

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Study

*Manga* serves as an important part of Japanese popular culture. While the history of *manga* could be traced back to the premodern era, the current form of *manga* is derived from the *manga* in the postwar era. During the postwar era, Japanese people were poor and unhappy from the war. Their situation led them to desperation for entertainment. *Manga* then became their source of entertainment because it was easily affordable (Ito, 2005).

*Manga* artists used *manga* as a medium to convey their feelings regarding trauma they had from World War II and the atomic bombs that were dropped in Japan (Schodt, 1996). This trauma would then influence the *manga* they made. Elements such as adult failure, the destruction of the world, and the survival of a group of young people bound together by friendship and optimism were found during the postwar era. These elements stay prevalent in *manga* nowadays (Bouissou, 2010). Tezuka Osamu, the creator of *Astro Boy*, was a *manga* artist during the postwar era. He was a teen during World War II. After the war, Tezuka was determined to teach peace, humanity, and respect of life through his *manga* (Ito, 2005). *Manga* eventually evolved. No longer telling the stories about the war, *manga* artists started creating new genres such as romance, sports, slice of life, and others (Ito, 2005).

Up until modern day, *manga* remains a popular choice of entertainment in Japan. In 2023, the estimated total sales of print and electronic *manga* books and magazines in Japan increased year-on-year by 2.5% to ¥693.7 billion, achieving a third consecutive record annual high, according to the All Japan Magazine and Book Publishers' and Editors' Association and the Research Institute for Publications. However, it is to be noted that print sales are declining in 2022. Meanwhile, the sales for digital *manga* in 2022 nearly doubled compared to the sales in 2019 (Nippon, 2024).

The reasons why *manga* remains popular in Japan are related to Japanese people's lifestyle and living conditions. Constant use of public transportation, long working hours, and crowded cities could cause boredom, stress, and the feeling of being confined in their own cities. Therefore, Japanese people long for relaxation and entertainment. *Manga* could be used as a media for escapism from a stressful world and high work demands (Gravett, 2004). *Manga* has a relatively cheap price, therefore it could be purchased easily. It is a way for Japanese people to escape from the stressful world and the confines of their cities (Rankin-Brown & Brown, 2012).

While *manga* mainly functions as a form of entertainment, it can also reflect societal conditions and voice social commentary (Ito, 2005). For instance, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995) explored the main character's dysfunctional relationship with his father, which depicts the 1990s Japan where the father is always working and rarely has time for his children (MacWilliams, 2008). Another one is a *manga* called *A Silent Voice* or *Koe no Katachi* (2014). The *manga* features a deaf main character who was bullied in the past and seen

as an “outsider” due to her disability, which reflects discrimination in Japanese society towards disabled people. However, the boy who bullied Nishimiya in the past apologized to her, and the two reached a mutual understanding. This part depicts the beginning of acceptance in Japanese society towards disabled people (Okuyama, 2020).

Popularity of *manga* does not stay inside of Japan. In the 1980s, manga was said to be making significant strides on the global scene (Natsume, 2001). Ever since then, manga fandom expanded, furthered by the use of the internet (Tanaka, 2020). In 2015, license sales outside Japan reached 11 billion yen (about US\$ 988 million) for print sales (Digital Contents Association, 2015). According to the consumer research group NPD Bookscan as it was shared by Kevin Hamric, the vice president of Viz Media which is the biggest *manga* publisher in America, manga grew by nearly 43% in 2020 (Diaz, 2021).

*Shounen manga* such as *My Hero Academia*, *Chainsaw Man*, and *Jujutsu Kaisen* regularly feature in bestseller book lists in America (Diaz, 2021). *Shounen* is indeed the largest segment of manga publishing. While this genre is targeted for boys, people from different categories such as women, girls, and men also read *shounen*. *Shounen* manga usually tells a story of a heroic journey. Common elements in *shounen manga* are the importance of hard work, young people’s spirits, and coming-of-age story (Drummond-Mathews, 2010). However, the themes that are covered in *shounen manga* are not limited to these elements.

My Hero Academia is a *shounen manga* that follows the recipe of heroic journeys of *shounen manga*. The *manga* is written and illustrated by Kohei Horikoshi. Published in 2014 and ended in 2024, it has 430 chapters in total, seven seasons of anime adaptation, and four movies adaptation. The number of chapters grants it ninth place as the *manga* with most chapters in *Weekly Shounen Jump* (JajanKen, 2024), a popular *manga* magazine in Japan (Drummond-Matthews, 2010). In 2024, *My Hero Academia* passed 100 million copies in global circulation, making it one of the bestseller *manga* worldwide alongside other big names such as *Jujutsu Kaisen* and *Astro Boy*.

My Hero Academia is a *manga* about a world of superheroes. Individuals in the *manga* universe possess a quirk, a supernatural power which is unique to each person. The main character, Izuku Midoriya, did not have a quirk. However, he still wanted to be a hero. His meeting with All Might, the number one hero, granted him a quirk and thus enabled him to enroll into a hero school as the first step in pursuing his dream. Up to this point, the storyline follows the narrative of *shounen manga*, which is to pursue your dream and work hard for it (Drummond-Matthews, 2010). However, Horikoshi also highlights societal issues through his characters. For instance, in the beginning of the *manga*, Horikoshi shows the bullying Midoriya received in middle school because he was the only one in his class without a quirk, and thus, he was deemed different; an outsider. It shows the reality of Japanese school bullying. In the fiscal year 2017, there are 414,378 cases of school bullying in Japan. The number is an increase of 28.2 percent compared to the previous year (Siripala, 2019).



Despite its heroes vs. villains theme, Horikoshi does not reduce the *manga* to a classic good and evil storyline. He uses his villains to challenge the notions and ideas of pristine heroes society. Dabi, or Toya Todoroki, is one of the major villains in *My Hero Academia*. He is a member of *League of Villains*, the main villains group. Later, he is revealed to be the son of Endeavor, the number two hero, who later became the number one hero after All Might's retirement. Toya's goal was to kill Endeavor because he was neglected as a child. He also wanted to shatter the image that all heroes are good by revealing Endeavor's abusive behavior towards his children and wife to the public.

Todoroki family storyline explores issues within family such as child abuse, domestic violence, and dysfunctional family. Todoroki family, which consists of six members, plays a major role in *My Hero Academia*. Endeavor, the head of the family, is the number two hero who is obsessed to beat the number one hero, All Might. His obsession led him to marry Rei Himura, a woman with a strong ice quirk that could balance his own fire quirk. Their marriage was purely for the benefits of each other. For Endeavor, he sought to have strong children who could surpass All Might. For Rei, she wanted to support her poor family by marrying a wealthy hero such as Endeavor. Their marriage produced four children, but only the youngest child, Shoto, who fulfilled Endeavor's expectation by having the perfect combination of his and Rei's quirk.

Despite the modern setting, Todoroki family is portrayed as a traditional patriarchal Japanese household, where the father is the authoritative figure of the family and the mother is the responsible for domestic and caregiving roles.

Endeavor resembles fathers in the Edo period who were heavily involved with their children's education, particularly their sons (Haveron, 2023). In this case, Endeavor is heavily involved in his youngest child's education. Endeavor wanted Shoto to be the number one hero. Therefore, he trained Shoto since he was young, pushing far his limits and ignoring Shoto's pleas to stop. Endeavor's portrayal also matched with fathers in the Meiji era where they were perceived as disciplinarians (Haveron, 2023).

His strict and authoritative nature proves to be abusive. Endeavor committed several abusive acts towards his children and wife. He hit his wife, Rei. He also demanded her to have more children when the current children he had did not meet his expectations. He neglected the rest of his children – Toya, Fuyumi, and Natsuo – by not giving them emotional support and attention. Instead, he focused on Shoto only. Even then, his focus on Shoto was harmful. He forced Shoto to keep training to be a hero even when Shoto begged to stop because he was tired. Endeavor's actions toward his children could be counted as child abuse, since he neglected three of his children, and physically harmed the youngest one. His actions led Toya, Fuyumi, Natsuo, and Shoto to develop different ways in handling the trauma they got from the abuse.

Even though the premise is dark, *My Hero Academia* does not only show the lasting effects of the child abuse and the trauma Todoroki siblings possessed. This *manga* also portrays the recovery journey of these siblings to be healed from their trauma and find their places in society.

The theme of child abuse has been featured in *manga* from time to time. In *shounen manga Hunter x Hunter* (1998), the main character's father is shown to be absent. He left his son, Gon, ever since Gon was a baby. In *Kuroko no Basket* (2008), a sport themed *manga*, the father of an antagonist, Akashi, is depicted as strict and always expect for perfection. This caused Akashi to not be able to accept defeat, and later developed a split personality. In *Blood on the Tracks* (2017), the main character's mother is a mentally unstable woman who is also manipulative and often gaslights her son. Even after the mother left the main character's life, he is shown to still be affected by her abuse until he becomes an adult.

Child abuse is indeed a problem everywhere in the world, including Japan. In fiscal year 2023, Japan's child guidance centers recorded the highest number of consultations regarding child abuse since records began, as announced by the government on March 25 (Kawano, 2025). According to Junko Mihara, the Minister in charge of child-related policies, a significant increase in psychological abuse reports was observed. One contributing factor, she noted, is children witnessing domestic violence, particularly incidents where one parent is abused in front of them. Mihara emphasized the government's commitment to protecting both children and parents in distress.

Out of a total of 225,509 consultations, 59.8% (134,948 cases) involved psychological abuse. This was followed by physical abuse at 22.9% (51,623 cases), neglect or refusal to care for children at 16.2% (36,465 cases), and sexual abuse at 1.1% (2,473 cases). The majority of perpetrators reported were

biological mothers (48.7%) and biological fathers (42.3%) (Kawano, 2025). Then, it could be said that child abuse is a growing problem in Japan.

Abuse that happened in childhood could still affect an individual until adulthood. Judith Herman (1992) argues repeated trauma in adult life erodes the personality already formed, while repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. A child who live in an abusive enviroment has to find out a way to adapt and protect themselves. Abused children would usually avoid or placate the abusers. Running away is also common amongst abused children. Under constant stress, they also often develop a talent for dissociating to protect themselves (Herman, 1992). These characteristics, if not treated, would get worse. Child abuse survivors may then experience later problems, such alcoholism/substance abuse, depression, domestic violence, multiple sexual partners and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, suicidal thoughts and attempts (American Psychiatrist Association). They could also develop PTSD or posttraumatic stress disorder.

Recovery is a difficult, but not an impossible journey. According to Herman (1992), there are three stages of recovery which are establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. These stages are not necessarily need to be performed orderly, as the concept is rather abstract. But in general, survivors need to experience those stages in order to recover from the trauma.

The increasing number of child abuse cases means increasing number of child abuse survivors. This phenomenon which is experienced by a portion



of people demands representation. Representation could function as a way to make people aware regarding child abuse and its effects on the survivors. One of the ways to represent child abuse survivors is through literature.

Literature could function as a tool that reflects society, the good and the bad. Literature could evoke empathy in people through the narrative it tells. By consuming literature, readers would place themselves in the shoes of the characters in literature. They would experience the joy, sorrow, misery, happiness, and conflicts of the characters. This would give way to feel empathy (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Therefore, literature that features child abuse, whether it is as past experience or the current conflict, could give insights regarding child abuse and its survivors. The readers could feel empathy for the characters, and they would find it easier to understand cases of child abuse in real life.

Unfortunately, previous studies regarding child abuse survivors and recovery process in *manga* are rare. However, there are other studies regarding another form of abuse and trauma in *manga*. Arivett (2022) in *Abuse, Healing, and Intergenerational Trauma in Natsuki Takaya's Fruits Basket* examines *Fruits Basket*, a shoujo *manga* by Natsuki Takaya, which explores themes of abuse, trauma, and healing. Arivett highlights how *Fruits Basket* transcends typical shoujo tropes to address the realities of trauma and healing. The story illustrates that breaking cycles of abuse requires forgiveness, self-acceptance, and supportive relationships. Seko and Kikuchi (2020) investigates how self-injury is depicted in Japanese manga, focusing on 15 slice-of-life manga published between 2000 and 2017. These narratives reflect stereotypical

portrayals of self-injury, predominantly featuring young female characters who self-harm as a coping mechanism from stress, depression, and abuse they experienced. Khan, Aslam, and Fatima (2024) investigates how the manga *Barefoot Gen Vol. 1* portrays the themes of war's horrors, power, and hegemony. It applies Allan Paivio's Dual Coding Theory (DCT), which emphasizes the complementary use of verbal and visual elements to enhance comprehension and emotional engagement.

There are also previous studies regarding trauma and abuse in comics. While they are not categorized as *manga*, they still carry the same form of combining text and pictures. Bovan (2022) studied transgenerational trauma in comics books *The Cases of Heimat* and *Sunday's Child*. Both of these books are created by someone who has a Germanic family member who lived during the World War II. The study found that the authors of graphic novels apply various technique to manipulate gutter and frame combinations to convey the transgenerational trauma they have related to a family member. Deman (2020) explored how sexual assault and trauma were depicted in superheroes comic. In this case, the study studied Carol Danvers' character and how she dealt with her trauma after sexual assault. Sinervo and Freedman (2021) explored how comics depict physical pain and emotional trauma through aesthetics and narrative. The authors focused on how empathy is generated in comics through the representation of both physical and emotional pain in two fictional comics: *How to be Happy* by Eleanor Davis and *Sabrina* by Nick Drnaso.

Based on the previous studies, there is a gap in the study of child abuse, its survivors, and the recovery process in *manga*, more notably in *My Hero*

*Academia* manga. This study aims to study the portrayal of child abuse survivors and their recovery process in *My Hero Academia* through Todoroki siblings. The study will use multimodal analysis. Multimodal analysis is a methodological approach that examines how various modes of communication such as text, images, sound, and gestures. Therefore, because *manga* is a combination of texts and images, multimodal analysis will be used. Transitivity will be used to analyze the written texts, while visual social semiotics will be used to analyze the visual texts. *My Hero Academia* is consisted of 430 chapters. However, not all chapters would be analyzed. Only chapters that are related to the portrayal of child abuse and their recovery process of Todoroki siblings would be analyzed.

## **1.2. Research Questions**

1. How are recovery process and child abuse survivors of Todoroki siblings represented in the visual texts in the series of *My Hero Academia manga*?
2. How are recovery process and child abuse survivors of Todoroki siblings represented in the written texts in the series of *My Hero Academia manga*?
3. How are the integration of visual and written texts depicted the recovery process and child abuse survivors in the series of *My Hero Academia manga*?

### 1.3. Scope of the Study

There are 430 chapters of *My Hero Academia*. This study analyzes 15 chapters from *My Hero Academia* that contain depiction of Todoroki siblings, especially the ones that are related to their portrayal as abuse survivors and their recovery process. Those 15 chapters are chapter 31, 39, 40, 44, 187, 192, 290, 300, 301, 302, 387, 388, 389, 390, and 426. Although portrayal of child abuse survivors and recovery process are depicted in other chapters as well, the selected chapters contain all the key elements observed across the rest of the *manga*.

### 1.4. Research Limitations

This research will only analyze selective chapters from the total of 430 chapters. The analysis that would be done is textual analysis regarding the written and visual texts that are provided in the *manga*. This research would not analyze the *anime*, so any differences in portrayal between the *anime* and the *manga* would not be included.

### 1.5. Research Objective

This study aims to scrutinize the representation of child survivors through visual and written texts of Todoroki siblings in *My Hero Academia manga*. The study would find out how are the integration of visual and written texts depict the recovery process and child abuse survivors in the series of *My Hero Academia manga*.



### 1.6. Significance of the Study

Research regarding child abuse survivors and their recovery process in *manga* is still scarce. Therefore, it is to be hoped that this study would be able to fill the gap. This research is hoped to be able to help future studies who also want to study child abuse and recovery process in *manga* through the lens of multimodal analysis.

### 1.7. State of the Art

Several previous studies have explored the representation of trauma in manga and comics, though with varying focuses and approaches. Seko and Kikuchi (2020) examined depictions of self-injury in slice-of-life manga and found that such portrayals often rely on stereotypes, particularly involving young female characters who harm themselves as a coping mechanism. This study highlights how manga reflects and reinforces societal attitudes toward mental health and gender, though it does not examine child abuse or the visual-written integration in depth. Khan, Aslam, and Fatima (2024), using Dual Coding Theory, investigated how visuals and texts in *Barefoot Gen* Vol. 1 work together to convey the horrors of war and dynamics of power. Their findings affirm that visual elements significantly enhance emotional intensity and comprehension. Although the focus is not on child trauma, the study emphasizes the importance of multimodal integration, which is relevant to this research.

Arivett (2022) explored themes of abuse, trauma, and healing in the shoujo manga *Fruits Basket*, particularly within the framework of *iyashikei* (healing fiction). While thematically close, the study does not apply a detailed

analysis of the interaction between visual and written texts. Bovan (2022) investigated transgenerational trauma in graphic novels *Heimat* and *Sunday's Child*, analyzing how gutter manipulation and framing contribute to the portrayal of familial trauma. Although visually focused, the study lacks a linguistic or textual dimension. Similarly, Deman (2020) examined post-rape trauma in superhero comics, particularly in the depiction of Ms. Marvel, offering insight into trauma representation but not in relation to childhood abuse.

Finally, Sinervo and Freedman (2021) analyzed how comics evoke empathy by representing both physical pain and emotional trauma, focusing on aesthetics and narrative techniques in *How to Be Happy* and *Sabrina*. While valuable in understanding the emotional effect of visual narratives, the study does not specifically address child abuse or recovery.

In summary, while these studies provide essential contributions to the discourse on trauma in comics and manga, none offers an in-depth analysis of how visual and written texts work together to portray child abuse survivors and their recovery process. This study aims to fill that gap by applying visual social semiotics and transitivity analysis to the Todoroki siblings in *My Hero Academia*.