Sushi, fashion, and anime: a postcoloniality paradigm as seen through Japanese Gen-Z identity integration

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ABSTRACT

Sushi, fashion, and anime are the centrepieces of Japan's postwar efforts to forge a modern national identity. These 'Cool Japan' cultural productions integrate the old with the new, East with West, and grand themes such as man with nature to create relevance in times of great political and economic change. This qualitative study looks at the everyday, lived fashion and anime preferences of Japanese Gen-Z, using the framework of social identity integration theory. It explores how the modern Japanese identity is constructed at the grassroots, uncovering the strategies that are used to integrate conflicting cross-cultural identities to construct national and cultural identity. Three themes are reported—ownership through agency, finding roots in aesthetics, and change as growth—shedding light on the strategies used to construct a postcolonial modern Japanese identity. Findings also reveal epistemic and ontological issues for the study of social identity in non-Western societies. The study has implications for cross-cultural research in social identity, as well as for the global discourse on paradigms for decoloniality.

Keywords: Identity integration, Japanese Gen-Z, fashion, anime, cross-cultural, decoloniality.

INTRODUCTION

It is ironic that in the two decades since Japan's Sushi Police attempted to 'eradicate' unauthentic sushi, the world has witnessed the global blossoming of sushi culture. As early as 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi introduced the slogan "intellectual property nation", underscoring Japan's new focus on developing cultural heritages such as Japanese cuisine and content businesses such as fashion and anime (Kohsaka, 2017; Cool Japan Strategy, 2024). In 2006, alarmed at the rampant proliferation of sushi restaurants and fearing for the authenticity of their intangible cultural heritage, the Japanese government created the Sushi Police and declared that all reputable sushi restaurants around the world should be certified (Cang, 2019; Sakamoto & Allen, 2011). Failed mission notwithstanding, today's sushi cuisine enjoys not only far greater prestige but also global growth that is projected to double again by 2030. The integration of stoic tradition with the wealth of grassroots creations has

vastly contributed to enrich sushi culture (DBMR, 2023; JETRO, 2023; Namimatsu, 2019).

The two other standard-bearers of modern Japanese identity, fashion and anime, are also in the process of going global. Anime's ability to form powerful narratives of the human condition and Japanese subcultural fashion's ability to transform Western fashion idioms into Japanese creations are capturing the imagination of the global cohort of young people (Drazen, 2014; Napier, 2001; Park, 2010; Skutlin, 2016). This "Cool Japan" initiative to forge a modern Japanese identity serves as the inspiration for this study: to understand how Japan has managed to integrate the traditional with the new, the Japanese with the Western, to create a postcolonial culture.

In the following section, the paper examines the grounds for considering Japan, a previous colonial power, as an object of decolonial study, and the study's theoretical framework is discussed. Findings from 27 in-depth interviews with Japanese Gen-Z (hereafter 'JZ') participants are presented, revealing three main themes revolving around identity integration. The discussion section puts forward the argument that these identity integration themes and strategies together represent a viable, collaborative postcoloniality paradigm. Finally, underlying theoretical issues in identity and cross-cultural identity research and limitations are followed by concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The need for a postcoloniality paradigm in modern Japan

Coloniality, defined as the perpetuation of colonial systems of domination through ongoing narratives of Eurocentric models of modernity and globalization (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Zagelmeyer, 2024), is at the heart of the global discourse on social justice. The emergence of superpowers such as China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Brazil (PWC, 2017; UBSS, 2022), and the brewing "revolt of Asia and Africa against the West" (Barraclough, 2004, p. 118) contribute to escalating nationalism and protectionism and underscore the need for collaborative paradigms for Western and non-Western cultures to share in a united, global perspective (Fritz et al, 2024; Harrison et al, 2021).

For many of Japan's neighbors, Japan conjures up images of the Imperial Japanese Army rather than that of a victim of colonization. From a modernity perspective, however, Japan is also a country that has grappled with coloniality for one and a half centuries.

The transformation of Japan from feudal society to modern constitutional monarchy was "triggered by Japan's traumatic encounter with its powerful other – the modern West" (Iida, 2013, p.11). The appearance of Commodore Perry's gunboats in Edo Bay

in 1853 and signing of the Unequal Treaties jolted the Japanese to the realization that Japan must change or be colonized. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 was a cultural and industrial revolution that abolished the Tokugawa shogunate and installed Western values, institutions, and technology. There would be a second traumatic encounter, the American Occupation, starting with unconditional surrender in 1945 and ending in 1952. To the broken nation, awe for the Americans was absolute, and Japan underwent another round of Westernization that catapulted it to the world's second largest economy in 1968 (Dower, 2000; Iida, 2013; Saito, 2023).

Insofar as modernization necessitated Westernization, the displacement of cultural and national identity and consequent mental coloniality was inevitable. Meiji novelist Soseki stipulated that "Japan could be truly independent and self-respecting only if it were no longer impelled from without, no longer compelled to borrow from the West, no longer forced to follow an already broken path rather than a self-determined course" (quoted from Iida, 2013, p.17-18). If the Meiji Restoration was trauma, defeat and American Occupation was spiritual devastation: "No matter how affluent the country later became, these remained the touchstone years for thinking about national identity and personal values" (Dower, 2000, p.25). Thus, Japan's frantic scrambles to modernize created a mentality of Western worship that led to a century and a half of delinking and coloniality (Dower, 2000; English, 2013; Evers & Macias, 2010; Iida, 2013; Marx, 2015; Saito, 2023; Slade, 2009).

However, Japan's postcolonial development is unique in that it was based on a premise of collaboration rather than conflict. Particularly in the postwar era, Japan's commitment to pacifism necessitated its military alignment with the West, requiring the integration of its traditions and societal institutions with Western technology and values (Hook, 1987; Dower, 2000; DiFilippo, 2006).

Modern Japanese identity

Fashion choices are visualizable and verifiable expressions of social and personal identity (Davis, 1994; Crane, 2000; Anderson, 2005). With the Meiji Restoration, Western clothing became a metaphor for 'civilization and enlightenment' (Iida, 2013; Molony, 2007; Saitō, 2011). Similarly, in post-War Japan, imitation of American fashion was widespread. However, with the dizzying economic success of the 60's, Japanese fashion began to look for its own idioms. Japanese haute couture designers Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto spearheaded this movement in the 70's and 80's, leading up to the subcultures and anime-inspired cosplay fashion of the 90's and 00's, reflecting Japan's struggles to de-link from Western hegemony (English, 2013; Evers & Macias, 2010; Marx, 2015).

Another medium emerging after WWII is anime. The influence of anime on the psychology and identity of Japanese adults (Kinsella, 2015; Lamarre, 2009), Japanese culture and subcultures (Napier, 2001; Saitō, 2011; Azuma, 2009), and its international

appeal (Allison, 2006; Bouisseau et al, 2010; Kovicic, 2014) are well-documented. Susan Pointon highlights "the constant cross-pollination and popular cultural borrowing" by anime, while Napier observes that "for most Japanese consumers of anime, their culture is no longer a purely Japanese one (and indeed it probably hasn't been for over a century and a half)" (Napier, 2001, p.22).

As Japan forges a modern identity for itself through sushi, fashion, and anime (Cang, 2019; Kohsaka, 2017; Valaskivi, 2012), JZ are the first generation to grow up at this historic crossroads: ascension to global economic superpower; bursting of the 90's bubble economy; new growth paradigms; Cool Japan; and the advent of internet and social media.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social identity integration

When multiple, incompatible social identities arise within the self-structure, social identity conflicts may emerge. For JZ, the high level of Westernization and the well-preserved traditions of Japan result in the clash of opposing identities. Individuals thus experience a lack of psychological coherence and are motivated to integrate those identities so they can be simultaneously important to the overall self-concept. The cognitive developmental model of social identity integration (CDMSII) provides a framework that captures "the dynamic intraindividual processes involved when social identities develop" (Amiot et al, 2007, p.6; see Table 1 for an overview)

Table 1. CDMSII overview. Author's depiction based on Amiot et al, 2015, p.176

Triggers of Identity Change	Antecedents of Identity Integration	Stages of Identity Change	Intragroup/Intrapersonal Consequences
• Immigration • Organization changes • Social/political changes • Life transitions	Inhibitors: • Feelings of threat • Status/power asymmetries Facilitators: • Coping and adaptation • Social support	1. Anticipatory Categorization 2. Categorization 3. Compartment-alization 4. Integration	• Discrimination and • ingroup bias • Psychological wellbeing

The framework specifies four stages for integration: (1) anticipatory categorization, where the individual is aware that current identities are not able to mix with new identities; (2) categorization, where the individual has formed the notion of new identities; (3) compartmentalization, where the individual is switching back and forth between identities; and (4) integration, where the individual finds ways to merge the two categories into a superordinate category that allows for the two or more conflicting identities to be important at the same time. There are two strategies for integration: (1)

Finding similarities and compatibilities; (2) Considering one of the conflicting identities as a superordinate category (Amiot et al, 2007; Amiot & Jaspal, 2014; see Figure 1).

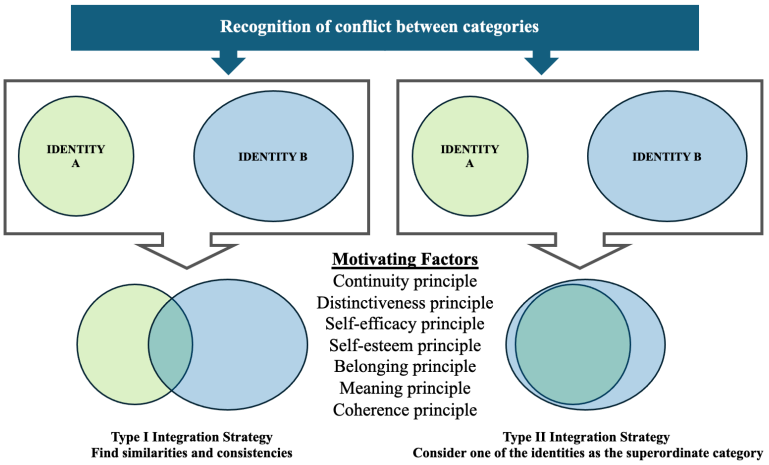

Figure 1. Two integration strategies provided in CDMSII (Amiot et al, 2007; Amiot & Jaspal, 2014)

The self-construct

Brewer & Gardner (1996) postulated three levels of self: the individual, relational, and collective. Studies on cross-cultural differences in the collective self have shown a relationship-based nature of ingroup cognition for Far-Easterners (Brewer & Yuki, 2007; Yuki, 2003), resulting in an interdependent, although not necessarily homogeneous, relational view of the collective self. This study borrows from the self-model of Brewer's (1991, 2012) optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT), which posits that the self will search for a point of optimum equilibrium between the need for inclusion in a group and the need for differentiation from the group.

Gap in the literature

CDMSII has been applied in fields such as cultural psychology and organizational psychology, where identity change and development to accommodate conflicting or competing identities have been the focus of inquiry. Japan's postcoloniality shares the dilemma of bicultural individuals studied in cultural psychology, who must either assimilate to the mainstream culture, find the intersection between the two, switch between the two, or find a way to integrate. However, the specific mechanisms of social identity integration strategies, particularly in cross-cultural contexts, are an understudied area and will therefore be this study's central focus. The objective of this study is two-fold: (1) to use the accounts of JZ's lived fashion and anime to understand their social identity integration processes and strategies; and (2) to evaluate the Japanese model as a postcoloniality paradigm.

METHODS

Twenty-seven JZ, 13 male and 14 female, aged 19 to 30 (mean 26.9) were recruited through snowball sampling (see Table 2). Participants have been given pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in Japanese and lasted 52 minutes on average (ranging from 39 to 73 minutes). Participants were each asked to send 5 photos of their favorite fashion and 3 images of their favorite anime beforehand. In consideration of privacy, participants could submit third-party instead of personal photos. Ethical approval was obtained from **[anonymised institution]** and informed consent was sought prior to the interviews.

Table 2. Demographics of participants

Nickname	Gender	Age	Location	Occupation
Rika	F	25	(Greater Tokyo (Kanagawa)	Working holiday in Canada after MA in Fashion Marketing
Sayu	F	29	Greater Tokyo (Fukui)	Real estate sales rep
Yoshi	M	27	Greater Tokyo (Saitama)	IT engineer
Kumi	F	25	Greater Tokyo (Saitama)	Insurance salesperson
Nao	F	24	Greater Tokyo (Saitama)	IT (business chat software customer success)
Gon	M	28	Greater Tokyo (Tochigi)	Food scientist, PhD student
Ken	M	25	Greater Tokyo (Tokyo)	Wine wholesale salesman
Misa	F	25	Greater Tokyo (Tokyo)	IT consultant
Taro	M	28	Greater Tokyo (Tokyo)	Sales rep (B to B, food industry)
Yumi	F	21	Greater Tokyo (Tokyo)	University student (applied chemistry)
Haru	M	26	Kyoto area	Top-tier University Hospital Resident doctor
Gaku	M	27	Nagoya area	Machine operator
Kao	M	28	Nagoya area	Sales rep (bank)
Kei	M	28	Nagoya area	R&D Food & Cosmetics
Tomu	M	27	Nagoya area	R&D Food & Cosmetics
Shin	M	30	Nagoya area	Sales rep (food)
Aki	M2F	29	Osaka area	System engineer/ Visual Kei Band Drummer
Ayu	F	30	Osaka area	Prep School Instructor, Professional Mahjong Player
Jun	F	30	Osaka area	Office clerk
Kayo	F	30	Osaka area	Nail artist
Mami	F	27	Osaka area	Sing-a-song writer / Hotel clerk
Mayu	F	29	Osaka area	Photographer
Riu	M	25	Osaka area	System engineer
Sao	F	30	Osaka area	Costume designer, waitress
Taka	M	26	Osaka area	Social Worker
Toshi	M	19	Osaka area	University student (environmental applied biology)
Kako	F	29	Western Japan	Subculture idol, bar owner

Transcripts were made in Japanese, translated to English, then revised by the author and reviewed by a second bilingual Japanese. The data was subjected to thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006, 2012, 2021). To account for the idiosyncracies of the Japanese language and cultural differences, the judgment of the author and reviewer was often required to translate the dialogues (Adnyani, 2020; Hasegawa, 2003; von Carolsfeld, 1991).

FINDINGS

Figure 2. Photos of participants

Of all 134 photos submitted, 132 photos were of clothing that in the West would be considered unremarkable (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, 24 out of 27 participants described their fashion as Japanese rather than Western, indicating integration processes at work. Thematic analysis uncovered three main themes: *Ownership through agency, Finding roots in aesthetics,* and *Change is growth*, each with three subthemes (see Table 3).

Table 3. Themes and subthemes

Main Themes	Subthemes
1. Ownership through agency	1-1. Cultural innovation
	1-2. The Japanese eye
	1-3. A shared sensibility
2. Finding roots in aesthetics	2-1. Rituals provide meaning
	2-2. Humility before nature
	2-3. Unlearning as learning
3. Change as growth	3-1. The dynamic collective self
	3-2. Identity as process
	3-3. Social resources

Ownership through agency

JZ regard their fashion and anime artifacts as expressing their Japanese identity because of their cultural agency.

Cultural innovation

JZ feel that what they wear is *Japanese style* clothing because they were created or influenced by Japanese culture and street fashion:

> "*Well, if you completely ignore where the clothes originate, my style is 100% Japanese.*" – Aki

Aki is a systems engineer who has a side gig as a Visual Kei band drummer. Halfway into the interview, Aki confided that she was actually a woman who was born a boy.

From childhood, she struggled with finding the right identity because she did not care for the *kawaii* stereotype (meaning 'cute', usually reserved for describing girls, small children, pets, or adorable objects) of the Japanese girl.

Figure 3. Aki's photos; all are of herself and taken within the past two years

Aki experimented with subculture fashion such as Visual Kei and GothLoli (see Figure 3), until she found her answer in Takarazuka theater (see Figure 4). Although she enjoys wearing GothLoli fashion, her favorite persona is that of a "*kakkoii* woman" (*kakkoii* means "cool", but usually describes men; thus, the connotation is closer to "strong woman").

Figure 4. Takarazuka Revue, all-women broadway-style musical theater founded in 1913 (Image Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6d/Paris_Sette-Takarazuka1930.jpg)

> *"The thinking that's coming in from [America] about gender and sexuality - do we need it? Japanese people don't think like that in the first place. It's too extreme."* – Aki

Aki ultimately *created* her own gender category. She described the eureka moment in high school when she realized she could be happy in the body she was born with by using fashion to become a *kakkoii* woman. Aki found hints in *kabuki* theater, the Takarazuka Revue, and Shibuya and Harajuku subcultures in which wearing dress of the other gender is commonplace, as well as anime such as *Steins;Gate* in which the subcharacter Luka is a boy who yearns to become a girl.

Haru, 25, a resident doctor at a top university hospital partial to cargo pants and import brands, considers his fashion choices 90% Western; however, he insists that 10% is Japanese:

> "*I think it's not really Western when it's street kei.*" – Haru

Although the current cargo look has roots in Y2K fashion with uncertain national origins (Criales-Unzueta, 2023), Haru identifies it with Japanese street fashion (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Haru's street *kei* cargo pants setup

Another example is Japan's idol culture which has been studied for its *oshi* (support/patronage) culture, whereby fans are actively involved in "supporting" the idol that they favor, including voting on issues such as what costumes their idols should wear and watching over them as they "grow" (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012; Ichen, 2024).

> "*There was a different (AKB) member that was my oshi, but then these clothes made me like Kojima Haruna more"* – Jun

Jun's relationship with fashion includes *contributing* to the production of an idol.

The Japanese eye

According to Ayu, the Japanese-ness of her style is in her Japanese mind's eye:

> *"When I look at the silhouette… somewhere in the image in the background of my mind, the volume of the skirt and the flared hems are at least partly due to the image of [a courtesan] wearing a kimono casually*" –Ayu (See Figure 6)

Figure 6. Ayu sees the image of a courtesan's casually clad kimono in this dress. (Image source: Alessandro de Benedetti https://www.instagram.com/p/C8fAmmYMVk2/?igsh=azNndW95OHd3dTlu)

Taro also sees a distinction in how clothing is enacted by the Japanese body.

"*It's a style that takes into account the [Asian] body type.*" –Taro

Haru, Ayu, and Taro all share in the sentiment that a production-based or idea-based agency confers a form of ownership.

A shared sensibility

Taka voices what scholars have termed *nihonjinron*, the Japanese belief that the Japanese are "uniquely unique" (Rear, 2017, p.6).

> *"The worldview is overwhelmingly different... I think there is a unique sensibility of the Japanese people"* – Taka

Other participants also point to the painstaking meticulousness of anime illustrations and plots.

> *"The solid profiling of each character, the elaborate plots, the foreshadowing and the resolutions, I don't know if that's done overseas"* – Gaku

Japanese-ness is thus ascribed to the sensibility of Japanese anime artists and audiences.

Finding roots in aesthetics

Affirmations of collective identities by the individual and confirmations by the group "rely on shared symbols and cognitive representations of the group" (Brewer & Yuki, 2007, p.310).

Rituals provide meaning

Much of Japanese philosophy and art is bound in ceremony and ritual (Kondo, 1985; Wicks, 2005):

> "*There are situations where traditional Japanese clothing is appropriate. For example, in the summer, if you go watch fireworks or a summer matsuri (festival), it is the yukata (cotton kimono, see Figure 7)*" – Shin

Figure 7. Summer festival with young people wearing *yukata* (Image Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=71541155)

Everyday ritualistic exchanges of politeness such as bowing according to predetermined motions and verbal exchanges permeate Japanese social interactions (see Figure 8).

> "*I think there are a lot of words that only Japanese people can understand, such as the [social] roles of each Japanese person*" – Taka

Figure 8. The greeting bow (from the waist, back straight) accompanied by the right words for the context (Image source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=45021286).

Humility before nature

> *"Gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration"* (Kenko, Buddhist monk: quoted in Saito, 1997, p.377)

Volumes have been written about the Japanese aesthetic of imperfection. One of the most famous anime quotes on imperfection are Mayuri's words in *Bleach*:

> *"For us scientists, perfection is despair. Be more wonderful than anything that has ever existed before, but never be perfect. Scientists must be creatures who constantly suffer from that contradiction, and yet find pleasure in it."* (Kubo, 2008, Episode 200; author's translation)

Beauty resides not in Kenko's faded flowers but in the agent's mind that sees the beauty.

> "*I chose this because it doesn't seem too beautiful...to hazusu [break the beauty] with some item*" –Kayo

> "*I consciously choose a small point, a brand logo, or a small [anime] character, a "one-point" accent, to hazusu [break the simplicity]*" – Kei (See Figure 9)

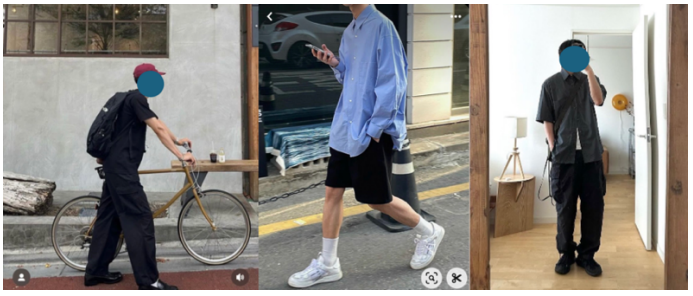

Figure 9. Kei's fashion. The red cap, the shorts, and the loosened buttons are the "one-point" to break the simplicity.

Appreciating imperfection is an act of humility because it acknowledges the room to learn and grow. Anime protagonists are usually just one member of a group and are often the weak link:

> "*The main character, Tanjiro, is a fairly normal human being, really weak, and he gives up really easily*" – Rika

Rika identifies with Tanjiro struggling to overcome his weaknesses one by one, striving together with his friends. In addition, imperfection means that we all have good and bad:

> "What all anime have in common is that it's not about rewarding good and punishing evil, it's not about complete evil or complete justice, *it's just that everyone is trying to live their lives*, that's what I like." – Sao [emphasis added]

Humility allows for the creation of a superordinate category of “imperfect people”.

Unlearning as learning

Buddhism holds that there must be unlearning and emptiness before the mind can be filled with new knowledge (Light, 2014; Nishihara & Rappleye, 2022; Rösch, 2017). For JZ, this means that invoking the spirit of unlearning to learn Western ways is also part of Japanese-ness.

> "*It was Sailor Moon that broke the notion for me that girls should be protected and be ladylike. But when I go on a date [with my husband], I feel like wearing skirts, something that doesn’t look too strong, something kawaii [laugh].”* – Mayu (see Figure 10)

The main character in Sailor Moon does not use “women’s language”, which in itself is an institution to ensure women stay “womanly” (Gagné, 2008). The show was instrumental in championing the image of the *tsuyoi* woman (strong woman) for Mayu and many Gen-Z women, who traditionally would be expected to be *kawaii* and *ohitoyaka* (ladylike/gentle).

This philosophy, embedded in Japan’s spiritual and practical traditions, thus enables JZ to embrace seeming contradictions, accepting the new without being fettered by the traditional.

Figure 10. Mayu in both *kakkoii* (left photo) and *kawaii* (right photo) setups

Change as growth

One pervading keyword for JZ is “growth”. The aesthetic of growth is another vehicle that facilitates the creation of superordinate categories.

The collective self

JZ understand that they are expected to stay in harmony with their groups. Riu

therefore sticks to monotones:

> "*If I'm too flashy, I have an image of sticking out in a public place like in a train.*" – Riu

Examination of Riu's photos for context reveals what Riu considers 'not too flashy' are plain white T-shirts with either blue (non-faded) jeans or black pants.

In talking about fashion, Kei often uses the noun 'one-point', Japanglish for a small accent to offset a simple, monotonous outfit.

> "*The standard for my choices is simplicity with 'one-point' for individuality.*" – Kei

The 'one-point' is the Eastern collective self's concession to individuality. Toshi wears an afro, which in Japan absolutely counts as 'sticking out'. Yet, he expresses a good measure of regard for others when talking about clothing choices:

> "*Also, I think Japanese people wouldn't wear wallet chains because they are too jingly."* – Toshi

In Japanese male fashion of the 1950's: "The basic male wardrobe went to extremes of conformity: a single charcoal-gray or navy-blue suit, dark tie, white shirt, and dark shoes. White shirts outsold colored ones more than 20-to-1. A striped shirt was enough to get a worker in trouble" (Marx, 2015, p.44). The fashion of JZ men is still true to the principle of harmony with the group, except for the indulgence in 'one-point' representing the new times.

Identity as process

Asked if she was more Japanese-like or Western, Sao adamantly refused to define herself:

> "*To say that I am 'Japanese' would be scary... To say that I am 'Japanese' would be to limit myself.*" – Sao

She felt that doing so would be putting herself in a box. If the self is relational, then it should be in a constant state of change, namely a process. This recurses back to the worldview that "reality consists of constant flux, transience, movement, and impermanence" (Saito, 2001; Wicks, 2005).

Social resources

The need to support and facilitate identity change with social resources is an important empirical observation in identity integration studies (Amiot & Jaspal, 2014; Brewer et

al, 2015; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Fashion, anime, and other social institutions including traditional and modern performing arts play an important role in facilitating JZ's identity integration.

> "*I became a fan when I saw how much Haruna Kojima [former AKB48 idol turned designer] expressed my ideal image of a woman through her apparel.*" – Jun

Although Western idols are often superheroes to look up to, the Japanese idol culture "provides an imperfect 'immatureness' that allows those who participate in Japanese Idol culture [to] have the possibility to 'create' their own 'Idols'" (Ichen, 2024, p.27), allowing fan and idol to grow together.

"Western identity" is also an important resource. Misa is a consultant in Japan's male-dominated IT industry. When she transferred to a new department as a third-year employee, her new boss referred to her as "candy for the eyes" (Misa). She regards her current clothing style as "absolutely Western" and uses it for empowerment, to project status and competence:

> *"This isn't about men or women, but when you're young, there are some people who will look down on what you say. So, I thought I'd do something about my gender with my clothes, and also, I've been talking only about my clothes, but I had bangs back then, so I got rid of them to look more mature."* – Misa

DISCUSSION

Overall summary of findings

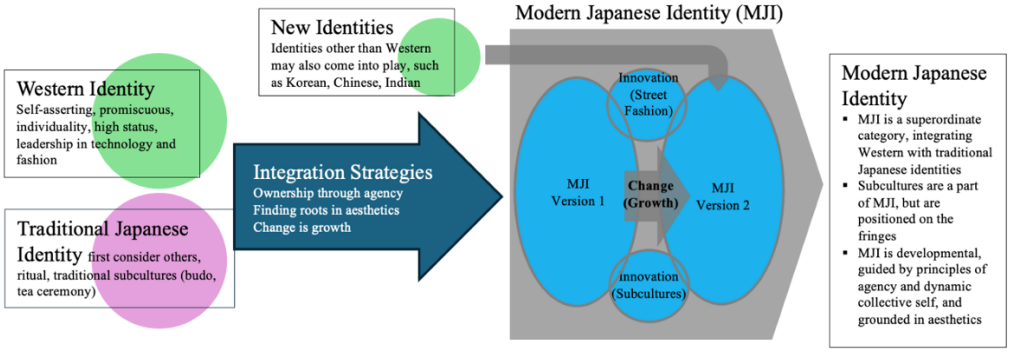

Figure 11. JZ's modern Japanese identity (MJI) development

The Japanese-ness of JZ derives from their modern Japanese identity (MJI), a superordinate category resulting from the integration of Western identities and traditional Japanese identities, allowing for both Western and Japanese identities to simultaneously be important (salient). Resolution of the conflicts is provided by the

integration strategies. The themes of agency, aesthetics, and "change is growth" imply that the equilibrium point of optimal differentiation is shifting; therefire, new iterations of MJI appear as intra-category innovations (new subcultures and new ideas) and new outgroup identities (such as Korean or Chinese) spur new growth (see Figure 11).

Developmental stages of JZ identity integration

JZ are constantly confronted with conflicts between Eurocentric modernity and Japanese national and cultural values. Several female participants experienced the dilemma of whether to conform to traditional expectations of women or to become like "strong" Western women. Older family members or the workplace thus often act as inhibitors. Bicultural individuals usually do not go through the anticipatory stage because they are born into the social context (Amiot et al., 2007; 2015); this is the same for JZ. Categorization occurs as they grow up and run into situations of identity threat. For low identity threat individuals who abide by the simplicity rule and avoid sticking out, categorization is a relatively passive process of staying tuned and being sensitive to shifts in trends; for high identity threat individuals there may be a reverting to the previous anticipatory categorization stage and the active search for suitable categories. The compartmentalization stage may also lead to lower psychological wellbeing, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, and loss of continuity. Aki's period of experimentation with different subcultures and Misa's workplace frustration at being seen as eye candy are such examples. The distress ultimately motivates them to tackle the fourth stage of integration, devising and implementing strategies to construct a new superordinate identity. Successful integration is rewarded by the restoration of psychological coherence and wellbeing. This is in line with previous work linking identity process theory and identity_integration (Amiot & Jaspal, 2014; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012).

Theoretical ground for the JZ integration strategies

Aestheticization: cultural anchors

The search for Japan's aesthetic particularity dates back to the modernists of the Meiji period, who lamented the irony that Japan's awakening to the value of its aesthetics was through the gaze of its "other", the gaze of Western powers that led to the Meiji Restoration and Japan's experience of coloniality (Iida, 2013). Nonetheless, the findings confirm that aesthetics lies firmly at the root of Japanese action and thought.

In contrast to the autonomous, independent self-concept in individualistic societies, the self in collectivistic societies is experienced as a node in a network of relations, and is therefore interdependent, relational, and contextual (Brewer & Yuki, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Snibbe et al, 2003). Since the point of equilibrium for Japanese collective identity is shifted toward the group, it serves as a natural point of differentiation with respect to the West. The aesthetics of humility and imperfection might be compared to 'morality anchors', values held by cultural groups which establish the cornerstones for identity construction (Ellemers, 2017). Different cultures

will have their different anchors.

Change is Growth: Embracing the process

The idea of change as a constant in the West goes back to Heraclitus. In the modern world, the debate over whether identity is entity or process is ongoing (Gioia et al, 2013; Gioia & Hamilton, 2016; Shultz et al, 2012). With our changing environments, ODT implies that the self is perpetually engaged in finding the optimal point of distinctiveness between the need to belong and the need to differentiate.

The major role of social resources

With their reach and popularity, fashion and anime supply a rich array of "pre-existing identities" (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010) and provide JZ with powerful "social support" (Amiot et al, 2007; Amiot et al, 2010). In the American Black people's search for alternative identities, the provision of "scripts" to help individuals has been advocated (Abizadeh, 2001; Appiah, 1994). In organizational management, the value of providing assistance to improve the success rate of identity change in mergers and onboarding of new recruits is well-recognized (Amiot & Jaspal, 2014; Amiot et al, 2015; Cable et al, 2013; Dai et al, 2011). The creation of supporting networks of resources should therefore be considered for any decoloniality program.

LIMITATIONS & AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Firstly, CDMSII was found to be an effective framework for understanding JZ identity integration both on the individual and societal level. Nevertheless, the findings point to the need to examine some of the framework's premises, such as its model for the self-construct, psychological coherence and wellbeing, and integration's psychological motivators. For instance, the dual lives of Aki and Mami hint at the possibility that compartmentalization may be an optimal final stage of integration where further integration is difficult.

Secondly, researching social identity across cultures multiplies methodological complexities (Cohen, 2007; Hammack, 2008). Triandis and colleagues wrote a scathing criticism of the "innumerable rival hypotheses" in cross-cultural comparisons, noting that the motivations and biographical background of the investigator have been shown to be predictors of the conclusions (1973). In this study, too, investigator bias needs to be acknowledged.

Similarly, the idiosyncrasies of JZ identity integration strategies need to be highlighted, and the cross-cultural validity of some bedrock psychological principles such as coherence, continuity, distinctiveness, and self-efficacy need to be examined in other cultural contexts.

Finally, coincidental factors such as the study's concurrence with the 2024 Olympics

where Japan came in third for gold medals may also have boosted feelings of national pride and self-esteem, affecting both interviewer and interviewees. This study has attempted to account for these challenges, but the results are ultimately reflexive, phenomenological and interpretive in nature, and require quantitative substantiation.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on how Japanese Gen Z have integrated traditional Japanese and Western, old and new identities to create a modern Japanese identity. Strategies grounded in individual agency, cultural innovation, aesthetics, and traditions provided insight into the successful integration of opposing identities. The findings highlight the role of motivational orientation such as disposition to embracing change and corroborate prior studies pointing to the importance of social resources.

For nations looking for a narrative for decoloniality, this Japanese Gen-Z example is presented as a collaborative paradigm which constitutes not a de-linking but rather a re-engagement based on agency and innovation. In a decolonial context, the strategy of "unlearning as learning" may be a missing element of the decoloniality discourse. To unlearn is not to forget; it is just to make room in the vessel for new knowledge to enter.

It might be emphasized that this study is *not* an advocacy to adopt Cool Japan and eat more sushi, watch more anime, or wear less flashy clothing. As far as the postcoloniality discourse is concerned, the most important message may be that integration is enrichment. In Japan's case, the Sushi Police need not have worried – authentic sushi tradition has not been destroyed; on the contrary, it has been well-preserved, elevated and integrated into a new, global culture. It is only fitting that this paper concludes with a quote from an anime hero:

> *"The strength of humans is in being able to change **on our own**!"*
> –Saitama, in *One-Punch Man* (Murata, 2012; author's translation)

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