nrg

NARRATIVE ARCS

Anime, Ascendant

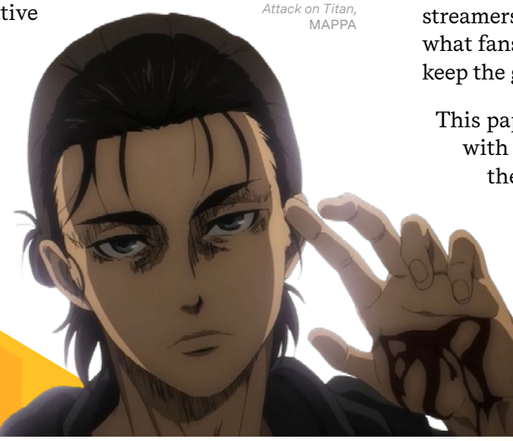
Exploring the future of anime series and unpacking fans' relationship with the genre across the US and Japan



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Anime has quickly become a core dish in America's viewing diet, among the fastest rising genres and showing no signs of slowing down. **Around a quarter of US streaming viewers now report watching anime on at least a weekly basis.** Gen Z, in particular, have proven to be keen consumers of the genre, with many of them highly vocal about their fandom on social media.

What's more, data from NRG's annual Future of Series report suggests that **anime is one of the three TV genres—alongside K-dramas and Horror—with the greatest momentum and growth potential** relative to the size of its existing viewer-base.



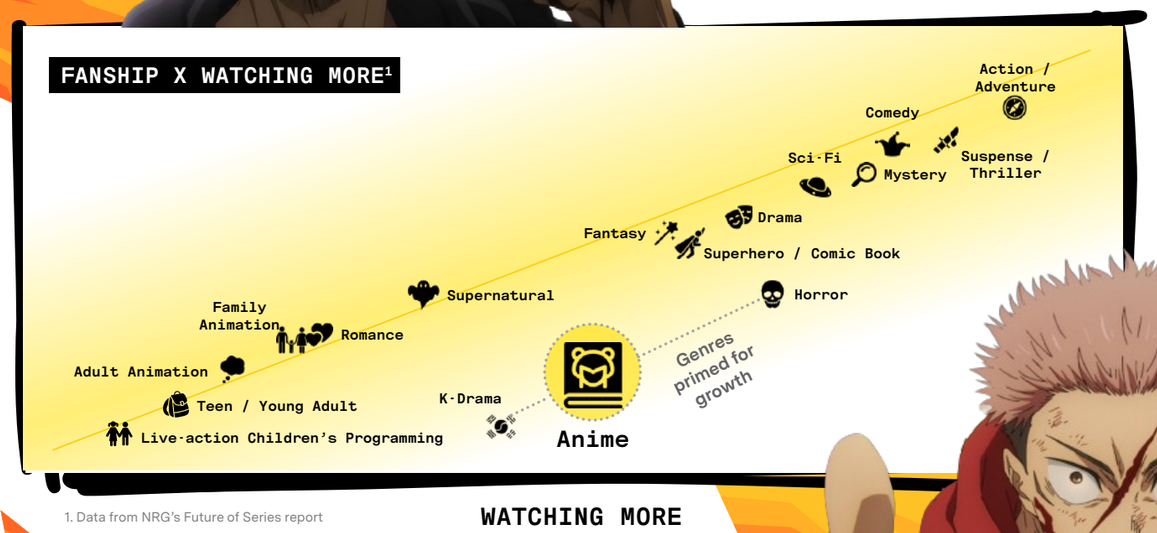
Eren Yeager, *Attack on Titan*, MAPPA

This intensifying interest in anime is excellent news for international studios and streaming services. But to stay ahead of the curve and to fully take advantage of this newfound interest in the genre—and, in particular, the intense fanship that has taken hold among much of Gen Z—we'll need to understand where anime is headed.

How can Western studios and streamers harness anime's cultural distinctiveness in a way that resonates with old fans as well as new? What can be learned from success stories, such as global sensation *Jujutsu Kaisen* or critically-acclaimed *Attack on Titan*? And how can studios and streamers walk the fine line of delivering more of what fans love while embracing innovations that keep the genre feeling fresh?

This paper sets out to answer these questions with original research conducted in both the US and Japan, alongside an in-depth semiotic analysis* that unpacks what makes anime tick, and what it is about the genre that keeps fans coming back for more.

FANSHIP X WATCHING MORE[1]



1. Data from NRG's Future of Series report

IN THIS REPORT, YOU'LL FIND...

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING ANIME SERIES TODAY

The unique cultural lens through which anime stories are told—typically a Japanese one—plays a key role in the genre's unique appeal to both local and international audiences, and shapes their expectations for new content.

In the US, in particular, fans show a strong interest in series that convey a sense of epic scale and imagination, with plots that focus on bringing order to unfamiliar, multidimensional worlds.

PART 2: FOUR FORCES SHAPING THE FUTURE OF ANIME SERIES

#1 **APPETITE FOR CULTURAL EXCHANGE**

Anime has become a two-way cultural conversation, with admiration for Japanese sensibilities drawing in Western audiences while the import of Western source material and styles of fandom are changing anime in Japan.

#2 **DESIRE FOR DIVERSITY**

Among US fans, anime is seen as boasting more complex narratives and more interesting art styles than Western animation, but lags behind when it comes to diversity and representation.

#3 **OPENNESS TO INNOVATION**

Anime fans are especially excited to engage with the genre in new formats, including interactive storytelling and live-action—so long as creators remain respectful of the source material.

#4 **CRAVING COMMUNITY**

Anime fans are highly creative and seek new, inventive ways to connect with each other and the medium—studios and streamers should find new ways to activate these fans and take full advantage of their creativity (and spending power).



Yuji Itadori, *Jujutsu Kaisen*, MAPPA

METHODOLOGY

01 SEMIOTICS*

Semiotics is a tool used to understand the deeper meanings and cultural codes behind how people think, feel, and act—going beyond what consumers can directly express about their attitudes and behaviors. By analyzing visual and language cues in content (like anime), semiotics explains why certain types of content resonate more than others. Overall, semiotics connects broad themes and values to actionable insights, balancing a global perspective with specific cultural nuances. For more on this analysis, see page 5.

02 QUANTITATIVE

Unless otherwise specified, data in this report comes from a study of 1,012 anime viewers aged 13-54; 509 from the US and 503 from Japan, who have seen at least two recent anime series, conducted online in May 2024. Where data from other sources has been used, this has been noted in the footnotes.



If you're short on time but want to know what's what when it comes to anime series today:

So who's watching anime series in the US right now?

Anime enjoys a diverse fandom among US consumers, but one that skews young and male. Gen Z, in particular, have played a key role in helping the genre break through into the pop culture mainstream. Among American anime viewers aged 13 to 54, over half (51%) are Gen Z.

And what do they like about anime series?

Beyond the animation itself, the quintessentially Japanese essence of anime is a core part of its appeal. But the most successful anime series hinge on two key tensions (identified by semiotics):

World type
Simple worlds (e.g., rural or urban Japan) vs. complex worlds (rooted in Japanese myth/lore)

Character motivation
Internal vs. external challenges (reflecting traditional collectivist Japanese values and the more stereotypically "Western" values of individualism)

By plotting popular anime series along the matrix created by these two tensions, we can identify four key heroic archetypes that define the anime landscape.

Okay, so which of the four content types should I prioritize?

Dimensional Defender stories have been the most lucrative in the US market in recent years (see *Jujutsu Kaisen*), and they focus on external conflicts, aiming to bring order to unfamiliar, multidimensional worlds.

Soul Searchers stories (e.g., *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*) also show strong potential for growth among American viewers. These stories feature complex worlds, while grounding their narratives within character arcs that focus on personal self-discovery and the tension inherent in finding one's own sense of meaning within the universe.

Moral Maverick (e.g., *Yuri!!! on ICE*) and **Grounded Guardian** stories (e.g., *Castlevania*), while still successful in parts, may be softer in their initial appeal.

The former typically lacks the kind of fantastical edge that many American anime fans are looking for from the genre.

The latter often overlaps too much, narratively speaking, with the kind of superhero and comic book fare that already saturates the US market.

Got what you needed and want to jump to trends shaping the next wave of anime? Then head over to part 2 to understand the future of anime series.

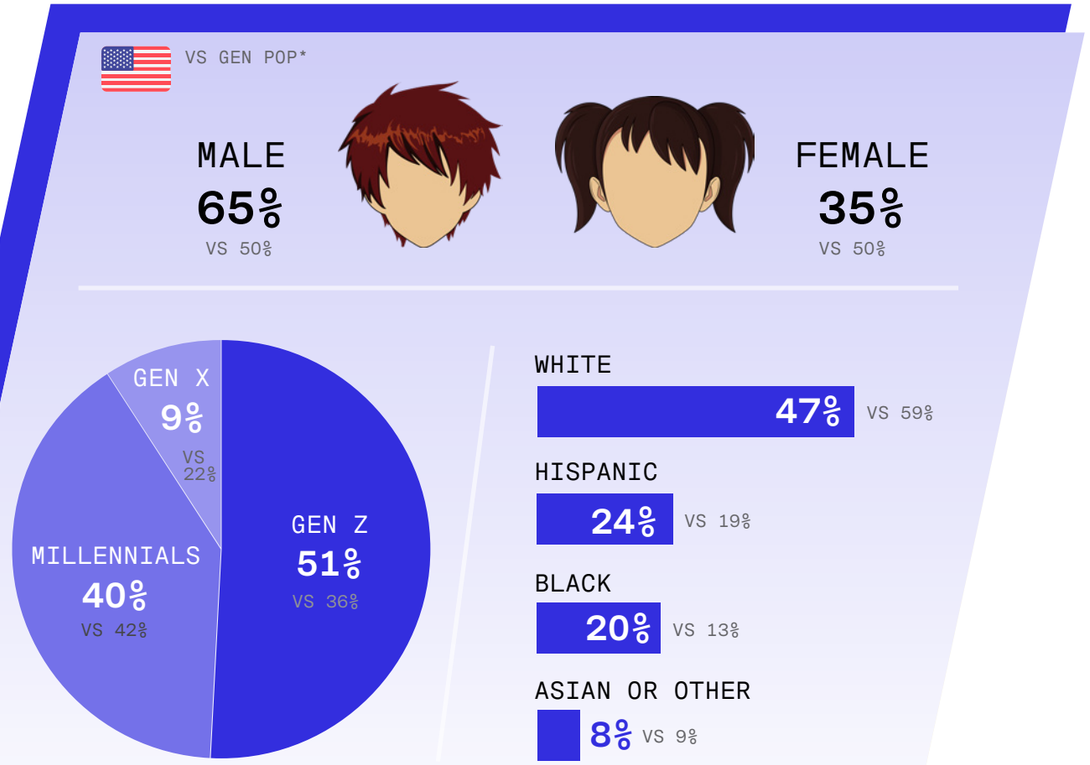
Meet today's anime fan:
highly engaged, creative, and mostly Gen Z.

Like with anything, to understand where something is now, we must first understand how it came to be.

For a few decades anime was considered to be an extremely niche genre. After all, animation is for children… right? Wrong! So went the cry of the anime fans all through the 70s, 80s, and 90s, though few heard their plea. Accordingly, only a handful of distributors during the 2000s would even bring anime from Japan to the US, with the fare often expensive (VHS for $30 a pop) and narratively limited (primarily science-fiction "mecha" and "seinen" for adult men). US broadcasters during this time also didn't help, often exclusively airing "shōnen" (for teens/boys) series such as *Dragon Ball Z, Pokémon*, or *Naruto* (to name a few) during morning children's cartoon slots—reinforcing the sentiment that this genre was geared to kids.

DEMOGRAPHIC MAKE-UP OF US ANIME VIEWERS AGED 13 TO 54[2]

VIEWERS WHO WATCH ANIME AT LEAST ONCE PER WEEK



*Census data from 2023

NRGMR.COM

But the true inception of anime's explosive popularity can be traced back to the year 2005, where one platform in particular showed viewers anime's chops en masse: YouTube. **The major shift ultimately came down to accessibility through technology.** Pirated and online sites in particular found their footing with anime. Crunchyroll, for example, acquired legal distribution rights for East Asian content in 2008 before eventually being acquired by Sony in 2021.[3] And so, following on from the advent of the internet, enter the latest entertainment advancement: streaming. These services made anime more accessible than ever before, providing new entry points to the genre and making it easier for existing fans to discover new titles that matched their specific tastes.

Notably, Netflix began dabbling in the anime space in 2014; by 2017, budgets for anime finally reflected its popularity.[4] This was only further cemented with an output deal struck between the streaming giant and the beloved anime powerhouse Studio Ghibli,[5] and the trend continues to this day. Just this past March at AnimeJapan 2024, Netflix announced a whole slate of new anime content coming to its streaming shores,[6] satiating the appetite of the 100 million households that annually consume anime on the platform.

And indeed, the American fan base for anime with whom this content exploded is not only large but highly enthusiastic. Anime fans in the US are, broadly speaking, young, male, and racially diverse. They also have a voracious appetite for content. Those who describe themselves as active fans of the genre report watching an average of 10 hours of anime per week, and are typically following at least three different series at any given time.

Gen Z have played the most significant role in propelling the explosive global growth of the genre. **In the US, this generation makes up 51% of the anime fandom among viewers aged 13 to 54.** TikTok has provided a platform for a thriving #otaku community of young Japanese pop culture enthusiasts (typically not of Japanese descent themselves) who discuss, dissect, and thus promote their favorite series in full view of a global audience.[7]

HOW AMERICAN VIEWERS DISCOVERED JUJUTSU KAISEN

#1	A friend/family member told me about it **47%**
#2	It was being widely praised by the anime community **40%**
#3	I saw a post about it on Instagram or another social media platform **37%**
#4	I was already familiar with the manga **28%**
#5	I saw a TikTok about it **28%**
#6	I saw merchandise related to the show **15%**
#7	I heard the opening song from the show **9%**



Satoru Gojo, *Jujutsu Kaisen*, MAPPA

For example, social media played a major role in accelerating the growth of anime sensation *Jujutsu Kaisen* (aka *JJK*), which launched in 2020 and quickly rose to international prominence. To note, recently *JJK* surpassed *Attack on Titan* as the world's most popular animated TV series.[8] And no wonder, given **nearly 4 in 10 American viewers of the series said they had seen content on Instagram or other social media platforms prior to watching it, and more than a quarter watched clips of the show or fan reviews on TikTok.**

But now that we know how anime came to be and who makes up the fan base in the US, we need to understand what resonates with them and why narratively this content is so impactful. What exactly is it giving these fans that continues to drive its popularity skyward?

2. Based on a survey of 3,000 US streaming viewers, conducted online in June 2024
3. Mark Schilling, "Sony Has Yet to Win Anime Fans to Its Post-Crunchyroll Strategy, but Opportunities Remain Strong," Variety, August 25th, 2021
4. Brian Barrett, "Want a Look at Netflix's Future? Follow the Anime," Wired, August 2nd, 2017
5. Sheena Scott, "Netflix Acquires Rights for Studio Ghibli Films Outside North America and Japan," Forbes, January 20th, 2020
6. Netflix, "Netflix Steals the Show at AnimeJapan 2024 with Exciting New Lineup," March 23rd, 2024
7. Ederlyn Peralta, "How Tik Tok & Social Media Changed The Anime Industry," CBR, July 29th, 2023
8. Alex Mateo, "Guinness World Records Names Jujutsu Kaisen 'Most In-Demand Animated TV Show,'" Anime News Network, April 5th, 2024

Successful anime series convey a Japanese ethos to a global audience.

Beyond the animation itself, the quintessentially Japanese nature of anime is a core part of its appeal. But what are the specific ways in which this nature manifests itself and shapes the contours of stories within the genre? What is it about a piece of anime—or anime-style—content that makes it feel, to fans, like an authentic expression of the genre's ethos? To answer these questions, we turn to semiotics.

WHAT IS SEMIOTICS AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

We conducted a semiotic analysis of ten popular anime titles (see titles framing this page) to identify the most culturally resonant and future-facing opportunities within the genre. These series span a diverse range of content types, including:

Shōnen
anime aimed at young men

Josei
anime aimed at older women

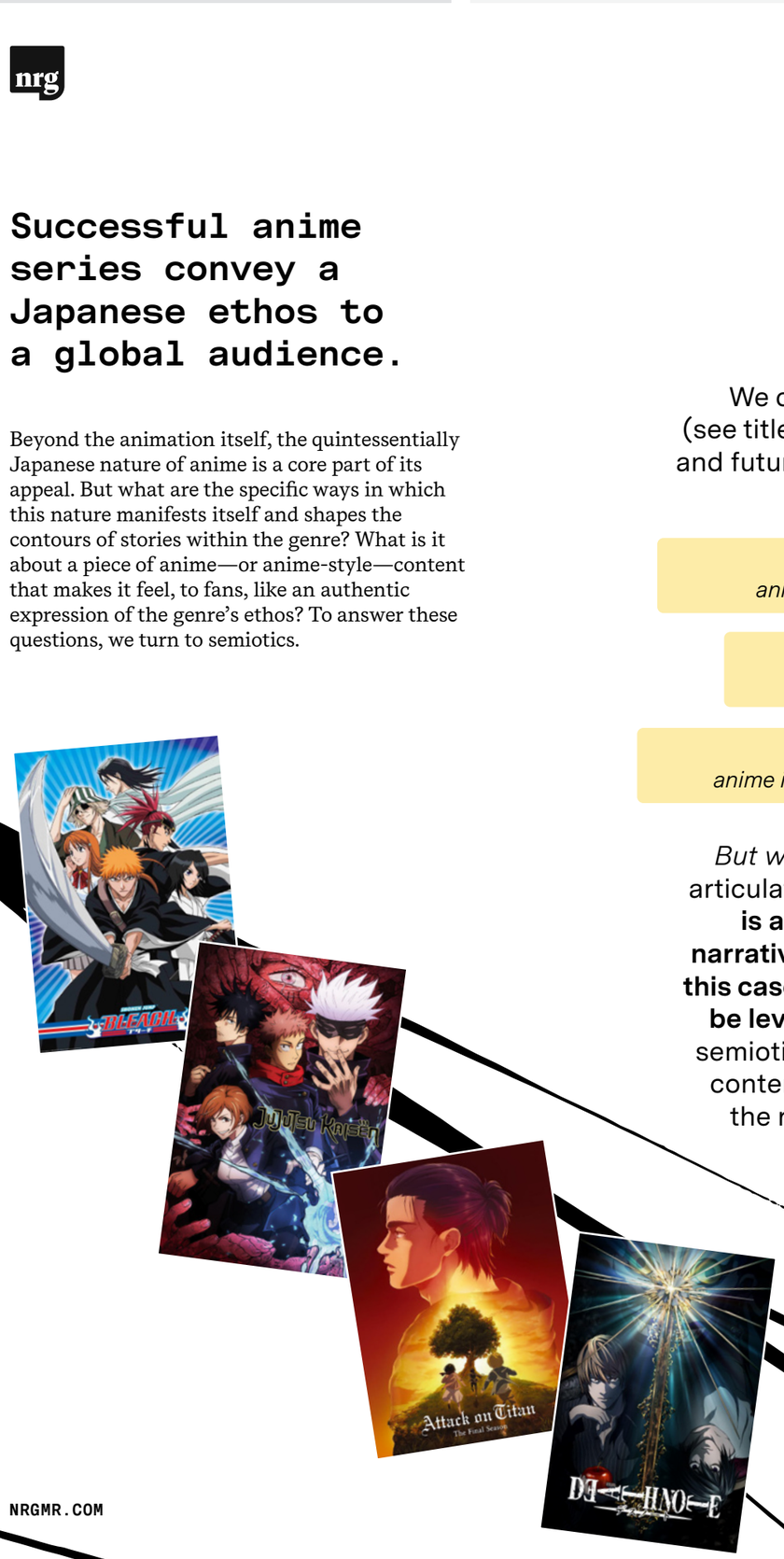
Sports

Mystery

Action/Adventure

Isekai
anime in which ordinary people find themselves transported to a fantasy world

But why semiotics? There is often a limit to what audiences can articulate when it comes to how they think, feel, and act. **Semiotics is an analytical tool that uncovers the underlying cultural narratives and cues that drive people's beliefs and behaviors—in this case, to understand what is inherently "anime" and how it can be leveraged by content creators in the future.** To achieve this, semioticians look for recurring signs and symbols within pieces of content, and use in-depth contextual knowledge to understand the relationships between these and unpack both literal and metaphorical meaning.





Anime's cultural heritage informs every aspect of the genre, from the aesthetics to the narratives and moral themes—and is core to its international popularity.

Semiotics allows us to identify two key axes on which successful anime series hinge. **The x-axis charts the degree to which the world is simple** (i.e., worlds that look like historical or contemporary Japan or other real-world locations) **or complex** (i.e., worlds that are more fantastical in nature, often incorporating spiritual dimensions or supernatural elements).

Keeping the Japanese lens in mind, simple worlds often include depictions of rural Japan or major Japanese cities, such as Tokyo. They might also exist as a Japanese re-imagining of a past Western world (e.g., the parallels drawn to Cold War Germany in *Spy x Family*). Complex worlds, on the other hand, often draw heavily from Japanese myth and lore, and local religious traditions such as Shinto and Buddhism.



Tanjiro Kamado, *Demon Slay*, Ufotable

Anya Forger, *Spy x Family*, Wit and ClowerWorks



Whether simple or complex, grounded or fantastical, world-building is a key ingredient in the alchemy of successful anime series. In both the US and Japan, the desire to "lose oneself" in a story is the most common needstate that fans are looking to satisfy when they begin a new anime series: settings that are both intrinsically compelling and richly detailed are essential for enabling that sense of surrender to the narrative.

The y-axis, on the other hand, tracks the nature of the conflict characters face throughout the story. **It differentiates between protagonists finding meaning through internal struggles**, focusing on their mental, emotional, and physical growth, **and those facing external conflicts**, battling monsters, evil spirits, or other agents of chaos and destruction.

Through the Japanese lens, we can further understand the tension between external and internal conflict as reflecting the tension between traditional collectivist Japanese values (i.e., the need to make sacrifices for the greater good) and the more stereotypically "Western" values of individualism that are becoming increasingly popular among Japan's younger generations (i.e., a quest for self-discovery or self-actualization).

This semiotics analysis allows us to understand the four "heroic archetypes" that define the anime landscape.

Moral Maverick narratives present opportunities to find success in a less-congested field. As in the Soul Searcher quadrant, stories are centered on moral quandaries, though the worlds are more familiar and the dilemmas may be more relatable (e.g., *Yuri!!! on ICE*). The most successful stories feature characters who are ordinary but aspirational, accomplishing extraordinary things through hard work and personal sacrifice. Moral Maverick stories are especially popular with Japanese audiences, who may enjoy the way in which these stories playfully subvert their culture's historic social values. While US audiences currently show less enthusiasm for Moral Maverick stories, success in the Japanese market can be leveraged as proof of authenticity, enhancing their appeal among American fans.

Opportunity can also be found in the Soul Searcher quadrant, where flawed heroes strive for personal mastery and self-discovery in an unfamiliar, morally complicated world. Successes such as *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* and *Re: Zero* indicate an appetite for high-adrenaline stories with a heavy, foreboding mood that echoes the main character's inner turmoil; supernatural elements also play well here. These stories are the second-most popular in the US, where they're preferred by roughly a quarter of fans, and they present an attractive alternative to competing in the more crowded Dimensional Defender space.

QUADRANT PLAYBOOK

MORAL MAVERICKS
Finding one's place in the real world

Tales of Moral Mavericks center on personal growth and relationships within familiar settings.

"There's good in everybody, even in those who seem evil"

Preferred by 8% 26%

Popular among Japanese viewers, often appealing to an older audience.

Stories to prioritize

Moral Ambiguity:
Protagonists struggling to balance their own values and desires with the need to respond to external pressures in a simple/relatable world (e.g., *Yuri!!! on ICE*)

Characters should be

Charismatic | Ordinary person | Someone who fights for their friends | Unique personality | Well-developed backstory | Emotionally versatile

SOUL SEARCHERS
Saving oneself amidst chaos

Soul Searchers embark on personal journeys of self-discovery in fantastical worlds.

"The world is messy and ambiguous and so too is our sense of morality"

Preferred by 23% 15%

Especially popular with U.S. audiences and adults aged 25 and older.

Stories to prioritize

Self-Discovery:
Stories rooted in the classic Japanese theme of mastering a skill as a path to mastering oneself (e.g., *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*)

Characters should be

Morally flawed but believes they are doing good | Undergoes significant character development | Dynamic relationships with others | Unique personality

GROUNDED GUARDIANS
Saving the world

Preferred by 7% 14%

Most popular with women and younger American men.

"Lightness and darkness are two sides of the same coin, it's about balance"

Grounded Guardians are heroes fighting external forces in a classic battle of good versus evil played out in a recognizable world.

Stories to prioritize

Hero Defeating Evil:
While there may be an exploration of the balance of light and dark in the characters, the righteousness of the hero's quest and the need to destroy the evil represented by the main villain are never seriously in question (e.g., *Castlevania*)

Characters should be

Motivations and actions are logical | Diverse characters reflective of the real world | A team player | Relatable

DIMENSIONAL DEFENDERS
Finding order in chaos

Preferred by 61% 45%

The most popular content type among both US and Japanese viewers.

"A hero must undergo struggle to grow and gain resilience"

Dimensional Defenders focus on external conflicts, aiming to bring order to unfamiliar, multidimensional worlds. Ambitious world-building pushes characters to moral and physical extremes.

Stories to prioritize

Protecting Innocents:
Protagonists navigate a chaotic world to protect innocents from danger, often in the form of curses, ghosts, or evil spirits (e.g., *Bleach, Jujutsu Kaisen*)

Characters should be

Outgoing | Physically strong | Ordinary person who achieves extraordinary things | Complex heroes AND villains | The chosen one | Serve as thematic narrative devices

Finding an audience for Grounded Guardian stories may prove more challenging, as this content type enjoys a rather small fan base in both the US and Japan. In part, this may be because these stories often overlap the most in tone and aesthetics with stories from other popular genres (such as superhero movies), and therefore feel, to committed fans, less distinctively "anime" than stories from the other three categories. Recent successes like *Castlevania* prove there is room for stories rooted in this quadrant, but stories of Grounded Guardians may not be the first choice of those taking a strategic approach to content development and licensing.

START HERE

Dimensional Defender stories emerge as a clear favorite among audiences, with a majority of US fans and nearly half of those in Japan saying they prefer stories of heroes battling external enemies in a fantastical world. This is consistent with the anime series that have enjoyed the most cross-cultural success, with the massively popular *Jujutsu Kaisen* being a prime example (click here to read the case study). Studios and streamers looking to take advantage of surging interest in anime will likely find tales of Dimensional Defenders a safe bet.

CASE STUDY #1

International sensation Jujutsu Kaisen is an anime North Star—and a prime example of Dimensional Defenders in action.

Popular in Japan since its 2020 debut, anime series *Jujutsu Kaisen* has since gone on to become a breakout global hit. *Jujutsu Kaisen* tells the story of Yuji Itadori, a student who swallows a powerful Curse and is propelled into the midst of a battle between heroic sorcerers and evil Curses.

A classic story of Dimensional Defenders protecting innocents from external forces, **the series is a brilliant example of how anime's classic elements can be brought together to create a compelling story that transcends cultural barriers while maintaining its Japanese sensibilities.** Here, it serves as a North Star series, revealing a path to future cross-culture success.

Y-AXIS

External conflict with added complexity

Main conflict is external:
The central conflict revolves around Yuji and his friends battling evil Curses to save the world, driven by Yuji's commitment to his grandfather's dying wish to use his strength to help others.

Adds complexity by introducing an internal conflict:
Yuji swallows an evil spirit, Sukuna, who becomes the main antagonist residing within him, leading to an ongoing battle for control over Yuji's conscience. This dual conflict, where the internal struggle mirrors the external fight, creates a compelling narrative with intertwined stakes.

JUJUTSU KAISEN

BLEACH

DIMENSIONAL DEFENDERS

X-AXIS

A complex world of domains and Curses sets the stage for high-stakes conflict

Multidimensional world-building:
The series introduces a world where over 10,000 unexplained deaths and disappearances in Japan are attributed to Curses, which are manifestations of society's negative emotions.

Imbued with Japanese lore:
These Curses are rooted in Japanese mythology, where unexplained events are often linked to souls that haven't reached heaven, with creator Gege Akutami modernizing this concept to create a tension-filled world.

Domains create battlegrounds for highstakes:
Gege Akutami's world-building allows for surprising narrative twists, including the sudden death of key characters, which keeps the series dynamic and unpredictable.

US viewers are intrigued by the concept of Curses and the lack of "plot armor," while Japanese viewers are drawn to the action and battles between sorcerers and Curses.

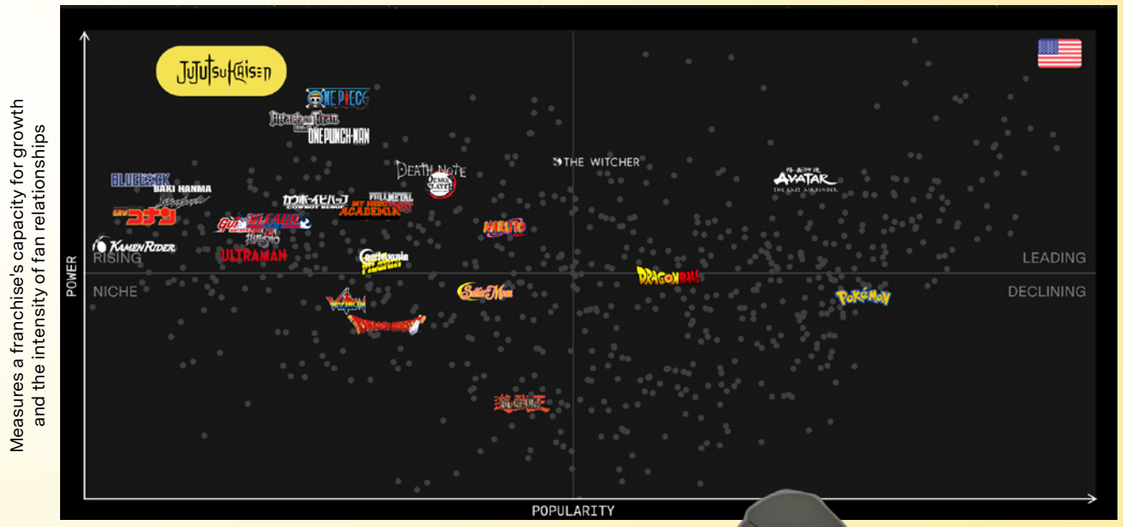
91%
of American Jujutsu Kaisen viewers
would highly recommend the series to their friends and family.

Building a word-of-mouth hit

Jujutsu Kaisen was rewarded with perhaps the one element of success its creators could not write for themselves: an enthusiastic word-of-mouth campaign that not only caught the eye of anime fans but helped bring new viewers to the genre.

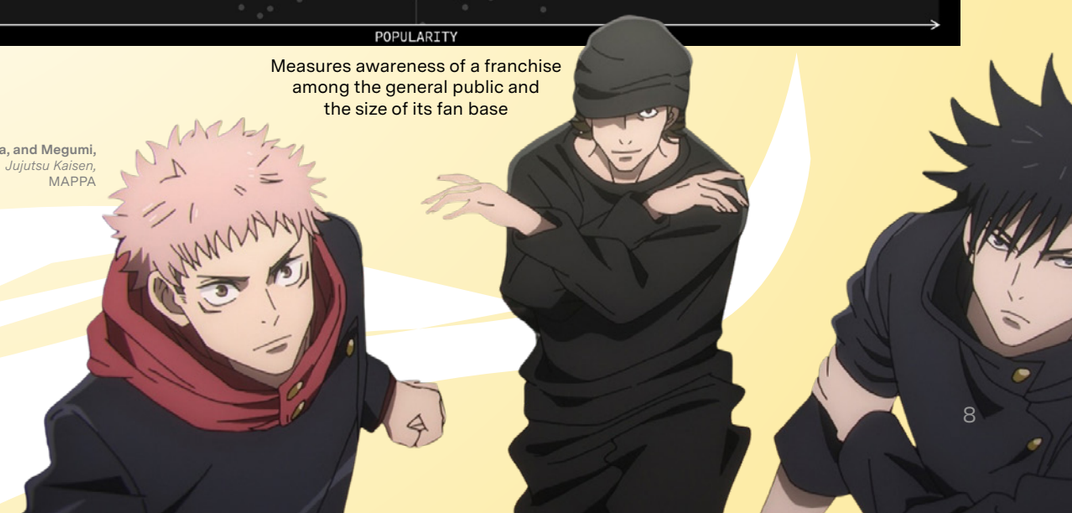
Data from NRG's Franchise IQ product—a weekly tracker that measures the health of franchises across a wide variety of entertainment categories—indicates that *Jujutsu Kaisen*, while not yet as well known among the general public as more established anime franchises, leads the genre in terms of franchise power. This suggests that the franchise is continuing to benefit from substantial positive momentum, and is well placed for future growth and expansion.

franchise IQ Health Map



Measures a franchise's capacity for growth and the intensity of fan relationships

Measures awareness of a franchise among the general public and the size of its fan base

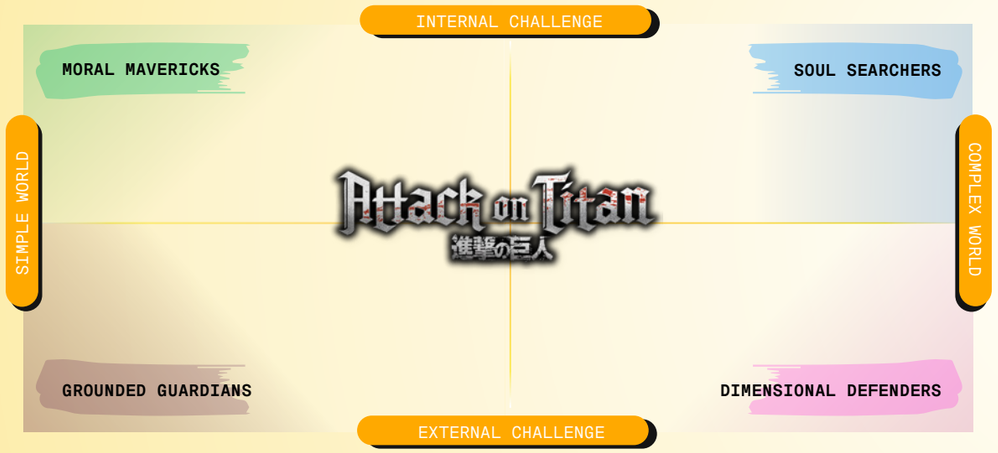


Yugi, Takuma, and Megumi, *Jujutsu Kaisen*, MAPPA

CASE STUDY #2

Of course, not all series will sit neatly within one of these quadrants in the way that *Jujutsu Kaisen* does; **many popular shows move between these different quadrants over the course of the series in order to mine the full range of narrative tensions that define the anime universe.** A prime example is *Attack on Titan*, which sits at the very heart of the matrix.

Attack on Titan sits at the heart of the matrix, successfully borrowing elements from all four heroic archetypes.



A runaway commercial success and critical darling, the series concluded its epic 10-year on-screen journey in November 2023. The show's narrative fluidity meant that a wide range of fans were able to find something to fall in love with, regardless of their preferences between different archetypes.

Attack on Titan's quadrant-smashing storytelling is first evident in its creative world-building.

The story begins in a seemingly fantastical world, in which the human population of Paradis Island is subjugated by a race of terrifying, man-eating monsters known as Titans.

As the series unfolds, however, viewers come to realize that the island sits in our world, and the story increasingly draws disturbing parallels to the events of the Second World War. In this way, we are given a world that is complex and simple all at once.

But *Attack on Titan*'s most impressive storytelling feat is found in its approach to character development, with main character Eren Yeager embodying all four heroic archetypes over the progression of the series.

EREN YEAGER AS
DIMENSIONAL DEFENDER

As the story begins, young Eren has lost his family and joins the Survey Corps in the hopes of doing his part to eliminate the Titans and restore order to Paradis Island.

EREN YEAGER AS
SOUL SEARCHER

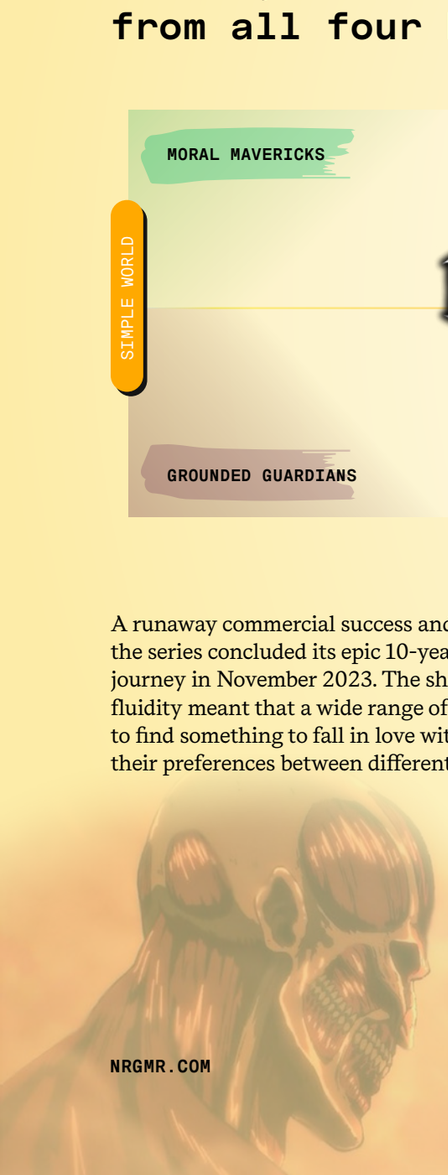
Eventually, Eren develops the ability to become a Titan himself and embarks on a journey of self-discovery as he seeks to control the beast within, harnessing its awesome fighting power while struggling to ensure it never hurts his friends.

EREN YEAGER AS
MORAL MAVERICK

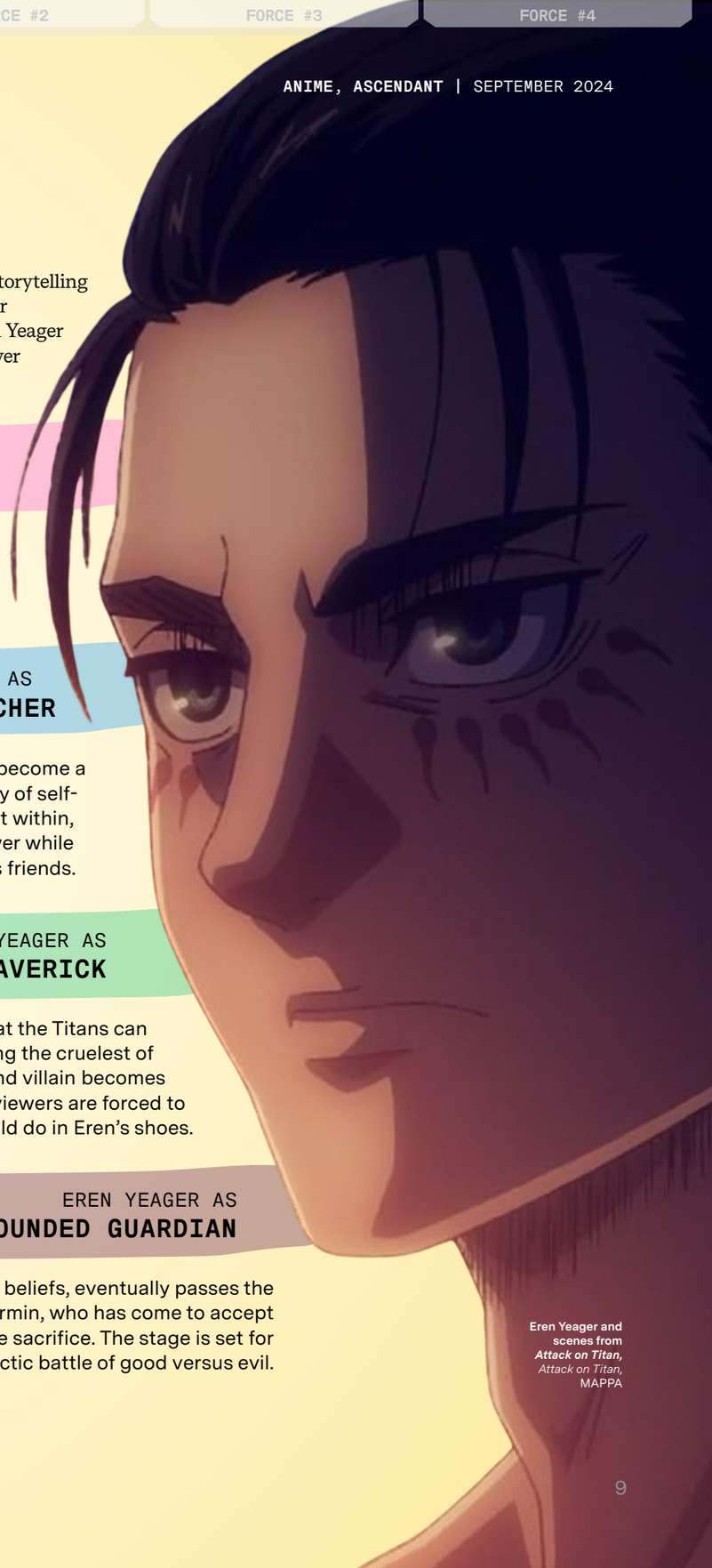
When a prophetic vision reveals that the Titans can only be defeated by Eren making the cruelest of sacrifices, the line between hero and villain becomes uncomfortably blurred, and viewers are forced to question what they would do in Eren's shoes.

EREN YEAGER AS
GROUNDED GUARDIAN

Eren, steadfast in his beliefs, eventually passes the torch to his friend Armin, who has come to accept the inevitability of the sacrifice. The stage is set for a climactic battle of good versus evil.







Eren Yeager and scenes from ***Attack on Titan,*** *Attack on Titan*, MAPPA



PART 2

THE FOUR FORCES SHAPING THE FUTURE OF ANIME SERIES

NRGMR.COM

Quick, tell me how I can shape the future of anime series:

What is it?	*Why does it matter?*	*What's the implication?*
FORCE #1 APPETITE FOR CULTURAL EXCHANGE		
An appetite for experimenting with narratives based off other cultures and IP (while keeping it sincere through the Japanese lens—as detailed in part 1).	Because if Western IP finds success in the format of anime within Japan, its popularity could inform its success internationally—especially since global markets often look to Japan's anime trends and what's resonating in anime's homegrown market.	It means don't shy away from experimenting with IP from across the Pacific as well as IP that originates from other mediums (such as video games) but be mindful that every IP is unique and will need to get the Japanese treatment right, as not to turn off fans.
FORCE #2 DESIRE FOR DIVERSITY		
Among US fans specifically, a desire for greater representation in anime series.	The US fan base is hugely diverse, so naturally they want to see greater representation reflected in the content they love to consume.	To cultivate a multiracial global fan base, we can expect to see more demand from audiences for content that features a diverse cast of characters.
FORCE #3 OPENNESS TO INNOVATION		
An appetite for technical and artistic innovation.	Novel artistry, aided by new technologies, can create fresh opportunities for fan engagement without sacrificing anime's fundamental character.	The genre is ripe for experimentation, and studios plus streamers should lean into this—whether by experimenting with new artistic techniques (such as 3D animation within traditional 2D anime) or translating this into new tech (e.g., AR and VR) and/or narrative formats (e.g., live-action opportunities).
FORCE #4 CRAVING COMMUNITY		
A desire for connection and community among anime fans.	Given the high sense of engagement and creativity, the community seeks tools and opportunities to engage with the medium, and it is crucial to foster this creative foundation to truly activate their potential (and spending power).	The anime community is a hugely creative one; providing opportunities for creative engagement both digitally and IRL (e.g., through events, cosplay, creating content online, etc.) can encourage the development of a connected global fan base.

Click to navigate to each Force

FORCE #1

APPETITE FOR CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Anime is a cultural two-way street that both introduces US viewers to Japanese sensibilities and increasingly imports narratives from other cultures back to Japan.



Slogra and Gaibon, *Castlevania,* Powerhouse Animation

The uniquely Japanese aesthetic and sensibilities of anime are certainly a major source of its appeal for fans—and something that should be preserved as the genre explores new territory.

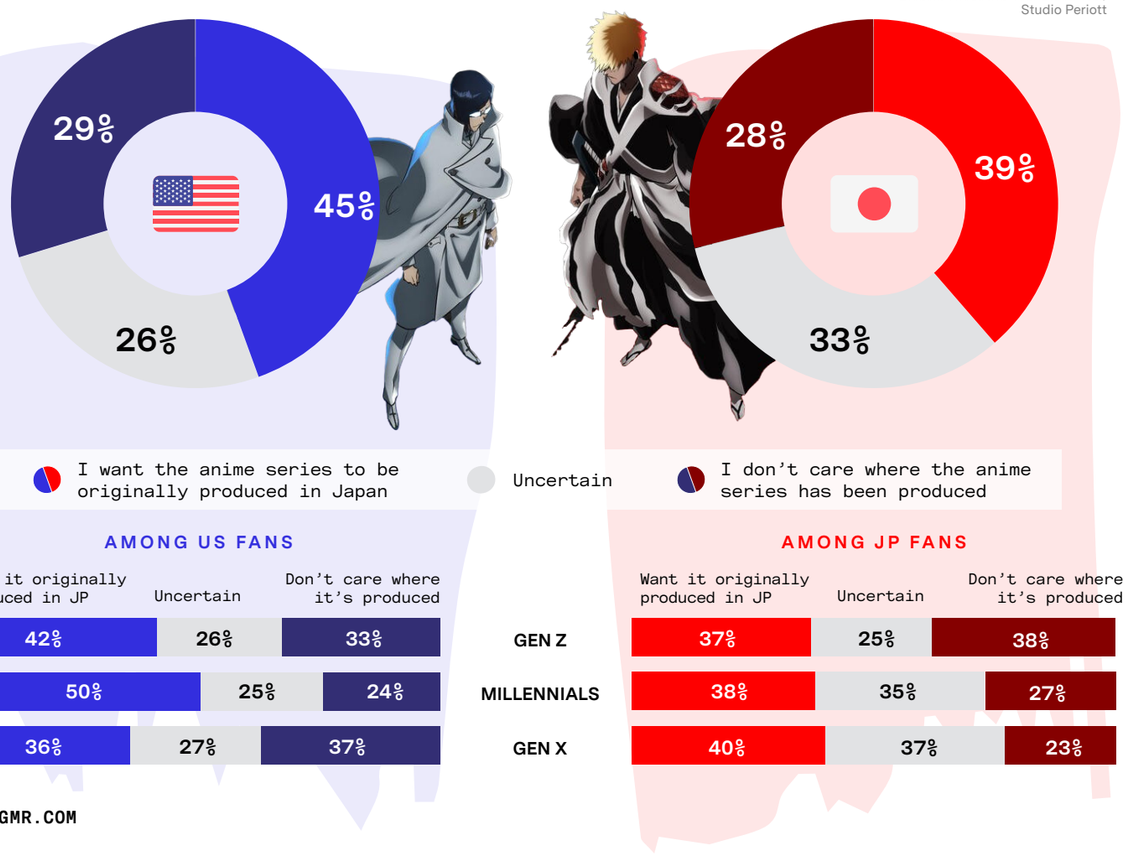
Within the fandom, there's debate about whether or not that means that shows have to literally be produced *in Japan* to count as anime.

Q: THINKING OF ANIME SERIES YOU ENJOY, WHICH IS YOUR PREFERENCE?

Within Japan itself, the term "anime" is used broadly to refer to all animated series, regardless of their country of origin. Many American fans and critics, however, limit their definition of the genre to shows from Japan; others are more liberal with the term, and include Western series, such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *RWBY*, that are clearly attempting to mimic the aesthetics and narrative conventions of their Japanese influences.[9]

9. Timothy Blake Donohoo, "Can a Purely American Production Still Be Called Anime?", CBR, January 1st, 2023

Uryu and Ichigo, *Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War,* Studio Periott



Ultimately, the distinction between "anime" and "anime-inspired" shows is largely a semantic one. Wherever one chooses to draw the line, it's clear that anime wouldn't be anime if it wasn't rooted in storytelling traditions based in Japanese culture—as we learned in part 1 of this paper.

Encouragingly though, this desire for cultural authenticity doesn't mean there's no scope for innovation. Quite the opposite—**new types of stories are welcomed. There's room for the format to transport people to other worlds and explore new types of characters and cultures,** while maintaining its visual appeal and core storytelling pillars. There are already several notable examples of anime based on Western stories, for example. *Castlevania* offers an anime spin on gothic horror, while *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* gives the anime treatment to a Western sci-fi setting (originally created by Mike Pondsmith as part of the tabletop roleplaying boom of the 1980s).

Both of these examples speak to the increasingly global nature of anime and anime fandom. *Castlevania* was an American production adapting a Japanese video game franchise itself loosely based on Bram Stoker's Dracula. *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*, meanwhile, was produced in Japan, but under the creative supervision of Polish video game studio CD Projekt Red. Despite their unconventional origins, both series enjoyed commercial and critical success, and were widely embraced by the anime community.

Japanese fans, in particular, appear to be welcoming this kind of cross-genre and cross-cultural experimentation. And even shows produced exclusively within Japan often draw on a wide range of narrative influences from beyond the country's borders; 2021's *Record of Ragnarok,* for example, draws heavily on religious and historical traditions from Europe, India, China, Egypt, and more.

US fans are also excited by the prospect of cross-genre experimentation, with half keen to see more of this in future anime series.

And we're likely to see more Western IP get the anime treatment. In December of this year, for example, Warner Brothers will be releasing *The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim*, an anime movie set in Tolkein's Middle-earth.[10]

But it would be remiss to suggest Western IP on its own is enough to guarantee success. As explored in the first part of this report, narratively the content type needs to hit the right notes and certain guardrails must be respected—whether that's specific lore and characters, or imbuing the content with a Japanese sincerity that does not alienate both fans of the original IP and anime as a whole.

The takeaway? **Anime is no longer simply a Japanese export: it's a multilateral cultural conversation.** This presents studios and streaming services outside of Japan with a unique opportunity to leave their mark on the genre—while also expanding the reach of their own IP.

10. Ryan Northrup, "Lord Of The Rings Animated Movie First Look Images: Massive Armies Assemble Outside 2 Iconic Middle-earth Locations," Screen Rant, May 14th, 2024



David and Lucyna, *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners,* Studio Trigger

FORCE #2

DESIRE FOR DIVERSITY

Compared to Western animation, anime is seen by US viewers as more sincere but overall less diverse.

When US audiences specifically are invited to make head-to-head comparisons between Japanese and Western animation, they generally report that they see anime as coming out ahead in terms of its unique sense of artistry, its impressive action sequences, and its compelling character development.

Conversely, US fans feel that Western animation is typically funnier and more self-aware. To an extent, this may reflect the difficulties in translating Japanese humor and wordplay for international audiences. But it also speaks to perhaps the biggest difference between the two artforms: sincerity.

Many of the most popular American adult animated shows of recent decades—shows like *Rick and Morty, American Dad!, Family Guy, Archer, South Park*, and so on—are shot through with a strong sense of irony, consciously winking at the audience and often relying heavily on metatextual humor and satire. **Anime, conversely, is seen by American viewers as a medium that takes itself more seriously**, one where even the most fantastical situations and characters are still portrayed with a sense of earnestness.

It's possible, therefore, that the growing popularity of anime among American audiences—and especially Gen Z—represents a cultural backlash of sorts, and a rejection of the self-aware style of storytelling that was once popular among Gen Xers and Millennials. In an increasingly irony-suffused culture,[11] younger viewers are seeking out a sense of sincerity that is hard to come by among Western animated shows—and they're turning to anime to get it.

11. Rohitha Naraharisetty, "The Year of Sincere," The Swaddle, December 27th, 2023

American viewers also feel that anime lags behind Western animation when it comes to diversity and representation. And this sentiment was echoed on-the-ground at AnimeCon in the UK, where NRG interviewed attendees.

59% of US anime fans say that they'd like to see greater racial diversity within the genre

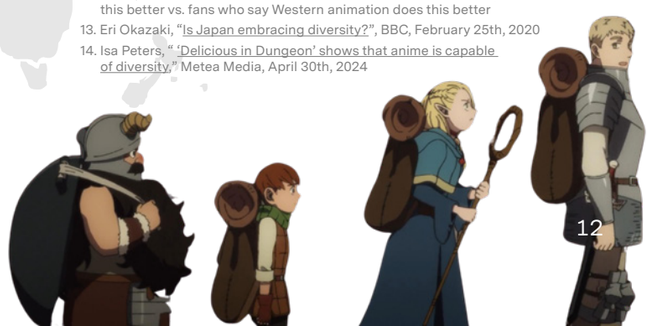
There's also significant interest among American viewers in greater diversity of body sizes and shapes (57%), more portrayals of Indigenous peoples and cultures (55%), and more characters with disabilities (44%).

Of course, it would be unfair to judge the diversity within anime through a Western lens, Japan is, after all, a far more racially homogeneous society than the United States—even if the extent of that homogeneity is sometimes misunderstood or misrepresented.[13] Within Japan itself, desire for greater diversity within anime is substantially less pronounced; only 34% of Japanese fans, for example, would like to see more characters of different ethnicities.

But as the genre continues to grow in popularity in the US and to cultivate a multiracial global fan base, **we can expect to see more demand from audiences for content that features a diverse cast of characters.** Indeed, some recent series—such as *Delicious in Dungeon*, based on the manga by Ryoko Kui—have won praise from critics for their willingness to showcase a wider variety of skin tones and body shapes.[14]

12. Based on a study of 2,074 US streaming viewers who self-identified as fans of both genres, conducted online in June 2024; net of fans who say anime does this better vs. fans who say Western animation does this better
13. Eri Okazaki, "Is Japan embracing diversity?", BBC, February 25th, 2020
14. Isa Peters, "'Delicious in Dungeon' shows that anime is capable of diversity," Metea Media, April 30th, 2024

WHAT WESTERN ANIMATION DOES BETTER THAN ANIME ACCORDING TO US VIEWERS WHO ARE FANS OF BOTH TYPES OF CONTENT		WHAT ANIME DOES BETTER THAN WESTERN ANIMATION[12] ACCORDING TO US VIEWERS WHO ARE FANS OF BOTH TYPES OF CONTENT
#1 Have a racially diverse set of characters +23%		Showcase unique art styles +20% #1
#2 Address social issues +21%		Have impressive action sequences +14% #2
#3 Incorporate cultural diversity +15%		Use symbolism and metaphor effectively +8% #3
#4 Be funny +13%		Offer deeper character arcs +8% #4
#5 Appeal to adults +9%		Develop complex and intricate plots +8% #5
#6 Have a sense of irony and self-awareness +6%		Blur the lines between good and evil +7% #6



Delicious in Dungeon, Studio Trigger

FORCE #3

OPENNESS TO INNOVATION

Novel artistry, aided by new technologies, can create fresh opportunities for fan engagement without sacrificing anime's fundamental character.

There's an appetite for aesthetic experimentation.

Despite being adamant that anime should continue to look like anime, fans still believe that there's room within the anime aesthetic for visual innovation and experimentation. Sixty percent of American fans—and 46% of Japanese ones—say that they'd like to see more shows that push visual boundaries.

Animation studio GoHands, for example—the driving force behind recent series such as *The Girl I Like Forgot Her Glasses* and *The Masterful Cat Is Depressed Again Today*—has carved out something of a niche for itself in this space, showcasing how CG-heavy shots and 3D renders can be integrated alongside traditional hand-drawn animation.[15] The studio's work has produced passionate responses, both positive and negative, from fans—but it does demonstrate that there's still significant room for boundary-pushing innovation within the genre.

15. Jonathon Greenall, "The Strange History Of GoHands, The Anime Fandom's Most Controversial Studio," CBR, July 8th, 2023



Ai Mie,
The Girl I Like Forgot Her Glasses,
Go Hands



The Masterful Cat Is Depressed Again Today,
Go Hands

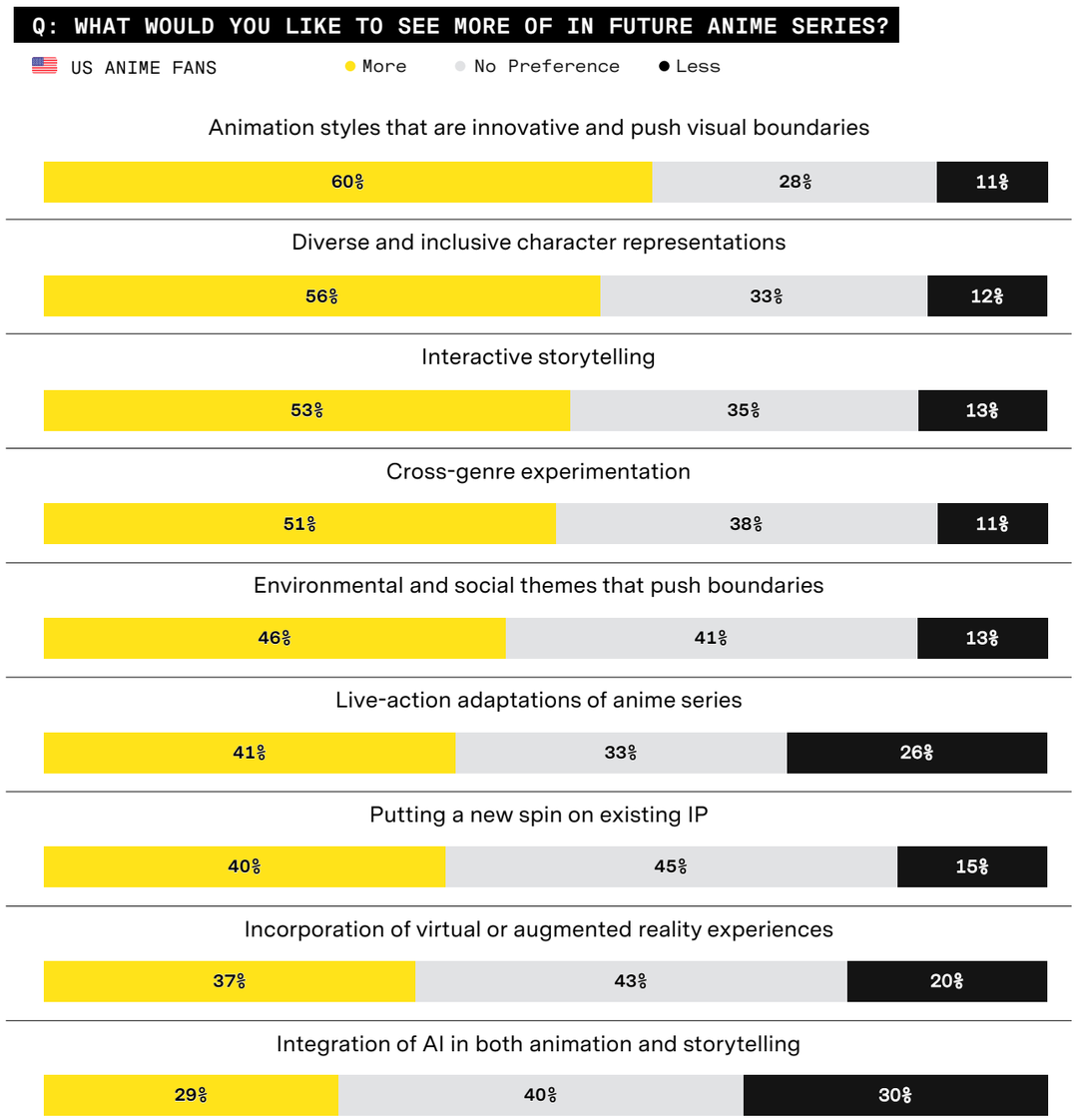
Interactive storytelling also shows solid potential.

This desire for innovation among fans also manifests itself in a considerable appetite for interactive storytelling, with just over half of US fans saying they'd like to see more of this. Outside of the anime genre, Netflix has been a leader in this space, offering subscribers access to interactive specials adapted from popular series such as *Black Mirror* and *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, as well as the children's cartoon *Captain Underpants* and the *Carmen Sandiego* game franchise.[16] Applying this sort of approach to anime properties could allow studios and streamers to give fans more of the franchises they love, while also indulging their desire for novelty.



Related to this, more than a third of American fans say that they'd be open to incorporating VR or AR elements into their anime viewing experiences. While interest here is not as strong as it is for other potential innovations for the genre, ultimately this technology is still in its infancy, so even a third saying they see the potential for anime to mix with VR and AR experiences feels high. As personal-use VR headsets continue to become more accessible to the average consumer, anime is likely to be one of the genres at the forefront of content experimentation, as media and entertainment companies begin to blur the line between TV, film, and video games. Notably, there's substantial overlap between the demographics where anime fandom has increased the most in recent years, and those that show the greatest openness to VR.[17]

16. Nicole Laporte, "Why Netflix is diving deeper into interactive storytelling," Fast Company, March 19th, 2019
17. Jia Rizvi, "Generation Z Gravitates Towards Immersive Tech-Driven Experiences," Forbes, November 30th, 2022



Live-action adaptations can be lucrative, if approached respectfully and sincerely.

Most notably, live-action adaptations have become a popular, if risky, option for studios looking to make the most of existing IP—but they're hardly the only game in town. *Death Note*, for example, had a sticky history with adaptations before finding acclaim as a musical, described as a "fever dream for fans" during its short run on the London West End.[18]

But live-action adaptations need to tread carefully and stay faithful to the source material. In recent years, live-action adaptations—of video games, comics, animated films, and anime—have become the go-to option for studios seeking to expand the reach and maximize the longevity of their existing IP. At their best, these adaptations can reinvigorate and add new depth to beloved classics; at their worst, they make enemies of their biggest fans.

It's a high-stakes gamble, though recent successes—such as Netflix's well-received live-action *One Piece*[19]—suggest it may be a gamble worth taking, **as it can drive a cycle of holistic engagement spanning an anime franchise's full range of offerings.** In its latest batch of viewership figures, Netflix reported that their live action *One Piece* adaptation helped to drive up viewing numbers for the original *One Piece* anime series and films, generating around 50 million additional views for *One Piece* content in the second half of 2023.[20]



Luffy, *One Piece*, Toei Animation



Death Note: The Musical in Concert 2023, Mark Senior/Carter Dixon McGill Ltd.

Q: WHAT ELEMENTS OF AN ANIME WOULD YOU WANT TO SEE PRESERVED IN THE TRANSITION TO A LIVE-ACTION ADAPTATION?

US ANIME FANS

#1 The anime's lore and backstory **72%**		
#2 The main characters **71%**	#3 The themes and messages **69%**	#4 The world and setting **68%**
#5 The character relationships **68%**	#6 The plot **67%**	#7 The overall tone and mood **67%**
#8 The overall aesthetics **65%**	#9 The moral message **65%**	#10 The ending of the series **65%**

18. Ryan Bamsey, "Death Note: The Musical Is A Fever Dream," The Gamer, September 19th, 2023
19. Izzy Friedman, "Review: Netflix's 'One Piece' has Broken the Live-Action Curse," The Cosmic Circus, September 1st, 2023
20. Katie Campione, "Netflix Releases Another Batch of Viewership Data", Deadline, May 23rd, 2024

Video games are a key avenue for engagement.

Despite the recent surge of interest in live-action TV and film adaptations, it's actually *video game* adaptations of anime franchises that American fans are most excited to engage with. Eighty-four percent of US anime fans say that they would either be "definitely" or "somewhat" interested in playing a video game adaptation of one of their favorite anime franchises.

No series illustrates the interconnectedness of anime and gaming culture as much as *Sword Art Online*. Originally a popular light novel series by Reki Kawahara about players of near-future virtual reality video games, the franchise received both an anime adaptation and its first video game adaptation around the same time in the early 2010s, creating a complex and overlapping fandom of manga enthusiasts, anime viewers, and video gamers.

Q: HOW OPEN ARE YOU TO ENGAGING WITH ANIME FRANCHISES IN THE FOLLOWING NEW WAYS?

TOP 10 BASED ON US FAN INTEREST



Playing a video game based on an anime series

US #1 | JP #3



Attending anime film screenings or premieres

US #2 | JP #6



Watching spin-off shows of existing anime series

US #3 | JP #1



Buying merchandise

US #4 | JP #4



Visiting anime-themed cafes or restaurants

US #5 | JP #5



Attending anime conventions or events

US #6 | JP #12



Reading light novels or manga spin-offs

US #7 | JP #2



Watching live-action adaptations of anime series

US #8 | JP #7



Participating in online fan communities or forums

US #9 | JP #15



Listening to anime-related podcasts or radio shows

US #10 | JP #11

FORCE #4

CRAVING COMMUNITY

Anime fans in America are highly creative and engaged, and are exporting their unique brand of fandom back to Japan.

The most zealous fans look beyond the series itself in search of even deeper engagement. **Like their Japanese peers, many Americans are finding that keeping up to date with the latest manga, buying branded merchandise, and reading anime magazines are fun ways to indulge in more of what they love.** For example, following on from the popularity of *One Piece*, a pop-up store is crossing the seas to bring Japanese merchandise to American shores in LA and a *One Piece* themed cafe will soon be opening its doors in Las Vegas.[21]

And in both markets, it's women who—despite being the minority among anime fans—are the key drivers of many forms of fan expression. While men are marginally more likely to read manga or buy physical magazines about anime, women show significantly more interest in buying merchandise, posting about anime online, writing or reading fan fiction, and creating or seeking out fan art.

It should be noted, however, that forms of in-person engagement are considerably more popular with US fans. Japanese fans, by contrast, prefer to express their fandom through activities that don't require attending in-person events or gatherings.

And indeed, one of the biggest differences between the two markets can be seen in the different role that conventions play within the fandom; US anime fans are four times more likely than Japanese fans to express interest in attending conventions. These events have seen an explosion in popularity in recent years, with last year's Anime Expo in Los Angeles, for example, playing host to nearly 400,000 fans from more than 60 different countries, generating an estimated impact of over $100 million on the local economy.[22]

PERCENTAGE OF ANIME FANS WHO...

Attend conventions

20% | 5%

Make costumes or follow cosplayers online

13% | 4%



Anime Expo, Los Angeles Anime Convention

While conventions certainly exist in Japan as well, many of the largest events—such as Comiket or AnimeJapan—are more akin to industry trade shows than the kind of fan-driven events seen in the US and other Western markets. In Japan, these events are primarily forums for publishers and individual artists to showcase new releases and sell doujinshi (self-published manga collections), rather than opportunities for attendees to connect with one another, attend fan panels, and participate in activities like cosplay.[23]

There are signs, however, that this is one area where American fans may be exporting their own brand of anime fandom back to the genre's homeland. Some newer events, such as Tokyo Comic Con, appear to be emulating the American model of community-driven conventions,[24] while longstanding events such as Comiket have taken steps in recent years to relax some of their cosplay policies. Anime, it turns out, is not a unidirectional cultural export; rather, it's a two-way street, with Western and Japanese forms of fan expression in constant dialogue with one another.

Right now, anime in America has something of a dual existence. Even as it permeates the cultural mainstream, bringing in legions of more casual viewers, it continues to enjoy a cult status among the most devout fans—fans for whom their love of the genre is a core part of their very identity. And indeed, these fans are craving even more diverse experiences and opportunities to connect with the genre and show off their loyalty to it.

21. Evan Valentine, "World's Largest One Piece Store to Bring Pop-Up to Los Angeles," Comic Book, July 2nd, 2024
22. "Anime Expo 2023 Celebrates 32nd Anniversary with Attendees from Over 60 Countries, Over 400 Exhibitors and 1,000 Hours of Programming," Anime News Network, August 9th, 2023
23. Ginger Gaiden, "Anime Events in Japan Are VERY Different From America," YouTube, August 31st, 2023
24. Kelly Agee, "Star-studded Tokyo Comic Con breaks attendance record," Stars and Stripes, December 13th, 2023

Q: WHAT ARE SOME WAYS IN WHICH YOU CURRENTLY ENGAGE/INTERACT WITH ANIME SERIES?

TOP 10 US VS JP



Talk to friends and family about anime

US #1 | JP #2



Buy merchandise

US #2 | JP #6



Read content online about anime

US #3 | JP #4



Read the latest manga

US #4 | JP #1



Watch or make videos about anime series

US #5 | JP #3



Watch or contribute to the TikTok/ Instagram anime community

US #6 | JP #10



Look at or create fan art about anime series

US #7 | JP #9



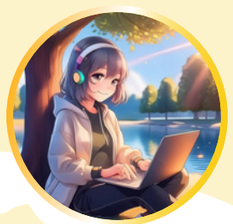
Post about anime series on social media

US #8 | JP #12



Listen to or make covers of anime series opening songs

US #9 | JP #5



Read or write fan fiction about anime series

US #10 | JP #11

Anime fans are keen to pursue fresh but familiar forms of engagement with the genre.

For example, **fans like the idea of seeing anime series on the big screen.** This is already a regular form of engagement with the genre for fans in Japan, where sequels and prequels to popular anime series often do well at the box office, and highly anticipated episodes—such as this year's "Shibuya Incident" arc of *Jujutsu Kaisen*—are occasionally given a limited theatrical release.[25]

But in recent years, theatrical anime titles have increasingly found their way to movie theaters in the US and other Western markets, often at the hands of specialist distributors such as Crunchyroll and GKIDS. *The End of Evangelion*, for example—often cited by critics as one of the greatest animated films of all time[26]—finally received a theatrical release in the US earlier this year, almost three decades after its 1997 premiere in Japan.[27] More recently, *Demon Slayer: Mugen Train* enjoyed a successful theatrical run in 2020, grossing $50 million in the US[28]—its second-largest market after Japan.

For the most part, however, the success of these films outside of Japan has been modest so far; *Haikyu!! The Dumpster Battle*—the second-highest grossing film of 2024 in Japan to date[29]—brought in just under $7 million at the US box office. But it's possible that the first true breakout box office hit in the US may be on the horizon, as almost 8 in 10 American anime fans say that they'd be open to attending anime film screenings or premieres in the future.



TOP 5 MARKETS FOR HAIKYU!! THE DUMPSTER BATTLE

AS OF JUNE 17TH 2024[30]

Japan	$70,191,392
USA	$6,801,028
South Korea	$4,721,881
Hong Kong	$1,671,075
Mexico	$1,140,745



Tobio and Shoyo,
Haikyu!! The Dumpster Battle,
Production I.G

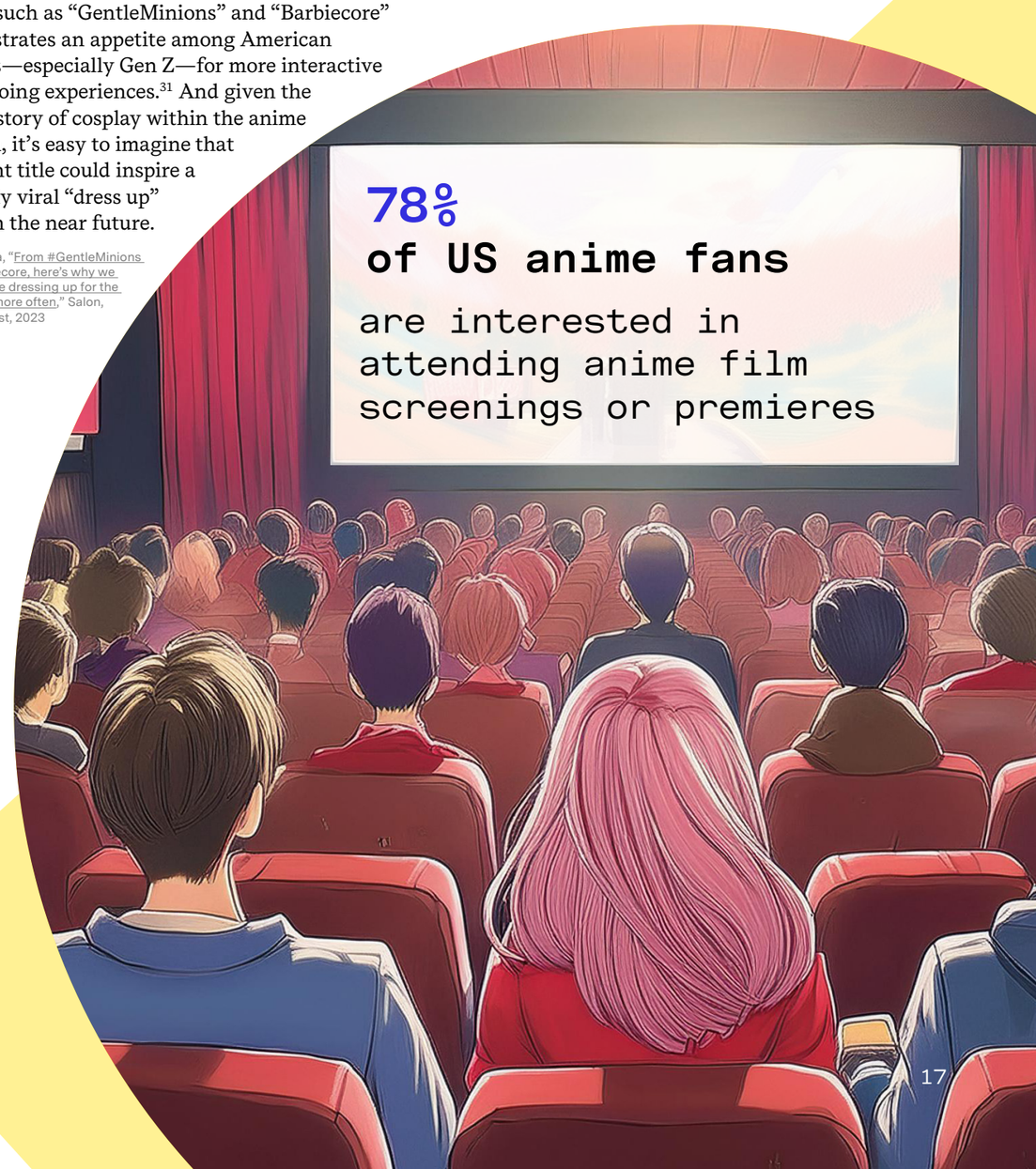
25. Ami Nazru, "Jujutsu Kaisen Season 2 Select Episodes Get Limited Theatrical Screening in Japan," IMDB, March 5th, 2024
26. Hannah Collins, "Neon Genesis Evangelion: The Best Viewing (and Reading) Order," CBR, September 9th, 2021
27. Oliver Brandt, "The End of Evangelion Is Getting A Theatrical Release In The US," Men's Journal, February 22nd, 2024
28. Demon Slayer: Mugen Train, Box Office Mojo
29. Japanese Box Office for 2024, Box Office Mojo
30. Haikyuu!! The Dumpster Battle (2024), Box Office Mojo

A big part of the appeal of theatrical screenings is the fact that they help to **turn anime viewing into an event**, giving viewers another opportunity to display their love of their favorite franchises and connect with like-minded fans in the real world.

Anime distributors in the US, therefore, ought to lean into the inherently social nature of the theatrical experience when promoting their new releases. The success of recent social media trends such as "GentleMinions" and "Barbiecore" demonstrates an appetite among American viewers—especially Gen Z—for more interactive moviegoing experiences.[31] And given the long history of cosplay within the anime fandom, it's easy to imagine that the right title could inspire a similarly viral "dress up" trend in the near future.

31. Joy Saha, "From #GentleMinions to Barbiecore, here's why we should be dressing up for the movies more often," Salon, August 1st, 2023

Ultimately, anime fandom is a uniquely creative one—and many viewers are drawn to the genre specifically because of the opportunities it provides for personal creative expression. Creating more opportunities for fans to engage in this type of expression, and to share the results with fellow members of the fan community, will be vital for securing the continued growth and expansion of the genre in the US.



By embracing these forces, studios and streaming platforms will be well-positioned to capitalize on anime's global ascendancy.

For studios and streamers, the extraordinary expansion of anime fandom is rife with potential, though the biggest rewards will be reserved for those who are able to grasp and harness these forces driving anime's future by:

Supporting cultural exchange

Recognizing that anime is part of a two-way cultural conversation, not only exporting Japanese content to the West but creating and distributing stories that explore Western narratives and helping Japanese fans indulge their growing appetite for Western-style fandom.

Showcasing greater diversity

Promoting greater representation across the genre, in recognition of the racially and culturally diverse fan base of anime in the US and elsewhere.

Staying open to innovation

Experimenting with new technologies and storytelling formats that give fans new ways of experiencing anime without losing sight of what they love about it in the first place.

Encouraging passionate engagement

Embracing the fans at the forefront of anime's US takeover by creating opportunities for them to express their uniquely creative brand of fandom.



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Semiotic Analysis by Madoka Suganuma

SEMIOTICS & METHODOLOGY CONTINUED

NRG worked in partnership with Japanese semiotician Madoka Suganuma to identify the symbolic codes behind some of the most successful anime series to unpack the cultural frameworks that underpin successful anime series today.

Data on long-term franchise trends comes from Franchise IQ, an NRG research program that measures consumer attitudes towards over 800 entertainment franchises. Data for this program is collected on a weekly basis by surveying 3,000 US consumers, ages 13 to 64.

Franchise IQ is a market-leading tracking product that measures consumer attitudes towards entertainment franchises—defined as IP with multiple consumer touchpoints across different forms of media or (planned) spin-offs, remakes, reboots, or prequels. This tracker operates in the US as well as 10 key international markets, using over 50 unique metrics to capture a full picture of franchise health.

To learn more about Franchise IQ, reach out to the team at FranchiseIQ@nrgmr.com

Looking to conduct a similar study? The Content Development & Marketing Strategy practice at NRG empowers studios, networks, streamers, and content creators worldwide to make strategic decisions. We offer custom solutions and innovative approaches, partnering with top entertainment brands throughout the content lifecycle—from concept development to marketing, post-release, and franchise extensions. Our focus is on delivering excellence in project management and storytelling while building lasting client relationships. For more information, contact Katie.Kelley@nrgmr.com

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