Japanese Emptiness:
A cultural approach on sustainability

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Signature

_____________________________
Being brought up with two cultures, namely the Japanese and the German, I always notice, understand and think critically about discourses and developments from two different perspectives. Furthermore, sustainability in fashion is a topic I, as a Fashion & Management student, have been constantly confronted with, especially at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute. For my Bachelor thesis, I decided to dive into a research topic, which started from a personal sense of discomfort. For the past years, I simply had to question why sustainability is discussed without any trace of cultural meaning. Even though my motivation started from personal experiences, I strongly wished to address this theme, recognising how it can add value to current movements of the sustainability discourse in fashion.

With this said, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my coaches, Rebecca Breuer and Sander Schellens, for guiding me through the process. Special thanks to Sander Schellens, who has been a reliable, supporting mentor throughout my AMFI path.
The concept of sustainability nowadays is seemingly so universal at first glance, but is this really the case? Actually, several opinions, including my own, deriving from the origin of sustainability and its development today, reveal a significantly Western-dominated concept. Being recognised by its sustainable society in its traditional shape, this paper takes Japan as a case study to research the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability. In short, it has been found out, that the concept of sustainability was non-existent, despite Japan achieving a uniquely sustainable and balanced society for centuries. Hence, all that is understood as sustainability in Japan, especially in the context of the fashion industry, is defined by the Western point of view. Due to its philosophies, values, sensitivities and aesthetics, which can be, in relation to sustainability, all linked to the concept of Emptiness (MU) in Japan, its sustainable approach is deeply rooted in culture, therefore never in need for a specific term defining the concept.

According to my analysis, the main difference between the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability and the modern Western concept of sustainability in the context of fashion is the presence or non-presence of the ego. The sustainability movement in fashion is still dominated by the ego, reflected in the development of sustainability as a status symbol with the rise of the conscious elite, the extreme occurrence of buzzwords, and its current use even as a trendy graphic design element on the garments itself. In contrast, this ego-led approach goes against Japanese culture and its aesthetics. We have to start realising that a word or concept such as sustainability is culturally determined in its origin and approaches. This paper aims to expand the sustainability discourse in fashion by investigating the role of culture, towards a more collaborative, knowledge-sharing approach considering a diversity of perspectives. Moreover, it intends to show how aspects of the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability could serve as inspiration towards a more harmonious and egoless approach without even using the word “sustainability”.

At last, this research reveals that as long as the term “sustainability” and its Western ideologistic implementation in fashion continues, on the one hand, the West will unconsciously push on their perspective on other cultures. On the other hand, other cultures are indirectly forced to imitate the movement in its exact shape to be recognised and accepted in the movement towards sustainability. Thus, it is time to encourage critical discussions about the influence of culture in sustainability, in order to find mutual understanding globally. Otherwise, sustainability will remain a Western-dominated ideology which will disappear in a temporary movement.
“The concept of Emptiness is the foundation of every aspect of the Japanese culture.”

Hara Kenya
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From personal experience, I realised that Westerners in my environment assume Japanese fashion brands to be sustainable to some extent. The main reason for this must be the image of Japan as being known for quality and innovation, as well as a nature-conscious culture in its traditional shape. Looking up the section about Japan in the Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia (2010), it is stated: “There is a potential for Japan to become a leader in the rapidly growing movement toward sustainability. The country’s culture, which embraces the idea of being in harmony with nature and mottainai, provides basic values that encourage this trend” (Vollmer, 2010 p.388). “Mottainai” is Japanese, which can be translated to “too good to waste”, an expression deeply rooted in everyday life. This statement implies that the Japanese culture contains aspects of sustainability, and this culture is a promising base of more conscious actions towards sustainability in fashion. However, even now, nine years later, internet research with the keywords “Sustainable Fashion” in the Japanese language quickly reveals: only Western brands are mentioned as examples and pioneers. From this, a disconnection of national culture from the global sustainability movement in the fashion sector is visible. Recently, critical views on the Western concept of sustainability in fashion have occurred. The article “Understanding Sustainability Means Talking About Colonialism” argues that “sustainability is a culture that has been around long before the West became aware or interested in the concept” (Semaan, 2018). This is a bold and honest criticism, I can only agree on. The concept of sustainability, as we use in the fashion industry, is a relatively new one, although talking about Japan, the prewar Japanese society is described as having achieved a sustainable society maintaining and developing a peaceful and high-quality culture for more than 200 years (Toki, 2017).

These previously stated realisations stimulate the question whether an implementation of the cultural dimension of the sustainability topic is necessary in the fashion industry, in order to attach more holistic, diverse meanings to the term sustainability itself. On an educational level, it has long been argued that there is a need for a more culturally inclusive interpretation of sustainability (Thaman, 2002). Also, recent research topics discuss
the “cultural challenge” of sustainability by the recognition and valuing of indigenous worldviews that can break down dominant Western paradigms. Caldas et al. address the challenge to integrate the role of culture fully, often missing in the sustainability equation (Caldas et al., 2015). Hence, researchers have already been pointing out that sustainability should be put into diverse cultural contexts. In the industry and fashion education, we are discussing the subject considering the three pillars of sustainability, the environment, economic and social pillars. Moreover, sustainability in fashion is undoubtedly discussed from a modern Western point of view since the origin of the movement started as a form of activism in Europe and the United States in response to appearing environmental issues (Gordon and Hill, 2015).

In a globalised fashion industry as of today, it might seem necessary and natural to have one global term “sustainability”, in order to work together on common goals towards a better future. However, critically speaking, this global term consequently neglects the role of culture. A generalised and global use of the term would implicate that there is no cultural determination of the meaning behind it, which goes against the linguistic recognition of Ferdinand de Saussure implying that every word is culturally determined (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). Such ignorance of culture in the sustainability discourse displays a threat for superficial use and generalisation of an ideology. There is a danger of forcing on a Western-dominated concept, resulting in a neo-colonialistic usage of the concept of “sustainability” and its implementation, rather than a collaborative, knowledge-sharing and appreciative approach considering a diversity of perspectives. This is why there is a necessity to consider cultural diversity in the sustainability discourse in the current fashion industry.

Sustainability is being generalised to one concept, although different cultures might have different origins, meanings, and approaches towards sustainability. Thus, I am going to research the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability, which will prove that there are different approaches to sustainability and point out the main differences in the concepts. Considering culture in sustainability can provide more emotional depth, and prevent the theme from vanishing as an ideology. Looking into the relationship between the Japanese culture and sustainability will give insights into how sustainability can be dealt with within the context of culture, which is different from a recently developed movement or trend. Considering cultural meaning can benefit from getting inspired by traditional wisdom, avoiding a temporary interest, and will eventually lead to a mutual understanding of sustainability globally.

WHY JAPAN?

For this research, the Japanese culture has been chosen to investigate. The Japanese culture is set as an example of “a culture” to research and opposed to the Western one. Previously, I mentioned Celine Semaan’s view
on sustainability in fashion as a form of colonialism. The designer, writer and advocate, Semaan, recognises cultures in the Middle East, North Africa, Africa, and Asia to have been sustainably engaged already for a long time. Indeed, Non-Western cultures can certainly deliver great examples and inspirations on how to live sustainably, without sustainability being a form of a status symbol. For instance, her article mentions an experience of repairing and taking good care of things in Lebanese culture. However, Japan has been chosen specifically as a case study for this research. Compared to other Non-western cultures, the Japanese one especially fits for this theme. Reason for this is, that while Japan is getting attention for its sustainable philosophies and values from time to time, what distinguishes Japan from the other nations is that it is also a very mature one, with a highly developed economy. It is unique for Japan to be maintaining their own traditional culture, while it went through an enormously fast-paced modernisation during the last century. Therefore, Japan has similar economic systems and an established consumer goods sector as Western countries, while still having its distinct culture, which is why it is so relevant and interesting to investigate in terms of sustainability. Additionally, this decision arose out of the opportunity to examine authentic and original sources due to my Japanese language skills, as well as to avoid misunderstandings by my personal experience with the Japanese culture.

**AIM**

As mentioned earlier, scholars have been researching the necessity of cultural integration in the overall sustainability discourse, and this theme certainly provides thought-provoking content for the current fashion industry. Hence, the aim of this research appears in providing a critical view of the generalised use of sustainability in fashion by investigating its cultural meaning for Japan. By in-depth research into one specific culture and its relation to sustainability, I want to expand the debate that has been developed mainly in Western countries, towards a more culturally inclusive one. By highlighting problematic consequences of the current sustainability movement, this thesis formulates a critique on the standardisation of the sustainability concept. This will consequently educate the reader, encourage better awareness of diverse meanings attached to sustainability and open a discussion about the cultural dimension of the topic in the fashion industry. Awareness is needed because it is time to understand that there is no one ideal and right approach or solution to sustainability and a normative narrative has to be enriched with diverse cultural approaches.

This thesis addresses the gap between the cultural and the contemporary sustainability movement in the fashion industry and intends to challenge the Western dominance of the discourse. Eventually, in a long term perspective,
the raised awareness possibly calls attention to the Japanese fashion industry to appreciate its own culture and understand its potential for contribution for the national and global sustainable development of the fashion industry. More importantly, it aims to bridge the gap between concepts by providing concrete and accessible inspiration about Japanese cultural concept of sustainability to the Western world.

It has to be clarified that I do not intend to compare cultures to conclude which one is “better”, but rather encourage to be critical towards the current sustainability discourse in fashion, and get inspired by diverse approaches.

PRODUCT

The product consists of an article for New York Magazine: The Cut. It refers to a previously published article by Celine Semaan, “Understanding Sustainability Means Talking About Colonialism”. That article is mainly focused on the privilege problem of sustainability and touches upon “other (Non-Western) cultures”. Here, the idea derived to continue with a (fictional) sequence of articles, which explains cultural meanings of sustainability. For this, the first edition puts a spotlight on the Japanese culture. The publisher is chosen due to its wide reach internationally, and the already established attention on a similar theme categorised as “Sustain/Ability”. The article is aimed at the Western fashion industry, as well as consumers to get inspired and encouraged to open a discussion towards a more holistic and mutual understanding of sustainability.
CHAPTER ONE

STARTING FROM A SENSE OF DISCOMFORT

The theme of this research determines qualitative research methods to be more fitting than quantitative ones. A statistical approach of research is not suitable, since the main components of the topic, sustainability and culture, are not measurable. For this theme, comparative literature research will be conducted. Overall, the research will be gathered by the primary use of literature, in the form of journals, web articles and books.

Firstly, some research will be conducted to validate the relevance of the research topic. For this, academic papers and theoretical models are analysed in order to understand the general relationship between sustainability and culture. Sectors outside of fashion are used, especially the one of higher education, which will be put into the context of fashion. For the first sub-question, several sources in the form of academic papers and web articles will be analysed to collect definitions of the terminology and conclude relevant meaning to be used for further research. For the second sub-question, books, as well as dictionaries about sustainability in fashion, are researched. Besides, a visit to the museum on sustainability and innovation in fashion, as well as

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The relevance and aim of this thesis lead to the following main research question:

What can the Western-dominated sustainability movement in fashion learn from a (Japanese) cultural meaning of sustainability?

Following sub-questions are composed to answer the main research question:

1. How can “Sustainability”, and “Culture” be defined?
2. How can the sustainability movement in fashion be described, and what are the recent critical happenings around the movement?
3. To what extent is the sustainability movement in fashion a Western one, and what impact does this have on a non-Western (Japanese) fashion industry?
4. What is the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability?
5. How is the Japanese cultural concept of sustainability and the modern Western concept of sustainability reflected in Japanese designers and brands?

METHODOLOGY

The theme of this research determines qualitative research methods to be more fitting than quantitative ones. A statistical approach of research is not suitable, since the main components of the topic, sustainability and culture, are not measurable. For this theme, comparative literature research will be conducted. Overall, the research will be gathered by the primary use of literature, in the form of journals, web articles and books.

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platform for knowledge, Fashion For Good, will help to investigate how the sustainability movement in fashion is being portrayed to the general audience. Moreover, critical views on the movement are collected through web articles, combined with personal observations by visiting web shops and stores of widely recognised fashion labels. This leads to a critical conclusion influenced by my own experiences but still backed up by relevant sources from other fashion professionals.

Regarding the third sub-question, the research is conducted mainly through gathering web articles from news platforms focusing on fashion. This secures relevant up to date information, which grasps on recent global developments on sustainability and the sustainability movement in the fashion industry. Coming to the Japanese perspective on sustainability in fashion, both Western and Japanese sources need to be evaluated. Additionally, my own observations will provide valuable insights as well, since I have been in contact with the Japanese fashion industry through entertainment media, social media, personal visits and acquaintances in the Japanese fashion industry. This mainly leads to insights from the mainstream consumer perspective in Japan.

Coming to the fourth sub-question, a limited number of sources are chosen to investigate. The complex character of culture in general, especially ambiguous persona of the Japanese culture can lead to constant confusion and contradiction when too many sources are used. Therefore, carefully chosen secondary sources of specialists are giving answers to the question. The main source will be a research paper by the Japan Association of Environment and Society for the 21st Century about the Japanese wisdom on sustainability. This source will provide the main research about the Japanese culture and its relation to sustainability. Since this paper is originally in the Japanese language, the text, as well as models, will be translated by myself. In addition, a few other sources from Japanese researchers and environmentalists will confirm or add information. Coming to the Japanese sense of beauty, two books from Hara Kenya and Soetsu Yanagi serve as the main source of research. The main inspiration for the answer on the relationship between the Japanese culture and sustainability provided designer Hara Kenya. His book “Designing Design” explains the design philosophies of him and several other Japanese creators. This provided information for the link between Japanese culture, aesthetics and sustainability. Hara Kenya was carefully chosen to dive into, firstly due to his embracement of “Japanese Emptiness”, secondly due to the repetitive occurrence as a reference in my research, and thirdly due to his involvement in Muji, which embodies analysed Japanese aesthetics.

To answer the fifth sub-question, the presence or non-presence of cultural influence in the values, visions and operations of Japanese designers will be
investigated. This will be done by relating the previously analysed cultural meaning of sustainability to examples of Japanese designers or brands. Mihoyo Fuji, the founder of Zero = Abundance, a publisher of online articles about Japanese aesthetics and contemporary design and architecture, was contacted, leading to her opinion on Japanese and Western sustainability. Also, the relevance of Hara Kenya as a representative designer for embodying Japanese aesthetics was validated. The book of Hara will provide trustworthy information on the Japanese lifestyle brand MUJI. The designers or brands do not fit a particular category except being Japanese and will be chosen out of the ones I encounter during the whole research phase.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

A limitation of the research could present the reliance on single-view sources of particular topics. The few amounts of previous studies on the relationship between the Japanese culture and sustainability led to the focus on the opinions of a small number of professionals, and the concentration on the Japanese aesthetics for the conclusion.

STRUCTURE

This thesis will contain six chapters. Chapter One explains the relevance of the research and the accordingly formulated sub-questions to answer the main research question. Therefore, the paper is mainly structured around the order of the sub-questions. The first chapter is followed by four chapters, which were derived through research on the sub-questions and its conclusions. After each chapter, a conclusion will be drawn, leading to an overall conclusion and answer to the main research question at the end.

Chapter Two and Three are mainly serving the purpose of proving three hypotheses, formulated before the research was conducted. The hypotheses derived from the initial investigation on the relevance of the subject matter and were briefly touched upon in the Rational. However, more in-depth research and analysis are required in order to answer the main research question. The following hypotheses lead to the first, second and third sub-question. The first hypothesis describes that sustainability is a Western-dominated concept, also in the context of fashion. When this is proven to be right, the second hypothesis follows, which is that this Western-dominance has certain consequences on Japan. Both hypotheses are based on the third one, which understands that there is a difference in the meaning of the modern Western concept of sustainability and the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability.
In Chapter Two, the research starts with defining the context of sustainability and its movement regarding the fashion industry. Due to its interrelation, the first and second sub-question is answered combined in one chapter. Two essential keywords of this research, “culture” and “sustainability” are complicated concepts which are hard to grasp. In order to give the research specific context, the terminology will be defined and referred to, when mentioning the terms throughout the thesis. Especially “culture” is a complex term linked to a lot of different theories and concepts. Therefore, its definition will serve as a frame, which is needed to discuss culture in relation to sustainability. Also, the Western and Japanese culture are briefly defined in order to understand the main differences, since everything will be analysed through opposing cultural elements.

Chapter Three dives more in-depth into the Western dominance of sustainability, which initially served as one of the important inspirations to research this theme. In order to conclude the consequences in relation to Japan, it is analysed further by using diverse sources. After proving the hypotheses in Chapter Two and Three by answering the first two sub-questions, the conclusions will lead to Chapter Four, which deals with the extensive research into Japanese culture and the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability.

Chapter Four first deals with the foundation of the Japanese culture, which is framed through the given definition of culture in Chapter Two. After cultural philosophies, values and sensitivities are investigated, the Japanese aesthetics are discussed, in order to understand the translation of Japanese philosophies in the approach on art, design and craftsmanship. This makes it easier to see the Japanese culture in a tangible relation to sustainability and fashion, without getting too lost in philosophies and spirituality.

After answering the fourth sub-question about the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability, conclusions on the different approach on sustainability for Japanese designers and brands are drawn in Chapter Five. For this, the approaches are analysed first by using all the previously conducted research, and fitting examples are matched to each approach. This will not only show how the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability can lead to sustainable approaches “the Japanese way”, but also shows how the Japanese designers or brands deal with the sustainability movement defined by the West. Chapter Six concludes all previous chapters by finally answering the main research question.
In Chapter One, I touched upon the relevance of the role of culture in sustainability. This chapter explores the definitions and meanings of “sustainability” and “culture”, which will serve as a guideline for the approach of further research. Sustainability as a discourse in the fashion industry is strongly connected to the overall sustainability debate. Therefore, finding answers on the origin of sustainability itself helps to understand the movement in fashion. After I have looked into the definition of sustainability and described the sustainability movement in fashion, recent developments of sustainability in the fashion industry are analysed from a critical point of view, in order to illustrate the issues occurring concerning this topic. Furthermore, definitions of “culture” are compared in order to choose the most fitting definition, which will guide the research on Japanese culture in Chapter Four. Moreover, the meaning of culture will clarify the relationship between culture and sustainability. Here, I want to point out that Western sources are used since contemporary definitions were formed out of the Western perspective.

SUSTAINABILITY

Firstly, I acknowledge the difficulty of defining sustainability due to its various and multi-layered meanings, associations and connotations. Greenpeace researcher and professor of Biological Science Johnston estimated around 300 definitions of sustainability in 2007 (Geissdoerfer, 2016). The one certainty of the term sustainability I agree upon is that there is no one superior definition. Therefore, some of the more common definitions are gathered to have something tangible to refer to.

One of the most wide-spread definitions occurring by research on sustainability is the one of the Brundtland report: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987). The term “Sustainability” got widely recognised due to the report “Our Common Future” by the UN Environmental Committee. It addresses the global need for sustainable development, emphasising that one generation should not exceed the limits of the available resources, and therefore leaving no negative
consequences for the next generation. Other definitions, for example, include: “Improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems” (International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 1991). This is a similar definition, but with the addition of “improving”, and therefore, more value is put on solving existing issues negatively affecting the living conditions of people. Often used as a synonym to sustainability, these definitions, however, are ones of sustainable development. The main difference between sustainable development and sustainability is that sustainable development is mostly used in contexts where development, and therefore, growth is essential. Hence, “sustainability” on its own implicates a concept which supports both growth and de-growth (Dessein et al., 2015, p.22). As such, sustainability is a slightly stronger term, which “might have social equity and justice not economic prosperity as its goal” (Ibid, p.23). This implicates that the use of “development” in the context of sustainability is always linked to growth, meaning that economic growth is secured while achieving social and environmental aims. The aspect of growth is controversial in the discourse on sustainability. While some opinions point out how economic growth is not compatible with environmental sustainability (Demaria, 2018), others emphasise the importance of economic growth to secure sustainable development (UN, 2019).

Despite the complexity of the terminology, certain is that the environment has always been the central aspect when talking about sustainability or sustainable development. Sustainability is such a challenging theme, yet models have been established to measure sustainability. In the mid-1990s, Author, adviser and entrepreneur John Elkington came up with the Triple Bottom Line, intending to measure corporate performance. This is why, often in business terms, and thus in the fashion industry, this TBL model, or, also called “People Planet Profit”, is commonly used to clarify sustainability. Companies strive to keep these three pillars in balance and use them as the main communication tool to the general public and consumers, as it is the common method to report corporate actions. Recently, another very popular and universal tool are the Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs, which were introduced by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, address global challenges and illustrate the versatility of sustainability. Also here, each goal can be categorised into either the ecologic, social or economic pillar. More and more corporations, as well as SMEs, use these to explain their focus on sustainability. Economic growth and sustainable development are often discussed critically. Since the definition of sustainability is regularly linked to sustainable development, the factor of growth always challenges sustainability. According to me, economic growth in the context of sustainability can be problematic when sustainability is used as a tool to support growth, hence increase consumerism.
It is a fact that the sustainable movement in fashion is getting more and more attention from both the consumer and industry side. The growing interest of consumers in the sustainability of fashion (Lanigan, 2019), as well as the evolvement of sustainability actions from industry side such as the Copenhagen Fashion Summit, or sustainable fashion awards such as the Leadership Awards by Common Objective, a business network for the fashion industry, make this clear. However, the movement still provides misunderstandings, debates and ambiguity. Firstly, I want to point out the contradiction in the phrase “Sustainable Fashion” itself. “Fashion is generally considered to drive consumption and is defined in terms of continuous change and novelty, while sustainability involves re-use and continuation” (Koelblin, 2018). “Sustainable Fashion” is so ambiguous because the central nature of the frequent change of fashion itself is challenging the limitations of available resources, characterising sustainability. Therefore, I would like to avoid this term and focus on the description of a sustainable movement in fashion. Moreover, sustainability in the context of fashion is an umbrella term. It holds different concepts, for instance, eco, green, fair, ethical, or slow fashion. According to the thesis on “Sustainability in the Clothing Sector”, these “concepts are used interchangeably and may mean different things, which results in conflicting messages” (Toemen, 2016, p.11). This indicates, how fashion brands or the media use buzzwords without completely understanding its meanings so that confusions about the definitions are caused. For example, “Ethical” could be used by a brand to describe a sustainable production origin of the garment, but disregarding other non-sustainable aspects.

Even though the complexity and ambiguity of sustainability in fashion is unavoidable, it is certain that since a few decades, there has been a sustainable movement going on. The origin of the sustainable fashion movement goes back to the 1960s. Issues resulting from technological developments were pointed out since the 40s, but the 60s mark a time in which the “need for significant change in fashion production” was established (Gordon and Hill, 2015, p.16). Initial concerns were raised regarding the use and production of textiles. The first synthetic fibre was made in 1941, and at the same time, cotton fibres using chemicals, as well as the use of fur became extremely popular (Gordon and Hill, 2015, p.16). In 1962, “The Silent Spring”, a book by Rachel Carson marked the beginning of environmentalist movements in fashion, corresponding with “rising concerns over the environment” (Ibid.). Amsterdam based interactive museum for sustainable fashion innovation “Fashion For Good” illustrates a brief timeline of the history of the movement, which they name as “Good
Fashion”. The timeline mentions that the polyester fibre was created in 1941, but rather focuses on the rise of ethical movements starting in the 90s. According to the timeline, protests against sweatshops in 1991, after a media exposure on sweatshop conditions, mark the first rise of awareness on the unethically of fashion production. Also, it states how the actual movement towards “Good Fashion” started in the 2010s. The Rana Plaza incident in 2013 has massively increased the awareness and motivated entrepreneurs to come up with solutions to solve environmental and social issues. This clarifies how actions were started to be taken and from around ten years ago. Coming back to the definition of sustainability, more and more fashion brands are trying to include every aspect of the three pillars to balance out the triple bottom line. Most commonly, when dealing with sustainability, all aspects of the value chain are taken into consideration. These include design, raw materials, production, supply chain and afterlife. Consequently, a circular life cycle is aspired.

We have seen, how the concern of environmental impacts of fabrics, as well as animal welfare, and the reveal of unethical sweatshops were the main driver for the rise of the sustainability movement. However, it took a long time until this became a widely recognised topic. Only today, changing consumer behaviour is also a significant driving force for the movement. “According to research by Common Objective, Google searches for “sustainable fashion” have grown 46% and “ethical fashion” 25% in the past six years”(Pinnock, 2018). Access of information and the radical transparency trend (McKinsey, 2019) result in sustainability becoming mainstream nowadays (Pasquarelli, 2019). This leads me to the recent developments of the sustainability movement, which will be critically analysed in the perspective of how the original motivation of sustainability correlates with the approaches from the side of the industry.

HYPER-LABELLING

As described, talking about the current fashion industry, it is unthinkable to leave out the term “sustainability”. The complexity of the concept and the occurrence of buzzwords is leading to confusion, but at the same time, the educated consumer and the transparency trend are demanding for clarity on sustainability in fashion. As a solution, the development of “Eco-Labelling” is visible, since “labelling is an effective way of informing consumers and customers about the environmental and social impacts of products” (Hahn-Petersen, 2018). Eco-labels in fashion include “Better Cotton Initiative”, “Fairtrade”, or the “Global Organic Textile Standard, for example. These are certified standards, which can help the consumer to understand the sustainability aspect of the garment better, providing the consumer with a certain feeling of trust towards a brand. It can be seen as quite a natural
development, which shows how the trend is moving towards extreme labelling, as I experience from own observations. I would describe this as “Hyper-Labelling”. Recently, an overall overdose of the term “sustainable” and other buzzwords can be recognised. I would like to illustrate this by using examples of two high-street, and one high-end fashion label. Under the H&M Group, Weekday has changed its brand promotion towards a clear focus on sustainability (see Fig.1). Main features are the Limited Organic Cotton collection and the current Recycled Fabrics Swimwear line. Their promotion of sustainability is greatly visible when entering the website, or the physical shop. Items from the swimwear line online are literally labelled as “sustainable” (see Fig. 2). Moreover, the Organic Cotton collection features Recycling symbols on sweaters and T-shirts (see Fig.3). The second example is Zara, with its “Join Life” collection, including jackets or pants out of recycled polyester (see Fig. 5,6). Similar to Weekday, the words “Please Recycle” are printed on the garments as a graphic design element, either on the belt or straps. Finally, there is the British designer Christopher Raeburn, who was awarded as one of the ten Sustainable Fashion Leaders of 2019 by Common Objective (Common Objective, 2019). The recent collaboration between the designer and The North Face show the words “Remade, Reduced, Recycle”, labelled on the clothes and bags of the collection (see Fig. 7,8). As illustrated, we can see a trend towards the use of “recycled”, “organic cotton” and even “sustainable” as a literal communication tool, even on the garments itself.

The promotion of sustainability is pushed greatly, and brands are seeming to praise themselves, or even defend their actions by using sustainability. It seems as if “sustainable” brands are sustainable because of how much the word appears in their brand promotion. Therefore, a judgmental approach is the consequence, differentiating between “sustainable” and “non-sustainable” brands. Also, industry professionals with a focus on sustainability explain the solution of popularising “sustainable fashion” being a “great marketing campaign”, because “promotion is key” (Olivia Pinnock, 2018). Overall one can recognise, that labelling and mentioning “buzzwords” serves as a crucial indicator of the sustainable movement. Claiming and promoting sustainability seems almost necessary for fashion brands to move with the stream of the trend. The consequential issues, which have been widely recognised and discussed already, are how the buzzwords and the promotion are used as attempts to encourage consumers that it is okay to purchase more. Greenwashing initially occurred as a result of environmental movements in the 60s, as a tool of companies to rebrand their image (Kenton, 2019). Fashion is adapting greenwashing, by capitalising demands for sustainable fashion (Slater, 2019). To illustrate this matter, I would like to come back to the promotions of Weekday. The poster on Figure 4 states: “100% Recycled:
100% of our swimwear is made from recycled materials” (see Fig. 4). However, one closer look into the composition of one of the 100% recycled swimwear tells the following: “Shell: 80% recycled polyamide, Lining: 92% recycled polyester”. It is doubtful, what happened to the rest of the fabric. This suggests that, since awareness of “sustainable fashion” is growing, brands must keep up with the demands, shaping into a rat race on who is the best fashion brand. As discussed in the paragraph on sustainability, growth being a critical factor for sustainable development, in fashion as well, is sustainability used to ensure consistent growth.
Figure 5: Please Recycle Puffy Jacket (Zara, 2019)
Figure 6: Please Recycle Jogger (Zara, 2019)

Figure 7: Ruched Coat Yellow (Christopher Raeburn, 2019)
Figure 8: The North Face × CR Rae Bag (Christopher Raeburn, 2019)
CULTURE

There are a lot of different definitions of culture, including the following quote defining culture as “shared understandings which bound individuals together in society, referred to the shared or common meanings, values and norms of particular people as expressed in their behavior, rituals, institutions, myths, religious beliefs and art” (Du Gay, 2013). This definition indicates that culture is defined by a set of generally known and accepted beliefs and way of living, of a specific society. Looking further into the meaning of national culture, “characteristics such as language, religion, ethnic and racial identity, and cultural history and traditions” are significant aspects of culture (IGI Global, n.d.). This definition differs from the previous one by adding the aspect of history and identity, not only behavioural aspects. These definitions include specific aspects of culture. A rather simplified meaning is that “culture represents and creates wider relations between human and nature, past, present and future, the materialised and the imagined world” (Dessein et al., 2015, p.36). This description implicates, how a culture influences the people of a specific society in their view on its environment, namely nature, animals, other human beings, material objects and non-material objects. It refers to a worldview which forms values and a system of ethical and moral choices (Ibid, p.36). Solomon et al. also explain one aspect of culture being Ideology, which is the worldview of a society, resulting in a set of moral and aesthetic principles (Solomon et al., 2016). Hence, for further research, culture is defined as the worldview of a particular group of people, mediating the relationship between the human and its entire environment, which results in common values, beliefs, norms and aesthetic principles. This provides a fitting definition of culture for this research since the meaning of sustainability will be analysed through human relationships, their relationship to nature and environment, as well as material and non-material objects, shown through values and philosophies, in the Japanese culture.

Culture strongly influences the worldview, and therefore, the view on the environment of a human. Culture defines how a society behaves towards nature, how it treats resources, how social life is maintained, and how these result in ethos, moral, and aesthetic principles. Therefore, the relationship between an individual or a society and sustainability is formed by its or their culture. That is why sustainability cannot be a general concept but needs to be viewed in relation to specific cultures. Since sustainability as a concept was established by the West, the Western culture must be linked to the origin and approach on sustainability. Now, I would like to introduce the Western culture and Japanese culture. The Western culture historically started from the Ancient Greek and Ancient Romans and can be defined by the culture or civilisation of European origin or association (Science Daily, n.d.). Since the
4th century, in addition, Christianity strongly shaped the Western civilisation. Through the Renaissance and Enlightenment, a tradition of rationalism has been shaped, with values of philosophy, humanism and scientific revolution (Ibid.). Also, rational argumentation, resulting in the political, clear division of “black or white”, is a characteristic of the Western culture. The political thought emphasises the value of human rights, equality and democracy (JAES21, 2007). Moreover, the pursuit of wealth and the value on individualism, coupled with a respect for science and technology, resulted in a strong emphasis on growth (Ibid.). In the Western culture, shaped by scientific reason and Christian ethics, the subordination of nature to human purpose is a characteristic (Dawson, 1961). The idea that God gave humanity authority over nature, strongly influenced the Western culture, since it defines the relationship between the human and its environment. In contrast, Japanese culture, founded upon the Jomon and Chinese civilisation, is strongly influenced by the beliefs of Shintoism and Buddhism and therefore has a distinct spiritual character appearing in its values and philosophies (JAES21, 2007). Putting the Western culture in context to how sustainability is defined and how the movement takes shape, it is recognisable how the values of the Western culture, namely science and individualism, also forms the concept of an approach towards sustainability. In contrast, since the Japanese culture differs from the Western culture, the concept of sustainability has to consequently differ as well. In Chapter Four, I will investigate the Japanese culture more in-depth in relation to sustainability.

Culture is defined as the worldview of a particular group of people, mediating the relationship between the human and its entire environment, which results in common values, beliefs, norms and aesthetic principles.
We have now looked into the origin of sustainability, the developments of the sustainability movement in fashion and defined culture. Regarding sustainability, it is important to conclude that both general sustainability and the movement in the fashion sector had occurred after a realisation of increasing environmental and social issues. Hence, the concept itself is relatively new, reflecting the consequences of modern civilisation after the industrialisation. Moreover, it is relevant to note that the concept was addressed by Western society. Sustainability is an effort which derived from an unsustainable development of the world, mostly resulting from the concept of economic growth. The sustainability discourse was and still is a concept popularised due to problems derived from industrialisation and globalisation. Strongly noticeable is the focus on our globalised world, togetherness, and conveyed messages about fairness and improvement of every human’s life while maintaining the earth’s resources. In fashion, a strong promotion of sustainability is noticeable, with increasing popularity on labelling. This reveals a rather egoistic character of sustainable movement, in which brands seems to defend their actions by claiming how “good” they are doing with sustainability. Even though it is impossible to give one definition to “sustainability”, the term itself is heavily used for promotional use. Regarding culture, the specification will help to investigate the Japanese culture in Chapter Four, by researching the relationship between humans and nature, between humans regarding each other and between humans and the materialistic and non-materialistic world. A brief introduction into Western and Japanese culture has revealed, how fundamentally different the foundation of the two cultures are, due to its different streams of civilisation, as well as religious beliefs.

An analysis which is significant to this research is that the current sustainability movement after understanding its origin can be linked to the main characteristics of the Western culture. Firstly, the emphasis on growth, which is a factor belonging to sustainable development, is also pursued in the sustainability movement in fashion. Secondly, the Western culture with its value on rationality, politics and “black or white” thinking, is visible in the act of defining brands into sustainable or unsustainable. In addition, the respect for science appears in an attempt of convincing consumers with numbers, such as “68% sustainable”. Thirdly, the importance of individualistic thinking influences an approach, in which the ego is dominant. Screaming of buzzwords and actively showcasing sustainable actions appear to be not only responses to the transparency trend but also embody Western cultural values. Given the above, the aesthetics of Hyper-Labelling can be explained. The overall preference for “shouting” sustainability, dominated by the ego, come back in the designs of the garments itself.
THE IMBALANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN FASHION

In the previous chapter, sustainability and culture were defined, as well as the sustainable movement in fashion described. Also, links were drawn between the current developments in sustainability and Western culture. The discourse on sustainability has created many points to discuss and criticise. As we are witnessing great efforts contributing to sustainable developments and general awareness, we are also realising major issues of the discourse, such as superficial use and greenwashing. Being aware of these criticisms, there is one significant topic most people just simply do not recognise yet. As mentioned previously in Chapter One, it is the Western dominance of the sustainability movement.

This chapter deals with the Western dominance of sustainability and its occurrence in the fashion industry, on the one hand from the Western, on the other hand, from the Japanese point of view. I will examine this by looking into Western and Japanese media and how sustainability in fashion is discussed, presented, and promoted. Hence, the impact of the sustainability movement on the Japanese fashion industry will be researched to get an idea about the mainstream Japanese perspective on sustainability in fashion.

ECO-COLONIALISM

Recently, Chandran Nair, Malaysian founder of Hong Kong-based think tank Global Institute for Tomorrow and author of “The Sustainable State” (Nair, 2018) brought to light how discussions about sustainability are often led by Western experts. He points out the main issue of today’s sustainable development narrative, which “is understood from the perspective of advanced economies rather than developing ones” (Zein, 2019). According to him, the Western-led approaches on sustainability completely blend out the Western responsibilities on the cause of environmental and social issues. This raising criticism on global sustainable development is described as “Eco-Colonialism”, a fairly new term in the discussion of sustainability. Zafirah Zein, correspondent of Singapore-based sustainable social enterprise “Eco-Business”, illustrates this matter using the issues arising out of plastic waste. In 2018, China banned foreign plastic waste import, leading to heavy criticism from British and
American companies. The problem here is, how Asian, especially South-East Asian countries are blamed for marine pollution through plastic waste, and being criticised for “their waste management practices and unsustainable consumer lifestyles”, although the waste often originates from developed nations in the West (Zein, 2019). Overall, environmental actions from Western countries are positively brought to attention, with the West leading the sustainability movement, whilst the Western economic model encouraging overconsumption majorly affected global environmental issues.

THE WESTERN DOMINANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN FASHION

The Fall 2019 fashion show of Danish fashion brand Ganni “Life On Earth” held in January this year, triggered controversy due to the use of videography of women from developing countries as a backdrop (Coscarelli, 2019). Ganni centred the show around the theme of sustainability, aiming to address diversity and ethical design. While some articles showed a supportive attitude towards Ganni, Anaa Saber, a New York-based blogger criticised the brand as “tone deaf”, due to portraying themselves indirectly in a superior position in relation to the “underprivileged” women (Saber, 2019). Whether intended or not intended by Ganni, this is an issue to be taken seriously. I myself, often notice this connotation of Western superiority regarding sustainability.

Figure 9: Global Category Guide: Sustainability (WGSN, 2019)
World leading trend forecasting platform WGSN has been publishing reports on sustainability in fashion since spring 2017. One of the recent reports is the “Global Category Guide: Sustainability”, showcasing destinations “around the world” to “shop sustainably” (WGSN, 2019, see Fig. 9). Mentioned cities include Nordic cities such as Copenhagen and Stockholm, other European cities as of Amsterdam, Berlin, London, and additionally New York and Portland. These are supposed to be cities which hold a great number of inspiring fashion brands focusing on sustainability. I do not doubt any good intentions of this report, but this makes unambiguous that Western, especially European fashion brands indeed are the leaders of sustainability. Consequently, Non-western cities and fashion brands are being indirectly portrayed as less sustainable or behind in the movement. In this guide, brands and stores are being introduced and promoted, which again clarifies how being a sustainable brand is used as a unique selling point. Sustainability is being used for market positioning and as a new opportunity to secure market share by distinguishing oneself from other brands. In the end, it is about consuming more, as phrases such as “key areas to shop” indicate.

Even though consumption is being stimulated, only looking at these developments from the Western perspective, they might seem valuable because they offer alternative solutions to fast fashion and raise general awareness of consumers. However, we must consider and analyse what effects and consequences these have on a global level. I must say that this Western ideology of sustainability in fashion equates being the global answer to the discourse. Even if not intended, Western companies are showing how “good” they are, often implicating a superior position to the rest of the world with certain formulations, thus blending out any other approaches on sustainability. One example I would like to mention here is the online magazine Luxiders. Founded in Berlin in 2017, Luxiders is a new Sustainable Luxury Magazine. Aimed for “avant-garde eco-friendly readers and consumers” (Luxiders, 2018), Luxiders introduces “sustainable” fashion, beauty and lifestyle brands. Looking into their descriptions of so-called sustainable products, it is remarkable how much the consumption of these “sustainable” products is stimulated. Talking about trends and must-haves for each month and each season by praising “sustainable” products, one could criticise how their perspective on a sustainable lifestyle is fueled with capitalistic ideas. Also, the magazine states how sustainability and innovation are the engines of the European textile industry, while expressing their mission to “expand the responsible consumption worldwide, building a culture of respect, with positive effects on the economy, society and the environment by reducing poverty, hunger, pollution, climate change and inequalities and increasing well-being, justice and peace” (Ibid.). Coming back to the term “Eco-Colonialism”, the capitalistic
As you can see, there is a side of the sustainability movement in fashion which forces on a Western ideology by presenting and promoting Western brands as frontrunners, whilst also creating much of a competitive feel overall. This leads the research to question whether Non-western brands are only going to be “accepted” as sustainable when following the exact same principles and presentations as the Western brands presented as perfect examples. Coming back to the statement of Nair, explaining how advanced economies dictate sustainable development, it has to be said that Japan certainly also belongs to the economically advanced nations. However, one must not forget Japan’s history of extremely rapid modernisation due to Western interference, and therefore, it remains a country which has adopted the Western economic model. Now, it is of great interest to look into the sustainable movement from a Japanese point of view. Having lived in Japan and being in constant contact with Japanese media, I can state that sustainability is not a generally recognised concept for the mainstream population, and is mostly only familiar in the form of Corporate Social Responsibility (Fuma, 2017). Directly translated, there are two words for the term “Sustainability” in the Japanese language. One is the Japanese translation “Jizokukanousei” (持続可能性).
Looking at the characters, this literally means “the possibility of continuation”. The other one is the English word “Sustainability” (サステナビリティ) itself. Surprisingly, both Japanese terms for “Sustainability” equal in meaning, and are defined exactly the same as definitions on sustainability from Western sources. As I tried to find the origin of the Japanese word, it only refers back to the Brundtland Report (Kawaguchi, 2006). This implicates that the term itself only exists due to the Western definition of sustainability.

When talking about fashion, I notice the more frequent use of the English term. The reason could be that for Japanese people, the English word sounds more “modern” and appealing than the Japanese one. It is recognisable that more and more attention is paid to this movement in fashion. Roughly speaking, there are two reasons for this. One is the growing necessity of addressing sustainability in various industries due to international communication and therefore push from government sides. For example, themes of sustainability and diversity are important elements of the Tokyo Olympics 2020. Another one specifically in fashion is the increasing awareness through Western developments mentioned in Japanese media. When “Sustainable Fashion” is searched in Google Japan or Yahoo Japan, for instance, most articles are translated articles from Western publishers such as Vogue or i-D, which obviously mention Western sustainable brands and developments such as Asos, Reformation or Fashion Revolution (Lord, 2018). Also, if it is a Japanese article, it describes the great efforts of Gucci, Stella McCartney or H&M (Kuriyama, 2018). Another driving force, according to my observation is, that recently, there are Japanese celebrities promoting sustainability, mainly on social media. For instance, one of the currently most successful Japanese models, Rola, with 5.5 million Instagram followers, is addressing global warming and actively promoting sustainable fashion, for example by representing H&M Conscious to the Japanese audience. This shows that the promotional character of the sustainability movement in fashion is slowly taking its shape in Japan due to the influence of Western brands as well.

It is certain that in the Japanese fashion-related media, the sustainable movement is clearly presented as a Western innovation, but how do the Japanese reflect on their position or situation in this global movement? The answer is that they mention that Japan has to make great efforts to get to the Western level, as actions are just recently starting to be taken. Junko Edahiro, a Japanese environmental journalist and founder of NGO “Japan For Sustainability” stated that there are a lot of great sustainability examples in Japan, but the movement lacks efforts when it comes to fashion businesses, compared to other countries. In her point of view, other nations are presenting their actions towards sustainability better. Thus, this shows how from the Japanese perspective, it seems to be necessary to demonstrate,
or even promote Japanese efforts in sustainability in order to be noticed and recognised in the sustainability discourse.

We have now seen how the movement is also taken its shape in Japan, mainly due to Western influences. We have also seen that Japanese people look up to Western brands and developments, following Western leadership and trying to implement the sustainability movement in its exact same form. The Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia stated: „There is a potential for Japan to become a leader in the rapidly growing movement toward sustainability“ (Vollmer, 2010). This research implicates that the imitation of the West is necessary to be accepted or recognised as advocates of sustainability. Now, it is questionable why sustainability is not a recognised topic as in the West. Neither is Japan known for sustainable movements in fashion, nor does Japan see itself as “developed” in this discourse. There is an interesting theory which gives a hint towards understanding this question. An interview by Women’s Wear Daily Japan, an online fashion, beauty and business news platform, about sustainability in fashion explains why sustainability is not as popular yet, compared to other fashion-conscious populations. It is because especially represented in the Edo-period, the Japanese society contains “Eco” or “Ethical philosophies” from the very past. Therefore, the unconscious cultural mindset of sustainability hinders the popularisation (WWD, 2016). This statement confirms an assumption, that the Japanese culture and history influence the sustainability discourse and movement in Japan, which takes us to have a closer look into the Japanese culture and its relationship to sustainability in Chapter Four.

CONCLUSION

Firstly, I would like to come back to the second hypothesis formulated in the paragraph on Structure in Chapter One. The hypothesis of a Western-dominated concept of sustainability has been proven as correct in Chapter Three. Recent news and debates revealed heavy criticism on the Western-dominated, or even Western-led development and solutions. We have also seen, how the negative consequences for developing countries are addressed. In the context of fashion, Western dominance is also visible, mainly through the presentation of Western fashion brands as frontrunners of sustainability by the Western and international media. Linking this to the development of “sustainable fashion” into a status symbol, a certain superior undertone of the West can be detected. In regard to the consequence of the movement for Japan, is it highly important to point out, how “Sustainability” as a concept never existed before the introduction from the Western perspective. That is why the term is defined exactly the same as in the Western language. From this, I conclude that “Sustainability” in the form of a social agreement never
existed in the Japanese culture. This also leads to the conclusion, that the Japanese fashion industry is seen as “behind” in the sustainability movement. Hence, this indicates that Japanese fashion will only be accepted as sustainable when literally the same words and measures are used.

Coming back to how culture is set in relation to sustainability, I have analysed that a culture defines the worldview of a specific group of people. Accordingly, culture determines the relationship between the human and nature, humans each other and humans and their materialistic and non-materialistic world. Having analysed that the sustainability movement is defined by the Western perspective, it is logical that approaches on sustainability are also influenced by the Western culture. Issues as Eco-Colonialism unveiled, that the Western approaches on sustainability are forced onto Non-Western cultures, which indicates that other cultures might have different solutions or approaches in sustainability. Chapter Four will investigate what the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability is, and will, therefore, lead to the answer on the third hypothesis, which is that there is a difference in the concept of sustainability in the Western culture and is the Japanese culture.
We have analysed that from the Western, but also from the Japanese perspective, the Japanese fashion industry is not being portrayed as “leading” the sustainability movement. However, as mentioned earlier in Chapter One, Japanese brands often radiate “something” which makes them seem sustainable to a Western observer, and might even be ordinary for a Japanese one. In this chapter, I want to dive more in-depth into this “something”. Coming back to the definition of culture, we should first look into the relationship between human and nature to understand the foundation of Japanese culture. Obviously, Japan experienced Westernisation during the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), and therefore, its economic, social and environmental systems have similarities to Western societies. Nevertheless, Japanese culture is a very distinct and unique one on its own. Traditional philosophy being the essence of culture, Japan is not westernised in the sense of preserving its values of Confucianism and social harmony. Looking back to the term sustainability and its definition, the environment has always been the starting point and focus. That is why it is significant to thoroughly understand how Japanese culture deals with the environment. Firstly, this chapter picks up contemporary associations of sustainability in Japan, which is recycling and the spirit of mottainai. These subjects show how the Japanese culture is perceived in relation to sustainability in the current days, but also prove, that there is something deeply rooted in the Japanese culture which results into sustainable philosophies and actions in modern Japan. In order to get to the core, the Japanese-style view on nature will be researched, which forms the base of the Japanese culture, with religion and geographical location playing crucial roles.

The hypothesis on which the choice of Japan is based on is that Japan has sustainable aspects in its culture. Until now, I discussed this only from a generally known, image-related perspective. For instance, serving the image of one of the most technologically advanced countries, Japan is recognised for its waste management and recycling innovations. Recycling has become an enormous industry in Japan, especially after being confronted with
"Mottainai" is often used in combination with a "Spirit". It is not only a concept on waste but represents the deep cultural roots of a sustainably minded culture (Taylor, 2017). An exact same word as “Mottainai” does not exist in the English language, but it can be translated as “wasteful”, used to express regret to waste in everyday ordinary life. Looking back to the origins of the word, “Mottai” is a combined word of “thing” and “body”, and is connected to the Japanese ancient thinking of personifications of things, believing that everything has a spirit (Nomiyama, 2018). Now, “nai” translates to “no”, or “there is not”. Hence, “Mottainai” implies regret towards a thing losing its life or soul. Therefore, things should be treated with care, so that its soul does not get lost. In other words, it expresses sorrow over things changing its original form. This kind of traditional philosophy stimulates a conscious and mindful attitude towards daily actions, where respect towards, and appreciation of the environment is considered. In 2005, after a visit to Japan, Nobel prize

waste problems in postwar Japan (Solid Waste Management and Recycling Technology of Japan, Ministry of Environment, n.d.). One of the reasons is, that despite the large consumer goods packaging industry Japan’s landmass is limited, and the island does not offer enough space for waste disposal (Japanology Plus: Waste and Recycling, 2015). Interesting here is that the Japanese are often described as waste avoidance culture itself, not only innovating to solve occurring issues. There is a certain mentality playing a role, and the key to this can be found in the cultural foundation of Japan. In January 2019, Netflix has released a show called “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo”. Marie Kondo is a world-renowned Japanese organisation consultant, introducing her philosophy and way of organising a home. Her so-called “KonMari-Method”, reflects aspects which represent the Japanese culture, namely the creation of a living environment and relation towards belongings in a nation which dealt with resource-constraints. The limited landmass has not only resulted in efforts to recycle waste as mentioned above but has also taught its population to live with fewer materials. As a consequence, the Japanese naturally learned to treat every object with care (Fuji, 2019). You can see that there is a supposedly spiritual approach to how the Japanese view and treat their environment and belongings. Therefore, the foundation of environmental technologies Japan is mostly known for, derive from Japanese ideas, values and sensitivities. That is why I would like to introduce the term “Mottainai”, which is not only part of my personal life but also has repeatedly popped up during my research on Japan and sustainability.
winner Wangari Maathai, a political and environmental activist, got in touch with the term “Mottainai” and started to popularize the word outside of Japan. To her, this single word expresses the 4Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Respect. Since then, international environmentalists, create campaigns and movements conveying the “Mottainai Spirit”. Even though this mentality is less strongly present in postmodern Japan, the term is still prevalent, especially in young children’s education. The most representative example for this is “Mottainai Baasan”, a series of picture books and card games by Mariko Shinju (see Fig. 10). The main character of this story is a “Mottainai” Grandma, who educates her grandchild about wasteful actions in daily life. This includes, for instance, leaving a single rice grain in the bowl, or not closing the tap water while brushing teeth. Moreover, she inspires with unique ideas for the reuse of commodities such as paper, short pens or peels. Overall, this Japanese word is used when things are thrown away without making use of its full value. However, in its core, it also expresses gratitude for nature’s blessing and towards people participated in the creation of things. I believe this is an ideal example of how a sustainable way of thinking is part of a culture, reflected in language and ordinary daily life.

Japan has been recognised for being a sustainable culture from time to time, but it is also a fact that Japan is often viewed as a country full of contradictions. Japan enjoys a certain image of a technologically advanced, but still spiritual and traditional nation, often famous for qualitative products. However, Japan is also known for being SDG underdeveloped, compared to European countries, and its rank dropped from 11th to 15th in 2018 (Okabe, 2019). Also, high depression and suicide rates, or gender inequality are aspects of Japan contradicting a sustainable image. Some opinions even
emphasise how Japan has lost its own perspective through westernisation and globalisation (Hara, 2009; Okabe 2019). It is inevitable how radical changes in economic development and industrialisation of a nation bring about issues, such as pollution, waste, and limits of energy resources. However, the answer to understanding the cultural meaning of sustainability in Japan is a rather philosophical one, represented in cultural values. Once getting to the bottom of how Japanese culture relates to sustainability, its influence in design, product making, fashion and lifestyle can be analysed.

A research paper titled “The discovery of Japan’s traditional wisdom to help create a sustainable society - Research first report for its international contribution” explains how traditional wisdoms of Japanese culture lead to sustainable living habits and societal functions, by looking into the history of Japan. This paper was published by the Japan Association of Environment and Society for the 21st Century (JAES21) in 2007, a long-standing non-profit organization with the mission to create a sustainable and circulative society by working towards a paradigm shift in people’s values and social systems (Kato, [n.d.]). The research illustrates the origins of cultural traits in predominantly philosophical and mentality based descriptions of Japanese values and sensitivity. Remarkable here is, how it is stated that the climate of Japan formed the base of its culture. Here, it is relevant to explain some linguistic matters. The word used in the original text, which closest translation in English is “climate”, “Fūdo”, actually contains not only climate but also topography, geology and landscape. The concept of “Fūdo” might be better expressed as “natural environment”; were historical and cultural background has to be considered, rather than mere natural phenomena. This is going to prove itself as highly important, in regard to how Japanese people traditionally view and treat their environment. The following graph illustrates how “Fūdo” (from now on referred to as climate) formed Japanese values and sensitivities, which, in turn, led to a Japanese way of living, built upon urban development and community (see Fig.11).
This means that indirectly, Japan’s climate has been the starting point for a society, that is characterised by Japanese persistence and durability. Clearly, it is of great interest to understand how the climate formed Japanese sensitivities and values. The paper points out the main characteristics of Japan’s climate, namely the four seasons, natural catastrophes, an island nation, forest and water. Firstly, Japan has an extremely diverse variety of the four seasons, due to its geographical location and land shape. The constant change of climate and weather resulted in genuine appreciation and enjoyment of all seasons, and therefore, one can see strong seasonal connotations in Japanese culture, such as food, ceremonies and clothing. Being sensitive to the transitions of the seasons also developed into a philosophy of the circularity of life. The diversity of climate is also represented in natural catastrophes, including earthquakes and volcanic activity. Being in constant confrontation with catastrophes, the Japanese learned to accept, respect, and even love the terrifying side of nature. Moreover, occurring catastrophes remind the Japanese of the immense power of nature, which humans can not control, also resulting in a reverent attitude towards nature. Thirdly, being an island nation, hence, living in limited geographical conditions, the Japanese have valued harmony based on circulation. Additionally, it is described how the great presence of forests and a variety of water resources had an impact on Japanese sensitivity. These formed the Japanese to build livelihood around forest and water, defining the interaction between humans and nature, as well as humans with each other. To sum up, the Japanese civilisation was formed through its climate, making Japanese people extremely sensitive to changes of nature, always observing and being confronted with its power and creating a sense of unity with nature.
This fundamental way of thinking, not to control, but to live in harmony with nature, it is said, had lead to Shintoism, Japan’s oldest religion, in which God is seen in every creation (Okabe, 2019). Everything includes everything, from mountains to rocks, trees, animals, and even humans. More of these religious traits are visible in Figure 12. A civilisation created upon the religion and traits of Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, and Confucianism, such as metempsychosis, respect for nature in its original form, or value of harmony influence characteristics of the society (see Fig. 12). These key characteristics are directly opposed to modern Western culture, which has the Greek and Roman civilisation at its roots (JAES21, 2007). Strikingly, the main difference is the position of the human being in the natural system. It points out that in Judaism and Christianity, the human acts as a kind of intermediate between God and nature, and therefore have the power to control nature. This can be regarded as the fundamental difference between these two streamlines of cultures. Moreover, rooted in Greek and Roman civilisation, Western culture has always valued rationality, so that the world has been divided into dualism, clearly judging what is right and what is wrong. The value of individual freedom and pursuit of wealth from characteristics of the society, which lead to a competitive market economy (Ibid.).

Figure 12: Japanese vs. Western Thought on Sustainability (JAES21, 2007, p.11, own translation)
Coming back to the foundation of a culture, namely the relationship of humans and their environment, nature, other humans and material and non-material objects, the belief of spirit in things and philosophy to live in harmony with nature form the key aspects of the Japanese culture. The cultural traits determine how the Japanese society functioned. The most relevant example of this is the incredibly sustainable society during the Edo period, in which a society full of respect towards nature, other humans and objects were maintained. In the following, I would like to present some concrete examples of the societal functions in the Edo period (1603-1868).

江戸時代
EDO PERIOD

The Edo period, also called the Tokugawa period, was a period of 265 years, established by the military dictatorship of Tokugawa Ieyasu. The Edo period is described as the last period of traditional Japan, characterised by internal peace, political stability and a flourishing urban culture, with an emphasis on agricultural production (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). Since Japan was almost completely closed off from other countries, the Japanese people did not. Due to Japan being an island and having closed borders, as well as a culture with a respectful mindset towards everything, the Edo society had developed a unique recycling community. Additionally, the Buddhist thought of reincarnation also leads to a circulation philosophy, resulting in the effective use of fewer resources. Highly impressive is that the word “Recycling” actually did not even exist at that time (Toki, 2017). This fact shows, that recycling was part of daily life, something so ordinary and simple, that it did not have a specific word attached to it. How common recycling was, shows the existence of a great number of recycling specialists “Ikakeya” repaired pots and kettles, a “Shōseya” was a crockery repairer. Also, specialised people bought off old umbrellas and clothing to repair or downcycle, wax waste, paper waste, and even fallen out hair to collect and reuse. Again, remarkable is, how this was considered to be “normal”. Only more recently, Japanese researchers are recognising the deeply sustainable ecological systems in traditional Japan, due to the increased awareness of SDGs. For instance, university professor Kōyū Furusawa explains the depth of the Japanese “Straw” culture, when interpreting it in the context of SDGs. Straw, being a by-product of the rice cultivation, loses its function as soon as the rice is harvested. However, the Japanese have found diverse purposes for this seemingly useless straw. Not only was it used for fuel or food for domestic animals, but also as material for simple roofs and walls, or to make sandals and rugs. Also, the ash was used as fertiliser, as well as for a variety of industries of textile dyeing, cutting tools, or the make of potteries (Furusawa, 2018). Equally important is to mention,
that the sustainable use of straw did not have only practical, but also spiritual reasons. Straw has been used for New Year’s decorations and shrine ropes, as well as the sumo ring, which are examples of a spiritual and religious way of use. According to Furusawa, this spiritual attachment is vital since the mental and emotional meaning of material circulation keeps the system from disappearing in a temporary movement (Furusawa, 2018). One of the projects of JAES21 is the “Community Wisdom Bank”. With the intention to share Japanese traditional wisdom with people from all over the world, the site presents 8 points of wisdom, which also summarise the main traditional philosophies of Japanese sustainability. I want to use these to recap on the main wisdom:

1. Mind over attachment to things: Traditional emphasis on spiritual affluence and peace of mind over attachment to things.
2. Harmony with Nature: Traditional societies founded on the spirit of harmony and oneness with nature.
3. Learning to be Content: Traditional wisdom of learning to be content.
5. Maintaining Harmony: Emphasis on valuing harmony and continuity of family and local community.
7. Living based on Respect for Ancestors and Predecessors: Continuity of life and ways of life centered on ancestral worship.

The points of wisdom show, how harmony is the main value of the Japanese culture. Being in harmony with nature, things, others and even yourself is maintained through a spiritual life philosophy with an emphasis on respectfulness and peace of mind.

We now have discussed the cultural foundation of Japan and the base of a sustainable society being originated from climate and religion. We understood how the geographical conditions, the Japanese-style view on nature, the spiritual beliefs and philosophies were full of sustainability, which is a major trend in the world today. We have also seen how these traits are not only philosophies but also provided inspiration for an ecological societal structure and function, especially in the Edo period. It is also fair to conclude that the Japanese way of thinking was deeply rooted in the culture, and considered as standard, leading to an ordinary, humble approach on sustainability. I would add that this sustainability can be described as “unconscious” sustainability, where words such as “recycling” or “ecology” do not even exist.
Despite the Japanese culture showing exceptional characteristics of sustainability in its profoundly rooted view on the relation of humans towards their environment, Japan itself does not much promote or consider itself as being sustainable, with the exception of a minor group of environmentalists and researchers. As mentioned in Chapter Two, especially when it comes to fashion or product design, one can hardly say that Japan is famous for sustainability. I find it intriguing to make sense of this puzzling phenomena. Coming back to the hint given previously, it can be said that one reason is that compared to the Western world, is it difficult to popularise something which is more present already. Also, Japanese sustainability can be described as something done more unconsciously, ordinary and modest. This idea will lead us towards the key to the answer, which can be found in the Japanese sense of beauty and aesthetics. Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy, dealing with taste and the concept of beauty (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Aesthetic concepts are often categorised in relation to different cultures, reflecting beliefs, attitudes or emotional values, and therefore express the worldview of a certain culture. Thus, aesthetics serves as more of a visual or tangible execution of culture, so that a worldview is reflected in aesthetic concepts of art, design, architecture, rituals, or ceremonies for instance. In addition, “in regions where people traditionally lived very close to nature”, aesthetic concepts are not only design principles (Fuji, 2019). “It was a code of conduct”, or “personal and collective guidelines to behave gracefully toward nature”, “to be adequately conscious about the surrounding environment; find things that would help them thrive; learn to leave nature alone when needed; and become creative in order to produce beautiful things that would make their lives happier and fuller” (Ibid). Therefore, aesthetics reflect the attitude towards life, and the art to behave, which is why culture and aesthetics are strongly connected. Aesthetics are useful to illustrate how culture is lived out.

Until now, I have mainly discussed the relationship between humans and nature, as well as touched upon the effects on society, thus the relationship of humans between each other. Now, I would like to dive more deeply into the relationship between humans and objects, not only regarding resources for livelihood but also objects expressing aesthetics. Having understood how sustainable philosophies derived through the foundation of Japanese culture, it is now relevant to put these into the context of aesthetics. It is significant to understand how traditional philosophies and values are reflected in design and product making, especially in order to answer the final question. Knowing how the cultural base influences aesthetic principles will play a crucial role in finding out how Japanese designers deal with the cultural meaning of
sustainability. Besides, it can give answers to the question, why sustainability in fashion or other design products is not widely recognised in Japan.

The Japanese-style view on nature is often linked to the Japanese sense of beauty. As mentioned previously, the Japanese are sensitive towards small transitions of nature, viewing nature with an accepting and appreciative attitude. Therefore, the Japanese aesthetic sense has been based on everything natural and decaying. This aesthetic concept is expressed, for example, in Wabi Sabi. The Japanese have always seen beauty in the fragility of life through falling cherry blossoms, falling leaves, or ageing beauty through rocks covered in moss (Okabe, 2019). Since ancient times, Japanese aesthetic concepts see beauty in nature at its end of life, rather than in lively nature (Okabe, 2019). “The Beauty of Everyday Things”, a book by philosopher and Japanese folk-craft pioneer Soetsu Yanagi explains how even in Asia, Japan is unique to have a standard aesthetic vocabulary (Yanagi, 2017). Japanese design often is characterised as simplistic, of high quality and with fine detailing. However, John Maeda, Associate Director of Research of the MIT Media Lab, states, that “what lies at the heart of a Zen-like nothing” of Japanese simplicity “is an incredibly deep, complex, and meaningful something” (Hara Kenya, 2017). What seems to be just simple or minimalistic design, is actually founded on an extremely complex philosophy. Therefore, the aesthetic concepts reveal the depth of the Japanese sense of beauty and will give more insight into the relationship between humans and objects in the Japanese culture.

Yanagi explains the Japanese view on beauty by using the concept of “Muji”, “Wabi Sabi” and “Shibumi”. First of all, “Ji” meaning ground, and “Mu” meaning no/nothing, Muji is an expression of a plain and un-patterned ground. According to Yanagi, the concept of Muji demonstrates the Japanese view of seeing beauty of the plain and the unadorned as the ultimate goal. This perception has its roots in Buddhist precepts that all things are empty of intrinsic existence (Yanagi, 2018). The following concepts of Wabi Sabi and Shibumi, are both different approaches to Muji. Wabi meaning rustic simplicity and Sabi meaning loneliness, the aesthetic principle is based on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. Japanese pottery captures the essence of Wabi Sabi, by appreciating imperfection and celebrating the fragility of the ceramics (see Fig. 14, 15). Especially the tradition of Kintsugi, a technique to repair broken pottery with gold dust or natural resin paint shows, how scars are even embraced (see Fig. 14). The concept of Wabi Sabi is derived from the Buddhist teaching of the “three marks of existence, which include impermanence (無常 mujō), emptiness or the absence of self (空 kū) and suffering (苦 ku)” (Plyglottando, 2015). This teaching expresses the Buddhist
philosophy to find peace through cessation of self, cessation of greed, and the superseding of dualism. This aesthetic is to be found in the Japanese zen rock garden, for instance. The most famous Zen rock garden is the one of Zen temple Ryoan-Ji (see Fig. 13). Here, the art of absence is pursuit by eliminating essential elements of a garden, water and plants, and only placing natural, moss-covered rocks on an almost empty ground of sand and pebbles (Fuji, 2017). Wabi Sabi in art, design and craftsmanship is visible through aspects of imperfection, impermanent, and incomplete. Lastly, another aesthetic principle is Shibumi, which stands for subtle or unobtrusive beauty. The beauty ideal of the Shibumi principle is to appreciate beauty by understatement (Yanagi, 2017). Zen Buddhism and Zen terminology influence the Japanese aesthetic principles. It values the natural beauty and beauty of everyday life, as well as reflects the Buddhist philosophies of egoless freedom. The five characteristics of traditional Japanese aesthetics are described as subtraction, concentration, absence, ambiguity, and decay (Fuji, 2019). The aesthetic characteristics and concept convey the Japanese traditional understanding of the world, especially the view on nature, the human’s ambiguous position in nature and the fragility of life. Therefore, the Japanese see beauty in the acceptance of natural forms and acceptance of the end of life, without pursuing perfection or complete satisfaction. You can see how these aesthetics are fundamentally different from Western aesthetics, which values mathematical harmony, geometrics, ratios and proportions, mainly influenced through the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle (Rai Technology University, [n.d.]).
The Japanese sense of beauty can be summarised as “MU” (Nothing) and the beauty of odd numbers (Yanagi, 2018). “MU”, represents the value on the unpatterned, unadorned, unobtrusive, the appreciation of emptiness and the plain, a significant component of the Japanese sense of beauty. “Mu” is an essential aspect of Japanese aesthetics, in which beauty and contentment are experienced within simplicity and emptiness (Hara, 2017). By odd numbers, the sense of beauty in irregularity, imperfection, or incomplete is meant. “Mu” actually is a recurring term in the Japanese culture. Even though the literal translation might be “Nothingness”, the concept of “MU” in the Japanese culture does not mean that there is no substance at all. It is a concept of “Emptiness”, which originally comes from the Zen teachings of Buddhism, which is a complicated concept, deriving from a belief that “nothing is absolute and existential”, and therefore everything is “empty” (Fuji, 2019). In his book “Designing Design”, Japanese graphic designer and art director of MUJI, Hara Kenya, makes sense of the Japanese aesthetics by using “Mu”. According to the theory of Hara, the geographical location of Japan at the Eastern end of Asia led to a constant overflow of culture, which arriving in Japan, had been balanced out with an utmost simplicity (Hara, 2017). The unique Japanese aesthetics often described as “simple”, differs from the Western concept of simplicity, which emerged in the context of modernism (Fuji, 2019). It is rather
“emptiness”, which Hara explains as following: “For the Japanese, it was a conscious, strategic materialisation of ‘nothingness.’ It was a careful process of eliminating each and every excessive frill in order to create an empty vessel, at once a vacuum but with a powerful centre of gravity, toward which people’s consciousness and creativity would be drawn” (Fuji, 2019). Subtraction of the worthless lead to a design philosophy, often described as minimalistic. Another recent source demonstrates a similar theory, which explains how “Mu” is at the centre of Japan. While “Love” and “Freedom” being at the centre of America, there are Buddhist terms connected to “Mu” at the centre of Japan. These are “Muga”, “Mujyou”, and “Mushi” (Maeno, 2018).

無我 - MUGA - Selflessness
無常 - MUJYOU - Uncertainty
無私 - MUSHI - Altruism

It is emphasised, that there is not nothing, but that there are components of the Emptiness concept at the heart of the Japanese culture. Throughout the history of Japan, the country has implemented foreign cultures, for example, Buddhism, the Chinese characters, Western politics and science (Maeno, 2018). Due to this Japanese Emptiness, Japan has openly accepted all influences, and not only accepting but also evolving everything into its own culture. Coming back to the foundation of Japanese culture, this extremely reflects the value of harmony and peace, due to the idea of selflessness. Noticeable throughout the research on Japanese culture is, that this idea of selflessness is reflected in every layer of the Japanese culture. The Japanese-style view on nature, combined with the Shintoism belief of a spirit in every creation, as well as the Buddhist Zen teachings on selflessness and pursue of mindfulness, both lead to the ultimate culture of harmony and balance, or the Japanese Emptiness, MU. In all layers of the Japanese cultural philosophies, values and aesthetics, whether the view on nature, the position of the human being, or respectful attitude towards any creation, the absence of the Ego noticeable. Therefore, I would describe “MU” as the main character of the Japanese aesthetic, in which MU indicates No Ego.

CONCLUSION

Chapter Three led to the conclusion that there was no existence of the sustainability concept in Japan, before the international recognition of a concept derived from the West. So then, how could a culture be uniquely sustainable without the existence of the sustainability concept? Chapter Four answers this question. It is because aspects which can be now described as sustainability are rooted in its culture, values philosophies and aesthetics.
Coming back to the role of culture, defining the relationship between human and its environment, I would like to sum up the Japanese culture accordingly. The foundation of the Japanese culture is formed through the relationship between human and nature. The Japanese-style view on nature is characterised by the acceptance of nature in every form and the position of the humans as part of nature, not controlling nature. Moreover, the Shintoism belief of a spirit in every creation results in an attitude full of respect, with harmony as the main goal. This naturally led to a sustainable approach on life, where society is based on the circulation philosophy, where resources are treated with care, and the “Self” or ego always remains in the background.

In aesthetics, the fundamental philosophies include an appreciation of natural form, plainness, the unadorned, the quality in simplicity, which can be all described as the Japanese Emptiness. This analysis leads me to the conclusion, that the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability is in MU, in which the value is set on harmony and the aesthetics are defined by Emptiness. Furthermore, MU, also meaning “No”, I find this description fitting, because a concept of sustainability does not exist in principle.

Having analysed the meaning of sustainability in the Japanese culture, the third hypothesis, which was that the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability and the Western concept of sustainability differs, can be proven to be right. In contrast to the Japanese cultural sustainability, which mainly derives from the harmonious human-nature relationship and the Emptiness concept, the Western sustainability concept is approached with Western cultural values such as individualism and rationality by using science and technology. The Western concept is a relatively new one, created after realising occurring problems, which mainly resulted from pursuing growth. Again, the core of culture, being the relationship between the human and its environment, also reveals the origin of the main difference in the meanings of sustainability in the Japanese and the Western culture.
Some opinions might say that Japan “was” a sustainable society, and the Japanese have lost their traditions and values due to westernisation. However, a culture and its philosophies do not just vanish. Lately, the traditional wisdom is getting more recognition by the Japanese people, striving for life within harmony and nature again. One reason for this is the Tōhoku earthquake and Tsunami that happened in March 2011. As we learned from the research on the Japanese-style view on nature, the Japanese have been constantly confronted with natural catastrophes, reminding them of the power of nature. For example, in UNESCO World Heritage Omori village, a village setting an example of a sustainable way of living, the population is increasing with Japanese people in search for a more meaningful life (UNESCO, 2018). Now, having analysed the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability, I would like to link this knowledge with the relationship between sustainability and Japanese creators. This chapter deals with different approaches to sustainability by using examples of fitting Japanese designers and brands. It investigates how the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability is visible in the approach of concept, designing, product making or communication.
Firstly, in my opinion, Muji is the ultimate contemporary brand which conveys Japanese philosophies in its brand identity, design and production. The aesthetics of Muji, based on the concept of Emptiness, make Muji a brand which is a personification of the Japanese cultural sustainability. Muji (short for Mujirushi Ryohin), is a lifestyle brand, born into the Japanese market in the 1980s, with Japanese graphic designer Kenya Hara as art director since 2002 (Hara, 2017). “Mujirushi Ryohin” translated means something like “No brand, quality products”. The three main principles of Muji are firstly the choice of materials, secondly the streamlining of the production processes and thirdly the simplification of packaging. Muji’s products, which vary from furniture to cosmetic products, household appliances, daily necessities and clothing, convey traditional Japanese values of simplicity, prudence, and self-restraint or what they call “this is enough” (Quito, 2016). In his book “Designing Design”, Hara explains the founding philosophy of Muji in the chapter “Muji: Nothing, Yet Everything”. The Muji products are created upon the concept of Emptiness, meaning that the objects are designed to the core essence, to be used as an empty vessel to anybody’s individual needs. Or as Hara says:

“Specific subtraction or omission leads to the exposure of the object’s very essence, through the search for the optimal shape and optimal material, screening out the egoism of the creator and the designer.”

This philosophy counters today’s world, “which runs on the fuel of capital and appetite” (Hara, 2017). Muji’s products are closely connected to the Japanese aesthetics of the unpatterned and unadorned and see quality in designs which adjust to a variety of living environments (see Fig.16). The universality and generality of the products are envisioned to inspire the users to appreciate the beauty of emptiness and find satisfaction in acceptance, rather than wanting “more”. Muji’s concept and design approach is recognised as being sustainable in Non-Japanese media. Journalist platform Quartz describes: “Instead of preaching to consumers, the company focuses on making sure its internal operations live up to the founding philosophy” (Quito, 2016). For example, since the early 80s, Muji used “broken” or “imperfect” Shiitake mushrooms for a lower price, which show similarity to today’s no food waste efforts (Hara, 2017). Moreover, fitting to its philosophy to discard all worthless, Muji always questions what is really necessary, fitting to the aesthetic principle of subtraction. The “Product Fitness 80” philosophy comes from an old Japanese saying “Hara hachi bunme”, which can be translated as “eat until you are 80% full” (Ryohin Keikaku, 2012). The meaning behind is, to be satisfied with some self-restraint. Therefore, Muji creates shortened cotton buds, narrower tape width or downsizes toilet paper, which consequently leads to less use of resources (see Fig. 17). However, Muji does not distinguish itself as
a “sustainable” brand. It instead sends subtle reminders of their consistency in high product design value, where each decision is made carefully. Even though the brand communicates actions of recycling, local resourcing or fair trade through its website, sustainability is not used as a promotional tool. An interview of Kanai, the chairman and representative director of Muji unveils the reason behind. Kanai states, that even though food waste or recycled paper is used from the beginning, the word “Ecology” was never used. This is because of a very Japanese way of thinking. Muji does not want to express that “We are doing so much good” (Kanai, n.d.) because that kind of attitude would go against “our sense of aesthetics” (Ibid.). This reflects how the promotional character of the sustainability movement in fashion does not go hand in hand with the Japanese cultural approach to sustainability.

“MUJI’s succinct design reveals a Japanese aesthetic which values sustaining simplicity by completely discarding all worthless decoration.”

Tadao Ando
MUJI AND CO

ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND TRADITION

Muji is an example of contemporary design reflecting Japanese cultural values and philosophies through aesthetics. Another approach on sustainability derived from the Japanese-style view on nature can be seen with Japanese fashion designer Hiroaki Tanaka, founder of Studio Membrane. Studio Membrane uses biodegradable protein resin fabric and a weaving technique inspired by traditional craftsmanship called Kumiko to create fashion pieces (see Fig. 18). His designs are categorised as “Eco-Fashion”, fitting into the sustainable movement in the industry. However, interestingly, he did not consider his designs as “ecological” until Zuhal Kuvan-Mills, organiser of Eco Fashion Week Australia (EFWA) told him. His design philosophy can be rather traced back to his cultural inspiration of anthropomorphism. According to Tanaka, anthropomorphism is a “specifically Japanese way of recognising the existence of spirit in the universe”, which influenced him to see clothes having their own identity and spirit, which are together with a human body, a part of nature (Shehata, 2018). This can be interpreted as him having an unconsciously sustainable way of approach inspired by the Japanese culture before his work was discovered to be “eco”. In contemporary Japan, some brands use traditional craftsmanship or techniques which can be considered as being sustainable but were ordinary practices back in history. For example, denim brand Kapital uses the traditional patchwork style called Boro. Boro derived as a technique from the necessity to deal with limited resources but is now appreciated as a utilitarian style carrying a piece of history (Bryant, 2015). Kapital creates denim pants or bags out of traditional Boro fabric made from cotton and hemp (see Fig. 19).

Figure 18: Behind Useless Shape. (Studio Membrane, 2017)
Figure 19: Boro Shorts. (Kapital, n.d.)
AN AESTHETIC ISSUE

The analysed examples carry approaches on sustainability which derived from the Japanese culture. Coming back to the core, the Japanese human-nature relationship, leading to philosophies, beliefs and values such as maintaining harmony, learning to be content or seeing a spirit in everything, had led to aesthetics which are not only design principles, but guidelines to behave gracefully toward nature (Fuji, 2019). Contemporary designers create accordingly, being consciously or unconsciously inspired by philosophies and traditional wisdom in different forms. The Japanese Emptiness concept being the foundation of every aspect of the Japanese culture (Hara, 2008), an egoless approach to sustainable design and creation is attained. These approaches form values which can be seen in the scheme of Japanese aesthetics connected to sustainable approaches in creation and design (see Fig. 20). The relationship between human and nature in Japan builds the foundation for a sustainable culture. Because sustainability in the Japanese culture is not an external concept which gets added onto environment, economy and society, it is rooted in culture and is lived out through aesthetics in the worlds of art, design, craftsmanship, fashion or architecture. That is why being sustainable is often something “natural and intuitive for many Japanese creators” (Fuji, 2019). Mihoyo Fuji is a Japanese author who studied Environmental Science and Management, as well as is the founder of Zero = Abundance, an online resource exploring the potential of Japanese Zen aesthetics and the concept of “less is more”. According to Fuji, the “Japanese version of sustainability is an aesthetic issue, whereas the Western one is scientific” (Fuji, 2019). Moreover, it explains again, why the concept of emptiness is the Japanese approach on sustainability. Hara explains, that when emptiness is embraced, it dissolves into your behaviour. Therefore, the Japanese version of sustainability is approached through behavioural aesthetic (Ibid.).

Since Japanese aesthetics are recognised in contemporary design, sustainability approached through aesthetics still being lived out by Japanese creators today. Architecture is an especially great example of the Japanese cultural approach to sustainability. This is because architecture directly designs the relationship between the human and the environment. Toyo Ito is an internationally prized Japanese architect who aims to connect the inside and outside through architecture (see Fig. 21). He sees modern “sustainable” architecture often to shield the inside from the outside in order to reduce energy consumption through insulation (Toyo et al., 2015). However, his philosophy consists of connecting people “with the outside environment/ nature as closely as possible” (Ibid.), which is inspired by traditional Japanese houses which are built with very few walls (Ibid.). In traditional Japanese architecture is an especially great example of the Japanese cultural approach to sustainability. This is because architecture directly designs the relationship between the human and the environment. Toyo Ito is an internationally prized Japanese architect who aims to connect the inside and outside through architecture (see Fig. 21). He sees modern “sustainable” architecture often to shield the inside from the outside in order to reduce energy consumption through insulation (Toyo et al., 2015). However, his philosophy consists of connecting people “with the outside environment/ nature as closely as possible” (Ibid.), which is inspired by traditional Japanese houses which are built with very few walls (Ibid.). In traditional Japanese...
housing, ambiguous rooms between the inside and the outside are created by using paper doors (shoji) or open hallways (engawa). This is linked to the Japanese-style view on nature, in which the human is not clearly separated from nature (Fuji, 2019). A similar philosophy has Kengo Kuma, who uses resilient Japanese paper (washi) for walls (Fig.22,23), giving the people inside the opportunity to observe and be aware of the weather, as well as appreciate the beauty of subtle shades (Ibid.). Fuji describes how these kind of approaches to sustainability are difficult to define or measure clearly. For example, “a CO2 emissions calculator does not have line items to take into account the benefits of super localised, small and often mobile traditional Japanese heating devices such as kotatsu or hibachi, which can give warmth only when/where it is needed” (Ibid.). Hence, there are cultural products which do not precisely fit into the requirements of sustainability concepts. Therefore, since sustainability usually needs to be measurable or definable in technological terms, above stated approaches on architecture may fail to become certified, for instance by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).

Figure 20: Japanese aesthetics connected to sustainable approaches in creation and design. (own graph).
Figure 21: Silver Hut. (Ito, 2018)

Figure 22 and 23: Archives Antoni Clavé by Kengo Kuma and Associates. (Leibal, 2018)
EGO VS MU

Some examples have illustrated approaches of sustainability derived from the Japanese culture. What links these examples are how Japanese creators do not categorise their concepts and designs as “sustainable” but take Japanese cultural philosophies, values and aesthetics as inspiration. Even the fashion designs of Hiroaki Tanaka, which get exhibited at the EFWA, only got defined as “Eco-Fashion” from someone else, not the designer himself. In general, the promotional character of the modern Western sustainability movement goes against the Japanese aesthetics. To scream out how much good you are doing, does not go hand in hand with the Japanese culture, because it is full of the ego. The ego dominates the Western concept, and that is why buzzwords exist, why sustainability is considered a status symbol, or why hyper-labelling occurs, as discussed in Chapter Two. Thus, the main difference between the modern Western concept of sustainability and the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability lays in the role of the ego. According to my analysis, culture influences the meaning, origin and approaches of sustainability. The Western culture, which is originally influenced by the belief that the human controls nature as deputy of God, values individualism, growth, clear definition, politics, science and rationality. Hence, sustainability as a concept was created as a form of a general agreement after realising environmental and social issues resulted from pursuing growth. In the fashion industry, the approaches result in the increase of brands which use sustainability as market positioning and the mainstream adoption results in greenwashing.

Now, it is proven that culture influences sustainability and different cultures lead to different approaches. However, let us remember how in Chapter Three, it was analysed that the Western-dominated sustainability movement results in the Japanese fashion industry looking up to Western brands. It was clarified, how “Sustainable Fashion” in the mainstream Japanese media is presented as created by the American and European brands, and both sides perceive Japan as being “behind” in the movement. As sustainability starts to gain recognition and popularity as a trend, the Japanese industry is reacting accordingly. Since the same terms are used, the origin, definition and approaches of sustainability are directly implemented as something “new”. As a result, brands which promote themselves as “sustainable brand” are upcoming in Japan. For example, Mes Vacances, a fashion brand created in 2018, literally uses the word “Sustainability” in its Japanese translation “サステナビリティ” to convey their brand message and is enjoying quite some attention from the Japanese media (Mes Vacances, n.d.). It is not difficult to imagine how more and more brands feel the need to implement “sustainability” into their vocabulary. It seems like an imitation of the current sustainability movement of Western brands. The sustainability movement demands brands from all cultures to showcase their
sustainability, promote it, and even defend themselves, using the same terms, hence follow the trends to be recognised as being sustainable. It is visible how global Japanese brands such as Uniqlo or Asics are implementing the term “sustainability” more and more into their communication. One could argue that measurable scales and requirements are necessary for a global industry, but since the meaning and approaches of sustainability on global terms are formed out of the Western culture, all other cultural approaches will stay “invalid”. The term “sustainability” is shallow once you realise that it is used as a universal concept, although approaches could differ in cultures. If one now thinks about the efforts of non-governmental organisation Rank a Brand, an “international community of responsible consumers who want to buy sustainable and fair products or services” as they describe themselves (Rand a Brand, n.d.), it shows how a general rule is set on how to be defined as a sustainable brand. Rank a Brand categorises the sustainability of brands from “Shop away” to “Do not buy”, by checking how much is communicated through their online presence. This example clearly shows a normative narrative in sustainability, in which cultural diversity is not taken into consideration. The use of sustainability is still dominated by the ego and is a driver for growth which does not accept diverse perspectives. After looking into how deeply philosophical Japanese sustainability can be, or how traditional wisdom cannot always fit into the regulations for sustainability, a question arises. Just because it can not be certified or measured, or just because the term “sustainable” is not used by Japanese creators to promote their designs or products, does that make them less sustainable? No, it is just a different approach.

CONCLUSION

This chapter provided answers to the fifth sub-question, which asked how the Japanese cultural concept of sustainability and the modern Western concept of sustainability are reflected in Japanese designers and brands. Examples in fashion and lifestyle, but also in architecture, showed how the Japanese philosophies, beliefs, values and aesthetics are influencing Japanese creators to concept, design, produce or communicate. Sustainability here is, however, not a clearly defined external concept to focus on, but a result of sustainable approaches derived from the Japanese culture. The Japanese aesthetics embody cultural traits which naturally set the tone on how to behave as a human towards your entire environment. For example, the cultural value of self-restraint, one aspect reflecting the concept of Japanese Emptiness, results in the philosophy of acceptance over appetite. But rather than restricting a certain level of lifestyle, it drives the innovation of intelligently thought through designs with a high level of sensitivity. This aesthetic of subtraction results in seeing quality in simplicity. Japan’s tradition of limited resources and the
belief that every creature has a spirit, led to a respectful attitude towards the product, as well as the appreciation of traditional techniques of repairment. All in all, the Japanese aesthetics do not just define beauty, but also a certain behaviour of the creator towards the environment, hence, can be described as behavioural aesthetics. The Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability is lived out in contemporary design, without using “sustainability” in their communication, or even having sustainability having defined as a concept. This proves that there is a different approach to sustainability compared to the current movement derived from the West. However, since the Western concept is dominating the global discourse, the movement is indirectly forcing Japanese brands to adapt to its standards, even though the character of promoting sustainability goes against Japanese values and aesthetics. In conclusion, Japanese designers or brands perform sustainability in two different ways. One is the approach deriving from the Japanese culture, which is sometimes also being reformulated into the Western communication method like with Studio Membrane, and the other is the complete adoption of the Western movement as a relatively new concept, as seen with Mes Vacances.
In order to get to the main research answers, I would like to recap on the conclusions of the starting chapters. The current sustainability movement in fashion is related to questionable developments. Sustainability is often used as a promotional tool to secure growth, resulting in a superficial use of the term itself and greenwashing. The link of the sustainability movement and the Western culture revealed, how the origin of the concept and its execution are influenced by Western values, norms, beliefs and aesthetics. However, sustainability is often treated as a universal concept, in the fashion sector visible through the perception of Western brands as frontrunners of the sustainability movement. This consequently leads to a neo-colonialist approach, which is becoming an addressed issue in fashion and other industries. Moreover, it is not well understood, how a normative approach effects non-Western cultures. In the case of Japan, the mainstream Japanese society looks up to Western brands and perceives sustainability as a new concept, which has to be now implemented in Japan as well. Only a minor group of researchers address how the Japanese culture was securing a sustainable society traditionally.

With this in mind, I would like to compare the Western concept of sustainability and the Japanese cultural concept of sustainability (see Fig. 24 and 25). In the Western culture, the value is put on rationality, politics and the “black or white” thinking, clear definitions, individualistic thinking with a focus on the self, and growth. Its interpretation of sustainability is a relatively new concept, which was created after realising occurring issues. The respect for science results in correction methods based on science as well. Furthermore, sustainability is attempted to pursue consistently with growth. Therefore, sustainability can be described as a scientific issue, in which the ego is dominant. In fashion or other design, the resulting approaches are the attempt to distinguish clearly between “good” and “bad”, shown through the popularity of labelling, and the use of sustainability as a unique market positioning. Competitiveness is a key factor of the sustainability movement, also visible through the rise of the conscious elite, where knowledge on sustainability is a status and the new luxury. On the contrary, in-depth research into the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability shows, that the foundation of the Japanese culture
is the Japanese-style view on nature, where the human is equal to nature and appreciates the uncertainty and uncontrollability of it. This, in the combination of other climate conditions and foreign influences led to beliefs, in which the ego of a human is nonexistent. The resulting values and norms are reflected in the Japanese aesthetics of Emptiness. It is crucial to keep in mind that the concept of “sustainability” and the term itself, did not exist before the West introduced it. The relationship between the Japanese culture and sustainability can be mainly explained through behavioural aesthetics, which are not only design philosophies, but guidelines on how to behave towards nature. Therefore, the Japanese concept of sustainability can be characterised as an aesthetic issue, and MU (No Ego). Japanese creators approach sustainability, not as an external concept, but are consciously or unconsciously inspired by cultural values, which develop into principles, for instance, “Quality in Simplicity” or “Respect for resources and products”. In the end, I would like to emphasise that obviously, there are some overlaps in both approaches, for example, quality being an indicator for sustainability or the system of recycling. Nevertheless, the origins of the approaches and executions differ.

Figure 24: Comparing sustainability concepts. (own graph)
All things considered, the main research question can be answered, being: What can the Western-dominated sustainability movement in fashion learn from a (Japanese) cultural meaning of sustainability? The conclusion can be divided into two aspects. The first aspect is that culture significantly influences the meaning of sustainability, and the Japanese cultural meaning of sustainability differs from the modern Western concept of sustainability. Currently, the Western world, as well as mainstream Japan, sees the West as the driver of sustainability. This is because the concept derived from the West, therefore, is based on the Western perspective. However, Japan’s approach to sustainability derives from its own philosophies, which do not always fit into the requirements of sustainability. This means, that as long as the Western viewpoint defines this word, Non-western cultures will need to constantly adapt, leaving them almost no choice not to imitate developments and trends. The Japanese meaning of sustainability is deeply rooted in the culture itself, reflected through belief, values and aesthetics, and there are approaches which can not be explained through Western sustainability, such as the Japanese-style view on nature or the concept of Emptiness. The normative narrative of sustainability has to be broken down by realising that culture is endogenous. Even though Japan was discussed for this thesis, and the Japanese culture has proven to be a very inspirational one, you can conclude that this works for other cultures as well. In order to secure a globally sustainable future, a dialogue with culture is extremely important, and will help to find a mutual understanding between cultures. We are so eager to stick to the three pillars economy, society and environment, and are trying to measure, categorise, scientifically explain, label. But culture is able to create emotional empathy and appeal to the senses. Finally, it is crucial to recognise that the Western culture is not the standard, and therefore, the term sustainability cannot exist without generalising an ideology.

The second aspect specifically resulted from the research into the Japanese cultural concept of sustainability. The sustainability movement in fashion is dominated by the ego, as visible in Hyper-labelling, promotional use, and
sustainability as a unique selling point, whereas the central aspect of the Japanese version is the value on MU (No Ego). In Japan, the word to define sustainability was not necessary while being an extremely sustainable society in the past. The approaches show in ordinary, daily life, such as the use of “Mottainai”. The Western sustainability can learn from Japan, how to live and create sustainably without even having a specific concept or the word. It is possible to be sustainable without mentioning, or promoting yourself as “good”. Shouting out sustainability in order to sell, can not be the long-lasting answer. In order to be truly sustainable, the ego has to be let go of. Of course, every culture should be respected, and one should not adopt another, but one can inspire the other to broaden our horizons, and in this case, the egoless approach of Japan is definitely worth learning from.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This thesis researched the meaning of sustainability for the Japanese culture. In order to strengthen the statement that the theory of cultural influence on sustainability also works for other cultures than the Japanese one, several more cultures could be investigated for further research. In addition, culture was considered as a foundation of a worldview, influencing values, norms, beliefs and aesthetics of society. It is also suggested, to consider cultural change, since culture evolves with time, and changes might as well influence the relationship to sustainability.


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Figure 20: Own graph. (2019). Japanese aesthetics connected to sustainable approaches in creation and design.


Figure 24: Own graph. (2019). Comparing sustainabilty concepts.

Figure 25: Own graph. (2019). Western sustainability ≠ Japanese sustainability.