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The Representation of Ikigai in The Character of Ryohei Arisu in The Drama Alice in Borderland

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Abstract: *Ikigai is a Japanese concept associated with what makes life feel worth living and with the subjective feeling that one's life has meaning. This study examines how ikigai is represented through the character Ryohei Arisu in the Netflix drama series Alice in Borderland. The study uses Mieko Kamiya's thought as its primary conceptual framework, particularly the dimensions of meaning and value, resonance, self-actualization, change and growth, future orientation, freedom, and life satisfaction. A qualitative approach is employed through textual and audiovisual analysis of selected scenes and dialogues from the first and second seasons. The findings show that Arisu's ikigai does not emerge as a single fixed purpose, but as a process of loss, reconstruction, destabilization, and renewal of meaning. The deaths of Chota and Karube collapse his reason for living, while Usagi's affirmation, memories of his two friends, the ethical choice not to sacrifice others, and hope for a future with Usagi reconstruct that meaning. After his ikigai is reconstructed, Arisu demonstrates a clearer direction in life, greater perseverance, responsibility for his choices, motivation to learn and change, empathy, and deeper social relationships. These findings affirm that the drama represents ikigai as dynamic and relational: meaning may weaken when guilt and loss re-emerge, but it can be rebuilt through choices, relationships, and orientation toward the future.*

INTRODUCTION

Ikigai (生きがい) is often translated as a reason for living, a purpose in life, or something that makes life worth living; however, these translations capture only part of the concept. In Japanese studies, ikigai can refer both to an object or source that makes life meaningful and to the subjective feeling that one's life has value. Kamiya (2004) places life experience, hope, relationships, and the search for meaning among the important elements in the formation of ikigai. Therefore, ikigai is not concerned only with happiness, but also with a person's capacity to continue living, particularly when facing suffering, loss, or uncertainty.

The international popularity of ikigai has also led to conceptual simplification. Outside

Japan, ikigai is often represented as a four-circle diagram combining what one loves, what one is good at, what the world needs, and what one can be paid for. This model may be useful as a tool for self-reflection, but it does not originate from Kamiya's original framework and may narrow ikigai into little more than an alignment between work and passion. In this study, ikigai is understood more closely in relation to the Japanese intellectual tradition: as a sense that life has meaning and is worth continuing, shaped by experience, relationships, choices, and goals that develop over time.

Popular media provide an important space for examining how such cultural concepts are represented narratively. Fiction does not merely reproduce everyday life; it constructs situations in which values become visible through conflict, dialogue, action, and character development. In survival-themed drama, questions about reasons for living become particularly prominent because characters repeatedly confront death, loss, and moral choices. Alice in Borderland therefore provides a relevant context for examining how meaning in life is formed, disrupted, and rebuilt within contemporary Japanese popular narrative.

Alice in Borderland is a Japanese Netflix series directed by Shinsuke Sato and adapted from the manga by Haro Aso. The first season was released in 2020 and the second in 2022. The story begins with Ryohei Arisu, an unemployed young man who withdraws from social life and immerses himself in video games before he and his two friends, Chota and Karube, suddenly enter the world of Borderland. In this world, players must participate in deadly games to stay alive. This extreme change in environment forces Arisu to confront questions he had previously avoided: why he should live, for whom he should endure, and what values he chooses to uphold.

Arisu is relevant to a study of ikigai because his purpose in life changes dramatically. At the beginning of the story, he appears to have little direction beyond his friendship with Chota and Karube. Their deaths in the Seven of Hearts game produce intense grief, guilt, self-blame, and a collapse of meaning. Thereafter, his relationship with Usagi, memories of his friends' final messages, and the choices he makes throughout the games gradually reshape his reasons for living. This transformation makes it possible to read ikigai not as a fixed trait, but as a narrative process that can be lost and regained.

Previous studies have examined ikigai in relation to health, well-being, personality, and the Japanese self (Mathews, 1996; Kotera et al., 2021; Kumano, 2018). Other studies apply ikigai to fictional characters, but often rely on popular models or focus on the presence of ikigai as a relatively stable condition. There remains room to examine how ikigai in popular media is constructed as a dynamic process shaped by loss, interpersonal relationships, ethical choices, and future orientation. This study addresses that gap by focusing on changes in Arisu's meaning in life across the two seasons.

Based on this background, this study addresses two research questions: (1) what factors contribute to the reconstruction of ikigai in Ryohei Arisu, and (2) what changes are represented after Arisu regains a meaningful sense of ikigai? The study aims to contribute to Japanese cultural studies and popular culture studies by showing how ikigai is represented through character development in a contemporary survival narrative.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach and a descriptive-analytical research method. Close textual and audiovisual analysis is conducted on selected scenes and dialogues involving Ryohei Arisu in the first and second seasons of Alice in Borderland. The unit of analysis is not every appearance of the character, but selected narrative moments that directly reveal changes in his reasons for living, sense of self-worth, social relationships, choices, and orientation toward

the future.

Data collection was conducted in three stages. First, both seasons were watched repeatedly to identify scenes related to life purpose, despair, interpersonal attachment, responsibility, and future orientation. Second, relevant scenes were recorded together with episode and time information, while key dialogues were transcribed or summarized according to the needs of the analysis. Third, the data were classified according to conceptual categories derived primarily from Kamiya's thought on ikigai.

The analysis was conducted through contextual reading. Each selected dialogue was interpreted together with the events preceding it, Arisu's actions, his relationships with other characters, and the changes occurring after the scene; earlier and later scenes were then compared to identify transformation. In this way, the analysis does not merely ask whether ikigai is "present" in Arisu, but examines how meaning in life is formed, destabilized, and reconstructed throughout the narrative.

Kamiya's theory is used as the primary conceptual framework. Secondary discussions by Kotera et al. (2021), Kumano (2018), and Mathews (1996) are used to clarify ikigai as a form of meaning and well-being rooted in the Japanese cultural context. Ken Mogi's popular five-pillar formulation, which is widely used in other studies, is not adopted as the primary framework in this article in order to maintain theoretical consistency. The analytical categories are summarized in Table 1.

To improve interpretive accuracy, descriptions of the scenes are limited to what can be observed in the narrative. For example, when Arisu lies motionless, refuses to eat, blames himself, or states that his life has no value, this study describes these conditions as despair and loss of meaning rather than offering a clinical diagnosis. This approach is important because a fictional work does not provide sufficient grounds for a medical assessment of a character.

Table 1. Ikigai categories used in the study

Category	Operational reading in the drama
Meaning and value	Statements or actions indicating that life is worth continuing or that one's existence has meaning.
Resonance	Meaningful social relationships, reciprocal need, affirmation, or relationships maintained with others.
Self-actualization	Commitment to a personally meaningful mission that the character chooses to pursue.
Change and growth	A shift from previous behavior toward a new way of acting or understanding oneself.
Future orientation	Hopes, goals, or imagined future experiences that make life worth continuing.
Freedom	Conscious choices made despite danger, discomfort, or sacrifice.
Life satisfaction	A feeling that life is moving toward a personally meaningful or acceptable condition.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Collapse and Reconstruction of Ikigai after the Seven of Hearts Game

The clearest turning point in Arisu's narrative is the Seven of Hearts game. Before this event, Chota and Karube function as Arisu's strongest emotional anchors. Arisu has neither a conventional career nor a conventional social goal, yet he still experiences belonging and vitality

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through friendship. When the rules of the game allow only one person to survive, the relationships that had supported Arisu become the source of an overwhelming loss.

Immediately after the deaths of his two friends, Arisu's orientation toward the future collapses. He repeatedly blames himself and states that his life has no value and that there is no reason for him to remain alive. At this point, the central issue is not whether he meets the criteria for a particular goal, but that he has lost the subjective sense that his life is worth continuing. This condition reflects the negative side of ikigai: when sources of meaning disappear, a person may lose direction and the motivation to move forward.

Usagi's intervention begins the process of reconstruction. She first responds to Arisu's collapse in practical terms by giving him food and shelter. More importantly, Usagi tells him that she does not want him to die and reminds him that his actions in the earlier Five of Spades game helped save her life. This statement gives Arisu something he no longer had after losing Chota and Karube: direct recognition that his existence still matters to another person.

This moment demonstrates the category of resonance. Arisu's sense of meaning is reactivated through relationship, not merely through solitary reflection. Usagi does not provide a complete philosophical answer. Instead, she acknowledges that Arisu's continued existence matters to her. The narrative then shows a change in Arisu's body and actions: he begins to move, think clearly, and participate in the games again. Thus, the reconstruction of ikigai begins with a relationship that allows Arisu to feel needed again.

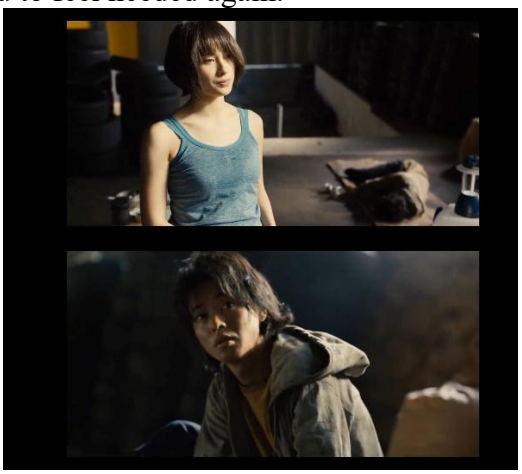


Figure 1. Usagi affirms that Arisu's existence still matters after the deaths of Chota and Karube (Season 1, Episode 4).

From Survivor Guilt to a Self-Chosen Ethical Mission

The Four of Clubs game shows that Arisu's renewed motivation is not simply a return to his former self. He begins to build a different principle for living. When an injured participant is left behind, Arisu insists on returning with fuel so that the bus can move, even though doing so may reduce his own chance of completing the game. He states that he no longer wants to let another person die so that he himself can survive.

This scene is important for two ikigai categories associated with Kamiya: change and growth, and freedom. Arisu cannot change the deaths of Chota and Karube, but he can choose how that experience shapes his subsequent actions. Painful memory becomes a source of ethical orientation. Instead of remaining trapped in guilt, Arisu uses his past experience as a reason to act differently when confronted with a similar situation.

This choice is also an expression of freedom because Arisu consciously accepts risk. He is

not free from the rules of Borderland, but he remains free to determine the meaning of his actions within those constraints. Kamiya's emphasis on freedom as one category of ikigai is particularly useful here: freedom does not always mean the absence of limits, but the capacity to choose one's attitude and actions even when the choice involves discomfort or sacrifice.

Arisu's statements after the game further clarify the emergence of self-actualization. He decides to search for the Beach, discover the truth about Borderland, identify those responsible for the games, and live long enough to complete what his two friends could not. This mission is imperfect and partly shaped by anger and grief, but for the first time Arisu consciously chooses a direction that organizes his actions. Ikigai here appears as commitment to a mission that is personally meaningful.



Figure 2. Arisu forms a new resolution not to survive by abandoning others (Season 1, Episode 4).

Future Orientation, Life Satisfaction, and the Role of Usagi

As the story develops, Arisu's ikigai becomes less centered on avenging those who have died and increasingly connected to a future with those who are still alive. When he tells Chishiya that he wants to know the truth, but that if he cannot return with everyone, at least he wants Usagi to return, the series shows a shift from retrospective orientation toward future orientation.

This shift becomes explicit in the second season when Arisu and Usagi acknowledge that they want to survive and return to their original world together. The future they imagine is strikingly ordinary. They do not speak of fame, achievement, or extraordinary success. Instead, they mention wanting to hold hands, walk together, eat together, laugh every day, and climb a mountain. These small experiences become concrete reasons to remain alive.

The scene is consistent with Kamiya's concepts of resonance, future orientation, and life satisfaction. Resonance appears through mutual recognition: each wants the other to remain alive. Future orientation emerges in activities that are imagined and can occur only if they continue to survive. Life satisfaction is represented not as a great victory, but as the possibility of living an everyday life characterized by emotional closeness.

For this reason, Usagi's role should not be reduced to that of a romantic reward for Arisu. Narratively, she functions as a relational partner through whom Arisu can repeatedly test whether his life has meaning beyond guilt. Usagi does not replace Chota and Karube; rather, his relationship with her enables Arisu to carry the memory of his two friends without continuing to live as a form of self-punishment.

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Queen of Hearts: Ikigai as Meaning That Can Be Destabilized and Renewed

The Queen of Hearts game provides the strongest evidence that Arisu's ikigai is dynamic rather than something permanently acquired. Mira manipulates Arisu by questioning the reality of Borderland and reopening his guilt over the deaths of Chota and Karube. She asks what Arisu truly wants to know: the nature of this world or the reason for his own existence. These questions directly attack the structure of meaning Arisu has built.

For a time, Arisu's motivation collapses again. This recurrence is analytically important. If ikigai is understood as a fixed possession, the later crisis would be difficult to explain after his earlier recovery. Kamiya's approach instead allows ikigai to be understood as a feeling and orientation that can strengthen or weaken in response to life experience. In other words, recovering meaning does not make a person immune to losing it again in the future.

Usagi again responds to this collapse through physical and relational affirmation. She insists that the time they have spent together is real and asks Arisu to regain awareness. Her argument is not that everyone must possess one grand purpose in life. Instead, she says that each person's answer is different and that having or not having a single clear reason for living is not what matters most. What matters is the fact that they are alive and have walked together.

Arisu responds with a series of concrete future wishes: holding Usagi's hand again, walking together, eating together, laughing together, and protecting her. He then asks Mira to continue the game. This sequence encapsulates the article's main finding. Arisu's reason for living is reconstructed through everyday experiences, reciprocal relationships, and a conscious decision to move forward. Ikigai is not a single abstract answer, but a sense that the future is still worth living with another person.



Figure 3. Arisu and Usagi express simple future experiences as reasons to continue living (Season 2, Episode 8).

Final Reconciliation with Chota and Karube

Before returning to the ordinary world, Arisu imagines one final conversation with Chota and Karube. He apologizes again, but Karube rejects the idea that Arisu should organize his entire life around endless apology and tells him to use his life fully until the end. This encounter completes an important transformation in the meaning of Arisu's memories of his two friends.

This scene most clearly represents the category of meaning and value. Arisu begins to understand that honoring his friends does not require permanent self-punishment. What is required is to accept the life that remains and live it responsibly. This acceptance does not erase grief. Instead, grief is integrated into a reason to live more meaningfully rather than a reason to

reject life.

This final reconciliation also explains why the article places Kamiya's theory of ikigai at the center of the analysis. The key issue is not whether Arisu discovers a single purpose that can be measured externally. Arisu's ikigai is distributed across memory, relationships, ethical commitments, hopes for the future, and the felt conviction that his life remains worth continuing. These elements change throughout the narrative, but together they form a continuously renewed sense of ikigai.

Narrative Impacts of Reconstructed Ikigai

The second research question concerns the changes represented after Arisu reconstructs a meaningful sense of ikigai. Five recurring impacts can be identified. First, his actions become more directed. He shifts from passively waiting for death to pursuing concrete goals: searching for the Beach, learning survival skills, protecting Usagi, and completing the games.

Second, the series represents greater perseverance under pressure. Arisu continues to face physically and emotionally demanding situations because he has reasons that go beyond mere self-preservation. The Queen of Hearts game provides the strongest example: after his structure of meaning is destabilized, he is still able to rebuild it and choose to continue the game.

Third, Arisu shows a stronger sense of responsibility for his choices. He decides not to repeat a pattern of survival through the deaths of others when alternatives remain. He also states that life is limited and that he no longer wants to waste time. Responsibility in this context is not only an obligation to Chota and Karube, but a new way of using the life he still has.

Fourth, renewed ikigai is associated with a willingness to learn and change. Arisu asks Usagi to teach him survival skills because he recognizes the limitations of his previous way of living. Learning becomes part of an effort to value the life entrusted to him by his friends. This connects self-development with meaning in life rather than merely with personal achievement.

Fifth, Arisu becomes more sensitive to social bonds. He gives water to other participants, tries to save people who can still be saved, and repeatedly prioritizes Usagi's safety. These actions demonstrate an expansion from self-centered survival toward empathy and relational responsibility. The drama therefore connects ikigai with changes in how a person relates to others.

Table 2. Summary of key narrative evidence

Narrative moment	Ikigai dimension	Interpretive meaning
After Seven of Hearts	Meaning/value; resonance	The loss of his friends collapses meaning; Usagi's affirmation restores the feeling that he is still needed.
Four of Clubs	Change/growth; freedom	Arisu refuses to repeat a survival pattern based on sacrificing others and accepts risk for a new principle.
Search for the Beach	Self-actualization; future orientation	He adopts a mission that guides his decisions and continues his friends' final hopes.
Bond with Usagi	Resonance; life satisfaction	Simple future experiences imagined together become sufficient reasons to continue living.
Queen of Hearts	Meaning/value; resilience	His purpose is destabilized and then renewed through mutual recognition and a conscious decision to continue living.
Final encounter	Meaning/value;	Memory changes from a source of self-

with his friends	acceptance	punishment into a responsibility to live life fully.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the representation of ikigai in Ryohei Arisu can be understood as a process of loss, reconstruction, destabilization, and renewal. Ikigai is not a single fixed purpose. It is formed through the interaction of personal experience, memories of Chota and Karube, affirmation from Usagi, ethical choices, and hopes for the future. Kamiya's categories of ikigai—meaning and value, resonance, self-actualization, change and growth, future orientation, freedom, and life satisfaction—help explain why this process is relational and changes throughout the story.

The narrative also shows several changes after Arisu reconstructs his reason for living: clearer direction, greater perseverance, stronger responsibility for his choices, motivation to learn, empathy, and deeper social relationships. These findings should be read as narrative representations rather than clinical claims about the character's psychological condition. The article shows that Arisu's transformation is more appropriately understood through the development of meaning than through diagnosis.

For Japanese cultural studies and popular media studies, the article's main contribution lies in its emphasis on ikigai as relational and dynamic. Arisu does not discover the meaning of ikigai once and possess it forever. Ikigai can weaken, especially when grief and guilt re-emerge, but it can also be rebuilt through relationships, choices, memories, and orientation toward the future. Alice in Borderland thus represents ikigai not as a formula for success, but as an ongoing process of making life feel worth living.

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