

The Ideal Masculinity of Male Ninjas in *Naruto* and *Naruto Shippuden* Anime Series

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ABSTRACT

Shounen is one of the most popular genres of anime. Although *Shounen* is usually targeted at younger boys, it is often consumed by audiences of all ages, such as *Naruto* and its sequel, *Naruto Shippuden*. In this study, I will focus on identifying the masculinity within the male ninjas in the series and analyzing the motivations behind the exercise of masculinity to find the ideal masculinity. I will combine the masculinity theory with the Japanese's manhood, to analyze the ideal masculinity in the text. Through my analysis, I find that the male ninjas of these anime series show different kinds of masculinity, which divides them into two roles, protagonist and antagonist. The protagonists are the ones who thrive to fight for others while the antagonists fight only to benefit themselves. As a result, the protagonists are able to possess the ideal masculinity as they can exercise their masculinity positively.

Keywords: anime, masculinity, male ninjas, protagonist, antagonist.

INTRODUCTION

The term "anime" (アニメ) comes as Japanese pronunciation of the word "animation" (Owens M., 2020). With unique characteristics which include diverse art styles and complex storylines, it is no wonder that anime is considered one of the most-watched series nowadays. This includes *Shounen*, one of the anime genres that is usually targeted at boys under 18 years old. There are a lot of Shounen anime that successfully gain a lot of attention from local and international audiences. When we are talking about *Shounen* anime, it is hard to not mention *Naruto* and its sequel, *Naruto Shippuden*. The mastermind behind this anime is known as Masashi Kishimoto, who first got the manga *Naruto* published in the 43rd issue of Japan's Shounen Jump Magazine in September 1999. *Naruto* became a hit quickly after its first few volumes of publication. With several achievements that the manga had gotten, it is no wonder that *Naruto* got adapted to anime series later on. The *Naruto* anime series first premiered across Japan on TV Tokyo and Animax on October 3, 2002. The series quickly moved forward to its second part, *Naruto Shippuden*, which took place two and a half years after the original setting of *Naruto*'s plot. This series first premiered on February 15, 2007, and ran until 2017 with 500 episodes in total, including 203 filler episodes in between. (*Naruto (series)*, 2020.)

Naruto is originally a story revolving the journey of its main character, Uzumaki Naruto. Throughout his journey as a ninja, Naruto has befriended many male ninjas and faced other male ninjas as his opponents. On several occasions, there are masculinity aspects that are shown by the male ninjas. The masculinity aspects that are shown in the series are similar to samurai. In his book, *Dimensions of Japanese Society: Gender, Margins, and Mainstream*, Henshall (1999) explained that the image of samurai from Japan's past has brought respect for Japanese male's perceived courage and loyalty. These samurai have shown the concept of Japanese masculinity and become the ideal representation of Japanese manhood. Masculinity traits that the samurai brought are visible in *Naruto* and *Naruto Shippuden* anime series' male ninja characters. While most of the male ninjas possess masculine traits, there is ideal masculinity that divides the characters into protagonist and antagonist. Carmel Sealey, an author of *Equilibrium*, explains how a story is "not only limited to a single protagonist" (Sealey C., 2021) as it has many characters that help the story to move forward, such as the antagonist.

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Therefore, in this study, I would like to focus on identifying the masculinity within the male ninjas and analyzing the motivations behind the exercise of masculinity to find the ideal masculinity. I would like to focus on giving examples from several episodes of Naruto and Naruto Shippuden anime series that show the aspects of masculinity within the protagonists and antagonists. These episodes which are included in the analysis consist of four episodes of *Naruto* (Episode 46, 60, 77, 78) and eighteen episodes of *Naruto Shippuden* (Episode 126, 129, 132, 133, 141, 156, 162, 163, 165, 166, 167, 168, 173, 175, 202, 209, 210, 211).

Based on the topic that has already been explained above, this study will investigate what kind of masculinity that is possessed by the male ninjas and in what way masculinity can be considered ideal. To investigate the study, I will use the theory of masculinity by combining the concept of Japanese masculinity and the masculinity traits in *The Male Sex Role* by Robert Brannon (1976). In Japan, there was a group of *koha* samurai who became an idealized representation of Japanese manhood. Through their victory during the phase of economic growth (*kōdo keizai seichōki*) as *sarariman*, they have become men who “endure hardship without complaint, a man of action with no finer words or thoughts, and a man who set about his duties without asking questions” (Henshall, 1999). *Koha* are expected to have a sense of *gaman* (endurance), *makoto* (sincerity), and *isshin* (single-minded commitment) in carrying out their duties.

The masculinity traits as described in *The Male Sex Role Identity* by Brannon (1976) in *Gender: Psychological Perspective* by Linda Brannon (2017) defines masculinity as “the opposite of women in a number of ways.” This is explained further in the comparison in the table below:

The Cult of True Womanhood	Male Sex Role Identity
(1)	(2)
Piety: True Women were naturally religious	No Sissy Stuff: A stigma is attached to feminine characteristics
Purity: True Women were sexually uninterested	The Big Wheel: Men need success and status
Submissiveness: True Women were weak, dependent, and timid	The Sturdy Oak: Men should have toughness, confidence, and self-reliance
Domesticity: True Women’s domain was in the home	Give ‘Em Hell: Men should have an aura of aggression, daring, and violence

Source: David, D., Brannon R. (1976). *The Forty Nine Percent Majority*, p.12.

The Male Sex Role identity has four different themes. First is No Sissy Stuff which means that men must avoid anything vaguely feminine, such as crying or fear. The second theme is The Big Wheel that describes men’s quest for success and status as well as their need to be looked up to. The third theme, the Sturdy Oak, describe men’s air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance, especially in a crisis. Lastly, the Give ‘Em Hell reflects the acceptability of violence, aggression, and daring in men’s behavior. The four themes from the Male Sex Role that are explained would become the framework to identify the ideal masculinity within the male ninja characters. I will use the combined concepts of Male Sex Role and Japanese masculinity to analyze the motivations behind the exercise of masculinity to find the ideal masculinity in the *Naruto* and *Naruto Shippuden* anime series

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following parts will discuss the analysis of my topic which will revolve around the masculinity traits within the male ninjas of *Naruto* and *Naruto Shippuden* anime series. The parts will be divided based on *The Male Sex Role Identity* by Robert Brannon. The first part will discuss *The Sturdy Oak* which includes traits such as toughness, confidence, and self-reliance. The second part, *Give 'Em Hell*, will discuss the masculine traits including aggression, daring, and violence combined with *No Sissy Stuff* where men should avoid doing anything that is vaguely feminine such as crying and showing fear. The last part will discuss *The Big Wheel*, which includes men's goal to gain status and be successful. The analysis of these parts will help to identify the ideal masculinity within male ninjas through the total of 22 episodes of *Naruto* and *Naruto Shippuden* anime series.

The Sturdy Oak

The Sturdy Oak component describes men's air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance, especially in a crisis (Brannon, 2017). Those themes, that describe the ninja's masculinity through the male ninja, are similar to the major qualities of the male characters within the traditional Kabuki theater named *tachiyaku*. *Tachiyaku* is a strong, powerful warrior who defeats his enemies and protects the weak in physical combat can be referred to as the cultural ideals of Japanese men (Fujimura, 2006). There are some examples that show how masculine the male ninjas are during the battles.

First, during the fight between Hinata Hyuga and Neji Hyuga in the event of Chunin Examination, Naruto Uzumaki as one of the spectators shows his masculinity through his toughness. Naruto, who acts as the protagonist, wants to protect Hinata by shouting "beat him up" as a form of encouragement for Hinata who he sees as the "weak". Naruto also shows his confidence in the next round of examination when he gets to fight against Neji, claiming that he "will win no matter what," as it appears in Figure 2.1.



Figure 2.1. Naruto shows confidence in his determination to win the battle against Neji.

Neji, the antagonist, also shows his confidence when he shows his confidence in his battle against Hinata Hyuga. Neji claims that he can predict Hinata, his enemy, to lose the battle even when their battle barely started. Neji also shows how confident he is as he trusts his judgment to use techniques that he believes could beat his opponents. During the battle, Neji does not show any mercy towards Hinata, who he deems to have no self-confidence as a ninja. The hatred Neji harbors towards Hinata is caused by his grudge towards Hinata's family who he believes has caused his father to commit suicide when he was still little.

Another example comes from the protagonist Jiraiya, another male ninja who plans to infiltrate a mysterious village where the antagonist, Pain, lives. Jiraiya shows confidence when he believes how he is strong enough to infiltrate the village himself in order to verify the current

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information he has about Pain. Jiraiya also shows toughness as his motivation to verify the information is to protect others' lives from Pain. Besides that, Jiraiya also shows self-reliance when he declines his friend's help to infiltrate the village, choosing to depend on his strength during his mission. The antagonist Pain also shows masculinity as a male ninja when he confidently claims that he can predict his victory even when his battle against Jiraiya has not finished yet. Pain also appears to be confident in his strength as he refers to himself as the "God" when Jiraiya asks him who he is. In the series, it is shown how little Pain expressed his desire to protect his two friends, indicating his toughness as a masculine male ninja. Though when he grows up, Pain is unable to overcome his trauma after witnessing his friend's death and uses his strength to hurt the innocents in order to benefit himself and his organization.

From the two examples that have been explained above, we can see how all the male ninja characters prove their masculinity by showing traits that are included in The Sturdy Oak such as toughness, confidence, and self-reliance. They are able to protect others while confidently relying on their own strength during the battles they are engaged in. However, what differentiates the male ninjas as the protagonist and the antagonists is the ideal masculinity that depends on their reasoning to act. The protagonists, Naruto and Jiraiya, are seen to use their strength to protect the weak and save others' lives, while the antagonists, Neji and Pain, fight so they could benefit themselves. Although the antagonists are able to show aspects of The Sturdy Oak through their actions, they lose their masculinity as they use their power to hurt and kill others. Therefore, I can conclude that the ideal masculinity that the protagonist has is the ideal one as he uses his strength to protect others.

Give 'Em Hell and No Sissy Stuff

Men are said to be "proud to display anger and aggression" (Brannon, 2017). These emotions trigger the masculine aspects of Give 'Em Hell, including aggression, daring, and violence. These traits are similar to how samurai children in an unsupervised environment create gangs, when they are ordered by their older members to "maintain what is righteous" (Minoura, 2010). This shows how Japanese youths bond with each other in the forms of aggressive masculinity. Whereas men may be embarrassed to show "vaguely feminine" actions such as crying and showing fear, as they are included in another aspect of The Male Sex Role named No Sissy Stuff. As samurai have educated their children in their early years for self-denial and self-control, when they become men, they are expected to repress the expression of their true emotion. Therefore, masculine men should show aggressiveness, violence, and daring as the repression of their desire to cry or showing fear.

There are some examples from the male ninjas who show their masculinity through the series. First is the protagonist Sasuke Uchiha, who cries upon the death of Itachi Uchiha, his older brother. Sasuke cries because he is sad after he finds out that Itachi was acting upon a mission that was unfairly given to him when he massacred their clan years ago. However, Sasuke does not cry for long as he immediately transforms his sadness to aggressiveness to crush the Konoha village which he believes has ordered Itachi to massacre their clan in the past. Sasuke also shows how violent he is when he decides to kill one of the Konoha village's upperlings, Danzo, who acts as the antagonist. Sasuke does not show any mercy when he faces Danzo as he launches attacks that are powerful enough to make Danzo bleed.



Figure 2.2. Sasuke unable to hide his cries after discovering the truth of his older brother's past.



Figure 2.3. Sasuke shows aggression as he wants to crush Konoha Village who hurts his brother.

The antagonist Danzo also shows how he is masculine as a male ninja when he shows no fear as he is approached by Sasuke. During the battle, Danzo is seen putting a sword near Sasuke's neck as a form of his aggressiveness to fight Sasuke back. It appears that Danzo fights Sasuke because he wants to gain more strength by stealing Sasuke's eyes. His intention is caused by his failure to overcome his mental damage after losing against his friend and failing to get recognized. Danzo believes if he could strengthen himself, he could get acknowledged, even if he has to achieve that goal by hurting others.

In another event, the protagonist Naruto, who has to fight Gaara, another a male ninja, is actually afraid when he sees how Gaara attacks his two friends, Sasuke and Sakura. However, instead of running away, he expresses his daring side when he attacks Gaara back in order to save his friends. Naruto also shows how he is aggressive as he still stands up despite his injured state and fights Gaara in close distance. The antagonist Gaara also shows his masculinity as male ninja when he does not hesitate to hurt Naruto's friend by using his powerful attack. Gaara also purposely wakes the monster inside him in order to win the battle against Naruto. This can be considered as violent as Gaara does not care whether he hurts himself or others during the battle. In the past, Gaara has failed to overcome his trauma when his former caretaker attacked him all of a sudden after claiming that Gaara "was not born to be loved". This event may push Gaara to believe that he has to fight only for himself as he cannot afford to trust others anymore.



Figure 2.4. As an antagonist, Gaara emphasizes how he only fights for himself.

All the male ninjas that have mentioned above have shown their masculinity by exhibiting traits such as aggressiveness, daring, and violence that are included in the Give ‘Em Hell as the repression of their desire to express their emotion by crying and showing fear, which belongs to the No Sissy Stuff. The ideal masculinity divides the male ninjas such as Sasuke and Naruto as the protagonists who fight for others and Danzo and Gaara as the antagonists who fight for themselves. In the series, Danzo and Gaara are seen to be unable to overcome their past trauma. Because of the mental pain that is not truly healed, they are pushed to fight for their own benefits. Through these examples, we can see how the ideal masculinity which the protagonist possesses once again lies on the male ninjas’ reasons to fight.

The Big Wheel

The Big Wheel can be described as “men’s quest for success and status as well as their need to be looked up to.” (Brannon, 2017). To achieve success and status, two martial art fighters from Japan named Nakamura Kazuhiro (a judo wrestler) and Tokoro Hideo (a mixed martial arts fighter) share their thoughts in *Men’s Egg Magazine* (2006) about a true man who must have persistence and willpower along with endurance and ability to overcome their opponents. Although both of them are professional athletes who engage in contests of physical strength, they agree that mental strength also plays a part in helping them achieve success and status.

This is visible in the event of *Pain’s Invasion* in *Naruto Shippuden*, when the protagonist Naruto Uzumaki shows his success after he wins against Pain during his practice. Naruto tries hard to acquire a new power that could add up to his physical strength even when he almost falls during his training. Naruto shows mental strength he has when he does not give up before he could complete the practice he undergoes. Although Naruto finds another obstacle as he still lacks physical strength when he gets to fight Pain directly, Naruto wants to succeed by winning against Pain to save his villagers. By the end of the battle, Naruto is able to win against Pain by using his physical and mental strength, proving his masculinity as he achieves success. After his success when he wins against Pain, Naruto automatically achieves status among the villagers. All those villagers see Naruto as the “Hero of Konoha”. This nickname indicates how Naruto has gained a good status as a masculine male ninja. This is very contrast to Naruto’s past self, who was shunned by the villagers because of the existence of a tailed beast inside of his body. Naruto proves that status and success can be achieved after overcoming past trauma by fighting for his villagers. It is shown in Figure 2.5 how Naruto’s success and status made him welcomed by the villagers who once hated him.



Figure 2.5. Naruto gains status among his villagers after succeeding in beating Pain.

Besides Naruto, the antagonist Pain is also able to show his masculinity by success and status. Pain shows how physically strong he already is when he infiltrates and destroys Naruto's village by himself. The physical strength that he has is one of the evidence that he still has not recovered from his mental damage after watching his friend, Yahiko, die in the past. Since that traumatic event, Pain persists to get stronger as he cannot let his other friends die anymore. Pain's strength is also acknowledged by one of his villagers who calls him "God". The nickname, which comes from his strong physical strength, indicates his status among other people who fear and respect his capability as a male ninja. However, with his strong power, Pain attacks for revenge. This is evident when he claims that revenge is "a chain of hatred" that will not bring justice as it is an unending cycle of people attacking other people. This means that Pain has been using his power for revenge which is only beneficial to himself as he hurts and kills innocent people.

From the two examples, we can see how both the protagonist Naruto and the antagonist Pain show their masculinity through their success and status which are included in The Big Wheel after struggling to be mentally and physically stronger. Unfortunately, not all the male ninjas are able to maintain their ideal masculinity as the antagonist is proven to only fight for themselves. As a result of their incapability to overcome their past trauma, they attack innocent people as they think it is beneficial to achieve their goal. Meanwhile, the ideal masculinity is seen within the protagonist who fights to save others. The ideal masculinity, which lies in their reason to save others, has helped them to achieve success and status.

CONCLUSION

In my analysis, I find that all the male ninjas in *Naruto* and *Naruto Shippuden* have masculinity traits within them. These traits, which are found in the analysis is based on The Male Sex Role by Robert Brannon (1976) are combined with the Japanese's idea of ideal masculinity. The traits that male ninjas possess include toughness, confidence, self-reliance (The Sturdy Oak), aggressiveness, daring, violence (Give 'Em Hell), crying and showing fear (No Sissy Stuff), and success and status (The Big Wheel).

The motivation that plays as an important aspect of ideal masculinity is able to divide the male ninjas into two categories, the protagonist and antagonist. From the examples and comparisons that have been explained above, it is evident that the protagonist and the antagonist have different motivations to fight. The protagonists, who possess the ideal masculinity, have a strong desire to fight for others. The protagonists will try to achieve success by overcoming their opponents to save other people. On the other hand, the antagonists fight for themselves. Not only do they hurt other people, but they also kill innocent people. These antagonists act selfishly during the battle since they are not able to overcome the mental damage that they get after traumatic events in their past. As a result, they often show no sympathy towards other people.

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In *Naruto* and *Naruto Shippuden* anime series, the male ninjas who act as the protagonists exercise their masculinity for the positive reasons, which is to save others, are allowed to remain masculine. However, the antagonists who are not able to exercise their masculinity as they cannot control their emotional pain due to traumatic events that they experience in the past will lose their masculinity as they fight only for themselves.

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