



Self-Injury in Japanese *Manga*: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

This study explored representations of self-injury in Japanese *manga* (graphic novels). A content analysis of fifteen slice-of-life *manga* published between 2000–2017 was conducted, focusing on forty scenes that depict eighteen characters engaging in self-injury. Most depictions of self-injury reflect a stereotypical perception of “self-injurer,” a young girl cutting herself to cope with negative emotion. Characters receive informal support from friends and partners, while parents are portrayed as unsupportive and even triggering. An emergent trend was observed among *manga* targeting male readers to label self-injuring women as “*menhera*” - mentally vulnerable damsels in distress - inviting a fetishistic gaze on the self-injuring female bodies.

Keywords *Manga* · Self-injury · Content analysis · Japanese popular culture

Introduction

As I watched the blood drip... And drip... It was like all the mixed-up thoughts in my head... were flowing out of me.

The only thing that makes me feel better... is pain. If I want to know what it's like to get hurt... I have to experience it firsthand.

– *LIFE* (Suenobu 2002, 85, 97)

After slicing her arm with a box cutter, Ayumu, a fifteen-year-old high school girl crouches on the floor, leaning against the bed. As the pent-up emotion that occupied her a moment ago

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dissolves with the blood flowing out, so does the imagined face of her former best friend staring at her with hatred. As tears flow from her eyes, Ayumu starts sobbing, “I’m sorry... I’m sorry...” over and over again (Suenobu 2002, 87).

Ayumu’s self-cutting, portrayed in a Japanese *manga* (graphic novel), *LIFE* (Suenobu 2002–2009; 20 volumes), vividly represents increased public attention toward this new “epidemic” among adolescents and young adults (Brumberg 2006). Since the early 1990s, medical and public health communities across the world have reported the growth of self-injury, the deliberate hurting of one’s body by cutting, burning, self-bruising or other methods. While self-injury affects all age groups, research has consistently shown high prevalence among youth. In a systematic review of one hundred nineteen epidemiological studies across eighteen countries, the mean lifetime prevalence of self-injury (i.e., reporting at least one self-injuring episode in lifetime) was estimated to be on average 17.2% among adolescents (ten to seventeen years old) and 13.4% among young adults (eighteen to twenty-four years old), compared to 5.5% among adults (twenty-five years or older) (Swannell et al. 2014). Although the definition of self-injury has been the subject of contested debate (Chandler, Myers and Platt 2011), it is now widely accepted that most acts of self-injury represent behavioural problems distinct from suicide attempts (Nock et al. 2006) and are distinguishable from culturally sanctioned self-mutilations such as tattooing or body piercing (International Society for the Study of Self-Injury 2018).¹

While most existing prevalence studies are done in North America (Swannell et al. 2014; Muehlenkamp et al. 2012), a handful of epidemiological studies have originated in Japan, a country in which mental illness is considered the fifth “priority disease” for national medical service (Ito et al. 2013). Okada et al. (2010) reported a lifetime prevalence rate of 8.2% from a sample of Japanese junior high school students (n=2206, age range: twelve to fifteen). Similarly, in a study of 1784 junior and senior high school students (mean age: 14.5, age range twelve to seventeen), a lifetime prevalence rate of self-cutting was 9.9% (Matsumoto et al. 2008), which is slightly higher than the prevalence rate of 6.9% among 540 college students (Yamaguchi et al. 2004). According to two systematic reviews of prevalence studies across geographical regions (Swannell et al. 2014; Muehlenkamp et al. 2012), these estimates are slightly lower than those reported in North America, Europe, and other East Asian countries. Nonetheless, mounting anecdotal evidence from health professionals and educational specialists suggests that the number of youth engaging in self-injury may have been rapidly increasing in Japan, perhaps outpacing research and clinical efforts (e.g., Ishige 2006; Takahashi and Fujiu 2015; Asano 2015). According to a survey with school counselors at junior high and high school levels, over 98% of the respondents reported experiences working with students who self-injure (Matsumoto, Imamura, and Katsumata 2009).

Although it is not clear why self-injury has rapidly gained public visibility over a relatively short period of time, it is quite possible that media portrayals, especially visual depictions of people who self-injure, have contributed to this growing public awareness. In their analysis of English movies, TV shows, music, and print news featuring self-injuring characters, Whitlock et al. (2009) identified a clear upward trend in the amount of media content featuring self-injury since 2000. There were twenty movies with explicit references to self-injury in the 2000–2005 period alone, whereas prior to the 1990s only two movies in the sample portrayed self-injury.

A corpus of research indicated that depictions of self-injury in movies and TV shows are often stereotypical and misrepresentative, as the self-injuring characters were predominantly “White female cutters” in their teens or early twenties (Whitlock, Purington, and Gershkovich 2009). This finding was replicated in another content analysis of forty-one English films

wherein the stereotype of young women cutting themselves to mitigate acute negative emotion was readily prevalent and persistent (Trewavas, Hasking, and McAllister 2010). Feminist scholars have problematized the gendered and racially-skewed representation of the “self-injurers” in popular media. Brickman (2004) contends that media portrayal of self-injurers as vulnerable young girls perpetuates the “delicate cutter” myth that reproduces a patriarchal assumption of female passivity. Echoing Brickman and other feminist thinkers, Bareiss (2017) also argues that representations of self-injury in popular Hollywood films, though somewhat challenging societal norms, ultimately reinforce normative expectations of young women who self-injure to be docile and submissive.

Compared to the Anglophone mediascape, little is known about how self-injury is represented in Japanese popular culture. Among many visual forms, *manga*² has become one of the most influential media outlets, due to its large and lucrative market,³ entertainment value, affordability, and unique visual language representing internal thoughts and emotions of characters (Cohn 2010). *Manga* has been instrumental in building a shared cultural space among Japanese readers, covering virtually all topics imaginable, including sports, war, corporate life, child rearing, sex, cooking, usury, and medicine. Beyond entertainment, *manga* plays a wide array of roles in Japanese society – from a teaching tool, an information source, a behaviour guide, social commentary, an agent of socialization (Ito 2005), to a vehicle for government policy (Matanle, Ishiguro, and McCann 2014).

One notable characteristic of *manga* is its division of genres by gender and age. Most *manga* first appear as a series in comic magazines, which are grouped by their gender-based readership, namely, magazines for men (*dansei-shi*) and for women (*josei-shi*). Each category is further divided into age-based subgenres including: *shōnen manga* (boy’s comics targeting readers eighteen years old and younger), *seinen manga* (comics for young males age eighteen to thirty), *seijin manga* (comics for grownups), *shōjo manga* (comics for girls eighteen years old and younger), *josei manga* (comics targeting young female adults age eighteen to thirty), and *redicomi* (“Lady’s Comic” for adult women). *Shōnen* and *shōjo manga* targeting young readers generally refrain from explicit nudity, violence and sex, while *manga* for adult audiences may carry R18 content.

Although Japanese consumers increasingly engage in cross-age, cross-gender readership, the gender-/age-based heterosexual marketing genres still firmly shape the styles and aesthetic of *manga*. For example, female characters in *shōjo manga* tend to embody societal appearance norms, particularity girlish-cuteness (“*kawaii*”) culture typified by large staring eyes, frilly dresses, flowers, ribbons and hearts (Kinsella 1995). Traditional gender perceptions manifest more conspicuously in boys’ and men’s *manga*, in which female characters use a stereotypical feminine speech style more frequently than has been reported for natural speech (Unser-Schutz 2015). Working women in best-selling men’s *manga* are typically portrayed as either excluded from careers or negatively constructed as being too masculine (Matanle, Ishiguro, and McCann 2014). Stereotypical gendering may also occur on the creator’s side, as *manga* authors are likely to draw for audiences of their own gender. In other words, *shōjo manga* are generally considered as comics “for girls, by girls,” while *shōnen manga* are comics “for boys, by boys, about boys” (Unser-Schutz 2015), based on a marketing assumption about readers relating to the characters of their own gender.

Like any other form of fictional literature and popular art, *manga* is deeply immersed in a particular social environment. It constantly reproduces dominant norms, cultural values and beliefs, including socially-embedded heteronormative gender norms and sexism, while offering readers an escape into an imaginative realm to pursue their desires and aspirations beyond

the limitations set by societal norms. Indeed, what *manga* offers goes beyond mere escapism; via authentic depiction of a “Japanese way of life” (Ito 2005), it not only confirms social order but also challenges readers to reconsider the taken-for-granted worldviews, social hierarchy and norms. For Masuda (2015), *manga*’s character-based narrative allows readers to “experience different types of the “I” and “relate to the world by simulating the characters’ thoughts and relationships” (28) and invites readers to reassess their everyday life and explore alternative ways of being.

Manga serves as a window to Japanese way of life that simultaneously conforms to and challenges societal norms and values, making this cultural artifact particularly optimal for analyzing a topic of interest *in situ*. While a few previous studies examined *iryō-kei manga* (medical comics) featuring medical professionals (e.g., doctors, nurses, pharmacists) (Kishi et al. 2011; Matsuoka, Smith, and Uchimura 2011), little has been explored about how *manga* depicts a public health issue such as self-injury in everyday life context. Literature on the topic of self-injury in *manga* is virtually nonexistent. We were able to locate one brief report (written in Japanese) by Ishige (2006) that examines self-cutting portrayed in *shōjo manga* published between 1973-2005, along with folklore and popular songs. Looking at *shōjo manga* featuring wrist-cutting, Ishige asserts that the meaning ascribed to self-injury has been changing over time from a suicide attempt to a coping strategy. However, although Ishige’s study offers a meaningful introduction to this largely under-explored topic, the author does not provide a detailed documentation of the search strategy, analytic method, and the content of *manga* examined. It remains unknown as to what types of characters were depicted to engage in self-injury and which set of meanings were associated with the act in each narrative. In addition, there seems to be a significant increase in the volume and variety of *manga* featuring self-injury since Ishige’s study, especially in genres other than *shōjo manga*.

The purpose of the present study was thus to examine how self-injury has been represented in Japanese *manga* since 2000 through a thorough exploration of character demographics, perceived functions of self-injury, and help-seeking behaviours among self-injuring characters within each *manga* narrative. This study also intended to expand the scope from *shōjo manga* to encompass other types of *manga* targeting different audiences in terms of gender and age. Given the gendered nature of *manga*, one can hypothesize that boys’ *manga* and girls’ *manga* may differ in portraying characters who self-injure, as well as meanings ascribed to each act. Exploring the content of *manga* featuring self-injury thus leads to an important realization about how this mass medium constructs a perceived reality of self-injury, and in so doing, shapes public perceptions of this phenomenon.

Methods

Data collection

To date, there is no comprehensive database for Japanese *manga*. The sources of data for this study were determined through various methods to enhance sampling validity. We first searched three digital databases for *manga*, the Japan National Diet Library’s online catalogue (<http://www.ndl.go.jp/>), the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs’ media arts digital archive (<https://mediaarts-db.bunka.go.jp/>), and Kyoto International Manga Museum’s Manga Repository (http://mmsearch.kyotomm.jp/index_j.html), using the term “*jishō*” (self-injury). We also consulted with librarians at six Japanese libraries with extensive *manga* collections.

Two out of the six libraries, the Osaka Prefectural Library and the Kyoto International *Manga* Museum, provided us with a comprehensive list of *manga* that might meet our eligibility criteria below. Additionally, we sought eligible *manga* by conducting a Google search, visiting online communities where members discuss *manga*/comics, movies and books featuring self-injury (e.g. Self-Injury.net), circulating general inquiries among our professional and personal networks, and consulting relevant literature on visual representations of self-injury.

While the narrative review by Ishige (2006) covered *shōjo manga* published between 1973–2005, 75% of the samples were published prior to 2000. Similar to what Whitlock et al. (2009) reported in their study of English movies featuring self-injury, since 2000 we have noticed a clear upward trend in the amount of *manga* portraying self-injury. To update and expand Ishige's work, we chose to analyze *manga* published between 2000 to 2017, and broadened the focus to include other marketing genres than *shōjo manga*, such as *shōnen manga*, *seinen manga*, and *Boy's Love*, a subgenre of *josei manga* featuring homoerotic relationships between male characters. As we were most interested in depiction of self-injury in everyday life contexts, we limited our focus onto *nichijō-kei* ("slice-of-life") genre that features realistic depictions of everyday life, excluding science fiction, fantasy, picaresque romance and other genres that take place in imaginary worlds. *Manga* featuring overt suicide attempts and culturally sanctioned forms of self-mutilation (e.g. tattooing, body-piercing) were also excluded. As such, our sample did not include a distinct *manga* genre featuring *Yakuza* (Japanese mafia) and *Yankee* (gangster) subculture that frequently portray ritualistic self-injury including *yubitsume* (a ritual of finger amputation to atone for one's misdeed) or *konjō-yaki* (a test of courage by burning skin with a cigarette). These self-mutilation rituals serve as staples of *Yakuza/Yankee manga* and movies as a sign of underground camaraderie among clan members, but did not meet our eligibility criteria.

A total of fifteen *manga* featuring eighteen characters with explicit engagement with self-injury were identified (see Appendix Table 4 for the list of *manga* analyzed). Of fifteen *manga*, there were eight *shōjo manga* (*Memai*, *Tobira*, *LIFE*, *GALS!*, *Mondai no nai watashitachi*, *Aishiteruze Baby*, *NANA*, *Tokyo Children*), five *seinen manga* (*eleGY*, *Last Menhera*, *Jisatsu Circle*, *G senjō Heaven's Door*, *Onani Master Kurosawa*), one *josei manga* (*Pietà*), and one *Boy's Love* (*CUT*). No *shōnen manga* met our eligibility criteria.⁴ Each *manga* was further scrutinized to identify scenes depicting self-injury. In cases where self-injury appeared more than once in the story, each scene was recorded as a separate event. A total of forty scenes of self-injury were depicted among the sample with nine out of eighteen characters (50%) portrayed as engaging in self-injury more than once. The year when the scene of self-injury appeared in each *manga* ranged from 2000–2017, with 75% (n=30) appearing during 2000–2005.

Content analysis

The method of content analysis was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Informed by previous quantitative content analysis of movies featuring self-injury (Whitlock, Purington, and Gershkovich 2009; Trewavas, Hasking, and McAllister 2010), two authors first collaboratively developed a coding rubric to capture: 1) demographic data of the characters who self-injure (i.e. gender, age, occupation, sexual orientation, whether the characters are portrayed as engaging in habitual self-injury); 2) methods of self-injury depicted (e.g., cutting, burning, hitting); 3) locations of self-injury on the body (e.g. wrist, forearm, thigh); 4) presence of other characters at the scene of self-injury; and 5) mental and/or physical health

intervention after self-injury. Two authors then individually read five *manga* each to qualitatively analyze: 6) events that triggered self-injury; 7) degree of suicidal intent (e.g., overt, implied, none); 8) consequences of self-injury; and 9) perceived functions of self-injury. In this process, perceived functions of self-injury were determined in accordance with the antecedents and consequences implicitly and explicitly portrayed in narratives. As *manga* contains a complex system of symbolic meaning combining multiple visual and textual subcodes, the authors paid close attention not only to plots, characters' facial expressions and dialogues but also backgrounds (e.g., tones of the scene), onomatopoeia, frames, and characters' interior monologues implying particular meanings associated with each self-injurious act. Klonsky's (2007) seven-function model also provided a guiding framework for coding of the perceived functions. The seven functions include: affect regulation, anti-dissociation, anti-suicide, interpersonal boundaries, interpersonal influence, self-punishment, and sensation seeking.

After two iterations, the coding rubric was finalized. The first author coded all forty scenes, while two trained research assistants independently coded 50% of the sample each using the final rubric to capture the aforementioned nine elements. Agreement between two coders (the first author and one of the research assistants) was on average 95%, ranging from 100% (demographic characteristics, methods of self-injury) to 82% (perceived functions of self-injury). During the coding process, the first author and the research assistants took notes of their thought process and ensured interpretative consistency by team discussion. Discrepancies among coders were discussed until consensus was achieved.

Results

Character demographics

Table 1 presents the demographic attributes of eighteen characters who self-injure in the sampled *manga*. A salient gender difference was found in the characters, with sixteen out of eighteen characters being female (88.9%). All but one character (94.5%) were in their adolescence aged between thirteen and eighteen years old, being in high school or at junior

Table 1 Demographics of eighteen characters depicted as engaging in self-injury in *Manga*

	Characters (N=18)
Gender	
Female	16 (88.9%)
Male	2 (11.1%)
Age	
15 or younger	2 (11.1%)
16-18	15 (83.3%)
Over 18	1 (5.6%)
Occupation	
Junior high school student	2 (11.1%)
High school student	15 (83.3%)
Other	1 (5.6%)
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	16 (88.9%)
Non-heterosexual	2 (11.1%)
Types of engagement with self-injury	
One-time only	5 (27.8%)
Habitual	13 (72.2%)

high school. The youngest age of onset depicted in those flashback scenes is grade four (nine to ten years old). In general, characters are portrayed as heterosexual, except for two characters, the female protagonist of *Pietà* (Haruno 2000) and the male protagonist of *CUT* (Kawayui 2003) who are depicted as in non-heterosexual romantic relationships. Characters who self-injure tended to be main characters in the narrative (77.8% n=14) with the story unfolding through their perspectives. These characters' internal thoughts are often expressed through thought bubbles or narrations. Thirteen characters (72.2%) are portrayed as recurrently engaging in self-injury, suggested by visible scars or through flashback scenes that reveal their past history.

Depictions of self-injury

Of the forty self-injury scenes, thirty-five (87.5%) feature graphic depictions of self-injury in action, while five scenes allude to the act through visual depictions of bleeding wounds or scars with characters' accounts or inner thoughts. Four of the forty scenes of self-injury are flashbacks in which the characters retrospectively recall their past self-injury and events that triggered the act. Of the forty scenes examined, cutting is the most prominent method (87.5%, n=35), followed by stabbing (7.5%, n=3) and burning (5%, n=2). In terms of wound locations, self-injury is performed most often on wrists (47.5%, n=19) and on arms (40%, n=16), then less frequently on thighs (5%, n=2), hands (5%, n=2) and neck (n=1). Two characters self-injure multiple body parts (See Table 2). In 85% of the scenes examined (n=34), characters self-injure alone in a private space such as a bathroom or a bedroom to conceal their behaviours. In six scenes (15%), characters engage in self-injury in the presence of others (e.g., friends, families) to shock the person in presence or to express belonging to a group. In the majority of scenes examined (n=34, 85%), characters engaging in habitual self-injury feel they would be discriminated against if others discover their self-injury and thus conceal their scars with wristbands or long sleeves.

Functions of self-injury and interventions

The perceived primary functions of self-injury vary across the forty scenes (Table 3). The most conspicuous is affect regulation (55%, n=22) in which self-injury is depicted as a strategy to

Table 2 Self-injury depicted in forty scenes examined. *The total percentage for wound locations is not 100%, as some characters self-injure multiple body parts

	Self-injury Scenes (n=40)
Method of self-injury	
Cutting	35 (87.5%)
Stabbing	3 (7.5%)
Burning	2 (5%)
Wound locations*	
Wrist	19 (47.5%)
Arm	17 (42.5%)
Thigh	3 (7.5%)
Hand	2 (5%)
Neck	1 (2.5%)
Concealment of self-injury	
Covert/alone in private space	34 (85%)
Overt/in presence of others	6 (15%)

Table 3 Functions of self-injury and interventions

	Scenes (n=40)
Functions	
Affect regulation	22 (55%)
Interpersonal influence	6 (15%)
Suicide Attempt	5 (12.5%)
Self-punishment	4 (10%)
Anti-dissociation	2 (5%)
Hallucination-driven	1 (2.5%)
Interventions	
None	29 (72.5%)
Unspecified	6 (15%)
Home first aid	3 (7.5%)
Hospitalization	1 (2.5%)
Psychological treatment	1 (2.5%)

alleviate acute negative emotion or aversive affective arousal (Klonsky, 2007) triggered by events such as bullying, friendship dissolution, conflict with family, or childhood trauma. The majority of scenes make no reference to a specific mental disorder (e.g., Borderline Personality Disorder, anxiety disorder) except for two scenes where characters are depicted as suffering from substance abuse (*Memai*) or depression (*Tokyo Children*).

For some of the characters who engage in habitual self-injury, the act tended to serve a single function (e.g., coping with emotional distress) despite being triggered by different antecedents. For others with recurrent self-injury, the meaning associated with self-injury varies depending on the motivation at the time, the relationship with the others in presence, and the frame of reference drawn to interpret the act. For example, a young female protagonist of *Tobira* (Momochi 2002) engages in self-cutting twice through the story; the first time is to express a blood oath of friendship with her classmate who habitually self-injures, and the second time is to attempt suicide in front of her mother. The protagonist, Manatsu, flexibly interprets self-injury first as a gesture of social bonding, then as a means to communicate her suicidality to her mother.

In most scenes analyzed (75%, n=30), self-injury is portrayed as independent from suicidal thoughts or behaviour. In *Last Menhera*, for example, the protagonist Sumire describes her recurrent self-cutting as a way of “enduring the pain of living” (Amano and Ise 2016, 56), rather than terminating her life. In five scenes (12.5%) characters are depicted as having overt or implied suicidal intent. Among these scenes three characters attempt suicide by wrist-cutting, while two attempt suicide by jumping or intoxication in addition to cutting.

In four scenes (10%), characters engage in self-injury to punish or invalidate themselves. This tendency is particularly salient in *LIFE* (Suenobu, 2002-2009; 20 volumes) quoted at the beginning of this article. The protagonist, Ayumu, is portrayed as shy and introverted, engaging in recurrent self-cutting as she feels she “does not deserve” to be happy (Suenobu 2002, 97). In two scenes (5%), characters injure themselves in a dissociative state. For example, in *Pietà* (Haruno 2000), the protagonist, Rio (a female high school student), is portrayed as cutting herself after having a flashback nightmare of her vicious stepmother. She is depicted as though not noticing her self-cutting until blood is dripping on the kitchen floor. Regaining a sense of self, Rio sinks on the floor with her arms wrapped around knees, faintly murmuring “Help” (19).

The majority of characters are not in any form of psychiatric treatment when engaging in self-injury. With respect to consequences of self-injury, in twenty-nine of forty scenes

examined (72.5%), self-injury does not result in any treatment or intervention. Six scenes (15%) were categorized as “unspecified” because these scenes depict either the character recalling a past self-injury episode, or the story stops right at the moment of self-injury then leaps to a few days/months later with no reference to whether a treatment or intervention was offered to the character. There is little direct depiction of mental health treatment provided to characters after self-injury, except for one *manga* (*Tobira*) in which the mother of the protagonist saw a psychiatrist for advice after her daughter’s wrist-cutting. In terms of informal support, ten characters (55.6%) receive support from partners and friends, while parents and siblings seldom served as a source of support. The reactions of partners and close friends tended to be empathetic and contributing to the characters’ recovery from self-injury, while parents, siblings and distant peers (e.g., classmates) are shown to be indifferent or react aversively to the character. In some of the *manga* examined, family members are portrayed as a direct trigger of self-injury. For example, in *Mondai no nai watashitachi* (Kimura and Ushida 2003, 3 volumes), a high school girl, Midori, faces constant pressure from her mother to succeed in school, marry a rich man, and take the mother out of her unhappy marriage. Midori feels distressed by the selfish dream that her mother imposes upon her and engages in recurrent self-injury until she meets the story’s protagonist Mio at school and receives emotional support.

An emergent conceptualization of self-injury was also observed. While self-injury itself does not serve a distinct identity label (i.e., no character is called a “wrist-cutter” or “self-injurer”), in two *seinen manga* (*eleGY*, *Last Menhera*) published in 2012 and after, female characters who self-injure are coined “*menhera*” (a derivation of “*mental health-er*,” a person with mental instability)⁵ by other characters or superimposed texts. In both *manga*, the *menhera* girls are depicted as isolated, mentally unstable, and highly dependent on male protagonists who are interested in having a romantic/sexual relationship with them. The female protagonist Sumire in *Last Menhera* (Amano and Ise 2016) also engages in promiscuous sexual activity to combat feelings of emptiness until developing a stable relationship with the male protagonist.

Discussion

The current study aimed to offer a close reading of scenes in Japanese *manga* featuring self-injury. We explored how self-injury has been represented in Japanese *manga* since 2000, focusing on self-injuring characters, the perceived functions of the behaviour, as well as the presence and absence of help-seeking among the characters. Results indicate that *manga*’s depiction of self-injury are largely congruent with previous research on self-injury in English films (Whitlock, Purington, and Gershkovich 2009; Trewavas, Hasking, and McAllister 2010; Bareiss 2017), in which characters who self-injure are predominantly heterosexual female in their late teens, engaging in habitual self-cutting. Although there are a few male self-injuring characters, the gendered perspective still permeates the sampled *manga*.

Likewise, functions of self-injury mirror those identified in previous studies and clinical research (e.g., Klonsky 2007; Klonsky et al. 2015). Most characters who self-injure are portrayed as using self-injury as a strategy to cope with negative emotions, punish themselves, or interrupt a dissociative episode rather than as an act of suicide attempt. In two of five scenes in which characters are depicted to have overt or implied suicide intent, wrist-cutting is used in combination with more lethal methods such as jumping and intoxication, implying perceived

low lethality of wrist-cutting. In alignment with Ishige's (2006) observation that wrist-cutting no longer signals suicidal ideation in the post-1980 *manga*, this finding indicates that while the depiction of wrist-cutting may still evoke a traditional cultural reading that connects the act with suicidal intent, the interpretation of habitual wrist-cutting as a coping mechanism to endure "the pain of living" (Amano and Ise 2016) may be increasingly incorporated into the Japanese popular cultural imagination. Given that research indicates habitual engagement in self-injury elevates suicide risk and provides a "gateway" for suicide (Whitlock et al. 2013), potential implications of this interpretation warrants caution.

There is a general lack of help-seeking among self-injuring characters. Across the forty scenes examined, self-injury is portrayed as a stigmatized behaviour that makes the characters feel ashamed, and they conceal their behaviours and scars from others. However, more than half of the characters who self-injure eventually receive emotional support from significant others who help them recover from habitual self-injury. While a similar finding was reported in a previous study in which self-injuring characters receive informal support from friends and family (Trewavas, Hasking, and McAllister 2010), in the present study the sources of support are primarily romantic partners and close friends; reaction by families, parents in particular, to the self-injuring characters tend to be unsupportive and aversive, or even triggering, like the mother in *Mondai no nai watashitachi* (Kimura and Ushida 2001-2003) who desires to use her daughter to compensate for her unhappy life. In such a context, character's self-injury is portrayed as a form of resistance against repressive parental domination, similar to Bareiss's (2017) analysis of films featuring self-injuring girls. In addition, the absence of parental support for self-injury can also be explained by the prevalence of a bildungsroman theme in both *shōnen* and *shōjo manga*, in which conflict with parental figures often serve as a catalyst for self-actualization for young characters.

In a related vein, we observed two contrasting perspectives toward young girls who self-injure. On one hand, in *shōjo manga*, characters who self-injure are primarily protagonists of the narrative, whose internal struggles and causes of self-injury are delineated with extensive detail from a first person point of view. As *shōjo manga* serve young female readers as "a model for reality" (Masuda 2015), these *manga* may invite readers to walk through life struggles with the protagonists and frame self-injury as a maladaptive but understandable response to contemporary pressures placed upon young girls. The depiction of self-injury as a gesture of friendship or group membership also reflects the female characters' desire for escaping from parental control and belonging instead to a group of peers who accept them.

On the other hand, *seinen manga* aimed at adult male readers portray girls who self-injure from the perspective of male protagonists. Of particular interest is the emergence of "*menhera*" characters in two *seinen manga* published since 2012, in which male protagonists are attracted to *menhera* girls who exhibited mental instability, fear of abandonment and insecure romantic attachments. For these *menhera* girls, self-injury is not just an act of affect regulation but also an identity label that shapes their role in the narrative. The *menhera* character can be seen as a twisted variant of the damsel in distress, a classic narrative trope in literature that involves young, attractive, and helpless mistresses waiting to be rescued by a hero. They were placed in a predicament not by a monster or a villain but by mental illness that makes them prone to risky behaviour such as self-injury or sexual promiscuity. Contrary to characters that self-injure in *shōjo manga*, these *menhera* girls are clearly subjected to the male gaze that objectifies and fetishizes the female self-injured body, while attention is deflected from underlying causes of self-injury. Although it may be too naïve to believe that readers take such a portrayal at face value, this fetishized gaze toward *menhera* girls nonetheless provides its overwhelmingly male readers with a highly gendered interpretive repertoire. An inquiry into these two contrasting

views would make a valuable contribution to the understanding of public perception on mental illness in Japan.

Furthermore, it would be meaningful for future work to explore depictions of subcultural and ritualistic self-injury in *manga* for male readers, particularly those themed *Yakuza* (Japanese mafia) and *Yankee* (gangster) that were excluded from the current study. In their content analysis of English films, Trewavas, Hasking, and McAllister (2010) report that male characters who self-injure engage in more diverse methods of self-injury than females. Exploring subculturally sanctioned body mutilations in *shōnen*, *seinen* and *seijin manga* targeting male readership may imply how these self-injuries have distinctive meaning in Japanese popular culture in contrast to the pathologized and highly gendered portrayal of self-injury explored in this study. In this process, applying a critical gender lens to these representations would substantially enrich future investigation. Moreover, future exploration into self-published *doujinshi* (indie comics) and web comics with self-injuring characters would further expand this field of inquiry. With the advancement of indie comic markets and self-publishing online tools, Japanese readers are increasingly exposed to less filtered and more direct depictions of violence and human suffering including self-injury, suicide, and other mental health issues. This line of research could analyze how this emergent subculture represents self-injury in comparison with mainstream *manga*, focusing particularly on the “*menhera*” characters and on unique behavioural and affective attributes they embody.

The current findings have several implications for future research and intervention of self-injury. First, *manga* has been deeply embedded in contemporary Japanese society to the extent that its power to shape public understanding of mental health issues cannot be underestimated. *Manga* representations of self-injury examined in this study offer a complex commentary on self-injury and have likely influenced, to varying degrees, readers’ perceptions of how people who self-injure could be like and should be treated. As *manga* is considered providing young readers “textbooks for living” (Masuda 2015, 28), some readers may turn to these *manga* to make sense of their own engagement in self-injury. The portrayal of emotional support from partners and close friends observed in this study may induce a sense of hope among readers who self-injure, while reducing the feeling of social isolation commonly reported by youth engaging in self-injury (Whitlock et al. 2013). Meanwhile, the general absence of support from family (parents in particular) found in this study is concerning, because this tendency may perpetuate existing stigma associated with self-injury and promote the vilification of parents.

Second, actual impacts of *manga* on readers should be examined in future research. Although there is as yet no empirical evidence if exposure to the portrayal of self-injury in *manga* (and popular media in general) may induce contagion,⁶ researchers have addressed concern that recurrent exposure to fictional/non-fictional self-injury stories may result in narrative reinforcement (Whitlock, Purington, and Gershkovich 2009), which, for better or worse, justify self-injury related behavioural choices. Indeed, remarkably little has been written about the positive therapeutic potential of *manga* for readers with mental health issues. Researching further into how readers of different types interpret *manga* and the potential use of *manga* in treating people who self-injure may provide a new avenue into improving support to those engaging in self-injury.

Finally, the present study makes a unique contribution to the emergent study of graphic medicine (Williams 2012) by illuminating how the medium of comic can be used to understand subjective experience of self-injury. For readers residing in other countries than Japan, the current study findings may be of particularly salience, as they offer an interesting window into a unique cultural interpretation of self-injury in Japan and suggest the potential of cross-cultural exploration into cultural attitudes toward self-injury and related mental health issues.

Given the increasing visibility of Japanese popular media including *manga* in international markets (Ito 2010), much more work could be done in this area, including the academic appraisal of *manga* representations of mental health in and outside Japan, and how such *manga* are perceived by Japanese and non-Japanese audiences.

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Endnotes

¹ Promoting this line of definition, a group of psychiatrists and researchers proposed a term “non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)” to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5 criteria (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Although NSSI did not become a standalone, formal diagnosis, the term is now widely used among the clinical community allowing clinicians to treat self-injury as a mental illness. Critical scholars of health such as Amy Chandler (2014) voiced concern over how this trend towards pathologization would impact individual and public understandings of self-injury.

² Although the history of Japanese *manga* can date back to the seventh century (Ito 2005), in this article *manga* refers to modern Japanese graphic novels popularized after World War II that combines traditional Japanese iconography with American cartoon and cinematic techniques. Fredrik Schodt’s seminal book *Manga! Manga!: The World of Japanese Comics* (1986) provides a comprehensive overview of the history of Japanese *manga* until the 1980s. Kinko Ito’s chapter (2005) also provides a succinct summary of Japanese *manga* history from ancient times to the early twenty-first century. It is worth noting here that this article uses the term “*manga*” both as a singular and a plural noun.

³ A 2018 report by the All Japan Magazine and Book Publishers and Editors Association (AJPEA)’s 2018 estimated the total sales of the *manga* industry in 2017 (physical and digital platforms combined) as 433 billion yen (equivalent to \$3.92 billion USD), which generated nearly double the revenues of the local film industry (228 billion yen, Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan, 2018). Although sales of print *manga* have been declining since the mid-1990s, the rise of *denshi comic* (digital comics) kept the market afloat. *Manga* also plays a vital role in Japan’s “media mix,” a character-based marketing strategy to distribute content across multiple media platforms (Ito 2010). Popular *manga* series often provide characters and plots for other platforms such as *anime* (animation), games, films, TV dramas, advertising and even political campaigns that together establish *manga*’s pervasive presence in Japanese cultural landscape.

⁴ There are two potential explanations that may account for the absence of *shōnen* manga. First, in *shōnen* manga, slice-of-life genre is popular, but not as dominant as in other genre (e.g., *shōjo* manga). Self-injury depicted as happening in imaginary worlds did not meet this study’s inclusion criteria. Second, when *shōnen* manga portray self-injurious behaviours, the acts tend to take a form of physical aggression against objects, rather than aggression against oneself. For example, it is a common scene among *shōnen* and *seinen* manga wherein a male protagonist punches a wall or window, damages the object, and consequently hurts himself. Such a portrayal did not meet the study definition of self-injury being a deliberate hurting of one’s body, because the injury is the consequence, rather than the purpose of the act. As pointed out by one reviewer, the absence of *shōnen manga* in our sample may also suggest a gendered understanding of self-injury penetrating Japanese popular culture. Future research focusing on gender difference in the depiction of aggressive behaviours among Japanese manga would provide further insight.

⁵ The term “*menhera*” spawned from a mental health discussion board on 2-channel (*2-chan*), a Japanese massive anonymous online forum. Although the term was originally used by people struggling mental health issues to address themselves, it increasingly carries negative, derogatory connotations in Japanese popular culture.

⁶ In Japan, potential psychological and behavioural impacts of *manga* on readers, especially adolescents and young adults, have long been the topic of contested debate. Violent and sexually explicit expressions in *manga* for young readership came under recurrent critique by parent associations, school authorities, and policy makers who insisted *manga* has harmful impact on children. Most recently in 2010, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government tried to ban the sexually explicit expression in *manga* and anime through the revision of the Tokyo Metropolitan Youth Healthy Development Ordinance. The Ordinance was amended to extend the definition of “harmful content” to include “*hijitsuzai seishōnen*” (non-existent youth). Facing massive protest from writers and publishers, this proposal removed ‘non-existent youth’ and received approval by the Metropolitan Assembly in December 2010 (Asahi Shimbun 2010)

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Appendix

Table 4 List of *Manga* Analyzed

Title	Author(s)	Year (when self-injury was depicted)	Genre	Numbers of characters who self-injure	Numbers of self-injury scenes depicted
<i>Aishiteruze Baby</i> (I love you, Baby)	Maki, Yoko	2003	<i>shōjo</i> (girls)	1	3
<i>GALS!</i>	Fujii, Mihona	2002	<i>shōjo</i> (girls)	1	1
<i>LIFE</i>	Suenobu, Keiko	2002, 2003	<i>shōjo</i> (girls)	1	7
<i>Memai</i> (Vertigo)	Momochi, Reiko	2000	<i>shōjo</i> (girls)	1	1
<i>Mondai no nai watashitachi</i> (We have no problem)	Kimura, Aya & Ushida, Maki	2002, 2003	<i>shōjo</i> (girls)	1	4
<i>NANA</i>	Yazawa, Ai	2005	<i>shōjo</i> (girls)	1	1
<i>Tobira</i> (The Door)	Momochi, Reiko	2002	<i>shōjo</i> (girls)	2	5
<i>Tokyo Children</i>	Mimori, Taeko	2005, 2006	<i>shōjo</i> (girls)	2	3
eleGY	Ooiwa, Kenji & Izumi, Kazuyoshi	2012	<i>seinen</i> (young men)	1	1
<i>G senjō Heaven's Door</i> (Heaven's Door on the G String)	Nihonbashi, Yoko	2003	<i>seinen</i> (young men)	1	1
<i>Jisatsu Circle</i> (Suicide Circle)	Furuya, Usagimaru	2002	<i>seinen</i> (young men)	1	2
<i>Last Menhera</i>	Amano, Shuninta & Ise, Katsuyoshi	2016	<i>seinen</i> (young men)	2	7
<i>Onani Master Kurosawa</i> (Masterbater Kurosawa)	Yokota, Takuma & Ise, Katsuyoshi	2008	<i>seinen</i> (young men)	1	1
<i>Pietà</i>	Makino, Nanae	2000	<i>josei</i> (young women)	1	2
<i>CUT</i>	Kawayui, Toko	2003	<i>Boy's Love</i>	1	1

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