

# Not so Cool Japan?

## Exploring the perceptions of contemporary Japan among Euro-American exchange students

Author: Luke Farrelly-Spain  
Supervisor: Astrid Norén-Nilsson



## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	1
Problem definition – Aim and purpose.....	2
Research Question .....	3
Academic contribution.....	3
Literature review.....	5
The concept of coolness.....	5
Contemporary interest in Japanese popular culture .....	7
Perceptions of Japan .....	10
Domestic perceptions and Nihonjinron.....	10
Foreign Perceptions .....	12
Theoretical framework.....	16
Orientalism.....	16
Othering .....	18
The attraction of Japan.....	21
Methodology .....	24
Research design .....	24
Data collection and sample .....	24
Profile of participants.....	28
Data Analysis.....	29
Ethical considerations .....	30
Self-reflexivity and positionality .....	32
Analysis .....	34
Respondents’ perceptions of Japan.....	34
Japan as cool .....	36
Motivating factors for moving to Japan.....	43
Conclusion .....	45
References.....	47

## Abstract

*This thesis examines the perceptions of Japan among Euro-American international students and investigates how these perceptions influence their motivation to study in the country. By exploring the relationship between popular culture, orientalist depictions, and cultural engagement, this study aims understand the complex dynamics which shape these students' attraction to Japan and their understanding of its culture. The study highlights the apparent coolness of Japanese cultural exports, which have often been cited as a key attraction to the country. Through interviews with participants, it becomes clear that this perceived coolness encompasses the innate Japaneseness of its cultural elements, its divergence from Euro-American norms, and the wider appeal of popular culture. However, the research also reveals the persistence of orientalist notions and othering perpetuated through popular culture dissemination, potentially disconnecting individuals from the realities of Japan. Nevertheless, the participants exhibited a desire to engage actively with Japanese culture, through language learning and a more fundamental engagement with the country. Their critical perspective on mainstream Cool Japan branding also challenges the effectiveness of such efforts and highlights the need to move beyond superficial attractions to cultivate more meaningful connections with Japan's culture.*

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Perceptions, Nihonjinron, Japan, Popular culture, Cultural engagement, Coolness, Othering

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to everyone who has helped me on this exceptional and insightful journey, and for their unyielding support over the past two years.

I would like to say thank you to my supervisor Dr. Astrid Norén Nilsson, whose guidance, support, and most of all patience has been very much appreciated throughout this research journey. I appreciate all the conversations and feedback you have provided me over our time working together, it really helped me make sense of this research and figure out where I would like to go next with my academic career.

I am deeply appreciative of the interviewees for their invaluable contribution to this research, thank you so much for your time and for sharing valuable insights which made this thesis possible. It was an absolute pleasure to sit down each one of you and listen to your stories and insights in such a meaningful and positive manner.

I am also incredibly grateful to the advisors and staff at Waseda University for their incredible hospitality and support during my short time in Tokyo. I would particularly like to thank Shimoda Sensei and Rhee Sensei for their insight and assistance throughout the vital data collection process, it was an absolute pleasure to work with you in such a fruitful capacity. I would also like to express my gratitude to Andy Hockersmith at Toyo University for assisting me in recruiting participants for this research. It was wonderful being able to catch up again in such a familiar environment even all these years later.

I am indebted to all the staff and teachers of the Centre for East and Southeast Asia Studies at Lund University. Thank you so much for this incredible opportunity and for encouraging such a supportive educational environment, it's been an incredible experience. I would also like to thank Nina Brand for her help and for arranging our field research in Japan.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this thesis journey. I could go on for a whole page thanking everyone who has offered their unrelenting support and understanding over the course of this masters. Thank you so much for your patience and love, and for believing in me at times when I might not have believed in it myself.

# Introduction

## Background

Japan is a country which has long inspired the world with its impressive manufacturing capacities and rich culture. Despite maintaining a significant economic and industrial presence since the end of the Second World War, it has become most recognisable in recent years for its remarkable cultural output, which has transformed the nation into an international trendsetter since the beginning of the nineteen nineties. In his oft-cited article, McGray (2002) describes how Japan had successfully managed to reinvent itself after its economic crisis into a purveyor of all things cool, projecting a desirable image of its culture heavily bolstered by a seamless interplay of tradition and trendiness. This has helped re-establish Japan as a significant regional force and had a largely positive impact on its national image. However, it could be argued that it has also helped perpetuate an overly attractive image of the nation and its culture which strongly deviates from reality.

Japan has long been the fixation of orientalist depictions within Euro-American culture, an obsession which has managed to persist in some form into the modern era (Abel, 2011, p. 63). As the country has risen in global prominence both economically and culturally, these perceptions have shifted away from exemplifying its perceived exotic beauty towards being more influenced by popular culture and mass media, emphasising the more unusual aspects of its culture (Wagenaar, 2016, p. 46). This has coincided with Japan's affirmation of its national and cultural sovereignty, which attempts to challenge the perceived dominance of Euro-American culture by promoting a cohesive Japanese identity, emphasising the supposed uniqueness of Japanese customs and culture in relation to it. The contemporary dissemination of Japanese popular culture, through both official and unofficial channels, has only further reinforced the perceptions of Japan as a distant country that is heavily contrasted against the supposed norms of Euro-American culture.

The combination of these factors has resulted in Japan being regarded as inherently different, while also being seen as cool and intriguing, contributing to an attraction to its culture which could be considered superficial and fundamentally detached from the daily workings of the nation itself. It could be argued that such perceptions reaffirm the notion of Japan as an object

of desire rather than a real location with a diverse culture, in a manner similar to orientalist perceptions of the country from the end of the nineteenth century. These perceptions often smooth over the complex realities of Japanese culture and society, leading to the continued perpetuation of warped narratives which further reinforce longstanding orientalist notions and a sense of cultural superiority over the country. The widespread popularity of Japanese pop cultural exports, such as anime and video games, and the prevalence of these idealised perceptions within communities engaged with this content raises the question about whether individuals interested in this content are more attracted to this imagined image of Japan or the actual country itself. This is further exacerbated by the apparent coolness of Japan and its culture, a notion which Hijjya-Kirschner (2013, p. 155) notes has been enthusiastically embraced by the country as confirmation of the widespread appeal of its pop culture. The term has also been actively adopted by the Japanese government as part of its Cool Japan national branding initiative (Tamaki, 2019, p. 115).

### Problem definition – Aim and purpose

This thesis investigates perceptions of Japan among Euro-American international students and attempts to understand in what ways these perceptions have influenced their decision to live and study there. While international students who choose to study in Japan display a certain level of interest in the country, they may also have been influenced by broader perceptions of Japan in their home countries. Understanding the processes behind their motivations and perspectives of the country might provide a better insight into how Japan is viewed, and how influential these perceptions have been in motivating people to live there. The aim of this research is to analyse the perspectives and interests of current international students from European and North American backgrounds using relevant academic theories to understand how perceptions of Japan are created and maintained within Euro-American and natively anglophone settings. It also aims to determine whether these perceptions or other factors ultimately motivated them to live in Japan.

## Research Question

*What are the perceptions of Japan among Euro-American international students, and how did these perceptions affect their motivations to live and study there?*

## Academic contribution

In recent years as the nation has become more culturally prominent, analysis and discussion surrounding foreign perspectives of Japan have become more comprehensive within academic literature. It should be noted that a significant portion of this discussion is primarily conducted from a Euro-American perspective and may not consider how Japan's domestic processes also impact foreign perceptions of the country. Furthermore, while there is a substantial amount of academic literature that examines the dissemination and influence of Japanese cultural exports, particularly popular culture, this is mainly framed within the context of nation branding or soft power projection (Tsutomu, 2004; Allen and Sakamoto, 2006; Iwabuchi, 2015). This literature details the effectiveness of these exports in projecting a positive image of Japan and shaping broader perceptions of the country abroad but does not provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these projections are received and interpreted. Additionally, given that it primarily focuses on projected images of the country, it does not provide a thorough analysis of why Japan has become so popular in recent years, or the specific aspects of its culture which have become widely appreciated.

The notion of cool has also been explored in literature as a means of understanding the popularity and appeal of Japan. The original article by McGray (2002) could be considered a seminal work in this discussion, as it outlines the spread of the cool elements of Japanese culture and discusses their potential appeal abroad. However, McGray does not provide a deeper understanding into the specifics of what makes Japanese culture cool or appealing to individuals outside the country, nor does he explore how these cultural elements have impacted perceptions of the country. Other literature which details the perceived coolness of Japanese culture also lacks a clear consensus in defining the specific elements or processes that make it cool, or how exactly this coolness is so widely appealing or influential (Hijiya-Kirschner, 2013; Valaskivi, 2013). This thesis aims to address these gaps in the research by conducting a

cohesive analysis into the factors contributing to the appeal of Japan. It will also seek to offer an insight into how perceptions of Japan have impacted students' motivations to move there and engage with the country on a deeper level.



## Literature review

The literature review will first explore the general concept of coolness often ascribed to Japanese culture, followed by the brief history of contemporary interest in Japanese popular culture. It will conclude with an overview of both domestic and foreign perspectives of Japan.

### The concept of coolness

Cool has become a widely used means of describing something as trendy, desirable, or interesting in a casual and off-handed manner. Despite its widespread use in contemporary culture, cool does not have a universally accepted definition, making it challenging to identify the specific elements of coolness and how certain phenomena come to be regarded as cool. The earliest prevalent usage of cool can be traced back to the Afro-American Jazz scene which began gaining prominence throughout the nineteen thirties (Raz, 2013, p. 254). Abel (2011, p. 62) outlines how cool typically denoted music or a style of performance that had a more mellow or relaxed tone within this context, invoking a sense of mystery and representing a degree of solitude away from established social norms. Abel's description is crucial in establishing cool as an intangible attraction to exotic phenomena which pushes the boundaries of conventional comprehension, while subverting the wider mainstream consciousness. It could be argued that originating within a marginalised community further underlines the subversive nature of coolness, establishing it as a concept which developed independently from the expectations imposed by wider society and a destination for escapism.

The definition of cool became more solidly defined into the sixties as its usage became more prevalent within subcultures and anti-establishment movements, primarily in the United States (Raz, 2013, p. 254). These movements were largely made up of progressive youths who viewed the term as a means of strategically positioning themselves away from the mainstream establishment, and which embodied a sense of authenticity and rebelliousness. Valaskivi (2013, p. 492) notes that cool grew to represent a safe space within these communities, where alternative interests and lifestyles could develop away from the harsh judgements of wider society. This assertion supports the idea of cool as a form of escapism. However, it could also be inferred that through this more overt confrontation with authority, cool developed into a

state of mind which embodied a critical stance against society and a sense of self-othering against mainstream conventions. Kinski (2013, p. 193) further elaborates on this, outlining how cool can also refer to an entity which is considered distinctly unique and maintains a largely disinterested attitude towards foreign influences or opinions. This interpretation can have both positive and negative connotations, representing an entity which is confident in its uniqueness but potentially also exudes a sense of arrogance through its refusal to engage in mainstream settings. It could be argued that this positioning at the limits of mainstream comprehension makes cool things desirable. However, the ties between coolness and identity building can also exacerbate an element of protectionism, through the attempted guarding of these phenomena from wider dissemination.

Valaskivi (2013, p. 492) outlines how the gradual commercialisation of coolness provided wider access to these once highly illusive subcultures, allowing more people to construct their identities around these cool phenomena. Thus, there is a potential that increased accessibility and the tighter integration of coolness into identity can dilute the inherent coolness of a given phenomenon, thus reducing its overall attractiveness. This highlights the fundamental precarity of cool, which is that it is highly sensitive to outside interference and overt mainstream acknowledgement. Raz (2013, p. 254) suggests that the inherent attraction to cool is rooted in its mysteriousness and unpredictability, which ultimately allows it to evolve rapidly in the face of social norms and largely evade mainstream popularity. Raz's assessment highlights arguably one of the most crucial aspects in understanding both the overall appeal of cool phenomenon and, crucially, the underlying mechanisms behind how coolness develops and spreads. Its highly changeable nature and unpredictability contributes to the overall desirability of coolness, but the rapid pace at which trends evolve means what is considered cool at present may not reliably have the same appeal once it becomes widely disseminated. This is supported by Valaskivi (2013, p. 493), who notes that cool phenomena must exist in a "permanent state of private rebellion", whereby they must strike a balance between being countercultural and being appealing enough to amass a sustainable following.

This extremely short lifespan means that once cool phenomena become overly saturated, via ubiquity, commercialism, or acknowledgement by a higher authority figure, they lose their edge and quickly become deeply undesirable (Valaskivi, 2013, p. 494). This highlights the

difficulty in creating a lasting sense of coolness, as it heavily depends on the perceptions of individuals or communities, particularly within a specific cultural or temporal context. This not only makes it difficult to predict the next cool phenomena, but it also makes it fundamentally impossible to intentionally create a genuine sense of coolness. The characteristics of coolness identified above can be used for identifying coolness and understanding its appeal. However, the factors which make certain attributes appealing and desirable differ greatly between communities, and thus the evaluation of what is considered cool must be contextualised within a particular community.

### Contemporary interest in Japanese popular culture

Interest in Japanese popular culture has only gained widespread prominence over the last number of decades in Euro-American countries, due to accessibility issues and linguistic barriers which previously hindered its wider dissemination. Japanese popular culture remained relatively unknown to the wider world throughout the post-war era, as the nation largely focused on rebuilding its economy. Pop cultural products from around this period were primarily targeted at domestic audiences, and thus had limited exposure beyond Japan, becoming merely a niche interest among a relatively insignificant amount of foreign consumers (McLelland, 2018, p. 6). Iwabuchi (2002, p. 24) outlines how Japan became more prominent throughout the late nineteen seventies and into the early eighties coinciding with a period of rapid economic growth, as it became a dominant exporter of low-cost consumer electronics and other manufactured goods. He asserts that Japan had begun gaining a foothold in the global entertainment sector through the production of portable music players and video games, but this is challenged by Kelts (2006, p. 181), who argues that Japanese popular culture remained in the “cultural backwater” of the mainstream international consciousness. Japan’s rapid industrialisation and economic growth during this period were perceived as a threat to Euro-American dominance, which contributed to a significant increase in anti-Japanese sentiment known as “Japan bashing”. Morris (2011, p. 25) highlights how the rise and prevalence of Japan Bashing throughout the eighties, particularly in the United States, represented a growing resistance against Japanese economic and cultural influences. Despite the ubiquity of Japanese exports, it could be argued that the hostile geopolitical environment and a sense of dismissal

hindered more widespread interest in Japanese popular culture. This is supported by McLelland (2018, p. 4) who notes that despite the increased interest in Japanese popular culture into the late eighties, it was still widely believed that Japanese cultural products would not achieve the same level of widespread success as its industrial output. Indeed, Koniček (2019, p. 113) highlights that although the increasing number of localised anime series on children's television, particularly in English-speaking countries, marked the tentative beginning of Japanese popular culture's emergence onto the international scene, its appeal was still relatively limited in scope.

This ambiguous positioning of Japanese popular culture supports the notion that its later widespread dissemination was largely accomplished through grassroots means by growing communities of devoted fans who had become intrigued by Japan's cultural potential (Ito, 2012, p. 161). Pop cultural products, such as anime and manga, amassed a small cult following into the early nineties among small communities who obtained and shared this content through largely underground means in the absence of official distribution (Eng, 2012, pp. 159–160). Kelts (2006, p. 143) describes how these communities also became heavily involved in the early translation and distribution of this content, primarily through the internet. McLelland (2018, p. 25) adds that this unofficial distribution greatly increased the accessibility of Japanese popular culture and had a significant impact on Euro-American youth subculture, especially within anglophone countries. However, the subversive nature of the content's selection and distribution led to few restrictions on what was being circulated, resulting in graphic or sexually explicit content being widely shared and gaining a following within certain communities (McLelland, 2018, p. 8). This led to a the strong association between Japanese popular culture, primarily anime, and a perceived sense of perversion which grew increasingly prominent during the nineties (Galbraith, 2019, p. 239). It could be argued that these factors not only impacted perceptions of the content but also of its consumers, which further limited the mainstream appeal of Japanese popular culture.

Despite these negative associations, Japanese popular culture remained popular within youth subcultures, and with the availability of more content with broader appeal and a surge in mainstream distribution, it crossed the threshold into wider global awareness in the late nineties. Kelts (2006, pp. 92–93) outlines how the immense success of shows such as Pokémon, and

video games from companies like Nintendo helped push Japanese popular culture into the forefront of the collective consciousness. However, it should be noted that this was also crucial in establishing the connection between this increasingly popular media and Japan. Tsutomu (2004, p. 7) describes how the generation of young people born or raised during this period and who were most exposed to the widespread prevalence of Japanese pop cultural products, ultimately developed a strong affinity for the country through this content. This interest continued to evolve into the twenty-first century as better accessibility and the development of fan communities increased the prominence of Japanese pop cultural exports, which continued to evoke a strong emotional response among Euro-American consumers (McLelland, 2018, p. 6). Given its initial underground appeal and integration with other aspects of contemporary Japanese culture, such as fashion and electronics, it could be argued that Japanese popular culture had been considered cool long before McGray's seminal 2002 article. However, his piece could still be considered the first explicit connection between Japanese culture and coolness, identifying an important association which significantly shaped perceptions of the country in the years that followed.

This can be most prominently seen with the launch of the Cool Japan initiative in 2010, a national branding strategy aimed at leveraging this widespread affection for Japanese popular culture to turn the country into an attractive destination for inbound tourists and bolster its underperforming economy (Tamaki, 2019, p. 115). The naming of the initiative was inspired by "Cool Britannia", a term coined to describe the similar increase in cultural prominence of the United Kingdom throughout the nineties (Valaskivi, 2013, p. 491). Cool Japan attempted to consolidate the most popular and trendy elements of Japanese popular culture into one marketable entity. However, Koníček (2019, p. 115) highlights that the initiative has been criticised for being shallow and overly commercialized, with its effectiveness being repeatedly called into question. It could be argued that the launch of the initiative coincided with a general decline in interest for Japanese culture, caused by a mainstream saturation of Japanese pop cultural products and competition from neighbouring Asian countries. Alt (in Kelts, 2006, p. 184) predicted that the popularity of Japan's cultural output would likely decline as the country became more aware of its broader appeal and as its content became more ubiquitous. This is supported by the lacklustre performance of the Cool Japan initiative, which has failed to replicate the same countercultural success that Japanese popular culture organically achieved

throughout the late nineties and into the early twenty-first century (Raz, 2013, p. 255). The above debates demonstrate the evolution of Japanese popular culture from a largely shunned underground phenomenon to an asset actively used by the government in its foreign policy, highlighting its significant potential to shape perceptions of the nation. However, they merely provide a glancing indication of why Japanese popular culture has become so widely successful, and only indicate a tangential connection to the broader concept of coolness.

## Perceptions of Japan

### Domestic perceptions and Nihonjinron

Japanese identity and domestic perceptions of the country are heavily influenced by a collective discourse known as Nihonjinron. Translated literally as “theories about the Japanese”, Nihonjinron seeks to reaffirm the perceived cultural specificities of the Japanese and their society (Hijiya-Kirschner, 2013, p. 156). Robins and Morley (1995, p. 164) outline that Nihonjinron is a form of exceptionalist nationalism which seeks to link Japan’s cultural heritage to its enduring history, and use its ethnic and cultural homogeneity to exemplify a perceived sense of cultural superiority and legitimacy. This interpretation provides a valuable insight into how Japan positions itself within the context of wider global interactions. Crucially, it helps reinforce the belief that Japan is a nation which is autonomous and has largely resisted foreign influence, thus making it quintessentially unique from the rest of the world (Valaskivi, 2013, p. 488). This is a key attribute of the Nihonjinron narrative and is supposedly reaffirmed by Japan’s history of seclusion from outside influences, which has consequently led to the development of a unique culture and identity that are shared by its people. However, it could be argued that the formation of this rhetoric goes beyond merely reaffirming patriotic values. It also indicates a fundamental desire to preserve what is deemed quintessentially Japanese, by positioning Japan as an othered entity with respect to the rest of the world. Iwabuchi (1998, p. 54) outlines how foreign influences and the adoption of foreign cultural elements have long been viewed as a negative process in Japan, and were often met with significant hesitancy. This is supported by Kelts (2006, p. 182), who asserts that Japanese culture is one of “acquisition rather than of absorption”, which selectively acquires and localises influences that suit its tastes while rejecting those that do not.

These points indicate a degree of cultural guarding, which Iwabuchi (1998, p. 58) further argues is done in a manner to preserve Japan's "cultural core", which is considered an integral part of the nation's cultural identity. The selective dismissal of foreign influences in favour of preserving this cultural core reinforces an inherent sense of "Japaneseness", which seeks to further strengthen the notion that independence and cultural homogeneity are integral aspects of Japanese culture (Shani, 2019, p. 83). This desire to maintain a well-defined sense of Japaneseness could be considered as a means of counteracting the perceived threat of foreign influences, which are seen as potentially eroding to Japan's cultural homogeneity and thus its constructed identity. However, this is challenged by Iwabuchi (1998, p. 55), who notes that the process of establishing a sense of pure Japaneseness has always been accompanied by the acceptance of foreign cultural influences. Based on this assertion, it could be inferred that *Nihonjinron* is less about attempting to denote what is traditionally Japanese, but rather what has become essentially Japanese, through the process of adapting foreign influences to suit Japanese cultural norms and preferences. This is supported by the integration of foreign cultural imports which, despite not being natively Japanese, have been incorporated and infused with a sense of Japaneseness, and are thus considered essentially Japanese (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005, p. 197).

It should be noted that *Nihonjinron* does not describe a version of Japan that exists, despite drawing upon traditional elements to reaffirm its exceptionalist rhetoric. Rather, it seeks to portray an idealised version of the country and rationalise its interactions with others through a self-determined sense of superiority, rooted in its perceived uniqueness. By exemplifying the ascribed Japaneseness of imported cultural elements, *Nihonjinron* could be considered a means of projecting Japan's uniqueness, by emphasising its distinctiveness from the rest of the world through the appropriation of cultural attributes. Goldstein-Gidoni (2005, p. 157) argues that this highly essentialised projection of Japanese culture serves as a significant point of attraction to foreigners, by emphasising cultural attributes that are intrinsically different from those found elsewhere, thereby further enhancing Japan's perceived uniqueness. Iwabuchi (1998, p. 30) supports this notion, outlining the increased focus on emphasising the purported uniqueness and Japaneseness of Japanese cultural exports as they became more prominent throughout the nineties. It could be inferred that the close link between Japaneseness and a perceived sense of exceptionality has the potential to create an essentialised image of Japanese culture, which not

only overlooks diversity, but may also feed into longstanding stereotypes about the country. Tamaki (2019, p. 118) suggests that the ambiguity around what is considered traditionally and essentially Japanese contributes to orientalist perceptions of Japan as a mysterious place which lies beyond the bounds of conventional Euro-American comprehension. Hijiya-Kirschner (2013, p. 156) additionally notes that Japan's positioning as being distinct from both Asian and Euro-American cultures further reinforces orientalist notions by establishing the country as a distinct and peculiar "other" away from both. These assessments provide an insight into how *Nihonjinron* strongly contributes to domestic perceptions, while also suggesting that the constructed image of the Japanese self and the nation's self-positionality on an international scale have the potential to shape foreign perceptions of the nation and its culture.

### Foreign Perceptions

The relative ambiguity as to what constitutes Japaneseness along with Japan's historically isolationist tendencies have contributed to a sense of obscurity when attempting to interpret its culture from a foreign viewpoint, which has been reflected in the changing perceptions of the nation over time. The Meiji government (1868 – 1912) sought to significantly shape foreign perceptions of Japan after its emergence from a protracted period of international seclusion, by framing it as a modern and autonomous nation that maintained deep ties to its traditional cultural heritage. One way in which the country demonstrated this distinctiveness was through prominently showcasing quintessential elements of its traditional culture, such as sumo wrestlers, and craftwork, at international forums throughout the early twentieth century (Valaskivi, 2013, p. 487). Through these projections, Hijiya-Kirschner (2013, p. 156) highlights how perspectives of Japanese culture became heavily influenced by Bushido, the supposed moral code upheld by samurai warriors, which deemed virtues like devotion, endurance, and self-control as uniquely Japanese. This association represents a key point in the development of foreign perspectives of Japan, as it frames the nation as a diligent, collectivist society, that is tightly bound to a deeply traditional culture.

These associations became more prevalent as Japan grew more internationally prominent and as it sought to further differentiate its culture from other countries, particularly those in Asia. Goldstein-Gidoni (2005, p. 158) outlines how Japanese artforms considered "traditional", such



as ikebana and calligraphy, became more closely tied to the evolving perception of the country which was beginning to be widely consumed abroad. The previously established emphasis on the essentialism of Japanese cultural elements that originated from abroad may be seen as a means of highlighting the inherent uniqueness of Japanese culture or to assert notions of cultural supremacy. However, it could be argued that it highlights a deeper aspiration to be viewed as a desirable culture from a foreign perspective. This is supported by Iyer (1988, p. 335), who notes that Japan is a nation “so desperately keen to make its sights available to the foreigner”, through a focus on not just selling Japanese-made products, but the wider culture. This deliberate marketing of Japaneseness as an asset could be viewed as an effort to enhance the uniqueness and mystique of Japanese cultural attributes, but it also perpetuates orientalist depictions of the "exotic East" by presenting Japan as a spectacle rather than a tangible location.

As Japan’s economic and manufacturing capabilities grew throughout the post-war era, perceptions shifted away significantly from the exoticisation of Japanese culture. Japan was viewed more as a nation which had aggressively embraced industrialisation and was fast becoming the embodiment of technological progressiveness (Wagenaar, 2016, p. 47). Hinton (2014, p. 92) describes how Japan’s economic miracle, extending from the sixties until the late eighties, caused perceptions of the country to shift towards portraying it as a model for commercial success, due to its business practices and high industrial efficiency. Despite mostly positive implications for the wider global market, the rate of Japan’s progress provoked a significant amount of anxiety from other industrialised nations. Robins and Morley (1995, p. 153) outline how Japan’s growth potential triggered a sense of insecurity among Euro-American nations regarding, not only the modernity of their own industries and societies, but of the potential “threat” that an economically capable Japan might pose to the global order. This is supported by Raz (2013, p. 258), who describes how Japan’s rapid development invoked longstanding orientalist imagery of the “Chrysanthemum and the Sword”, which depicted the country as being superficially beautiful, but wielding an untold potential to exert significant influence.

While this comparison provides a vital insight into the emergence of "Japan bashing" during the eighties, it does not fully explain why Japan's technological capabilities continued to be admired on a less political level. McLelland (2018, p. 25) describes how Japan remained

distinguished for its ingenuity and design, particularly in the emerging entertainment and video games industries, in spite of wider geopolitical hostilities. In addition, Robins and Morley (1995, p. 168) note that Japaneseness had become more strongly associated with high technology and creativity, which contributed to perceptions of the country as being an “artificial reality” of innovation. Indeed, As Japanese cultural exports became more widespread, their aesthetic qualities and ability to capture a new sense of popular imagination were increasingly being attributed to their inherent Japaneseness (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 29). Through this attraction to the intrinsic Japaneseness of its cultural exports and the increased spread of Japanese popular culture, it could be argued that wider perceptions of the nation began shifting away from affection, more towards a fixation on its differences. Robins and Morley (1995, pp. 169–170) describe how Japan’s high level of technological integration along with the apparent moral deviance of its popular culture contributed to the perception that it was a depersonalised society, fundamentally detached from what were considered the “conventional” norms of Euro-American nations. Hinton (2014, p. 93) adds that perspectives of Japan, based on exposure to its popular culture, generally fixated on an apparent prevalence of social dysfunctionality and the transgression of sexual norms, which ultimately established Japan as a perverse other.

These assertions indicate how perceptions of Japan shifted away from an appreciation of its creative output, towards a selective exemplification of its deviations from Euro-American conventions, where elements of its popular culture began to be regarded as indicative of the country's broader culture or mindset. This is supported by Kelts (2006, p. 135), who describes how noncontextualized segments from Japanese television appeared on television in anglophone countries throughout the nineties, often presented in a crude manner with the explicit purpose of highlighting the apparent absurdity of Japanese culture as a form of entertainment. It could be inferred that this minimalization of Japanese culture, through the unintentional or wilful omission of context, flattens the complexity of the country and reduces it to a set of stereotypes and clichés, which is reminiscent of longstanding orientalist depictions of a highly exoticized Japan (Daliot-Bul, 2007, p. 178). This perception of Japaneseness as being different or inherently “weird” has only become more prevalent into the twenty first century, through increasing coverage in popular media and online (Wagenaar, 2016, p. 47). However, it could be argued that this perception of weirdness represents an intersection between these foreign views of Japan, and Japan’s own perceptions of itself. Inokuchi and

Nozaki (2005, p. 68) detail how the depictions of Japan as “weird” or “unusual” could be directly substituted with “different” or “unique”, highlighting a direct interchangeability between these perceptions. This viewpoint is significant, as it suggests that Japan’s assertion of its own uniqueness may contribute to the construction of this “weird Japan” perception.

To conclude, the literature reviewed here establishes a relationship between the concept of coolness and the wider dissemination of Japanese popular culture. It also provides an insight into the shifting perceptions of Japan, both domestically and internationally, and how the projection of Japan’s uniqueness has been a persisting point within both the construction of its national identity and the appeal of its culture abroad.

## Theoretical framework

This section will establish a theoretical framework which will be used to examine the construction and projection of perceptions of Japan, based on the concepts of orientalism, othering and academic theorisations of the attraction to Japanese culture from a Euro-American perspective.

### Orientalism

Orientalism is a concept which seeks to reaffirm longstanding narratives of the ascribed cultural inferiority of “Eastern” countries in relation to the established, dominant culture of the “West”, often exemplifying a sense of exoticism towards the former (Said, 1979, p. 3). Although Said’s original text largely concerns interactions between former colonial Euro-American nations and the Middle East, its core concepts can still be applied to interactions with the wider “Orient”, which also encompasses nations in East Asia (Inokuchi and Nozaki, 2005, p. 63). Orientalism is centred around the maintenance of the constructed superiority of a dominant culture through the establishment of a sense of normalcy based on its own norms, which other “inferior” nations or cultures are judged against. Comparisons made against this sense of normalcy are influenced by the apparent modernity of the dominant culture, and are typically contextualised within the timeline of colonial pursuits by Euro-American nations (Robins and Morley, 1995, p. 159). Therefore, the Orient can only be regarded as “modern” when it has been colonised by a dominant power, with its apparent modernity being gauged by its receptiveness to the imposition of foreign customs and culture. It should be noted that the Orient does not represent a tangible location encompassing a unified religion or culture. Rather, it is purely a constructed entity whose purpose is to act as a point of comparison and to reaffirm a sense of control, or the apparent advancement of the dominant culture in relation to it (Robins and Morley, 1995, p. 155). Thus, it could be argued that orientalism is not characterised by admiration or an effort to gain meaningful knowledge about the Orient. Instead, it purely seeks to influence the narrative surrounding the Orient and its culture, irrespective of realities which may prove otherwise.

The exotification of the Orient is often conducted through the perpetuation of inaccurate and overly flattering imagery. Miller (2018, p. 57) describes how this imagery often invokes strong elements of sexual desire, particularly towards the female form, and embodies an assumed sense of “universal heterosexuality” typical of the ethnocentric perspectives of Euro-American cultures. This is furthered by Hinton (2014, p. 92), who notes that these perspectives are akin to stereotypical judgements based off the projection of sexual desires onto the Orient by former colonialists, who viewed it as being unconstrained by Euro-American conventions. Orientalism has manifested itself in various forms in relation to Japan since the country’s re-emergence onto the global stage during the Meiji era (1868-1912). A heightened interest in Japanese culture, known as “Japonisme”, became popular in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, centred around portraying a beautified version of Japanese lifestyle through art and literature, emphasising the perceived exoticism of Japanese culture (Koníček, 2019, p. 108). The continued reaffirmation of the “mysterious Orient” imagery cemented the notion that Japan was a desirable, yet fundamentally different entity which existed beyond the conventional understanding of Euro-American culture, but was also distinct from the cultures of other Asian countries (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005, p. 166). However, it could be argued that Japan's own colonialist acts as an imperial power, along with its emergence as a rapidly industrialised nation in the post-war era, posed a significant challenge to its positioning within the orientalist hierarchy.

Iwabuchi (2002, p. 60) outlines that Japan's deviation from the typical orientalist perspective provoked discussions about whether the country was following a more Euro-American path of development, or if the rest of the world was instead being influenced by Japan's autonomous progress. This is developed by Wagenaar (2016, p. 49), who notes the propensity within the framework of orientalism to assume that influence and the process of ascribing attributes occurs in an isolated and unidirectional manner. These perceptions are further complicated by the positioning of Japan as a point of convergence between the apparent sensibilities of Euro-American culture, and as the supposed embodiment of Oriental mysticism (Robins and Morley, 1995, p. 162). It could thus be inferred that Japan's increasing global influence challenged the basic concepts of orientalism and the control it attempted to exert over the narratives and imagery of the Orient. Indeed, Robins and Morley (1995, p. 161) argue that Japan's autonomous

development and the importance of Nihonjinron in the construction of Japanese identity demonstrate that orientalism was ineffective in influencing Japan's self-perception.

Japan's continued industrialisation during the latter half of the twentieth century led to the emergence of a new form of orientalism known as techno-orientalism, which departed from the traditionally exoticized portrayals, focusing more on the nation's rapid advancement and its increasing integration of technology into society (Wagenaar, 2016, p. 50). While traditional orientalism typically portrays an idealized image of the Orient, techno-orientalism takes a more negative view, depicting an overly developed society whose cultural output and relevance are perceived as being overly reliant on technological advancement (Roh, Huang and Niu, 2015, p. 2). Robins and Morley (1995, p. 168) note that as Japan's manufacturing capacity and technological output increased, the nation was portrayed as an incredibly advanced society, but also one which had become increasingly dependent on technological progress. This contributed to the perception that the country had sacrificed intrinsic human elements in favour of economic development and manufacturing dominance, reinforced by a rigidly bureaucratic set of social norms (Wagenaar, 2016, p. 49). This is supported by Iwabuchi (1994, p. 49) who describes how the radical shift in perception from the beautified Orient to an almost dystopic industrialised state, led some Euro-American academics to mourn the loss of "authentic Japan" to the merciless process of modernity. It could be inferred that the desire to maintain Japan in a beautified and historically set state is an attempt to preserve its unique cultural identity, distinct from Euro-American culture and influence, implying that a further conflation between the two could potentially dilute the innate appeal of the country. Techno-orientalism became less relevant during the nineties as Japan's economic performance declined, and its neighbouring countries in East Asia became a more viable threat to Euro-American industries. However, it has managed to persist and become amalgamated into the wider orientalist image of Japan through the proliferation of Japanese popular culture and contemporary depictions of the country in Euro-American media (Hinton, 2014, p. 93).

## Othering

Othering is a process of exclusion that seeks to justify and highlight inherent differences between two opposing groups while also reaffirming a sense of distance or established power

dynamic between them. Othering is often associated with orientalism, as it is the process by which orientalist ideas are imposed as a means of justifying an ascribed sense of supremacy over the "other", often by perpetuating exoticized or trivialised perceptions (Inokuchi and Nozaki, 2005, p. 62). The positioning of Japan as an eminent other away from the established normality of Euro-America has been persistent throughout the interactions between these cultures. Hammond (1999, p. 312) notes how this positioning is often accompanied by attempts to define a quantifiable "Japanese character", where ascribed perceptions of its culture are used as an explanation for the wider behaviour of Japanese society and its people. This is elaborated upon by Hinton (2014, p. 93), who describes how anglophone media in particular has the propensity to depict the "Japanese" as a collective entity that is tightly regulated by a strictly defined culture, rather than as individuals within a complex society.

Othering can therefore be considered as a process of trivialisation that relies on inaccurate perceptions rather than factual observations of various aspects of Japanese culture. The focus on Japan's perceived exoticism or technological advancement reaffirms the nation as being distinctly different from what are viewed as the commonly accepted conventions of Euro-American culture (Hammond, 1999, p. 312). The additional removal of relevant cultural context, either purposefully or not, has the effect of heightening both its perceived unusualness and difference, by exemplifying cultural elements which are unfamiliar to Euro-American culture. This is supported by Wagenaar (2016, p. 48), who notes that this intentional framing of Japanese culture ultimately leads to foreign perspectives becoming the dominant force in defining Japan's characteristics and shaping further perceptions. These notions of Japanese culture and its population being considered a tightly interwoven entity thus become a form of self-validation, which further emphasises the difference of Japanese culture without requiring any supplemental explanation.

The motivations behind othering are often not clearly defined, however Robins and Morley (1995, p. 162) suggest that it can be viewed as a defence mechanism in response to the unexpected intrusion by an influential external force perceived as a threat to the established balance of power. Japan's rising global influence during its economic miracle presented a significant challenge to both the dominant position of Euro-America within the global order, and the apparent legitimacy of the orientalist processes which maintained it. It could be argued

that exoticized perceptions of Japan were sustained until Japan had gained significant regional and technological influence, at which point it crossed a perceived boundary and became a concern from a Euro-American perspective. In lieu of its active rejection to an assimilation into Euro-American culture, Japan was thus purposefully excluded based on the differences which it was once admired for. Japan bashing could be viewed as the most prominent example of this process, but the minimisation of Japan's importance through the repeated trivialisation of its culture could be considered a more persistent form of othering. Hammond (1999, p. 313) details the perception of Japan as "unbelievably weird and very frightening", highlighting the perceived discrepancy between the unpredictability of its potential impact, while also reinforcing its perceived unusualness. It should be noted that this fixation on the qualities that supposedly differentiate Japanese culture from Euro-American culture often ignores the shared similarities. Hinton (2014, p. 103) provides an example of this, noting how the popularity of simulation video games among men in Britain has become normalised, whereas the same phenomenon in Japan is regarded as "strange" or viewed with a sense of perversion. This exemplification of supposedly unusual attributes reinforces stereotypical perceptions, framing the wider culture as morally dubious or fundamentally incompatible with Euro-American conventions (Wagenaar, 2016, p. 50).

It should also be noted that Japan's positioning of itself away from Euro-American culture contributes to this wider othering process. By emphasising Japan's uniqueness, it could be argued that *Nihonjinron* intersects with and potentially exacerbates this process of external othering. Iwabuchi (2002, p. 64) suggests that Japan is subjected to othering on two different fronts; It is othered from the Euro-American sphere of influence by being perceived as culturally and racially inferior, but it is also othered from the rest of Asia by its developmental history and self-ascribed superiority over its neighbouring countries. This is supported by Tamaki (2019, p. 122), who notes that Japan actively embraces this distinctive sense of "dual Otherness", as demonstrated by the construction and maintenance of its self-image. Through the convergence of domestically proclaimed uniqueness and the continued focus on Japan's cultural unusualness from abroad, this dual otherness not only presents Japan an opportunity for self-promotion, but also provides an insight into the processes behind the deeper level of attraction to Japanese culture. Goldstein-Gidoni (2005, p. 166) details that Japan has long recognised its status as an othered party, and has sought to leverage the more exotic or unique

20



features of its culture as a way of promoting itself to the world. This is supported by Wagenaar (2016, p. 51), who argues that the persistence of these unusual perceptions can be attributed to a general difficulty in comprehending Japanese culture or an unwillingness to find similarities, concluding that this image of weird Japan “simply sells”. These findings suggest there is a connection between Japan's perceived otherness and the wider appeal of its culture, but further examination of their combined effects is necessary to examine the intricate nature of this attraction more comprehensively.

### The attraction of Japan

There has been a growing association between the popularity of Japanese popular culture and a perceived sense of coolness surrounding these cultural exports in recent years, which has been considered a driving force behind its attractiveness and widespread popularity. There has also been a focus on the role that Japan has played in the wider development of contemporary popular culture across the world, particularly in Euro-American countries. As previously indicated, the coolness of Japanese popular culture can be largely attributed to its alternative positioning and the active shunning of content, such as anime and manga, by the Euro-American mainstream. Valaskivi (2013, p. 494) notes how a phenomenon's perceived coolness can be considered as a form of rebellious interest, through which cultural movements or products which are seen as “scandalous” or disapproved of by higher authority figures become attractive and gain a cult following. This is furthered by McLelland (2018, p. 6), who suggests that this active rejection of mainstream acceptance further enhanced the perception of Japanese popular culture as being radically different from what was readily available in Euro-American countries, adding to its coolness and thereby boosting its appeal. The largely community-led distribution of Japanese popular culture and the explicit nature of content being shared within some fan communities further indicates this desire to seek out content which may not have been deemed morally acceptable for mainstream consumption. This not only caused Japanese popular culture to become distinguished based on its “edginess” or perceived difference, but also helped solidified the perception of Japan as originator of cultural products that were inherently cool (Allison, 2008, p. 102). 7

As Japanese popular culture moved beyond these underground communities and gained more mainstream recognition, the connection between coolness and Japaneseness became more closely intertwined. Iwabuchi (2002, p. 33) asserts that the broader appeal of Japanese popular culture can be attributed to the notion of *mukokuseki*, which involves the removal of intrinsically Japanese qualities, to make cultural products more appealing to foreign consumers. However, this is largely refuted by Kelts (2006, p. 198), who argues that Japanese cultural exports like anime and manga became synonymous with a counter-cultural form of storytelling predominantly due to their distinct aesthetic and broader appeal to diverse interests, when compared to Euro-American popular culture. It could be argued that this distinctiveness of Japanese popular culture, through its presentation, narrative, and divergence from Euro-American norms both reinforces its inherent Japaneseness and validates its coolness, without the need to rely on Japanese imagery or depictions. It should be noted that this association of coolness and Japaneseness is not always a conscious process. Allison (2008, p. 101) supports Kelts' assertion, describing how the Japaneseness of these cultural products is perceived through a largely intangible means, often without an awareness or active acknowledgement that they originated in Japan.

Building upon the othering of Japan by Euro-American culture, the amalgamation of coolness and Japaneseness reaffirms the perception of Japanese popular culture as subversively attractive, often without a conscious examination of the underlying processes that have contributed to this perception. Thus, as stated by Tsutomu (2004, p. 7), this broadens the perception of Japaneseness to encompass elements that are considered cool, weird, interesting, and unusual, further reinforcing the notion of Japanese culture being fundamentally different from Euro-American cultural norms. This framing of Japan through its cultural exports can be seen as both invoking orientalist depictions and reinforcing the notion of Japan as an intangible destination for escapism or an object of interest, rather than a physical location. Abel (2011, p. 63) details how those who are highly interested in Japanese popular culture can be drawn to highly fetishised depictions of the nation, but may not have a genuine desire to understand the culture on a deeper level or engage with it outside of their chosen media. This is corroborated by Miller (2018, p. 56), who describes how more enthusiastic fans of Japanese pop cultural exports practice "cultural gatekeeping" by avoiding content that depict historical or political perspectives and explaining away problematic elements as being fictional, and therefore

immune to criticism. These perspectives reinforce a constructed image of Japan situated between a tangible geographical location and an imaginary entity, which may further reaffirm inaccurate representations of its culture based on ascribed attributes or intentionally skewed perspectives (Robins and Morley, 1995, p. 167). The implicit attraction to an idealised version of Japan along with a reluctance to engage with its actual culture indicates a trepidation around potentially damaging this constructed image of Japan, which could make it more tangible, and potentially less cool (Abel, 2011, p. 63).

This highlights the fundamental flaw behind the manufactured concept of Cool Japan, in that its appeal is largely reliant on this association of Japaneseness with coolness, supported by beautified imagery and the longstanding grassroots interest in Japanese popular culture. This further raises issues regarding both the initiative's long-term effectiveness and its potential to perpetuate inaccurate perceptions of Japanese culture. As previously outlined, the core attraction to cool phenomenon lies in their subversion of mainstream conventions through their rebellious stance towards higher authority, which allows them to become a form of escapism for those drawn to them. This avoidance of mainstream popularity, along with the elusiveness and inherent ambiguity of cool, ultimately makes it impossible to reliably consolidate cool cultural attributes in order to capitalise on their popularity (Abel, 2011, p. 61). This process is further complicated by the problematic nature of some Japanese pop cultural products which initially spurred this association with cool. Valaskivi (2013, p. 494) highlights the fundamental difficulties in promoting certain cultural products which are considered cool in a dignified manner, given that they often embody the more deviant and unsightly side of Japanese popular culture.

The framework established in this section provides a fundamental understanding into the processes that shape perceptions of Japan. It will thus serve as a grounding for the interviews and subsequent analysis, to gain a deeper understanding into the lived experiences and motivations of students who have chosen to move to Japan for study.

## Methodology

This section will provide an overview of the research design, data collection, and analytical methods used in this study, while also detailing the ethical considerations considered throughout the research process and a profile of the interview participants.

### Research design

This thesis relies on constructivist epistemology which involved conducting interviews that focused on the participants' life experiences, their relationships with Japanese culture, and their exposure to perceptions of Japan in their home countries. Constructivist epistemology suggests that knowledge is not a fixed or objective entity but rather a product of social and cultural contexts (Olssen, 1995, p. 82). Since the aim was to gain an insight into how these perspectives of Japan influenced the participants' motivations to move to the country, if at all, this approach was used to analyse the crossovers between the participants' experiences, cultural backgrounds, and broader perceptions of Japan. Similarly, a constructionist ontological perspective was adopted for the analysis, to provide an understanding into the processes behind how participants constructed their perceptions of Japan and what ultimately motivated them to move to Japan.

### Data collection and sample

Interviews were chosen as the most effective method to gather the required data, but there were challenges in determining which form of interviewing would be best suited to gain the appropriate insight from participants, as well as align with the academic literature and relevant theories. Serial interviewing was initially considered as a potentially useful means of analysing the perceptions of the participants at various points over the course of their time in Japan, by examining the effect prolonged engagement with the country had on their overall perception of the country. Read (2018, p. 4) outlines that serial interviewing is a highly effective means of effectively tracking perception changes as an ongoing process, due to its incremental nature and how it does not require exploring a large set of past experiences all at once. In addition,

serial interviewing allows for a sense of familiarity to be gradually built with participants over time, making it easier to explore memories and ideas which may have deeper emotional connections. However, given this research is aimed at understanding the students' motivations to go to Japan through their pre-established perceptions of the country, serial interviewing would present no discernible advantage and may have been an inefficient use of the limited time in the field. In addition, the variability of international students' schedules would present additional challenges in arranging follow-up interviews, particularly if the student had decided to travel or even returned home after the conclusion of their study period.

Semi-structured interviews lasting about an hour each with individual participants were deemed more appropriate, since they better suited the research topic and allowed for a more detailed set of information to be extracted efficiently and consistently. This looser style of interviewing was chosen over a more strictly defined line of questioning largely due to the variance and intangible nature of the expected data. Kallio *et al.* (2016, p. 2959) note that semi-structured interviews are well suited for understanding perceptions or topics that participants have a deep emotional connection with, allowing them to elaborate on aspects they consider meaningful. This is supported by Bernard (2018, p. 165), who highlights their suitability for capturing the "lived experience" of participants and promoting transparency between the participant and interviewer by enabling a clear channel of communication. Semi-structured interviewing allows for a more open-ended approach, enabling the participant to speak freely about these experiences without being confined by a pre-determined line of questioning. However, due to their open-ended nature, there is also a risk that the conversation may stray from its core intentions and lose its focus. Whiting (2008, p. 38) details a number of techniques, such as vocal reaffirmation, repeating the participant's points, or simply remaining silent to allow the participant to think aloud, which were used during the interviews to probe for more information and subtly guide the participant without much overt influence. These techniques contributed to a conversational environment which reduces the participants' apprehension and allowed for a more natural flow of information.

The interviews were supported by an interview guide, consisting of a small number of broad topics which were expanded into a wider selection of points for further elaboration (Adams, 2015, pp. 496–498). As noted by Gournelos *et al.* (2019, p. 105) the use of an interview guide

can help mitigate the interviewees bias by reducing leading questions, without impacting the conversational flow of the interview. The guide was designed to be flexible, allowing for adjustments to be made during the interviews to suit each participant's individual situations and to ensure that their responses were accurately documented. This allowed for consistency to be maintained between each interview and gave participants the ability to identify and elaborate upon topics that resonated most with them without feeling pressured to suit the aims of the study. The participants reported that they had enjoyed this relaxed approach and felt that they were able to discuss their interests and perceptions in a relatively engaging manner. The audio of the interviews was recorded and continued running for a short period after each interview to document any additional afterthoughts or relevant discussion (Bernard, 2018, p. 177). Extensive fieldnotes were taken in addition to the audio recordings, which noted repeated points and additional context provided by the respondents as well as potentially relevant connections back to the literature I had identified during the interviews. Rapport (1991, p. 11) outlines how fieldnotes could be considered a means of capturing a sense of dual conventionality, combining the more formal data collection process with the interviewer's thoughts about the questioning and responses as they are both taking place. Through the process of documenting my own thoughts in addition to the participants', the fieldnotes became a powerful tool for reflection, providing a deeper insight into sentiments expressed at the time of the interview and becoming a vital source of context during the analysis.

Interviewing commenced soon after the field research began in Waseda and continued for a period of about six weeks, from early-January to late February 2023. I established contact with the participants through the partnership with Waseda and pre-existing contacts from Toyo University, where I had previously studied during my bachelor's degree. This provided a substantial initial pool of international students to contact, but unfortunately did not yield enough responses. On the advice of my advisor, I attempted a more direct approach by handing out business cards to international students around Waseda's main campus and attended Waseda's Intercultural Communication Centre, where international students often spent time after classes. However, as the field research was conducted during the Japanese spring break, the number of international students available for interviews was significantly lower than anticipated. Snowball sampling proved to be the most effective recruitment method, which involved using each respondent to assist in recruiting further participants by promoting

participation in the research through their own personal networks (Merkens, 2004, p. 168). Bryman and Bell (2019, p. 161) note that while snowball sampling may not provide a wholly representative portrayal of a given population, it can often be the only feasible means of reaching groups that may be hard to access. Indeed, this form of sampling ultimately proved highly effective, as it leveraged the tight-knit communities around international students to significantly broaden reach and allowed for a more diverse range of students from different disciplines to be recruited.

The chosen demographic was decided by considering several factors related to the popularity and receptivity of Japanese popular culture, as discussed in the academic literature. Tsutomu (2004, p. 7) uses the term “Third Generation Japonisme” to describe the grouping of Euro-Americans born and raised through the nineties and beyond, who were heavily exposed to the initial influx in popularity of Japanese cultural exports such as anime, manga, and video games. As a result, individuals from this generation may have been more motivated to move to Japan due to their strong convictions or perceptions about Japanese culture and the country. I thus limited the demographic to those aged between twenty and thirty-five, as I deemed them most likely to have been most exposed to cool perceptions of Japanese popular culture when it was most prevalent. I also wanted to examine if these perspectives were influenced by the strong English language influence within Japanese pop cultural fandoms through a more tangential exposure to anglophone perceptions. The chosen demographic was thus flexible enough to effectively include both native and non-native English speakers from Euro-American countries.

The decision to specifically interview students was made through a reassessment of scope, which made it significantly easier to track down a cohesive group of potential participants for interviewing. The initial plan encompassed a wider variety of foreigners in Japan, such as students, young professionals, and individuals participating in the JET programme, an international exchange initiative for natively English-speaking graduates. However, upon consultation with my supervisor, it was determined that this approach was too broad to identify coherent motivations among such a varied set of individuals. Students were deemed more consistent and easier to access, given the partnership agreement with Waseda University and the time constraints of the field research. While this approach presented a smaller variation of motivations and fewer potential participants, it still allowed for a comprehensive analysis of

their motivations to move to Japan and their general interest in Japanese culture. A total of seven interviews were conducted, with five taking place in and around the Tokyo area and the remaining two being conducted via Zoom due to the respondents' location at the time.

### Profile of participants

The interviews were conducted with Euro-American international students who had specifically travelled to Japan for the purpose of engaging in research or studies. Out of the participants, only one was female, and the age range was evenly distributed between 22 and 31 years old. Although an attempt was made to amass a more evenly gender balanced sample, this was unfortunately not possible due to access to a limited amount of exchange students and must be considered as a limitation. Three of the respondents came from natively anglophone countries, specifically the United States and Ireland, while the other four were from Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden respectively. Four of the interviewees stated they had previously visited Japan in some capacity on at least one occasion; Three of these mentioned that they had come to the country on several occasions, both as tourists and through high school or university exchanges, while the fourth mentioned that he had only visited on a short trip in 2019. The remaining three participants were being interviewed during their first long-term stay in Japan and had been living in the country for at least six months at the time of their interviews.

Each participant explicitly mentioned that their first interest in Japan stemmed from exposure to some form of Japanese popular culture when they were younger. The majority cited anime and manga as their initial areas of interest, while music, films, and Godzilla were also mentioned as additional early attractions. Based on the precise age ranges provided by the participants or approximation by the temporal context of the discussion, it can be estimated that their exposure to Japanese popular culture occurred between 2004 and 2009. This is supported by Alt (in Kelts, 2006, pp. 183–185), who describes Japan as having reached a “creative plateau” towards the end of this period, expressing scepticism regarding the longevity of Japan's cultural appeal in Euro-American countries in the following years. It should be noted that none of the participants felt that this early exposure to Japanese popular culture had any significant influence on their subsequent deeper interest in Japan, nor did they have any direct involvement with the fandom communities that surrounded this content. Indeed, their later

28



interests in Japan appear to be predominantly influenced by the ubiquity of Japanese products and culture in Euro-American countries during this period.

Four participants stated that they felt Japanese culture had been a pervasive “background force” throughout their upbringing, presenting either overtly through technology and media, or more subtly as an intangible “vibe” which permeated society and had gradually become the “usual thing”. They further describe a moment of realization, where their latent exposure to Japanese culture was brought to the forefront through a specific event or combination of factors. This moment appears to have been a significant factor in shaping the participants’ interests and their motivations to study in Japan. One participant compared it to the “eureka moment” he experienced, when he made the connection between songs that he heard in passing and a musician he had not previously known had made them much later. This suggests a deeper connection between the amalgamation of these background phenomena and the participants’ consolidated interest in Japan which emerged at a later stage.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen as the primary data analysis method for this research, as it allowed for a broad, yet comprehensive means of understanding the processes behind the formation of perceptions and the motivational forces which led the students to Japan. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 28) describe how TA can be loosely described as a “methodology” which encompasses a variety of different processes and methods that achieve their goals in subtly different ways, while remaining loosely connected. Therefore, they argue that it would be better to view these different variants of TA in terms of their shared intention of establishing a “pattern of meaning” between various themes through processes such as coding. The lack of explicit structure and variable dataset generated by semi-structured interviews presents a challenge in identifying themes which both provide a representative overview of the interviewees’ responses and remain relevant to the wider nature of the research. Bryman and Bell (2019, p. 81) suggest three guidelines when coding texts: avoid overlapping themes to enhance the efficiency in denoting specific responses, provide an exhaustive list of themes that cover as many possibilities as possible, and establish a clear set of rules for how codes should be applied accompanied by relevant examples.

The audio of each interview was transcribed before being loaded into NVivo for analysis. Themes were preliminarily identified by cross referencing these transcriptions with the interview guide and fieldnotes, with a particular focus on the points of repetition and potentially relevant connections to the literature I had previously highlighted. This process yielded a small number of initial codes, which were then gradually expanded through a process Creswell (2013, p. 184) calls “lean coding”, whereby additional codes are created through multiple reviews of the transcripts. A total of fifteen codes were produced through repeating this iterative process, which made the correlations between the interviewees' responses more apparent and identifiable, and resulted in several relatively broad, yet interlinked, themes. I followed the process outlined by Owen (1984, p. 275), which involved being aware of the recurrence and repetition of certain elements across individual respondents, as well as the forcefulness of a particular participant's statement in relation to the others. This allowed me to reduce bias by allowing dominant themes to present themselves more naturally, which not only provided a more accurate understanding of the respondent's perspectives, but also resulted in a concise number of themes which could be used in the subsequent analysis.

### Ethical considerations

Several points of ethical consideration were identified which needed to be considered throughout the collection and processing of the data. Discussions regarding the motivations for going to Japan along with other personal information used to contextualise these motivations may expose a significant amount of private data, including identifying information, political leanings, sexual preferences, and potentially problematic views. Some of the participants may also hold positions of authority or work in organisations where the disclosure of such opinions may harm their career or professional reputation. To protect the identities of the respondents whilst maintaining the integrity and consistency of the collected data, I have taken a number of precautions in accordance with Lund University's ethical guidelines for field research (Lund University Ethics Council, 2019). The participants have been anonymised throughout the data collection and subsequent analysis processes to comply with data protection standards, with only general information such as their age range, gender, and country of origin being used where relevant (Saunders, Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 2015). The respondents additionally signed

a consent form outlining how their data would be processed and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study within a reasonable timeframe. The decision to record the interviews for later analysis and potential transcription raised additional considerations regarding the storage and processing of this potentially sensitive data. The recordings were initially planned to be stored fully offline, but it was deemed more practical to record interviews via a personal device and then compress the audio files into an encrypted archive folder, which could then be safely backed up both locally and online.

## Self-reflexivity and positionality

Personal motivations and attachments to the topic, as well as inherent biases create potential conflicts with regards to positionality, which must be addressed prior to analysis. The field of area studies has long been influenced by the desire to categorise and quantify countries outside of the Euro-American sphere of influence, exerting a degree of orientalist control over the narratives and history of these regions. Although this research intends to critically analyse these processes and the perspectives they create, it is important to acknowledge the Euro-American nature of the field of studies and the theories commonly employed within it, as these can ultimately impact the resulting findings. Reader (1998, pp. 238–239) argues that contemporary research on Japan has been historically influenced by orientalist notions, that have been more motivated by prevailing social or economic concerns than a genuine academic interest in the country. As a student within this field, it is easy to absorb these notions into an unconscious bias, which may guide the research and questioning and introduce an additional layer of subjectivity. Careful consideration must therefore be given to acknowledge the inherent biases of the discipline, whilst also providing an appropriate level of criticism and analysis to move away from these longstanding ideals. One such example that I have consciously taken with this research is to refrain from using terms such as “Eastern” and “Western”, as this terminology reinforces an orientalist viewpoint and oversimplifies the finer cultural variations within these regions.

It is important to note how personal experiences can also influence the compilation and analysis of the data. My motivation to engage in this research topic is based in my own longstanding attraction to Japanese culture and my personal engagement with the country. My affinity for Japan has developed through a process unique to my interests and experiences, encompassing opinions that have been shaped by these factors beyond the orientalist imagery and perceptions. Through my interests and by spending prolonged periods of time in the country, I became aware of how widely perceptions of Japan differed from the actual lived reality of the nation and sought to understand the processes behind how these perspectives developed. However, my personal connection to Japan highlights the potential for my own perceptions to influence the research. There is a possibility that I may unconsciously seek data that reaffirms my own notions or contrasts the stated perspectives, through either direct or indirect exposure to the

processes outlined previously. Thus, I have tried to be mindful throughout the research process of my views, remaining openminded to findings which may have contrasted my convictions or prior expectations of the results. I aim to present a research piece which remains objective and offers valuable academic insight into an area which I would like to continue exploring through further analysis and investigation in the future.

## Analysis

This section will analyse the interview responses of Euro-American international students in Japan, exploring their perceptions of Japan, including what they find cool about the country, and examining their motivations for choosing to study there.

### Respondents' perceptions of Japan

The participants expressed a mostly positive and balanced perception of Japan, displaying a degree of affection for the country whilst still acknowledging unsightlier aspects of its culture and daily life. Each of the participants felt that they had acclimatised well after the initial novelties of moving subsided, feeling settled and generally content with their decision to come to Japan. They also stated that they were able to recognise that Japan did not significantly differ from their home countries, which further contributed to their overall positive perception of the country. Four of the interviewees further outlined points of similarity between Japan and their home countries, which they claimed helped normalise their perceptions and allowed them to maintain an open-minded attitude towards potential differences or challenges. Indeed, aside from minor inconveniences, such as excessive bureaucracy within Japanese organisations and the continued widespread usage of cash, none of the participants reported that they had encountered any significant issues adapting to life in Japan. One participant noted that she was initially shocked by the abundance of religious sects in Japan, which she had personally experienced on a trip to Yamaguchi prefecture in 2022. However, she stated that she had become familiar enough with Japan through repeated visits to recognise that it had both good and bad aspects, like her home country.

Experience with the more mundane aspects of Japanese life and informal interactions with Japanese people additionally appeared to be an influential factor in the formation of these more grounded perspectives. Six of the respondents stated having regular meaningful interactions with Japanese friends and peers, which they felt gave them a better sense of perspective around daily Japanese life through the experiences of natives. However, one participant notably deviated from this trend, displaying a perception of Japan mostly in line with the rest, but which had been notably skewed by more stereotypical perceptions of the country. He did not seem to

have as much direct interaction with Japanese people as the other participants outside of a relationship context and appeared to be more intrigued by the more unusual and sexual aspects of Japanese culture. This reflects a form of confirmation bias described by Wagenaar (2016, p. 51), whereby these “weird” aspects of Japanese culture are actively sought out to validate pre-existing perceptions of Japan as different or unusual. Aside from this outlier, the respondents acknowledged the stereotypes and prevailing orientalist depictions of Japan but appeared to actively reject them, in favour of experiencing the culture for themselves. It should be noted that the three participants who had not previously been to Japan described initially adopting an overly critical perspective of the country prior to their arrival as a means of tempering their expectations. These perspectives were primarily based on negative stereotypes of Japan, such as an apparent hostility towards foreigners, the rigidity of the country’s social structure, or its perceived isolation from the rest of the world. The three participants ultimately expressed that these expectations were unfounded, and that they had since formed significantly more positive perceptions of the country than they had originally anticipated.

The interviewees also highlighted the significant anglophone influence in sustaining perceptions of Japan as weird or unusual, and noted how these perceptions have persisted through various means even within non-natively English-speaking countries. While only three of the participants came from natively English-speaking backgrounds, they all expressed some degree of exposure to the perception of Japan as “weird” or unusual, primarily with anglophone contexts such as through English language media and online. These perspectives were generally described as being negatively loaded, exemplifying a racist or stereotypical position towards Japan which often sought to exemplify its weird or more “cartoonish” elements, often through an explicit omission of context. The participants felt that these perspectives represented a dismissal of Japan based on a pre-established sense of unusualness, which justified its positioning away from Euro-American norms by emphasising obvious cultural or linguistic differences, focusing particularly on the presentation or content of popular media. Furthermore, the two German and one Swedish interviewee stated that they felt these perceptions were largely confined to English-speaking contexts. They noted that perceptions of Japan in their native languages were more influenced by the country’s perceived economic and technological strengths and the traditional elements of its culture. This supports Hinton’s (2014, p. 89) assertions, which detail the prevalence within Anglophone perceptions to depict Japan as a

distinctively othered party based on an apparent transgression of established norms. The three native English-speaking interviewees confirmed this idea, detailing how they felt these skewed perceptions of Japan had long been present in the Anglosphere, but had become more perpetuated over the last two decades through online forums and social media. The two American participants additionally stated that they felt the US' complicated history with Japan likely further influenced these perspectives, noting how the contemporary perception of "weird Japan" gradually replaced more negative stereotypes from the Second World War and the period of Japan bashing.

### Japan as cool

The perception that Japan as a country or various aspects of its culture were regarded as cool was a prevailing notion throughout the interviews. The participants either explicitly described what they personally considered cool about Japan or detailed cultural elements that they felt were more generally associated with Japan's coolness. These were grouped into five themes which formed the basis of the analysis for this thesis: Japan's differences from Euro-American culture, its technological advancements, the perceived inaccessibility of Japanese culture, the purported unusualness of its culture, and supposedly innate Japaneseness of its cultural exports.

Several participants indicated that Japan's perceived differences from common aspects of Euro-American culture or daily life were seen as being cool. The interviewees described Japan as a new and fresh environment when compared with their home countries as well as more specific points of divergence. One interviewee specifically described how he felt something as mundane as riding the metro was cool, as the expansiveness of Tokyo's railway network was so immensely different from what he was used to in his small Swedish hometown. Other participants also mentioned that they thought Japan's convenience culture and the abundance of activities to do in Tokyo at nearly all hours was also cool, particularly in relation to how much this differed from their home countries. This attraction to Japan's perceived differences from the participants' home countries supports Hammond's (1999, p. 311) assertion that Japan is a country often defined by its difference from Euro-American countries, and is emblematic of the process of othering. It also establishes a more concrete connection between the wider concept of coolness and these perceived differences, as well as the positioning of Japan away



from Euro-American norms. This notion of difference also encompassed what the participants perceived was more socially accepted in Japan, when compared to within a Euro-American context. Four of the participants felt that Japan was more accepting towards individuals who openly expressed their hobbies or interests in public, regardless of how niche they were, when compared to their home countries. They further stated that Japan appeared to better cater to these interests through merchandise and advertising, and found it cool to be in a country where Euro-American media did not exclusively dominate the mainstream.

Three of the participants considered Japan's technological advances and its active integration of advanced technology into everyday life as cool. They provided examples such as the rapid development of consumer electronics and video games consoles, the Shinkansen bullet train, and Japan's manufacturing capabilities in producing advanced hardware such as semiconductors. While appreciating these more prominent technological developments, the participants also acknowledged significant technological gaps within daily life, such as the heavy reliance on cash and the inconvenience of certain tasks that they felt should be digitalised, such as buying event tickets. They felt this demonstrated a prevailing conflict between technological development and traditionalism, and that the perceptions of Japan as technologically advanced were not as relevant now as they had once been. One participant stated that his perceptions of Japan as cool were based on more "old-school" perspectives of Japan's technological advancements, particularly from the sixties to the eighties. Another believed that progress has largely continued behind the scenes since Japan's period of technological dominance in the eighties, and that it still maintains a strong background presence despite not being so overtly present in everyday life. This association between Japan and high technology highlights the persistence of techno-orientalist perceptions as outlined by Robins and Morley (1995, p. 168). Although the participants witnessed and acknowledged Japan's technological shortcomings, it could be inferred that the pervasiveness of this imagery still presents a strong point of attraction to the country, even long after its period of technological dominance has passed.

Several participants mentioned that Japan's relative inaccessibility from both a cultural and geographic perspective was a factor which also contributed to the perceptions of Japan as cool. One of the interviewees proposed that Japan's long history of seclusion from the rest of the

world made its culture significantly less accessible and thus more intriguing. He mentioned that even after the flood of Japanese culture onto the world stage following the end of its isolationist period, the country remained culturally distant from the Euro-American sphere of influence, which reaffirmed it as an enigmatic country and further enhanced its coolness. The assertion aligns with Inokuchi and Nozaki's (2005, p. 62) description of the "other", as an entity which can be excluded, exoticized, or glorified through its physical distance away from the familiar environment of the observer. Another participant detailed the challenges in obtaining Japanese content outside of the country until relatively recently, noting how it often required digging through internet forums or relying on amateur communities to translate the limited content available. In addition, she witnessed that individuals with a more intense interest in Japanese popular culture often came from lower income backgrounds, and believed the unattainability of travelling to Japan due to the high cost likely made the country appear cooler and more desirable as a result. These perspectives frame Japan as an othered entity away from Euro-American norms through an ascribed sense of distance. However, it could also be argued that the general unavailability of Japanese content outside the country represents an equal process of self-othering, indicating a desire to intentionally make its culture more inaccessible to foreigners. Hijiya-Kirschner (2013, p. 156) elaborates on this process, describing Japan's self-positioning away from Euro-American influences and ideals as an attempt to emphasise its authenticity and exemplify an ascribed sense of exoticism. These combined processes reinforce perceptions of Japan as distant and inaccessible, contributing to its coolness both through an ascribed sense of elusiveness and perceived sense of inaccessibility.

Two of the participants highlighted that the weird and more unusual aspects of Japanese culture were also perceived as cool. One respondent felt that cool is often ascribed to elements which overtly rebel against conventional perceptions of normality, which thus establishes a key link between coolness and weird. He acknowledged that while some aspects of Japanese culture may be considered unusual, they are not as prevalent in everyday life as is often believed, and that the Japanese themselves also find these unusual or morally questionable aspects weird. However, he further mentioned that Japan is likely aware of these perceptions to some extent, and actively attempts to appeal to foreigners who seek out these unusual aspects by advertising these cultural outliers as something that is both weird and attractive. He gives the example of Tokyo's Akihabara district, referring to it as a "Mecca of weirdness" where the most unusual

aspects of Japan are prominently displayed, and notes that while this is an effective way of generating revenue, it also further reinforces stereotypical perceptions of "weird Japan". These points are largely supported by the second participant, whose notions of Japan's coolness were more closely tied to these unusual perceptions, leaning towards the more sexually perverse aspects of the country. He outlined elements of Japanese culture that he particularly found cool, such as variety shows and anime, but also mentioned how he often frequented sex shops and detailed an apparent sense of hyper-sexualisation that he believed was prevalent throughout Japanese culture. He considered these more sexual aspects of the culture weird but acknowledged that this was likely due to not having grown up or spent enough time in the country, and that they would likely become more normalised if he experienced them more regularly. Nonetheless, his strong attraction and exposure to these unusual aspects of Japanese culture appeared to significantly impact his wider perceptions of the country.

This perception of Japan as both weird and perversely interesting reflects broader orientalist perspectives of the country which present it as an exotic object of intrigue, but it is also heavily affected by the observer's own desires and interests. Hinton (2014, p. 92) notes how exoticized perceptions of Japan have been historically based on gendered stereotyping and an overt sexualisation of Japanese women, portraying the country as a deviant place devoid of what are considered more sensible Euro-American customs. This portrayal of Japan as deviant or unusual, reinforced through the active pursuit of explicit cultural elements and subsequently perceiving them as cool, reveals a form of interest which is directly influenced by these orientalist processes.

Although the interviewees' interests varied between the previously stated categorisations, the most significant correlation observed in all interviews was between the concept of coolness and the inherent Japanese properties of its cultural exports. The participants considered the inherent Japaneseness of certain cultural products and how Japanese culture adapted and presented foreign cultural elements significant factors that attracted them to the country, but found it difficult to articulate why they felt these processes were cool. Four of the participants suggested that the close connection between Japan's national identity and its cultural output reinforced the notion that only things it can produce or directly influence can be considered "Japanese". They noted that Japanese pop cultural products are often perceived as cool, and

that the strong association between these outputs and Japan's national identity furthers the perception that the country and its culture are cool by extension. However, this association is not exclusively limited to native Japanese cultural outputs. Five of the interviewees believed this perception of coolness also extended to imported cultural elements and products, such as cars, technology, animation, and food, which had been adapted and "improved" through essentially Japanese processes. They stated how these products had become widely regarded for their quality or creativity through the integration of Japanese cultural values into their design, production, or presentation, while also acknowledging Japan's long history of adapting foreign elements to suit its needs. They concluded that the integration of essentially Japanese values into these products was the key factor that made them recognisable and highly regarded for their quality, further reinforcing the association between Japaneseness and desirability.

The idea of Japaneseness is an abstract and intangible concept, which makes it challenging to identify and explain why it is appealing. Goldstein-Gidoni (2005, p. 157) highlights how the essentialised and idealised perception of Japaneseness presented through Nihonjinron discourse is a significant point of attraction for foreign consumers of Japanese culture, even those aware of its inaccuracies. The emphasis on the Japaneseness of these cultural exports reaffirms a sense of exceptionalism, which perpetuates the idea that only cultural products or phenomena that are directly influenced by Japan can be considered essentially Japanese. Three of the interviewees considered Japanese storytelling and aesthetics to be cool, noting that they exuded essential qualities which differentiated them from what was available elsewhere. However, they found it challenging to articulate the specific qualities that made these cultural products attractive, attributing their attractiveness to the distinct Japanese context in which they were created. This suggestion that the Japanese context is inherently attractive is further supported by three participants, who described how they felt that the consistency of Japan's history and its longstanding position as a distinctly unique nation made it cool. They surmised that Japan's homogeneity, emphasis on preserving its traditional culture, and the active maintenance of its unique language have contributed to a unique cultural context which established the country as not just different but also distinctive. These aspects demonstrate how Japanese identity and the active integration of distinctly Japanese values into its cultural products are a significant point of attraction and establishes a clear link between Nihonjinron and the perceptions of Japan as cool.

A contrasting perception is presented by Iwabuchi (2002, p. 28), who argues that this supposedly inherent Japaneseness is not so widely apparent, and thus not a major point of attraction for most consumers. He supports this by outlining the concept of mukokuseki, where the “cultural odour” of Japanese products and media is purposefully removed to make them more appealing to international audiences. However, this notion is largely rejected by the respondents, who asserted that removing this Japaneseness from these cultural products would no longer make them attractive or differentiate them from what is available elsewhere. One participant criticised the term “cultural odour”, noting the negative connotations of the word “odour” and stating that it framed Japaneseness as something which was detrimental and needed to be removed. The respondents' sentiments suggest that the exceptionalism of Japanese cultural exports contributes to its exclusivity by highlighting the culture's distinctiveness and unique creative capacities, reinforcing a sense of coolness which sets Japanese culture apart from the rest of the world.

Despite the participants' personal assertions for considering Japan and its cultural exports cool, a notable contradiction arose when discussing the constructed notion of Cool Japan. Five of the interviewees described a generally negative perception of individuals who were interested in Japanese popular culture in their home countries due to the hyper-obsessive level of attraction largely associated with fandoms. They noted how those who had a more intense and overt affinity for Japanese popular culture were often labelled “weeaboos<sup>1</sup>” and shunned by wider society, and questioned whether this could be regarded as a “genuine interest” in Japanese culture. Two participants felt this perception was dismissive and argued that, given its prominence within contemporary Japan, interest in popular culture should be considered just as valid as interest in the more traditional aspects of Japanese culture. However, they agreed that popular culture should not be viewed as wholly representative of wider Japanese culture. The remaining three participants had a more critical perspective, suggesting that the

---

<sup>1</sup> Weeaboo is a pejorative slang term commonly used online to describe a non-Japanese person who is obsessed with Japanese culture to an excessive degree.

fixation with pop cultural products reflected a superficial interest in an imagined version of Japan and the products themselves, rather than a deeper appreciation or understanding of the country. Abel (2011, p. 63) supports these assertions, describing how more passionate fans of Japanese popular culture often have no interest in learning the language, as they recognise a closer engagement with the country will diminish its cool appeal. He further outlines that although interest in popular culture to learn about Japan may indicate a desire to better understand the country, it typically fails to result in a more comprehensive or profound understanding of its culture.

Although the interviewees described various aspects of Japanese culture as cool, they appeared to be largely detached from the concept of Cool Japan, and highly critical of both its general perception and the Japanese government's efforts to promote it. One participant suggested that as Japanese popular culture has become more mainstream and more associated with obsessive fandoms, perceptions have shifted away from viewing it as niche and desirable towards it being normalised or even viewed as decidedly uncool. This corroborates Valaskivi (2013, p. 494), who asserts that phenomena that were once seen as cool become considerably unappealing or decidedly "lame" when associated with a higher authority or governmental body. Other participants felt that the Japanese government's involvement in bolstering its pop cultural exports was ill-conceived and poorly timed, particularly in response to the rapid growth of the Korean Wave. They felt the government had been too slow to effectively capitalise on the longstanding interest in Japanese popular culture, focusing too much on promoting a more superficial image of the country rather than normalising a more meaningful engagement with its culture. These perspectives support Tamaki's (2019, p. 118) assertions about how the Cool Japan initiative has been widely criticised in Japan for being unfocused and having poorly defined goals, being described as a waste of money and a poor attempt at public diplomacy. It could be inferred that this misguided promotion of the cool aspects of Japanese culture made the country more attractive to a broader demographic, but at the expense of effectively destroying its cool appeal.

## Motivating factors for moving to Japan

While the respondents described various aspects of Japan that they considered cool, they indicated that they did not want to be bound solely by these perceptions. The participants displayed a passionate interest in various aspects of Japanese culture, but also expressed how their motivations for moving to the country were strongly influenced by a desire to engage comprehensively with its culture. Each of the respondents stated that learning or perfecting the Japanese language had been a key factor in their decision to move to the country, with three of the participants noting that it was their primary motivator. They all acknowledged the importance of Japanese language proficiency in allowing them to better adapt to daily life in Japan, but also viewed the language as a means furthering their existing interests in Japanese culture. Four participants described how they felt that immersing themselves in their specific interests, such as Japanese history, politics, and literature, was the most effective way of improving their language skills and saw moving to Japan as a vital step to achieve this goal. While the interviewees exhibited a passion for Japanese culture and a general awareness of orientalist perceptions, three admitted to being previously attracted to Japan's perceived differences, with one participant describing the country as an "escapist fantasy" removed from his familiar environment. This largely corroborates Abel's (2011, pp. 62–63) assertion that cool phenomena are often considered an escape from everyday realities. Indeed, while these interviewees stated they had since recognised the inaccuracy of their initial perceptions and expressed remorse for holding them, they also felt that these perceptions did not have an impact on their ultimate decision to travel to Japan.

Despite playing a significant role in their initial exposure to Japanese culture, interest in popular culture did not appear to be a motivating factor in the respondents' decision to move to Japan, nor did it seem to remain a prominent factor in their continued interest in the country. Apart from two participants who outlined a continued interest in Japanese indie music, none of the interviewees reported maintaining persistent contact with the pop cultural products which had initially incited their interest in Japanese culture. Although they acknowledged that their earlier exposure to popular culture certainly influenced their later interests, they did not feel that this was a direct motivating factor in their later decision to move to and study in Japan. The participants appeared more interested in experiencing the lived reality of Japan through what

they considered was cool about Japan, as opposed to being influenced by orientalist perceptions in their home countries or pop cultural products. One participant mentioned friends from his university who were primarily motivated to move to Japan based on popular culture, and detailed the significant challenges they faced in reconciling their preconceived notions with the lived reality of the country. This validates the process outlined by Koníček (2019, p. 114), whereby individuals who are primarily attracted to Japanese popular culture develop a fascination with a constructed "pseudo-Japan" that is heavily grounded in their interests, rather than a deeper understanding of the country's implicit realities. It could be inferred that without a more fundamental understanding of the intricacies and difficulties of daily life in Japan, it is extremely challenging to find a point of convergence between the idealised perspectives and reality.

The participants' more grounded understanding of the problems within this lived reality were most prominently displayed through their discussions about their future ambitions to live and work in Japan. All the respondents expressed a hesitant interest in moving to Japan for a medium to long-term period, but stated they would only do so if they were confident that such a move would be beneficial to their long-term career goals. Several participants additionally stated they saw no merit doing a job that was unmatched to their skillset, or to work in Japan "just to be there". They gave examples of jobs typically aimed at foreigners, such as English teaching and working in Eikaiwas (English conversation schools), which they considered unsatisfying and noted were commonly viewed by foreigners as an easy means of staying in Japan long-term. Five participants also cited Japan's work culture as a point of contention which would significantly discourage them from working in the country, highlighting issues such as the uneven work-life balance, excessive overtime, uncompetitive wages, and the difficulties in finding work as a non-native. They expressed a preference for working either with a foreign company operating in Japan or being based in their home countries, while having the ability to make regular business trips to the country.



## Conclusion

The goal of this research was to investigate perceptions of Japan among Euro-American international students, and to understand how, if at all, these perceptions impacted their motivation to move to Japan for their studies. Throughout the interviews, the respondents expressed tangential exposure to prevailing orientalist perspectives of Japan, through their peers, the media in their home countries, or through interactions with individuals who believed these more trivial perspectives of Japan. The participants expressed that their perceptions of Japan were primarily shaped by what they personally found cool about Japanese culture, based on their own experiences and individual interests, rather than prevailing notions of the country's coolness. This included the intrinsic Japaneseness of its cultural elements, the inaccessibility of Japanese culture and content, and the country's differences from the participants' Euro-American backgrounds. They also acknowledged the perceived weirdness of some aspects of Japanese culture and the country's technological advances as additional factors which contributed to its coolness. Despite their extensive knowledge and tangibly deeper connection with Japan, the respondents' attractions exhibited elements of orientalism and othering which have historically been prevalent in Euro-American perceptions of the country. This suggests that individuals who have a deeper understanding of Japanese culture and practical exposure to the country are still influenced by these perspectives, and associate Japan's perceived coolness and broader appeal to them.

A noteworthy finding from the research is that the participants did not actively embrace or perpetuate these perceptions. Their perceptions of what is cool about Japan were driven by a desire to enrich their experiences in the country and further their interests in its culture, particularly through learning the language. This motivation played a pivotal role in their decision to live and study in Japan, and it allowed the interviewees to develop a more meaningful connection with Japan through an active engagement with its culture and people. The research confirms that popular culture, particularly anime and manga, and other elements of Japanese culture often considered cool played a crucial role in instigating the selected demographic's interest in Japan and were demonstrably a catalyst for their subsequent interest in Japanese culture. However, this initial exposure did not appear to have a lasting impact, and ultimately did not significantly influence the respondent's desires to move to Japan. Indeed,

the respondents appeared to be mostly disconnected from prevailing trends and fandoms and expressed an aversion to these exports due to the obsessiveness of their communities and their inaccurate depiction of typical Japanese life. They were also highly critical of the constructed notion of Cool Japan promoted by the government and based on the country's popular culture. They felt that this degree of interest represented an appreciation for more superficial and nonrepresentative aspects of the culture, and that it created a disconnect between the imagined and lived realities of Japan. They also observed how this divergence led certain individuals to disconnect from the reality of the country, with some seeking elements of the culture that reaffirmed their bias, while others opted to leave the country entirely and expressed no desire to return. Collectively, the participants considered the mainstream dissemination of Japanese pop culture, and the superficial appreciation displayed by fandoms as uncool, and expressed doubt that Japan's nation branding attempts had been successful or would be effective in the long-term.

It should be noted that this thesis cannot claim to be representative of all Euro-American students studying in Japan. However, based on the respondents' testimonies and subsequent analysis, it indicates that students who are willing to commit to long-term stays in the country are predominantly motivated by their interests and desires to engage with Japanese culture, and to go beyond their pre-existing perceptions of Japan. (16,231 words)

## References

- Abel, J.E. (2011) 'Can Cool Japan save Post-Disaster Japan? On the Possibilities and Impossibilities of a Cool Japanology: Can Cool Japan Save Post-Disaster Japan?', *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 20(1), pp. 59–72. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6781.2011.01148.x>.
- Adams, W.C. (2015) 'Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews', in K.E. Newcomer, H.P. Hatry, and J.S. Wholey (eds) *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*. Fourth. Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386>.
- Allen, M. and Sakamoto, R. (eds) (2006) *Popular culture, globalization and Japan*. Routledge (Asia's transformations).
- Allison, A. (2008) 'The Attractions of the J-Wave for American Youth', in Y. Watanabe and D.L. McConnell (eds) *Soft power superpowers: cultural and national assets of Japan and the United States*. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe.
- Bernard, H.R. (2018) *Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sixth Edition. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77–101. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- Bryman, A. and Burgess, E. (2019) *Social research methods*. 5th edn. Canada: Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Dalio-Bul, M. (2007) 'Eroticism, Grotesqueness and Non-Sense: Twenty-first Century Cultural Imagery of Japan in the Israeli Media and Popular Culture1', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 28(2), pp. 173–191. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860701236609>.
- Eng, L. (2012) 'Anime and Manga Fandom as Networked Culture', in Okabe, D., *Fandom Unbound*. Yale University Press. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nkp9q> (Accessed: 17 January 2023).
- Galbraith, P.W. (2019) *Otaku and the struggle for imagination in Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Goldstein-Gidoni, O. (2005) 'The Production and Consumption of "Japanese Culture" in the Global Cultural Market', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(2), pp. 155–179. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540505053092>.

Gournelos, T., Hammonds, J. and Wilson, M. (2019) *Doing academic research: a practical guide to research methods and analysis*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge.

Hammond, P. (1999) 'The Mystification of Culture: Western Perceptions of Japan', *Gazette (Leiden, Netherlands)*, 61(3–4), pp. 311–325. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0016549299061003008>.

Hijiya-Kirschner, I. (2013) 'Is Japan Cool?', in U. Haselstein, C. Gersdorf, and E. Giannoulis (eds) *The cultural career of coolness: discourses and practices of affect control in European antiquity, the United States, and Japan*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Hinton, P. (2014) *Necsus / Representation or misrepresentation?: British media and Japanese popular culture, Necsus*. Available at: <https://necsus-ejms.org/representation-misrepresentation-british-media-japanese-popular-culture/> (Accessed: 29 April 2022).

Inokuchi, H. and Nozaki, Y. (2005) "'Different than Us": Othering, Orientalism, and US middle school students' discourses on Japan', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 25(1), pp. 61–74. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790500032533>.

Ito, M. (2012) *Fandom Unbound*. Edited by D. Okabe. Yale University Press. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npg9q> (Accessed: 17 January 2023).

Iwabuchi, K. (1994) 'Complicit exoticism: Japan and its other', *Continuum*, 8(2), pp. 49–82. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304319409365669>.

Iwabuchi, K. (1998) 'Marketing "Japan": Japanese cultural presence under a global gaze', *Japanese Studies*, 18(2), pp. 165–180. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371399808727650>.

Iwabuchi, K. (2002) *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Iwabuchi, K. (2015) 'Pop-culture diplomacy in Japan: soft power, nation branding and the question of "international cultural exchange"', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 21(4), pp. 419–432. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1042469>.

Iyer, P. (1988) *Video Night in Kathmandu and Other Reports from the Not-So-Far-East*. New York: Pico Iye. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/melus/article-lookup/doi/10.2307/468126> (Accessed: 17 February 2023).

Kallio, H. *et al.* (2016) 'Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 72(12), pp. 2954–2965. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>.

Kelts, R. (2006) *Japanamerica: how Japanese pop culture has invaded the U.S.* 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kinski, M. (2013) 'Cold Norms and Warm Hearts: On the Conception of Etiquette Rules in Advice Books from Early Modern and Modern Japan', in U. Haselstein et al. (eds) *The cultural career of coolness: discourses and practices of affect control in European antiquity, the United States, and Japan*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Koníček, M. (2019) 'Japanophilia: Becoming the Other', *Theory and Practice in English Studies*, 8(2).

Lund University Ethics Council (2019) 'Ethical aspects relating to studies abroad'. Lund University.

McGray, D. (2002) 'Japan's Gross National Cool', *Foreign Policy*, 130, pp. 44–54. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3183487>.

McLelland, M. (2018) 'Introduction', in M. McLelland (ed.) *The End of Cool Japan - Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–30.

Merkens, H. (2004) 'Selection Procedures, Sampling, Case Construction', in U. Flick, E. von Kardorff, and I. Steinke (eds) *A companion to qualitative research*. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.

Miller, L. (2018) 'Scholar girl meets manga maniac, media specialist, and cultural gatekeeper', in M. McLelland (ed.) *The End of Cool Japan - Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, pp. 51–69.

Morris, N. (2011) *Japan-bashing: anti-Japanism since the 1980s*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge (Routledge contemporary Japan series, 30).

Olssen, M. (1995) 'The epistemology of constructivism', *ACCESS: Contemporary Issues in Education*, 13(2).

Owen, W.F. (1984) 'Interpretive themes in relational communication', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70(3), pp. 274–287. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383697>.

Rapport, N. (1991) 'Writing Fieldnotes: The Conventionalities of Note-Taking and Taking Note in the Field', *Anthropology Today*, 7(1), p. 10. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3032670>.

Raz, A.E. (2013) 'Marketing National and Self Appearances: Cool and Cute in J-Culture', in U. Haselstein et al. (eds) *The cultural career of coolness: discourses and practices of affect control in European antiquity, the United States, and Japan*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Read, B.L. (2018) 'Serial Interviews: When and Why to Talk to Someone More Than Once', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1), p. 160940691878345. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918783452>.

Reader, I. et al. (1998) 'Studies of Japan, Area Studies, and the Challenges of Social Theory', *Monumenta Nipponica*, 53(2), p. 237. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2385677>.

Robins, K. and Morley, D. (1995) *Spaces of Identity*. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=edo&AN=17369169&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Roh, D.S., Huang, B. and Niu, G.A. (eds) (2015) *Techno-Orientalism: imagining Asia in speculative fiction, history, and media*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press (Asian American studies today).

Said, E.W. (1979) *Orientalism*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Saunders, B., Kitzinger, J. and Kitzinger, C. (2015) 'Anonymising interview data: challenges and compromise in practice', *Qualitative Research*, 15(5), pp. 616–632. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114550439>.

Shani, G. (2019) 'Consuming the *nihonjinron*', *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(4), pp. 1119–1121. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12550>.

Tamaki, T. (2019) 'Repackaging national identity: Cool Japan and the resilience of Japanese identity narratives', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 27(1), pp. 108–126. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2019.1594323>.

Tsutomu, S. (2004) 'Japanese Culture on the World Stage', *Japan Economic Foundation* [Preprint], (March/April 2004 Issue).

Valaskivi, K. (2013) 'A brand new future? Cool Japan and the social imaginary of the branded nation', *Japan Forum*, 25(4), pp. 485–504. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2012.756538>.

Wagenaar, W. (2016) 'Wacky Japan: A new face of orientalism', *Asia in Focus*, (3), pp. 46–56.

Whiting, L.S. (2008) 'Semi-structured interviews: guidance for novice researchers', *Nursing Standard*, 22(23), pp. 35–40. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7748/ns2008.02.22.23.35.c6420>.