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How do the cultural concepts of Takumi 匠, Wabi-Sabi 侘び寂び, and Kawaii 可愛い shape the identity of Japanese fashion, and what role do they play in its global appeal and success?

Patrick HLUBEK
Hauptfach Japanologie (FS 6)
Matrikelnummer 12225304

Willi-Graf-Straße 23
80805 München
PatrickHlubek@proton.me

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Introduction

"Don't be one of a group. Be yourself. Stay a little bit monotone – walk on our side of the street, don't walk the mainstream of fashion. You'll be polluted by trends." (Yamamoto 2017)

In the 1980s, three fashion designers brought international attention to Japan. For the first time, a force outside of Europe stepped into the global fashion spotlight, sparking widespread interest in the distinct characteristics of Japanese fashion. Today, Japanese brands are exported worldwide. Notable examples include UNIQLO, Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto, and Y-3, a collaboration between Adidas and Yamamoto Yōji 山本耀司. Miyake Issey 三宅一生 reflects on this shift: "In the Eighties, Japanese fashion designers brought a new type of creativity; they brought something Europe didn't have" (Wood 1996).

Japanese fashion faces several challenges in presenting itself on the international stage, including cultural misunderstandings and market expectations shaped by Western norms. However, it is not simply competing with global fashion markets; rather, the revolution ignited by these three avant-garde designers reshaped the fashion landscape itself. Their work profoundly influenced and redefined aesthetic sensibilities, inspiring future generations of designers (English 2011: 129f).

To understand what distinguishes Japanese fashion from its Western counterparts, this thesis focuses on three cultural concepts deeply embedded in Japanese society that significantly shape its fashion identity: *takumi 匠*, *kawaii かわいい*, and *wabi-sabi 侘寂*. These concepts capture key values and aesthetics unique to Japanese culture and provide a useful framework for analysing the distinctiveness of Japanese fashion.

This thesis begins by defining essential terminology to establish a foundation for analysis, including working definitions of fashion, institutionalized fashion systems, design, identity, and branding. It then explores how *takumi*, *wabi-sabi*, and *kawaii* are expressed

in fashion, offering clear definitions of each concept. Finally, the thesis discusses the global appeal of these concepts alongside the challenges they face, concluding with an examination of their broader implications within contemporary fashion.

Definition of Fashion

To begin a discussion of fashion, it is necessary to first establish a working definition. The academic community has often pushed back against the study of fashion, frequently dismissing it as a product of capitalist consumption or, in the past, reducing it to a "matter of women." Although fashion has been a subject of study since early on, such social perceptions help explain why defining fashion remains contested in academia (Aspers; Godart 2013: 172). These factors contribute to the complexity surrounding the term. Nevertheless, offering a definition is beneficial. The reason lies in the unique vantage point fashion provides. Like other applied disciplines, fashion offers a distinct lens through which to study culture, owing to its close relationship with everyday life and personal identity (Breward 1995: 1–4).

Despite the contested nature of the term within the academic community, this thesis proceeds with an understanding of fashion based on its etymology and contemporary interpretations. The English word *fashion* derives from the French term *façon*, which emphasizes a way of doing or making things (Kawamura 2005: 5). Luhmann (2000: 47) draws a parallel between the modern concept of fashion and advertising, viewing fashion as a product that inherently embodies change. The transformation of garments in their making and wearing over time is what is described as "fashion."

Clothing production and fashion production are both collective efforts involving many people, but they serve different purposes. Clothing production focuses on the physical manufacturing of garments and includes various roles such as thread makers, textile producers, designers, patternmakers, and factory workers. Fashion production, by contrast, centres on the creation, promotion, and maintenance of the idea of fashion. It involves fashion professionals who act as gatekeepers and distributors within a broader

system. Fashion is characterized by continual change, and its social acceptance relies on collective awareness and a willingness to adopt new styles. Unlike slow-changing cultural dress systems (e.g., the Japanese *kimono* *着物*), fashion depends on an institutionalized system of change and diffusion, one that has been primarily established in the Western context (Kawamura 2005: 50f). This thesis adopts this understanding of fashion: as a system driven by change, embedded within institutional structures rooted in the West.

Institutionalized fashion System(s)

Fashion does not exist independently but functions within institutionalized systems that structure and regulate its production, dissemination, and reception. A prime example is the French institutionalized fashion system, centred around *La Fédération Française de la Couture, du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode*. Founded in 1868, this federation establishes a hierarchical and centralized network that legitimizes designers and their creations through formal rules and exclusive membership. It categorizes fashion into distinct strata such as haute couture, prêt-à-porter, and mass-market design, thereby creating a layered social system in which certain designers attain elite status while others remain marginalized (Kawamura 2004: 36–40).

Hara (2008: 139–143) provides a detailed account of how the modern fashion system, particularly the one structured around France and Italy, functions less as a domain of free artistic creation and more as a highly orchestrated industry driven by trend forecasting, branding, and information control. At the heart of this system lies a centralized trend-setting commission, composed of trend writers, textile industry leaders, and government officials, which annually determines the prevailing themes, colours, and materials for the upcoming season. These forecasts are disseminated through expensive reports and integrated into every stage of production, from thread selection and fabric weaving to the final runway presentations at Paris and Milan Fashion Weeks.

As a result, fashion houses and designers operate within the constraints of these predetermined *fashion stories*. Designs or materials that deviate from the official

scenario risk marginalization and invisibility. Fashion journalism and critical discourse further reinforce this structure by amplifying approved narratives and collections. This creates a dominant global information axis, with Paris and Milan serving as the central launch pads of serious fashion, leaving limited space for alternative or independent fashion systems outside of this institutional framework.

Design

As fashion was previously defined, design also requires a definition. However, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of design. Lunenfeld (2003: 10–15) highlights the expansive scope of the term, noting that we live in a world shaped by a *design cluster*. The diversity of inputs and outputs in contemporary design practices, including processes, clients, users, tools, and outcomes, renders design an umbrella term. Due to its wide-ranging nature, only abstract definitions of design can be offered.

It is valuable here to distinguish between the act of designing and the study of design. Lunenfeld further argues that multiple viewpoints and unexpected discoveries continuously influence how people think and work within the field. Design research plays a critical role by transforming ideas and theories into practical actions. These actions, in turn, generate new ideas, completing a creative cycle in which theory and practice inform and support each other.

The space of design research also helps bridge the divide between two groups: creative practitioners who may distrust academic content, and critical thinkers who often view designers' practical compromises with scepticism. This ongoing dialogue between thinking and making is especially relevant in the context of Japanese fashion, where cultural concepts such as *wabi-sabi*, *takumi*, and *kawaii* function not only as aesthetic principles but also as design strategies. These three concepts will be examined in more detail throughout the thesis, as they illustrate how cultural values inform the design process.

Identity and effects of cultural terms on identity

The earliest recorded definition of the word *identity* dates to around the year 1560, with its etymology rooted in the Latin word *idem*, meaning "the same." A person's identity was thus traditionally defined as the traits that remain consistent across different circumstances (Dictionary.com n.d.). Hall (1996: 222-226) expands on this classical view of "sameness" by arguing that identity is not stable in nature. While a person's identity remains recognizable, it adapts, grows, and shifts in response to personal experiences, historical contexts, and social roles.

It is within this more fluid understanding of identity that cultural concepts such as *takumi*, *wabi-sabi*, and *kawaii* serve not only as aesthetic principles but also as expressions of national and cultural identity (Yanagi 1972: 101–119; Koren 1994: 1–10; Kinsella 1995: 220–222). These concepts inform the ethos of Japanese fashion and contribute to its global distinctiveness. As Kenya Hara (2018: 184) observes: "Today, confronted by an era of slow growth, Japan is finally beginning to recognize its own history and traditions as a rare 'soft' resource for creating value in a global context." This statement highlights how traditional aesthetics are increasingly being repurposed as cultural assets, reinforcing identity both within Japan and on the global stage.

Fashion history

In the next step, the discourse about fashion in Japan is presented. To introduce Japanese fashion, it is helpful to first consider fashion in its historical context. A major turning point in the history of clothing occurred in the 18th century. During this time, the foundations of the modern fashion system began to take shape. This change was driven by the Industrial Revolution, sometimes called the consumer revolution, which brought innovations in manufacturing, supply chains, and retail methods. These developments made luxury items, once exclusive, available to a wider range of people, especially in Europe (Breward 1995: 110). As fashion became more accessible, it grew into a key force behind mass production and consumerism, helping to shape modern industrial society (Breward 1995:

142). The discussion about fashion and its social implications began in Europe between the 17th and 18th centuries (Belfanti 2008: 420).

Japan adopted Western fashion on a large scale during the Meiji Restoration as part of its effort to modernize by following Western models of civilization. Government policy required the navy to wear British-style uniforms and the army to wear Western-style clothing. At first, only military personnel wore Western clothes, so only men wore Western-style clothing. However, these Western clothes were initially used mainly as workwear. In their free time, people continued to wear traditional Japanese clothing. Over time, Western clothing started to blend with Japanese clothing, and Western styles became more common in daily life (Shōji Shingo 2000: 596).

Some theories suggest that the rise of industrialization in Europe led to the creation of ready-to-wear (*prêt-à-porter*) clothing, which helped shape modern fashion. This fashion then spread worldwide (Francks 2015: 333f). However, the adoption of Western fashion in Japan raises the question of whether Japan had its own fashion before Western influence. Francks argues that fashion did exist in Japan prior to Western contact, but it was different. Due to laws limiting the display of wealth, fashion did not develop openly or in many forms. Instead, Japanese people focused on refining the weaving, dyeing, and embroidery of their clothes. These techniques are evident in the evolution of the kimono over time.

There is a clear difference between Western and Japanese clothing traditions. Western clothing focuses on shaping the body and creating a three-dimensional form. Japanese clothing, on the other hand, emphasizes the fabric itself. Instead of revealing the body's shape, Japanese clothes conceal it by draping fabric in flat, flowing layers over the body (Francks 2015: 335).

Importance of cultural values in design and branding

A product may feature a logo, a distinctive shape, or be made of specific materials; these are its material brand markers. However, according to Holt, these elements do not carry intrinsic meaning or history. Instead, a brand is constituted by the psychological

perception of its audience. This perception, shaped over time, becomes the “history” of the brand’s material markers (Holt 2004: 20–21). As these perceptions are formed collectively, branding is inherently tied to cultural context. While human nature is universal, cultures differ significantly and shape individuals’ behaviors, thought patterns, and values. Culture can be likened to software programming the brain, which is changeable yet deeply rooted in one’s social environment (Hofstede et al. 2010: 5f). Consequently, perceptions of a brand vary across cultures. For example, the cultural gap between someone from East Asia and someone from Central Europe can be far greater than between two people from the same country. A brand targeting Japanese consumers will naturally reflect Japanese cultural values and ideals. This plurality of cultural perspectives presents a challenge for brands navigating global markets. A Japanese brand seeking to expand internationally must consider how to adapt its identity and message to resonate with diverse cultural audiences.

In fashion especially, design is never created in a vacuum. Cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic values are deeply embedded in creative practices. In Japanese fashion, concepts such as *takumi*, *wabi-sabi*, and *kawaii* play a central role in shaping brand identity and guiding designers in connecting with both domestic and international audiences. The importance of these values is also reflected in national efforts to promote cultural branding abroad, such as JETRO’s 2024 project *Takumi Next*, which supports Japanese artisans in expanding their global reach. Initiatives like this highlight how cultural values are not only preserved but actively mobilized to define and promote Japanese fashion identity on the global stage.

The thesis introduces examples demonstrating how Japanese cultural concepts are applied in fashion. At first glance, the selection of examples for each cultural term may appear arbitrary. However, this perceived randomness can be understood by examining the agents behind fashion creation. Competing theories in fashion studies address this issue. One perspective supports a top-down diffusion model, where trends originate with elite designers and gradually filter down to the public. In contrast, other scholars argue for a bottom-up model, suggesting that fashion trends emerge from consumers, subcultures, and everyday wear (Kawamura 2006: 785). Considering these opposing theories, I have chosen to include both individual designers, even when designing under

their own names as registered brands with multiple employees (for example, Yamamoto Yohji), and fashion labels not centered around a single designer. Rather than selecting examples based on a particular diffusion model, the methodology behind the selection is guided by commercial success, cultural influence, and the clarity with which the concept is represented.

Glocalization

Robertson (1995: 26f) introduces the concept of *glocalization* in response to dominant sociological interpretations of globalization. Against the backdrop of globalization as a process of cultural homogenization, Robertson coins the term *glocalization* to describe the complex interaction between global and local influences. He highlights a central tension in globalization theory between homogenization and heterogenization, emphasizing that what appears to be local is often shaped by global or external forces. Another important aspect of *glocalization* is the tension between universalism and particularism.

In the context of Japan, Iwabuchi (2002: 27) discusses part of *glocalization* strategies through the concept of *mukokuseki* *無国籍性* ("cultural odorlessness"). Products intended for international markets are culturally neutralized, stripped of specific cultural markers to enhance their global appeal. Iwabuchi identifies consumer technologies, comics and cartoons, and computer/video games as examples of such culturally odorless products.

While this thesis does not focus extensively on *glocalization*, this concept provides useful context for understanding how Japanese fashion may navigate global and local influences.

Approach to examination of Wabi-Sabi, Takumi and Kawaii

While *wabi-sabi* is examined through selected case studies to explore its aesthetic principles in detail, *takumi* and *kawaii* are discussed through a broader survey of fashion practices and designer philosophies to demonstrate their widespread influence. Each concept is introduced with its respective historical background, followed by an explanation of its contemporary relevance.

I. Takumi

Takumi 匠 refers to craftsmanship, a concept deeply rooted in Japan. This craftsmanship embodies a philosophy that prioritizes exceptional skill and dedication, often involving a lifetime pursuit of mastery in one's craft (Xu 徐 2024: 1). The spirit of craftsmanship traces its origins back to the 5th to 7th centuries in Japan, when traditional handicrafts emerged alongside the introduction of Chinese technologies, religions, and philosophies. During the Nara period in the 7th century, craftsmen gained improved social status and were organized through institutions like the *Naishōryō* 内匠寮 (Office of the *Takumi*). The existence of such institutions reflects close ties to official courts, which fostered respect for craftsmanship and contributed to the promotion of its spirit.

Later, with the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate, the Japanese craftsman community underwent changes. A new group of craftsmen called *shokunin* 職人 appeared, organizing themselves into specialized trade groups. This development advanced the regionalization of handicrafts. As the Edo period progressed, the number of artisans increased, and with that, the previously sacred image of the craftsman diminished. The idea of craftsmanship shifted toward performing skilled work in everyday life (Xing 邢 2024: 2).

Under Ishida Baigan 石田梅岩 (1685–1744) and the philosophical school of *Shingaku* 心学 he founded, public perception of craftsmanship transformed significantly. Baigan's teachings contributed to a widespread appreciation of craftsmanship, reinforcing occupational pride and promoting philosophical ideas about social equality and the ethical role of commerce (Hammitzsch 1941: 21f).

After the Second World War, the Japanese government provided incentives such as financial support and public recognition of companies. In addition, strict industrial product standards were introduced (Xing 邢 2024: 3).

To better understand how *takumi* is perceived today, this thesis also considers a related concept: *monozukuri* ものづくり. *Monozukuri* emphasizes a sincere attitude towards the creation process (Babu 2016). If *takumi* represents the ideal of the master craftsman, *monozukuri* may be seen as its human face, the everyday artisan who practices meticulous craftsmanship and carries forward traditional techniques.

In this thesis, *monozukuri* ものづくり is not treated as a fixed cultural essence but rather as a socially constructed concept shaped by government policy, economic pressures, and cultural discourse. While it is now widely associated with care, precision, and high-quality manufacturing, *monozukuri* underwent a significant transformation. In the 1970s and 1980s, many educators in Japan were skeptical of vocational education that focused heavily on manual labor, advocating instead for curricula that emphasized scientific thinking and general education. This began to change in the late 1980s, when collaboration between schools and local small- and medium-sized enterprises revived the value of hands-on skills. In manufacturing-heavy regions, *monozukuri* became central to both vocational training and local identity. By the 2000s, it was widely accepted and recognized for its educational and cultural importance (Katayama 2014: 45f).

This shift in perception forms the backdrop for understanding *takumi* as a more specific cultural ideal, one that emphasizes not only technical excellence but also regional identity and long-term dedication. In Japanese fashion, *takumi* serves not only as a

symbol of refined skill but also as a cultural narrative that contributes to the industry's unique global presence.

A. Takumi in Modern Fashion

In 1993, Issey Miyake developed his PLEATS PLEASE ISSEY MIYAKE line by innovating with new pleating methods (Issey Miyake n.d.a). By experimenting with pleats, he created a technique that allows the pleated fabric to maintain its desired shape. This technique makes the pleated garments “easy to wear, to care for and to travel with; practical for all aspects of daily life, comfortable, affordable, and elegant” (Issey Miyake n.d.b).

Figure 1 Homme Plissé Issey Miyake FW23

In addition to creating new garment technologies, Miyake explored traditional fabric techniques. He travelled to regions known for traditional dyeing, *sashiko* embroidery, and leg-guard gaiters, drawing inspiration from *takumi* artisanship and incorporating these methods into his technological innovations (Issey Miyake n.d.). His work represents an intersection between Japanese traditional techniques and modern technology to meet contemporary demands in the fashion industry. This evolution of representing traditional skills embodies *takumi* in modern fashion.

Another key player in modern fashion that foregrounds *takumi* craftsmanship is the menswear brand Visvim. Its mission statement emphasizes connecting traditional artisans' products to the market (Visvim n.d.). Visvim uses a natural indigo stencil dyeing technique called *aigata* *藍型* in its products (Visvim 2023), as well as a natural indigo dyeing method, *aizome* *藍染め* (Visvim 2022). Besides highlighting its collaborations with artisans, Visvim also contributes to modern fashion by publishing dissertations on the artisans it works with and their techniques, such as the two dyeing methods mentioned above.

Figure 2 Aigata (Natural Indigo Stencil Dyeing): indigo dyeing process

Figure 3 Aigata (Natural Indigo Stencil Dyeing): KERCHIEF DOWN JACKET (N.D.)

B. Global Appeal and Challenges

Japan's artisan skills find global appeal, as evidenced by the growing interest of luxury brands in Japanese companies that prioritize high quality and local craftsmanship. One prominent example is LVMH's acquisition of the brand Kapital, which reflects this trend (Adegeest 2025). Acquisitions like this can help companies relying on traditional, labor-intensive techniques to remain in business. However, critics fear that under corporate ownership, these companies might be pressured to prioritize profitability, potentially moving away from their original values and risking the erosion of the unique, traditional character on which they were built.

Besides LVMH, other fashion companies have partnered with Japanese craftsmen. Brands such as Tory Burch, Uniqlo, Aesop, Nike, and Jimmy Choo have all collaborated with Buasou, a Tokushima-based company known for its indigo-dyed products (Suen 2023). These partnerships not only enhance the global distribution of artisanal Japanese fashion by connecting it to companies with established international supply chains but also help preserve traditional techniques.

Efforts are also underway within Japan to help artisans expand their reach. One example is Japanese designer Hiroyuki Murase, founder of the luxury brand Suzusan. Educated in Germany, Murase has a deep understanding of the European market and is using that experience to support other Japanese artisans through the project “Creation as Dialogue”. This initiative connects local craftspeople in Nagoya with the European market by facilitating collaboration between Japan-based artisans and Japanese designers living in Europe (Suen 2023). By linking people who share a similar cultural background and work in the same field, such efforts reduce the risk of cultural clashes and help maintain product authenticity.

Another promising development for *takumi* in the global context of Japanese fashion is the growing movement toward slow fashion. As concerns over sustainability and the consequences of mass production become more pressing, both consumers and designers are beginning to rethink how clothes are made and consumed. While slow fashion is often associated with environmental sustainability, its definition is broader and more complex. Part of this ambiguity stems from a lack of academic consensus on what slow fashion fully encompasses (Fletcher 2010: 259f). Still, it follows in the footsteps of established movements such as Slow Food, founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1986. Slow Food emphasizes the importance of food that supports the community and the environment, and this idea has been adapted into the realm of fashion.

Slow fashion addresses sustainability challenges by focusing on two key pillars: slow production and slow consumption. Slow production allows for a healthier coexistence between workers and production cycles, giving the environment the time it needs to regenerate naturally. It also improves workers’ quality of life by reducing the pressures associated with fast-paced manufacturing. Slow consumption is about creating garments designed for longevity, products that can be used for a long time due to their high quality and thoughtful design. Instead of chasing trends, slow fashion values timeless pieces that remain wearable beyond a single season (Jin; Jung 2014: 512).

Eco-modernist thinking assumes that technological innovation alone will resolve the environmental issues within the fashion system (Fletcher 2017: 1). However, there are alternative approaches to sustainability. *Takumi* aligns with slow fashion through its core

values. These values are fundamental to slow fashion, which champions deliberate production and enduring quality. Rather than relying on rapid cycles and trend-based consumption, Japanese fashion shaped by *takumi* emphasizes artisanal techniques, timeless aesthetics, and long-lasting materials.

Clothing made with the value of *takumi* reflects the principles of slow fashion. These garments are created through processes refined over generations of craftsmanship. They often involve high design standards and a deep respect for materials and time. As such, *takumi* naturally intersects with the philosophy behind slow production and slow consumption. This overlap not only supports global sustainability movements but also helps distinguish Japanese fashion in the international arena.

To situate *takumi* within the institutionalized fashion system, its rising visibility through acquisitions, expanded distribution networks, and consumer outreach demonstrates its integration into the established fashion world. This includes respected brands, fashion shows, and global media. As *takumi*-inspired fashion becomes more commercially viable, it also gains the opportunity to reshape prevailing fashion norms by advocating authenticity, quality, and ethical production.

The positive influence of *takumi* is evident in the legacy of Yamamoto Yohji. In an interview with *GQ Japan*, he states:「服に対する考え方は一度も変わったことがないですよ」(Johnson 2023). Translated as “My way of thinking about clothes has never changed,” this unwavering approach embodies the spirit of *takumi*, emphasizing consistency, craftsmanship, and a deep-rooted philosophy beyond passing trends.

Yamamoto’s influence is widely recognized. A designer from the brand ACRONYM describes him as an avant-garde artist whose contributions to tailoring, volume, and the use of black have made a lasting impact on the fashion industry. According to this designer, everyone involved in fashion today is, to some extent, influenced by Yamamoto (Johnson 2023). His work exemplifies how a sustained commitment to *takumi* can nurture talent with the capacity to shape global fashion discourse.

Despite the promise *takumi* holds for the future of fashion, it also faces significant challenges. As previously discussed, fashion functions as an institutionalized system, particularly centered in France and Europe, which does not always accommodate

approaches such as *takumi*. The concept is rooted in individual mastery and traditional craftsmanship rather than in fast-changing trends. *Takumi* emphasizes function, process, and materiality over visual novelty or mass-market appeal. Furthermore, it is often situated outside Eurocentric frameworks, which continue to shape dominant notions of fashion legitimacy. As a result, fashion based on *takumi* can struggle to achieve broad international recognition within these established systems.

II. Wabi Sabi

Wabi-sabi 侘び寂び is a philosophy and aesthetic rooted in Zen Buddhism. It emphasizes impermanence, humility, asymmetry, and a deep appreciation for natural imperfection (Juniper 2003: 1f). Due to the difficulty of capturing the full range of meanings associated with *wabi-sabi*, this section focuses specifically on its aesthetic applications.

Historically, the terms *wabi* and *sabi* had distinct and initially negative connotations. Over time, particularly during the 14th century, both terms underwent semantic shifts. Their meanings evolved from referring to loneliness and desolation to denoting simplicity, transience, and beauty found in imperfection. Eventually, the two concepts merged and are now commonly used together as *wabi-sabi* (Koren 1994: 21ff).

Wabi-sabi is recognized through several visual and material markers, although these vary depending on the artistic medium. This analysis concentrates on how *wabi-sabi* is expressed in fashion and material culture. A key indicator of *wabi-sabi* in clothing is the suggestion of natural processes. Garments that show signs of aging or weathering, such as discoloration, fading, fraying, or holes, are central to this aesthetic. These marks suggest exposure to elements such as rain, wind, sunlight, heat, or cold.

The overall aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* in fashion can be described as grounded in natural and subdued qualities. This is reflected in coarse or raw textures and materials that may appear unfinished or unrefined. The craftsmanship is often subtle and not immediately visible, contributing to the humble character of the garment.

In addition to texture and material, colour plays an essential role. *Wabi-sabi* typically avoids bright hues in favour of a subdued palette consisting of greys, muted tones, and soft pastels. Edges are generally soft, and shapes are often asymmetrical or irregular. Simplicity is a defining principle, not necessarily in concept but in composition. This simplicity is achieved through the use of minimal materials and restraint in design while still maintaining both visual and conceptual interest.

Finally, *wabi-sabi* is characterized by its unpretentious nature. It does not seek attention but instead reflects an understated elegance that blends seamlessly with its environment. This aesthetic mirrors the quiet beauty of the natural world and the inevitability of time (Koren 1994: 62–72).

A. Similarities to Western concepts

The aesthetic principles behind *wabi-sabi*, such as transience, imperfection, and natural simplicity, share similarities with certain Western aesthetic practices. Terms such as “poverty chic,” “poverty core,” and “pauperist style” describe Western phenomena that favour visual motifs associated with poverty. These styles are characterised by torn, stained, worn-out, and ill-fitting garments. Although the terminology has evolved over time, the phenomenon itself has existed since the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, the term “poverty core” has become prominent in public discourse. The emergence of this trend can be attributed to two main factors. In the 1960s and 1970s, wearing second-hand clothing served as a form of rebellion against middle-class norms. In contrast, its contemporary popularity is more closely associated with environmental concerns and rising awareness of social inequality. Consequently, overt displays of consumption have declined in desirability, while modest and understated styles are increasingly regarded as socially appropriate and ethically conscious (Negrin 2014: 197–213).

It is important to highlight the differences between trends such as poor chic and *wabi-sabi*, as individuals unfamiliar with *wabi-sabi* may mistakenly attribute to it the characteristics of poor chic. Halnon (2002: 507f) argues that poor chic comprises a set of fashion and lifestyle trends that use poverty to perform a form of “class vacation.”

Consumers of poor chic engage in highly visible consumption and symbolic references to poverty in order to assert social status and manage fears of downward mobility. This symbolic engagement transforms poverty into a commodified tourist experience. In conclusion, poor chic serves as a means of managing anxieties about falling into poverty.

The concept of *poor chic* is fundamentally tied to sociology, whereas *wabi-sabi* is rooted in aesthetic philosophy, Japanese cultural history, and Zen Buddhism. Distinguishing between these two concepts in the context of runways and fashion brands requires an understanding that *poor chic* primarily revolves around class tourism, symbolic consumption, and social inequality, while *wabi-sabi* centres on imperfection, impermanence, simplicity, and spirituality.

A further parallel exists between the Daoist concept of *ziran* 自然 and *wabi-sabi*. In Daoist aesthetics, *ziran* refers to innate spontaneity and unforced naturalness (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2005). Applying *ziran* to clothing design requires caution due to its complex philosophical background, but its core meaning relates to harmony with nature and the rejection of artificiality. Similarly, *wabi-sabi*, also a concept requiring culturally sensitive interpretation, emphasizes an appreciation of imperfection and impermanence. Both concepts, within their respective traditions, reject polished perfection and instead value authenticity, natural expression, and material modesty.

However, interpreting such cultural concepts within contemporary design discourse can risk oversimplification or misinterpretation. For example, Fang, Fu, and Peng (2023: 2500) describe the brand Uma Wang, founded in London in 2003 by Chinese designer Zhi Wang, as embodying the *wabi-sabi* ethos. The brand uses natural fabrics such as cotton and linen, employs vegetal and tea dyeing methods, and draws its colour palette from organic sources such as rocks. While these choices clearly express an affinity with nature and sustainability, they may align more closely with the Daoist ideal of *ziran* than with the aesthetic of imperfection characteristic of *wabi-sabi*.

B. Wabi-Sabi in Modern Fashion

In the 1980s, Japanese designers such as Kawakubo Rei and Yamamoto Yohji introduced fashion that challenged conventional norms, often categorised under the theoretical term “deconstruction.” This style became more defined during the 1980s and 1990s and is known for its asymmetry, raw or unfinished appearance, distressed textiles, unconventional materials, and the reshaping of traditional garment silhouettes. These attributes strongly overlap with the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*. Both deconstruction fashion and *wabi-sabi* emphasise imperfection, asymmetry, and a rejection of polished, idealised forms. While the concept of *wabi-sabi* is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, its influence has extended beyond national borders, especially through the global reach of Japanese designers. Belgian designers such as Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, and Martin Margiela adopted similar principles, blending them with their own cultural contexts (Kawamura 2005: 105–115). This demonstrates that *wabi-sabi*, although originally Japanese, has become part of the wider design vocabulary in international fashion. Designers such as Rick Owens, who was still a student when Kawakubo and Yamamoto first presented their groundbreaking collections in Paris, continue to carry traces of this influence in their own work. Owens’s raw textures, minimalism, and emphasis on asymmetry reflect a similar appreciation for imperfection (English 2010: 130). This suggests that the *wabi-sabi* sensibility introduced by Japanese designers was

not only revolutionary but continues to shape how fashion is imagined and created on a global scale.

Figure 4 Look from Rick Owens Fall 2016 Menswear collection

C. Global Appeal and Challenges

Urban life is often characterised by overwhelming busyness and overstimulation. In such environments, the Japanese aesthetic philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, which emphasises imperfection, impermanence, and simplicity, offers a meaningful counterbalance. As modern societies accelerate, practices and visual cues that foster mental clarity become increasingly valued. When translated into fashion, *wabi-sabi* manifests through garments that embrace asymmetry, incompletion, and subtle textures, inviting wearers to

reconnect with a slower, more reflective state of mind. Such designs not only reflect aesthetic values but also serve as gentle reminders to pause and appreciate imperfection (Fang Fu Peng 2023: 2504). Brown and Ryan (2003: 822) discuss how mindfulness, as a quality of consciousness, promotes well-being by fostering self-awareness and emotional regulation. Mindfulness practices enriched with *wabi-sabi* principles, by embracing imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness, have been linked to enhanced emotional balance, life satisfaction, resilience, and authentic self-expression (Pelz 2025). In this way, *wabi-sabi* fashion carries a unique appeal in contemporary society, where the demand for mindfulness and authenticity continues to grow.

In response to growing concerns over environmental pollution, the fashion industry has witnessed a rising awareness of ecological sustainability. *Wabi-sabi*'s philosophy, with its emphasis on natural imperfection and harmony with nature, resonates strongly within this eco-conscious movement. Unlike traditional fashion, which often relies on animal leather and synthetic chemicals, *wabi-sabi*-inspired clothing prioritises the use of all-natural fabrics and minimises chemical treatments (Fang Fu Peng 2023). This development exemplifies how *wabi-sabi*'s principles have transcended cultural boundaries and influenced global fashion practices that value environmental harmony and mindful consumption.

In the following two case studies, the use of *wabi-sabi* by Kawakubo Rei and Yamamoto Yohji is examined. The analysis focuses on their fashion shows, specifically Kawakubo Rei's Spring/Summer 1997 "Lumps and Bumps" collection for Comme des Garçons, as well as Yamamoto Yohji's Spring/Summer 2015 menswear collection. These shows are analysed through a visual lens, considering materials, cuts, colours, and audience perception.

D. Analysis

1. Rei Kawakubo (Comme des Garçons): SS 1997 “Lumps and Bumps”

“Lumps and Bumps” can be seen as a modern take on the Japanese aesthetic concept of *wabi-sabi*. The collection breaks away from conventional ideas of beauty by placing padded, uneven shapes under tight garments, which create distorted and asymmetrical silhouettes. This embrace of irregularity reflects asymmetry, while the use of simple fabrics and a muted colour palette ties into simplicity and naturalness. The designs resemble organic or bodily growths and seem to reflect on themes such as impermanence and imperfection, both of which are central to *wabi-sabi*.

Even though the collection is visually striking and highly experimental, which might seem at odds with *wabi-sabi*’s more quiet and subtle character, it still captures the essence of the aesthetic. “Lumps and Bumps” challenges conventional ideas of beauty and encourages an alternative view of imperfection, not as a flaw, but as something to be acknowledged, accepted, and potentially appreciated.

The show’s reception was mixed but notable. At the time, many found the distorted shapes unsettling, as they clashed with mainstream fashion expectations. However, this disruption was intentional, aimed at provoking reflection and challenging prevailing perceptions of beauty and form. Over time, “Lumps and Bumps” has been recognised as a groundbreaking collection that expanded the language of fashion, particularly within avant-garde circles, and demonstrated how fashion can embody deeper cultural and philosophical ideas (Ahmed 2016).

Figure 5 Look from Comme des Garçons Spring 1997 Ready-to-Wear collection

Figure 6 Look from Comme des Garçons Spring 1997 Ready-to-Wear collection

2. Yohji Yamamoto: SS 2015 Menswear

Yohji Yamamoto's Spring/Summer 2015 Menswear collection shows a subtle but visually grounded connection to the aesthetic principles of *wabi-sabi*. The garments presented on the runway featured loose, flowing silhouettes with visible layers, raw edges, and fabrics that appeared soft, worn, and naturally textured. These details suggest an intentional departure from polished, symmetrical tailoring and instead embrace a kind of roughness or incompleteness. The visible stitching and unfinished hems reinforce a sense of impermanence, while asymmetrical cuts and the irregular fit contribute to an aesthetic of imbalance, which is one of *wabi-sabi*'s core visual traits.

The fabrics used enhance this impression. Although the collection does not explicitly reference *wabi-sabi*, its visual language reflects similar values: a preference for authenticity over refinement, for process over perfection, and for garments that appear grounded, lived-in, and real. Yohji Yamamoto's Spring/Summer 2015 Menswear collection was received as an expressive and poetic exploration of identity and texture. Critics noted the collection's soft tailoring, sheer fabrics, floral prints, and layered silhouettes as blending masculine and feminine codes. The raw hems, loose fits, and unexpected fabric

combinations reinforced Yamamoto's reputation for challenging fashion conventions while maintaining elegance and emotional depth (Verner 2014).

Figure 7 Look from Yohji Yamamoto Men's Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear collection

Figure 8 Look from Yohji Yamamoto Men's Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear collection

E. Limits to interpretation

While Yamamoto's and Kawakubo's preference aligns with key aesthetic principles of *wabi-sabi* (such as simplicity, understatement, and an appreciation for subtle beauty), it is important to recognise that their choices may not always be intended as a direct expression of the cultural concept itself. Rather, these design decisions arise from their personal philosophy and response to fashion norms. Thus, while their work can be interpreted through a *wabi-sabi* lens, it is more accurate to view their use of aesthetics as part of a broader, individual approach that resonates with but does not fully embody traditional *wabi-sabi* ideals.

III. Kawaii

The final concept explored in this thesis is *kawaii* 可愛い. The definition of *kawaii* is ambiguous and has undergone numerous reinterpretations. According to the online dictionary *goo*, the term *kawaii* (かわいい) originated from *kawayui* (かわゆい), meaning "lovable" or "adorable." It denotes qualities of charm, endearment, or cuteness, often evoking affection or protectiveness toward things perceived as small, weak, or innocent (*goo* 辞書 1999). *Kawaii* has evolved into a multifaceted concept, frequently modified by prefixed adjectives that create nuanced variations in meaning, such as *kimo-kawaii* キモかわいい ("creepy-cute") (Nittono et al. 2021: 3)

Given that *kawaii* encompasses a broad cultural, emotional, and social spectrum in Japan, this section begins with a brief overview of its historical development and socio-cultural context. The primary focus, however, will be on its aesthetic dimensions, specifically the visual markers that characterize *kawaii* in fashion.

Although the precise origins of the term are unclear, positive connotations of *kawaii* can already be found in the 11th-century text *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon (Lieber-Milo; Nittono 2019: 2). This development set the stage for *kawaii* in subsequent history.

The emergence of *kawaii* as a national mood can be traced back to Japan's postwar reconstruction. After its defeat in World War II, Japan faced the task of rebuilding not only its infrastructure and economy but also its cultural identity. In the immediate postwar period, humility and submission defined the national atmosphere. By the 1960s and 1970s, however, a new sensibility began to take shape within the *shōjo* (young girl) subculture (May 2019: 59ff).

The cultural foundations of this new sensibility can be traced back to the emergence of *shōjo* 少女 as a distinct social category during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Educational reforms during this period created a newly protected group of adolescent girls, idealized as innocent, delicate, and imaginative. This group of consumers shaped the demand for *kawaii* goods and imagery, which emphasized softness, vulnerability, and fantasy, reflecting prevailing social expectations (Takahashi 2013: 116; Kawamura 1994: 32).

In this context, *kawaii* became associated with vulnerability, playfulness, and a symbolic withdrawal from the violence of Japan's militarist past. Over time, it developed into a layered and paradoxical structure. To present oneself as *kawaii* could mean appearing defenceless yet self-sufficient, innocent yet ironic, transparent yet masked. In contrast to Germany's postwar embrace of remorse, Japan adopted *kawaii* as a cultural mechanism for coping with national trauma, making it playful, ambiguous, and emotionally disarming (May 2019: 61f).

A. Kawaii as Socio-Cultural Phenomenon

The scope of kawaii is often undervalued or oversimplified in global interpretations. As Adamowicz and Sosnowska (2018) note:

> „Fenomenu kawaii nie powinno się sprowadzać tylko i wyłącznie do sposobu estetyzacji przedmiotów i otoczenia, ale to właśnie ten estetyczny wymiar wydaje się najbardziej rozpowszechniony i najłatwiej rozpoznawalny poza granicami Japonii. [...] Coraz więcej osób łączy termin kawaii z uliczną modą Harajuku, Hello Kitty czy innymi słodkimi maskotkami i gadżetami. “
>
> (The phenomenon of kawaii should not be reduced solely to the aesthetic styling of objects and environments, yet this aesthetic dimension is the most widespread and most easily recognized outside of Japan. [...] More and more people link the term kawaii to Harajuku street fashion, Hello Kitty, and other sweet mascots and gadgets.)

In a broader industrial and cultural context, Japan's national institutions have identified kansei 感性 (translated roughly as "sensitivity" or "emotional sensibility") as a fourth core principle in manufacturing, alongside performance, reliability, and cost (Ohkura 大倉 2011: 73). Within this framework, kawaii can be understood as an expression of kansei value, emphasizing the emotional and affective dimensions of both design and consumer experience.

Kajiwara Kanji 梶原 莞爾 (2010: 363) also explains how kawaii shapes Japanese creativity and innovation:

> 「私たちの眼はともすれば虚に向かう。遊びという行為、遊 ぶという理由から突き詰めて結果に至るのが日本式である り、かわいいイノベーションとでも言われるものではない だろうか。」
>
> "The Japanese style is to thoroughly pursue the act of playing, the reason of playing, and arrive at the result; might this be called 'kawaii innovation'?"

Kajiwara's interpretation sheds light on how *kawaii* functions within Japanese fashion, not merely as an aesthetic but as a methodology rooted in emotional intuition and exploratory experimentation. Unlike the linear, goal-oriented design logic common in Western frameworks, Japanese innovation often begins with curiosity, *kansei*-based sensitivity, or personal resonance. In this sense, *kawaii* plays a central role in design strategies by encouraging playful, emotive engagement rather than rational planning

This approach to design is echoed by Kenya Hara, one of Japan's most prominent design thinkers. In Designing Design (2008: 435), Hara writes:

"Design is not the act of amazing an audience with the novelty of forms or materials; it is the originality that repeatedly extracts astounding ideas from the crevices of the very commonness of everyday life."

Like Hara's vision of design, kawaii draws strength not from spectacle but from the elevation of the ordinary. It reveals beauty and emotion in what is often overlooked. This alignment with emotional subtlety and sensitivity to everyday experience positions kawaii not merely a trend but as a design philosophy.

Scholar Takeuchi Tadao 竹内忠男 emphasizes the growing cultural significance of kawaii, particularly within the realm of fashion. In his examination of youth culture and global consumer trends, he describes kawaii as a communicative aesthetic: a mode of expression that connects fashion, identity, and emotional desire. What was once a niche aesthetic associated with subcultural rebellion has, he argues, evolved into a fully-fledged cultural industry that merges traditional Japanese values of subtlety and playfulness with modern strategies of branding and self-representation (Takeuchi 2010: 223–226). Japanese fashion subcultures like Lolita and Visual Kei exemplify how kawaii becomes a vehicle for self-expression, community belonging, and even resistance to normative gender roles or adult expectations (Kinsella 1995: 220; Yano 2013: 164f, 199).

This layered understanding of *kawaii* also complicates its role in the global marketplace. As the aesthetic is exported through anime, pop culture, and fashion, its meanings often shift in translation. In global contexts, *kawaii* may be perceived as merely cute, whimsical, or infantilizing, stripped of its deeper cultural and emotional underpinnings.

However, in Japan, it remains connected to a more intricate system of social and aesthetic values, including emotional literacy, sensitivity to detail, and nostalgia for simplicity (Takeuchi 2010: 224–225).

This disconnect raises important questions about cultural translation and the commodification of affect.

In sum, *kawaii* represents more than a trend or visual style. It is a culturally embedded strategy that merges emotion, identity, and creativity. Whether in subcultural fashion on the streets of Harajuku or in globally marketed products, *kawaii* functions as a deeply affective and nuanced design language (Takeuchi 2010: 224–225). It invites both designers and consumers into an emotional dialogue that challenges the boundaries between cuteness, sophistication, and innovation.

B. Kawaii in Modern Fashion

The aesthetic markers of *kawaii* vary significantly across its subcategories, with each expression placing different visual and emotional emphases. One prominent substyle is Lolita fashion, a Japanese subcultural movement rooted primarily in youth fashion. Drawing on Gothic, Punk, Rococo, and Victorian influences, Lolita fashion is characterized by lace, frills, ribbons, high collars, and voluminous skirts layered with petticoats. This silhouette evokes a nostalgic, doll-like femininity that corresponds to an idealized image of European childhood within the Japanese cultural imagination (Nguyen 2016: 16). However, Lolita represents only one subset within the broader spectrum of *kawaii* aesthetics.

More generally, *kawaii* fashion emphasizes soft, pastel colour palettes, particularly pink, baby blue, and lavender, rounded shapes, and whimsical motifs such as cartoon animals, hearts, stars, and bows. Garments often feature oversized accessories, plush textures, and childlike silhouettes that convey cuteness, vulnerability, and emotional accessibility (Kinsella 1995: 220–225). While Lolita fashion leans toward ornate historical fantasy,

mainstream *kawaii* fashion tends to project a more casual and approachable form of innocence, characterized by lightness, softness, and playfulness in both form and colour.

Figure 9 Display window of Shibuya 109, Tokyo, January 12, 2025

Figure 10 Display window of Shibuya 109, Tokyo, January 12, 2025

When discussing *kawaii* in fashion, it is important to clarify that the term does not refer to the success of a single brand. Rather, *kawaii* functions as an aesthetic framework employed by both commercial fashion labels and subcultural groups. While individual brands may serve as representatives of the *kawaii* aesthetic, the broader phenomenon is best understood through the shared visual and cultural logic they reflect. Accordingly, any analysis of *kawaii*'s global reach must take into account institutionalized fashion practices that emerge from subcultural forms of expression.

C. Global Appeal and Challenges

The word *kawaii* has gained international circulation and has become a recognizable element of global pop culture. One notable manifestation of this trend is the rise of Lolita fashion, which has established a presence in countries such as Italy, Germany, Spain, South Korea, and Thailand (篠原資明 Shinohara Shimei 2012: 1). As Ngai (2022: 2) cites from a *Women's Wear Daily* report, by 2004, Lolita fashion had become financially significant, generating at least $900,000 annually. What was once perceived as a "weird style" in Japan had by then evolved into an "established category."

A key strategy in the global spread of *kawaii* is *kawaii* branding. *Kawaii* functions as a form of soft power, influencing international pop culture, animation, and merchandise. One of the most iconic examples is Sanrio, the company behind Hello Kitty. Sanrio continues to demonstrate international success, with licensing alone generating billions in annual revenue across major global markets. The cultural force of *kawaii* enables it to be adapted by global brands such as Uniqlo, H&M, and others (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024; Uniqlo 2024; H&M 2025).

Sanrio, with its flagship character Hello Kitty and the universe surrounding her, exemplifies the application of *kawaii* in corporate branding. The company's philosophy is to contribute to a virtuous society, encapsulated in its corporate motto *Minna Nakayoku* (みんなかよく, "Let's all get along"). Sanrio positions itself as a champion of friendship

and emotional connection (Sanrio Co. n.d.). By translating *kawaii*, a culturally specific concept in Japan, into a universal value, Sanrio has managed to succeed both domestically and internationally (Globis 2021).

Kawaii branding also demonstrates notable adaptability in targeting different consumer demographics. With Japan's youth population in decline, an increasing number of companies have adjusted their marketing strategies to appeal to adult women. By introducing new product lines, including adult-oriented goods such as personal electronics and jewelry, companies like Sanrio have successfully repositioned their core consumer base to include women aged 18 to 40 (Yano 2013: 10). This flexibility, supported by the broad and evolving definition of *kawaii*, enables brands to adjust their appeal both within Japan and internationally.

Furthermore, the appeal of *kawaii* is evident in brands like Baby, The Stars Shine Bright (BTSSB), a fashion label specializing in Lolita fashion. Established in 1988 in Tokyo, the company opened its first overseas store in Paris in 2006, followed by a store in the United States in 2009. Over time, the brand has participated in various international expos and fashion shows, including one at the International Film Festival in Shanghai, China (Baby, The Stars Shine Bright n.d.). Its presence at global fashion events and in Paris, a major fashion capital, underscores how *kawaii* fashion has entered the international stage.

Kawaii also resonates with individuals seeking escapism. Consumers are often drawn to products that evoke warmth, nostalgia, and vulnerability (Granot; Alejandro; Russell 2013: 77). This form of escapism can even be associated with Peter Pan Syndrome. Kiley (1984) describes this psychological phenomenon as the desire to avoid adult responsibilities and remain in a youthful state indefinitely. Since *kawaii* originated within youth culture, the consumption of *kawaii* products in adulthood can evoke memories of childhood. This psychological connection functions as a bridge that enables *kawaii* culture to resonate with global audiences.

As kawaii is often expressed within subcultural contexts, particularly in Japanese youth culture, it is noteworthy that some designers emerging from these scenes have successfully translated kawaii-influenced aesthetics onto the international fashion stage. One prominent example is Jun Takahashi 高橋盾, founder of the brand

UNDERCOVER. Originating from the Harajuku subculture scene of the 1990s, Takahashi debuted his first womenswear collection in Paris in 2002, where it received critical acclaim (Rabkin 2020). His work incorporates elements of kawaii. As he explains in a 2015 interview with *Hypebeast*, a men's magazine focused on fashion and streetwear:

> "I think it's very human. I take that cute teddy bear and I give it a bit of a shock — that bit of violence. The combination is something that gives it real beauty. I am not denying beauty, but presenting it in a different light."

This description aligns with Cuevas's (2016) interpretation of *kawaii-kowai* かわいいこわい (*kawaii-kowai* 可愛い怖い): a fusion of *kawaii* かわいい (*kawaii* 可愛い), associated with purity, innocence, and femininity, and *kowai* こわい (*kowai* 怖い), connoting fear and danger. It illustrates how *kawaii*, when adopted by subcultures, can transcend its original cultural context and find resonance within the global fashion system.

Figure 11 Look from Womenswear Collection "But Beautiful V Guruguru," Fall/Winter 2007

Figure 12 Look from Menswear Collection "Order/Disorder," Fall/Winter 2019

The fashion system is a powerful tool for global diffusion, yet designers often employ alternative cultural strategies to achieve international recognition. Japanese producer and designer Nigo followed this path with his brand *A Bathing Ape* (BAPE), which combines playful, cartoon-like imagery with streetwear aesthetics. BAPE's use of characters, especially in its *Baby Milo* line, exemplifies what Yano (2013: 62) describes as *kyarakutā* きゃらくたー overload: a saturation of character imagery characteristic of *kawaii* culture in Japanese consumerism that blurs the line between play and commodity. This approach strategically spreads *kawaii* aesthetics on a global scale.

Kawamura (2006: 785) notes that Japan's youth-driven fashion economy often subverts dominant Western fashion hierarchies, with Nigo as a prominent figure in this movement. His engagement with hip-hop culture enabled him to position BAPE at the intersection of domestic subcultures and global trends. Japanese creators like Nigo have shaped transnational flows of hip-hop by blending localized aesthetics with the global appeal of rap (Condry 2006: 182). Collaborations with figures such as Pharrell Williams and Kanye

West (Highsnobiety 2020) further elevated BAPE into a transcultural icon, extending the reach of *kawaii* through the hybrid subcultures of Harajuku and hip-hop. This approach presents a challenge to conventional ideas of international appeal.

A key challenge for the international spread of *kawaii* fashion lies in its diffusion network. Kawamura (2006: 797f) observes that many participants in Tokyo's fashion scene express disapproval toward designers who have gained widespread international attention. As a result, *kawaii* fashion that enters Europe's institutionalized fashion system often loses appreciation within Japan. In order to maintain a distinct identity, Japanese fashion communities have created their own magazines, such as *Egg*, *SOS*, *Tokyo Style News* and *Cawaii*, which function outside of mainstream fashion media networks. Although *kawaii* fashion gains global visibility through the Internet, there appears to be little desire within the community to conform to institutionalized fashion systems. This is reflected in consumer attitudes and the creation of independent media beyond the established fashion network. Understanding this tension is essential for exploring how *kawaii* fashion negotiates its identity between local authenticity and international appeal.

Kawaii is a concept with no fixed definition. As Kawamura (2006: 797) notes, after interviewing young women involved in Tokyo's fashion scene, kawaii is difficult to define because its meaning is constantly evolving. This thesis aims to explore the boundaries of kawaii by analysing its etymology and identifying recurring aesthetic markers often associated with it. However, as the interviewees in Kawamura's study suggest, kawaii is ultimately defined by what youth culture itself considers kawaii, and this judgement is shaped by local context. One participant observes that Jun Takahashi's fashion is no longer desirable because it is "too famous" or "too well known." This raises an important question: if kawaii emerges from a localized and shifting cultural source, to what extent can the work of Jun Takahashi or other well-known designers still be considered kawaii? This ambiguity presents a challenge when attempting to export kawaii fashion globally. If kawaii is defined locally and shaped by constantly shifting youth sensibilities, how can it be consistently marketed abroad? Moreover, when designers like Jun Takahashi become globally recognised, their work may lose its kawaii appeal in its place of origin. This suggests that widespread appeal may undermine the very cultural specificity that defines kawaii.

Another challenge to the international popularity of *kawaii* fashion is its distinctive aesthetic. *Kawaii* fashion is visually striking, and its culturally specific elements can be perceived differently across societies, which limits its diffusion due to varying cultural frameworks. While the appeal of *kawaii* has been previously linked to the form of escapism it offers, this same characteristic can hinder its reception in other cultural contexts. Yomota (2006: 14) argues that Japanese culture places strong value on small and immature things, such as children or childlike objects. These evoke a sense of intimacy and serve as tools to remind individuals of their own childhood, fulfilling a nostalgic desire to return to that period of life.

Attitudes Toward the Fashion System

Japanese fashion designers often articulate their perspectives on the global fashion system, and Yamamoto Yohji is no exception. In an interview with Women's Wear Daily (WWD), a prominent fashion industry trade journal, Yamamoto shares his critical views on the fashion industry and offers insight into his distinctive approach to fashion. The conversation reveals not only his skepticism toward prevailing norms but also the philosophical depth that underpins his creative choices. At one point in the interview, WWD asks him:

> WWD：ショーの翌日に服が買えるなどファッションシステムの在り方を問い直す動きが出ているが、どう思うか？
>
> 山本：まあ好きにしろ、といった感じ。
>
> (WWD: There is a movement to question the fashion system, such as buying clothes the day after a show, what do you think about that?
>
> (Yamamoto: Well, do as you please.)

Yamamoto's decision to refrain from engaging in conversations about reforming the fashion system suggests a certain degree of detachment from it. Rather than positioning himself within the system, he appears to operate on its margins, guided by his own values

and vision. This becomes even more apparent when he responds to a question about his consumer base, further reinforcing the idea that the fashion system is not the central focus of his creative process:

> WWD：誰のためのデザインをしているのか？
>
> 山本：最初の頃は俺の中に理想の、実在しない女性がいた。その女性はどこかの丘の上に立っていて、遠くを眺めている。髪が風でなびき、タバコではなくシガーを吸っていて、かっこいいわけ。で、最後に「私、女辞めたの」と言う。最初は、その実在しない人のためにデザインしていた。でも最近はもう少しかみ砕いて作っている。最近の女性たちは世界中、非常にダサくなっていると思う。一日に何回も、ファストファッションで買い物するなんて、少しは疑問持てよ、と言いたい。「一着の服を選ぶってことは1つの生活を選ぶってことだぞ」って。だから俺は、そういったことに疑問を持つ女性のために作っている。
>
> (WWD: Who are you designing for?
>
> Yamamoto: At first, I had an ideal woman in my mind who didn't exist. She was standing on a hill somewhere, looking into the distance. Her hair was blowing in the wind, she was smoking a cigar instead of a cigarette, and she was cool. And at the end, she said, "I quit being a woman." At first, I designed for that imaginary person. But recently, I've been making it a little more straightforward. I think women these days are very uncool all over the world. I want to say that you should be a little skeptical about shopping at fast fashion stores multiple times a day. "Choosing one piece of clothing means choosing one lifestyle." That's why I make it for women who question such things.)

In the interview, Yamamoto Yohji emphasizes that his designs stem from personal convictions rather than external trends. He transforms his thoughts and ideas into fashion, guided by a deeply individual creative vision. Specifically, he criticizes women who blindly follow trends driven by overconsumption and the fast fashion industry. On a broader level, his critique targets the mechanisms of global capitalism embedded within the fashion world. In contrast, Yamamoto advocates for clothing that is intentional, enduring, and reflective of authenticity. When asked by WWD why he frequently uses the color black, his response reveals how this aesthetic choice embodies a refusal to conform to the

expectations of the fashion system and reflects a deeper commitment to resisting its norms:

> WWD：絶望感が「黒い」デザインにつながったと？
>
> 山本：おふくろの洋裁店を手伝っていたころから、女性の服は男から見てかわいいとか、セクシーだとか、そんなのばかりだったので、“それは違いませんか？”という思いがあった。肩書なしで女1匹でいる人に対して、“Can I help you?”“May I help you?”という思い。そうなるとやはり甘っちょろい色は使えない。どうしてもモノトーンの男性っぽい色になる。
>
> (WWD: Did your sense of despair lead you to the “black” design?
>
> Yamamoto: Ever since I was helping my mother's tailor store, women's clothes were always considered cute or sexy by men, so I thought, “Isn't that wrong?” I thought, "Isn't that wrong? I felt “Can I help you?” and "May I help you? In this case, we could not use sweet colors. The colors were monotone and masculine)

From the beginning, Yamamoto’s creative ambition stood in contrast to his lived experience. Surrounded by colorful clothing that left him dissatisfied, he turned his attention to designing garments in black. His entry into fashion signaled a deliberate stance of opposition to the industry’s conventions. While Yamamoto Yohji resists the global fashion system, he also engages with the broader context of fashion in Japan, particularly the work produced by Japanese designers within the country:

> WWD：昨今の日本の若手デザイナーについてアドバイスはあるか？
>
> 山本：勝手にすればいい。それより、日本のデザイナーはなぜ日本で認められないのか、という思いはずっとある。商業施設が新しくできると、1階には必ず海外の有名ブランドが入る。日本が日本を盛り上げない。だから日本の若いデザイナーは海外に出ざるを得ない。若手デザイナーに向けては、だから“まあ頑張れよ”“ただ服を作って輸出すると集金が大変だぞ”、と伝えたい。
>
> (WWD: Do you have any advice for young Japanese designers today?

Yamamoto: They can do whatever they want. More than that, I've always wondered why Japanese designers aren't recognized in Japan. Whenever a new commercial complex opens, the first floor is always filled with famous overseas brands. Japan doesn't support or uplift its own. That's why young Japanese designers are forced to go abroad. To them, I just want to say: "Well, good luck." But also, "Just know that if you simply make clothes and export them, collecting payments will be a hassle.")

One might assume that Japanese designers are appreciated domestically, but Yamamoto argues that this is not the case in Japan. Many Japanese fashion designers take their business overseas, with Europe considered the epicenter of fashion and likely the main reason for this preference. Yamamoto highlights the lack of infrastructure, industry support, and a consumer culture that favors Japanese brands at home. He emphasizes the structural pressure to seek recognition and financial success abroad. His statements, "Well, good luck," and "Just know that if you simply make clothes and export them, collecting payments will be a hassle," reveal a sense of frustration and disillusionment with how the fashion industry functions.

WWD：ファッション業界に長く身を置いていて自分の限界を感じたことはあるか？

山本：あります。40代後半の頃。ヨーロッパのジャーナリストたちが俺のことを「マスター」とか「マエストロ」とか言い出した。俺は反抗してヨーロッパに来たのに受け入れられちゃった。特にフランスはすごい。才能ある人間をうまく丸め込んで牙を折っちゃう。やばいと思った。「マエストロ」と言われてフラフラしちゃって、次のコレクションのイメージがわかなくなっちゃった。毒を抜かれて、不平等に対する怒りが薄れた。5年間くらいかな。だからそのときはバンド活動をしていた。全国ツアーを組んでその合間に仮縫いする、みたいな。

(WWD: Have you ever felt your limitations after being in the fashion industry for so long?

Yamamoto: Yes, when I was in my late 40s. When I was in my late 40s, European journalists started calling me a "master" and a "maestro. I came to Europe in defiance, but I was accepted. France in particular was amazing. They are able to round up talented people and break their fangs. I thought, "Oh my God. I was dizzy from being

called a “maestro,” and I couldn't imagine what the next collection would be like. I was poisoned and my anger at inequality faded, for about five years. So I was playing in a band at the time. I would tour around the country and do temporary sewing in between.

In a more in-depth reflection on the fashion industry, Yamamoto reveals an inner conflict with the global fashion system. The system can both legitimize and neutralize a fashion designer. The circumstances under which Yamamoto entered the fashion industry were marked by defiance and anger, perhaps fueling his vigor for creating fashion. However, once absorbed by the system, a designer may lose their critical edge. Yamamoto’s experience suggests that the fashion system in France carries the risk of diluting or disconnecting a designer’s original intent.

WWD：「ヨウジヤマモト」の何が今世間的にウケていると思うか？

山本：今の流行に疑問を持つ人が出てきたのではないだろうか？しかもそれが若い男性を中心に始まっていて、男性がウチの女性ものを買いに来ることが多い。意識的に日本の袴みたいな、スカートみたいなデザインを出したら爆発的に売れて、今も伸びている。女性ものについては今、“キチンとしなきゃ”となるとリクルートスーツになり、いつも着ている服との差が極端で中間がない人が多い。だからキチンと着る服、としてウチが認知されているようだ。流行ものが嫌だ、と思う女性が少しずつ出てきている。「ヨウジヤマモト」は高いから、まずは「ワイズ」や「リミフゥ」から入ってくる。

(WWD: What do you think makes Yamamoto Yohji so popular among the public nowadays?

Yamamoto: I think people are starting to question the current trends. Moreover, it has started mainly among young men, and many men are coming to buy our women's items. When we consciously introduced designs like Japanese hakama and skirts, sales exploded and are still growing. Nowadays, when it comes to women's clothing, if you have to look neat, you end up wearing a recruiting suit, and the difference between that and the clothes you normally wear is so extreme that many people don't have a middle ground. Therefore, it seems that our clothes are recognized as clothes to be worn neatly. Women who don't want to wear trendy clothes are gradually coming out of the closet. “Yohji Yamamoto” is expensive, so they start with ”Y's“ and ”LIMI FEU.)

Yamamoto identifies a growing segment of consumers who resist the dominant trend narrative, challenging the prevailing currents of the fashion system. The tendency to follow the fashion system is not consciously or subconsciously ingrained in this consumer base. This shift indicates a broader movement toward authenticity and a critical stance on traditional fashion cycles.

Designers like Yamamoto Yohji often see themselves as working against the system that is fashion. Instead of following trends or focusing on market demands, they seem to care more about staying true to their own vision.

Broader Implications

The cultural concepts of *wabi-sabi*, *kawaii*, and *takumi* together represent Japanese identity as a balance between modernity and tradition. Through the dynamic interplay of these ideas, Japanese fashion establishes a broad and resilient foundation for success on the global fashion stage.

wabi-sabi adds philosophical depth to Japanese fashion by acting as a counterpoint to the perfectionism often found in the global fashion industry. Emphasizing imperfection, asymmetry, and natural decay, it introduces emotional and conceptual richness. This sensibility serves as a form of resistance to the hyper-commercialized pace of global fashion production.

Alongside *wabi-sabi*, *takumi* preserves tradition through the mastery of artisanship. Japan remains rooted in values such as precision, authenticity, and generational knowledge. The connection contemporary designers maintain with this artisanal heritage provides them with a grounded design vocabulary, drawing from both *wabi-sabi* and *takumi* as foundational pillars.

In contrast, *kawaii* introduces a dimension of modernity. It expresses playfulness, softness, and emotional freedom. As a cultural practice, *kawaii* expands fashion beyond functionality and commercial trends by incorporating emotional storytelling and

imaginative creativity. This adaptability strengthens the potential for cultural reinvention in both domestic and global contexts.

The three concepts are rooted in distinct domains: *wabi-sabi* in philosophical aesthetics, *takumi* in artisanal heritage, and *kawaii* in modern cultural expression. While each concept can be perceived independently, their intersection creates a multifaceted cultural identity. This interplay supports both the preservation of tradition and the possibility of creative reinvention. It allows Japanese fashion to evolve continuously, establishing a position of influence in the global fashion system through a balance of enduring cultural values and the constant change inherent to fashion.

Designers such as Issey Miyake and the brand Visvim exemplify this dynamic integration. Miyake blends technological innovation with traditional pleating techniques, while Visvim incorporates handcrafted processes to appeal to a contemporary international audience. These cases demonstrate how Japanese cultural concepts remain embedded within modern fashion practices, enriching them with both depth and distinctiveness.

The broader implication is that Japanese fashion offers a model of cultural sustainability. It maintains relevance and innovation while remaining deeply connected to Japan's cultural foundations. In doing so, it presents an alternative to dominant Western paradigms of fashion development.

Yamamoto Yohji's critique of fast fashion, which targets the production of cheap and disposable clothing, reflects deeper values rooted in *wabi-sabi* and *takumi*. *Wabi-sabi* encourages appreciation for imperfection and the natural aging process, while *takumi* emphasizes craftsmanship, patience, and quality. Together, and also when considered independently, these concepts challenge the culture of mass production and disposability. They advocate for garments that are thoughtfully designed, made to last, and carry significance beyond short-lived fashion trends.

One indicator of the global appeal and adaptability of Japanese fashion is its growing presence within contemporary music scenes, particularly in hip-hop and trap. Artists such as Playboi Carti, Frank Ocean, the Polish rapper Oki, and rapper-rock musician Chivas frequently reference brands like Comme des Garçons and Rick Owens. These labels are either Japanese or strongly influenced by Japanese design philosophy. While

such references may initially appear superficial, they reflect a deeper engagement with the aesthetics and values embedded in these brands. The deconstructed, minimal, and often intentionally imperfect silhouettes associated with Comme des Garçons, for example, subtly evoke the aesthetic principles of *wabi-sabi*. Likewise, the artisanal approach underpinning these labels resonates with the spirit of *takumi*. When musicians integrate these fashion elements into their lyrics or visual identity, they reposition Japanese fashion within a global, youth-driven, and street-oriented context. This process not only demonstrates the international reach of Japanese cultural concepts but also highlights their capacity for reinterpretation and relevance across diverse social and cultural landscapes.

Conclusion

Japanese fashion succeeds globally not despite its cultural specificity, but because it translates these cultural concepts into a language accessible to international audiences. Framed under the term glocalization, ideas such as *takumi*, *wabi-sabi*, and *kawaii* have been adapted and transformed as they circulate worldwide. While Kawakubo Rei and Yohji Yamamoto pioneered Japanese fashion in the 1980s with avant-garde designs deeply influenced by *wabi-sabi*, it is important to acknowledge that their experiences do not represent the full range of challenges faced by contemporary Japanese designers. As trailblazers, they opened doors and shaped global perceptions of Japanese fashion at a time when the industry was far less interconnected.

Today, globalization, with fashion magazines, social media, and digital platforms, enables designers to reach wider audiences and access new opportunities. This shift has altered the nature of challenges for emerging designers, who now navigate a landscape shaped by digital visibility, rapid trends, and global competition. Understanding this evolution is crucial to gaining a fuller picture of Japanese fashion's identity and the diverse experiences of its creators.

This thesis has examined how the cultural concepts of *wabi-sabi*, *takumi*, and *kawaii* function as pillars of Japanese fashion. Each contributes values that shape both local

identity and global influence. Rooted in philosophical aesthetics, traditional craftsmanship, and contemporary youth culture respectively, these concepts form a multifaceted framework that allows Japanese fashion to remain grounded in cultural specificity while engaging in continuous reinvention.

wabi-sabi challenges global norms by valuing imperfection, asymmetry, and natural aging over surface perfection. *takumi* upholds artisanal knowledge and generational skill, emphasizing the importance of process, materiality, and quiet excellence. In contrast, *kawaii* offers an emotional and playful mode of expression, expanding the fashion vocabulary to include vulnerability, softness, and subversive self-styling. Despite their different origins, these concepts often intersect in the work of key designers such as Kawakubo Rei, Yamamoto Yohji, Miyake Issey, and Takahashi Jun, who integrate them into practices that challenge linear, Western-centric narratives of fashion progress.

The global diffusion of Japanese fashion, through music, streetwear, and subcultures, demonstrates that these values are not only resilient but also adaptable. However, this transnational appeal comes with challenges, namely the risk of cultural misinterpretation and the tension between local authenticity and global commodification. Yet it is precisely this ambiguity that allows Japanese fashion to operate in both resistance to and resonance with global systems.

Ultimately, Japanese fashion offers an alternative model of cultural sustainability, one that values emotional depth, craft integrity, and fluid identity. In a world increasingly shaped by speed, disposability, and visual overstimulation, the continued relevance of *wabi-sabi*, *takumi*, and *kawaii* reveals the power of fashion to reflect not only what we wear, but also how we live, feel, and connect.

This phenomenon of glocalization in Japanese fashion also raises broader comparative questions, particularly regarding how streetwear and other fashion movements in East Asia negotiate identity, tradition, and global cultural flows.

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Figure 9: Author’s own photo (2024). Display window of Shibuya 109, Tokyo, January 12, 2025

Figure 10: Author’s own photo (2024). Display window of Shibuya 109, Tokyo, January 12, 2025

Figure 11: 032c (2022). “Smash What Is Left to Be Smashed: Jun Takahashi’s UNDERCOVER.” https://032c.com/magazine/smash-what-is-left-to-be-smashed-jun-takahashis-undercover

Figure 12: 032c (2022). “Smash What Is Left to Be Smashed: Jun Takahashi’s UNDERCOVER.” https://032c.com/magazine/smash-what-is-left-to-be-smashed-jun-takahashis-undercover

「服に対する考え方は一度も変わったことがないですよ」

「私たちの眼はともすれば虚に向かう。遊びという行為、遊 ぶという理由から突き詰めて結果に至るのが日本式である り、かわいいイノベーションとでも言われるものではない だろうか。」

WWD：誰のためのデザインをしているのか？

山本：最初の頃は俺の中に理想の、実在しない女性がいた。その女性はどこかの丘の上に立っていて、遠くを眺めている。髪が風でなびき、タバコではなくシガーを吸っていて、かっこいいわけ。で、最後に「私、女辞めたの」と言う。最初は、その実在しない人のためにデザインしていた。でも最近はもう少しかみ砕いて作っている。最近の女性たちは世界中、非常にダサくなっていると思う。一日に何回も、ファストファッションで買い物するなんて、少しは疑問持てよ、と言いたい。「一着の服を選ぶってことは1つの生活を選ぶってことだぞ」って。だから俺は、そういったことに疑問を持つ女性のために作っている。

WWD：絶望感が「黒い」デザインにつながったと？

山本：おふくろの洋裁店を手伝っていたころから、女性の服は男から見てかわいいとか、セクシーだとか、そんなのばかりだったので、“それは違いませんか？”という思いがあった。肩書なしで女1匹でいる人に対して、“Can I help you?”“May I help

you?”という思い。そうなるとやはり甘っちょろい色は使えない。どうしてもモノトーンの男性っぽい色になる。

WWD：ショーの翌日に服が買えるなどファッションシステムの在り方を問い直す動きが出ているが、どう思うか？

山本：まあ好きにしろ、といった感じ。

WWD：昨今の日本の若手デザイナーについてアドバイスはあるか？

山本：勝手にすればいい。それより、日本のデザイナーはなぜ日本で認められないのか、という思いはずっとある。商業施設が新しくできると、1階には必ず海外の有名ブランドが入る。日本が日本を盛り上げない。だから日本の若いデザイナーは海外に出ざるを得ない。若手デザイナーに向けては、だから“まあ頑張れよ”“ただ服を作って輸出すると集金が大変だぞ”、と伝えたい。

WWD：ファッション業界に長く身を置いていて自分の限界を感じたことはあるか？

山本：あります。40代後半の頃。ヨーロッパのジャーナリストたちが俺のことを「マスター」とか「マエストロ」とか言い出した。俺は反抗してヨーロッパに来たのに受け入れられちゃった。特にフランスはすごい。才能ある人間をうまく丸め込んで牙を折っちゃう。やばいと思った。「マエストロ」と言われてフラフラしちゃって、次のコレクションのイメージがわかなくなっちゃった。毒を抜かれて、不平等

に対する怒りが薄れた。5年間くらいかな。だからそのときはバンド活動をしていた。全国ツアーを組んでその合間に仮縫いする、みたいな。

WWD：「ヨウジヤマモト」の何が今世間的にウケていると思うか？

山本：今の流行に疑問を持つ人が出てきたのではないだろうか？しかもそれが若い男性を中心に始まっていて、男性がウチの女性ものを買いに来ることが多い。意識的に日本の袴みたいな、スカートみたいなデザインを出したら爆発的に売れて、今も伸びている。女性ものについては今、“キチンとしなきゃ”となるとリクルートスーツになり、いつも着ている服との差が極端で中間がない人が多い。だからキチンと着る服、としてウチが認知されているようだ。流行ものが嫌だ、と思う女性が少しずつ出てきている。「ヨウジヤマモト」は高いから、まずは「ワイズ」や「リミ フゥ」から入ってくる。

Statutory Declaration

I hereby declare that I have written the present thesis independently and have not used any sources or aids other than those indicated. All quotations are clearly marked in the text. This thesis has not previously been submitted, either in the same or a similar form, as part of any academic assessment or examination.

München 29.06.25

Place, Date

Signature