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ARTICLE

Integrating Japanese *Dragon Ball* Anime Characters into Superhero Therapy: A Viable Approach to Motivating Substance Use Recovery

Ajibola Abdulrahamon Ishola^{1,2*} , Olusegun Akande²

¹ Department of Audiology, Federal University of Health Sciences, Ila-Orangun 234101, Nigeria

² Department of Behavioral Sciences, Lead City University, Ibadan 200223, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the inclusion of Japanese *Dragon Ball* anime characters into Superhero Therapy for the purpose of encouraging people with substance use and addiction to change. Drawing on qualitative data, the study looks into the nature of these characters, specifically Goku, Vegeta, and Piccolo, as symbols of struggle, transformation, and a second chance for personal transformation purposes. This study examines the role of pop culture characters from anime and cartoons in the process of emotional restoration of substance-dependent young people aged 18 – 35 years who are fans of anime or cartoons. The participants targeted in this study are 20 people selected from drug rehabilitation networks in Ibadan, Nigeria. Based on the screening results that followed the guidelines of Braun and Clarke, four analytical themes are outlined that describe how participants define pop culture characters as a source of motivation for developing coping strategies for personal change; motivation that is fostered through themes of overcoming, managing oneself, and social support. Furthermore, such Japanese culture motifs as *ganbatte* and *kintsugi* found in anime are revealed to strengthen such relationships, as these values contribute to participants' emotional repair mechanisms and provide constructive reaction strategies regarding substance dependence. This paper gives information on how anime and pop culture fictions can serve as therapeutic tools in mental illness treatment, using role models and culturally relevant characters and narratives that evoke emotional coping and recovery motivation.

Keywords: Superhero Therapy; *Dragon Ball*; Substance Use; Motivation; Recovery; Anime

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Ajibola Abdulrahamon Ishola, Department of Audiology, Federal University of Health Sciences, Ila-Orangun 234101, Nigeria; Department of Behavioral Sciences, Lead City University, Ibadan 200223, Nigeria; Email: ajibola_ishola@yahoo.co.uk

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses a growing contemporary societal concern: the interconnection of pop culture and emotional rehabilitation^[1-4]. People develop friendships with animated characters from movies, TV shows, anime, and cartoons, and such friendships play an essential part in defining emotional health^[4]. This paper seeks to examine how some of these connections can be utilized in the therapeutic process, especially in cases of drug abuse or mental illness^[2,3]. Alcohol and drug abuse remain one of the biggest concerns across the globe, especially in globalized societies where socioeconomic factors such as unemployment and environmental influences that sustain substance use are still on the rise^[5]. Akunna and Lucyann^[6] and Dukku^[7] gave reasons explaining that the use of substances in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria, is increasing. They equally attributed this to factors such as dissatisfaction with life, health problems, and social isolation^[6]. It becomes clear that dependency on drugs is not a simple matter; recovery is complex due to these major push factors^[8]. The reason for modifying behaviour is arguably a critical area in rehabilitation in addiction models, and knowing the push that drives the person to seek help or stop using is fundamental for any sort of intervention.

More specifically, the use of narrative such as pop culture stimuli, specifically ‘Superhero Therapy’, has become as popular for client engagement as they are profound in their benefits^[9]. Scarlet and Alves^[10] proposes a new intervention called Superhero Therapy, which uses fictions from the popular culture milieu to apply in psychotherapeutic clinics. This method consists in using characters from selected movies and books, so people can identify with characters, who represent hope and potential for change in life^[10]. It helps clients address issues connected to feelings of loneliness and concern with building relationships by interacting with characters as if the characters act as friends or support systems^[9]. Existing studies suggest that different types of parasocial interaction, where an identity forms an affective connection with a fictional character, can play a crucial role in emotional recovery and individual change, specifically regarding the youthful sufferers of mental health disorders^[11]. For example, patients with an addiction problem may need to identify with superheroes who overcome their afflictions as a way of

finding solutions to their problems and thus improve their coping mechanisms. Animated characters represent facets of the human experience, modeling how individuals should handle adversity and where they should draw strength^[12]. It is crucial that television characters can walk viewers through the journey of the disorders, as the Hulk did with dissociative identity disorder^[13]. Such involvement can help people facing similar challenges get to understand themselves better and accept themselves. Cartoon characters are also used because people struggling with drug abuse problems may also find similarities in the characters^[14]. It can help the viewers to lessen loneliness if they understand that other people also have similar issues^[13,15]. The benefits of people’s engagement with such narratives bring out the need for the use of pop culture to promote recovery from substance addition^[16]. In analysing the effects of “Superhero Therapy” and the effect of cartoon characters as symbolizing strength to help inspire people that are struggling to rebuild their strength, this study can add to the knowledge of how pop culture can influence rehabilitation initiatives^[12].

Japanese popular culture, particularly anime and superhero characters, has become a creative means in therapeutic practices, complementing the superhero therapy approach, which uses fictional stories for emotional rehabilitation^[10]. Fictional heroes like Goku of *Dragon Ball*, who have demonstrated strength, persistence, and transformation over the course of the anime series, are helpful for characters enacting substance use disorder^[17,18]. Other examples of context-relevant variables include attitude towards change and/or change motivation, support network, and the physical or social context. Third, possible reasons for wanting to change include self-dissatisfaction, health issues, and the need to reconnect with the family. It emerges that family support and peer pressure are relevant forms of positive and negative social support, respectively, in the recovery process; unemployment and living conditions are the environmental factors influencing the beginnings and termination of substance use. Inclusion of these variables in the particular therapeutic models may produce favorable results in the treatment of addiction^[10]. The given approach can therefore be applied based on the analysis of Japanese anime, namely *Dragon Ball*. The show has undeniably left a clear mark on world pop culture and provides complex story arcs that would suit peo-

ple of any age^[17,18]. This show is based on the protagonist Goku, a Saiyan who embarks upon a mission to strengthen his fighting abilities and evolves through the process of fighting strong adversaries who impart useful lessons pertaining to life^[17,18]. The struggles of Goku to continue his quest, regardless of the odds, demonstrate tenacity. Furthermore, the themes of friendship and self-discovery found in the series resonate with individuals struggling with personal adversities^[18]. In addition to entertainment, viewers can learn to approach the topic of a problem in psychotherapeutic ways, such as the problem of identity or/and the problem of coping with adversity, as discussed by Scarlet and Alves^[10]. As each of the characters and all their endeavors are described, the portrayal of characters is a useful vehicle for conveying inspiration, and depict practice lessons accompanied by possible strategies for dealing with adverse circumstances^[5]. Emulating characters such as Goku, Vegeta, and Piccolo who depict the values of hard work, transformation and the fight over personal/external turmoil can provide a reference point for those seeking help for substance use disorders.

Beyond the established framework of Superhero Therapy, the integration of popular culture and “geek” media into clinical settings is increasingly supported by evidence suggesting it enhances client engagement and facilitates the translation of complex clinical concepts^[19,20]. Research indicates that using media such as comics, role-playing games, and superhero narratives can serve as versatile therapeutic resources, broadening a clinician’s repertoire to address issues ranging from anxiety to substance abuse^[19]. For instance, the application of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been successfully adapted using superhero metaphors and missions, which helps youth visualize coping strategies as “superpowers” and behavioral activation as heroic quests^[21]. Furthermore, the specific use of Japanese media formats, such as Manga, has demonstrated efficacy in mental health interventions. Randomized controlled trials by Imamura et al.^[21] and Panto et al.^[22] found that an internet-based CBT program delivered in Manga format significantly improved depressive symptoms among workers, suggesting that the visual and narrative style of Japanese media is a viable vehicle for therapeutic content. This supports the exploration of “Anime Therapy,” where fictional narratives are used to foster recovery^[23]. Additionally, studies on role-playing games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, have shown that participants

can use their characters to safely engage with mental health difficulties, providing a structured environment to develop adaptive skills and resilience, which is directly relevant to the recovery trajectories of individuals with substance use disorders^[24]. Collectively, this body of literature provides a strong precedent for utilizing the specific narrative structures of *Dragon Ball* to support rehabilitation.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Mental health problems caused by substance use disorders remain a huge problem globally. It remains one of the biggest drawbacks of traditional forms of treatment is the lack of motivation to continue the recovery^[5]. While various interventions for substance abuse exist, relapse is still high, including those in Ibadan Metropolis. It is not uncommon for a person to lose the drive to stay clean and drug-free, as well as transform their behavior in a way that will ensure that he or she does not turn back to drugs. Growth and development of stress is fostered by the following: personal dissatisfaction, unemployment, peer pressure, and social isolation^[6]. In contrast, conventional forms of treatment can be quite useful but may not grab people’s attention like they should, especially when such individuals need fresh motivation and easily identifiable examples of what to do in order to manage or eliminate their difficulties^[8]. If one appreciates the naturalistic clinical treatment course, emphasis on discovering new therapeutic strategies that improve participation, promote individuals’ strengths, and maintain motivation for the change needed to improve behavior seems reasonable^[10]. Pop culture, in general, can be incorporated into therapy; for instance, using anime characters may offer another solution to increasing motivation, but what has not been discovered is how to meet the client’s personal, social, and environmental motives to recovery^[10]. Using references from pop culture, such as drawing from the anime *Dragon Ball*, allows for therapy to reach the human level^[18,25]. When it comes to developing characters, powerful figures such as Goku and Vegeta, who are portrayed as characters with the quality of resilience, change makers, or characters in the process of redeeming themselves^[17,18], may equally help certain people to have some forms of interventions, especially in the course of recovering from their addictions. Thus, their potential applicability in actual therapeutic contexts appears to be frequently uninvestigated.

1.2. Objectives

1. To examine the benefits of anime characters, especially from the *Dragon Ball* series, in encouraging motivation for behavior change in substance use recovery.
2. The purpose of the study was to evaluate how anime characters depicting social support systems impact substance use and rehabilitation efforts.
3. The study aims to assess how unemployment, peer pressure, and other environmental issues are handled within the context of anime-based therapeutic interventions.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study follows a qualitative approach and identifies the factors of the theme of emotional rehabilitation with relation to pop culture characters, anime cartoons, and cartoons. This investigation is well-suited to the qualitative research paradigm because, in this case, the researcher is able to gain a unique understanding of participants' experiences, emotions, and their perception of the existing, often interpersonal relationship with pop culture. Thematic analysis helps one determine and describe patterns or themes of qualitative data while catching meanings regarding how these various narratives affect emotional states and coping mechanisms, especially in relation to substance use^[1].

2.2. Data Collection

2.2.1. Participant Selection

Information was obtained from individually administered semi-structured interviews with 20 youths aged between 18 and 35 years who are substance dependents and self-identified as anime and/or cartoon fans. The participants were sourced from social media groups associated with drug rehabilitation anonymous groups linked to drug rehabilitation, and non-governmental organizations in the Ibadan Metropolis, South West, Nigeria. For the purpose of diversity, inclusion criteria entailed that participants must have watched anime or cartoons at least five anime series, and that participants must have a personal issue with substances or mental disorders. Participants were clearly informed before participating, and interviews were carried out in a private

and courteous manner.

2.2.2. Interview Process

Concerning the examination of participants' thoughts and feelings, the interviews were semi-structured, which provided sufficient variability, whereas certain issues were discussed in all interviews. These interview questions were centered on the participants' affiliative feelings towards the characters, perceived effects that these characters have on positive feelings or emotions, and self-reported substance use and mental health disorders. The interview guide included questions focused on participants' emotional connections to their favorite characters, the perceived impact of these characters on their emotional well-being, and their experiences with drug abuse or mental health challenges. Sample questions included:

- "Which anime or cartoon character do you relate to the most, and why?"
- "How do you feel these characters influence your thoughts and emotions?"
- "Can you share any experiences where a character helped you cope with difficult situations?"

Every interview took about 30 min–1 h; thus, the participants could state their situation in detail. Participants' permission was sought for the audio recording of interview sessions, whereby interviews were afterwards transcribed in full.

2.3. Data Analysis

The study adopted an interpretivist epistemological stance, acknowledging that knowledge regarding the therapeutic value of anime is co-constructed by the researcher and the participants within their specific socio-cultural context. We employed a reflexive thematic analysis approach, adhering to the six-phase guidelines established by Braun and Clarke^[1]. The analysis was predominantly inductive, allowing codes and themes to emerge directly from the participant data rather than fitting them into a pre-existing coding frame, although a deductive sensitivity to the theoretical framework of Superhero Therapy was maintained.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the process to document personal preconceptions regarding substance use and

pop culture, thereby minimizing bias and enhancing the credibility of the analysis^[26]. The specific phases of analysis were as follows:

1. Familiarization: Multiple readings of the transcripts were conducted to immerse the researcher in the data.
2. Coding: Initial codes were generated by line-by-line coding of the entire dataset, identifying semantic and latent meanings related to motivation and character identification.
3. Generating Initial Themes: Codes were collated into potential themes based on shared meaning and relevance to the research questions.
4. Reviewing Themes: Themes were checked against the coded data extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' perspectives.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: The essence of each theme was refined, and clear definitions and names were generated.
6. Producing the Report: The final analysis was written, selecting vivid, compelling extract examples to ground the interpretation in the data.

2.4. Literature Review

Apart from the structured interviews, a search of other secondary sources of information, including academic articles, journals, and internet sources addressing Japanese pop culture and its impact on the psychology of consumers, was carried out. This literature served as the backdrop for the findings in the present study and facilitated the place of the study into the body of research on pop culture effects on mental health and recovery. Academic articles, books, and

online sources were mainly focused on identifying themes and ideas that epitomize participants' evidence given.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

As for the method of participant recruitment, informed written consent and ethical approval for the current study were given by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were informed that their answers would be kept confidential and they had the right to withdraw from the study at their discretion. Each participant was read the research purpose and their data rights before they agreed to be interviewed.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic and Behavioral Characteristics

Table 1 serves to contextualize the study findings by presenting the demographic and behavioral profile of the participants. The data confirms that the sample comprises young adults within the high-risk age bracket for substance initiation and dependency. Furthermore, the high prevalence of co-occurring mental health issues such as depression and anxiety validates the complex clinical presentation of the participants. The data on anime consumption habits indicates a deep engagement with the medium, with the majority of participants having watched between 5 and 20 series. This substantial exposure supports the plausibility of using these narratives as therapeutic anchors for this specific population, as it suggests a pre-existing familiarity and emotional investment in the characters and stories.

Table 1. Demographic and Behavioral Characteristics of Anime and Cartoon Fans with Substance Dependency (N = 20).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–24	8	40%
	25–30	6	30%
	31–35	6	30%
Gender	Male	13	65%
	Female	7	35%
Substance Dependency	Alcohol	5	25%
	Cannabis	6	30%
	Opioids	4	20%
	Polysubstance	5	25%
Anime/Cartoon Series Watched	5–10 series	8	40%
	11–20 series	9	45%
	More than 20 series	3	15%

Table 1. Cont.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Mental Health Issue	Depression	7	35%
	Anxiety	6	30%
	Bipolar Disorder	3	15%
	Aggression/impulsiveness	4	20%
Primary Source of Anime/Cartoon Exposure	DSTV Cartoon Network	13	65%
	Startimes Toonami	7	35%

3.2. Thematic Analysis

Based on the reflexive thematic analysis of the interviews, four major themes were identified that describe the role of anime characters in motivating recovery: Sustaining Motivation, Social Support and Belonging, Coping with Environmental Stressors, and Redemption and Personal Growth. The following sections present these themes, supported by illustrative quotations from the participants.

3.2.1. Theme 1: Sustaining Motivation to Stop Drug Use

Participants frequently identified with the relentless perseverance of characters like Goku. The theme of personal agency was central, as participants drew parallels between the physical training in *Dragon Ball* and the mental discipline required for recovery. The Japanese concept of *ganbatte* (doing one’s best) resonated deeply with participants who felt empowered by the “never give up” attitude portrayed on screen.

One participant, a 24-year-old male recovering from cannabis dependence, noted:

“When I watch Goku, he is always training. Even when he loses a fight, he gets back up and trains harder. It makes me feel like my recovery is a kind of training. If I relapse, it’s just a loss, not the end. I have to get back up and train again.”

This sentiment was echoed by others who found that Goku’s journey encouraged them to take control of their own recovery journeys, viewing sobriety as a continuous path of self-improvement rather than a static state.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Social Support and Belonging

The isolation often felt during substance use was contrasted with the strong themes of friendship and camaraderie (*nakama*) in *Dragon Ball*. Participants emphasized how characters like Gohan relied on mentors like Piccolo and friends for strength. This narrative engagement motivated partici-

pants to seek out similar supportive relationships in their own lives, recognizing that recovery is not a solitary endeavor.

For instance, a 29-year-old female participant with alcohol dependency stated:

“I used to isolate myself when I drank. But watching how Gohan needs his friends to survive... it made me realize I can’t do this alone. I started going to meetings more often because I wanted my own ‘team’ like the Z Fighters.”

The concept of *wa* (harmony) was reflected in the participants’ desire to foster relationships that help in recovery, moving away from the loneliness of addiction.

3.2.3. Theme 3: Coping with Environmental Factors

The study revealed how participants utilized anime narratives to cope with external pressures such as unemployment and peer pressure. Characters like Trunks, who faced apocalyptic futures, served as models for resilience in the face of adverse circumstances. Participants reported that seeing characters navigate societal pressures and negative influences helped them develop healthier coping strategies, such as asserting boundaries against negative peer groups.

A 21-year-old participant dealing with polysubstance use explained:

“Krillin is not the strongest, but he stands his ground. When my friends pressure me to use, I think of Krillin staying true to himself. It helps me say no without feeling weak.”

3.2.4. Theme 4: Redemption and Personal Growth

Perhaps the most poignant theme was that of redemption, heavily influenced by the character arc of Vegeta. Participants who struggled with guilt regarding their past actions found hope in Vegeta’s transition from a villain to a protector of Earth. This narrative facilitated a sense of self-forgiveness

and the belief that positive change is always possible, regardless of one’s history.

A 32-year-old male recovering from opioid use shared:

“Vegeta destroyed so many people and planets, but he became a hero and a good father.

If he can change that much, then maybe there

is hope for me too. My past doesn’t have to define my future.”

This aligns with the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, where broken pottery is repaired with gold, emphasizing that one’s “cracks” or past mistakes can make the final product more beautiful and resilient (see **Table 2** below).

Table 2. Thematic Analysis of Perception of Character and Emotional Effect on Participants.

Major Themes	Key Concepts	Dragon Ball Characters	Role in Motivating Patients	Lessons and Emotional Strengths from Japanese Culture
Sustaining Motivation to Stop Drug Use	Personal Agency and Empowerment: Fostering personal agency in recovery is crucial. Individuals need to feel empowered to take control of their lives and make decisions that contribute to their healing process.	Goku	Goku’s relentless pursuit of strength encourages patients to take control of their recovery journeys, demonstrating that continuous self-improvement is possible.	The Japanese concept of <i>ganbatte</i> (頑張って) emphasizes perseverance and effort in the face of challenges, fostering a mindset of resilience essential for recovery.
	Community and Belonging: The factor of community support is relevant. Finding people with similar experiences helps build a network that helps individuals to feel that they belong, which is helpful in maintaining motivation.	Gohan	Gohan emphasizes the importance of teamwork and support from friends and family, motivating patients to seek connections and foster relationships in their recovery.	The Japanese word <i>wa</i> (和) emphasizes the community aspect, where individuals are encouraged to foster relationships that help in recovery.
	Narrative Engagement: Pop culture narratives help people focus not only on their problems to feel understood, but also on obtaining motivation stemming from characters’ experiences.	Vegeta	Vegeta shows that a change is possible, therefore encouraging the patients to have faith in themselves that they can work through personal issues.	Japanese culture places a strong emphasis on the fact that it is possible to make oneself into a better person after having had a not very good past behavior.
Problems and Needs Areas	Isolation and Loneliness: Friends and family who use alcohol and drugs usually get lonely and this makes them give up being around such important people. A part of developing social relations is the creation of supportive contexts.	Piccolo	Piccolo changed his role to a sensei, thus teaching patients the need to also connect with others during their recovery phase.	The idea of <i>omotenashi</i> is to make spaces friendly and inclusive that help people overcome feelings of loneliness.
	Coping Mechanisms: Individuals often lack effective coping strategies to handle stressors, leading them to substance use. Developing healthy coping mechanisms is crucial.	Trunks	Trunks’ resilience in facing adversity serves as a model for coping with challenges, inspiring patients to develop healthy strategies instead of resorting to drugs.	Basic Japanese ethical principles, including <i>wabi-sabi</i> (侘寂), view the broken as beautiful and the process of decay as natural and welcome, encouraging proper living.
Helping the Clients Develop a Reason to Quit Using Drugs	Negative Influences: Peer pressure and negative social environments can undermine motivation to quit. Addressing these influences is crucial for sustaining recovery efforts.	Krillin	Krillin’s ability to stand by his principles and resist negative influences motivates patients to recognize and combat harmful peer pressures in their lives.	The art of living in Japanese society emphasizes submitting to positive societal influences, ensuring that individuals avoid darkness and pursue light in their recovery journey.
	Utilizing Pop Culture Characters: Anime characters can be positive models.	Goku	Goku is the most wanted role model for people who are in the recovery process, as he has proven determination and a ‘never give up’ attitude.	The main lesson of <i>kintsugi</i> , or the art of repairing ceramics with gold, means that every crack in life contributes to beauty and sturdiness.
	Superhero Therapy: Different aspects of “Superhero Therapy” can be applied by therapists, so clients interact with either narratives and characters who face and overcome difficulties.	Vegeta and Gohan	These characters give lessons on transformation and effort, informing patients they can transform for the better.	The key message of <i>kintsugi</i> , or repairing broken pottery with gold, teaches that all cracks in life add to beauty and strength.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Perception of Character and Emotional Effect on Participants.

Major Themes	Key Concepts	Dragon Ball Characters	Role in Motivating Patients	Lessons and Emotional Strengths from Japanese Culture
	Cultural Narratives in Anime: Elements of “Superhero Therapy” can be utilized by therapists, allowing clients to engage with narratives and characters who struggle and succeed, facilitating discussions around personal issues.	Vegeta and Gohan	These characters illustrate lessons on transformation, showing patients that they can change for the better through effort.	The idea of <i>kintsugi</i> embraces both breakdowns and repair with the message that one’s past makes him or her stronger.
	Personal Growth through Struggle: Positive messages associated with anime, such as friendship, endurance, and forgiveness, can influence people.	All Characters	All characters’ development in <i>Dragon Ball</i> places importance on friendship, which commends that no one is alone in their battles and support is important for regaining strength.	The key message of <i>kintsugi</i> teaches that all cracks in life add to beauty and strength.

These transformations add knowledge from lessons and the strengths of Japanese culture to the table, enriching descriptions of the major themes and their implications for clinical psychology in drug rehabilitation.

3.3. Exploring the Impact of Anime Characters, Particularly from *Dragon Ball*, in Enhancing Motivation for Behavioral Change in Substance Use Recovery

Based on the respondents’ identification of characters, content analysis of the characters shows that motivational uses of anime characters, specifically those from the *Dragon Ball* series, are effective in substance use recovery. Writers used such characters as Goku, who comes to show that despite the setbacks you meet along the way, you should never give up on your training^[18]. This story can be recommended for use in presenting an identified patient with reminders of a role model of recovery that is close enough that a reader can see themselves in it. They also mentioned that Goku’s never give up attitude urged them to face their problems in rehabilitation processes. Besides, owing to different traits, it is also possible to mention redemption characters, one of the brightest examples of which is Vegeta. His character change from a selfish and ruthless man of war to a protective figure to his family shows that the public is always given second chances for redemption for the mistakes they made. Each story provides evidence that people can change their lives for the better and thus encourages others who are struggling

with substance use disorders.

3.4. Evaluation of the Role of Social Support Systems in Reducing Substance Use and Treatment, from the Anime Perspective

The narrative of challenges and losses in anime emphasizes the importance of social support. For instance, the power of community, which is represented by friends and camaraderie reflected in *Dragon Ball*, stresses the significance of community in rehabilitation^[18]. Scientific evidence also highlights how things like family and friends, like Piccolo and Krillin for Goku, can also help build a strong form of buffer and morale support for the character during such lean periods in one’s life. The study highlights the need to establish rapport with several other people, like those who are on a similar experience of quitting drugs, which has the ability to foster the development of belongingness and this has the potential to keep one motivated in the fight to quit taking drugs. Thus, participants claimed that watching characters’ interactions made them look for such relationships in their own lives, which supports the idea that it is not a single process. In addition, the issue of training/tutoring, as illustrated in the story of Piccolo, reveals the subject of change through help and support. The show demonstrates that having positive role models should be required for those in need of help, and the Guiding Light of Piccolo, as an embodiment of motivation for Gohan, illustrates that growth of new positive role models is paramount to choosing properly.

3.5. Analysis of How Elements Like Unemployment, Peer Pressure among Others, Are Handled According to Anime-Based Therapeutic Modalities

The discussion also reveals the ways that different features of the environment, such as unemployment and pressure from peers, are depicted in different anime stories. *Dragon Ball*'s characters experience numerous demands from outside and the community's unkind forces, and such problems are similar to those faced by people with addiction diseases. For instance, during the school period, the academic pressure expected of children can put weight on them. Such a storyline may be familiar to some audiences and will make them think of ways they handle stress and come up with better ways of handling it. Also, identity plays a major role in anime since the characters are often presented with tests that are societal in nature. Characters who fight against such temptation are depicted in a show of strength, something that I believe everyone recovering goes through, for instance; when Goku was enticed to betray his friends but refused. In this respect, through focusing on these challenges, anime creates opportunities to employ enhanced coping strategies that do not involve substance use and thus aims at empowering people.

4. Discussion of Findings

The insights generated from this research contribute to understanding how elements of popular culture, animated television and films, especially anime, influence the process of character's emotional recovery in contemporary adaptations of pop culture. In doing so, this research adds to the knowledge base on the potential of therapeutic interventions, borrowing from the value of culturally familiar depictions of characters, social support systems, and environmental variables of the *Dragon Ball* series.

4.1. Effectiveness of Anime Characters on Motivational Beliefs for Behavioral Change

The study showed that use of the characters of the series like Goku and Vegeta is helpful to encourage people in the process of rehabilitation. It makes people get through their own problems by proving the strong will and self-empowerment of Goku in the anime. In the AR compo-

ment, participants said that Goku's journey motivates them to become agents of change and to keep pushing for improvement. This is well supported by the literature, which views inspirational figures as the key to building up hope and coping abilities^[27,28]. The change of Vegeta as a character exactly represents the theme that relates to the redemption of an individual, empowering the people who believe in the possibility of changing their evil nature and leading a better and healthier life. These results also support the importance of using relatable characters within therapeutic practice in order to build hope and growth. The concept of narrative identity suggests that individuals integrate these fictional role models into their own life stories to facilitate change^[29].

4.2. Mechanisms of Change: Psychological Needs and Empowerment

The findings of this study, which highlight the importance of social support and motivation, can be further understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Recent research on Anime, Manga, and Games (AMG) consumption suggests that engagement with these media fulfills fundamental psychological needs, specifically autonomy, competence, and relatedness^[30]. Participants in our study who identified with characters like Gohan to foster relationships, or Goku to regain control over their lives, may be satisfying these innate needs through parasocial interaction. This aligns with the concept of "Geek Psychology," where clinicians use metaphors from fandoms to translate clinical language into resonant concepts, thereby empowering clients to work through their problems^[20]. By viewing their recovery journey through the empowering lens of a Saiyan warrior, clients may experience a heightened sense of agency that traditional therapy models sometimes fail to elicit.

4.3. Source of Social Support

The study also underscores the importance of social networks in determining trends in substance use and rehabilitation based on Japanese animation images. Recall the relationships Goku built in *Dragon Ball*, which implies the essence of establishing rapport with individuals in a similar situation. This grasp made the participants feel the desire to look for friendship and family support, just as Gohan did, in order to face challenges. Using the idea of *nakama*:

仲間 (comradeship) from the Japanese rehabilitation culture, emphasizes the collective approach to attaining the adopted goals. Such findings are in accord with evidence showing that cohesive social support is essential for maintaining enthusiasm and avoiding backsliding^[31]. The emotional bonds portrayed in anime can serve as a therapeutic resource, encouraging individuals to prioritize their relationships and seek help from others.

4.4. Addressing Environmental Factors

The study also evaluated how environmental factors such as unemployment and peer pressure are addressed through anime-based therapeutic approaches. The challenges faced by characters in *Dragon Ball* often mirror the societal pressures and expectations encountered by individuals in real life. For example, Gohan's academic struggles and the weight of societal expectations resonate with participants who experience similar pressures, prompting them to reflect on their circumstances and seek healthier coping strategies. Furthermore, the portrayal of peer pressure in anime encourages viewers to resist negative influences. Characters like Goku demonstrate the importance of staying true to one's values despite external pressures. From this narrative, it is such a good reminder, especially for those who are recovering, to ensure that they do not give in to peer pressure; they can actually make good decisions. Scholars say knowledge gained from anime narratives may help society understand how anime as a form of art can help those in need to find ways of coping with resulting difficulties in society.

4.5. Narrative Structure and Recovery

The thematic analysis regarding redemption and overcoming adversity aligns closely with narrative structures identified in addiction recovery literature. Kiss et al.^[30] applied Propp's folktale theory to recovery narratives, identifying a shared "hero's struggle" against a villainous drug. The narrative arc of *Dragon Ball*, from struggle to training to victory, mirrors this structure, providing participants with a script for their own recovery. This narrative engagement is crucial for youth, who are increasingly self-accessing popular media for intervention. Hayvon^[32] notes that youth discuss using anime to rehabilitate themselves from addiction, finding character identification to be a source of hope and a

mechanism for reframing their struggles without glamorizing substance use. Additionally, Mahoney^[33] further documents the effectiveness and utilization of geek psychology, reinforcing the applicability of fandom-based frameworks in therapeutic contexts.

4.6. Culture and Emotional Resources

The work proves that the lessons, as well as certain emotional assets originating from the Japanese culture, are important in terms of clinical psychology and drug rehabilitation. Terms like *ganbatte* (頑張つて) refer to hard work and endurance, while *kintsugi* (金継ぎ) talks of strength in brokenness, and are all helpful models for people in the process of recuperation. These cultural messages support the concept of the pursuit of struggle for change, which is a therapeutic principle of building up strength and resilience. The emphasis on the community aspect, especially focusing on the subject of this paper involving characters in *Dragon Ball*, was an aspect that was widely embraced by the participants. The themes that reflect hope, friendship and persistence are so poignant in anime that they give people who have problems with substance use the right incentive to fight. The cultural specificity of Japanese anime appears to play a unique role in the emotional resilience of participants. Nurfitri and Rahman^[34] found that Japanese character education delivered via anime had a positive influence on the self-esteem and resilience of adolescents in drug rehabilitation. This supports our findings regarding the Japanese cultural concepts of *ganbatte* and *kintsugi*. The visual storytelling inherent in manga and anime allows for a form of "emotional transportation," where spectators detach from their immediate symptoms to experience emotions through characters, facilitating behavioral imitation and emotional repair^[23]. Therefore, the *Dragon Ball* narrative is not merely entertainment but functions as a cross-cultural educational tool that provides the scaffolding necessary for individuals to rebuild their self-worth and maintain sobriety. The present paper stresses the inclusion of elements of pop culture, such as anime, in therapeutic intervention to boost the process of motivation towards positive behavioral changes in substance users in recovery. It is in light of the findings from the examination of the *Dragon Ball* anime characters and the cultural discourses they reflect that it becomes possible to appreciate the role of emotional resources such as optimism and social relations as key prospects

for recovery. Therapists who employ these and similar narratives produce emotionally appealing landscapes for change that enable their clients to confront and overcome obstacles on their way to transformational solutions. Further studies should be an extension of this work, looking at how pop culture is depicted in mental health and how these narratives can be employed to help people in the process of recovery. Furthermore, related digital media interventions, such as video game-based approaches for withdrawn youth, offer promising complementary avenues for future research in this area^[35].

4.7. Recommendations

From the current study, the overall analysis suggested that embedding anime characters in the treatment concept of Superhero Therapy contains a viable strategy to encourage behavioural modification. Policymakers and healthcare providers should consider:

- Using Anime Characters to Address Personal Dissatisfaction: Goku may be used in therapy to teach clients constant progression and defensiveness against failures.
- Building Community Support Through Family and Friendships: *Dragon Ball* also focuses on the importance of family and friends, which may be used to guide the clients on the importance of family and friends in their rehabilitation process.
- Creating Employment Opportunities and Structured Engagement: Characters like Vegeta and Goku always train and level up; thus, the clients can always follow suit and remain busy in structured activities instead of idling, which may lead to relapse. A type of training that focuses on vocational skills can share the same call to growth as the anime, of not changing, but getting better.
- Leveraging Spirituality for Motivation: Thus, if it were to target functionality relevance, the motivation or spirituality, the themes constituting *Dragon Ball* can be incorporated into religious recovery programs to assure them that their process of recovery is part of an even bigger story.

5. Conclusions

Thus, the aim of the study highlights the engagement of characters and issues from Japanese anime, especially

Dragon Ball, into Superhero Therapy for substance use and addiction. Healthcare providers can effectively use relativity and commence motivation for change amongst addicted people using the principles of anime as inspiration and drive towards self-improvement and personal transformation, such as anime/live-action characters alongside cartoon characters. Counselling modalities like “Superhero Therapy” and demonstrating coping strategies using cartoons hold significant preventive strategies for children. Also, anime and Afro-Pop as cultural products have further relevance as discursive nodes that speak to themes of identity and are thus connected to the social story of love in the technologically advanced society. Understanding the value of and the need to engage popular media in clients’ recovery processes may help to improve the well-being of vulnerable groups of people.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.A.I. and O.A.; methodology, A.A.I.; software, A.A.I.; validation, A.A.I. and O.A.; formal analysis, A.A.I.; investigation, A.A.I.; resources, A.A.I.; data curation, A.A.I.; writing—original draft preparation, A.A.I.; writing—review and editing, A.A.I.; visualization, A.A.I.; supervision, A.A.I.; project administration, A.A.I.; funding acquisition, O.A. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Federal University of Health Sciences Ila Orangun (protocol code FUHSI/IRB/2024/001).

Informed Consent Statement

Participants were informed that their answers would be kept confidential and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at their discretion. Each participant was read

the research purpose and their data rights before they agreed to be interviewed.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data due to privacy and ethical considerations.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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