving process (Singer, 2004; Loseke, 2007; Ezzy, 1998), making it well-suited to understanding how fandom develops and transforms across different life stages.

Identity Theory

Identity Theory (Stets & Burke, 2000) describes how individuals take on role identities as a fan or otherwise, and internalize the associated expectations, meanings, and behaviours. Essentially, being a fan means seeing oneself in that role and aligning one's behaviour. These expectations influence actions within fan-related situations. However, instead of a mere group of identical individuals, a fan community networks people with distinct viewpoints who negotiate shared meanings and manifest their fandom in various ways (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Fan identity often intersects with broader elements of self-concept. If one relates being a fan to qualities like creativity, curiosity, or social connection, the role will accordingly be performed (Stets & Burke, 2000). Fan and personal identities are negotiated by the individuals, with behaviours modified to maintain authenticity, with “activation” of the fan identity depending on both the quantity and strength of social connections. A higher level of commitment enhances the likelihood of seeking or creating chances to express their fandom. Once activated, this identity frequently drives behaviours aimed at self-verification, ensuring

actions reflect internal standards of being a fan. When this alignment is achieved, it can boost self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a sense of consistency, thereby reinforcing continued engagement (Stets & Burke, 2000).

In this research, Identity Theory highlights how profoundly Japanese popular culture is woven into participants' everyday lives, influencing self-perception, social interactions, and choices regarding when and how to manifest (or withhold) their fan identity.

Self-Verification Theory

Self-Verification Theory (Burke & Stets, 1999) extends Identity Theory by examining how individuals pursue validation of their self-concept from others. Self-verification takes place when one's sense of self in a situation, which is shaped by feedback from others and personal interpretation, aligns with internal identity standards. This congruence provides psychological stability and reinforces commitment to one's identity.

People actively employ various strategies to achieve self-verification, such as seeking out interactions that confirm their identity and avoiding those that might challenge it. They might reinterpret feedback to maintain self-consistency, step back from unsupportive environments, or temporarily elevate other identities when validation is not possible. Over time, consistent self-verification builds trust, enhances emotional connections, and fosters a sense of belonging to a group (Burke & Stets, 1999).

In the context of fandom, self-verification may happen when a fan's identity is acknowledged and affirmed by the surrounding people. For example, when peers recognize their expertise, participate in fan activities with them, or value their creative expressions. On the other hand, a lack of recognition or encounters with negative stereotypes can lead to a withdrawal from public fan communities. In this research, Self-Verification Theory aids in understanding how participants uphold and safeguard their fan identity within social contexts, often seeking validation in secure, trusted environments while steering clear of situations where their fandom may be misinterpreted or undervalued.

Narrative Identity Theory

Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 2001; Ezzy, 1998) emphasizes how individuals interpret their lives through the narratives they construct about themselves. These stories interlace past and current events with future goals, forming a cohesive self-narrative that provides a sense of unity and purpose; an individualized perception of self-continuity (Ezzy, 1998). Life narratives are rooted in history but are also subject to reinterpretation, formed by the individual as well as through interactions with others (Ezzy, 1998; McAdams, 2001). A sense of time is involved, with continuous rethinking of the past and future in relation to the "emergent present" reshaping unrelated occurrences into significant milestones within a developing life narrative (Ezzy, 1998). Although these narratives are based on actual experiences, they selectively interpret and frame events to derive meaning.

In contexts of fandom, such personal stories are influenced by individual decisions as well as larger cultural factors (McAdams, 2001; Loseke, 2007). They transform as new experiences surface (Singer, 2004), and in global youth fandoms, identities can be intricate – a combination of emotional connections, fictional realms and critical analysis of media content (Sugihartati, 2019). Fandom can manifest and be strengthened through activities like cosplay, fan gatherings, and online engagements (He et al., 2022; Yamato, 2016), with digital communities sometimes providing a greater sense of belonging than offline environments (Sugihartati, 2019; Lehtonvirta & Räsänen, 2010; Fu, 2017). Narrative Identity Theory is utilized in this work to explore how participants positively incorporate fandom into their personal narratives – as a source of happiness, a driving force for personal growth, or a pathway to social connection.

Future Self-Continuity Theory

Future Self-Continuity Theory (Hershfield, 2011) explores how individuals' perceptions of their future selves influence their decision-making, particularly in situations with long-lasting effects. Individuals are more inclined to make present-day choices that favour a future version of themselves when they perceive a resemblance between their future and present selves: full of clarity, authenticity, and positive attributes. This theory addresses the complications of making decisions over time by acknowledging the internal conflict between the planner-self, which is focused on future aspirations, and the short-sighted doer-self, which seeks immediate satisfaction. Recognizing this conflict often encourages the implementation of precommitment strategies to help guide or limit future actions (Hershfield, 2011). Levels of future self-continuity vary along a spectrum. The drive to engage in behaviours that safeguard long-term welfare is greater with stronger perceived continuity between the future and present selves (Hershfield, 2011).

In the context of fandom, this may include envisioning futures where Japanese popular culture continues to play a significant role, i.e. future creative professions, ongoing language studies, or lasting participation in fan communities (Kapogli & Quidbach, 2021). Pursuits such as cosplay, fan art, and content creation can act as pathways for personal fulfilment and development (Galih, 2012; Hidayatullah, 2023), while contemplation on ethical and societal matters is stimulated by Japanese media (Bryce, 2010), influencing the type of individual a fan hopes to become. Using Future Self-Continuity Theory, this study sheds light on how the current involvement in fandom influences participants' envisioned futures: lifelong enthusiasm, career choice, or basis for personal development.

When viewed collectively, these viewpoints depict identity as fluid (influenced by continuous experiences), socially endorsed (through acknowledgment and self-affirmation), narratively formed (through individual life narratives), and future-focused (aligned with long-term goals). This comprehensive framework provides an insightful perspective on how Malaysian youth interact with Japanese popular culture beyond a form of entertainment and extending to a significant avenue for self-discovery, social relationships, and the pursuit of personal aspirations.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilised a qualitative approach to investigate how Japanese popular culture influences the identity development and future aspirations of Malaysian youth. The aim was to understand the relationship between immediate interactions with Japanese popular culture and long-term goals and self-growth.

Data Collection

A group of twenty Malaysian public and private university students who actively engage with Japanese popular culture took part in this research. The sample included 17 ethnic Chinese and 3 Malay participants, consisting of 6 females and 14 males. As an exploratory sample, it was not meant to represent the population statistically. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, beginning with known enthusiasts of Japanese popular culture, who then referred others within their social circles. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted via text on WhatsApp. This platform provided convenience and comfort, enabling participants to reply at their own pace, while generating an immediate textual record conducive to analysis (Desai et al., 2024).

The interviews followed an integrated guide and addressed topics such as entry into fandom, media preferences, involvement in communities, experiences of recognition, values, challenges, and aspirations for the future. Prior to participation, respondents were informed

about the purpose of the study and provided consent. To ensure privacy, nicknames were used instead of legal names. Participation was voluntary, responses were guided by the participants, and they could withdraw at any moment.

The interview guide was based on theoretical frameworks, incorporating Identity Theory (role adoption, salience, enactment), Self-Verification Theory (social recognition and affirmation), Narrative Identity Theory (life stories, turning points, moral themes), and Future Self-Continuity (vividness of the future self, precommitment). This theoretical structure ensured that the prompts addressed (i) identity formation and enactment, (ii) recognition experiences and community dynamics, (iii) meaning making throughout life experiences, and (iv) the links between current practices and future paths.

Data Analysis

To facilitate a clear comparison within the cases, each participant was assigned a score between 0 and 5 (whole numbers) across six dimensions derived from coding: Identity Salience, Community Participation, Creative Production, Recognition/Verification, Future Alignment, and Constraints Managed (higher scores signify fewer barriers or barriers that are actively overcome). These scores were based on observable evidence namely specific behaviours, roles, and incidents, and were applied following established decision rules to maintain consistency in judgments. Coders utilised straightforward anchors (0 = none/absent; 1 = incidental; 3 = intermittent/moderate; 5 = sustained, public, multi-context) and provided brief rationales for each significant score to ensure an audit trail. These indicators serve as descriptive tools for synthesis; they are not designed as psychometric scales and were not employed for inferential statistics or causal interpretations.

Next, we calculated a single Engagement Composite by taking the unweighted average of four dimensions related to present engagement (Identity Salience, Community Participation, Creative Production, and Recognition/Verification). This composite (0 to 5) views these dimensions as complementary aspects of “doing fandom now.” Sensitivity analyses using alternative weightings (such as increasing the weight of Creative Production) did not result in any significant changes to the cross-case patterns, so the unweighted mean was retained for the sake of clarity. This composite omits Future Alignment and Constraints Managed to reflect present enactment rather than future ambitions or structural elements. Future Alignment received ratings based on the combined presence of clear goals and proactive measures (such as portfolios, JLPT preparation, and relevant courses); scores of 4-5 generally necessitated both components.

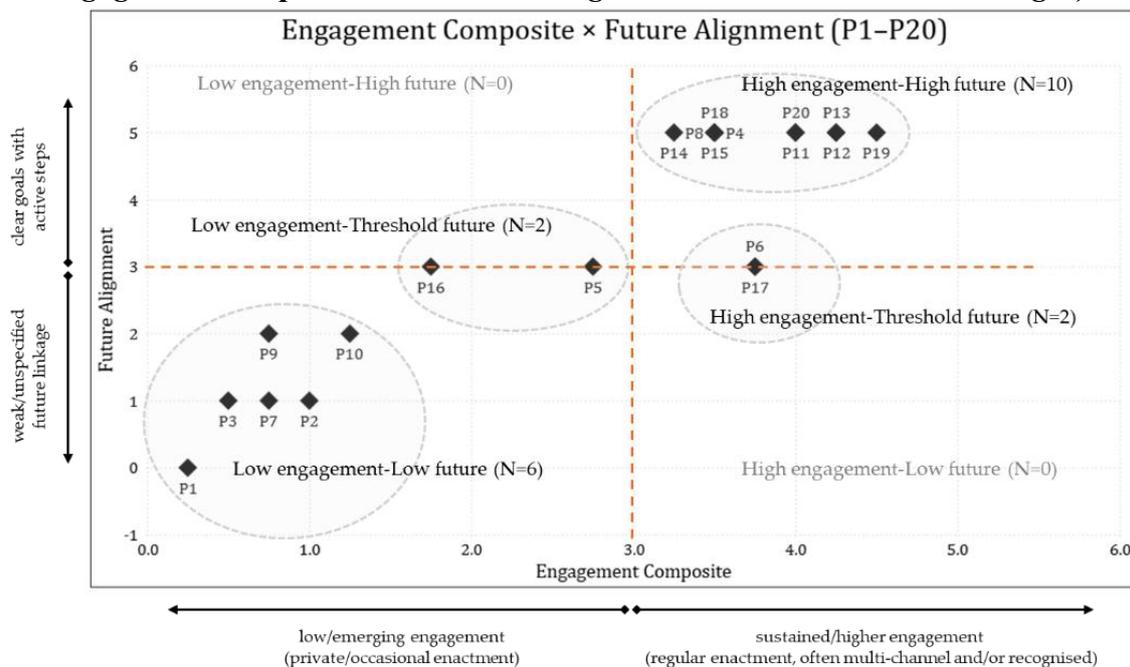
For the purpose of cross-case comparison, the participants were plotted on a two-axis graph, with the Engagement Composite represented on the x-axis and Future Alignment on the y-axis (see Figure 2). The Engagement Composite is the arithmetic mean of four elements: Identity Salience, Community Participation, Creative Production and Recognition/Verification (each scored 0–5). Future Alignment is a 0–5 rating of the clarity of goals and the evidence of active steps. Dashed lines at 3 mark interpretive midpoints where scores >3 are classified as ‘High’, <3 as ‘Low’, and exactly 3 as ‘Threshold’ on the respective axis. Each point was marked from P1 to P20 to ensure traceability to qualitative evidence.

It is important to note, however, that these quadrants are used solely as descriptive aids and are not employed for inferential claims. The figure acts as a guide for readers, highlighting patterns immediately, while interpretations are firmly rooted in thematic excerpts and the concise, evidence-supported explanations found in Table 1. Although Constraints Managed is not part of the Engagement Composite, we report each participant’s Constraints Managed score in Table 1 to make structural conditions visible alongside the placement rationale.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Figure 2 illustrates the positioning of participants P1–P20 across four distinct interpretive quadrants. Four main characteristics are evident. Firstly, the upper-right quadrant representing High engagement and High future is predominant, containing ten individuals. Secondly, the lower-left quadrant, which signifies Low engagement and Low future, clusters six participants who exhibit a casual or private fandom with limited potential for future involvement. Thirdly, there is a small band of Low engagement–Threshold future, represented by two participants positioned near the midpoint of the y-axis on the left side of the graph. Fourthly, there is a small band of High engagement–Threshold future, represented by two participants located near the midpoint of the y-axis on the right side of the graph. Importantly, the quadrant for High engagement and Low future is absent in this group, indicating that once participation becomes regular and visible, some degree of future planning typically emerges. Similarly, the absence of Low engagement and High future indicates how future trajectories are closely connected with an individual’s current level of engagement.

Figure 2. Participants positioned by Engagement Composite and Future Alignment. *EC = Engagement Composite; FA = Future Alignment; CM = Constraints Managed*



On the x-axis, the Engagement Composite scores range from 0.25 (for P1) to 4.50 (for P19), with a median score of 3.5, skewed to the left due to the presence of six low-engagement cases. This central tendency demonstrates that over half of the sample regularly engages through multiple channels. On the y-axis, the Future Alignment reveals a pronounced bimodal distribution: ten participants achieve a score of 5 (indicating clear goals along with active steps), four participants score 3, and six score 2 or lower, with the median being 5. Collectively, this visual representation reinforces a positive association between engagement (active participation) and future alignment (clarity of aspirations and steps taken), with no instances found in the High engagement-Low future quadrant.

Table 1: The Rationale of Participants’ Placement

Participant	EC	FA	Quadrant	Explanation for Placement	CM
P1	0.25	0	Low–Low	Casual viewer (JoJo, slice-of-life); private, no communities; avoids “weeb” stigma; no	4

Participant	EC	FA	Quadrant	Explanation for Placement	CM
				recognition episodes; hobby only with no future linkage.	
P2	1	1	Low–Low	Sword Art Online/ <i>isekai</i> fan; attends Comic Fiesta casually, minimal online; collects merchandise; financial limits reduce depth; occasional Instagram recognition; no clear goals beyond collecting.	2
P3	0.5	1	Low–Low	Enjoys Attack on Titan, sushi, Uniqlo; chats with friends only; no communities or recognition; admires Japanese manners; remains a casual hobby without plans.	4
P7	0.75	1	Low–Low	Prefers music/games, slice-of-life/comedy for relaxation; introverted and private; family-supported; no goals, fandom treated as leisure.	4
P9	0.75	2	Low–Low	Follows <i>shōjo</i> /romance; private reader, no communities; inspires kindness/patience; informal family recognition; prioritises contentment and stability, not JPC careers.	5
P10	1.25	2	Low–Low	From Sword Art Online to <i>manga</i> /VTubers; passive online, avoids events; <i>anime</i> profile pictures for light signalling; family watched Attack on Titan together; collects ideas for projects, no clear trajectory.	4
P16	1.75	3	Low engagement–Threshold future	Long-term Metal Gear Solid/VTuber interest; solo engagement; attends festivals twice yearly; recognises anime’s mainstreaming; plans Japan trip; no ongoing communities.	5
P5	2.75	3	Low engagement–Threshold future	Broad J-culture influence on art and outlook; shares with friends only; ignores “cringe” stigma; creates without fixed pathway; aspirations remain informal.	4
P14	3.25	5	High–High	Idol fandom (<i>Hey! Say! Jump</i>); Japanese culture club + online; Osaka exchange recognition; balances study/work; JLPT preparation towards teaching career.	3
P8	3.5	5	High–High	Engages across <i>anime/manga/games</i> ; active online/offline; overcame family disapproval; pursuing animation degree; targets games/animation industry.	4
P4	3.5	5	High–High	Dedicated to <i>mecha</i> /Gundam; produces art, builds/shares Gunpla; active in community; feedback validates work; cost is a constraint; aspires to mechanical design career.	3
P15	3.5	5	High–High	J-pop/Yorushika fan; animated MVs inspire creativity; selective sharing after toxic fandom;	4

Participant	EC	FA	Quadrant	Explanation for Placement	CM
				maintains fan art following; studying animation; aim to create animated MVs.	
P18	3.5	5	High–High	From Initial D to VTubers; introvert, light community use; studying animation + Japanese; shares illustrations; career goals in gaming/animation or VTubers; overcame teasing.	3
P17	3.75	3	High engagement–Threshold future	Action, <i>iyashikei</i> , Japanese Domestic Market (JDM) culture; active online; fan art recognised in livestream; avoids physical events; creates unique works; hobby focus over career.	3
P6	3.75	3	High engagement–Threshold future	<i>Tokusatsu</i> (Ultraman/Kamen Rider); engages via <i>cosplay</i> , singing, YouTube; peer recognition online; maintains hobby without career linkage.	3
P11	4	5	High–High	Inspired by action/comedy; active in physical communities; produces art/animation with peer recognition; pursuing career as animator.	5
P20	4	5	High–High	Engaged with Conan/Bleach; main community in Japanese learning; speech contest runner-up; balances studies; aiming JLPT N3 and Japan-related career.	3
P12	4.25	5	High–High	Long-term fan (LoveLive!, <i>tokusatsu</i> , stageplay); active online/offline; produces writing, edits, illustration; faces access challenges; committed to JPC-related career.	3
P13	4.25	5	High–High	Deep anime engagement since age 13; online active; vice-president of anime club; advocates anime's depth; faced misconceptions; aspires to be professional artist.	4
P19	4.5	5	High–High	Family-nurtured fandom; <i>shōjo</i> /slice-of-life focus; sells fan art at festivals; values politeness/respect; studying animation; seeks internships for animation career.	4

(i) High engagement–High future (n = 10)

Participants P4, P8, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P18, P19, and P20 are grouped together in the upper-right quadrant. Their profiles show a shared pattern of consistent involvement, acknowledgment, and proactive approaches toward their future goals.

A key characteristic is their consistent practice. These individuals engage not only as consumers but also as producers who create, perform, and share their interests across various platforms. P4 builds Gunpla models and creates *mecha* artwork. P12 and P13 are engaged in both online and campus communities, with P13 taking on the role of vice-president of a university *anime* club. P11, P15, and P19 are active creators of fan art, animations, and illustrations. Such activities allow their fan identities to remain visible and persistent in their everyday lives.

Their motivation is supported by recognition and a sense of belonging. Validation comes from various sources such as audiences, peers, and family members. P19 markets fan

art at conventions while developing a portfolio, P20 achieved public recognition through a speech competition, and P12 enjoys ongoing support from online communities. These experiences affirm their identities as fans and creators, enhancing their confidence to continue their pursuits.

Another important aspect is how they convert their passions into actionable futures. A few of them are pursuing degrees in animation or gaming (P8, P11, P18, P19). Others establish disciplined practices like maintaining portfolios and regular posting schedules (P4, P15, P19). P14 and P20 are preparing for Japanese language certifications, intertwining their fandom with their academic and career paths. Participants also reflect on significant instances that transformed enthusiasm into organized action. Examples are P13's leadership position, P19's inaugural art sale, P20's contest victory, and P8's shift to study animation following family backing. These pivotal moments transition fandom from a private hobby into structured, goal-oriented trajectories.

In this group, preferences for genres frequently correspond with their aspirations. Interests in *mecha* relate to careers in design and engineering (P4). Fandoms surrounding idols and stage plays support careers in teaching or performance (P12, P14, P20). The creation of animated music videos fuels ambitions in audiovisual storytelling (P15). Enthusiasm for gaming and VTubers connects to careers in interactive media (P18). Though these connections are not absolute, they imply that cultural products can influence the development of skills and identities.

Lastly, this group also encounters limitations. P4 faces financial constraints in model-building, P14 and P20 manage their academic responsibilities, and P12 experiences challenges related to access. However, rather than dissuading them, these obstacles sharpen their focus, driving them to adapt through portfolios, language qualifications, or sustainable practices that keep their identities alive.

(ii) Low engagement–Low future (n = 6)

Participants P1, P2, P3, P7, P9, and P10 occupy the lower-left quadrant of the map. Their engagement with Japanese popular culture is generally light, personal, and disconnected from long-term aspirations. For P1, P3, P7, and P9, *anime* and *manga* serve mainly as a means of relaxation or mood enhancement, typically through the slice-of-life, comedy, or romance genres. Recognition from others is infrequent and often incidental, such as a parent noticing their reading habits or a friend briefly acknowledging their interests. P10 primarily maintains his fandom online, engaging in a passive manner with memes and VTuber content, while subtly signalling his interests through anime-themed profile pictures. P2 invests in merchandise and occasionally attends events, but his financial constraints limit the extent of his involvement, with his ambitions cantered on collecting rather than broader goals.

The future prospects for this group are limited, but this is understandable. There are no opportunities for public roles, ongoing feedback, or leadership, which means their fan identities remain situational rather than central. Without consistent participation, there is little motivation to evolve their fandom into structured commitments. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the worth of their experiences. In fact, participants describe their involvement as enjoyable, balanced, and suitable for their personal circumstances. For some, avoiding stigma, like P1's intentional effort not to be labelled a "weeb," or dealing with practical limitations, such as P2's financial concerns, are conscious strategies to sustain a comfortable level of engagement.

In a broader context, this group underscores the genuine nature of private fandom as a recreational activity that enhances well-being without necessitating additional commitments. It illustrates the conditions under which fandom remains a hobby, characterized by modesty, privacy, and intrinsic rewards. These participants demonstrate that an identity tied to Japanese popular culture can hold significance without needing to evolve into career or professional

avenues. Should opportunities for recognition or more supportive environments emerge, their involvement may shift. However, for now, their engagement remains consistent, satisfying, and suitably aligned with their life priorities.

(iii) Low engagement–Threshold future (n = 2)

The Threshold future category (score = 3) indicates a transitional phase where participants express certain aspirations, although these remain tentative or only somewhat integrated into their regular practices. In this quadrant, participants demonstrate a desire to envision their future, but their daily involvement lacks the dedication or regularity needed to firmly establish those futures.

Participants P5 and P16 are located on the left side of the map, showcasing modest and sporadic engagement alongside developing future perspectives. P5 draws creative and philosophical inspiration from works like *Blue Period* and *Frieren*. His artistic creations reflect these influences, though he chooses to share his work privately with friends rather than within formal fan communities. He sees himself continuing his artistic journey beyond institutional settings, driven more by personal significance than by structured affiliations. On the other hand, P16 has a deep-rooted connection to *Metal Gear Solid* and *VTubers*. His engagement includes attending two festivals each year and planning a trip to Japan. For him, fandom acts as a means of exploration that intertwines self-reflection with cultural awareness, such as noting the rising popularity of *anime* in Malaysia.

(iv) High engagement-Threshold future (n = 2)

In line with the previous group, the Threshold future (score = 3) reflects a middle-ground stance, where participants engage in strong and visible practices now, but their long-term goals are modest, hobby-oriented, or only vaguely defined. Participants P6 and P17 occupy the right side of the map, demonstrating consistently high levels of involvement alongside futures that have not yet been converted into clear career objectives. P6 shows a deep commitment to *tokusatsu* series like *Ultraman* and *Kamen Rider*. His participation includes *cosplay*, singing, and sharing performances on YouTube. Active in digital communities and recognized among his peers, he receives validation from fan groups. Nonetheless, he frames these activities as hobbies rather than career options, balancing them with wider life responsibilities.

In a similar vein, P17 blends a love for action and *iyashikei anime* with a passion for Japanese car culture (JDM). He maintains interactive online communities, creates unique fan art, and has received acknowledgment for his work during a livestream. These experiences validate his identity as a creator and an active participant. However, he does not channel this creative energy into professional aspirations. Instead, he embraces it as a valued form of self-expression and community connection. Collectively, these instances illustrate that high levels of engagement do not necessarily lead to future planning. For some individuals, fandom serves its purpose as a source of creativity and belonging in the present, without the need to evolve into formal professional objectives.

(v) High engagement–Low future (n = 0)

The lower-right quadrant, which signifies high engagement but low future alignment, does not include any participants in this research. This lack of participants provides valuable insight. Among this group, once fandom becomes reliable, noticeable, and socially recognized, it is almost always accompanied by some level of forward planning, whether it manifests as academic decisions, portfolio creation, language learning, or long-term aspirations for creative endeavours.

In other words, sustained engagement seldom exists without being linked to future considerations. Even if aspirations are modest or centred around hobbies instead of careers,

those involved in this study still envisioned some continuity of their fan identity in their imagined futures. This indicates that acknowledgment, regular practice, and the significance of identity naturally encourage a degree of alignment with future objectives.

The absence of this quadrant also illustrates the limitations of fandom within this context. Although low engagement can comfortably exist without future orientation, high engagement seems to lead individuals toward some type of projection into their life paths, no matter how small. This supports the larger conclusion that the enactment of identity and future alignment are closely connected processes for Malaysian youth who are fans of Japanese popular culture.

DISCUSSION

This study applied an integrated framework combining Identity Theory, Self-Verification Theory, Narrative Identity Theory, and Future Self-Continuity Theory. The findings show clear alignment with each perspective.

Identity Theory (Stets & Burke, 2000) is reflected in the High engagement–High future group, where ongoing practice and visibility support fandom as an active role identity. P4's Gunpla building, along with P12 and P13's leadership within the community, and the creative works of P11, P15, and P19 exemplify how continual participation solidifies the fan role across different contexts. Leshner et al. (2024) observed that individuals who participate in events reap advantages in social, mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical areas when they engage in activities that affirm their fan identity, suggesting that regular involvement strengthens and incorporates this identity into their overall well-being.

Self-Verification Theory (Burke & Stets, 1999) is reflected in the importance of recognition and belonging. Validation from audiences, peers, and families affirms identities as fans and creators, motivating persistence. P19's convention sales, P20's contest award, and P12's community support illustrate how acknowledgment reinforces commitment, while the absence of such opportunities in the Low engagement–Low future group leaves fandom situational and private. As suggested by Wang et al. (2023), good community atmosphere promotes interaction and cooperation among community members, increases social support and identity, and encourages creativity among fans. This means that the environment created by peers and the broader fan community provides a supportive space where creative efforts are recognized and valued.

Narrative Identity Theory, as proposed by McAdams (2001), illustrates how significant experiences serve as turning points that connect past interests with future opportunities. Leadership positions, initial sales experiences, or validation from family transform passion into organized action, weaving fandom into individual life stories as a means of development and connection. For the Low engagement–Threshold future group (P5, P16), narratives are vivid yet only partially realized, highlighting how future-oriented stories can precede habitual practices. Dirghangi and Wong (2022) emphasized that narratives provide coherence to life by sharpening focus and enhancing goal pursuit and decision-making through the integration of cognitive, emotional, and motivational systems. The notion that narratives boost goal pursuit indicates that the mental framing of these goals, along with the narrative structure surrounding them, functions as a guide or source of motivation prior to the actual, often routine, actions undertaken to achieve those goals (Dirghangi and Wong, 2022).

Future Self-Continuity Theory (Hershfield, 2011) explains the strong link between engagement and alignment with the future. In the High–High group, current actions lead to tangible planning through portfolios, preparation for the JLPT, or decisions regarding degrees. Conversely, the High engagement–Threshold future group (P6, P17) shows that even with intense participation, future outlooks can remain focused on hobbies instead of professional pursuits. The absence of participants in the High engagement–Low future quadrant indicates a

boundary condition where ongoing, recognized engagement seldom occurs without some type of forward-looking projection. Hong et al. (2024) illustrates that future self-continuity is positively correlated with an enhanced sense of meaning or purpose in life, occurring through authenticity. If this connection is lacking, it would eliminate the psychological advantages of future self-continuity, rendering high, lasting engagement without any forward projection highly unlikely or potentially unsustainable. This suggests that having purpose and a distinct set of goals (elements contributing to meaning in life) is essential for prolonged engagement, and these are directly supported by future self-continuity (Hong et al., 2024).

These findings reinforce earlier evidence linking JPC fandom to language learning, creativity, skills, and career interests, while extending it to newer practices such as VTubers and hybrid communities. At the same time, the Low–Low group underscores the authenticity of private fandom as meaningful leisure that enhances wellbeing without requiring professional pathways. Together, the results depict fandom identities as fluid, socially endorsed, narratively constructed, and future-oriented, clarifying how Japanese popular culture shapes self-discovery, relationships, and aspirations among Malaysian youth.

While this study offers process-level insights into the relationship between Japanese popular culture and identity development among Malaysian youth, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small ($n = 20$) and recruited through snowball sampling. Although diverse in gender and background, the participants cannot be taken as statistically representative of Malaysian youth. The findings therefore highlight patterns and trajectories rather than generalisable trends.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data through text-based interviews on WhatsApp. While this platform provided convenience and comfort, it may limit the richness of expression compared to face-to-face or multi-modal interviews, and cannot capture non-verbal cues that could add depth to interpretation. Finally, the research design was cross-sectional, capturing experiences at a single point in time. As a result, the dynamic processes of identity formation, self-verification, and narrative development could not be observed longitudinally. Future studies should adopt longer-term or repeated-interview approaches to track changes over time.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to provide a more nuanced, human perspective on how Japanese popular culture integrates into the identities, relationships, and life journeys of Malaysian youth. With three main objectives guiding the study, it effectively illustrated the ways in which Japanese popular culture influences identity formation, social bonds, and aspirations, while also recognizing the limitations of its methodology.

Firstly, the research revealed how fans navigate and shape their identities through personal experiences, influences, and values. Utilizing Identity Theory and Narrative Identity Theory, the analysis indicated that regular engagement and visibility within the High engagement–High future group solidify fandom as an active role in their identity. In contrast, individuals in the Low engagement–Low future group demonstrated that private fandom can authentically serve as a form of leisure and relaxation, contributing to well-being even without public roles or firm commitments. Key narrative turning points, such as assuming leadership roles, initial art sales, or contest achievements, further illustrated how fandom interlaces with life narratives and future aspirations.

Secondly, the research explored the impact of specific media content and fan communities, both online and offline, in fostering a sense of recognition, belonging, and personal growth. Aligning with Self-Verification Theory, affirmation from audiences, peers, and families bolstered participants' confidence and dedication. Online platforms and peer networks created essential spaces for exploration and connection, while clubs and events

offered avenues for self-expression and leadership. The lack of such recognition in the Low–Low group rendered fandom more situational and personal. Meanwhile, particular genres, including *mecha*, idol fandom, animated music videos, and VTubers, inspired unique skills, creative output, and even career opportunities.

Thirdly, this study assessed how current involvement correlates with future ambitions. Employing Future Self-Continuity Theory, the results underscored a robust connection between present actions and future aspirations. The High engagement–High future segment illustrated how proactive participation translated into concrete achievements, such as qualifications in animation and gaming, creative portfolios, and certifications in the Japanese language. Interestingly, no participants were categorized within the High engagement–Low future quadrant, implying that consistent, visible, and socially validated fandom almost always comes with aspirations for the future, whether academic, career-oriented, or related to personal hobbies. Certain transitional cases reflected hobby-focused or interim positions, suggesting that aspirations might emerge independently from practical engagement or remain distinct from professional goals.

In summary, the research successfully achieved its purpose by elucidating the processes and providing a thorough, theory-based account of how Japanese popular culture influences the identities of Malaysian youth. The integrated framework encompassing Identity Theory, Self-Verification Theory, Narrative Identity Theory, and Future Self-Continuity Theory offered a comprehensive view, portraying fandom identities as dynamic, socially recognized, narratively constructed, and orientated toward the future. The quadrant analysis illustrated the range of experiences from private leisure to career-focused pathways, emphasizing the diverse role of Japanese popular culture in aiding self-discovery, fostering social connections, and enhancing aspiration-building.

The study provides valuable insights into the factors that determine whether fandom remains a meaningful leisure activity or evolves into a route for personal growth. By updating the evidence base concerning newer subcultures and clarifying the boundary conditions, it broadens the existing literature and highlights areas for further investigation, especially concerning VTubers, hybrid online–offline communities, and the long-term trajectories of youth engagement. Ultimately, for Malaysian youth, Japanese popular culture serves as more than just entertainment; it is a significant channel for self-exploration, social interaction, skill advancement, and the pursuit of personal dreams.

Acknowledgment

This research did not receive specific grants from any funding agencies in the public or commercial sectors.

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