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1. **MATT GUINIBERT**

2. Auckland University of Technology (AUT)

3. **JO PAGE**

4. Auckland University of Technology (AUT)

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9. **That time I was reincarnated**
10. **as a problematic trope:**
11. **Viewer preferences**
12. **and cultural trends in**
13. **reincarnation isekai anime**
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26. **ABSTRACT**

27. *The genre of reincarnation isekai anime, wherein a protagonist dies in their*
28. *original world only to be reborn in a fantastical one, has grown significantly in*
29. *global appeal. Yet, this genre's expansion also normalizes controversial themes*
30. *such as mental health issues, sexual and violent content, and the sexualisation*
31. *of virtual minors. This article employs a data-driven approach, analysing user-*
32. *generated coding of themes and properties from English-speaking fan sites, to*
33. *critically examine three emergent and interconnected dimensions: the success of*
34. *series deemed 'trashy', the complexities surrounding sexual themes, and the rising*
35. *appeal of the 'zero-to-hero' motif in a post-pandemic world. The findings reveal*
36. *a paradoxical allure of 'trashy' but popular content, complex ethical dilemmas*
37. *surrounding sexual themes, and an increased resonance of empowerment motifs*
resulting from the pandemic. These discoveries provoke renewed discussions on

KEYWORDS

isekai tensei
maladaptive media
consumption
escapism
virtual minors
trash sells
data-driven

anime's role in shaping and reflecting societal values and raise questions about regulatory challenges in a globalized media setting. The study confirms the need for more nuanced understandings of the genre's growing global influence, particularly outside of Japan, and calls for continued research to delve deeper into its complexities.

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INTRODUCTION

The genre of reincarnation *isekai* ('other world') anime ('Japanese animation'), wherein a protagonist dies in their original world only to be reborn in a fantastical one, has gained considerable popularity in recent years. As the genre expands its audience imparting the exploration of benign themes such as action, fantasy and romantic harem, it potentially also serves to normalize controversial areas such as mental health, sexual and violent themes, and the sexualisation of minors. Additionally, this genre has seen a rise in the 'zero-to-hero' theme, a narrative motif that resonates strongly in a world disrupted by the pandemic, embodying viewers' desires for escapism.

Examination of such problematic themes in manga and anime is nothing new, with harsh critiques following the 1989 'Otaku Killer' (an infamous murderer who was obsessed with anime) who kidnapped and killed girls (Azuma 2009). Further examination of the *isekai* genre has been conducted, e.g., Lu (2020) or Muhamed (2020). This study seeks to add to this burgeoning body of knowledge by focusing specifically on the reincarnation *isekai* sub-genre using data collected from English-speaking audience fan sites to explore these problematic themes. Three interrelated aspects will be examined in detail: the dichotomy between well-rated series and those considered 'trashy', yet successful; the influence and challenges of sexual themes, including the sexualisation of virtual minors; and the growing prominence of the 'zero-to-hero' motif, particularly in the wake of the global pandemic. By examining the themes that define and characterize this genre using a data-driven approach sourced from English-speaking audiences' user-generated coding of themes and properties of these anime, this study aims to provide an understanding of this burgeoning genre as perceived by audiences outside the Japanese domestic market, and in turn, offer insights into the potential societal and cultural factors that influence its appeal.

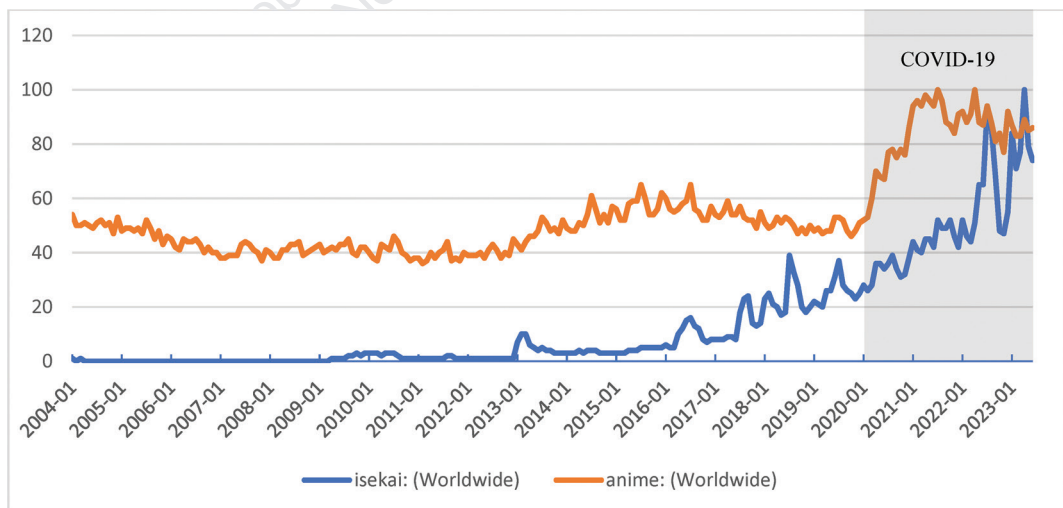
THE EXPLOSIVE GROWTH OF ISEKAI

Anime is growing in popularity outside of its domestic Japanese market. In a report from the Association of Japanese Animations (2022), the overseas revenue spends have surpassed that of the domestic market and the total global revenue reached 2.74 trillion Yen (USD 18.5 billion) in 2021. Western market researchers give similar figures for this period and estimated the global market size had risen to USD 28.6 billion in 2022; they further predict an annual growth rate of 9.8 per cent through to 2030 (Grand View Research 2021). To contextualize this figure, Netflix's revenue was \$31.6 billion in 2022 (Statista 2023). Crunchyroll, a western streaming platform specifically for anime, reported it had 120 million registered users and 5 million paying members in 2021 (Crunchyroll 2021). Current Crunchyroll statistics are not available for total registered users, however, Crunchyroll was acquired by Sony and merged with Funimation which saw the paying members double

1. to 10 million in a year (Sony 2022). These statistics all build a picture of a
 2. rising global demand for anime. This surge in interest can be viewed and
 3. dated using Google Trends (2023a, 2023b), which reports a sharp increase
 4. in interest in the search term 'anime' starting around the beginning of 2020
 5. (Figure 1).

6. Correlating with the increasing global consumption of anime, is the rising
 7. consumption of a genre of anime called *isekai* ('different world' or 'other
 8. world'). Isekai anime is currently one of the most popular genres of anime.
 9. One in five anime released in 2021 on Crunchyroll were isekai (Crunchyroll
 10. 2022), and a total of 312 complete or proposed anime currently occupy this
 11. genre (MyAnimeList 2023) (note: seasons and format changes are counted as
 12. separate titles in anime). The isekai genre typically involves a character either
 13. being transported or reincarnated into another world. This chapter focuses on
 14. the latter and extremely popular reincarnation sub-genre.

15. The observed increase in interest for anime beginning in 2020 aligns
 16. temporally with the global outbreak of COVID-19 and the ensuing world-
 17. wide lockdowns (visualized by the grey area in Figure 1). The nature of the
 18. pandemic led to an unprecedented shift towards home-bound activities and
 19. a stronger reliance on the internet for socializing and entertainment, which
 20. may have served as a catalyst for the increased interest in anime. The inter-
 21. net, a longstanding hub for anime fans (Azuma 2009), likely enabled broader
 22. exposure to anime communities as socialization shifted online. Further, the
 23. increase in digitally mediated conversations may have increased exposure
 24. to anime-related content such as memes and gifs. Streaming platforms saw
 25. massive growth during 2020–21 driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (Spangler
 26. 2022; AJA 2022), and thus further increased accessibility of anime for Western
 27. audience engagement. While Google Trends highlights a concurrent rise in
 28. anime interest with the pandemic, it does not imply causation. The pandemic
 29. context likely influenced this trend, suggesting an association between
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 51. Figure 1: Google Trends (2023a, 2023b) recorded levels of interest for the search terms 'isekai' and 'anime'.
 52. The grey area indicates the COVID-19 pandemic.

lockdown-induced digital entertainment demand and anime's increased popularity.

WHAT IS AN ISEKAI?

Isekai animes are stories in which the protagonist is transported from their ordinary world to a parallel or 'other' world. The typical worlds found in isekai are pseudo-medieval European or Victorian sword-and-sorcery fantasy settings, while other settings typically draw on wider clichés found in fantasy, sci-fi and role-playing games (Muhammed 2020). Overwhelmingly, isekai draw on gamic elements found in computer-based role-playing games with characters either entering a game world they recognize, or a world in which common gamic conventions are present, e.g., having 'HP' or 'hit-points', 'MP' or 'magic-points', special items or equipment one might find in a computer game (Price 2021).

The protagonist is typically an everyman who must learn to navigate this new world, often bestowed with special powers or abilities which they must use to overcome the challenges of their altered environment (Lu 2020; Muhammed 2020; Price 2021). Alternatively, knowledge from the protagonist's previous life is used to succeed in their new life. The plots of such shows usually follow a hero's journey and are propelled forward by the main protagonist learning and growing while obtaining multiple love interests, wealth and power.

The appeal of isekai is commonly attributed to its escapist nature, which allows viewers to temporarily disengage from their realities and immerse themselves in the characters' adventures, providing a respite from daily life (Lu 2020). This escapism is facilitated by leveraging isekai tropes of an everyman protagonist (Muhammed 2020), and traditional fantasy tropes such as other-worldly settings, novel experiences and empowerment. The use of an everyman as the protagonist easily allows viewers to self-insert and immerse themselves in the story and vicariously experience a sense of adventure, empowerment and wish fulfilment. Isekai settings further reinforce self-insertion through world building, allowing the audience to explore and come to understand the parallel world's culture, physical properties, political situation or magical systems alongside the main protagonist. This includes navigating unfamiliar social structures, cultures and environments, providing viewers with a sense of adventure and exploration. The trope of protagonists growing in power, skill and social prowess may resonate with viewers who desire similar growth or wish to escape feelings of powerlessness in their own lives (Muhammed 2020). These facets of isekai are likely a key contributing factor as to why its popularity is growing exponentially.

WHAT IS AN ISEKAI TENSEI?

Common tropes used to insert characters into the parallel world include being pulled into a game, summoning, interacting with tools or books, portals and *tensei* ('reincarnation'). In *isekai tensei* ('reincarnation into another world'), the protagonist dies in the real world and is then reincarnated in a fantasy world with their memories intact. For some animes, the protagonist's reincarnation is a transportation, where they find themselves revived and as they were, but with some new abilities in a new world (Price 2021). Other animes take a more traditional interpretation of reincarnation, starting the protagonist from birth in a completely different body (sometimes this can be a new gender, mythical

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1. race, or object) but still with their memories intact. Typically, the protagonists
 2. of reincarnation isekai are male and older in the real world than in the other
 3. sub genres (Price 2021).

4. Most reincarnation isekai feature protagonists with negative elements
 5. in their lives prior to reincarnation. These can include but are not limited to;
 6. computer-game addiction, pornography addiction, being bullied, suffering
 7. from some form of abuse, being overworked, being an invalid, being *hikimori*
 8. (a 'shut-in'), not in employment education or training (NEET), lonely, or any
 9. combination of these (Lu 2020). Several reasons can be postulated for why
 10. this has become a common trope. First, it creates contrast; by portraying the
 11. main protagonist negatively in their original life, the show can create a strong
 12. contrast between their old life and their new life. Second, it justifies the rein-
 13. carnation; by making the main protagonist's original life unpleasant or unful-
 14. filling, the anime can provide a justification for reincarnation into a new world
 15. while also creating sympathy for the protagonist. Third, it allows for character
 16. growth; by starting the main protagonist off in a negative light, the narrative
 17. can provide an opportunity for character growth and development. A common
 18. plot device is to offer the protagonist opportunities to overcome their flaws
 19. or past mistakes in the new world and become a better person as a result.
 20. Somewhat oxymoronically, despite the protagonists' negative aspects, they are
 21. still portrayed as the everyman – a benign, humble and relatable character to
 22. help facilitate the viewer's self-insertion.

23. **METHODOLOGY**

24. This research utilizes a data-driven approach, integrating techniques of web
 25. scraping, data cleaning, descriptive statistical analysis and developing themes.
 26. The study aims to investigate the prevalence and popularity of diverse themes
 27. or tropes in reincarnation isekai anime.

28. The source for sample titles was extracted from two prominent west-
 29. ern online anime databases, 'My Anime List' (<https://myanimelist.net>) and
 30. 'AniDB' (<https://anidb.net/>). These platforms' detailed categorization of anime
 31. enabled efficient searching and filtering for reincarnation isekai anime. An
 32. initial exploration was performed exclusively on My Anime List, resulting
 33. in a compilation of 68 anime titles, encompassing formats such as original
 34. video animations (OVAs), TV series and movies. Original net animations
 35. (ONAs) were excluded due to the inconsistency of their records in databases
 36. and the scarcity or irregularity of user-generated data. The tentative list of
 37. titles underwent refinement, with titles either currently airing (incomplete) or
 38. yet to be aired being eliminated, yielding 45 titles as of 16 June 2023. In the
 39. context of anime, distinct seasons and formats are treated as separate titles.
 40. For instance, 'Konosuba', a renowned reincarnation isekai anime, constitutes
 41. five distinct titles, including two seasons of the TV series, a prequel TV series,
 42. a movie and an OVA. Consequently, out of the 45 titles, only 28 unique over-
 43. arching universes or narratives were present. These titles were cross verified
 44. with AniDB to ensure alignment with the study's selection criteria. There was
 45. a discrepancy between the two databases occurring on one title, so this was
 46. manually verified.

47. User-generated data was subsequently retrieved from AniDB using
 48. 'ParseHub', a web-scraping tool. This data comprised information on each
 49. anime title, the average user rating and number of rating votes cast for each
 50. title, and two sets of user-generated tags applicable to the title or the characters
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appearing within the show. The amassed data contained 2393 instances of anime tags (451 unique) and 4155 instances of character tags (759 unique). Each tag was categorized into larger themes by AniDB and many were accompanied by textual descriptors for each code. Thus, AniDB facilitated a crowd-sourced coding of the anime titles, encoding both the titles as a whole and the characters within each title.

Following collection, the data underwent a cleaning process via Microsoft Excel, involving the removal of irrelevant information, blank cells, and errors, and categorization of the data into meaningful units for analysis. The cleaned data was subject to descriptive statistical analysis, primarily comprising frequency counts of each tag to discern the proportion of shows exhibiting specific characteristics. Cross-referencing the titles ratings against each titles associated tags offered insights into the popularity of specific themes or tropes. This process also enabled the researchers to become well-versed with the data. The tags were then manually coded then grouped into themes. Once the themes and the constituent tags were assembled, the frequency and weighted average ratings were calculated to gain a comprehensive understanding of the isekai elements and audience preferences. The highest rated titles and tags were also explored as means to give credence to the themes. Likewise, information related to content indicators was analysed. Lastly, Chat GPT's code interpreter was used to provide software-assisted analysis to verify and refine the statistical analysis and themes.

The research sourced its data from AniDB, a publicly accessible website operating under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license. In accordance with this licence, appropriate attribution is given, and the dataset used in this study is accessible for public viewing and usage at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HCQMPX>. Given the public availability and anonymity of the data, the research presents minimal risk of harm to individuals. The validity of the study was ensured by the careful selection of the data source, the accurate collection of data from this source, and by using software-assisted analysis to corroborate results. The transparency of the data source, data-collection method and analysis methods allows the potential for replication by other researchers.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the rigorous methodology, the study is not without limitations. Even though all known complete reincarnation isekai anime titles were included in the dataset at the time of data collection, the dataset should not be construed as an exhaustive representation due to the user-generated nature of the data, which is susceptible to biases, mistakes and manipulation. Additionally, while the titles were cross-verified to ensure validity of selection, the tags could not be corroborated, thus limiting the study's ecological validity as the data was solely drawn from AniDB. While AniDB has large amounts of site traffic, including 1.4 million total site visits for June of 2023 (Similar Web 2023a), the content nature and the effort required to participate in voting and tagging may skew the contributing demographics. Finally, the absence of contextual descriptions attached to all tags (as opposed to most) could result in inconsistent application of the tags to titles. Also, the presence of these contextual tag descriptions does not guarantee consistent application by users either. Future research could address these

1. limitations by conducting a thorough analysis on the content of the titles by
 2. the researcher and engaging in viewer interviews to glean more comprehen-
 3. sive insights into audience perspectives.

5. RESULTS

6. **Reincarnation isekai ratings**

7. An examination of 45 titles, each having user-generated ratings, was
 8. conducted, and subsequently ranked. The mean score was 5.88 (out of 10),
 9. with a median of 5.62. The lower and upper quartile scores were 4.66 and 7.44
 10. respectively. The single title with the largest number of rating votes cast was
 11. 6657, whereas the lowest was 186, yielding an average of 1508 and median of
 12. 1126 votes cast per title. The potential of a relationship between total votes
 13. cast and ratings was explored, but none was found. *Mushoku Tensei: Isekai*
 14. *Ittara Honki Dasu* ('Mushoku Tensei: Jobless reincarnation') emerged as the
 15. top-ranking title, attaining a score of 8.61/10 with 2831 votes, whereas *Isekai*
 16. *wa Smartphone to Tomo ni 2 (In Another World with My Smartphone 2)* had the
 17. lowest score, at 2.92 with 2258 votes.

19. **Content indicators**

20. AniDB employs content indicator tags as a proxy for region-specific age
 21. restriction systems, such as the R-rating system, applying them to each anime
 22. title. The following table (Table 1) presents the frequency and average rating of
 23. the main content indicators:

24. Content indicators reveal that a significant proportion of reincarna-
 25. tion isekai anime contains violence (62.22%) and nudity (37.78%). Notably,
 26. anime titles with these content indicators typically receive higher ratings than
 27. those lacking them. The highest rated title tags echo the subject matter of the
 28. content indicators, and unsurprisingly come from two of the *Mushoku Tensei:*
 29. *Jobless Reincarnation* titles. The tags are 'coughs up blood', 'sex', 'pornography',
 30. 'torture' and 'voyeurism'.

33. THEMES

34. **Theme 1: Action and Violence**

35. As highlighted in the content indicators section, themes of action, violence
 36. and combat are prevalent in the dataset. In total, 21 unique title tags related
 37. to this theme were identified, including 'violence' (28 occurrences), 'collateral
 38. damage' (seventeen occurrences), 'fighting' (eight occurrences), 'war' (eight
 39. occurrences) and 'action' (31 occurrences). This supports the notion that action

44. *Table 1: A table of the content indicators present in the dataset, the average rating of titles featuring the content*
 45. *indicators, and the percentage of titles featuring the content indicators.*

46. Content indicator tags (applied to anime)	47. Average rating out of 10	48. Occurrences as %
49. nudity	50. 6.67	51. 37.78
52. mutilation	6.15	13.33
violence	6.04	62.22
gore	6.01	26.67

and violence are typical components of isekai anime, which is consistent with the findings from the content indicators.

Theme 2: Fantasy Setting

Reincarnation isekai predominantly feature a fantasy world, often equipped with unique rules, creatures and societal structures. This is evidenced by 41 out of 45 titles tagged as ‘fantasy’ and ‘speculative fiction’, 28 as a ‘fictional location’ and 21 as ‘European stylized’. The average ratings for these tags ranged from 5.7 to 6, mirroring the average of all the titles. This suggests that the setting is an inherent aspect of reincarnation isekai rather than a unique feature of specific titles.

Theme 3: Mythical Creatures

The fantasy element extends to the presence of mythical or magical creatures in isekai anime. Eight unique title tags reflected this theme: ‘dragon’, ‘demon’, ‘elf’, ‘deity’, ‘fairy’, ‘juujin’ (human–animal hybrids), ‘succubus’ and ‘vampire’. The inclusion of such mythical creatures adds credence to the genre’s intrinsic fantasy storytelling elements and further emphasizes its otherworldly settings.

Theme 4: Swordplay and Magic

‘Swordplay’ and ‘magic’ were significant presences in the title tags, with the tag ‘magic’ appearing in 39 out of 45 titles (average rating of 5.94), and ‘swordplay’ appearing in 21 titles (average rating of 5.86). Furthermore, several subgenre tags related to magic, including ‘magic circles’, ‘visible aura’ and ‘magic weapons’, were also frequently noted. These findings reiterate the isekai genre’s alignment with common tropes found in broader fantasy media.

Theme 5: Humour

There were twelve unique humour-related title tags, with the tag ‘comedy’ being most prevalent at 32 occurrences and an average rating of 6.15. Clearly comedy is favoured in reincarnation isekai. Humour and light-hearted moments are often incorporated, serving to balance the serious or dramatic elements often present in these shows.

Theme 6: Ecchi

The prevalence of *ecchi* (‘lewd’ or ‘dirty’) content is evidenced by the abundance of related tags within the title tag dataset. Thirty-one unique title tags linked to lewd content were identified, with a weighted average rating of 6.32/10. This result echoes the findings related to the content indicators and confirms reincarnation isekai audiences’ preference for ecchi content.

Contrasting this preference for ecchi, however, are the lower ratings associated with traditional scene-based ecchi tropes, often used to place characters in suggestive situations. A common example would be that of a bathing scene to provide an opportunity for some form of voyeurism. The trope is so prevalent in anime that there are databases such as <http://animebathscenewiki.com> that catalogue the 1600 plus animes that have featured bathing scenes. Table 3

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Table 2: Left: Ten most frequent ecchi title tags. Right: Ten highest rated ecchi title tags.

10 most frequent ecchi title tags	Average rating out of 10	Frequency count	10 highest rated ecchi title tags	Average rating out of 10	Frequency count
ecchi	6.47	21	sex	8.43	2
nudity	6.67	17	pornography	8.43	2
skimpy clothing	6.50	15	voyeurism	8.43	2
Gainax bounce (exaggerated bouncing breasts)	6.39	15	borderline porn	8.25	1
breasts	6.71	14	sexual fantasies	7.96	3
large breasts	6.71	14	pantsu (panties)	7.77	3
furo scene (bathing scene)	5.85	13	sudden naked girl appearance	7.63	1
harem	5.72	13	uniform fetish	7.58	1
lap pillow	6.49	11	loli	7.58	1
boobs in your face	5.45	8	penis jokes	7.56	1

Table 3: Occurrences of scene-based ecchi tropes and the average rating of titles associated with these tropes.

Scene-based ecchi tropes	Average score out of 10	Frequency count
shower scene	7.16	3
lingerie shopping	6.44	1
furo scene (bathing scene)	5.85	13
hot springs visit	5.83	7
bath house visit	5.13	4
beach visit	4.95	7
beach volleyball episode	4.20	4
changing room scene	3.43	1

shows the occurrences of scene-based ecchi tropes and the average rating of titles associated with these tropes.

Theme 7: Loli

Evidence of the sexualisation of young characters can be seen in the dataset through the usage of tags such as 'lolicon' (featuring girls), 'loli' (an abbreviation of 'lolicon') and 'shotacon' (featuring boys) that denote young characters in sexual situations. The tag 'loli' featured in ten titles with an average viewer rating of 5.75. Further, two titles used the 'lolicon' tag, while the 'shota' (short for shotacon) tag was used once.

Theme 8: Zero to hero

Some reincarnation isekai anime explore themes related to a negative mindset, isolation, hikikomori ('withdrawn from society'), or being a NEET, potentially reflecting the mindsets or experiences of some viewers. This is justified by the tags 'NEET' (five occurrences) and 'lonely' (one occurrence). The weighted average rating for shows with these tags is 6.86/10, a full point above the total ratings average and clearly demonstrating such shows resonated with audiences. Additional tags further contributed to the idea of someone in a negative place, such as 'yare yare kei' ('an unmotivated character', five occurrences), 'trauma' (six occurrences), 'pessimist' (five occurrences) and 'bad luck' (five occurrences).

Following a protagonist's reincarnation, they often become extremely powerful in their new world, offering a stark contrast to their previous life. Ten titles were tagged with 'drastic change in life', three with 'zero to hero', and two with 'aim for the top'. In total 21 titles were tagged with 'nearly almighty protagonist', in which the titles featured a protagonist who becomes extremely powerful or overly powered and never experiences scenarios in which they might lose. The inclusion of gaining magical powers and fighting skills (Theme 4) further reinforces the idea of a protagonist who gains great power. Power also manifested as sexual power in the data set. For example, thirteen titles were tagged with 'harem', in which a male protagonist is surrounded by multiple female love interests. Two titles were tagged 'reverse harem', in which a female protagonist is surrounded by multiple male love interests.

DISCUSSION

The presence and prominence of the themes of action and violence, fantasy setting, mythical creatures, swordplay and magic, ecchi and zero to hero in the reincarnation isekai dataset reaffirm the prevailing understanding of the genre. These themes, each integral to the isekai genre's identity, are consistent with the broader literary context and expectations, reflecting established narrative tropes within the fantasy genre. This finding underscores the validity of the dataset and its alignment with existing literature on isekai. The discussion will therefore turn to how the themes reflect broader societal concerns, desires and anxieties.

Escapism

Many of the themes speak to ideas of escapism, notably themes, two ('Fantasy Setting'), three ('Mythical Creatures'), four ('Swordplay and Magic'), six ('Ecchi') and eight ('Zero to Hero'). The 'Zero to Hero' theme reveals a known pattern of isekai whereby a protagonist with some negative elements in their life dies and then is reincarnated to become a powerful hero. The similarity between the audience and the protagonist's pre-death scenario may have appeal to those seeking to engage in escapism. As demonstrated in Figure 1, there is a connection between COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns and the increased interest in isekai. The lockdowns had a profound impact on people's living situation and mental health. Those under lockdown conditions reported greater levels of loneliness, depression and suicidal ideation (Killgore et al. 2020). Furthermore, the lockdowns are noted to have had a greater impact on the mental health of young adults than other demographics (Banks and Xu 2020; Pieh et al. 2020), who are the greatest consumers of anime (Similar Web 2023b).

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1. The lockdown living conditions and mental state of anime consumers demo-
 2. graphic reflect those of the prototypical lonely shut-in reincarnation isekai
 3. protagonist. Viewers may have felt a sense of camaraderie with these characters
 4. and found respite in vicariously living through protagonists who escape such
 5. living situations to become powerful and desirable.

6. The desire to engage in escapism is a commonly cited cause for engaging
 7. in media use (Hastall 2017). Further, known causes for engaging in escap-
 8. ism, such as depression and anxiety (Hastall 2017), match the aforementioned
 9. effects COVID-19 lockdowns had on anime's target audience. Escapism,
 10. framed in this context, poses an interesting line of enquiry in this study's
 11. context; was this escapism adaptive (e.g. a positive means to repair one's
 12. mood), maladaptive (e.g. a means to further withdraw and engage in exces-
 13. sive media use), or both? Scholars have hotly debated this issue in the wider
 14. sphere of anime and manga since 1989 when Tsutomu Miyazaki, dubbed the
 15. 'Otaku Murderer', was arrested for the murder and rape of four girls (Azuma
 16. 2009). The timing and growth of reincarnation isekai popularity among west-
 17. ern viewers may suggest a new manifestation of this decades-old debate;
 18. that western viewers initially consumed isekai anime during lockdowns, and
 19. adopting maladaptive escapism, have continued to withdraw and consume
 20. more isekai forming a maladaptive self-reinforcing cycle. This may explain the
 21. explosive growth in popularity among western audiences. However, such a
 22. claim must be tempered as speculation drawn and therefore warrants further
 23. investigation.

24. **Trash sells**

25. *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation* top ratings position (8.61/10) aligns with
 26. expectations, given its derivation from a widely acclaimed light novel series.
 27. Contrastingly, *In Another World with My Smartphone* poses an intriguing
 28. scenario. Both the first and second seasons recorded significantly low rating
 29. scores of 3.43/10 and 2.92/10, respectively. This series is widely criticized as a
 30. clichéd and lacklustre isekai within the fandom, with the only unique aspect
 31. being the protagonist's ownership of a functioning smartphone in a fantasy
 32. world. However, the series was renewed for a second season, which is an
 33. unusual occurrence in the anime industry as most anime titles only get one
 34. season (Amaam 2016). Similarly, the same phenomenon of renewal of poorly
 35. rated titles can be seen in the title *By the Grace of Gods* and its sequel, which
 36. also recorded low rating scores of 4.44/10 and 3.33/10, respectively.

37. The renewal of low-rating titles suggests an intriguing trend in viewer
 38. preferences; even series perceived as inferior can captivate audiences and
 39. are consumed, or to put it more simply, trash sells. McCoy and Scarborough
 40. (2014) report on a similar normative contradiction in low-brow western media,
 41. where audiences condone television shows as 'trashy' yet still find themselves
 42. consuming these shows either as a guilty pleasure, or ironically. This phenom-
 43. enon can be seen in fandom discussions pejorative use of 'trash' to describe
 44. anime, exemplified in *Trash Taste*, a popular YouTube channel hosted by west-
 45. ern anime reviewers who frequently lampoon the isekai genre while consum-
 46. ing, reviewing and promoting it (Trash Taste 2023). This pattern indicates some
 47. understanding between creators and viewers that the allure of isekai can lie in
 48. its trashy appeal.

49. The effect of trashy appeal can also be seen when examining the results of
 50. scene-based ecchi tropes. Titles containing scene-based ecchi tropes weighted
 51.
 52.

average rating of 5.5/10 falls below the rating averages. These ratings results suggest that these conventional scenarios, despite being prevalent, are looked down upon within reincarnation isekai. However, the inclusion of these scenes' diminishing ratings should not be confused with a lack of success. As noted earlier, trashy content with poor ratings has been demonstrated to be successful by means of being further adapted. Twenty-one titles contained scene-based ecchi tropes rated lower than 5.88/10 (the dataset's average rating) and of these only four did not currently have or plan to have sequels or other anime adaptations, which is an impressive statistic. The success of low-brow content (discussed next) indicates that it is an important ingredient in reincarnation isekai, and further reinforces that ratings do not equal success and the notion that trashy reincarnation isekai sells.

Sexual themes

Japan's doujinshi market, inclusive of self-published and fan works, provides a platform for budding artists to introduce their manga or light novels. While many doujinshi infringe on original intellectual properties, their existence is tolerated due to the mutual benefits they bring to the manga industry, acting as a talent and idea incubator (McInerney 2018). Notably, Comiket, Japan's top doujinshi event, sees about a million attendees biannually, showcasing around 9 million doujinshi (McInerney 2018). Doujin sites like *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* ('Let's Become a Novelist') have birthed many iconic isekai tales adapted into anime, including *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*, which significantly shaped the isekai genre (Morrissy 2021).

In the West, doujinshi is often linked with erotic fan-made content, a perception fed by the sizable volume of such works. Although not exclusively erotic, many manga artists began with erotic content creation. These erotic works often provide these manga artists an initial income source and fan base. Notable examples include *Masamune Shirow*, the creator of *Ghost in the Shell*, who began and continues as a *hentai* ('erotic') artist, and Clamp, the all-female manga studio behind *Cardcaptor Sakura*, who initially produced *yaoi* ('homoerotic') doujinshi. Artists like *Toshihiro Ono* and *Nanashi*, associated with *Pokémon* and *Don't Toy with Me, Miss Nagatoro* manga respectively, have also contributed to the hentai genre under the aliases *Kamirenjaku Sanpei* and *774*, respectively. This widespread use of pseudonyms makes it challenging to quantify the extent of manga artists launching careers with erotic content, but the trend is palpable and appears to be influencing the nature of the content being produced in reincarnation isekai, which frequently launches new narratives in this same space. This can be seen clearly in the data collected, with just under half the titles including ecchi content, and the large volume of tags dedicated to categorizing ecchi content and character fetishes.

Sexualisation of virtual minors

The sale, distribution and production of child pornography is illegal in Japan under the 1999 Act on Punishment of Activities Relating to Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, and the Protection of Children (Japanese Law Translation n.d.). This act was amended in 2014 that made the act of possession illegal, too (LOC 2014). However, in both the original and the amended versions of the act, virtual child pornography such as illustrations of fictional characters is legal to both own and produce. The exclusion of virtual characters in Japan's child pornography laws allows for children to appear in romantic

1. or sexual contexts in Anime and Manga. This deliberate exclusion has been
 2. a topic of international debate, with organizations such as UNICEF weighing
 3. in and asking Japan to impose stricter restrictions (Reynolds 2014) and VICE
 4. News publishing a story called 'Inside the Pedophilic Manga Industry in Japan'
 5. which casts a negative light on the manga industry (VICE News 2022). The
 6. crux of the debate is (1) Does sexualizing virtual minors cause harm as it does
 7. not involve real children?, (2) What does this mean for freedom of expression
 8. laws in Japan? and (3) What are Japan's international obligations? (Takeuchi
 9. 2015). This debate persists as proponents claim it is very difficult to establish a
 10. direct link between virtual child pornography and child victimization, despite
 11. evidence of second-order effects.

12. While the lolicon and shotacon genres make only a minority of Japan's
 13. erotic content produced, they can be seen to have influenced anime in the data
 14. set. These genres in conjunction with other Japanese cultural phenomenon
 15. such as junior idols, the age of consent having been 13 and only just raised
 16. to 16 as of June 2023 (Ye and Inuma 2023), and the *bishōjo* ('beautiful girl')
 17. aesthetic (Galbraith 2019) to name a few, have bled into the mainstream of
 18. anime over time. This can be exemplified by a character trope in isekai anime
 19. in which a female love interest that forms the protagonist's harem is a prepu-
 20. bescent girl. Other common tropes involve female romantic interests who are
 21. from different humanoid races (e.g. elves or vampires) that look prepubescent
 22. or in their early teens, but are in fact middle-aged to hundreds of years old
 23. (e.g. *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*) or transform through some magical
 24. means between prepubescent body and that of a fully grown adult (e.g. *Isekai*
 25. *Nonbiri Nouka* [*Farming Life in Another World*]).

26. This dataset reveals a disconcerting lack of viewer discomfort towards
 27. content featuring the sexualisation of minors, as indicated by the absence
 28. of negative rating variance when compared to the dataset's overall aver-
 29. age rating. As sexualization of virtual minors is more heavily regulated and
 30. condoned by countries and markets outside of Japan, one would expect more
 31. social pressure on western audiences to denounce or eschew such content, yet
 32. the ratings data collected by this study suggests otherwise. Given the growing
 33. popularity of isekai among western audiences this is concerning for several
 34. reasons. Firstly, the content could breach other countries' law. For example,
 35. Australia has a zero-tolerance policy for child pornography, including virtual
 36. child pornography (Krone 2004). However, in a recent ruling, the second
 37. season of the isekai *Isekai Maou to Shoukan Shoujo no Dorei Majutsu Omega*
 38. (*How Not to Summon a Demon Lord Omega*), which contains loli content, has
 39. been effectively banned from home-video release in Australia by receiving a
 40. refused classification (RC) rating (McDonald 2023). An RC rating means that
 41. the show 'cannot be sold, hired, advertised or legally imported in Australia'
 42. as it 'falls outside generally-accepted [*sic*] community standards' (Australian
 43. Classification n.d.: n.pag.). However, the anime is still available on the stream-
 44. ing service Crunchyroll which presents both ethical and legal concerns on how
 45. streaming media can circumvent bans and local law. Secondly, while direct
 46. links are difficult to make between virtual child pornography and child victim-
 47. ization, 'experts have suggested that children are harmed by a culture that
 48. appears to accept child sexual abuse' (Takeuchi 2015: 230). With the explosive
 49. growth and subsequent revenue being generated by this genre, the poten-
 50. tial for maladaptive consumption, and streaming preventing traditional means
 51. of restricting access to this potentially harmful media, there are reasons for
 52. concern regarding the inability of nations to effectively regulate such content.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploration has unveiled the ways in which reincarnation isekai engages with both benign and controversial themes, reflecting broader societal concerns, desires and anxieties. Through the analysis of three interrelated aspects, the success of titles labelled as 'trashy', the nuanced influence and challenges of sexual themes, and the growing prominence of the 'zero to hero' motif, especially in the context of the global pandemic, provides insights into the dynamics of viewer preferences, creator influences and cultural trends.

The 'trash sells' phenomenon illustrates the paradoxical allure of content that may be seen as inferior yet captures audiences, reflecting perhaps a universal human penchant for guilty pleasures or ironic enjoyment. Meanwhile, the investigation of sexual themes, including the sexualization of virtual minors, underscores the complex relationship between creative freedom, societal norms, legal considerations, ethical boundaries and how streaming media can violate these. The pandemic-induced surge in consumption of the 'zero to hero' motif prompts the need for further inquiry into its psychological impact and broader societal implications.

These findings prompt further discussions on the role of anime in reflecting and shaping societal values, as well as regulatory challenges in a globalized media landscape. While this study contributes to our understanding of the reincarnation isekai genre, it also highlights the need for continued research. Given the genre's global impact and its evolving nature, there is an imperative for deeper investigations that can help us better understand its complexity and its cultural significance outside of Japan.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Matt Guinibert is head of digital communication, advertising and public relations at Auckland University of Technology. His background in digital media encompasses a diverse range of fields, including visual communication, user experience and interface design, technology-enhanced learning, and the strategies that underpin the use of digital media. His current research projects explore interdisciplinary topics within the field of digital

1. media. Matt is currently training as a data scientist to expand the methods
2. used in his studies.

3. Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland
4. City, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
5. E-mail: matt.guinibert@aut.ac.nz
6.

7.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4000-1724>
8.

9. Jo Page is a copywriter with a background in radio and journalism. Not
10. surprisingly words are her thing. With more than twenty years of experience in
11. the field of media communications, she now teaches on the Advertising and
12. Brand Creativity major helping students to find creative solutions to business
13. problems. Jo is embarking on research exploring how social media and word-
14. of-mouth advertising supports the growth of modern-day childhood tradi-
15. tions such as Dinovember.
16.

17. Contact: Auckland University of Technology, 55 Wellesley Street East, Auckland
18. City, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
19. E-mail: jo.page@aut.ac.nz
20.

21.  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6430-7779>
22.

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