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*Final Thesis*

**The "Why" of Japan**  
Social background and motivations of Italian  
people interested in Japan and its culture

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this research is to find out the reasons underlying Italian people's interest towards Japan and its culture. Rather focusing on "*what*" of Japan has appealed them, the objective is to unveil "*why*" Japan, in all its possible expressions, from pop culture to history, arts, literature has had an attractive influence over them. The research has been conducted through quantitative methods, with a survey, and qualitative methods, organizing semi-structured interviews. The period of time taken into consideration when inquiring the interviewees is, mainly, the age of mandatory education from elementary school to high school, but the situation in the present time has been assessed too. Through the opinions emerged from the interviews, it has been also pointed out a range of personal experiences that are common in Italian people who consider themselves interested towards Japan, involving social issues such as episodes of bullying, loneliness and isolation, sense of loss and pessimism towards one own's future, family issues, gender identity and sexual preferences, escapism from reality and the research of a parallel and more appealing world to hide into. In this sense, Japan and the entertainment it offers have a "healing" role for many young (but not only young) people: it represents a safe space where to be one's true self, far from the expectations and the pressure exerted by Italian society.

## 要旨

本論文の研究課題は二つである。一つ目はなぜイタリア人は日本に興味を持ち始めるかという問題である。イタリア人の「なに」が好きなのかではなく、「なぜ」日本文化の要素を面白いようになるのか、という問いに答えられるように研究を実行していった。二つ目は、日本に興味を持つイタリア人たちには、社会的なバックグラウンドや、過去の経験などに何らかの共通点があるのではないかという問いにも注目した。特に、いじめ、差別、孤独の経験に注意を払った。

なぜこの研究テーマを選んだかという点、日本に関心を持っている自分の知り合いや友人などが、社会的にも人間関係の角度からも困る経験をしてきたことが多いと気づいたからである。その理由で、本論文では自分の主観的な見方に客観的な説明を与えようという目標を達成するように研究していった。自分の仮説としては、日本、または日本文化や日本のエンターテインメント・メディアなどへのきいうみの発達は、人間関係や生活への不満などの経験に関係があり、イタリア人にとって「日本」という概念は現実からの逃避方法になるという現象が起こっているのではないかと考えられる。

本論文の構成は、研究方法に関する章と四つの章に分かれている。

研究方法では、本論文の研究テーマに関わる既存の情報資源はないため、自分で情報を集めることにした。以下の二つで情報を収集した。

1. まず、現象の概要を理解するために、カフオスカリ大学などで日本語を学ぶ大学生と日本語を学ばない人を対象としたオンラインアンケート調査を作成した。質問の内容としては、回答者のジェンダー、年齢、教育レベル

などに関して、回答者のアイデンティティを明らかにさせる質問を行った。そのうえで、いじめ、差別、日常生活への不満足に関する回答者の経験の有無を調べるための質問を行った。アンケート調査の最終版をネット上で公開する前に、アンケートの「パイロット調査」を三回目行って細部を修正した。こうすることで、回答者のフィードバックのおかげで間違いや不明な質問を除くことができた。

2. アンケート調査の結果を得た後、カフオスカリ大学などで日本語を学ぶ大学生と日本語を学ばない人も含めて10人にインタビューを行った。その目的は、本論文の対象とした現象をより深く分析することであった。インタビューにはかなり個人的な質問が含まれたので、「半構造化 *Semi-structured* インタビュー」を行った。それにより、テーマに対するインタビュー어의個人的な意見や性格のユニークさなどを表現でき、課題を現実的に捉えることができた。インタビュー者を選んだ時に、できるだけ違うバックグラウンドの人を含めようとした。

第一章では、得られた情報に基づいて、それぞれの人が日本文化をなぜ面白いと思うようになったか、という問題を分析した。アンケート調査の結果によると、イタリア人の中で最も人気のある日本文化の要素は「ポップカルチャー」、つまり漫画、アニメ、ビデオゲームだということである。だから、特に「ポップカルチャー」のどの要素が面白く、なぜ面白いと思ったのか、について分析した。インタビューの話では、日本ポップカルチャーにおける特徴は「ダイバーシティ」と「バラエティー」である。「ダイバーシティ」とは、日本製のメディアとイタリア製のメディアと比較することで生じた、内容と文化要素の違いを指して

いる。「バラエティー」は、日本製のメディアを通して表示された、様々なジャンル、ストリート、キャラクターを意味している。ポップカルチャーの以外に、料理や社会をはじめ、様々な日本の要素も分析されてる。

第二章では、イタリアの養育システムがどのようにイタリア人の日本における興味の発達に影響を与えるという現象が分析されている。イタリアの教育システムは小学校、中学校、高等学校を含め、それぞれの時期には違う状態がある。インタビューの話では、小学校の時に日本に興味があってもいじめと差別はされなかった。しかし、中学校ではアニメ、漫画などは「子供向け」のメディアと思われ、そのエンターテインメントが好きな人に対して差別やいじめを与える可能性があるらしい。だから、中学校では日本文化とその文化に興味を持っている人に対するステレオタイプが生じるという現象も分析されている。ステレオタイプの中でも、人間関係がうまくできなくて自分の興味にオブセッションがある「オタク」はもっとも知られているステレオタイプであるらしい。

第三章では、日本文化は現実からの逃避方法ではないか、という仮説が検討されている。インタビューで日本文化は、日常生活や学校、家庭の中で困難を抱えている人々のニーズに応えることがわかってきた。特に、いじめや差別を経験した人はアニメを見ると、そういう経験から離れて忘れることができる。また、アニメを見ると、日常生活で感じられない感情を感じて嬉しくなるという意見もインタビューから出た。

結論では、それぞれの章の要点をまとめており、研究の結果が紹介されている。イタリア人の不満足感は社会が及ぼすプレッシャーに基づいているということが考えられる。特に、社会に促進されたロールモデルが自分の性格と価値観

から遠い場合、社会からの孤立が感じられる。その結果、別のロールモデルを探  
す必要が生じて、日本文化はイタリア文化と違うので、その探求の対象となる、  
という仮説が考えられる。日本のメディアは、環境や文化、シチュエーションは  
違っても、登場人物の個性や価値観はイタリア人が求めるものと似ている。しか  
し、日本文化や日本文化が好きな人に対してはステレオタイプがいくつもあり、  
そのステレオタイプはイタリア人にネガティブな影響を与える可能性もある。

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## *Introduction*

The objective of this thesis is to delineate the identity of Italian people interested in Japan and analyze their past social context and personal background to derive possible commonalities among their experiences and links to their interest. In addition, an attempt was made to define not the "*what*" of Japan is the object of interest, but "*why*" the country, its culture, and the products derived from it have triggered curiosity on the part of Italians. In other words, it was not considered sufficient to know that Italians are interested, for example, in Japanese animation, but rather it was important to investigate why Japanese animation arouses interest and fascination. Another aspect that has been analyzed is the role of the Italian school environment and the resulting dynamics in relation to the development of the individual's interest in Japan. The three main stages of compulsory schooling (elementary, middle, and high school) have been the main focus since they are considered the most influential in the development of a person's personality and therefore most prone to bring about changes in self-perception and interests.

I chose this theme based on my personal experiences and intuitions and, therefore, the whole study is a pioneering attempt to give objectivity to a subjective view of the reality in which I lived. Many acquaintances who are interested in Japan, including the writer, have shown that they face, or have faced, certain difficulties from the standpoint of social relations, personal sphere, sexual orientation and more. My hypothesis is summed up in the idea that the development of a strong and long-lasting interest in Japanese culture, particularly in popular culture's products, and a form of experienced discomfort (particularly during childhood or adolescence) are intertwined, and that Japanese culture turns out to be a safe place where to take refuge from the inadequacy of oneself in relation to the reality in which one lives, or vice versa. As a matter of fact, one chapter of this study is aimed at describing the phenomenon of Japan as a form of escapism from reality or personal and relational issues.

Another purpose, purely of a personal nature, of this study is to bring to light an issue in Italian society, in the hope of helping all those who have had similar experiences to those described by the interviewees who contributed to the drafting of this thesis. Hopefully, more skilled researchers will find a good use for this flawed and incomplete study to further analyze the phenomena described here and deliver more objective and scientific results.

As for the structure of the thesis, it has been divided into four sections covering the main aspects covered.

The section dedicated to the methodology is focused on the means by which the research work was carried out, and, in particular, how the author created the primary sources on which to base the study will be described. The quantitative research was carried out through a questionnaire shared online through social media and other digital means, while the qualitative research was carried out through semi-structured interviews with the respondents who expressed the desire to be interviewed in the questionnaire. A brief description of the respondents' identikit, based on the data gathered through the survey, will be provided here, in order to trace an overview of the target of this study.

The first chapter focuses on the elements of the Japanese culture that triggered an interest for them in Italian people and is based mainly on the interviews. One of the two subchapter analyzes in particular the characteristics of Japanese popular culture, intended as entertainment media, which appears to be the most prominent factor in triggering fascination in Italian people. The other subchapter covers other aspects of Japan, such as food, society, language and other more.

The second chapter is focused on the Italian school system's social context and its influence in relation to the development (and enjoyment) of people's interest in Japan. The behavioral patterns of interviewees and other subjects present at school will be described to find out the benefits and difficulties of having an interest in such topics. An in-depth analysis of the stereotypes towards people interested in Japanese and Japanese culture has been conducted too. Lastly, a brief overview of the role of geographical isolation (in terms of living in a less populated area) and social isolation (in terms of presence of people to share one's interests with) have been conducted in an attempt to find a correlation between isolation and the development of an interest in Japan.

The third and final chapter of this study is dedicated to the phenomenon of considering Japanese culture as a form of escapism from reality. The conversations with each of the interviewees have brought up a series of personal issues whose negative effects were mitigated by the enjoyment of Japanese culture, in particular thanks to forms of entertainment such as comics and animation. Among the issues described, experiences of bullying, discrimination, family issues, mental health issues and existential crisis are featured.

## *Methodology*

While research has been conducted, sources of information regarding the intrinsic characteristics of Japan and its culture that possess the ability to spark fascination in people, especially regarding the Italian demographic, resulted to be very scarce or nearly absent. Data concerning the dynamics between people's social contexts and the development of an interest in such topics were not found either. Therefore, in order to give an answer to the inquiries presented in this dissertation, the author has proceeded to create the primary sources of information by himself. The methodology followed to do so, presented in detail in this section, consists mainly of two parts which also represent the two phases of the data collection. The first one concerns the quantitative research, which has been carried out through the creation and administration of an online survey with the purpose of tracing an objective overview of the phenomenon and determine people's perception about it. The second phase, related to the qualitative research, consists of ten interviews performed with people who gave permission to be interviewed, and followed a semi-structured type of conduction given the personal nature of the topics. While the data collected through the survey was useful to give a general outline of the themes explored, the results presented in this study derived mostly from the opinions and the statements of the interviewees, since they represent the most genuine and authentic source of information.

The dissertation has been structured following the three main topics discussed in the interviews, and each chapter was redacted combining the general data emerged from the surveys, implementing original tables created by myself, with the transcription and commentary of the interviews, in order to describe as truthfully as possible the phenomena explored. The following subchapters will explore in depth both the quantitative and qualitative research conducted, and an outline of the survey's respondents, based on the data gathered, will be presented too.

### *Online survey*

In order to acquire all the necessary information to actualize my research and bring genuine evidence to corroborate my thesis, I evaluated a spectrum of different methodologies trying to find out the most suitable one to reach my purposes. Eventually, I

concluded that a survey through the service *Google Form* would be useful not only to obtain simple and concise data, but also for the practicality of its use: through social networks such as *Instagram*, *WhatsApp* and *Telegram* I was able to exponentially increase the number of respondents and have access to a wider range of data and opinions. The target of the survey were people (independently from the region of provenience) who lived in Italy since childhood and developed (and explored) their interest in Japan while living in the country. The realization of the survey has been conducted as follows:

1. 09/2022 – 10/2022: Redaction of a raw questionnaire based on my own experience and perceptions about the topic. It included a wide range of questions (both in terms of form and contents). Following the suggestions from “*Do It Yourself Research: The bestselling practical guide to doing social research projects*” by Yoland Wadsworth (2016), I decided to conduct a series of “*pre-testing*” of my questionnaire (p.93) to find out the critical aspects of my questions and get a more objective view of the framework.
2. 15/10/2022 – 20/10/2022: Formulation and administration of the first pre-testing of the questionnaire. I therefore selected a group of 10 people all interested in Japanese culture, the target of my study, submitted them the first raw version of the questionnaire and gave them a week to answer. The inquiry was composed by 38 questions of different types: 11 multiple-choice questions, 19 *yes / no* questions and 8 closed questions. Information regarding the respondents’ interests related to Japan, their social background and lifestyle at the time of the development of such interest, their perception of isolation from the social context where they lived in were inquired. According to the respondents’ feedbacks, I concluded that the survey not only was exceedingly long and time consuming, but also that some of its questions were too vague, unclear, or posed in a way not suitable for being answered in the way I expected. Most of the closed questions didn’t leave room for a critical analysis of the phenomena.
3. 25/10/2022 – 30/10/2022: Formulation and administration of the second preemptive follow-up questionnaire, this time composed by only 5 open questions, and submitted it again to the same 10 people. While open questions were suitable for a

detailed and well thought answer, partly solving the problem of the first questionnaire, they were not suitable for an online questionnaire that needed to be quick, incisive, and direct. I assumed that people would not have had the patience or simply the time to thoughtfully answer to several open questions and therefore the answers would have been incomplete or rushed, nonetheless. This understanding led me to considering the possibility of setting up interviews for the respondents who were willing to be interviewed.

4. 30/10/2022 – 15/11/2022: Formulation and administration of the third pre-testing of the survey. I reduced the number of questions from 38 to 20 and divided them into two distinct categories: the first one included all the questions meant to draw a personal profile of the respondent, gathering information such as gender, age, type of high school education and the field of study at university. The second one, instead, included the questions related to the respondent's interest towards Japan, asking in what consists of said interest, when it has developed, the presence (or absence) of people to share it with and a series of questions regarding one own's perception about episodes of bullying or discrimination suffered, loneliness and the level of happiness in relation to their daily life. I chose 10 different people from the two pre-testing before, submitted them the survey and asked for feedbacks to improve my work. Overall, the survey was well received by the respondents and there was no need of radical changes to questions or the survey's structure. Before submitting the definitive version to the public, I inserted in the questionnaire a voluntary box to allow the respondents to leave their contact information in case they were interested in the topic of my research and wanted to be interviewed in the future for a deeper analysis of their point of view.
5. 19/11/2022 – 26/11/2022: Administration of the final survey. The total number of respondents was 92 people, including people from different ages, backgrounds, education level, gender, and region of provenience. Many feedbacks have been received from the free comment box at the end of the survey, and most of them showed a positive impression on the survey's contents and on the research theme. Proof of this appreciation is the relatively high number of respondents (around 30%)

who wrote their contact information to be interviewed in the future to contribute further to the study's results.

### *Interviews*

Once collected the quantitative data through the *Google Form* survey, from November 30, 2022 to December 7, 2022, I arranged an interview schedule to gather a qualitative overview of the phenomenon. I have selected 10 of the respondents who gave me their permission to be interviewed and contacted them to set up a discussion. I followed a specific criterion during the selection process: I necessitated the point of view of different people, so I chose people possibly of different ages, living conditions, gender, and sexual preferences, and both people who have studied Japanese language and people who have not. The basic information on the interviewees can be referred to in the following tables. Of course, to preserve the interviewees' integrity and privacy, the names have been changed and information that could be linked directly to their identity have been omitted.

<b>Interviewee N°1</b>	
<b><i>Name</i></b>	Fabrizio
<b><i>Gender</i></b>	Male
<b><i>Age</i></b>	25
<b><i>Living location</i></b>	Bergamo, Lombardia, Italy
<b><i>Education level</i></b>	Bachelor's degree
<b><i>Occupation</i></b>	University postgraduate student
<b><i>Japanese language study experience</i></b>	Yes

<b>Interviewee N°2</b>	
<b><i>Name</i></b>	Franco
<b><i>Gender</i></b>	Male
<b><i>Age</i></b>	25
<b><i>Living location</i></b>	Verona, Veneto, Italy
<b><i>Education level</i></b>	Bachelor's degree
<b><i>Occupation</i></b>	Unemployed
<b><i>Japanese language study experience</i></b>	No

<b>Interviewee N°3</b>	
<i>Name</i>	Marco
<i>Gender</i>	Non-binary
<i>Age</i>	25
<i>Living location</i>	Gorizia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy
<i>Education level</i>	High school degree
<i>Occupation</i>	University bachelor student
<i>Japanese language study experience</i>	Yes

<b>Interviewee N°4</b>	
<i>Name</i>	Roberta
<i>Gender</i>	Female
<i>Age</i>	41
<i>Living location</i>	Verona, Veneto, Italy
<i>Education level</i>	High school degree
<i>Occupation</i>	Company secretary and accountant
<i>Japanese language study experience</i>	No

<b>Interviewee N°5</b>	
<i>Name</i>	Sara
<i>Gender</i>	Female
<i>Age</i>	25
<i>Living location</i>	Venezia, Veneto, Italy (temporarily in the United Kingdom)
<i>Education level</i>	Bachelor's degree
<i>Occupation</i>	Voluntary worker
<i>Japanese language study experience</i>	Yes

<b>Interviewee N°6</b>	
<i>Name</i>	Giacomo
<i>Gender</i>	Male
<i>Age</i>	36
<i>Living location</i>	Bologna, Emilia-Romagna, Italy
<i>Education level</i>	Bachelor's degree
<i>Occupation</i>	University postgraduate student, company employee
<i>Japanese language study experience</i>	Yes

<b>Interviewee N°7</b>	
<i>Name</i>	Marisa
<i>Gender</i>	Female
<i>Age</i>	25
<i>Living location</i>	Verona, Veneto, Italy (now in the United Kingdom)
<i>Education level</i>	Master course
<i>Occupation</i>	Freelance stage manager
<i>Japanese language study experience</i>	No

<b>Interviewee N°8</b>	
<i>Name</i>	Luca
<i>Gender</i>	Male
<i>Age</i>	32
<i>Living location</i>	Vicenza, Veneto, Italy
<i>Education level</i>	Bachelor's degree
<i>Occupation</i>	Company employee
<i>Japanese language study experience</i>	Yes

<b>Interviewee N°9</b>	
<i>Name</i>	Tiziana
<i>Gender</i>	Female
<i>Age</i>	25
<i>Living location</i>	Trento, Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy (temporarily in Japan)
<i>Education level</i>	Bachelor's degree
<i>Occupation</i>	University postgraduate student
<i>Japanese language study experience</i>	Yes

<b>Interviewee N°10</b>	
<i>Name</i>	Greta
<i>Gender</i>	Female
<i>Age</i>	25
<i>Living location</i>	Milano, Lombardia, Italy
<i>Education level</i>	Bachelor's degree
<i>Occupation</i>	University postgraduate student



<i>Japanese language study experience</i>	Yes
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As can be observed by the tables summarizing the information about the interviewees, most of them are 25 years old university students with an experience in Japanese language studies. I have interviewed 5 women, 4 men and managed to obtain useful statements from one of the very few non-binary people who responded to the questionnaire. The older candidates provided interest insights regarding the condition of being passionate about Japan during the late 80's and 90's, allowing a comparison between the older and the newer generations and the changes that have happened over time. Unfortunately, most of the candidates live in north-eastern Italy, therefore no relevant information related to other areas of the country have been collected. Nonetheless, the respondents come from different regions, and even the people who are from the same district come from different cities (an approximate geographical indication has been provided in order to preserve the respondents' privacy).

The interviews followed a semi-structured frame of work, with a set of fixed questions for every candidate. The fixed questions had the purpose of investigating the reasons behind the interviewee's interest towards Japan asking them "why" they enjoy a certain feature of Japan rather than only asking them what they like about the country. Subsequently, questions about the possible connection between their interests and negative subjective experiences such as bullying, isolation or family issues. In particular, the attention was focused on the three main educational phases: elementary, middle, and high school. Some of the inquiries were set to investigate the stereotypes that afflict people interested in Japan and stereotypes towards Japan and Japanese culture themselves, and, finally, some questions about Japanese culture as a mean of escapism from the reality have been prepared too. The purpose of such inquiries was to find out if Japan was the cause of the discrimination towards the respondents or their defensive mechanism towards an unpleasant and unsatisfactory reality. Aside from the fixed questions, a set of personal ones were asked too depending on the single interviewee, with contents ranging from LGBTQ+ community issues, family issues or the peculiarities of their interests towards Japan. The interviews were held online through *Google Meet* service except for one that was held in a face-to-face session, and, upon permission, the candidates have been recorded. All of them

were conducted in Italian language, since all the interviewees were native Italian speakers, as me. Therefore, a process of translation and adaptation to English language has been required in order to make this research accessible to a greater number of people. The statements of the interviewees have been adapted with the purpose of maintaining as much as possible the original structure of the interviews and the dialogues, but minor changes have been made to provide a more fluid and direct experience and to adapt the original speech to the destination language.

## Respondents' identikit

From now on I will be presenting an overview of the data gathered through the Google Form survey I have sent through social networks. After this, I'm analyzing the data with a deeper insight, comparing the raw numbers with the opinions and the information emerged from the interviews I carried out. It must be mentioned that, since this research has been conducted on the Italian territory, the survey's questions and chart legends have been written in Italian language.

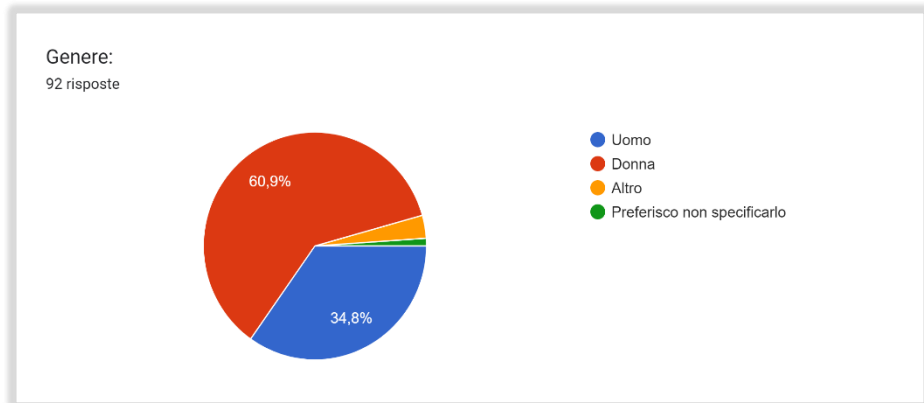


Table 1: Respondents' percentage by gender. By author.

Starting from the first section of the survey, dedicated to draw a profile of the respondents, as can be observed from *Table 1*, 60,9% of the respondents were women, the prevailing group in this research, followed by men (34,8%). Three people (3,3%) do not identify themselves as either men or women and one person (1,1%) preferred not to specify its gender. Unfortunately, the data here presented show an imbalance between men and women and a sadly scarce representation of people from alternative sides of the gender spectrum. Regarding age, a considerable number of respondents are part of the 18 – 25 brackets (60,9%), followed by the 26 – 40 brackets (31,5%). For a total of six people, the

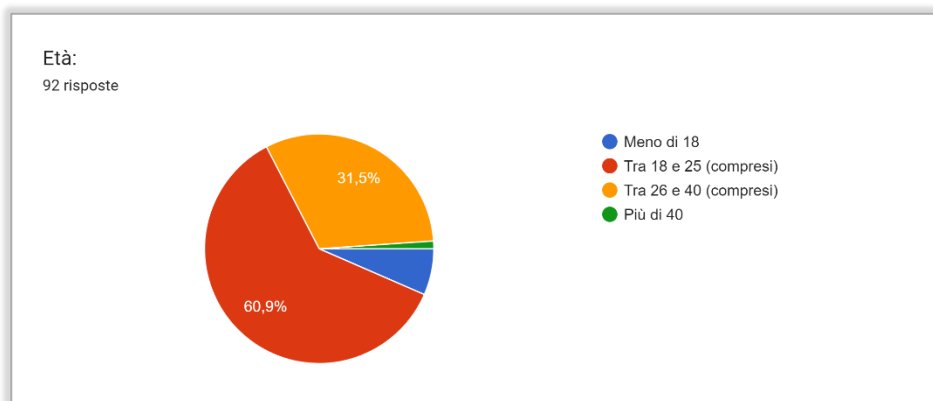


Table 2: Respondents' percentage by age. By author.

6,5% of the respondents are under 18 years old and only one person (1,1%) is older than 40 years old. This result was

predictable supposedly because of the methodology I chose to diffuse my survey: having relied upon social media and my own network of acquaintances, it was foreseeable that

most of the respondents would be quite young and that people over 40 years old were less likely to get access to the questionnaire link.

The next characteristic that has been researched on is the type of education of the respondents, starting from high school to university. Regarding high school

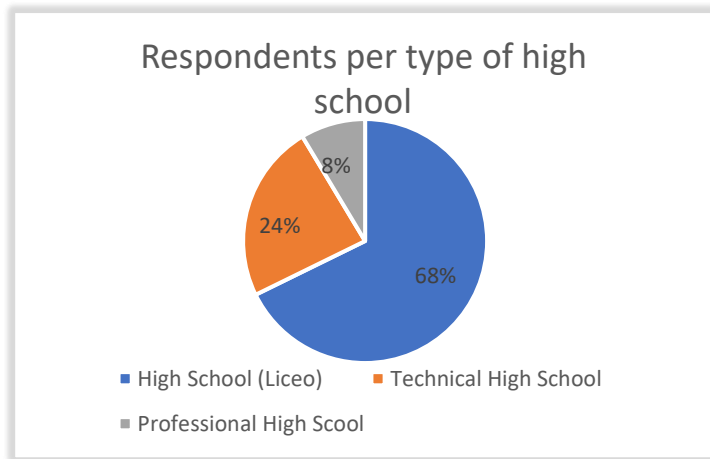


Table 4: Respondent's percentage per high school typology. By author.

typology<sup>1</sup>, as can be observed in Table 4, the largest part of the respondents (68%) has studied in a “Liceo”, a type of high school that, according to the Italian Ministry of

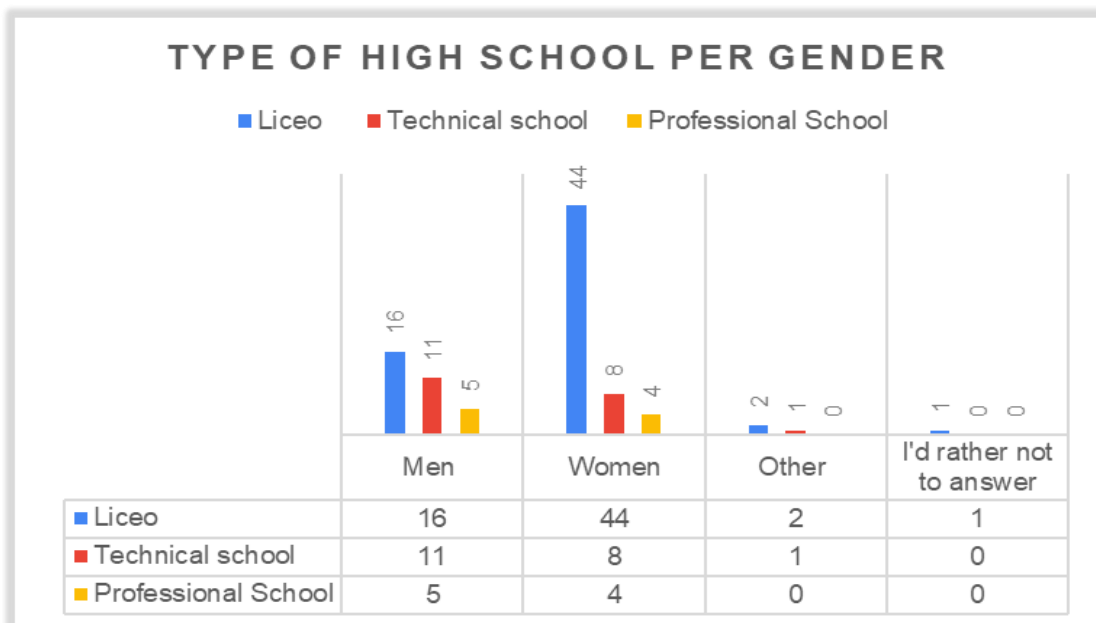


Table 3: Type of high school per gender. By author.

<sup>1</sup> For a smoother comprehension of the survey section regarding education, a brief overview of the Italian school structure will be presented here. The structure presents three main segments:

- *Scuola dell'infanzia*, which is not compulsory and concerns children from 3 to 6 years old.
- *Primo ciclo di istruzione*, which is compulsory, lasts 8 years in total and includes:
  - *Scuola primaria* (universally known in Italy as “*Scuola elementare*”, in English “Elementary school”), which lasts 5 years (from 6 to 11 years old).
  - *Scuola secondaria di primo grado* (universally known in Italy as “*Scuola media*”, in English “Middle school”, which lasts 3 years (from 11 to 14 years old).
- *Secondo ciclo di istruzione* (universally known in Italy as “*Scuole superiori*”, in English “High school”), which includes two alternative paths and last differently; only the first two years of each path are compulsory:
  - *Scuola secondaria di secondo grado*, accessible for students who completed “Primo ciclo di istruzione” and that includes “*Licei*”, “*Istituti tecnici*” and “*Istituti professionali*”.
  - “*Percorsi di istruzione e formazione professionale*”, accessible for students who completed “Primo ciclo di istruzione”, can last three or four years depending on the curricula chosen and are organized by Italian Regions.

Source: <https://miur.gov.it/come-funziona-il-sistema-scolastico>

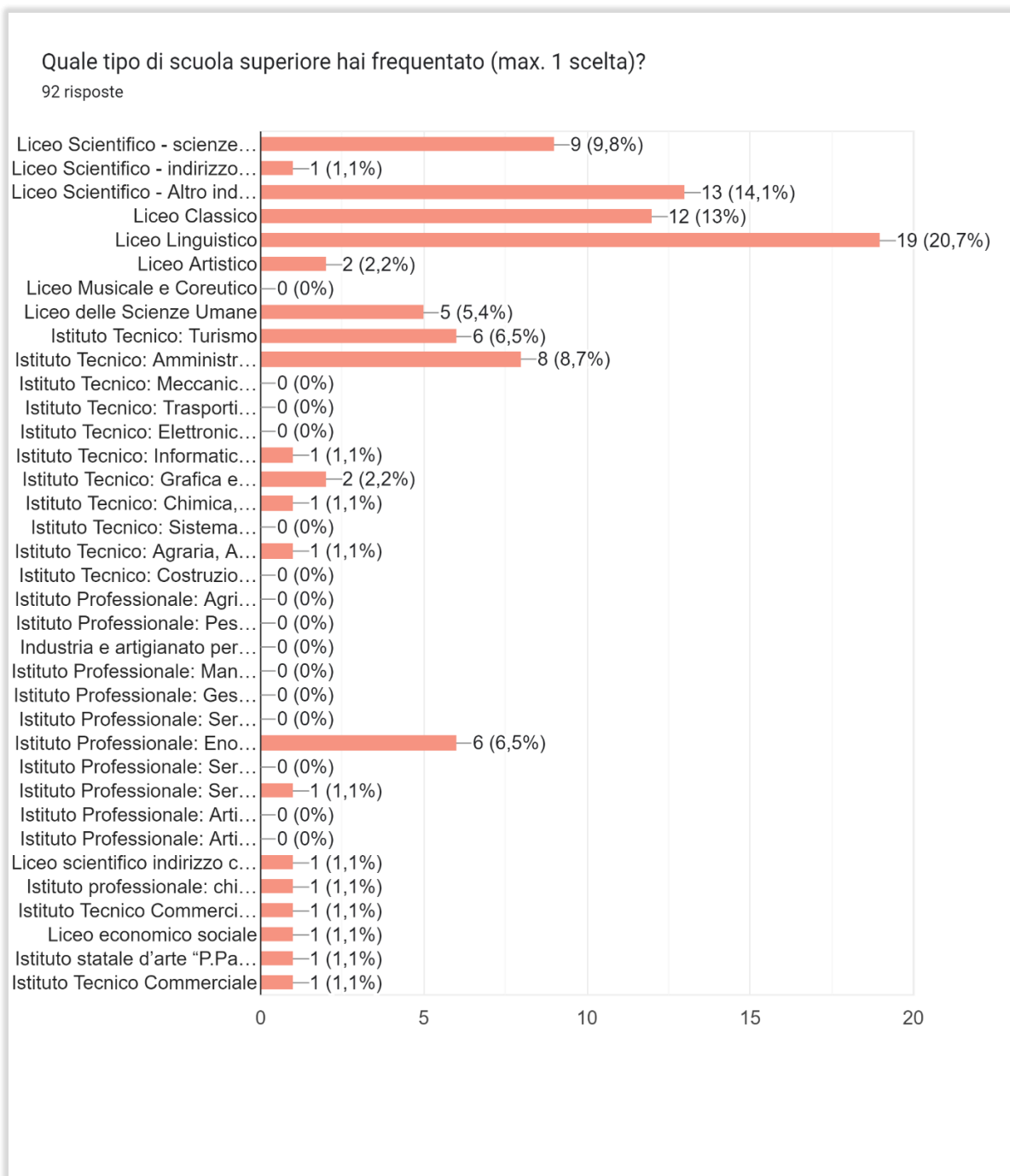


Table 5: Respondents' percentage per High School Curricula. By author.

Education and Merit website page<sup>2</sup>, has the purpose to provide the students with cultural and methodological tools useful for a deep understanding of the reality to solve problems critically, creatively, and rationally. The 24% of the respondents has studied in a Technical High School, institutions linked to specific professional sectors that give students practical abilities for an immediate entry in the job market. The remaining 8% has studied in a Professional High School, connected to the territory where they are located with a program

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.miur.gov.it/scuola-secondaria-di-secondo-grado>

that offers research laboratories and innovative learning systems. Table 3 shows a preference in choosing the

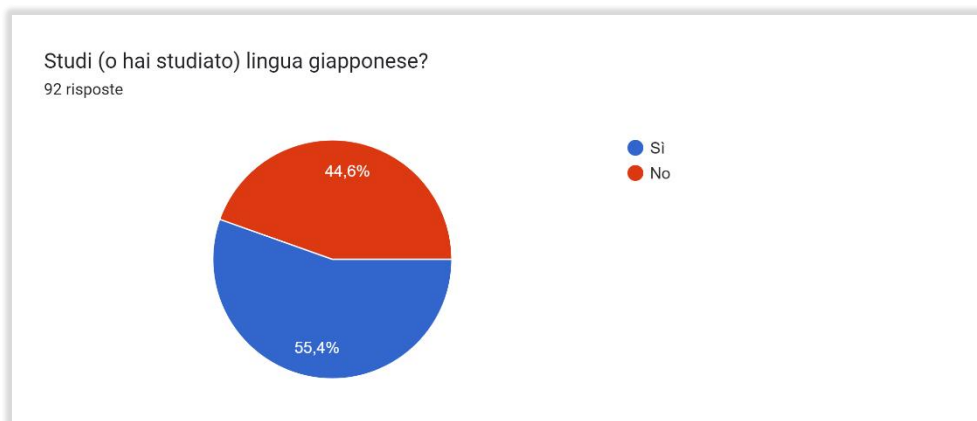


Table 6: Percentage of respondents who have studied Japanese language. By author.

“Liceo” typology for both men and women, and two of the three people who do not identify themselves as men or women have attended to a school of the same type. Although women outnumber men, the latter category surpasses the former when considering “Technical Schools” and “Professional Schools”, signifying a preference in men for a school typology that immediately prepares them to the job market, while women tend to choose a “Liceo” probably with the intention of carry on their studies in the future. Nonetheless, all 92 respondents have completed, or are completing, a High School education program.

Taking a closer look at the high school curriculums chosen by the respondents (Table 5), the 26,1% of them attended to one of the curricula provided by a Scientific studies “Liceo”, the 20,7% attended a Linguistic studies “Liceo”, and the 13% of them attended a Classical studies “Liceo”. Regarding Technical Schools, the two curricula who got the highest data are the “Business administration, finance and marketing” curriculum (8,7%) and the “Tourism” curriculum (6,5%), but “IT”, “Graphics and communications”, “Chemistry and Biotechnologies” curricula appear too even if for just one or two percentage points each. For the Professional High School high schools, unfortunately only three curricula appear: “Eno-gastronomy and hotel hospitality” (6,5%), “Health services and social welfare” (1,1%) and “Industrial chemistry” (1,1%).

The following field of inspection takes into consideration whether the respondents have decided to further increase their education level by attending a university and if so, what field of studies has been chosen by them. The initial idea regarding the method of inquiring the university field of study consisted in creating a similar question to the one concerning high school curricula. However, due to the overwhelming number of degrees in Italy, and to the fact that many of them are hybrid courses that cannot be categorized easily,

I decided to choose a few macro-areas and to let people select the field they felt the closest to their degree. The macro-areas can be described as follows:

- Humanistic: related to literature, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, intercultural studies.
- Economic: related to economy, finance, business administration, statistics.
- Juridic: related to legal studies, legislation, public administration studies.
- Linguistic: related to foreign language studies (including language practice and cultural studies), intercultural communication, translation and interpreting.
- Technical – Scientific: related to architecture, engineering, IT studies, science studies (physics, biology, chemistry), medicine, mathematics.
- International relations: related to international relationships, intended as international politics, human rights issues, cooperation.
- Politics: related to national and international politic institutions and organizations.
- Communication: related to information and communication studies, communication technologies, advertisement, editorial systems, journalism.
- Arts: related to art history, visual arts, musical arts, theatre and cinema, cultural heritage preservation.
- Cinema: added by one of the respondents.

The possibility to add new choices was given in order to include degrees that are not related to the ones suggested in the survey. This is, admittedly, an unclear oversimplification of the matter by the author's part. Moreover, the survey allowed to choose more than one field of studies in order to allow people with hybrid degrees to describe more truthfully their studies, but this eventually led to a vague final result in terms of number of respondents per field of studies. Also, there is the possibility that people selected different choices to describe the same degree, deteriorating even more the quality of the information gathered.

As can be observed in *Table 7*, 50% of the respondents have attended to a degree in linguistics. This information is consistent with the one emerged from *Table 6*, which indicates that 55,4% of the respondents have had an experience in Japanese language studies. Such a high percentage is due to the fact that a considerable part of the respondents consists of students from the Japanese Language bachelor or master's degree at Ca' Foscari

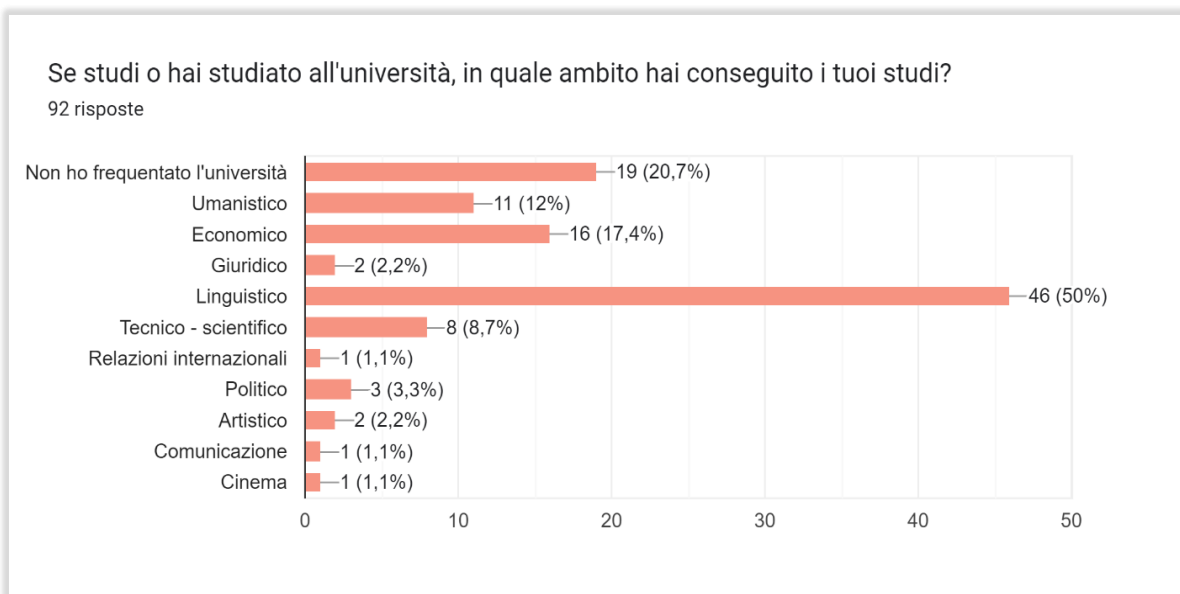


Table 7: Respondents' percentage per university field of study. By author.

University of Venice. The slight difference between the two percentages could be explained by supposing that the 5,4% of the respondents have studied Japanese language during High School or attending an extracurricular language course. It is also consistent with the data shown in *Table 5* regarding high school specialization: many respondents who studied linguistics in high school (or a technical school in which learning a language is fundamental for the sector it is linked to, such as *tourism* or *business administration, finance, and marketing*) have decided to continue studying a foreign language in university too. *Table 7* shows that 20,7% of the respondents did not attend university. This can be partly explained by looking at *Table 2*, which shows that a significant percentage of respondents are 18 years old or younger and therefore they haven't been able to attend to university yet. A considerable number of respondents have earned a degree in humanistic studies (12%), economic studies (17,4%) and technical – scientific studies (8,7%). From these data it could be stated that an interest in Japan is more common in people who have attended to linguistic or humanistic studies, but it is less common in more technical-oriented study fields such as law, economy, or science. This fact could imply that people who are passionate about Japan look for a field of study that can satisfy their interest and subsequently choose one of the curricula that involves Japanology courses. By this logic, a significant affluence in linguistic studies (intended as Japanese language studies) is foreseeable.

*Table 8* shows the high school curricula frequency of the respondents who have studied or are studying Japanese language. Predictably, a higher frequency can be observed in curricula offered by “Liceo” type of school and in particular the Classical studies and



Linguistic studies ones. The data regarding the Scientific studies curriculum is remarkable: a considerable number of respondents have an experience of Japanese language, which doesn't match with the contents of their high school studies. The same logic can be applied to the few respondents who had a technical or professional high school background, although in some curricula such as hotel hospitality or business administration Japanese language can be considered a useful skill in prevision of a career path tied with Japan.

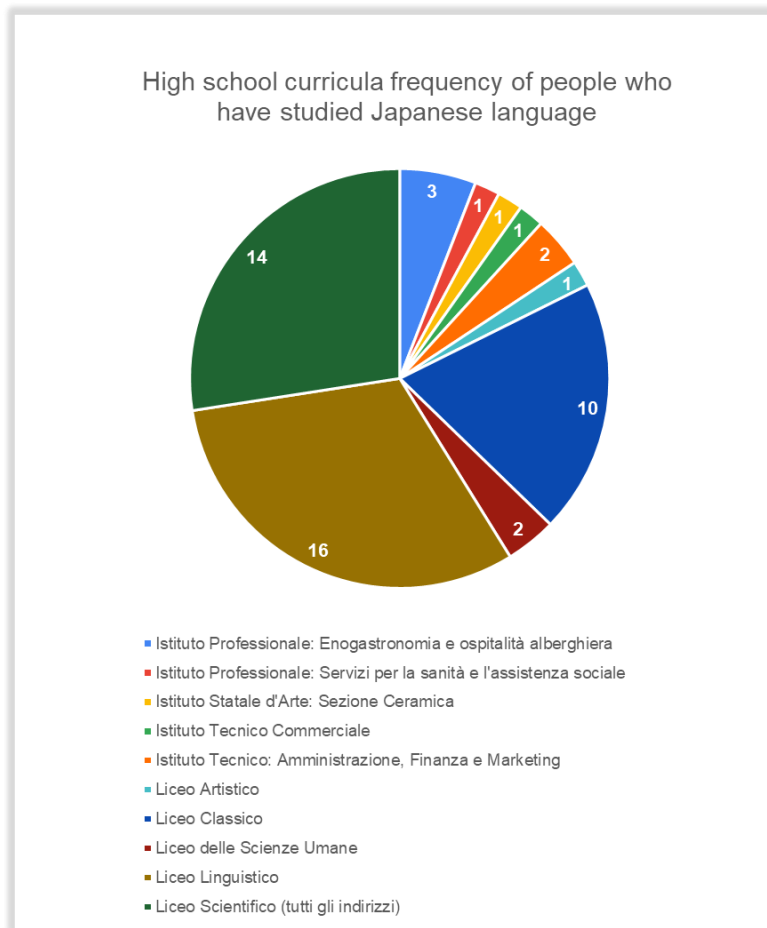


Table 8: High school curricula frequency of people who have studied Japanese language. By author.

## Chapter 1: The “Why” of Japan: what makes Italian people interested in Japan?

One of the purposes of this research is to examine why Italian people have developed a certain interest in Japan or one aspect of its culture, in order to find out the reasons of this influence. Rather than focusing on “*what*” of the Japanese culture manages to appeal people, I channeled my attention on “*why*” said element has the ability to appeal in the first place. Of course, data regarding the respondents’ interests in practice was necessary to further inspect the reasons of its attractive force; to do so, I collected information regarding what are the most popular features of Japan that have caught Italian’s attention through the survey on Google form, and the result emerged from it are showed in *Table 9* which can be seen shortly after. What has been asked is what were the first aspects who kickstarted the respondents’ interest towards Japan with a maximum of three choices per person.

*Table 9* speaks for itself: 82,6% of the respondents answered that *Japanese pop culture* (to be intended as Japanese entertainment media such as manga, anime, videogames, TV dramas, music and so on) has been their starting point of their interest towards Japan. With no surprise, this data is consistent with what has emerged from the answers to the question: “*Independently from your personal experience, do you agree to the fact that*

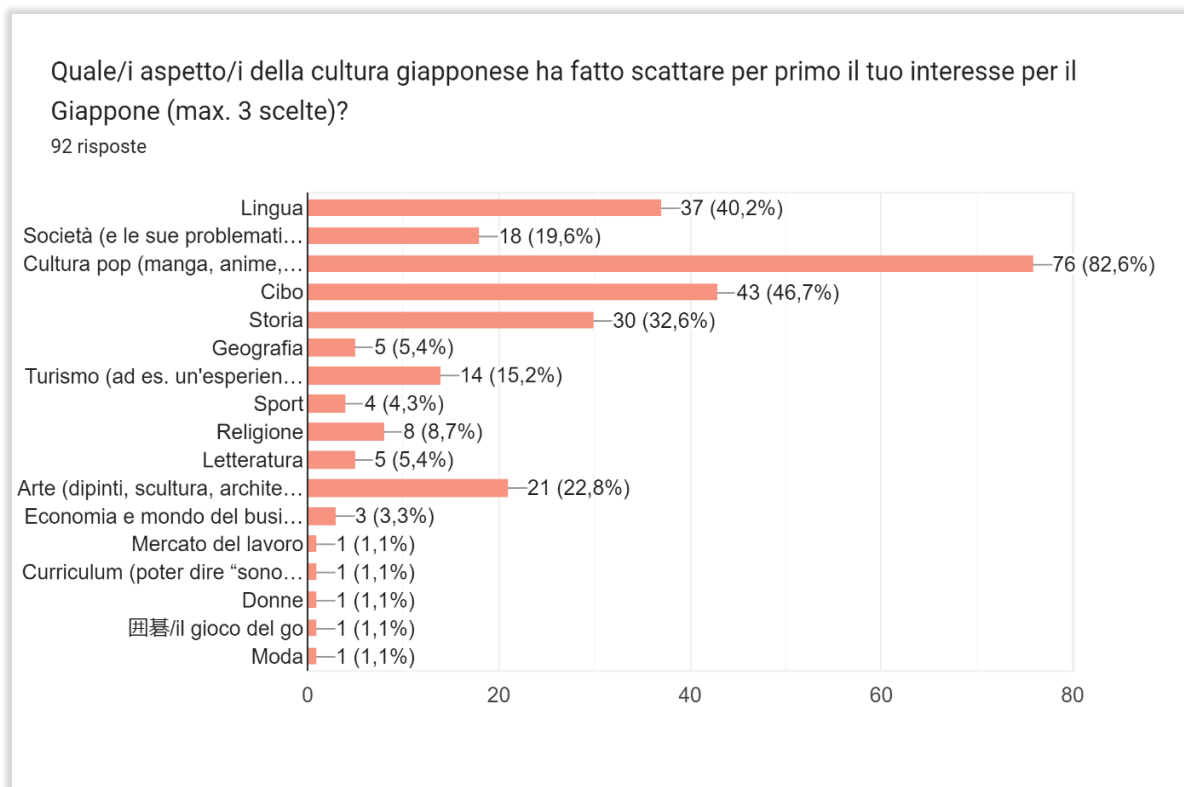


Table 9: Respondents’ type of interest towards Japan in percentage. By author.

*Japanese pop culture is one of the most diffuse access ways to Japanese culture?” (Table 10). As shown by the table, almost the totality of the respondents agrees with the previous statement, with a striking 70,7% who agrees completely and no respondent who does not agree at all. It is therefore safe to assume that Japanese pop culture has a key role in diffusing Japan’s image among Italian people and that Italian people get to know the country through the filter of manga, anime, and related forms of entertainment. The other aspects of Japanese culture that are preferred substantially by respondents are *Food* (46,7%), *Language* (40,2%), *History* (32,6%), *Arts* (22,8%) and *Society and its issues* (19,6%). Of course, the data related to the interest toward the language is predictable if we consider the substantial number of respondents who have had an experience in Japanese language studies. As an explanation for the data regarding the food, one could argue that it has to do with the powerful impact that sushi has had on Italian people during these last years. According to a research dated June 2021 and conducted by Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA), an Italian information and multimedia agency, the 76% of the respondents stated that sushi is a food that is considered “*desirable during all year*”<sup>3</sup>, signifying a strong appreciation for this kind of food. Among the motivations that justify this love for sushi, Italians mentioned its *taste* (59%), its *variety and shapes* (42%) and the fact that it *looks exotic* (23%). This last aspect will be further taken into consideration in the next sections of this research, when analyzing the opinions of people who have been interviewed.*

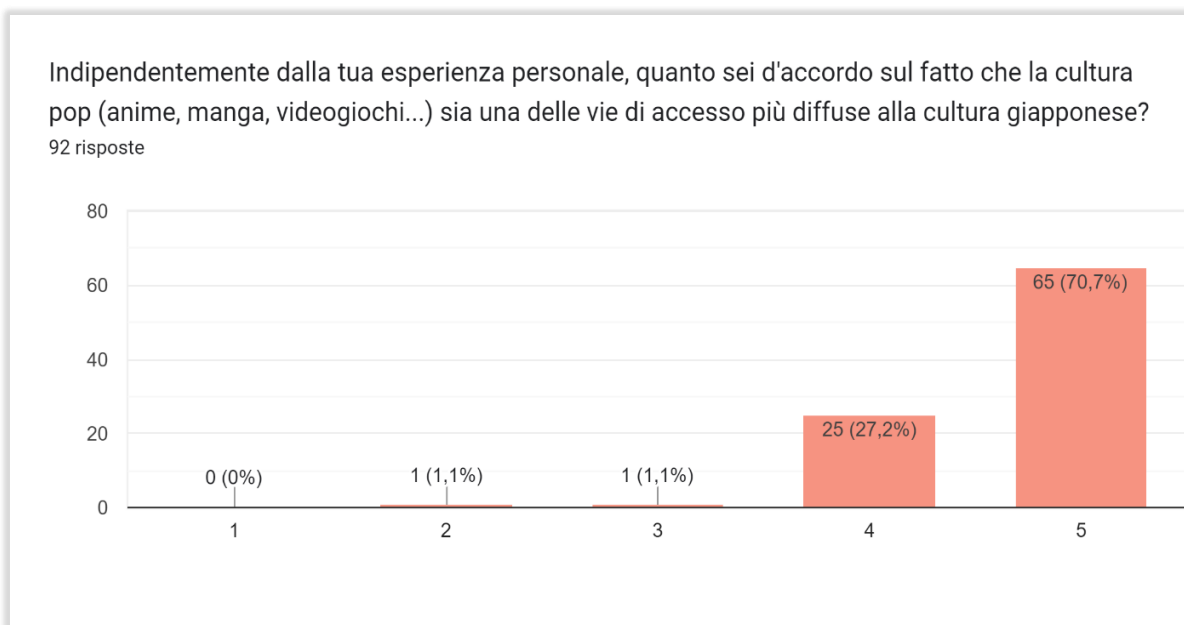


Table 10: Percentage of respondents’ who think Japanese pop culture is an immediate access way to Japan. By author.

<sup>3</sup> Source: [https://www.ansa.it/canale\\_terraegusto/notizie/in\\_breve/2021/06/18/sushi-cibo-desiderabile-tutto-lanno-per-76-italiani\\_1c5fdd34-1f35-4e0c-8225-5e3b47379591.html](https://www.ansa.it/canale_terraegusto/notizie/in_breve/2021/06/18/sushi-cibo-desiderabile-tutto-lanno-per-76-italiani_1c5fdd34-1f35-4e0c-8225-5e3b47379591.html)

Overall, it is safe to assume that the first approach that Italians have with Japan consists in aspect that are more closely tied to pop culture. History can be included too in this range of aspects if we consider stereotypical historical figures of Japanese history such as samurai or ninja, strongly appreciated and popular worldwide. On the contrary, aspects such as *Japanese society* (19,6%), *literature* (5,4%), or *religion* (8,7%), which need a deeper knowledge and an additional intellectual effort to be clearly understood, seem to be less accessible and therefore less likely to be the access point to Japan.

This chapter analyzes the distinctive features of Japanese culture that has been mentioned by the interviewees as the drivers of their interest towards the country. The first, aspect, which has been brought up by the totality of the interviewees, is the role of pop culture in the process of the development of said fascination to Japan. Subsequently, other aspects of the culture such as food, literature, society and so on will be explored briefly too.

### *1.1 The role of Japanese pop culture*

As stated before, the main purpose of the interviews I conducted was to find out why the interviewees found fascinating one of more features of Japanese culture and therefore asked them to describe the reason why they became interested in them. Most of the interviewees chose pop culture as one of the first aspects that kickstarted their interest towards Japan, therefore I focused my questions on finding out the motivations underlying such a powerful attractive power. The following statements highlight Sara's experience regarding her relationship with Japanese pop culture, specifically manga and anime, and her opinion about why such media had an influence over her:

R.C. (...) Thinking about Japanese pop culture, specifically the parts of it you are interested in: why do you think you got interested in it and what intrinsic characteristics do you think it has that made you attracted to it?

Sara  
25-year-old This is a difficult question (...). (*Speaking about manga and anime in specific*) For certain aspects I considered them diametrically opposite to the media I normally used to consume. (...) For example, the structure or the presence of some recurring visual features, such as the apparition

of punctuation on screen (...) that made it almost look like a comic on screen. Then, I'd say the cultural elements, that independently from the setting or the environment of the show, represent an influence different from the one I was used to, or I saw in my everyday life (...).

R.C. (...) So, your interest towards manga and anime was stimulated by the acknowledgement, whether it being conscious or unconscious, of the fact that they were different from other forms of media?

Sara Yes.

R.C. (...) Speaking about the themes covered in manga and anime, do you think they had an influence in making you interested in them?

Sara Surely, I acknowledge the fact that the themes presented in anime had a significant role in the development of my interest, and I recognize that some of them can be found in works of art with a western background, but I think the difference is in the way said themes are explored. (...) At a certain point, in manga and anime come into play a set of linguistic and cultural patterns that are so different from what we are used to that they stick in your head. (...)

R.C. Could you please raise a practical example of this diversity?

Sara For example, I don't want to fall into stereotypes, but I have the impression that character's inner monologues are more expanded in anime, compared to western cartoons (...). It almost looks like an acted part, the inner monologue becomes a theatrical monologue, so, other than words, sounds or other elements that make you understand the inner discomfort of the character are emphasized. (...)

From Sara's point of view, the cultural "diversity" presented by these media is the main feature Japanese manga and anime possess and that, according to her opinion, made her

interested in them. She mentioned the punctuation that appears on screen, which is obviously a distinct Japanese element that can't be found in entertainment from European or American countries, therefore embodying an “*exotic*” aspect of the media. According to Sara's opinion, the recurring linguistic and cultural elements that appear in Japanese entertainment are, indeed, “different” from the ones she is used to see in other forms of media and therefore appealing to her tastes. In this sense, and opposite to the visual elements that appear on screen, Sara feels that, in Japanese media, the characterization of the character too is different from the media she is used to. She states that the inner monologues, aimed to describe the characters' feelings and state of mind, are particularly emphasized and rendered as “theatral monologues”. This could imply a (at least perceived) lack of exploration of character's feelings and emotions in western media.

About diversity, the point of view of Marco, 25 years old Japanese language student who got first in touch with Japan through karate and animation, helps in the understanding of the meaning behind these diverse cultural elements:

R.C.                    What are the aspects of Japanese culture that kickstarted your interest towards Japan?

Marco                    Mainly two aspects: the first contact I ever had with Japan was sports, 25 years old                    because I started karate when I was around 4 or 5 years old. It was a very light activity, not very demanding since we were young kids. Then, (*the second contact was*) at elementary school, my father showed me for the first time *Spirited Away*<sup>4</sup>. I already knew *Dragonball*<sup>5</sup> or *One Piece*<sup>6</sup>, which were broadcasted on TV, but the very first spark was with *Spirited Away*, because it was something completely different (*from other types*

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<sup>4</sup> *Spirited Away* is an animation movie ideated by Hayao Miyazaki and released for the first time in 2001. The story is about Chihiro, a 10-year-old girl who is moving with his parents. The family gets lost and end up in a seemingly abandoned city, which is inhabited by curious spirits. Source: <https://www.studioghibli.it/film/la-citta-incantata/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Dragonball* is a worldwide popular Japanese comic series ideated by Akira Toriyama and published for the first time in 1984. The story is about Goku, a kid with a monkey tail who goes to adventure to find the seven legendary Dragon Balls. It's mainly a comedy and fighting show and therefore very popular among young boys. An animated show based on the comic has been realized later. Source: <https://www.animeclick.it/manga/9542/dragonball>.

<sup>6</sup> *One Piece* too is an extremely popular Japanese comic series (transposed into animation) ideated by Eichirō Oda and published for the first time in 1997. The story is about Rufy, a young aspiring pirate with the ability to stretch and bend his body like rubber. Source: <https://www.animeclick.it/manga/9556/one-piece>.

*of entertainment*). I'm sure I had some comics too, which some of my classmates from elementary school lent me, but personally the first two aspects were sports and anime.

R.C. (...) You mentioned that *Spirited Away* is “different”. Can you explain what do you mean by that?

Marco Well, it's a completely different approach towards animation and this can be noticed even by people who aren't really knowledgeable about it, because at that time I wasn't either. I think that the main comparison that can be done in terms of entertainment from those years is with Disney movies: compared to Studio Ghibli<sup>7</sup> ones, from Miyazaki, they are much more caricatural, in a sense, while the others (*Ghibli movies*) have a more realistic approach, at least when it comes to (*characters'*) movements, relationships... It's a different style and the aesthetic approach is what attracted me, the aesthetic diversity and... Probably something from the movie direction too, that I can't really mention now and definitely couldn't when I was younger. It's an instinctive feeling I had.

R.C. What do you think it's the reason of this instinctive feeling of diversity you had?

Marco Well... One thing that came to my mind now and referred to *Spirited Away* is the presence of folkloristic themes, so (*for example*) *yōkai*<sup>8</sup>, *kami*<sup>9</sup>... All those elements that are part of a completely different culture attracted me for their diversity, their distance, since they don't appear in movies like *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* or *The Little Mermaid*. I mean there still is some mythology, but it's closer to us so we don't

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<sup>7</sup> Studio Ghibli is the Japanese animation studio which produced many worldwide famous animation movies such as *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Howl's Moving Castle* and others.

<sup>8</sup> *Yōkai* (妖怪) is the Japanese term for “ghost”, or “spirit”.

<sup>9</sup> *Kami* (神) is the Japanese term for “deity”, or “god”.

see it as strange or distant. I think this aspect (*the diversity and distance of the folkloristic elements in Ghibli Movies*) had a strong influence (*in Marco's appreciation towards the media*).

From Marco's words, Japanese animation presents aesthetic features and styles that are so particular they are perceived instinctively as different from the public who enjoys it. Differently to Disney movies, Japanese animation seems to distinguish itself through a more "realistic" approach, in terms of how the character's movements are animated and how the relationships between them are explored. In a sense, this reconfirms that a deeper exploration of the character's inner side, contrarily to what happens in western media, could be a reason for triggering interest in Italian people.

Another fundamental aspect that has been mentioned by the interviewee is the presence of specifically Japanese folkloristic themes, such as deities or spirits, presented in *Spirited Away*. However, it's not the mere presence of them that makes this product different from Disney ones: Marco states that while cultural aspects are represented in Disney animation products too, they are viewed as close to his daily life experience and therefore not as appealing as Studio Ghibli ones, which belong to a distant and different culture. In this sense, Japanese animation provides a set of "*exotic*" cultural elements, such as nature deities and benevolent or malevolent spirits, that stimulates the attention of the viewers and makes them more and more interested in the media thanks to their unavailability in their culture of origin. In terms of development of a curiosity in what Japan has to offer, these characteristics, tied with the specific identity of the country, are probably the most evident element.

To further expand the relation between Japanese media diversity, or exoticism, and the development of an interest in Japan and its culture, it is meaningful to report Giacomo's statements regarding his appreciation towards Japanese language, which he admitted was his first contact point with Japan and its concept of diversity:

R.C.                      What was the first aspect about Japanese culture that kickstarted your interest in Japan?



Giacomo 36 years old I'd say the Japanese language, because the first contact I had with Japan and its culture was a movie broadcasted on RAI 3 channel (...) at 2 a.m.; it was the *Suna no Onna*<sup>10</sup> movie, broadcasted in original language with Italian subtitles. I remember reading the subtitles and asking myself: "What the hell are they saying?!" Regardless of the tragicomic story, about being trapped in a sand pit, I was completely shocked in bliss by all those sounds I couldn't understand (...) and I clearly remember thinking: "I need to know what they are saying".

R.C. (...) You mentioned this movie and the Japanese language, but which one do you think it had more impact on you?

Giacomo The language, without any doubt.

R.C. Why?

Giacomo Well, try to imagine the period of time I grew up in. Born and grew in the 80's, when the first mainstream anime started to be imported in Italy such as *Sampei*<sup>11</sup>, *Tiger Mask*<sup>12</sup>... These anime interested me because I was at the right age, I stared at the TV and stayed there (*for hours*). But I have never asked myself how anime would be in original language, maybe because I was a kid, maybe because I didn't care, and when I got exposed to the original product, not filtered by the work of a translator and dubber dialogist, the effect was completely unexpected. I was shocked and I needed to know what they were saying. (...) At that time,

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<sup>10</sup> *Suna no Onna* (in English "Woman in the dunes") is a novel written by Kōbo Abe and published in 1962. The plot is about a novice entomologist who wants to discover a new species of bug and ends up in a remote desert. He is welcomed by a local village and offered to spend the night in a house where a woman lives. However, he will find himself trapped in a sand pit. A movie transposition of the book has been released in 1964. Source: <https://www.animeclick.it/novel/45497/suna-no-onna>.

<sup>11</sup> The interviewee is referring to *Tsurikichi Sanpei* (in English "Fisherman Sanpei"), the animated transposition of the homonymous manga published in 1973 and written by Takao Yaguchi. The story is about Mihira Sanpei, a joyful boy with the passion of fishing. Source: <https://www.animeclick.it/manga/22447/tsurikichi-sanpei>.

<sup>12</sup> *Tiger Mask* is a manga series written by Ikki Kajiwara and illustrated by Naoki Tsuji, first published in 1968, and later adapted in an animation series by Toei Animation. The story is about Naoto Date, real name of the Tiger Mask, a feared heel wrestler (a wrestler representing a villain, or a rulebreaker) who went back to Japan and decided to become a heroic wrestler after having met a boy who was idolizing a villain. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiger\\_Mask](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiger_Mask).

anime openings were not singed by Cristina d'Avena<sup>13</sup> yet, so you could hear them in original language and asked: “*What are they saying?!*” (...) These were the first questions I asked myself and that eventually led me to the path I chose in life, in university and so on.

R.C. (...) In retrospective, why did the language manage to spark interest in you when you were a kid?

Giacomo The short answer is because it was something unbelievably distant from me. A world, a culture, a lifestyle diametrically opposite, or at least this is what I thought at the time, from what I always experienced, which was the usual Italian culture about eating together with the family doing small talk while watching television. I always had this image of Japanese people being hard workers, with a “house and church” kind of lifestyle with no social interaction whatsoever... So, getting to know that there was this stereotyped culture at the other side of the world that was completely different from the Italian one made me very curious. Then, yes, the TV aspect always comes back: commercials, cartoons, tv shows and all those things.

R.C. What emerges from your statements is a strong connection between the language and the animation world...

Giacomo Yes, animation, movies... (...). Because during the 80's and 90's everything Japanese in origins I could see was through cartoons; I had no other choice. So, I could see middy uniforms on girls, *bukatsu*<sup>14</sup> or sports clubs, the culture festival<sup>15</sup>, all things that for a kid from that

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<sup>13</sup> Cristina d'Avena is a famous Italian singer, actress and television presenter popular for being the voice of many Japanese anime openings in Italy.

<sup>14</sup> *Bukatsu* (部活) is a term which indicates are extracurricular activities, organized in clubs, very popular and highly encouraged (if not mandatory) by Japanese education system. They can include sports activities, cultural activities, and other hobbies.

<sup>15</sup> Cultural festival (in Japanese *Bunkasai* 文化祭) are public events held by most of Japanese school annually, where the students participate in realizing activities and entertainment, and public can enter the school to visit it.

period, used to “normal” things, had a certain appeal. The language was the next step, when I realized there was a language different from Italian, different from English or generally European languages and therefore could have been interesting.

Giacomo states that the Japanese language was his first contact with Japan and its culture, specifically through a projection of *Suna no Onna* movie in original language. What emerges from this section of the interview is the fascination for the sounds of an intelligible and remote language, the attractiveness of unknown words and the impellent curiosity to find out the meaning hidden behind them. Quite interesting is his reaction when exposed to the product in his original form and not filtered by dubbing: the different sounds between the Italian and Japanese languages surprised him to the point of developing the need to know what the characters were saying. In this case too, the “*exotic*”, “*different*”, “*distant*” nature of the Japanese language is the trigger of Giacomo’s interest towards Japan.

However, while the language represents the main engine for his fascination, it is undeniable that Japanese animation and the cultural aspects presented in the shows had a strong influence too. It is with these media that the interviewee gets to know evidently Japanese elements such as the sports club in schools or the tradition of the *bunkasai* (or culture festival). Said aspects get highlighted and grab the attention of the viewer because the viewers themselves compare instinctively the social environment in which they live and the one presented by the show: that is the moment when the viewers, unaware of Japan, realize that somewhere in the world the environment seen in anime exists and their curiosity gets piqued, pushing them to further explore their new interest even in a professional or educational way, as in Giacomo’s case.

His experience is one of debunking the stereotypes he had about the country. His idea of Japanese people consisted in thinking that they were people absorbed in their working life, with no room for personal space or hobbies. However, being exposed to Japanese media, and especially the original version not filtered by a dubbing, made him realize Japan is not a monolithic and unchangeable concept, but rather a world different very different from the one he was used to, and therefore complex and undecipherable.

The theme of “*diversity*”, present in Japanese pop culture, is explored differently by the interviewees and offer a different personal interpretation of the matter. Greta, 25 years old Japanese language student, felt that the main difference between anime and other

animation products lies in how the characters are developed and in some particular visual features recurrent in the shows:

R.C.                   What do you think are the intrinsic characteristics of Japanese animation that made you interested in it?

Greta  
25 years old           In retrospective, I'd say the drawing style, among other things. I remember trying to watch non-Japanese cartoons and not appreciating them in the same way for the style. Then, I'd say characters, because the ones from anime are always filled with values and meanings they want to convey. (...) If I think about American cartoon characters, not only they seem much more impudent, as if they were already arrived to the "destination point", while in anime you get to see the development of the hero much more, who starts weak and then slowly he learns things (...). Then, being a fan of fantasy genre and stuff, I have always found this kind of stories in anime, especially in the most famous ones. (...) Since I have always read many books and tried to find interesting romance stories, eventually I got fed up with them because they looked to me all the same (*the ones from books*), so reading manga allowed me to read about the same genres but in a different way, because love stories in manga are completely different from the ones in, I don't know, Italian books. It was about the research of something new because I've had enough of what I already had.

R.C.                   You mentioned the word "different" a lot: could you explain me what you mean by that?

Greta                   (...) Well, as for love stories, they are different because immersed in a Japanese context. There are many recurrent cliches in Japanese love stories, such as I don't know, the first date, or the confession, that in Italian or say western products are not regarded with the same importance. So, you have a product that explores in a completely

different way the love story, maybe focusing more on the “before” (*getting engaged*) and see the girl having a crush for the boy, the boy acting in a weird way... And it’s more interesting. However, many American love stories are more focused on the “after” and there is a much more physical expression of love rather than the Japanese ones... I mean, especially in genres like *shōjo*, you could even wait the kiss for years (*laughs*); this anticipation (*of the kiss*) is nearly absent in Italian or American stories.

Animation wise, the presence of some techniques... I don’t know, the replay of some scenes, or the use of effects to confer more pathos to the moment, such as the sakura tree petals flying around (...). In my opinion, Japanese media really focus on the scene, on the background: for example, in anime there is recurrent use of seemingly meaningless scenes, such as the characters simply walking down the street, or the display of the sunset, or the water stream of a small river... There is this tendency of showing the surrounding nature, which conveys an almost nostalgic feeling that is typically Japanese, and to me it’s fascinating and makes anime different from other media. Of course, nature is displayed in other media too, but in that case, it becomes the main subject of the scene, while in Japanese anime nature gets integrated in the scene. (...)

Greta explores the theme of diversity offered by Japanese media through mainly three aspects. The first one revolves around the main character, who she perceives to be more static in western media, while in Japanese media they appear to be more prone to a personal development and characterized by values and virtues they want to convey to the viewer. The importance of a deeper exploration of the characters’ personalities and feelings seems to be, according to the interviews conducted, a very important element that can be enjoyed very easily in Japanese media, but not in the western ones. Flawed and conflicted characters allow the viewers to relate in terms of their own flaws and insecurities; on the other hand, “perfect” characters are seen as distant from the viewers and not so appreciated.

The second aspect concerns the way romantic stories get fleshed out: in Japanese media, the focus is on the period of time before the creation of the couple, exploring specific stages such as the confession, and with a more romantic and less sexual approach on the

story, differently from western media who are more focused on the period subsequent of the creation of the couple. This type of depiction of the love story responds to Greta's needs, who, being an avid reader, has experienced many "western style" love stories and wants to enjoy a different perspective of the same genre. What emerges from Greta's statements, especially in relation to romance stories, is therefore the research of something new and different from the usual range of possibilities offered by the Italian (or in an extended sense, western) entertainment media.

The last aspect considered to be different is the exploitation of the nature and its display; in this sense, landscapes are not the main subject of the scene, but rather they contribute to the narration of the story by conveying at the same time a typically Japanese "nostalgic feeling". The depiction of nature, even being free of any direct and recognizable cultural element, and its involvement in entertainment media whose focus is not the depiction of the nature itself becomes a specific feature of Japanese media. The diverse and "japanese" feeling given by media isn't necessarily perceived in that way for its contents, but for the way said contents are conveyed and presented to the public.

Shifting from a romantic to a more erotic point of view, according to Luca, 32-year-old company employee, Japanese media offer a different representation of sensuality that isn't present in western media:

Luca                    (...) Even talking about female characters' costumes (*meaning succinct ones*), Japanese creators don't really care (*about the costumes being sensual*), while in western videogames they try to make them more and more realistic. And this is valid for anime too (...). And then, well, even the existence of anime (*genres*) such as *ecchi*<sup>16</sup> or *harem*<sup>17</sup>... I mean it's unique to Japanese animation.

R.C.                    So, is there a difference in representation of eroticism?

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<sup>16</sup> *Ecchi* is a Japanese word that means "sexy", or "lewd". Media considered *ecchi* are not explicitly sexual in contents, but allusions and references towards the sexual sphere are very common and it is up to the watcher to explore the scenes with their fantasy.

<sup>17</sup> *Harem* is an anime, manga, light novel, videogame (and so on) genre that indicates storied focused on a protagonist (generally a heterosexual man) surrounded by three or more love interests (generally heterosexual women). This genre relies on self-insertion protagonists that allow watchers to project unto the main character. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harem\\_\(genre\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harem_(genre)).

Luca Well, I'd say yes... Well actually, in these anime it's more comedy than eroticism, because you don't really see anything erotic. The common aspect about these anime is that the main character (*generally a male*) ends up doing nothing with the girls, so there is nothing really erotic (*laughs*). (...) Leaving aside actual pornography, in Japanese media it's common to see erotic contents but in a more subtle and comic way.

R.C. *(The conversation here shifted towards a comparison between how sexual scenes are presented in western productions, such as the Spanish tv show "Elite" or the American "Game of Thrones" and how they are presented in Japanese media – the details of the scenes will not be mentioned to avoid spoilers)*

Luca (...) Why do sex scenes get presented in such an explicit way in western media? Because the purpose is to cause a shock effect to the viewer. In eastern media it's now how it works. (...) What's (*erotic but*) not proper pornography is slightly implied, while in western media is very explicit (...).

Other than eroticism, Luca points out the difference in sensibility towards politically correct issues and minorities' inclusion policies between western productions and Japanese ones:

Luca In Japanese media you can still hear many gay jokes that no one would  
32-years-old dare say anymore in a Hollywood movie, especially in recent years. (...) Even regarding Black characters, you don't really see them in anime because Japanese producers don't really care about creating and inserting them in their productions. Maybe it's because the main target are Japanese people and black population in Japan is very low... (...) I mean, have you ever noticed Italian characters in anime? They always

incarnate the Italian stereotype. I was playing *Dragon Quest XI*<sup>18</sup> and there is this city inspired on Venice, and I don't know about the original version, but in the English dubbing the characters say random Italian words while talking (*laughs*) (...).

Luca therefore notices two main differences between Japanese productions and western ones: the first one is a more lighthearted and implied approach to erotic contents in Japanese media, which tends to express sexuality in a comic way through genres such as *ecchi* and *harem* that, according to him, cannot be found in other productions, while western media tend to express more explicit erotic contents even in non-pornography media.

The other one is a difference in sensibility from the producers towards politically correct issues: while western productions are keen in elaborating strategies of inclusion of minorities, Japanese media seem to be hesitant in embracing these changes and subtle discrimination or the non-representation of categories of people such as gay people or black people still persist. The use of racial stereotypes is another tool to generate comedy in the viewers, which nowadays in the western world would not be tolerated anymore.

In terms of comparison between two countries and relative aspects, Fabrizio, 25-year-old student, expresses his point of view regarding specifically Italian media and the lack of variety in contents in contrast with Japanese media:

R.C. (...) Why do you think you started getting interested in Japanese popular culture and what do you think it has to offer more or differently from other kinds of entertainment?

Fabrizio Well, about Italian entertainment, it's only "cinepanettoni"<sup>19</sup> (*laughs*).  
25 years old Its target are people who don't want to think much, maybe they are of a

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<sup>18</sup> *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age* is a Japanese role-playing videogame published by Square Enix in 2017. The game features many settings inspired by real world places, including a city based on Venice. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon\\_Quest\\_XI](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon_Quest_XI).

<sup>19</sup> *Cinepanettone* is an Italian language neologism with a slightly negative connotation used to indicate a certain category of Italian comedy movies released mainly during the Christmas holidays. The term comes from the words "cinema" and "panettone", a typical Italian Christmas cake. These movies, frequently casting the comedy duo Christian De Sica and Massimo Boldi, are said to have repetitive plots and vulgar comedy, but are apparently well received by Italian public. Source: <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinepanettone>.



certain age (*meaning relatively old people*) and laugh at the usual gag of the average bad-mannered Italian family who goes to I don't know, Bahamas for holidays. (...) Italian tv shows are generally tied to the same topics: the family, the influence of religion, cooking, traditions and specific cultural elements of Italy (...). About what Japanese pop culture has to offer, well, it offers everything. It's not something "fixed", it's something that keeps going and stimulates your interest (...) You want to know if the main character will succeed in his adventure, if there will be some kind of plot twist, there is something that keeps you hooked. (...) It also has to do with putting yourself in the character's shoes when you were a child, but even now. (...) Japanese anime or videogames offer you something more than just staring catatonically to a screen, they keep you interested and make you think.

From Fabrizio's statements, a mild sense of disappointment regarding the variety of themes offered by Italian movies and tv shows has emerged. It appears that this form of entertainment, embodied by the "cinepanettone" genre, does not reflect the tastes of young people, but rather it satisfies the needs of Italians (mainly old people) interested in a very specific set of themes: the family and the comedy originated by its shenanigans, the massive presence of religion or religious themes and the recurring stereotypically Italian cultural aspects. This thematic range is not necessarily considered boring or uninteresting by the interviewee, but the necessity of a more variegated approach in telling these stories would be appreciated. And said need of variety, in this case, is satisfied by Japanese animation, a type of entertainment that is dynamic, fluid and even hysteric if we consider the number of facets it can involve. They do not make viewers mindlessly stare at a screen, but rather they manage to capture the audience attention in an active way, stimulating curiosity, self-analysis and the will to keep watching.

Animation as a technique itself is considered a fundamental feature for the realization of such unrealistic situations:

R.C. (...) So, what does Japanese animation offer more than, for example, American tv shows?

Fabrizio            Plot wise, you can create whatever you want (*in an anime series*). (...)  
A tv show is always linked to reality somehow. You can't implement  
certain things unless you somehow bend the laws of physics. (...)

Japanese media, in particular with the implementation of animation, offer a range of possibilities in terms of plot devices, settings, stories and characters that is limited exclusively by the authors' creativity. Tv shows (to be intended as live action tv shows casting real people) are incapable of conveying the same number of possibilities that animation can. In this sense, the variety provided by Japanese animation becomes the one of the core attractive points of the Japanese culture because it gives every single person something to relate to, or something that traces a similitude between the viewer and the show. The following statement is from Tiziana, 25 years old Japanese language student, who expressed her point of view regarding the variety offered by anime during a discussion related to LGBTQ+ community issues their connection to Japanese culture:

R.C.                (...) In other interviews, the fact that Japanese culture and in particular  
animation become a safe space for diversity has emerged. It would be  
interesting to know why this happens, though...

Tiziana            Purely for variety, if you ask me. I dare you to find another kind of media  
25 years old        that has so much variety like anime and manga. I mean, seriously, try to  
think of a plot as weird as possible; most likely there will be an anime  
about that. (...) The fact that (*the technique*) is drawing, or animation,  
makes the possibilities to become... endless. Whatever you wanted to  
represent, you could do it, and that's very different from tv shows or  
movies that need an insane budget to do something through *CGI*. Try to  
realize something like *Attack on Titan* in live action... (*With animation*)  
You can realize something which is much more faithful to your idea,  
you simply can do it. (...) There are things from a person's imagination  
that can't be expressed in any way other than a drawing. A drawing is a  
much more direct type of representation than words. It's a way to

represent what's in your head without any kind of filter between what you (*author*) are thinking and the people watching it. This allows the possibilities to be endless and there is a wide variety in genres or topics that can be explored; this creates this wonderful safe space basin for many different people who come and look for different things. (...)

According to Tiziana's words, anime and manga are the one of the few typologies of media that can offer a limitless variety of genres, topics to be explored, and stories. Her point of view is clear when it comes to affirming that anime and manga have the power to become a sort of common ground for people who, even if they have a different background and seek different things, they find themselves to be part of a wider, safe community. As mentioned before, the technique of animation and drawing are the key to this result: they incarnate the power of the endless imagination of the authors and become the direct connection between them and the desires and inner thoughts of the viewers and readers. A story told through animation, or a drawing, can't be realized in the same way (or cannot be realized at all) through other means. Drawing (and by an extent, animation) allow people to project in a simple but effective way intimate feelings, ideas, and experiences that, normally, it would be impossible to express. This projection is received by the viewers, who have the possibility to relate to the unique elements showed in a manga, or in a show, and therefore find a way to validate their own feelings.

Variety offered by anime is mentioned by another interviewee, Luca, to justify his appreciation for Japanese animation:

R.C. (...) What are the characteristics of anime that, according to you, made you interested to this kind of entertainment?

Luca So... Variety in terms of typologies of anime that can be enjoyed and the stories that can be explored. It depends on my mood, with tv shows or videogames too, actually. With the variety of anime that there is, I can always find something that matches what I'm looking for in that moment, whether it being an action anime, a romance one or a slice-of-life one. Then... I like the drawings, the technical aspect of Japanese

animation, which I prefer over the American one. Above that, well, I'd say that anime are what made me interested in Japan, but at the same time the fact that many anime are set in Japan is the reason I got interested in them, probably, with these oriental and different settings... (...). There are heavier anime, such as *Evangelion*<sup>20</sup> or *Welcome to the NHK*<sup>21</sup> that explore psychological themes, and lighter ones such the myriad of harem ones (*laughs*), so yeah, it's a type of entertainment that can be both serious and playful (...).

In this case, variety is conceived not as a virtual safe space with the ability to attract different people with unique needs, but rather as a range of different genres and stories that respond to the individual needs of the viewer. Japanese animation provides as many stories as the emotions of the single person, who has therefore the possibility to look for an anime whose contents satisfy their needs in that moment. It ranges from light themes to more heavy and dark ones, Animation becomes therefore a channel to find validation to one own's feelings in a very accessible and entertaining way.

In this interview too, the importance of animation as a window to "diverse" elements in awakening Luca's interest in Japan emerges.

While many of the interviewees stated that one of the reasons they are interested in Japanese animation is its diversity compared to the other media they consume or the reality they live in, one of the respondents, Roberta, a 41 years old woman, said quite the contrary. Her interest in Japanese animations is originated by the similarities she could trace between the themes presented or the characters' lives and real-life situations.

R.C. (...) Why do you think you started getting interested in Japanese popular culture and what do you think it has to offer more or differently from other kinds of entertainment?

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<sup>20</sup> *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is an animated series produced by Gainax and ideated by Hideaki Anno and broadcasted from 1995. The plot is about Shinji Ikari, a teenager boy who gets recruited by his father Gendō to fight unknown beings called "*Angels*" through futuristic bio-machines, the "*Eva*". Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neon\\_Genesis\\_Evangelion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neon_Genesis_Evangelion).

<sup>21</sup> *Welcome to the NHK* is originally a Japanese novel written by Tatsuhiko Takimoto, later adapted into a manga and anime series. The story is about a hikikomori, asocial and recluse, who gets help from a girl he doesn't know but she seems very knowledgeable about him. The main topic is the one of hikikomori, but other issues, such as depression, existential dread, and isolation, are explored. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welcome\\_to\\_the\\_N.H.K.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welcome_to_the_N.H.K.)

Roberta  
41 years old

Actually, thinking about the answer to this question makes me wonder, on the other hand, what western entertainment has to offer in practice. If I think about it, I'm sure something comes to my mind, but otherwise many things come from the eastern world: videogames, manga, anime... From my experience, I only ever watched Japanese cartoons. I have no idea about Italian cartoons and, other than that, there are the Disney Classics.

R.C.

(...) Is there a reason why you enjoyed more Japanese animation rather than, for example, Disney animation?

Roberta

I didn't necessarily enjoy more Japanese animation; I enjoyed them both in the same way. I liked Japanese animation because it presented common stories, characters with a common background generally... Of course, there were magical characters, or princesses too sometimes. But I have vivid memories of anime with common situations and characters living an ordinary life and I think children could relate to them for this reason. Of course, there were anime with magical powers, transformations and so on, but those ones too showed common people in the end. What I liked most is the similarity between real people's ordinary lives and the characters' ordinary lives, but with the addition of something special. For example, my favorite anime from when I was a child is *Sampei*, who is an orphan kid living with his grandfather and with the passion for fishing: it's a very ordinary story.

R.C.

(...) Being born in the 80's and having lived through the 90's, do you think the period of time you grew up in has something to do with your preferences?

Roberta

Yes, having lived the 80's and 90's in first person and living now the 2000's, when my son and daughters are growing up, I can tell the difference in anime that are broadcasted. (...) With the diffusion of

*Dragonball* I sensed a shift towards more fantastic stories. But I belong to the generation who watched *Candy Candy*<sup>22</sup>, *Georgie*<sup>23</sup> or *Sampei*, which showed you normal lives or even sadder than usual ones.

In this rather particular case, the attractive feature provided by Japanese animation does not consist of research of the “alternative” the “diverse”, but it is based on the similarities that can be traced between the life of the characters of the shows, which told common stories, and the life of the audience. These similarities allow the viewers to relate to the events happening in the anime, making the media itself appealing for them. According to the interviewee, having lived her upbringing during the 80’s and 90’s can be considered an important aspect in shaping her tastes and her interests towards Japanese animation, since not only the majority of the cartoons that were broadcasted were Japanese in origins, but also because said cartoons presented a very specific and recurring set of themes: the ordinary lives of the characters, even with the presence of magical powers. In other words, the supernatural features and the “*exotic*” cultural difference become secondary and are not regarded, specifically in Roberta’s case, as the main attractive element of Japanese animation.

To summarize, it is undeniable that the Japanese popular culture (to be interpreted mainly as manga, animation, and videogames) had a major role in sparking interest towards Japan in Italian people. However, from the statements of the interviewees emerge two specific qualities regarding these media that makes them appealing and interesting to them: the first one is the concept of “*diversity*”, which must be intended in different ways since every single one of the interviewees gave a different interpretation of it. The first and maybe the most evident facet of diversity is the cultural diversity of the worlds and the elements that are presented in Japanese pop culture compared to the Italian social environment where the interviewees have lived. It is when an anime shows the viewers a *yōkai* or tells the story

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<sup>22</sup> *Candy Candy* is a Japanese manga series written by Kyoko Mizuki and illustrated by Yumiko Igarashi, published in 1975, and later transposed as anime. The story is about Candy, an abandoned orphan taken in by an orphanage around the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. She eventually meets a boy who will have an important role in the plot of the show, even when Candy gets adopted by a family. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candy\\_Candy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candy_Candy).

<sup>23</sup> *Georgie!* is a Japanese manga series written by Mann Izawa and illustrated by Yumiko Igarashi, published in 1982 and later transposed as an anime series. The plot is about Georgie, a girl who lives in Australia with her mother and her two brothers. She will eventually find out she has been adopted and she will leave for the United Kingdom to track her original family. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgie!>.

of a couple of Japanese students falling in love during the culture festival's preparations that Italian people start to acknowledge that what is presented is not common in their ordinary life and their curiosity gets piqued. Diversity is mentioned even when talking about how characters are presented and developed: in Japanese media they appear to be as close as possible to actual human beings, filled with values, emotions and able to self-analyze themselves with deep and intimate inner monologues. In a sense, from the interviewees' statements emerges a sense of disappointment towards western and specifically Italian media, which are said to revolve around themes and topics either not very enticing for a young person or very redundant and centered on Italian culture and its stereotypical aspects such as the family or religion. This flatness of themes inspired some interviewees and made them start a research towards the diverse. It is here that the second aspect of the Japanese pop culture comes into play: the "*variety*" of its contents. The techniques by which these media are created, namely drawing and animation, are stated to be the most efficient ones in allowing the creators to express as faithfully as possible their ideas. Not only this, but also animation and drawings make the possibilities in terms of plots, stories, characters to be virtually unlimited. Therefore, there will always be an anime or a manga that stimulates the interests of a person and that can respond to different needs not only of the single, but of an entire community of people, who "meet" themselves in this endless basin of possibilities, even coming from divergent backgrounds. In this sense, Japanese pop culture becomes a safe space where to find one own's answer to their needs and desires. It is meaningful to state here one of the anonymous comments that has been posted in the voluntary comment section at the end of the questionnaire:

Anonymous      From my experience, the escapism towards Japanese culture has been the consequence of isolation (as mentioned in the survey) during my school years. In my case, but not exclusively, Japan and the related cultural aspects provide a supportive hospitality (in the forms of online or face-to-face communities) to people who are interested in them.

From this comment, another key aspect of Japanese culture in terms of why Italian people get interested in Japan arises: not only "diversity" and "variety" respond to their need of enjoying media with contents that differ from the ones offered by western and Italian forms of entertainment, but also answer and provides healing to some kind of discomfort

experienced by the viewers and readers in their daily lives. Japanese pop culture, therefore, becomes a way to channel the negative feelings and experiences and to relieve the sufferings of an unpleasant social background. This aspect will be further explored in Chapter 4 of this study.

## *1.2 Other aspects of Japanese culture*

While Japanese popular culture appears to be the main channel by which Italian people get interested in Japan, through the variety of contents offered and their diversity in terms of cultural and technical features from the western or Italian entertainment, there are other aspects of the country that have been stated to be the initial spark of their interest. Popular culture incarnates the access gateway to a variety of aspects, Japanese in origins, that Italian people have explored, enjoyed, and made them part of their ordinary life. The first aspect that is going to be analyzed is food, which is also the second highest aspect that has been chosen in the survey. This is Fabrizio's statement on why he thinks he developed an interest in Japanese food:

R.C. Can you tell me what your choices were for the survey's question:  
*"What aspects of Japanese culture kickstarted your interest in Japan?"*

Fabrizio I chose art, pop culture and if I recall correctly for the third one...  
Not language (*laughs*), because I didn't know a thing about Japanese language before starting to study it. No, it was food.

R.C. (...) Now, what I want to ask you is, for example, in relation to Japanese food: why do you think Japanese food got you interested in it? What aspect of Japanese food made you interested in it?

Fabrizio Well, first of all, because it looks weird. We come from a culture (*the Italian one*) where the food is put on top of a pedestal and if you said you ate a pizza abroad or a carbonara in Tokyo you could get killed



(*ironically, by Italian people*). But aside from the fact that even if we have a few dishes with raw fish, eating it on top of some rice seemed a very weird thing to me. *Naruto*'s ramen<sup>24</sup> too, like, we are not used to eat spaghetti in broth with many ingredients like meat or vegetables, we are used to "*minestrina*"<sup>25</sup> – "*it's a very weird thing, so I'd like to know better about it*", that's what I thought. It's so different from Italian food that I found it interesting.

R.C. So, if I'm not wrong, the word "*weird*" comes out a lot...

Fabrizio Yes (...), because we, as European, put Europe at the center of the world, so when you approach a culture 10000 kilometers far away from you, you think of it as "*weird*". (...) Maybe I had this kind of thoughts when I was 10 years old, now that I'm an adult I think of it in terms of "*it's just a different culture*".

In this case too, just as the popular culture, the main feature of Japanese food, in this case raw fish, sushi and ramen, is its diversity when compared to Italian one. Fabrizio's point of view denotes a change in his perception of typical Japanese dishes throughout his life: he started thinking of it as "*weird*", since he is part of a culture with an incredibly strong, and one could say strict, culinary tradition and then changing opinion through understanding that Italian food (or by an extent, Europe) is not the center of the world and that what was initially weird becomes simply part of a remote culture of a distant country. Combining noodles, meat and vegetables in the same dish therefore becomes just as ordinary as the Italian "*minestrina*", while still retaining the exotic appeal of a different culinary tradition.

The next aspect to be examined is the reasons behind the development of an interest towards Japanese society. Foreseeably, in this case too the juxtaposition of the Italian

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<sup>24</sup> *Naruto* is an extremely popular Japanese manga series, written and illustrated by Masashi Kishimoto, published from 1997 and later transposed into animation. The story is about Naruto, a young orphan boy who wants to become a great ninja and the leader of the village he lives in. His favorite dish is *ramen*, which consists in noodles served in broth, typically with soy sauce and miso and other toppings such as boiled eggs or sliced pork. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naruto>.

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramen>.

<sup>25</sup> "*Minestrina*", in Italian language, is the diminutive word for "*Minestra*", which indicates a simple dish made with broth and sometimes pasta of short cuts (called "*pastina*"). The diminutive word "*Minestrina*" bears in some cases a different meaning from the original one, and it indicates a type of dish generally cooked for babies or people either ill or with specific dietary needs. Source: <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minestrina>.

experience and one own's perception of what Japanese society is highlights a set of cultural differences that are said to be the most curious aspect of the matter. The statements from Franco, 25-year-old, will help in the understanding of this aspect:

R.C. (...) Could you please tell me what of Japanese society sparked your interest and why?

Franco Well, I'd say that since Japanese society is completely different from ours with different rules, I think that the fascination for it, if you are a curious person, is automatic. What piqued my curiosity most was the group dynamics, or well, as far as I know, the fact that the social group comes always before the individual. Generally, I see Japanese society as a machine that never rests, with the mindset of "*let's try to make the group work no matter what*" even if from an individual point of view some critical points are not shown. This aspect is not as pervasive in Italy as it is in Japan, or at least this is my opinion.

R.C. (...) So, if I'm not wrong, your fascination for Japanese society rises from its diversity when compared to the Italian one?

Franco Yes, I think so. Certainly, the interpersonal relationships (*between Japanese people*), or at least from how I see it, are way less simple and direct... It's like if there was a series of "layers" to overcome and you get to the lowest layer after having reached a deep intimacy.

R.C. (...) Why do you find this fascinating?

Franco Well, I'd say because I find some aspects to match with my personality, for example the need of reaching a decent level of intimacy before touching another person. It bothers me so much when someone I don't know touches me and acts friendly with me when they don't have the right to do it. And, I don't know, it looks to me that a friendship relationship is more truthful, almost "earned" if it takes a long time to

get to it. (...) I don't know, if I put an effort in establishing a relationship with someone and I want to do it continuously in time, it's because I care about you and I wouldn't make an effort if I didn't. Well, of course maybe in Italy some things (*meaning affection*) are considered the norm or common sense, but they could be viewed as weird or like trespassing personal boundaries from a Japanese person and vice versa. For example, the kissing on the cheeks (...), or the constant hugging in high school even with people you don't really know: here (*in Italy*) is considered as normal, there (*in Japan*), I don't think it is.

Greta, Japanese language student, expressed her interest in Japanese society too, always in terms of differences between the two countries:

R.C. (...) So, why did Japanese society spark your interest?

Greta Mmh, this is more difficult to answer because it's an interest that came later... I mean, I interpret society as "social issues" and I'm not very interested in this kind of topics generally, so even if I happened to read news about Japan, I wasn't that involved. Or even hot topics like hikikomori<sup>26</sup>, suicide rate... I wasn't really interested in them. But through anime, which show you something about Japanese society and culture, I got slightly more curious and started reading books or articles about, for example, the difference in the family system or the difference in the concept of family, as well as more objective topics such as how the school is structured, how many years do they (*Japanese people*) study and this kind of things... Or, for example, when you watch a sports anime, and you see the characters playing football, you wonder: "*is it like an American college where the activity is offered by the school or is it an unrelated activity like in Italy?*". About social issues, I have never spent time on exploring them: it is when I actually started studying

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<sup>26</sup> *Hikikomori* is a Japanese word used to describe a social phenomenon consisting in people rejecting any form of social interaction by shutting themselves in their houses or even in their rooms. The issue originated in Japan, but it's rapidly expanding in other countries too and, recently, the number of Italian Hikikomori is raising too.

Japanese culture in university that I got more and more interested in these topics. (...) It was about asking myself how things work in Japan compared to here (...).

R.C. (...) Could you please give me a practical example of a social difference you find interesting between Italy and Japan?

Greta Well, one of the most evident ones, when comparing Italy and Japan, is for example the way affection is displayed between people. You can see this in anime too, right? The fact that characters do not behave in a certain way (*with explicit displays of affection*). (...) Another example is the stereotype regarding Japanese workers, who are said to be kind no matter what happens and therefore “fake” ... And in a sense, it’s true, but because I think they manage to differentiate the “public person”, or the worker, from their actual personality. I mean if I go to the tobacconist (*in Italy*) to buy a bus ticket, and the owner is in a bad mood, maybe because he got into an argument with his wife, he is going to treat me badly even if I’m his customer. In Japan, well, my impression could be that the Japanese (*clerk*) is doing okay because he is gentle with me, but maybe he got into an argument with 300 people too... Maybe it’s societal pressure, maybe it’s the strict company policies, I don’t know... But when I went to Japan, the most “impolite”, per say, clerk was just acting a little bit colder than usual and not being actually impolite (...).

From both Greta and Franco’s point of view, the most interesting aspects of Japanese society are the differences that can be traced between Italian social environment and the Japanese one, rather than the social issue related topics inherently tied to Japan. Franco mentions the different ways by which relationships are established and maintained, pointing

out a more indirect and timid approach when it comes to Japanese people. He also admits he prefers this type of socialization, as it is seen as more authentic, rather than the Italian one, which consists in a more intensive use of physical contact even when an intimacy base hasn't been established yet. The displays of affection are brought up by Greta too, who recognizes that the difference in the approach between Italy and Japan is made obvious even by anime characters' behavior. Other than this aspect, Franco mentions the dynamic of social groups, to him more pervasive and oblivious of the individual's needs in Japanese society if compared to Italy. Greta states that her interest towards Japanese society sprouted thanks to the glimpses of social and cultural aspects shown by anime, rather than more prominent issues such as *hikikomori*. Japanese animation showed her a different scholastic structure, a different perception of the concept of family and made her question herself about how these systems work in Japan and if they are similar or different to Italian ones. Her study experience in Japan made her understand, even though realizing this is a stereotype and therefore a non-universal logic, how Japanese people possess the ability to differentiate their behavior when working from their daily life, while Italian people tend to let their emotions influence their job performances.

During the interview, Greta mentions Japanese religion too as one of the aspects that made her interested in Japan first. This is of course relatively linked to society and its mechanisms:

Greta                      Religion is one of the aspects I found most interesting about a country because it influences its entire history (...) and the mentality of its people. I got more interested (*in religion*) when I realized I'm atheist, because I had the chance to discover different religions. (...) I was fascinated by Shintoism because it's a religion which can hardly be defined as such, since differently from Christianity there isn't a prominent religious figure<sup>27</sup> like the Pope, it doesn't have sacred scriptures (*intended as the Bible*), it's a polytheist religion based on nature... (...). The concept of religion is way different from the one in

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<sup>27</sup> While this statement is inherently true, since the emperor was venerated as the descendant of the goddess Amaterasu until the second post-war constitution and no more after that moment, he still retains a fundamental role in the Daijōsai of the sun-goddess ritual, which is still invested with a distinctive religious aura (Breen and Teeuwen, 2010, pp. 168-169).

Italy, since in Japan it is regarded as a part of the social practices rather than being members of a cult. (...) In Italy the most studied religions are the monotheist ones, while the polytheist ones are basically unknown... So, it's fascinating.

As mentioned before, religion belongs to a set of Japanese culture's aspects that are hard to interpret as a young person; therefore, an interest towards this typology of topics is likely to be developed in a more mature age. Nonetheless, it is interesting to mention that Greta has found Japanese religions, in particular Shintoism, to be one of the first aspects that caught her attention beside pop culture and society. In terms of why, she mentions yet again, the diversity, in this case interpreted as the different way by which the concept of religion is considered in Italy and in Japan. According to her statements, she interpreted Shintoism more as a part of Japanese people's lifestyle rather than the belonging to a religious community such as the Christian one. The lack of a prominent figure and the strong connections with the natural world, rather than the teachings written in the Bible, are unusual elements for Christianity, which poses one single God and one sacred book as its pivotal elements. Her atheism allowed her to explore and study polytheist religions, which are said to be ignored by Italian education system in favor of the monotheist ones.

Other than Japanese popular culture, both Roberta and Sara expressed their interest towards literature and arts (to be interpreted as sculpture, architecture, paintings, but not manga, which while they can be considered a form of art indeed, they have been included in the Japanese popular culture category). Starting by arts, Sara mentioned that her passion sprouted during her high school years, when she got to know the Japanism movement and the paintings from European artists such as Monet or Van Gogh:

R.C.                    (...) In relation to Japanese arts, could you please tell me which elements made you interested in them?

Sara Well, it was my fourth year of high school, and I studied Van Gogh, Monet and in general the Impressionist artists and they (*teachers*) teach you: “*There’s a constant reference to Japanese culture, to Japonism, for the vibrant colors and the thick outline of shapes, the chromatic contrasts, the simplicity of the representation and the highlighting of few key elements...*” So, all these concepts are tied to Japonism, and the core of Japanese art made me curious. I thought “*Well, I like Van Gogh, I like Monet, let’s see from where this inspiration comes*” and I started to become interested in Japanese artists.

R.C. The next question is: why did you like these references to Japonism and Japanese art in impressionist artists?

Sara Because... Well having discovered Monet and Van Gogh first, I rationally haven’t connected it (*my appreciation towards these artists*) to the fact that was inspired by Japanese art. It’s when I did the comparison, by digging into the matter and looking for information, that I acknowledged the similitudes. I think I unconsciously traced a connection with anime and manga too, which don’t have a 3D perspective and present well-defined outlines, vibrant colors. (...) Artistic techniques aside, the themes (*presented in works of art*) too... Monet always painted the same pond with water lilies... What becomes protagonist (*in Japanese art*) is something that we culturally and normally are not used to consider important. Culturally we are convinced that complex and baroque themes are to be considered artistic and worthy of value (...). However, the themes generally explored in that (*Japanese*) art, which I approached first, concerns nature or themes that you experience every day when you wake up. Why are they so special? They are special because they are “*normal*” (...).

In regard to Japanese art, Roberta finds it fascinating for reasons different from the ones stated by Sara:

R.C.                    Could you tell me which elements kickstarted your interest towards Japanese art?

Roberta                Well, Japanese art, similarly to literature, is completely different from the one we have (*intended as Italian and European one*), and Asian forms of art, well, Japanese in this case, represent different realities based on the culture from which the artists are from. In Japanese art there are productions regarding the sexual aspects of Japanese people's lives, while in the western counterpart such aspects are almost considered a taboo, even considered in a different way (*meaning in a shameful way*) or aren't represented at all. I think it's the way of thinking at the base that doesn't allow this kind of representations in our culture (...). Above that, everything from the drawings, the painting techniques, the distribution of spaces, the use of colors, the themes... I wouldn't say it's an opposite to western art, but just completely different, and very enjoyable because of it (...). For example, I consider origami to be a form of art too. I like it because even if it's just a folded piece of paper, it takes a good chunk of time to do it and if you give it to someone as a present, it means you really care about that person. It's a very simple but thoughtful way of expressing love for someone, and it's a form of art we don't really have here. (...)

Sara and Roberta both share the same interest in the difference on how Japanese art is depicted when compared to the types they are familiar with. For example, the use of vibrant colors, thick outlines or the simple representations are considered peculiar elements of Japanese art that makes it different from European one. However, while Sara finds the ordinary or natural themes (therefore connected to her daily life experiences) represented in the works of art to be the most appealing ones, Roberta states that it is the distinct cultural aspects she found while enjoying the works of art to be the attractive and interesting. So, when Sara's curiosity is triggered by the common traits between Japanese artists and the impressionists, Roberta's curiosity is piqued by the diversity of the cultural elements represented. In this regard, the latter mentions the presence of works of art with erotic representations, a topic considered as shameful, a taboo, and therefore ignored in western



art. The case of Japanese art is therefore particular because it highlights, unsurprisingly, the different ways Japanese culture can catch the attention of an Italian person: similarly to anime, the variety of contents has the ability to grant gratification to different people, who enjoy art for different reasons and seek different aspects in the works they find appealing.

Japanese literature has been said to be interesting by Sara for the way character's inner dimension and introspection are expressed:

R.C. (...) What about Japanese literature? Could you please tell me which aspects made you interested in it?

Sara Well, I could repeat the same answer I gave you for pop culture and literature. The focus, or the point of view, are posed on different aspects in comparison to the western counterparts. Generally, at least for the genres of literature I'm passionate about, the focus is the inner dialogue, the feelings, the hesitation, and the inconsistencies of a character (...). I feel like there's this pervasive feeling of disappointment and the tendency of not saying things that should be told, (...) and that (*the message of the stories*) is not about doing or not doing something in a certain situation, but the feeling of being involved in that situation and having participated in it.

R.C. You mentioned a "*feeling of disappointment*" a few moments ago. Do you share, or did you in the past, the same kind of feeling.

Sara (*Laughs*) We've been talking about this until 5 minutes ago. To answer the question, yes, absolutely. But the sense of disappointment is not to be intended as regret, because, speaking in general terms, no matter what happens in a situation and no matter how it ends, you learned something from it and the feeling connected to that situation sticks with you. So, the important thing (*about stories in Japanese literature*) is not the situation itself, but the characters' feelings and perceptions in relation to

it, and it doesn't matter if that feeling is a positive or negative one; it is valid and meaningful either way.

While Roberta shares the same interest for Japanese literature as Sara, the reasons behind her appreciation are different:

R.C.                    Could you tell me why did you get interested in Japanese literature?

Roberta                Well, I like Japanese literature because it is different from all the other types of literature I'm used to read, which is mainly the European one. In my opinion, it explores themes that are not represented in the European literature.

R.C.                    Such as?

Roberta                Myths, legends, literature based on the battles or the lifestyle of samurai for example...

R.C.                    (...) Why do you think you perceive these elements as "different"?

Roberta                I think it's because the culture where they are originated from, and the background of the authors is different. Even the rules of writing, or the techniques used are completely different because they are from a culture very distant from the European one (...).

As can be understood by reading the interview's excerpts above, Sara and Roberta's interests towards Japanese literature revolves around its diversity, but the reasons of why said diversity is considered interesting are different from the two interviewees. While Roberta states, one could say more obvious, aspects of diversity, such as the different cultural origins of the pieces of work and the mythology or the historical figures presented in them, Sara points out a difference in how the characters are structured. She states that Japanese authors tend to emphasize the inner struggles of the characters, mentioning a sense of disappointment that is presumably common in many works and to which Sara relates to. In this case, the difference between Sara and Roberta's motivations towards their interest in Japanese literature can be justified by a difference in the educational path the two have

chosen: while Sara has an experience in Japanese language and culture studies at university Roberta doesn't; it is predictable, therefore, that Roberta's interest revolves around much more immediate aspects regarding Japanese culture, while Sara, through her education, has already digested the obvious contrapositions and maintains a more academic approach to the matter.

To conclude this overview of why Italians develop an interest in Japan and its culture, a few opinions about sports will be stated here. The first one is from Tiziana, who realized her interest towards Japan was partly tied to the fact that she practiced karate:

R.C. (...) So, why do you think, of all the countries, you developed an interest in Japan?

Tiziana Well, I have to dig in the past... Way before high school, around when I was 7, I started practicing martial arts mainly for a self-defense matter, but I found it interesting anyway (...). So, now you will be thinking: "*Which was your favorite show when you were 7 years old?*" It was *Power Rangers Ninja Storm*<sup>28</sup> (*laughs*). So, from that point, I convinced my mother, and I started practicing martial arts, which I did for more than 10 years. Other than the lessons, the teacher taught us something about martial arts history in Japan, the numbers and the greetings in Japanese and stuff like that...

R.C. (...) About *Power Rangers Ninja Storm*, what did you like about it?

Tiziana Well, I was only seven so... I remember they showed many fighting scenes with superpowers too (...), but I found the martial arts aspect to be very interesting and it made me think: "*I want to learn that too!*".

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<sup>28</sup> *Power Rangers Ninja Storm* is the eleventh season of *Power Rangers* franchise, released in 2003. The story is about three not so skilled students of the Wind Ninja Academy, who manage to defeat an enemy who threatened the academy with the guidance of their teacher, and became Power Rangers in order to protect the city where they live in. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power\\_Rangers\\_Ninja\\_Storm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power_Rangers_Ninja_Storm).

R.C. Do you think the Japanese cultural elements were influential in your appreciation for the show?

Tiziana I mean, they were ninjas with the black robes and all... But I have a feeling this kind of “*japaneseness*”, presented at the beginning, fades away the more you proceed with the show, so I think that what caught my attention was more the self-defense and martial arts aspect rather than the Japanese cultural aspects randomly showed.

Tiziana states that her interest towards Japan was triggered by practicing martial arts since when she was seven years old. Her approach to martial arts, in turn, has been triggered by a specific show, Power Ranger Ninja Storm, which depicted a series of fighting scenes conducted by ninjas. However, according to Tiziana’s statements, it was not the Japanese elements that caught her attention, but the martial arts depiction itself. The context in which the lessons were conducted, with the lead of a teacher who taught the students about Japanese martial arts history and some words tied to the sport, that made her acknowledge the fact that said sport was Japanese in origins, but not the contents of the sport themselves. Marco has a similar experience regarding, since he started karate when he was a young kid:

R.C. (...) Did you know that karate was a Japanese sport when you started practicing it?

Marco Yes, I knew it because I has been told so, so I knew. But for me it was a passive immersion (*into Japanese culture*), for example for the dojo’s interior design.

R.C. (...) So why did you like karate more than, for example, other popular sports such as volleyball or football?

Marco I’d say because it’s a rather individual sport... I mean I practiced with other people (...) but it’s still a sport with an individual approach focused on the single person, so I think that this aspect put me at ease

somehow. I practiced swimming at the same time, and I can see some parallelisms because that's an individual sport too. I think that the fascination for martial arts was originated by the fact that I watched *Dragonball* or shows like that, but I'm not sure if at the time I made this connection consciously or unconsciously (...).

If one would need to trace the common point between Marco's and Tiziana's experiences, the influence (either conscious or unconscious) of pop culture media in the development of the interest towards martial arts is to be mentioned. The sport itself does not provide elements tied to Japanese culture enough to justify the fact that the two interviewees further deepened their interest in Japan. In Tiziana's case it is the context in which the martial arts lessons were conducted that made her knowledgeable about the fact that karate is a Japanese sport, and in Marco's case the identifying aspect was the dojo's interior design.

In conclusion, outside of Japanese pop culture, which is without any doubt the most influential feature of Japanese culture in the process of the development of an interest towards Japan in Italian people, another set of aspects has been mentioned from the interviewees to have a role in their passion. A parallelism between these two branches of Japan's culture can be easily traced: their diversity in comparison to Italian (and in a broader sense, "*European*" or "*western*") cultural assets. One of the most striking and evident examples is food, which for its recipes and ingredients incarnates an exotic feeling, which is seen appealing by Italian precisely because it is almost absent in the Italian panorama. Other aspects, such as art, literature, religion, or society undoubtedly had a posthumous role in the development of an interest towards Japan, since they carry themes and contents that are too complex to be understood by the mind of a child; as a matter of fact, some interviewees stated that their curiosity towards these elements has been piqued in a subsequent moment of time. Nevertheless, it is always the "*diverse*" aspect of these elements to be highlighted as the reason of its attractiveness. Therefore, the difference in social interaction between Italian and Japanese people, the difference in the telling of romantic stories, the different perspectives and techniques implemented in paintings and novels represent the spark which ignited Italian people's interest towards Japan and led them to further deepen their knowledge about the matter. It is important to mention that, while "*diversity*" is interpreted consciously by the interviewees as a valid motive for their interest, from their statements, the research of something that appeals and satisfies their own

needs emerges. Therefore, while the “*diversity*” is to be interpreted as a comparison between the interviewees’ culture of origin and the culture of origin of the media they are approaching, they (consciously or unconsciously) dive in to that same “*diversity*” to look for something alternative, yes, but familiar to them; possibly something that their culture of provenience do not provide. Franco finds Japanese people’s social interactions to be interesting because he himself doesn’t enjoy the Italian way to approach someone; Greta explores manga to read about romance stories that are different from the ones represented in Italian media; Sara enjoys Japanese literature because she can relate to the sense of disappointment felt by the novel’s characters. The alternatives offered by Japanese culture are regarded as appealing not only because they represent a different reality to the one Italian people are used to, but because said alternatives appease their needs and provide a solution to the elements they are lacking.

## Chapter 2: School environment, isolation, and stereotypes in relation to Japan

As can be observed from the analysis presented in Chapter 1 of this study, a tendency among Italian people to get to know Japan

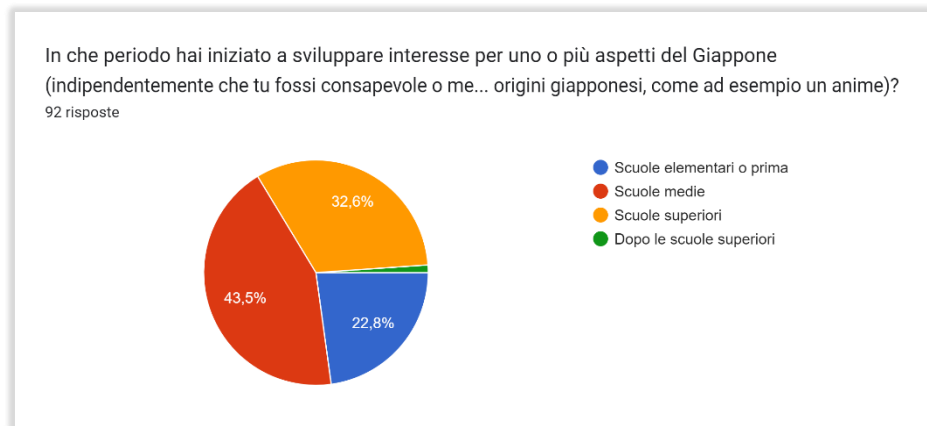


Table 11: Percentage of respondents by period of time when they developed an interest towards Japan. By author.

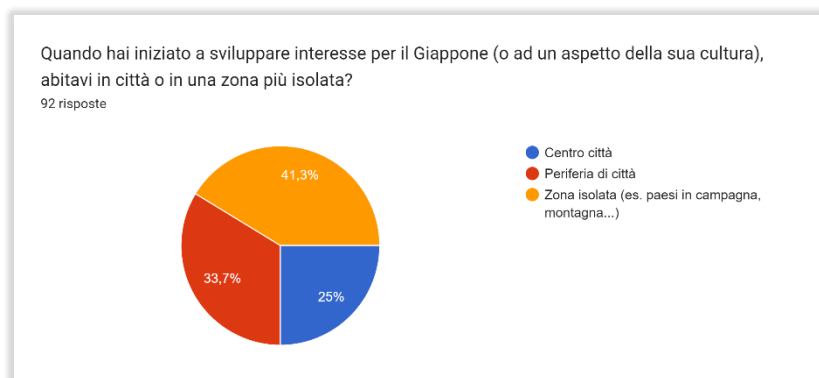
through pop culture and, in a broader sense, easily accessible aspects of said country, emerges. This phenomenon could be explained considering the period of time when their interest has first developed; *Table 11* provides useful information about this aspect. Roughly half of the respondents (43,5%) have replied that they developed an interest in the aspect selected from the list of *Table 7* during middle school (around 11 – 14 years old). Another considerable part of the respondents (32,6%) developed their interest during high school (around 14 – 19 years old); the 22,8% during elementary school or before (until 11 years old). A single respondent answered that they have developed their interest after high school. Mainly two conclusions can be drawn from this data: the first one is that Italian people generally get interested in one of Japanese culture's aspects (independently of the awareness of the Japanese nature of said aspect) during young age, with a tendency of this phenomenon happening during middle school years. The second conclusion is that it is predictable that Italian people develop an interest towards an aspect of Japanese culture that can be easily understood by a young person, such as the pop culture, food, or language, rather than more complex and adult-oriented aspects such as the business world or the job market. This aspect matches with the statements emerged from the interviews I conducted and from the data showed in *Table 10*: Japanese animation and comics have a key role in spreading the image of Japan into the minds of young Italians, making them fascinated about this far and different country. However, while it seems that school environment facilitates the development of this kind of interests, it is not necessarily true; sometimes, said social

context can represent a hostile environment in which be passionate about Japan. This chapter will focus on the experiences of the interviewees, in order to highlight such hardships.

During the elaboration of the survey and the planning of the interview, I have hypothesized a correlation between a condition of isolation and how an interest towards Japan unfolds and further develops. The term “isolation” is to be considered with two different meanings:

- Geographical isolation, which takes into consideration the correlation between the respondents and interviewees’ living place’s geographical conditions and their interest to Japan:
- Social isolation, which is about the presence or absence of constant social interactions in the moment of the development of an interest toward Japan.

On one hand, *Table 12* shows an interesting overview of the location where people started to develop their interest in Japan. 41,3% of the respondents replied to be living in an isolated area



*Table 12: Respondents’ percentage by geographical isolation. By author.*

(such as countryside small towns or mountains villages), while the 33,7% in the city outskirts. Only the 25% of the respondents lived in the city center. The percentage of people interested in Japan is inversely proportionate to the closeness to an urban area. Predictably, people who live in an urbanized city have access to more options when it comes to entertainment, having much more possibilities to take part into sports or social activities, while people who live in the countryside or in the city outskirts have access to a poorer range of possibilities. For this reason, it is possible to assume that lacking alternatives, people from isolated areas have shifted their attention to what was accessible in their hometowns: anime shows broadcasted in tv, and online contents related to them.

On the other hand, *Table 13* provides information about the frequency by which respondents were left home alone on a weekly basis during the period of time they developed an interest towards Japan. The 35,9% of them replied they were spending time



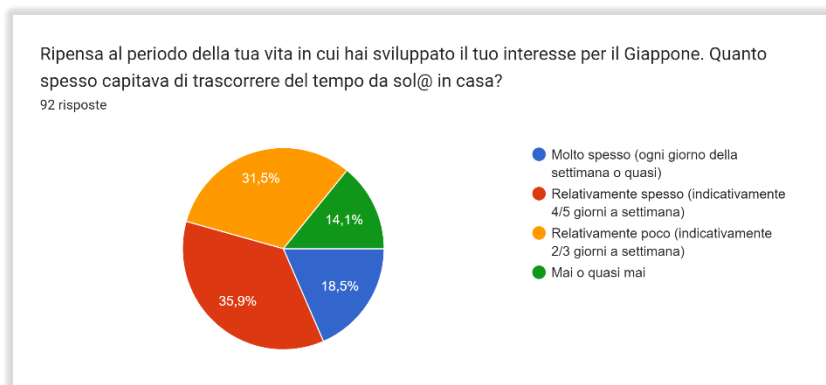


Table 13: Respondents' percentage by the frequency they stayed home alone on a weekly basis. By author.

every) day of the week, and only the 14,1% of them almost never had such experience. By looking at these data, it is safe to assume that among people interested in Japan and its culture there was a tendency, in their school years at least, to remain alone at home during relatively often. In this case, social isolation could have led to an easier approach to make use of entertainment means available inside one's house, namely television and computer. And, especially during the lunch time slot, right after Italian kids get home from school, Japanese animation shows were broadcasted relatively often on the most popular channels<sup>29</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the most prominent actor in the diffusion of Japanese animation in Italy is the television broadcasting company Mediaset Italia S.p.A.: during the 2000's, on channel "Italia 1" four time slots from early morning to the evening were dedicated to the broadcasting of well received anime series such as *One Piece*, *Naruto*, *Detective Conan* and the evergreen *Dragonball*<sup>30</sup>. This dedication to Japanese animation from one of the main Italian broadcasting companies signifies that the public at the time appreciated this typology of content, and for that reason it could have led many children and teenagers to develop an interest to Japan that transcended the mere vision of animated shows.

According to the answers registered in the survey and showed in *Table 14*, television is indeed one of the main ways respondents got in touch with Japan, showing a percentage of 46,7%. But the main access way to Japan and its culture appears to be internet and the influence of social media (69,6%). More face-to-face social approaches such as word of

<sup>29</sup> One of the most popular channels in Italy is Italia 1. It broadcasts a wide range of tv shows, depending on the time slot during the day. For example, in the early morning, right before students go to schools, cartoons can be watched. This happens also during the time slot right after lunchtime and in the afternoon, when the kids get home from school. During the evening, however, generally adult-oriented tv shows are broadcasted. Other than this, most of the channels from free television broadcast mainly soap operas, tv series and generally adult oriented-contents. Channels that are specifically designated for cartoons are K2 or Boing, and sometimes anime appear in the schedule, but there is no specific popular channel for anime.

<sup>30</sup> Source: <https://www.giornalepop.it/la-storia-degli-anime-in-italia/>

alone at home relatively often, from 4 to 5 days a week, and the 31,5% stated this to happen at least 2 or 3 days a week. The 18,5% of them stated they were alone almost every (if not

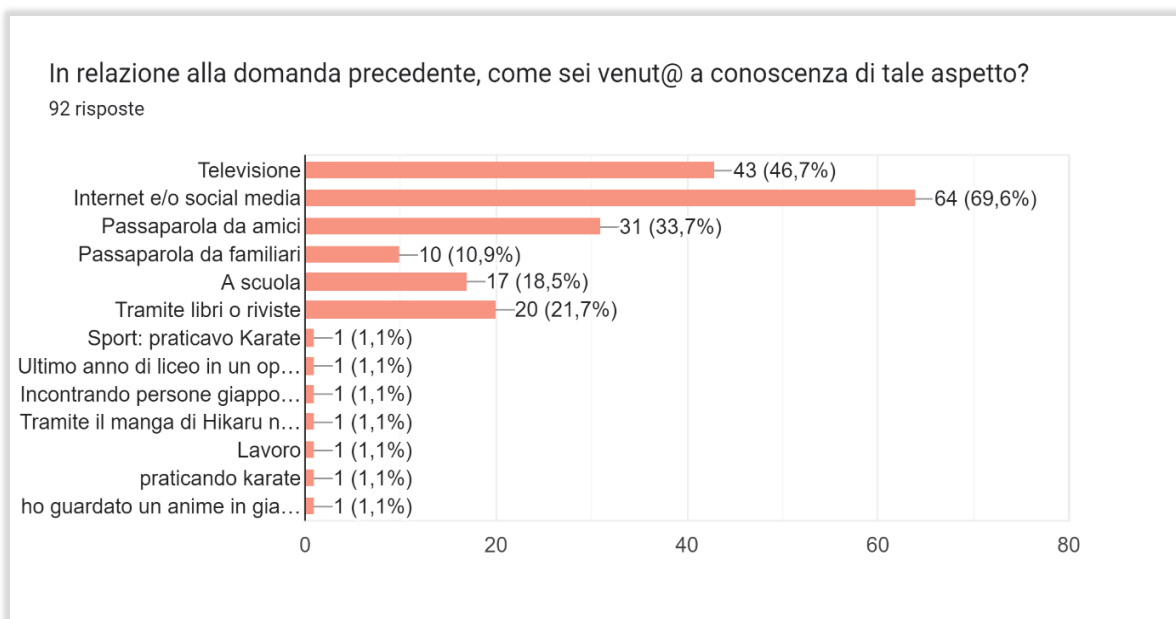


Table 14: Percentage of respondents by the mean through which they got to know Japan or its culture. By author.

mouth by friends or family members (respectively 33,7% and 10,9%) seem to be less efficient means of spreading the knowledge about Japan, but still retain a considerable influence. However, educational institutions like the school appear to have a relatively less important role in this aspect (18,5%), surpassed even by the influence of books and magazines with a percentage of 21,7%. Looking at this data, it is safe to assume that while the percentage related to the word of mouth conducted by friends seems to indicate that even through social approaches it is possible to get to know aspects of Japan, internet and television are the main actors in spreading Japanese culture among Italians.

The low influence of school institutions in the development of an interest in Japan and its culture can be justified by the history and geography program's contents, established by the former Ministry of Education, University and Research. According to the Decree n°211 of October 2010, concerning the national provisions regarding the specific learning objectives related to activities and learning plans included in study programs for "Licei", the history program expects the student, at the end of his scholastic career, to be "knowledgeable about the main events and transformations in the long period of Europe and Italy, in relation to the global history"<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, the document states that "it is useful and desirable to turn attention to different civilizations other than the western one, devoting

<sup>31</sup> Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, *Schema di regolamento recante "Indicazioni nazionali riguardanti gli obiettivi specifici di apprendimento concernenti le attività e gli insegnamenti compresi nei piani degli studi previsti per i percorsi liceali di cui all'art. 10, comma 3, del d.P.R. 15 marzo 2010, n. .... in relazione all'articolo 2, commi 1 e 3, del medesimo d.P.R."*, Decree n°211 / October 2010, Rome, Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, December 2010, p.77.

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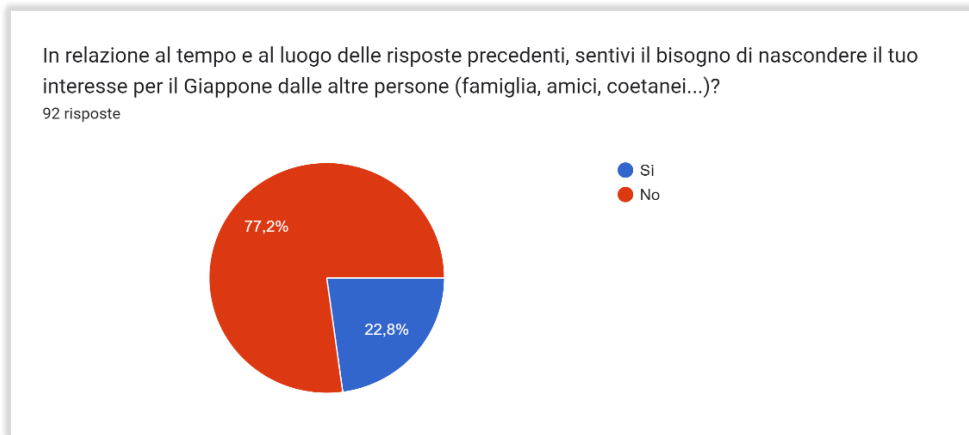


Table 15: Percentage of respondents who, in relation to when and where they developed an interest to Japan, felt they needed to hide it from other people. By author.

civilization during the Roman Empire establishment, to extra-Europe countries conquered during the European colonialism between the XVIII and XIX centuries (...)"<sup>32</sup>. About geography program, which lasts only the first two of five years, it establishes “the study of the contemporary world (...) aimed to analyze aspects of Italy, Europe, contents and other States”<sup>33</sup>. Reading the aforementioned national provisions, subjects such as history and geography focus heavily on the events and the issues of Italy and Europe, and while overviews on extra-European countries are stated as expected, they are always presented in relation to the events of western countries and, above all, are not compulsory. It is up to the teachers’ discretion to include these topics in their teaching schedule, so most likely students won’t be provided, academically speaking, of a deep insight of Japan’s cultural assets and their influence in the global economy.

As emerged from the opinions of some of the interviewees, experimenting interest towards Japan is not necessarily a social activity; in some cases, it even appears to not to be a socially acceptable behavior. *Table 15* shows how many respondents felt the need to hide their interest towards Japan during the period when they started developing it from other people, whether them being family members, peers, or friends. While most of the respondents answered “No” to the question, the 22,8% of them did feel they had to hide the fact they were enjoying spending time in activities related to Japan in some shape or form. What emerges from this data, and from the interviews that will be reported subsequently, is that among Italian young people, and especially in school related environments, lies a form of discrimination towards people who show an interest in Japan or its culture. The supposed reasons of this discrimination will be discussed later while examining the opinions of the

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

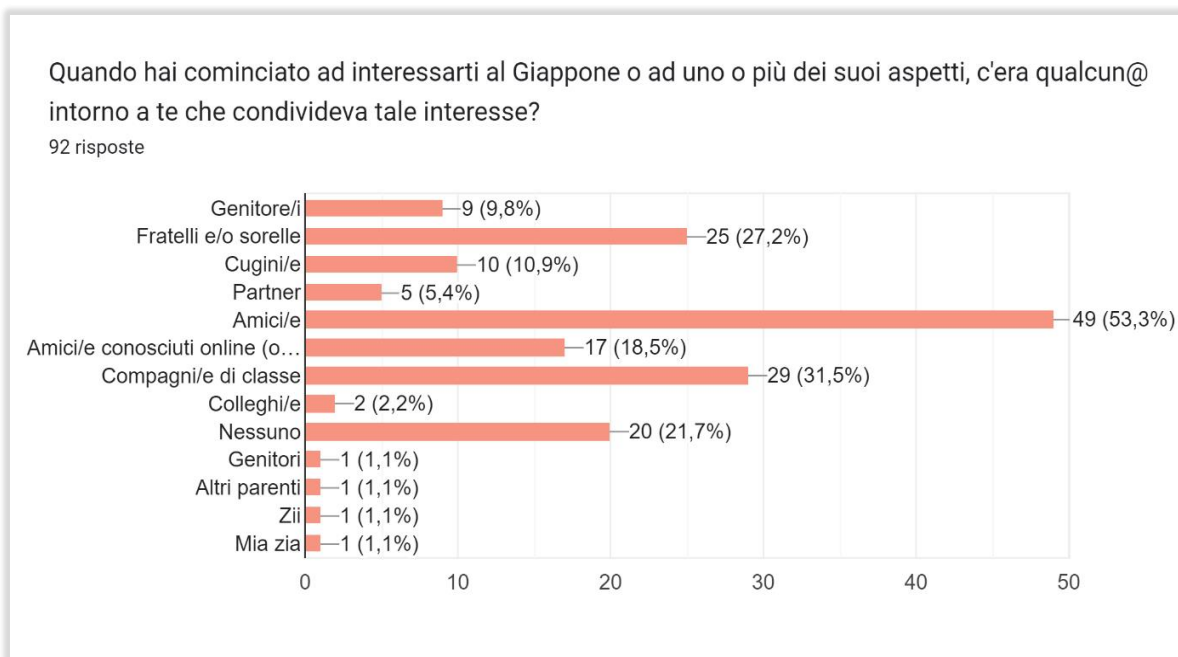


Table 16: People who shared the respondents' interest toward Japan in percentage. By author.

interviewees. The percentage shown in *Table 15* is coherent with the number of respondents who didn't have anyone around them who shared their interest towards Japanese culture (*Table 16*), reaching the 21,7%. However, the majority of them answered they had friends (53,3%), classmates (31,5%), siblings (27,2%) and even cousins (10,9%) or parents (9,8%) who shared their interest towards Japan or one of its aspects. From these data it can be concluded that close family too has a role in the socialization of the respondents, and that it is likely that the respondents got influenced by a family member and made them interested in Japan, or vice versa. However, the socialization linked to this kind of interest is carried out mainly with friends and classmates' presence. Combining the data from the tables presented until now, it is possible to assume that, while the actualization of the interest is expressed individually (for example, consuming anime or manga) in one own's home there is a social component tied to this interest that is presumably carried out in a subsequent moment of time in social environments with friends and trustworthy people.

That being said, even if school is presumably the most important part in a kid and teenager social life, from the statements arisen in the interviews I conducted, it appears not to be a safe context in which one can express their interest towards Japan. To be more specific, people with such hobbies can face stereotypes and prejudice that are perpetrated towards them, simply for enjoying anime and manga. In this sense, middle school appears to be a crucial moment in the development of a person's character, and, as consequence, a shift in their interests. For many of the interviewees, the passage to middle school appears

to be a critical phase for young Italians, not only regarding their interest towards Japan, but in general when trying to integrate into the new school environment. These are some of the interviewees' experiences related to this part of their life:

R.C. (...) Speaking of elementary school, do you think that your passion for Japan and its culture could have been a reason for discrimination?

Tiziana Ah, I don't think it was the case when I was that young. Growing up I started hiding these things because I found it embarrassing, maybe around the first year of middle school. I couldn't recognize similar interests in kids around me and it happened I tried to talk about it to them, but they reacted saying: "*That's so weird!*", so probably that's when I started hiding it. It was in high school when I met a few classmates who were somewhat interested, so I started talking about it exclusively to them, but I still felt I needed to hide it from other people because it was still considered something weird and not to be proud of (...).

R.C. So, in middle school you hid your interest toward Japan from other people?

Tiziana Yes, because I could see that no one around me had similar interests, and when I tried to talk about it, I didn't receive positive feedbacks, so I saw it (*her interest*) as something that distanced me from others. I think that's a period of one's life (*middle school*) when many changes happen, and there are many other things that make you feel bad... Feeling rejected from the people you need to spend 5 hours a day every day with is not the best, so you do everything you can to make people accept you.

R.C. But then my question is: "Why would Japanese culture be a reason for rejection from others?"

Tiziana            Because at that time, the “*diverse*” was something weird and that you shouldn’t appreciate because it was too different and incomprehensible for most people, so if you like it then you must be weird too. I think people couldn’t separate someone’s interests from their personality (...). Since I didn’t want to be perceived in a certain way, I tended to hide my interest for some things.

R.C.                Did you have someone you could share your interest in Japan with during elementary and middle school?

Tiziana            No.

R.C.                Did the situation change when you got to high school?

Tiziana            I had three or four classmates who shared my same interests and one in particular introduced me to many (*anime*) shows (...). I used to watch the shows she suggested because I liked them in the first place, so I did it gladly, but also because we had something in common to talk about (...). New school, new people. So, you try to make friends and you can create a relationship talking about a show both know (...). I still tended to hide this from other classmates though, because usually they told us: “*You watch Chinese cartoons*” or “*What are you doing?! You’re so weird...*” so I didn’t talk about this to them (...).

Tiziana statements highlight how the three main phases of Italian education system, elementary, middle, and high school, have a different impact in people interested in Japan and Japanese culture in general. Her experience is quite similar to the ones of other interviewees and helps in defining a common ground shared by most of them. In elementary school, she denies the fact that her passion about Japan could have been a motivation for other people to discriminate her. It is in middle school when she started feeling embarrassed about her own hobbies. She stated she tried to talk to her classmates about it, but the reaction she got was one of rejection. And the fear of rejection was, according to her opinion, a reason important enough to decide to not share her passion for Japan to anyone, especially

to people she had to meet every day. Eventually, once in high school, Tiziana met a few classmates with whom she could talk about anime, but the feeling of shame and incomprehension coming from other people remained.

When asked why, according to her opinion, people tend to discriminate Japanese culture enjoyers, she mentioned that anime are “*diverse*”, and therefore, for many people, difficult to understand. From her statements, they did not show any kind of interest in knowing more about, for example, anime; on the contrary, they are very fast in criticizing and stereotyping her passions. On this aspect, it emerges that, at least in middle and high school, people tend to overlap one’s personality with their interests, and therefore elaborate a judgement on their entire being based merely on what they enjoy. Moreover, “others”, intended as people not interested in or unaware of Japanese culture, are perceived the majority, so Tiziana felt she had to adapt herself to the predominant group and hide her interests as much as possible to blend in and avoid discrimination as much as possible.

This is Marco’s point of view regarding the correlation between school and his interest in Japan:

R.C. (...) Let’s consider the situation from a geographical point of view: when you started consuming Japanese media where did you live? How was the situation from a scholastic point of view?

Marco When I started watching anime and reading manga, I was in elementary school, and I lived in between the city outskirts and a countryside small town, so not really in the city center but I wasn’t completely isolated either (...). I’m sure that in that period there were two series that were watched by boys: *Dragonball* and *Lupin*<sup>34</sup> (...). Those were the ones boy watched, because girls didn’t really watch shows with fights and stuff (...). I remember that at that time I used to watch *Sailor Moon*<sup>35</sup> too,

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<sup>34</sup> Lupin III is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Monkey Punch, first published in 1967 and later adapted into an animation series. The story is about Lupin III, grandson of the infamous Arsène Lupin, his mates Jigen and Goemon, and the charming Fujiko Mine. They usually try and steal treasures, jewels and get involved in mysteries while being incessantly chased by Inspector Zenigata. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lupin\\_the\\_Third](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lupin_the_Third).

<sup>35</sup> *Sailor Moon* is a Japanese comic series written and illustrated by Naoko Takeuchi, published for the first time in 1991 and later adapted into an animation series. The story is about a schoolgirl named Tsukino Usagi, who leads a team of girls able to transform to fight enemies who want to steal or exploit the Legendary Silver Crystal,

differently to other boys, but watching anime wasn't really seen as weird because everyone watched what there was in TV (...). The term "*anime*" wasn't known in elementary school: watching an anime wasn't that different from watching, I don't know, *Johnny Bravo*<sup>36</sup>... It was more or less the same thing. Maybe it looked weird that I watched *Sailor Moon*, because it was considered "for girls", and that could have been a reason for isolation, but it wasn't that serious.

R.C. So, from what you say, beside of the boys - girls distinction, there was no discrimination for watching anime at that time, right?

Marco No, at that time no.

R.C. What about middle school? Did the situation change or not?

Marco It changed, but negatively. I think that middle school period is the worst one for kids because they start to feel the need to become "older" (...). There the clashes (*with other kids*) start... You start smoking, you start going out... So, it's the start of all those distinctions that will get wider and wider with time, but I don't think that factor (*consuming Japanese media*) was the reason I got discriminated, simply because I didn't mention it (*when talking to other kids*).

R.C. Were you afraid of mentioning it because you would have gotten discriminated if you did it? Or was there another reason?

Marco Probably yes, that too, but I really never bonded with anyone during middle school, except for someone who I played sports with, so in class

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an artifact that could cause the destruction of the Solar System. Every Sailor is named on a different planet or celestial body. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sailor\\_Moon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sailor_Moon).

<sup>36</sup> *Johnny Bravo* is an American animated series broadcasted in Italy by Cartoon Network. The plot revolves around Johnny Bravo, a stereotypically handsome and tough guy who tries to date girls failing, while getting involved in funny or comic situations. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny\\_Bravo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny_Bravo).



I only had superficial relationships and I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. (...)

R.C. (...) Can you tell me something about high school?

Marco So, high school has been an interesting period of my life... Negatively interesting though (*laughs*) (...). During the second year of high school, I watched Evangelion, and that show completely changed my approach in enjoying these kind of media (...). I was coming out from a period when I was rather isolated and lonely, middle school to be specific. Then, I put on a façade of “*I don't care*”, almost rebellious towards what society expected me to be, like being good at school and other things. So, I read manga in class as a form of rebellion towards other people's judgement and criticism, and even if most people saw me as the weird one, there was a group of four or five people who were interested in manga, anime, videogames. For this reason, I was always with them (...). I'll be honest: in terms of manga and anime, I was getting along pretty well with that group of people... Sometimes we chose something to watch together (*individually, but at the same time*) and we talked about it later and so on. When it comes to people outside this group, I was rather indifferent to them. (...) It was more a passive kind of discrimination; we were indifferent to each other, but they never chose me as a target and isolated me specifically.

R.C. Could you expand a little bit more what you mean by indifference?

Marco Let's say we weren't completely indifferent to each other, but if in a conversation it happened that I mentioned some reference to those things (*meaning Japanese culture*), the conversation either ended there or shifted to another topic. They wouldn't want to talk to me unless they needed something from me. Classic, I'd say.

Marco's experience gives more details about what it means to be interested in Japanese media in elementary school. According to his statements, there was no sort of discrimination

whatsoever towards people watching Japanese cartoons, although he mentions a difference in what boys and girls watched. Among boys, the most popular shows were Lupin and Dragonball, more action and comedy-oriented shows which are stated not to be appreciated by girls. It is not clear what girls preferred to watch, but Sailor Moon was not considered for boys, and this is when a light form of discrimination emerges: Marco, whose gender assigned at birth is male, enjoyed watching *Sailor Moon*, a show “for girls”, and it was something seen negatively presumably by other boys in the class. In this case, the Japanese origin of the show has nothing to do with the discrimination he suffered from: Marco even stated that the word “anime” was not known by kids and watching a Japanese show was no different than watching an American one, such as *Johnny Bravo*. It was Marco’s habit to enjoy shows socially perceived as “for girls” that caused other people’s aversion.

In middle school, however, the situation was different. The interviewee stated that middle school is the period when kids start to feel the need to become older, and to adapt their behavior to the one they consider proper for an adult person. While Marco stated he was never bullied because of his passion for Japanese culture, he admits he never shared it with anyone to avoid possible discrimination caused by his passions. His experience, just like Tiziana’s, highlights a form of social isolation, such as described before, intended as the lack of people to share one own’s interests with. He couldn’t form any meaningful relationship with his classmates in middle school and therefore he had no one to talk about Japanese culture.

In high school, Marco, similarly to Tiziana’s experience, finally found a group of people who shared his same interests and with who he could be open about them. However, contrary Tiziana, he stopped hiding his appreciation for Japanese media; he even started to purposely show it in social contexts as a form of rebellion towards society expectations. It is interesting to note that, as a form of rebellion towards what it is perceived as “normal” by society, he chose to consume Japanese comics during class hours. The implicit meaning of this action is that Marco himself recognized that reading comics was not a socially acceptable behavior in the context he was living in, and therefore doing it would have challenged society expectations despite his classmates’ judgement and criticism. Other classmates’ behavior towards Marco’s rebellious acts is not described as aggressive or direct, but as a form of mutual ignoring. Social interaction between them occurred only in specific occasions, when the classmates needed something from him, but no more than that.

Marco's point of view unveils the necessity, from middle school onwards, to fit into the expectations imposed by society among many teenagers and said expectations do not include the enjoyment of Japanese culture and products. Regarding this aspect, Fabrizio's statements will follow here:

R.C. (...) Why didn't your parents or peers from your hometown watch anime?

Fabrizio Because it was considered something that losers do, simply.

R.C. Why, in your opinion?

Fabrizio Well, if you ask me, middle school years are the years of silliness (*laughs*) (...), and either because your tastes change or because your friends say: "*Why are you still doing these kinds of things?*" and you stop doing the things you did when you were a kid.

R.C. Could the fact that anime are tied to Japan be the reason of them being considered something losers watch?

Fabrizio It might be. (...) Some people might think that anime are such an unreal and sci-fi thing that you get so into it that eventually, I don't know, you end up wanting to become a Pokémon trainer. They can look so different from things that are more realistic that people can say to you "*maybe it's time to grow up*"; it's something imposed by society. (...) During middle school you start watching tv series because they are more realistic, and you think of them as closer to you. It doesn't really matter if you are 12

years old and watch *Breaking Bad*<sup>37</sup>, where they cook meth all the time, or *Suits*<sup>38</sup> which is about people going to trials and stuff, (...) they (*society*) impose you to seem less of a child and more of an “adult”. They tell you: “*Try to blend in a little*”.

From Fabrizio’s statements, two important elements emerge concerning the relationship between middle school social environment and one’s passion towards Japanese media in particular. The first one is the aforementioned societal pressure coming from classmates: comments such as “*Maybe it’s time to grow up*” reveal that the common opinion about Japanese animation is that it is considered for kids, and since they feel the need to adapt to the new environment and be “*less of a child and more of an adult*”, society expects them to push away all the elements connected to the previous phase of their life. For this reason, students abandon anime for adult-oriented tv shows to fit into the expectations of society. This presumably creates a divergence among people who simply changed their interests and tastes, shifting from anime to other activities, and people who still enjoy Japanese animation.

The second aspect, which is partly noticeable in Tiziana’s experience too, is the incomprehension of Japanese media coming from people not interested in them, which spreads even more the gap between them and people who enjoy watching anime and reading manga.

The patterns unveiled in the previous interviews’ sections are quite similar to the ones emerged from Franco’s experience:

R.C. (...) During which period of your life did you start developing an interest towards Japanese culture?

Franco I think around the end of middle school and the beginning of high school, but it started growing deeper from the third year of high school

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<sup>37</sup> *Breaking Bad* is an American tv show created and produced by Vince Gilligan and released for the first time in 2008. The plot is about the relationship between Walter White, an overqualified high school chemistry teacher afflicted by cancer, and his former student Jesse Pinkman. They start producing methamphetamine in order to pay Walter’s health expenses and in doing so, they face criminals and dangers of all sorts. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breaking\\_Bad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breaking_Bad).

<sup>38</sup> *Suits* is an American legal drama created and written by Aaron Korsh, firstly released in 2011. The story is about Mike Ross, who has an eidetic memory, and Harvey Specter, a remorseless lawyer, who work together to win lawsuits and close cases. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suits\\_\(American\\_TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suits_(American_TV_series)).

onwards. I mean, I started watching anime way before, with *Dragonball* (...), but then I started reading manga at the end of middle school and the only chances I had to talk about these things were with my cousin, who lived in Calabria, and another guy who lived in the house in front of mine, in the small town I lived in. Then, during the third year of high school I met some of my best friends and I started experiencing my interest in a deeper way, I got access to internet, and I started watching informative videos about notorious Japanese comic series and videos that criticized this form of art too (...).

R.C. So, from what you say, you started having an interest towards Japanese pop culture before middle school, right?

Franco I think so, yes... Unconsciously though. I don't remember if during elementary school I was aware of the fact that *Dragonball* was a Japanese animation series, but I think at the time of middle school I was. (...)

R.C. (...) You mentioned before when you were a kid you lived in XXX (*the interviewee's hometown*), right?

Franco Yes, correct.

R.C. And in that place, beside you and your neighbor there was no one else interested in Japanese culture, is that correct?

Franco More or less... Actually, there was some kind of common interest (*among kids in elementary school*), there were some "passing fashions" related to what Mediaset was broadcasting at the time. There has been the period of time when everyone was playing with *Yu-Gi-Oh*<sup>39</sup> cards,

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<sup>39</sup> Yu-Gi-Oh! is a Japanese comic series written and illustrated by Kazuki Takahashi, serialized starting from 1996 and adapted as an animation series later. The plot is about Yugi Mutō, who awakens a millenary spirit solving a

there was the period of time when everyone was playing with *BeyBlade*<sup>40</sup> toys, but these things weren't their main interest; generally, kids played football, went around the city by bicycle causing a ruckus... Well, I couldn't play football and I wasn't willing to cause a ruckus with my bicycle, also because my mother wouldn't let me (...). I mean, I remember having some conversations about *Dragonball* with the "popular kids" in elementary school, but it wasn't something to be proud of. Especially in middle school, and especially girls, people would have mocked you if you had interests towards cartoons. To them, they were too childish, which makes me laugh because at 13 years old you still are a child. I remember this episode of me setting a soundtrack from the *Naruto* anime series as my mobile phone's ringtone, and one day it rang during class and one of the girls looked at me and said "*Really? What are you, a baby?*" (...)

R.C. (...) So middle school is the period of time when one would start being bullied or discriminated for this type of interests?

Franco I wouldn't say one would get to the point of getting bullied, but maybe discrimination or being made fun of, yes... Generally, in elementary school there is no conflict whatsoever regarding this aspect. From middle school onwards, kids start developing specific interests and if that specific interest gets associated with your identity, it's like your entire personality revolves around that aspect. So yeah, I'd say that in middle school mockery or discrimination start... Maybe you get avoided, or considered more childish than others and definitely you are not considered as one of the popular kids, unless you had mainstream interests... You keep your interest in Japan for yourself.

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mysterious puzzle owned by his grandfather. A popular trading card game is based on the comic series. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yu-Gi-Oh!>.

<sup>40</sup> *Beyblade* is a Japanese comic series written and illustrated by Takao Aoki, serialized for the first time in 2004. The manga was published to promote the sales of "Beyblades", spinning top toys developed by Takara Tomy. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beyblade\\_\(manga\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beyblade_(manga)).

R.C. So, in middle school, did you feel the need to hide your interest in Japan?

Franco I knew that it would have not been seen positively by others...  
Sometimes yes, I avoided talking about it, sometimes I didn't care.

R.C. What about high school? Did the situation change?

Franco I think that from high school onwards I stopped caring completely (*about other people's judgement*). Once you find your group of friends you can safely talk about this (*interest towards Japan*) with, or even show it to external people who consider you a loser (...), and you stop caring. I had my group of friends, I was happy with them, I was being myself enjoying my interests, why should I hide? (...).

Again, a similar pattern concerning how people with an interest in Japanese culture are seen can be noticed Franco's experience. In elementary school, there was no issue whatsoever if people watched Japanese cartoons; actually, according to his experience, it was even possible to have a conversation with the "popular kids" about the mainstream shows broadcasted by Mediaset, which everyone watched. However, being a follower of said "passing fashions" did not mean being "popular", and these forms of entertainment were already considered second-class hobbies, if compared to what were perceived the mainstream ones, such as playing football or going out with friends by bicycle. Even if everyone played with *Yu-Gi-Oh* cards or *BeyBlade* toys, it wasn't something "*to be proud of*". With these statements, Franco implicitly admits that already in elementary school there was a clear distinction between activities that were socially acceptable, and activities that were not, regardless of how funny and entertaining they could have been. This, consequently, will lay the ground for the viral diffusion of the stigma towards people interested in anime in middle and high school.

Once again, middle school is indeed stated to be the period when mild discrimination towards people who enjoy Japanese media. According to Franco's experience, people with such interests didn't get bullied consistently, but suffered other forms of discrimination such as isolation, avoidance, or mockery. Showing one own's interest in Japan is considered by people a childish behavior that should be limited to elementary school, and therefore

enjoyers of such media have to keep said interest for themselves in order to fit in the new “adult” environment. Another aspect that arises in Franco’s words, similar to the one emerged from Tiziana’s experience, is the inability to distinguish between one’s personality and their interest. In other words, in middle (and high school too) there was the perception that students couldn’t help but overlap a set of stereotyped characteristics, tied to the interest they enjoy, with their personality. So, while having mainstream hobbies made someone cool, or, in other words, “adult”, enjoying Japanese animation or cartoons in general made them childish, or, even worse, “losers”, citing Fabrizio’s words.

Eventually, Franco too managed to find in high school a group of people who he could share his interests with and be fully himself without caring about other people’s judgement. It is safe to assume that a solid group of friends (even if they represent the minority if compared to the other classmates) is fundamental in learning how to deal with external pressure and criticism and develop the courage to be oneself. In other words, a “safe space” where to explore without fear one’s interests is needed in order to stop being affected by other people’s opinions and experience one own’s passions freely.

Luca too underwent similar circumstances in elementary and middle school, but had a significantly different experience in high school:

R.C. (...) In elementary school, was the fact that you watched anime a reason for getting discriminated?

Luca No, not in elementary school. I don’t think so. Let’s say in elementary school I never felt the need to share what I was watching to my friends, and I have never talked about it in school, but I think that if I had done it, there wouldn’t have been problems at all. In my opinion, in middle school everything changes. I started to miss someone to talk to about manga, anime, and videogames, and I started to feel like if talked about it, I would have been considered an outcast, a weird kid. I mean, if you randomly talked about the mainstream ones (*shows*), like *Mila e Shiro*<sup>41</sup>,

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<sup>41</sup> *Mila e Shiro* is the common short way to refer to *Mila e Shiro, due cuori nella pallavolo*, which is the Italian title of *Attacker You!*, a Japanese manga series by Jun Makimura and Shizuo Koizumi, adapted later into an animation series. The plot is about a schoolgirl named You, who is passionate about volleyball and dreams to become a



there were no problems at all because everyone in Italy know about them. But if you showed a little deeper interest in these aspects, I think in middle school you could have some problems (*with people*).

R.C. Why?

Luca Because in middle school people start to want to be cool (...), to be part of a group of people who share the same interests, and it's the moment when people start to think anime are for kids (...).

R.C. So, you had no one you could share your interest with during middle school, right?

Luca Correct, but it wasn't bothering that much because I used to play football with my classmates, so I talked to them about that or about what was happening in school. It was an intensifying feeling (*the lack of someone to share his interests with*), I felt it less in middle school and more in high school (...).

R.C. (...) Did the situation evolve in high school, either positively or negatively?

Luca In high school it got worse, because I didn't have anyone I could talk about these things (*Japanese pop culture*) to, and since in those years I started having issues at my feet and back I had to gradually stop playing football, which is my other big passion (...), so I found myself without anyone I could talk to about anything. (*Regarding Japanese popular culture*) I have never even tried talking about it, because I could sense that I couldn't with them (*his classmates*). (...) In those years, I had a scooter, so I started going out with a group of friends from my

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member of the Japan's national women's volleyball team. In Italy, the characters' names have been changed (You is called Mila), and the adaptation focused more on the love story with Shiro. Source: [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mila\\_e\\_Shiro\\_-\\_Due\\_cuori\\_nella\\_pallavolo](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mila_e_Shiro_-_Due_cuori_nella_pallavolo).

hometown. We went out at night, but they made fun of me because I wasn't talking that much... I have never answered back to them, but I mean, what did they want me to talk about? (*Both laughing*) They only talked about clubs, scooters (...), so eventually I ended up staying at home (...).

R.C. (...) Did you feel the need to hide your interests from other people?

Luca Yes, I think so. Considering the classmates I had, it would have created me some problems (...).

R.C. (...) So, from what you say, you never had anyone you could share your interest towards Japanese culture with from elementary school to high school, correct?

Luca Yes.

R.C. How did you manage to solve this situation?

Luca (*Laughs*) How did I solve it? I solved it by going to university, almost ten years after high school. (...) I didn't even care about knowing people specifically interested in anime, I would have been happy with someone a little curious about Japan in general. (...) Excluding people I met in Japan, the only person interested in these things I met after school was a colleague I worked with in Decathlon, who was into cosplay<sup>42</sup> (...).

Luca described a similar condition to the one of the previous' interviewees in regard to elementary and middle school. Even if he didn't share his interests to other classmates (because he didn't feel the need to), he stated there would have been no problems in doing so while in elementary school, reconfirming the pattern emerged from the other

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<sup>42</sup> Cosplay is a type of performative art in which people wear costumes and fashion accessories based on the characters from movies, anime, tv shows, books, videogames and so on, often role-playing the character their look is based on. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosplay>.

interviewees' words. Furthermore, once again the change in social perception of Japanese media happened in middle school, where people who watch anime are stated to be considered “*weird*” or “*outcasts*”. Other than this, he stated that in middle school, students start to “*want to become cool*”, which can safely be intended as wanting to adhere to the social expectations driven by the desire to become adults and start seeing anime as an attribute associated with elementary school kids. Fortunately, Luca's other passion was football, which can easily be considered one of the most (if not the most) popular hobbies among Italian boys, so he had regardless the chance to socialize through such activity. Just like Franco stated, Luca admits that talking about popular anime shows in Italy, known by more or less everyone, is considered acceptable, but showing a deeper interest in anime (presumably meaning unpopular shows) becomes a problematic behavior.

However, while the previous interviewees managed to find classmates who shared their interest in Japanese culture, Luca could not. He felt like if he tried to talk about it to them, they would have rejected him in some way. In addition, the injuries in his feed and back made him stop playing football, so in the end he found himself with no one to talk to about his interested, living a long period of social isolation. His efforts to socialize with people from his hometown were meaningless, as they didn't have anything in common other than having a scooter. As a consequence, during his school year he never had anyone to share his interest in Japanese culture with, and he had to attend to university to find someone who did. Luca suffered from a heavy form of social isolation, especially regarding his interests, and his passion for Japanese animation never actually helped him to socialize with someone.

Here will follow Greta's experience, which highlights a different point of view from the one of other interviewees:

R.C.                    (...) According to your experience, in elementary school could the fact that you were interested in Japan be a reason for discrimination?

Greta For me personally, I don't think so, because what was Japanese in my life at that time were anime that I watched on tv, and it was something everyone did. It depended on the show actually... There were some of them that didn't necessarily make you popular (*for watching them*), but everyone watched them... I happened that some girls had the dolls based on the characters from those anime, and if you had them too you were considered "in", instead of being considered weird. For example, Pokémon were extremely popular, and if you had the cards or the videogames you were not considered a loser if you were interested in that. I happened to watch less popular anime, so I didn't talk about it with anyone, but it wasn't a matter of shame, I wasn't scared of being made fun of. I simply knew no one watched it (...).

R.C. What about middle school? Did the situation change?

Greta In middle school I didn't care that much about Japanese culture if I have to be honest. There were only the usual anime I watched after school that were part of my daily routine, but I think I have never shared this to other people because they were not interested. So, if I talked about it, it was with family members, like my siblings or my uncle, because they watched anime too with me. But in this case too I don't think it would have been a reason to be bullied or to be ashamed. I think if I had tried to talk about it, they (*classmates*) would have told me: "*Sorry, I don't watch anime*" and that's it (...).

While Greta's words confirm some of the patterns already emerged from the other interviewees' statements, her experiences is slightly different when considering the peer pressure to stop enjoying Japanese media. During both elementary school and middle school, she never spoke about her passion for Japanese anime to other kids, just like the other interviewees, but she never felt the need to hide it for the fear of being rejected or made fun of. She simply admits that she watched unpopular shows, and it would have been meaningless to brought them up in a conversation because she knew no one would have

watched them. Greta even states that, in elementary school, being a fan of popular shows and buying the merchandising based on them could make someone more popular to the eyes of other kids, contrary to what other interviewees seem to think. It must be said that she had a few family members who she could share her passion for anime with, so even if her classmates didn't care about anime, she still had the chance to talk about it to someone, preventing her the experience of social isolation other interviewees had to go through. About the influence of Japanese animation in Italian people's lives, Greta stated the following:

Greta            (...) Japanese culture became part of Italian people's lives when they were kids. Our generation has been heavily influenced by it. Consider that in elementary school we didn't have a smartphone, we didn't have that many channels in television, that many games, so either you went outside to play, or you watched anime on tv. That's what you could do. So basically, everyone watched an anime at one point of their lives. Maybe most of them are not interested or don't like it anymore, but they would never get to the point of mocking someone for watching them (...), even though I'm aware exceptions exist. (...) Let's say that I have always liked reading in general, so reading manga was only a part of my passion; I used to read books, fan fictions, articles, blogs... If I have had a strong passion for (*exclusively for*) anime and manga, showing up at school with Pokémon-themed hoodies or Pokémon cards at eighteen years old, probably it would have been completely different (*other people's opinion on her passion*).

According to her opinion, it is natural that Italian people (supposedly around her age) were influenced by Japanese culture since anime were one of the main forms of entertainment. Even if it didn't become a long-lasting passion, people would still accept someone watching anime since it was a part of their life too, sooner or later. However, Greta herself stated that enjoying manga and anime was only a fraction of the things she enjoyed doing, and since she didn't spoke about it with classmates in elementary and middle school, she presumably managed so socialize through her other interests. Reading her last words, it is safe to assume that if her interests revolved exclusively around manga and anime and if she adopted certain

behaviors (such as wearing Pokémon-themed hoodies) at an older age, other people would have criticized her.

It is however interesting to analyze her experience in high school, because it deviates completely from the ones of the other interviewees:

R.C.                   And what about high school?

Greta                   Initially, I lost interest in anime and stuff because my lessons' schedule overlapped with the broadcasting time in television and so on... However, around second or third year of high school I actively started to look for new things to watch and read and I even found two or three people who gave me suggestions and who I could talk about it with (...). In high school I had classmates who were definitely not interested in Japanese culture and if I talked about it to them, they would listen to me, but they didn't show interest. It happened to me that I had some friends who weren't into Japanese culture, but if we met in the evening and suggested them to watch an anime (...), they were okay with it. So, I managed to involve them, but because they were open-minded enough to understand that even if it's a Japanese product, they might like it regardless.

Like some other interviewees, Greta had a few classmates who shared her interest in Japanese animation and manga and who suggested her new media to enjoy. However, what's different in her experience is that she could talk about it even with classmates who apparently were not interested at all. They would listen to her without judgement but would not deepen the topic beyond that level. The most remarkable aspect, however, is Greta's proactive behavior in trying (sometimes, succeeding) to involve other people in watching a Japanese show when they hanged out in the evening. This leads to think that, while the presence of a stigma towards people interested in Japanese culture still persists, its perceived entity is different among the interviewees. For example, Luca stated that he "could sense" that other students in high school would not be interested in his passions and therefore he thought they would reject him for them. However, according to his words, he did not possess proof of this, and it can be hypothesized that his passive behavior was led

by a prejudice towards his classmates. On the contrary, Greta never excluded the possibility of her classmates being interested in Japanese culture, and therefore she managed to involve someone in enjoying her hobbies with her. However, it must be said that Greta specifically mentions that the people she tried to involve were, in her opinion, open-minded enough to accept that they might like a media even if it is Japanese in origins. This could mean that Greta herself implicitly knows about the stigma towards this set of interests and that it is not something to suggest indiscriminately to everyone.

To conclude the overview of the relationship between school environment and Italian people interest in Japan, Roberta's statements will follow here. Roberta, 41 years old, is the oldest among the interviewees and gives perspective on what meant enjoying Japanese media during the 80's and 90's:

R.C. (...) You mentioned that you started having interest in Japanese anime in elementary school. Did you have someone around you who was passionate about it?

Roberta When I was young, so beginning of the 80's, I don't think my family members were into it... (*As for the other kids*), I think it was because those shows (*anime*) were the only ones that were broadcasted, aside from Mickey Mouse shows... I don't think it was an actual interest towards Japan, it was more a habit. Everyone liked them, not because they were Japanese media, but because that's what was on tv.

R.C. So, in elementary school there was someone who was interested in anime, right?

Roberta Yes, more or less everyone was.

R.C. And there was no discrimination for watching them?

Roberta Absolutely not.

- R.C.                   What about middle school?
- Roberta               Maybe there was some discrimination, yes. On the lines of “*Do you still watch cartoons?!?*” but nothing more. As I said before, people were not aware that *Creamy*<sup>43</sup> or *Georgie* were Japanese shows, so the discrimination was not because of that, but just because they were cartoon shows.
- R.C.                   And during high school? Did you have someone you could share your interest with?
- Roberta               I attended to an all-girls school, and I had a few classmates who shared my interest in videogames and anime.
- R.C.                   How was your interest considered by other classmates or other people?
- Roberta               It was seen as something childish.
- R.C.                   Why?
- Roberta               Because for most people it’s a world associated with kids, both anime and videogames... But my parents were into videogames too, so I didn’t care much.
- R.C.                   (...) What kind of bullying or discrimination do you think people with an interest in Japan could suffer from?

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<sup>43</sup> *Creamy* is the colloquial term used to refer to *L’incantevole Creamy*, the Italian equivalent of *Creamy Mami, the Magic Angel*, a Japanese anime show produced by Pierrot and released in 1983. The plot is about Yū, a 10 years old girl, who meets an alien which gives her a magical wand, granting her the ability to transform into a 16 year old girl with magical powers. In return, she has to help the alien finding the Feather Star. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creamy\\_Mami,\\_the\\_Magic\\_Angel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creamy_Mami,_the_Magic_Angel).



Roberta            I wouldn't say physical bullying... I have no experiences regarding me or people around me. They (*people interested in anime and videogames*) were considered "losers" (...).

R.C.                Did you and your friends feel the need to hide your interest?

Roberta            No, not at all.

Roberta consolidates the general experience lived by all the candidates in elementary school. There was no discrimination for enjoying Japanese animation since it was a very common way to spend time having fun at home. She stated that watching cartoon was indeed a habit everyone had, and apparently no one was aware of the distinction between a Japanese show and a show originally produced in another country. This unawareness persisted during middle school too, but this time in different terms: independently from what kind of animation one watched, it was considered as childish. This unveils a common stereotype, which will be further analyze in the next sections of this study, of considering animation shows a genre targeted exclusively to children.

While Roberta has not directly experienced discrimination for her hobbies, she is aware that in high school consuming Japanese anime and videogames was considered a childish behavior that only "losers" had, but the presence of a few classmates and family members who shared her passions allowed her to enjoy her hobbies with peace of mind. This aspect reconfirms the importance, already emerged from other interviewees' experiences, of the presence of a group of friends, or in general a social connection, with whom share one's interests in order to enjoy them in a healthy way.

Despite the generational difference, one could say that the dynamics in relation to discrimination and stigma towards people interested in Japanese culture, particularly Japanese animation, have not changed during the years. The lingering feeling of shame and the fear of rejection for enjoying uncommon interests apparently have not changed with time, since Roberta statements reconfirm what other younger interviewees felt about their condition. However, it must be said that she is the only interviewee of her age and more information should be collected for a more objective analysis of the matter.

In conclusion, the overview of the relationship between the interviewees' interest towards Japanese culture and the school environment they lived in can be summarized highlighting the presence of a common dynamic in all three main sections of compulsory education system in Italy. Starting from elementary school, from the data collected it the candidates didn't suffer from any kind of prejudice or discrimination for enjoying Japanese culture (in specific, Japanese animation, since it represented the most popular media thanks to the diffusion by television), and even if not every interviewee did it, they were free to talk about it without fear. Furthermore, in the case of cartoons, there seemed not to be an awareness of the distinction between Japanese ones and the ones from other countries, leading to think that the "*japaneseness*" of said media were not the reason for the discrimination, if occurred. Nonetheless, according to some of the statements, already in elementary school there was the perception of more socially accepted hobbies and other ones not to be proud of, independently by how many people were enjoying them or how entertaining they might have been.

Middle school is stated from most of the interviewees to be the hardest period for people willing to pursue their interest in Japanese culture. The societal pressure to refrain from perceived "childish" habits, mainly associated with elementary school, for what is considered "adult" behavior, leads many young students to abandon their passion for animation in general for more popular and socially acceptable activities. However, not everyone wants to stop enjoying, for example, anime and manga, and these people are forced to keep their interest as hidden as possible to avoid discrimination. It is safe to assume that there is the possibility that in the same classroom multiple people with said set of interests coexist, but they never manage to meet for the fear of discrimination and rejection. The difficulty in socializing through Japanese culture leads some middle school students to a form of social isolation that could have lingering effects in the future too.

In high school, the common experience is that people managed to find a few classmates to share their passions with, allowing them to enjoy their interests without fear and concern, despite the social stigma still being rather persistent. However, in Luca's case, he didn't manage to find anyone with his same set of interests. Presumably, the fear of rejection felt from middle school onwards led him to adopt a passive behavior regarding his interest and never tried to involve someone else in his hobbies, making him quite more isolated than other interviewees. A proactive behavior in trying to let other people know about one's interest is proved to be an effective strategy if we read Greta's experience, who

managed to involve a few of her classmates, who were not interested in Japan, in watching Japanese shows. The main difference between the two experiences is that while Luca felt a sense of shame towards his passions since middle school, Greta did not, so she never developed the prejudice that her classmates would not be interested in her hobbies.

Therefore, people's personality and perception about their interest and the social environment where they live in influence each other and are mutually important in the healthy development of their passions. It is true that a hostile environment such as middle school, where discrimination and mockery towards people interested in Japanese culture are ordinary, will complicate the communication of people's interests to other people, but the development of a strong prejudice towards classmates and the adoption of a passive behavior can prevent them to find new friends who might share their same passions.

### *2.1 Common stereotypes and prejudices*

While interviewing the candidates, I tried to collect information about the common stereotypes and prejudices that are associated with people who enjoy Japanese culture or to the culture itself. Most of the examples given by the interviewees concern in particular Japanese popular culture, so it is safe to assume that it's the aspect of Japan that attracts most of the stereotypes from people not interested in it.

Sara's experience in school gives an interesting insight into the stereotypes perpetrated to people interested in Japanese culture:

R.C. (...) You mentioned before you started getting interested in Japan unconsciously through anime and manga in elementary school. During this period, did you get discriminated or made fun of because of this kind of interest?

Sara No, not during elementary school, because I think there wasn't the mental association between anime and the stereotype regarding who watches them. So, no; everyone enjoyed this type of media, consciously or not. In middle school, people start to develop more consciously their

interests, and as for my experience I didn't get discriminated or anything, but it (*her interest*) wasn't something I shared with others. In high school, with the access to internet, and with the adolescent need of belonging to a group (...) connected to one's interests, it is possible "*that not belonging to my same category means that your category is worse*" (...), and the stereotypes come from this phenomenon. So, these stereotypes derive from ignorance and the sense of belonging to a certain group you need to defend, and the pride for this belonging, and that's when "*problems*" rise... But I wouldn't even say problems, I have never got bullied, verbally, physically, or psychologically for this interest. It is true that with access to internet, I didn't really feel the need to find someone to share my passion in real life, though (...). This might have led me to talk less about it, but I never felt the need to hide this passion for the fear of facing the consequences (...). It (*her passion for anime*) was my world I personally built for myself, so I didn't feel the necessity of external influences that could have threatened the balance of that world.

R.C. You mention a "stereotype" towards people who watch anime and are passionate about Japanese culture. Could you please expand this aspect a little more?

Sara Generally, they (*people with these interests*) are considered negatively because they are seen as introverted people, who struggle to relate with people in real life and to deal with everyday situations... (...).

R.C. Do you think this stereotype fits you, either in a positive or negative way?

Sara Surely, because I think that all stereotypes have a grain of truth, so I can see myself in the person who enjoys this passion to hide in it, but everyone's passion serves as a way to let some steam off. So, I don't

consider this stereotype in a negative way because I think I have a healthy relationship with this passion, and it has more positive influences rather than negative ones on my life (...). I don't think the stereotype fits me if it is considered with a negative connotation.

Sara's experience is similar to the ones told by other interviewees: beginning with elementary school, where everyone enjoyed watching anime without any repercussion, like other respondents she stopped talking about her interests in Japanese animation around middle school. In high school, she stated that the access to internet she had the chance to explore autonomously her interests without the need of sharing them to other people, but that she never felt pressured to hide them.

However, one of the most interesting aspects mentioned by Sara is the presence of certain stereotypes connected to people who watch anime. In particular, she stated that they are commonly seen as introverted people struggling with everyday situations and socialization. Moreover, she thinks that said stereotypes are rooted in the creation of groups of people based on the interests shared by the members of the group itself: once part of a certain category, people feel the need to defend it by, according to Sara's words, belittling other groups. It is safe to assume that stronger groups are based on "stronger", or more popular, interests, and possess the social power to dominate over weaker ones, based on niche or socially stigmatized interests, amplifying the stereotypes associated with them. It is interesting to notice that Sara recognized herself in the stereotype of the introverted person, and she stated that she used anime as a way of escapism from the struggles she had to face for her personality. However, she has a positive view about it, since she stated to have a healthy relationship with her hobbies and actively help her in overcoming her hardships.

Sara stated she never got bullied or discriminated for watching anime and enjoying Japanese culture in general and she has an overall positive perception of the dynamic between the stereotype associated with her passions and her relationship with, but she also admitted she never shared her interests with anyone. It can be hypothesized, however, that her lack of negative experiences is the reason why she has a positive perception on her passions. If she shared them to other people and got negative feedback, it is plausible that her opinion about the stereotype would be different.

Another common stereotype perpetrated towards people who enjoy Japanese popular culture products, which was already mentioned briefly in the previous sections of this study, is the one that associates watching anime and reading manga with childish behaviors. Greta mentioned this in her interview:

R.C.            You told me you didn't have any negative experience, but do you think there are stereotypes perpetrated towards people who like Japanese culture?

Greta            Specifically regarding people who like anime and manga, I think there is the stereotype of them being childish, because there is the conviction that animation, so not only anime, is for kids (...). Towards people interested in Japan in general, I'd say that the "childish" stereotype persists because Japan is always associated with manga and anime. And if you study those things (*meaning Japan and its culture*), you give the image of someone "radical", a little bit weird... I think there is this idea that if you get to love so much a culture that's completely different from the Italian one, maybe in Italy you don't feel 100% comfortable in Italy... I don't know if it makes any sense. If you like something that different, than maybe *here* is not the right place for you, but it's not necessarily true (...). I've never had anyone saying this to me right in my face, but I have the feeling there is this way of thinking. Which is not necessarily negative, since you may give the idea of being open minded, (...) you have more possibilities abroad, a "citizen of the world" (...).

From Greta's words, two main aspects related to stereotypes can be observed: the first one is the fact that animation media in general (not only Japanese) are associated with children, and since Japan is associated mainly with anime, the general perception is that Japanese media are for kids. The other aspect regards the image of people who develop their interest towards Japan to an academic level of depth. In such case, Greta thinks that people who choose to study Japanology in university are seen people who do not fit in the Italian society and therefore they are looking for an alternative place where to feel more comfortable.

According to her opinion, the stereotype doesn't necessarily come exclusively with negative connotations: on one hand, people with such an academic background can be seen as radical, a little weird or even unfitting to their culture of origin; on the other hand, some people might see them as open-minded students who have explored another country and had access to an international set of values, providing themselves with more opportunities for their future. Japanese culture as a valid alternative to the reality where people live in is an indeed recurrent leitmotif in this study, since in it represent a way to escape from the everyday struggles people face.

About the correlation between animation and childish behavior, Franco, who is a movie enthusiast, has an interesting point of view:

Franco            (...) I think it's something instilled in their (*Japanese people*) culture, but in Japan, animation is considered as a mean to narrate adult stories, whereas in the western world animation and comics are considered as a genre, rather than a technique. So, people don't watch Mamoru Oshii<sup>44</sup>'s (*animation*) movies because they're about the themes recurrent in his work, they go and watch an animation movie because the kids can have fun. Or at least this is how it works in Italy. I can't recall any mainstream western animation movie whose target are not kids (...).

His opinion about Japanese animation is that it is not limited only to productions targeted to kids, but also to adults, while in the western world, animation is not seen as a way to narrate stories independently from the target, but a genre specifically for children. This originates the assumption that people who watch anime are considered childish, but, in reality, many authors, such as Mamoru Oshii, realize their work through animation and instill in it themes and topics that could not be understood by young people.

About why there is the assumption that animation media are exclusively for kids, Luca's words can be useful in finding an answer:

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<sup>44</sup> Mamoru Oshii is a Japanese filmmaker famous for his philosophy-oriented storytelling and director of many famous anime movies such as *Ghost in the Shell* or *Angel's Egg*.  
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mamoru\\_Oshii](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mamoru_Oshii).

R.C. According to your opinion, why do people think anime are for kids, or, simply, a reason to discriminate someone?

Luca Ignorance, simply. They know nothing about it, and they don't care about knowing more. They don't know the number of typologies of anime that exists, they don't know that in Japan even elderlies read manga in trains (...). To them, the only existing anime are the ones broadcasted on *Italia 1* channel, which is a distorted perception because those shows have been censored and adapted, like *Sailor Moon* or *Rossana*<sup>45</sup>. They only have a minimized and Italianized vision of anime. And (*another reason is*) the fact that it's animation. Animation is associated with media for kids (...). I mean, if you ask someone about *Attack on Titan*<sup>46</sup>, they have no idea what it is. Or maybe they have heard about it, but they don't care about watching it. Maybe it could even be interesting for them, but their prejudice stop them. In my opinion, this idea of "animation is for kids" has been perpetrated by Disney too (...). When it produces an animation movie, it's clearly targeted to kids (...).

According to Luca's words, ignorance regarding anime is the main reason why people consider them as a childish media. In his opinion, people's prejudice against anime is so strong to prevent them from not only enjoying this media, but also to even try to get to know more about it. Again, the issue with animation arises again: since anime shows are realized through animation, most people think every show is targeted to kids. He also mentioned Disney as a possible perpetrator of this misconception, since he stated that most of the

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<sup>45</sup> *Rossana* is the Italian equivalent of *Kodomo no Omocha*, is a Japanese comic series by Miho Obana, serialized from 1994 and adapted into an animation show. The plot is about Sana Kurata, a popular and successful young actress who is constantly bothered and annoyed by Hayama, leader of a band of bullies in her class who cause ruckus. The Italian adaptation of the anime heavily changed the show and the plot, altering the names (from Sana to Rossana, from Hayama to Eric), removing as much as possible every reference to Japanese culture. Source: [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Il\\_giocattolo\\_dei\\_bambini](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Il_giocattolo_dei_bambini).

<sup>46</sup> *Attack on Titan* is a Japanese comic series written and illustrated by Hajime Isayama, serialized from 2009 and later adapted into an anime show. The plot is about Eren Jaeger and his two friends, Armin and Mikasa, who live in a city surrounded by three walls outside of which Titans are said to live. One day, the outer wall gets demolished by the Colossal Titan, allowing other Titans to enter the city and consume the humans. The show depicts very gruesome scenes and topics not suitable for children. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack\\_on\\_Titan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_on_Titan).



company's production is children-oriented, and the massive popular influence it has had on Italian people over the years might have instilled in them the idea that animation is indeed a genre for children. People's unwillingness to know more about anime are unaware of the variety of it, and do not realize that there's plenty of adult-oriented production that everyone could enjoy. However, according to Luca's words, Italian people have a minimalized and Italianized perception of this media because of the adaptation and hard censorship of the shows from Italian television broadcasting companies. The misconception towards animation is therefore perpetrated by television too, which adapted the shows to make them appealing for children.

A few interviewees, when talking about the stereotypes concerning Japanese popular culture, mentioned specific terminology to denote different categories of people who have a different relationship with their interests. Tiziana's interview section can be useful to understand more about this aspect:

R.C. Do you think there is a stereotype perpetrated towards people interested in Japanese culture?

Tiziana (...) I think the stereotypical image could be the one of people who are always by themselves, who have weird interests and are considered outcasts by society (...).

R.C. (*The conversation briefly shifted towards other topics*) You mentioned "nerd"<sup>47</sup> and "weaboo"<sup>48</sup>. Could you explain the difference?

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<sup>47</sup> According to the Cambridge Dictionary online page, the word "nerd" refers to people, in general men, who are not considered conventionally attractive and are awkward or socially embarrassing; furthermore, it indicates people who are interested in a non-mainstream topic, generally IT related, and know a lot about it. The term itself has therefore a negative meaning, but recently the stigma is slowly fading away. Source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/nerd>.

<sup>48</sup> According to the site urbandictionary.com, the word "weaboo" refers to people who are obsessed specifically to Japanese culture (mainly pop culture) who are overly zealous when sharing their supposed knowledge about Japan and act like they can speak the language. These people often show a behavior of rejection towards their culture of origin and tend to believe that Japan is the perfect country. Source: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=weaboo>.

Tiziana Well, according to my opinion, “*nerd*” is someone who has niche interests, is passionate about them and is willing to spend money on them and this kind of things... Someone is “*weaboo*” when the thing (*their interest*) becomes a little more problematic, you know? When they start glorifying a certain country, in this case Japan, even if they have never been there, they don’t know the language, the history, the actual culture, which is not the one depicted by anime... Only because they enjoy pop culture, they think they know about that country, they want to live in Japan, but they don’t know how hard school is in Japan and stuff... I consider this ignorance (...). I brought this up because I think that generally the stereotype perpetrated toward nerds is the one of the *weaboo* but being nerd doesn’t necessarily mean being a *weaboo* too (...), or the so called “*giappominchia*<sup>49</sup>”.

R.C. (...) We’ve been talking about stereotypes regarding people who enjoy Japanese culture, but what about stereotype towards the culture itself?

Tiziana Well, regarding pop culture, I’d say people often think that anime are all *harem*... Just because there’s a character with big boobs, then it must be a porn show. I think this is the main stereotype. It happened to me that I’ve been told: “*What are you watching, you pervert?!*” just because a character with some big boobs showed up on screen. This was perceived as something erotic, because, stereotyping, in the western world animated shows are for kids and therefore if it’s animation with contents not for kids, then it must be porn. There were shows that I was very passionate about and knew some of my friends would have enjoyed them too, but I never suggested to watch them together because they would have thought I’m a pervert (...).

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<sup>49</sup> “*Giappominchia*” (or “*giappominkia*”) is the Italian version of “*weaboo*”. It bears a negative meaning and is a rather offensive word. It is originated from “*Bimbominchia*” (or “*bimbominkia*”), which is referred to teenagers who tend to have annoying and childish mannerisms, especially when intervening in online discussions. Source: <https://slengo.it/define/bimbominkia>.

According to Tiziana's words, the general stereotype perpetrated towards people interested in Japanese culture describes lonely people that are considered outcasts for their weird interests. She then mentioned a few English words, frequently used in Italian language too to designate people according to their relationship with their passions. The first one is the "nerd", a person passionate about uncommon interests. From her words, it appears there is no negative connotation associated with the term. When it comes to the term "giappominchia" (the Italian equivalent of "weaboo"), however, her tone implies she doesn't bear a positive image about people who are part of said category. They are described as people whose only knowledge about Japan comes from Japanese popular culture media, and therefore have a distorted and oversimplified image of the country. However, while lacking an objective perspective of Japanese society, they have a strong conviction that Japan is a flawless country, the perfect place where to live in. According to the research conducted on the term, it appears that weaboos zealously diffuse their supposed knowledge about the country and end up being considered as annoying, childish, and know-it-all people by others. From Tiziana's statements, it is possible to imply that their ostentatious behavior leads to the overlapping of the image of "nerds" and "weaboos", flattening the differences into one single group: the one of people interested in Japan. In other words, weaboos' behavior strengthens the prejudice that people interested in Japan will be overly expressive and loud about it, spreading their negative image to the nerds too. It must be pointed out that the mere existence of specific Italian words to belittle people with an interest in Japan is explanatory of how the discrimination towards this category is diffuse and well consolidated.

Another interesting element highlighted by Tiziana is the fact that, occasionally, anime are considered as pornographic content. According to her words, this misconception originates from the contrast between the stereotype that animation is for children and the reality, which is that anime are not necessarily targeted to them. So, if a character is depicted in a way appealing for adults, the first rational thought people seem to have is that the show must be pornographic in contents. As a consequence, of course, people who enjoy anime are not put in a positive light and considered perverts. According to Tiziana's words, people who bear a prejudice towards anime see these media through a dichotomy: on one side, they are seen as media for children; on the other side, they are seen as pornography. Either way, watching anime is not seen as a socially acceptable behavior and, apparently, people do not consider the existence of a grey area between the two extremes.

Marisa, with her statements, adds a few more terms related to people interested in Japanese culture and explains her opinion on the stereotypes towards them:

R.C. (...) In your experience, what are the stereotypes perpetrated towards people interest in Japanese culture?

Marisa I think there are two opposite stereotypes. One is the stereotype of the “otaku<sup>50</sup>”, who never goes out, or the “fangirl”, which in my opinion is considered even worse because there is a tendency to demonize and condemn what girls like; the other one is the stereotype of the scholar, who doesn’t care at all about Japanese media and sees Japan exclusively as a historical and cultural source of interest. I think in Italy the most common one is the one of the “otaku”, a socially awkward person who never goes out, is obsessed with anime and manga, is considered weird and for that reason deserves to be bullied. About fangirls, I’m talking about those hysterical girls obsessed with Japan (*laughs*).

R.C. Can you tell me more about this?

Marisa I think girls are seen way worse regarding this aspect, because in general when talking about media, including music, tv shows, people are inclined to make fun of young girl’s interests. There was a period of time when girls went crazy for *One Direction*<sup>51</sup>, so everyone made fun of them because (*the general way of thinking is on the lines of*) “*it’s not possible for girls to be simply passionate about them, they must be hysterical!*”, but if a guy goes to a football match and breaks down stuff it’s not really frowned upon. And it’s the same for anime: if a girl

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<sup>50</sup> *Otaku* is a Japanese word that describe people who consume interests, especially regarding anime, manga, videogames, or computers. The term has a strong negative connotation in the past, since Otaku were considered society outcasts, but now the stigma has softened quite a lot. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otaku>.

<sup>51</sup> *One Direction* are an English-Irish pop boy band formed in 2010. It is considered one of the most popular boy bands of the last years and the members are often described as teen idols, given their overwhelming popularity among teenage girls. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One\\_Direction#Image](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Direction#Image).

expresses an interest in an anime show, there will be someone basically interrogating her to “*prove*” she is a “*real*” fan or to ascertain she is not watching it only for the show’s lovers couples (...).

Marisa brought up three stereotypes regarding people interested in Japan and Japanese culture. The first one is the “otaku”, described as a socially awkward person with almost no social interaction and has an obsession for Japanese popular culture in specific. Another one is the stereotype of the scholar, which interested in Japan for its cultural and historical assets and is not interested in Japanese media. Among the two stereotypes, the former is stated to be the most prominent in Italy, while the latter do not seem to be as much diffuse.

What is interesting in Marisa’s words, is the specific stereotype related to girls: the stereotype of the “fangirl”. While Marisa depicts fangirls as the feminine equivalent of the otaku, from the behavior described it appears to be similar to the “weaboo”: they are girls so obsessed about some of their passions to the point of being considered hysterical. The discrimination towards this category is stated to be much worse when compared to the discrimination otakus suffer from because, according to her opinion, there is an inclination in making fun of girl’s interests, highlighting a possible form of sexism and double standards in Italian society. As a matter of fact, she thinks that the disruptive behavior of a football enthusiast, for example, is not judged as harshly as a girl who enjoys anime or *One Direction*’s music. Furthermore, it seems that girls need to provide proof about their interest towards the media they like, especially regarding whether their curiosity is based merely on the romantic contexts depicted in them. As a consequence, it is safe to assume that there is the perception that men tend to belittle women’s interests, and if said interest is based on the romance aspects of the media, they are not even considered “real” fans.

To summarize, the stereotypes and prejudices perpetrated towards people interested in Japanese culture (with a more prominent focus on Japanese popular culture products) and the culture itself appear to be various and well consolidated in the Italian society. Most of them originate during middle and school and are connected to a dynamic of belonging to a certain group of people characterized by a determinate set of interests. Some of these sets are more likely to be socially acceptable, and therefore socially “strong”, while others, such as the interests in Japanese popular culture, are not as much accepted and therefore suffer from the judgment and criticism of the people who are into the most popular ones. This

leads people with well-received interests to talk more about them, socialize easily and create a solid group, while people passionate about uncommon hobbies tend to hide them for the fear of being rejected, and consequently get isolated (or isolate themselves). It can be hypothesized that the intensity of the discrimination suffered, people's behavior in relation to the expression of their interest might change: the more discrimination one has suffered, the more likely it is for them to develop a passive behavior and not share their interest, and vice versa. This, of course, depends on the single personalities of people too and it is not necessarily true in all cases.

Regarding Japanese popular culture, it appears a black and white perception of it emerges from the interviews. On one hand, the most common stereotype seems to be the fact that's considered a genre for children, rather than a technique implemented to depict a wide variety of stories. According to the interviewees' statements, people's prejudice is so strong they do not consider the chance they might enjoy some of the media realized through animation. Furthermore, it seems that such distorted perception of anime comes from the role of Italian television, which adapted the shows to make them enjoyable by kids and the role of other very influent productions, such as Disney one, which contributed to the diffusion of the parallelism between animation and media for children. On the other hand, the recognition that some contents shown in anime are not targeted to kids triggers the idea that anime shows are pornography. In both cases, negative connotations are associated with Japanese animation and spread over the person itself, which is considered to be childish or a pervert depending on the case.

Furthermore, the presence and recurrent use of specific terminology aimed to belittle people interested in Japanese culture is significative of the degree of diffusion of the discrimination towards them. Japanese culture (in specific, popular culture) is frequently overlapped to a set of behaviors correlated to certain stereotyped categories: the one of the otaku, who is said to be socially awkward, lacking social interaction and obsessed with Japanese culture; the one of the giappominchia, who obnoxiously manifest a distorted and simplified knowledge of Japan; the one of the fangirls, who are said to adopt hysterical behaviors in relation to their passion. These extreme behavioral patterns are perceived to be attributed to people who enjoy Japanese culture indiscriminately: arises, as stated by the interviews themselves, a tendency to categorize people's personalities through the stereotypes associated with their passions.

It must be said, however, that the interviewees do not necessarily reject the idea of fitting in those stereotypes for certain aspects, and in some cases, they even bear a positive image of it. Being seen as “weird”, “radical” and loving another country could be interpreted as being an open-minded person with an international set of values and more possibilities in the future. Some of them even admit having difficulties when it comes to social interaction but consider their passion as a healthy coping mechanism for their issues and seem not to be affected by other people’s criticism.

## 2.2 *Social dynamics and isolation cases*

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, I have hypothesized a correlation between the geographical isolation degree of people and the dynamics of their interest in Japanese culture. It must be said that not enough empirical data has been collected regarding this aspect, but the interview sections can provide an interesting starting point for possible future research.

To begin, Marisa’s statements will be reported here:

R.C. (...) Could you tell me where you lived when you started developing an interest in Japanese culture?

Marisa I’ve always lived in Valpolicella, surrounded by vineyards (*laughs*) and even if it wasn’t an extremely isolated place, I’ve never had that many friends (...). I mainly had relationships with my adult family members, so even if I wasn’t completely alone, I considered myself to be pretty isolated.

R.C. Did you have someone who shared your interest in Japan?

Marisa Actually, I did. Well, my father and I started to develop an interest (*in Japanese culture*) at the same time (...). We share many interests, and I

was the kind of kid who when discovered something new, like a tv show or whatever, I showed it to my father. My father and I watched *Naruto* entirely. From the beginning to the end (*laughs*). So yeah, sharing this with my father made things easier. Then, as a teenager, around fourteen or fifteen years old, I used to be very active on anime-themed online forums. I posted daily, and sometimes I met with people I got to know online... We even managed to meet at Lucca Comics<sup>52</sup> once. So, I'd say that internet has a major role regarding my social life at that time.

Marisa admitted living in Valpolicella, a hilly area in the outskirts of Verona, and she didn't have many friends around her age at the time of the development of her interest in Japan. She stated to maintain relationships with mainly the adult members of her family. However, despite the lack of a group of friends, she could share her interest towards Japanese media with her father, who usually joined her watching anime shows. This reconfirms the importance of the family in the dynamics of one's interests emerged from the survey conducted, whose results are presented at the beginning of the chapter.

Another important factor mentioned by Marisa and present in the survey results too is the influence of internet in the development of her interest in Japanese popular culture. When she was a teenager, she enjoyed posting her opinions on anime-themed online forums and she even managed to bring the relationship from a virtual space to the real world. This is indicative of the fact that internet can help geographically isolated people to meet others with same interests and that it doesn't always have a limiting effect on people's social life. About this aspect, Tiziana's statements are quite interesting in reconfirming the role of internet:

Tiziana            (...) The only time that this hobby led me to know new people was when I watched an anime called "*Durarara!!*"<sup>53</sup>. The show is very confusing, but the core point is that there is a virtual chat with unknown people,

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<sup>52</sup> *Lucca Comics*, short for *Lucca Comics & Games*, is an international comic and game convention held once a year in Lucca, Italy. It's the most important comic-related event not only in Italy, but also in Europe, and the second worldwide after *Comiket* in Tokyo. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucca\\_Comics\\_%26\\_Games](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucca_Comics_%26_Games).

<sup>53</sup> *Durarara!!* is a Japanese light novel series written by Ryohgo Narita and illustrated by Suzuhito Yasuda, published in 2004 and later adapted into a manga and anime series. The plot is about "The Dollars", a mysterious gang who has influence in Ikebukuro and about the Black Rider, a local urban legend. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durarara!!>.



and it can be accessed by knowing the password. If you watch the show you get to find out which is the password, and that the chat actually exists. So, I entered the chat by inserting the password and there were many different virtual rooms, I looked for an Italian language one and I got to know many people, including a girl I met in Ca' Foscari University years later (...).

In her case, the anime show itself provided a tool to allow people to connect with other watchers and to socialize through an online chat service. Tiziana eventually managed to meet in real life one of the people they contacted through the chat, meaning that Japanese animation itself can have a positive effect in the social dynamics between people.

Speaking of social dynamics and spaces that allow people to freely express their interest towards Japanese culture, it is useful to go back to Marisa's interview, which provides a curious perspective on theatre courses:

R.C. (...) How was the situation in high school?

Marisa I have to say in high school my interests changed, and I got into tv shows and theatre more, so my passion for Japan faded gradually for a certain amount of time. But there still was an underlying interest, especially in videogames, movies, and Japanese culture (...). Personally, I was never bullied in high school, but maybe it was because I was kind of ignored by others... I mean it still was an upgrade compared to middle school (*laughs*). I found more people to have a conversation about these topics (*Japanese culture*) when I started a theatre course. I don't know if you know about it, but theatre courses are, like, a hub for people with alternative interests, or LGBT people... So, I managed to increase my social life (...). Since my *liceo* was rather difficult, I think my classmates and I were more focused on surviving, academically speaking, instead of fighting with each other for having different interests (...).

R.C. Why do you think theatre courses are hubs for people with alternative interests?

Marisa I think it's because theatre lets you express aspects of yourself you normally couldn't. It helps you become more open about yourself, especially if you are an introverted person or if you created walls around you after being bullied or ignored. It's a context in which anyone is free to express themselves (...).

According to Marisa's experience regarding high school, discrimination towards her interest in Japan didn't occur because she was being mostly ignored by her classmates, but also because everyone was more focused on academic results rather than judging and criticizing each other. So, school was not a suitable context where to talk freely about her interest. However, she stated that when she joined the theatre course, she managed to find a group of people with her same passions. Marisa describes theatre courses as "*hubs for people with alternative people*" and this, of course, includes those who enjoy Japanese culture and its products. Regarding why these activities are considered as such, she explained that theatre allows people to express sides of one's personality that normally couldn't be revealed and that it helps deconstructing the issues created by bullying and isolation. This implicitly highlights the necessity of safer spaces where to express one's passion towards Japan, because normally it would be a side of one's personality that shouldn't be (or is difficult to) share with others.

Luca, who didn't have anyone to share his interest in Japanese culture with from elementary to high school, doesn't think geography has something to do with his unfortunate experience:

R.C. Thinking from a geographical point of view, I know you live in the countryside and not in the city center. Do you think this affected your chances of finding someone interested in Japanese culture?

Luca Not really. I didn't have anyone in elementary and middle school, which are located in my hometown, and I didn't have anyone in high school,

which is in central Vicenza. Maybe, if I attended to a high school with a specialization in arts, I could have found someone more interested in these aspects. Let's say in those years, mid 2000s, anime were something much more underground in comparison to today, so maybe there were less people watching them (...). In those years there wasn't Netflix, which normalized watching anime a little bit; you could only watch them through channels like *MTV*<sup>54</sup> or streaming websites. So, rather than geography, I think that the (*social*) environment you live in, and the period of time have a stronger influence in this aspect.

The fact that he didn't know anyone interested in Japanese culture in both elementary and middle school, located in his countryside hometown, and in high school, which was in Vicenza's city center, led him to think that it is not geography which makes a difference, but rather the surrounding social context and the period of time considered. In his opinion, attending an arts school (instead of the commerce and finance institute he attended to) could have increased the chances to find someone interested in Japanese anime. He also stated that, at his time (late 90's and early 2000's) there were less means to watch anime compared to today, and that streaming services such as Netflix normalized (socially speaking) watching this kind of contents. This could be indicative of the fact that while being geographically distant to populated areas could lead to think to have less chances of finding people with the same passions, it is not necessarily true that living in a city could help in socializing more over this set of interests.

Greta, however, has a different opinion about this. She thinks that living relatively close to Milan was helpful in finding people with less prejudicial towards Japanese media contents:

R.C.                      Geographically speaking, where did you live when you started to develop an interest towards Japan?

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<sup>54</sup> MTV is an American cable channel launched in 1981, featuring mainly musical contents in the beginning, and shifting later towards teenager and young adult-oriented ones. MTV started to be broadcasted in Europe too from 1987 and, especially after the reduction of musical contents, it featured reality and anime shows too. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MTV>.

Greta I have always lived in a tiny countryside town where everyone knows everyone, and since both elementary and middle school are located here and nearby high schools were only a few, I spent all my education years with the same people. At the same time, it's just one hour from Milan, which is the most international city in Italy, so my town is not very isolated. You can feel the influence from Milan.

R.C. So, do you think the influence from Milan made Japanese culture to be seen less negatively?

Greta It might be, yes (...). In Milan live many Asian communities that, even passively, catch your attention in some way or another. I mean, if you have a Chinese or middle eastern classmate, whether you want it or not you learn something from their culture. This multiculturalism leads you to get used to different things since a young age, and this fact could develop in an interest when you grow up. Beside this, I think in Milan are located several entities or companies who exploit this idea of Japan as an exotic and different country, for example I don't know, Muji shops around the city, or sushi or ramen restaurants with Japanese chefs... Or Tenoha, which is a shop that arranges (*Japan-themed*) exhibitions that are extremely popular even among people who are not really into Japan (...). I mean, architecture too... One of the most popular spots in Milan is "Tre Torri<sup>55</sup>", one of which was built by a Japanese architect (...). For example, my grandparents get to discover Japanese things because there is an exhibition in Milan; if they didn't live here, they wouldn't.

In Greta's opinion, Milan's multiculturalism wave helps in weakening the negative stigma associated with Japanese culture. The influence of the various shops, restaurants, exhibitions and architecture brought Japanese imagery into people's daily lives and made them used to dealing with different cultures since a young age. She brings as an example the

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<sup>55</sup> *Tre Torri* is the colloquial term to refer to *CityLife*, a residential, commercial and business district located in Milan. *Tre Torri* means "Three Towers", and the district is called this way for the presence of three skyscrapers, one of which was designed by Japanese architect Arata Izosaki.  
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CityLife\\_\(Milan\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CityLife_(Milan)).

experience of her grandparents: she thinks that if they didn't live near Milan, a city that offer many opportunities to get to know Japanese culture, they would not know about it. It is impossible to deny that the more a city is open to multiculturalism and is open to be influenced by other cultures, the more likely it is for its inhabitants to develop an interest for these aspects, get used to them and not be prejudicial towards them. In this sense, living close to Milan is way different than living close to another city that is not as much multicultural, and this could be a reason why other candidates had less opportunities in sharing their interests with other people.

Summarizing, it can be said that one's living geographical position can have a role in increasing or decreasing the chance to find someone to share the interest in Japan with, but coming from a more isolated area does not necessarily mean that it's difficult to find people with the same passions. To mitigate the lack of friends interested in Japan, family members could have a major role, and internet is definitely helpful in the socialization through Japanese popular culture. Having access to internet gives the possibility to know other people and arrange meetings with them, softening the loneliness of living in the countryside with few friends. However, living in multicultural and international-oriented cities such as Milan brings a different experience compared to people who are from other places in terms of acceptance towards Japanese culture influences. These cities' international environment might reduce the stigma and the stereotypes towards people interested in Japan and its culture.

The role of environments such as theatre courses, which allow people to express themselves without the concern of being judged and criticized, appears to be necessary for people who express the desire of sharing their interest towards Japan. This implies that enjoying Japanese culture is still considered a stigmatized behavior which should not be adopted in public or showed to others. The importance of "safe spaces" is recurrent in this study and is a characteristic of Japanese culture.

### Chapter 3: “Japan” as a form of escapism from reality

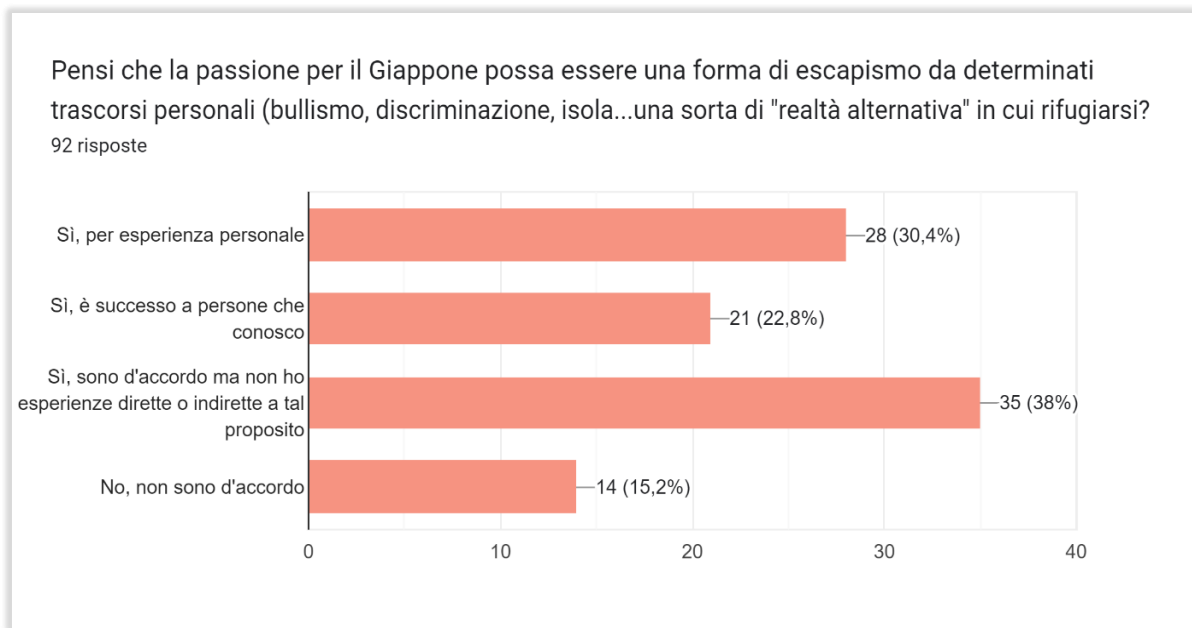


Table 17: Percentage of respondents on their opinion about Japanese culture as a form of escapism. By author.

One of the purposes of this research is to find out exactly in which context Italian people become interested in Japan or one of its aspects. Other than picturing an identikit of the respondents in terms of gender, age, type of education, and residence place, the survey was aimed to scope their social background by inquiring about discrimination, satisfaction regarding their daily life and other aspects. One of the key questions of the survey can be considered the following one: “Do you think that your interest in Japan has been a form of escapism from personal past events (bullying, discrimination, isolation, family issues...) acting as an alternative reality of some sort?”. As can be observed from the answers showed in Table 17, the 30,4% of the respondents not only agree on the statement but have also personally experienced such form of escapism. The 22,8% of them know someone who had such experience, and the 38% of the respondents do not have personal experience nor know someone who had but agree to the statement. Only the 15,2% do not agree at all.

What emerges from this table are mainly two aspects: one is that a large part of the respondents lived a condition they wanted to escape from; the other one is that their interest towards Japan was being their remedy to lower the suffering and run away from said reality. With no surprise, as showed by Table 18, while most of the respondents stated they were fairly satisfied by their daily life conditions when they started developing an interest towards Japan (on a scale from 1, meaning unsatisfied, to 5, meaning fully satisfied, the

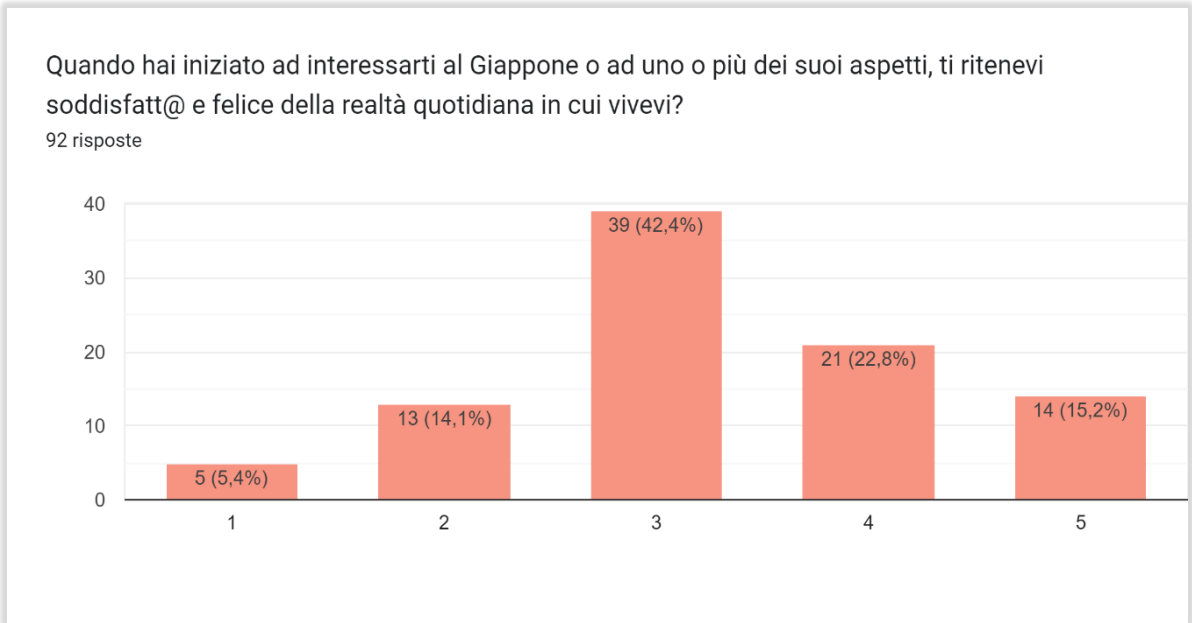


Table 18: Percentage of respondents by their level of satisfaction regarding daily life when they developed an interest in Japanese culture. By author.

42,4% replied 3, the 22,8% replied 4 and the 15,2% replied 5), the 20,5% of them don't consider their ordinary life satisfying enough.

To investigate the reasons of said dissatisfaction, Table 19, regarding the presence or absence of episodes of bullying and / or discrimination, can provide a useful overview of the matter. 56,5% of the respondents stated that, when they realized they started to become interested in one of more aspects of Japan, were not experiencing episodes of bullying or discrimination. This means that the remaining 43,5%, almost half of them, unfortunately did. It must be mentioned that the number of people who have experienced such type of negative

situation is rather high.

On a positive note, only the 13% of total responded was bullied because of their passion for Japan and

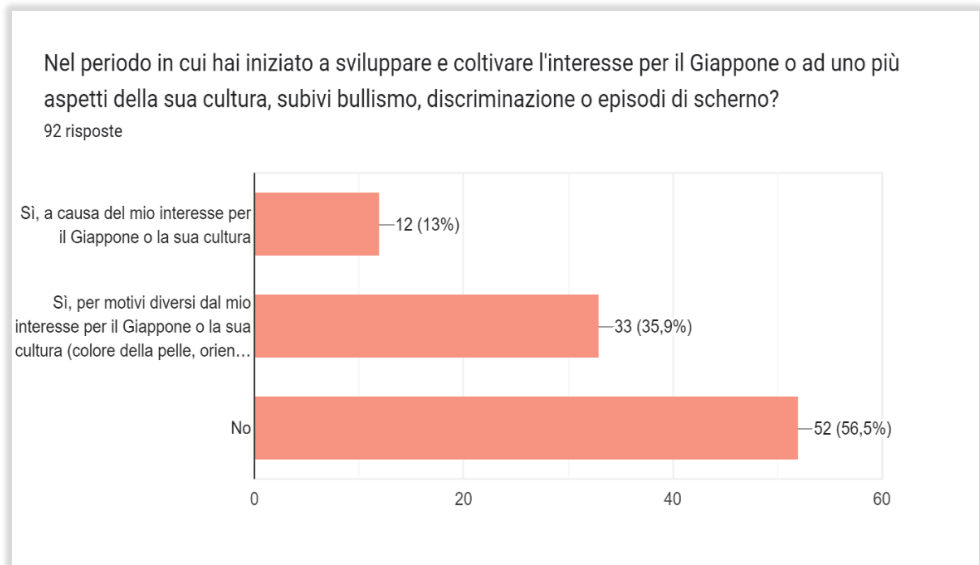


Table 19: Percentage of respondents by presence of bullying or discrimination experiences. By author.

Japanese culture. This could mean that while this kind of interest is affected by a social

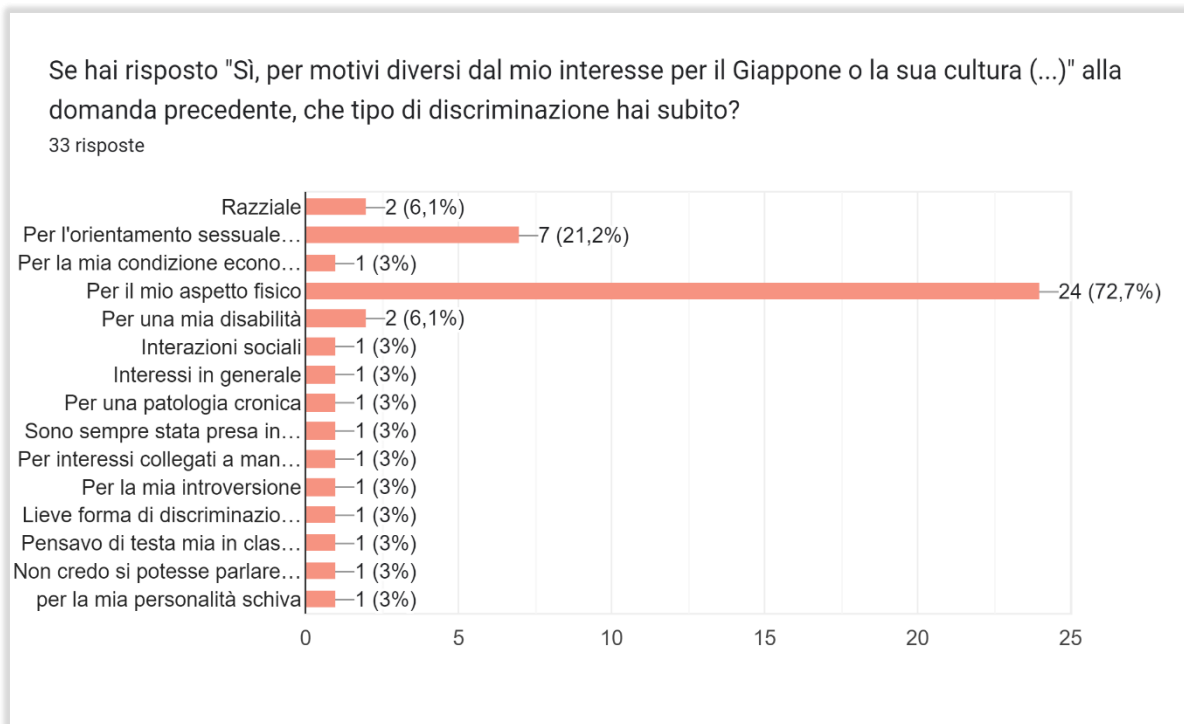


Table 20: Percentage of respondents by typology of discrimination or bullied endured. By author.

stigma and is seen as an aspect to make fun of someone for, such phenomenon is not as consistent as other forms of bullying. As a matter of fact, 35,9% of total respondents admitted they have been bullied or discriminated in the past, but for other reasons than their interest in Japan.

To investigate the specific reasons of the negative experiences they have been victim of a specific question has been designated for the purpose. Said question, whose results can be observed in *Table 20*, was not set as compulsory, in order to allow the respondent to preserve their privacy in case they didn't want to share the detail about this aspect. Roughly one third of the total number of the respondents have replied to question and as can be seen, the most popular motivation for having suffered from an episode of bullying is for their physical appearance (72,7%); follow discrimination or bullying for one's sexual preference or gender identity (21,2%), for one's provenience (racial discrimination) and one's disability (both 6,1%). Other than these options, the respondents were given the possibility to add freely their own experience, and predictably different situations have emerged, ranging from discrimination for one's introverted personality to bullying for suffering from a chronic disease.

To prove further investigate the relationship between the respondents' interest towards Japan and its culture and an experience of bullying or discrimination, the statements from one of the interviewees, Marisa, will be reported here. She is a 25-year-old freelance



stage manager who moved from Italy to the United Kingdom but spent a large part of her childhood and teenage years in Italy. One of the most particular aspects that have emerged from her words is that, in her opinion, the fact itself that Japanese culture can represent a sort of escapism from reality is one of the reasons she got interested in Japan:

R.C.            Could you please tell me what aspects of the Japanese culture kickstarted your interest towards Japanese culture?

Marisa        Well, to be honest I don't really remember what I replied to your questionnaire, but I can tell you that the beginning of my interest towards Japan has been mainly through anime and manga, and then I got gradually interested in the country, its culture... I don't know if this helps...

R.C.            Don't worry, everything helps (*both laughing*). (...) Thinking about anime, or more in general about Japanese pop culture, what do you think are the characteristics that made you interested in them and why?

Marisa        I'd say mainly (*because they represented*) a form of escapism, especially in middle school since I got bullied a lot in that period for reasons not really connected to my passion for Japan initially, even if bullies are very good at picking details so later that too became an ulterior motive of bullying. But what attracted me of anime was how different animation was from the western one I was used to, and the fact that some anime explored themes that were a little darker, a little more captivating... For example, one of the ones I was most passionate about was *Soul Eater*, especially in that period (*middle school*), and I remember I liked it because it was about souls, death and it represented a form of escapism too for me (...).

R.C.            (*At this point the interview took a very different direction and only later we came back to the escapism topic*) Sorry, going back to something you

mentioned in the beginning: you said that Japanese culture was a form of escapism for you. I'd like to ask you what is the situation or condition you wanted to run away from?

Marisa Well, I can say that especially during middle school, when I was around 11- or 12-year-old, I was victim of an experience of bullying at school. I was bullied for my physical appearance and for my sexuality and, above all that, I had some problems with my mother because my relationship with her has always been very tense. So, basically in that period I went to school to get bullied, and when I went home, I argued with my mother. (...) Then, once I got interested in anime, manga, and Japanese culture, that too became a reason for being bullied, so yeah, getting home and seeing these stories and these worlds completely different from mine where there is the "loser" who finds out to have a special power, or through his determination, even if he gets hit a lot, he makes it I don't know... I could relate to it; it gave me a little bit of hope. (...)

Marisa then pointed out who were the actors of the bullying in specific:

Marisa I don't know if it's useful for your research, but the bullying I experienced came mainly from boys, while the girls (*intelligible sounds*) ...

R.C. Sorry, the boys were bullying you, but I didn't catch what girls did to you.

Marisa You know that kind of silent bullying from girls? They don't... Well, they talk behind your back.

Marisa points out an "out of the frying pan, into the fire" situation in her school life: she was being bullied for her physical appearance and for her sexual orientations at school, and when she came home, she had to deal with her unstable relationship with her mother, which

led to frequent arguments between the two. Such unpleasant daily life conditions seem to have an important role in turning a hobby related to Japanese culture in a form of escapism from reality. Differently from other hobbies such as sports, however, Japanese pop culture seem to be stigmatized by some people and therefore what is supposed to be a way to relieve stress and give pleasure, and in some cases, it becomes another reason for being bullied yet again. Tiziana, unfortunately, has a similar experience to Marisa's in terms of bullying at school:

R.C. Do you think Japanese culture in all its possible interpretations could have been a form of escapism for you?

Tiziana 100%, absolutely yes (*laughs*). Absolutely, I was so depressed at the time that I came home after school, I went to bed, turned on the computer and watched anime all day. So yes.

R.C. ... Please elaborate further.

Tiziana I mean, I hated my daily life... It made me particularly depressed (...), I wasn't happy about myself, my body, my school performance, my relationship with teachers in school and with most of my classmates, I didn't like what I was studying but it was too late to change, and I didn't want to waste a year... Everything sucked, right? So yes, I'd say that coming back home, going to bed and having the possibility to immerge myself in fantastic worlds with superpowers, without people having to go to school and be trapped with other people they didn't like doing things they didn't like, with positive stories and awesome and thrilling characters, emotions that maybe I couldn't feel in my ordinary life because I only felt the void, the complete darkness... (...) I had insomnia caused by the anxiety of having wake up to go back to school the next day that I lived five years of my life with probably two hours of sleep per night, and when I came back from school completely exhausted I had no energies left for nothing other than going to bed and hoping to be somewhere else.

Tiziana states clearly that during her school years, she used her passion for Japanese animation as a form of escapism. In her case, it represented a way to run away from her daily life, especially regarding school, and from her depressive thoughts caused by the events she suffered in life. She states she was so desperate and tired by her life that she only had the strength to watch anime and wander with her mind in fantastic worlds where she could find the emotions she couldn't experience in her ordinary life. During the interview, the causes of her sadness have been furtherly explored:

R.C. (...) Have you ever experienced episodes of bullying or discrimination for being passionate about Japanese pop culture or simply for liking Japan?

Tiziana Well, maybe people mocked me a little for it... Being bullied specifically for that reason, no, simply because they knew I practiced martial arts (*laughs*)... It was a counterbalancing between “*oh cool, you practice martial arts*” and the fact that I liked these weird things (*meaning Japanese pop culture*). So, bullying, yes, but for other reasons. I think that was not the main aspect of why people made fun of me (...).

R.C. So, would you like to talk about this experience of bullying? Of course, you are not forced to answer me if you don't feel comfortable in doing it.

Tiziana It's called “being fat”. Or being “overweight”, because I mean, come on... I've never been very slim. Then I lost weight, even if I got it all back during the COVID pandemic, but it's extremely sad the difference in how people treat you when they consider you attractive, body wise. People who always made fun of me, once I lost weight, started treating me much better and that's really fucked up. (...) Another reason why I think I got bullied, well... I'm dyslexic and I've been diagnosed only when I became 21-year-old, so during university, (...) and no one noticed before simply because I got good grades at school. So, when

there was something to read, this happened even during high school, I got panic attacks or started crying... If I was to be examined in front of the class too, I had so much anxiety I kept coughing. I found out the reason of this only later, after tons of medical examinations, and basically the “valve”<sup>56</sup> between my stomach and esophagus doesn’t work properly and with anxiety the gastric fluids come up to my throat making me cough. But everyone though I was pretending to cough to not to be examined by teachers or to not to read in front of everyone. So, they told me “*You play the victim*”, “*You are just pretending to be ill*” and things like that. And that was another reason why I got bullied.

The bullying Tiziana experienced revolved mainly about two reasons: the first one was her body weight, that foreseeably made her an easy target for bullies. The second reason was her dyslexia and the psychological consequences of this disorder. It is important to highlight the fact that she wasn’t even aware of the fact of being dyslexic, so she was being bullied for something not under her control. She was suffering from strong anxiety caused by performance issues linked to her disorder, but as far as her classmates were concerned, she was just playing the victim. Another noteworthy aspect is that she doesn’t consider her passion for Japan as one of the reasons of her bullying: she says she was mocked sometimes for it, but she wasn’t consistently harassed for enjoying anime to the point of being considered a form of bullying. However, given that she considered Japanese pop culture as a form of escapism, it is important to understand if this way of putting a distance from the real world had a positive or negative effect on her:

R.C. (...) In retrospective, do you think that your approach towards Japanese culture as a form of escapism helped you overcome your hardships?

Tiziana (...) Yes and no. Yes, because, as I said earlier, (*anime*) made me feel emotions I didn’t feel in my daily life since I was super depressed, and I was passionate about it because I could relate to the characters, I could

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<sup>56</sup>The valve the interviewee is talking about is the Cardia, the upper orifice of the stomach that connects it to the esophagus. It is not actually a valve, but it can restrict itself and prevent the passage of gastric fluids created during the digestion of food. Source: <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardias>

experience happiness and so I wanted to keep watching them. No, because more than often one of the reasons I felt so anxious about going to school was... Well, it's not that I was that bad at school, but I definitely could have done more. Maybe if I hadn't spent so much time watching anime and had put more effort or had studied more at school, I wouldn't have had so much anxiety for going to school and I could have lived a slightly better experience (...). It must be said that I had teachers particularly bad at teaching who made me lose all the will to put an effort in school and study their subjects on my own (...). It was also a matter of performance, since I was a top-notch student in elementary and middle school and all of a sudden, in high school, I became a mediocre one.

Tiziana's feelings in regard anime as a positive form of escapism from the depressive thoughts and the performance pressure she was feeling are contrasting: she does recognize that her passion for anime made her forget about the pain she was living and made her experience emotions she would have not felt otherwise, but at the same time she admits that spending too much time on her laptop alienated her even more and influenced negatively her grades in school. Japanese pop culture, in her case, represented a double-edge sword: a mean to forget her daily life conditions who isolated her even more as a side effect.

Another experience of escapism through the enjoyment of Japanese popular culture has been provided by Giacomo, who admitted he has been bullied consistently from middle school to high school, and not only by his classmates:

R.C. (...) Do you mind talking about your bullying experiences during the school years? You are not forced to answer to this question if you don't feel comfortable in doing it.

Giacomo Don't worry I don't mind. My memories are rather foggy (...) because it took me a long time to try and forget nine years of my life. I tried very hard to forget 3 years of middle school and six years of high school

because they have been very difficult years, and the few positive memories I have from that period are not (*memories from*) inside the school (...). From what I remember about the bullying I suffered from in middle school, it was because I was considered a weird kid. I went to school wearing the fisherman hat, or the loose rapper-kind trousers and I was left alone even by the classmates I had in elementary school. I will always remember that during P.E. class I was been made fun of because of my body, or that I couldn't stop and tie my shoelaces when exiting the school... If I had them untied, I just ran to the bus stop risking falling, because it happened a few times to be kicked when I stopped to tie them. The teachers have never seen anything of this; partly it was my fault because I never raised my voice, and partly it was the school's fault because nothing has ever been done to protect me.

About high school, I have both happy and unhappy memories. One of the few episodes of bullying, which I think happily about now, was with one of my classmates. (...). He was the leader of the boys of my class, and since I never fell under his influence he saw me as a danger, I don't know, maybe as the weird one yet again. I got pushed around, made fun of... Whatever it comes to your mind. One year, he invited the entire class to his birthday party (...) and I was the only one who showed up in the end. (...). He became one of my dearest friends and we still are (...). The other episode of bullying, which I will never be able to overcome, is the bullying from school (*intended as the teachers*). (...) I was in fourth year of high school, and I had a teacher who decided to make me fail the year. And she made it. Let's say I've never been that good in Italian language and History (...), but the Italian language teacher for some reason never accepted the fact that I got the highest grades in English, French and Spanish and bad grades in Italian. So, she decided to make me fail a year. And you will be thinking: "*How do you know this?*". I know this because the French language teacher came to me and said: "*Giacomo, I think it's better if you change class...*", and when I asked her why, she told me: "*Well, between you and me, XXX*

*(Italian language teacher's name)* wants to make you fail the entire year". And she did it. The second bullying experience from that same teacher happened the next year (...). Every time she examined us, she made me photocopy the best graded test from one of my classmates and she made me study it. She also had the bad habit of repeating the same test every year. So, I had a copy with perfect score of every test (*since he failed and had to repeat the fourth year*) (...). What happened once is that she gave me my test back with the lowest grade, and I started laughing in front of everyone. She asked me why I was laughing and (...) I got out the classroom. She followed me and asked: "*What's wrong with you? Are you on drugs or something?*" (...). I took off from my pencil case a copy of the test of my classmate, with the highest grade, and my test and showed them to her: even the punctuation was exactly the same. I took the tests to the principal: of course, the principal defended the teacher (...). The bullying exerted by teachers has a stronger psychological impact, in my opinion, because their job should be to protect you, to defend you and to teach you, not to ruin your life (...).

R.C. (...) Why didn't you change class as your French language teacher suggested you?

Giacomo (...) It was an adamant decision from my part not to change class, because I didn't want to lose my classmates. The classmates who always protected me, who made me feel part of something because I never have. I was coming from three years of middle school where I was constantly beaten in the (*school*) courtyard, so finding a class that loves me and above all accepts me for who I am... Well, why should I give up to it?

R.C. Thank you for sharing your experience. I'm sorry to make the conversation shift towards the topic of my research, but I need to ask you this: do you think that your passion towards Japanese culture was a



form of escapism from these episodes of bullying both in middle and high school?

Giacomo (*Repeatedly nods with his head*) Yes, absolutely yes. Apart from the comic stores in Bologna where I always hanged out at and where bough comics over comics over comics, I had access to the first ADSL (...), so during the afternoon instead of doing my homework or reading the history book, I spent hours staring at the computer screen waiting for the download bar to reach the end and download an episode of, I don't know, *Seikon no Qwaser*<sup>57</sup>. I wouldn't say I pictured myself in those situations (*meaning anime situations*), but I was gladly hiding myself in them. We could say that the sorrows, the problems of that period, what was my real life, the bullying, not going well (*at school*) and so on faded away in those 30 minutes of episode of *Evangelion*, *Trigun*<sup>58</sup> or *Excel Saga*<sup>59</sup>.

Giacomo's experience in terms of bullying can be divided in two periods of time: the bullying he suffered from in middle school, which was effectuated mainly by his classmates and revolved around physical violence and body shaming, and the bullying he suffered from in high school. Although the gravity level of bullying in middle school is noteworthy, Giacomo recognizes that it was the actions from his Italian language teacher the ones that scarred him the most. Leaving aside the negative aspects on the student's psyche, which are indeed serious, Giacomo points out the partiality of the school system he experienced: he was bullied from one of the people who should have protected him instead. Without any

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<sup>57</sup> *Seikon no Quasar* is the Japanese title for *The Quaser of Stigmata*, a Japanese manga series written by Hiroyuki Hoshino and illustrated by Kenetsu Satō, published for the first time in 2006 and later adapted into an anime series. The plot is about the school lives of Mafuyu Oribe and Tomo Yamanobe, who are persecuted by other students led by Miyuri Tsujidou, the daughter of the dean. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Qwaser\\_of\\_Stigmata](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Qwaser_of_Stigmata).

<sup>58</sup> *Trigun* is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Yasuhiro Nightow, published in 1995 and later adapted into an animation series. The plot is about Vash de Stampede, a gunman with a bounty on his head who has to fight against the bounty hunters who come to kill him. The series is heavily inspired on Western movies. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trigun>.

<sup>59</sup> *Excel Saga* is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Kōshi Rikudō, published in 1996 and later adapted into an animation series. The plot is about Excel and Hyatt, two young officers belonging to the ACROSS organization, whose purpose is to conquer the words. The two characters start from conquering the city of Fukuoka, but they manage to screw up the mission and cause troubles. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excel\\_Saga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excel_Saga).

real defense mechanisms and supported only by his classmates, he tried to hide from this reality through anime. Japanese animation was therefore for him a way to forget his bullying experiences and to soothe the pressure and the sorrows caused by an unfair situation over which he didn't have any influence.

Luca's statements, which will be reported here, help in the understanding of the use of Japanese popular culture as a form of escapism from monotony and loneliness. In this case, bullying or discrimination do not have a role in turning a hobby into a form of escapism, but it's the repetitiveness of one's ordinary life to spark the research of something different:

R.C. (...) According to your experience, do you think that Japanese culture in all its facets could have been a form of escapism for you?

Luca Yes, especially from high school onwards I think that my passion for Japanese culture has assumed this role. In middle school I had fun, actually. I had fun at school, studying didn't bother me, I had fun playing football... And you know, the class was small, it was in my own hometown, so I knew most of the people and the environment was familiar to me. From high school, I got tired of school, and I was never able to settle and familiarize. I never made friends there in general and I started having issues to my body, so I wasn't having fun playing football anymore too because when I got home from football practice, I was a wreck. So, the only positive aspect of my life were the other hobbies I had, which were videogames, anime and so on. Considering that I didn't have friends or other hobbies, in the evening it was important for me to take a break and lighten my life with anime or tv shows. Afterwards, when I started working, my job was very repetitive so the first trip to Japan I did has been very important; I felt the necessity to leave Italy and completely change environment.

R.C. (...) What about your family conditions? Do you think it was a form of escapism from that too?

Luca No, I don't think so. I mean, I had some hard times with my family and maybe sometimes it happened, but I wouldn't say that was the main reason of my escapism. It was more the loneliness I felt in high school and the need of breaking the monotony, (...) and Japan is good for it because with it you don't break only the monotony of your work, but also the repetitiveness of what you see every day (...).

In Luca's experience, Japanese popular culture has been (and still) is a form of escapism from the monotony of its daily life. He states that he was never able to familiarize with the school environment, making the socialization with his classmates difficult, and the physical issues he suffered from distanced him from football, one of his favorite hobbies. What was left for him was what Japan offered: anime and videogames. When he started working, he felt and still feels the need to break the repetitiveness of his mundane activities and decided to travel to Japan to experience new things and leave Italy.

Sara, whose statements regarding why she became interested in Japanese popular culture have already reported in chapter 2 of this study, admitted that her passion towards anime and manga represented a form of escapism for her too:

Sara *(Talking about why she thinks anime are interesting)* (...) In anime scenes there are cultural influences different from the ones I was used to see in my everyday life, so it's almost like I acknowledged a parallel world, a fantasy world where I could escape to... A world I knew the rules (...) because I could recognize certain patterns, and that provided me a sense of safety... I don't know if what I'm saying makes sense...

R.C. *(From here onwards the conversation shifter towards other topics, only to go back later to the escapism issue)* (...) You mentioned the escapism

earlier: do you think you perceived Japanese culture as a form of escapism from your daily life?

Sara Yes, but obviously it's not the only reason.

R.C. What are the other reasons?

Sara Well, it was a form of entertainment, rarely for educational purposes... For the last case, well, I wasn't asked to research or study on these kind of things (*meaning related to Japan*), but the interest and curiosity were born naturally from me.

R.C. As you know, one of the topics of my thesis is the escapism, so I need to ask you: from what were you escaping from?

Sara Well, clearly escapism comes from a sense of dissatisfaction towards many aspects, which mutated into the research of something that could give me some kind of gratification or entertainment... To not think (*laughs*).

R.C. You mentioned a "*sense of dissatisfaction towards many aspects*". What are these aspects?

Sara I'd say dissatisfaction towards school (...), towards a certain pressure exerted by my family and the society in general to perform the best I could, and expectations not only from a performance point of view but in terms of my personality too. (*The dissatisfaction*) Certainly it comes from my inability to conform to the standards adult people were expecting a teenager to have. Especially during my teenage years, I felt this pressure to become a person I didn't feel close to the person I was, and I wanted to become, and this type of media made me discover different personalities and made me help normalize having certain

thoughts, certain feelings and needs. (...) I could relate to certain characters who possessed personality traits similar to mine and it made me realize and accept that it's valid to feel certain emotions (...).

R.C. (...) Could you recognize from where the pressure you mentioned before was coming?

Sara Teachers, classmates, parents, family members, friends and external groups of people, western media... I'd like to expand the "western media" topic because it could be useful to your research.

R.C. Please do.

Sara I realized I mentioned western media because (...) their format provides a "knight in shining armor" type of character<sup>60</sup>, which is perceived as a role model to follow but it wasn't necessarily the role model to which I could relate. However, in oriental media that I used to enjoy, there is always the discussion related to the inner sphere of characters and it was easier for me to relate because the main characters wasn't the "*knight in shining armor*" anymore, but a person who makes mistakes, who gets in trouble... Someone you could see was going through a growth process, but the purpose of this process wasn't necessarily to become a perfect sphere; rather it was maintaining your own personality while learning how to deal with your emotions and improving yourself (...).

R.C. Beside the societal pressure you were feeling, were there other aspects you were escaping from?

Sara Err, I'd say family issues, which I needed to take a break from (...).

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<sup>60</sup> According to the site TV Trope, the Knight in Shining Armor is a trope recurrent in Europe since middle ages, and indicates generally a man who practice chivalry towards women, self-control and has a strong sense of honor. It is used nowadays to indicate a brave, strong and just man, considered "perfect". Source: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/KnightInShiningArmor>.

R.C. You are not forced to answer to the next question, so if you don't feel comfortable it's all right. Could you please describe said family issues?

Sara Well, there were many conflicts in which I could be involved in first person, but even in second or third, or simply I was affected by them on an emotional level because they were happening. (...) The conflicts happened because there were people (meaning her family members) who were not able to deal practically and emotionally with inconveniences that happened on a daily basis, even the minor ones. When a parent is not able to react in a healthy way, I, as a teenager, lacking the instruments to interpret the situation, was constantly worried and I needed to find my own coping mechanisms (...).

Sara's statements regarding this topic are rather long but significant in terms of understanding how Japanese culture can be interpreted as a form of escapism. In her experience, she chose anime as a coping mechanism for many reasons, the first of them being the need to distance herself from the sense of dissatisfaction she was feeling in regard to her daily life. In particular, the dissatisfaction sprouted from the fact that she wasn't conforming to a certain societal standard people were forcing on her. In relation to media, she perceives the role model provided by western entertainment as a "*knight in shining armor*", a tribute to perfectionism which everyone should reach. However, Sara considers anime as a source of alternative role models to relate to: they provide set of characters who are allowed to make mistakes and undergo to a development which is not functional to the reach of perfectionism, but to maintain one own's personality while getting better and learning how to know interpret one own's emotions. She also stated that watching anime was a form of escapism from the conflictual conditions of her family, which scarred her emotionally and didn't provide her the tools for a healthy conflict resolution.

The experience of Marco, one of the interviewees, is interesting in terms of his relationship with *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, an extremely popular Japanese animation series ideated by Hideaki Anno, and his conditions of depression and loneliness during high school and university years:

R.C. (...) You mentioned *Neon Genesis Evangelion* before... Can you tell me more about it? What influence did it have on you and on your approach towards Japanese culture?

Marco Well, *Evangelion* has been many things to me because Shinji is a protagonist that was my age (*when he first watched it – around 15 years old*) and the fact of having a character that reflects you helps you relate to the show. (...) Simply the fact that basically all the characters are depressed too, or the fact that they seem to be doomed to an unhappy life even if they try to do their best, their research of their own identity trying to figure out who is the actual “me” and who is the person society expects them to be (*is what makes them relatable*) (...). I related to this kind of things because I was going through the same issues: I didn’t really know who I was, I didn’t really understand if I was the wrong one and if it would have been necessary for me to change myself to be appreciated by someone or simply have the chance to find someone who appreciated me. All these things (*from the series*) struck me but in a positive way.

R.C. (...) What emerges from your answer is that for you *Evangelion* was a way to see yourself reflected on a screen, is that correct?

Marco Yes, correct.

R.C. So do you think it was a way to escape from reality to you?

Marco Yes, I think it was.

R.C. Do you feel like telling me what the condition you were escaping from was?

Marco I was running away from both my personal reality and the external reality too (...). During the first years of high school, I think I started suffering from depression and I didn't even have a good relationship with my mother, similarly to the Shinji – Gendo<sup>61</sup> relationship (*laughs*). For a certain period, I struggled communicating in class... It took me a while to become part of the group and I was “alone”, even if I had a peer who I knew from middle school, but I didn't really have a close relationship with him. (...) I struggled taking part into social groups and I felt a strong sense of isolation. With time, the situation got better “externally”, but not “internally”; everything seems just fine from the outside but in the inside, you keep doubting yourself (...). During university, one of the things I felt the most was the need of choosing a (*future*) path and figuring out if it is a good one or not.

Similarly to Sara's experience, Marco's form of escapism is related to a perceived societal pressure to become a person with specific characteristics decided arbitrarily by others, and to his relationship with her mother, which is stated to be complex. To clarify his point of view, Marco raises the Japanese animation show “Neon Genesis Evangelion” to build a comparison between his experiences and the one's lived by the characters. In this sense, he felt he could relate to the characters because of the depression he was suffering from, and which is a recurring topic in the show. He perceives the sense of dismay felt by the characters as similar to his, in terms of instable future perspectives and uncertainty in his future path. In Marco's case, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* becomes a mean to externalize and validate his own depressive feelings and the complexity of his relationship with his mother just because those exact themes are explored in the show itself. He saw the depiction of his own discomfort and fear towards the future in the form of a tv show, therefore realizing that he was not alone in his research of his identity and in the escape of the pressure society was exerting on him.

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<sup>61</sup> One of the core plot points of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is the toxic relationship between Shinji Ikari, the main character of the series, and Gendo Ikari, his father. Throughout the series, the father is depicted as manipulative, cold and emotionless towards his son, while the latter is shown in constant need of attention and approval from his parent. Other recurrent themes are depression and the research of the meaning of one own's life.



The following interviewee is Franco, who admits he used his passion for Japan, in particular for Japanese animation and manga, to overcome the feeling of solitude he had during his daily life:

R.C. Do you consider your interest in Japan, in any shape or form, as a way of escapism from reality and, if yes, could you describe said reality?

Franco Well, personally I think that's the case because when you live in a small countryside town where there's not much to do and you have no way of moving out from there, you tend to stay inside your house and do what you can do there, and what I had in that time (*middle school and high school period*) were videogames and cartoons. (...) So yeah, there was a period of my life when I played videogames and watched anime not only because I liked it, but also to evade from a reality that didn't satisfy me.

R.C. (...) Could you please talk about the negative aspects of this reality you wanted to evade from?

Franco Well, the family situation was not idyllic: my brother and I were often left alone at home, and I didn't see my father very often and same for my mother because she worked all day long. So, we spent most of the time at home alone doing homework and then either playing videogames or watching anime. Maybe he (*his brother*) went out a little more often than me, while I hanged out with those two or three people who shared my interests with, but we generally hanged out into each other's house, so we didn't really go out. (...) At the time I wasn't conscious about the fact that I was into videogames or manga to "*not to be into*" other kind of things. When you spend time on your own, it's easier to do it while doing things that make you think about a reality different than yours

(...), for example the worldbuilding of many battle manga<sup>62</sup> with all these fantastic worlds where everything is an adventure, while in XXX (*the interviewee's hometown*) the only adventure you can have is crossing the street without getting run over by a car (*laughs*).

In this case, a different perspective on escapism, strongly connected to the interviewee's hometown's geographical position, is presented. Franco, who stated that he has lived in Verona's countryside and far from a more populated area, admits he enjoyed anime and videogames not only because he enjoyed them as a form of entertainment, but as a way to make up for the shortage of stimulus in his life. Living in an isolated area, possibly not well connected to other cities through public transportation, forced him to find other ways to overcome boredom and enjoy his life more. From his experience, a mild sense of loneliness emerges too, since his parents were always working, and his brother had a more active social life than him. The lack of alternatives in terms of spending his free time led him to develop an interest towards anime and videogames. This form of entertainment, therefore, provided him a range of stories and adventures, as he mentioned to be present in numerous battle manga, which represented a valid alternative to the unsatisfactory reality he was living and gave him the possibility to enjoy his free time in a less tedious way.

While many interviewees stated that their enjoyment for Japan culture, whether it being for Japanese popular culture or other aspects, represented a form of escapism from different complex conditions of their ordinary lives, some of them do not share their experience. This is the case of Fabrizio, Roberta, and Greta in particular.

R.C.                    (...) According to your experience, do you think your passion towards Japan represented a form of escapism in some point of your life?

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<sup>62</sup> The term "*battle manga*", mentioned by the interviewee, is the inappropriate way to refer to "*Shōnen battle manga*". "*Shōnen manga*" refers to an editorial category of Japanese comics targeting mainly boys of a young age. The term "battle" refers to the genre of said manga and revolve mainly around fighting between the characters. Example of Shōnen battle manga are *Dragonball*, *One Piece* or *Naruto*. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shōnen\\_manga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shōnen_manga).

Fabrizio            Actually, I've been thinking about this, and I concluded that's not my case. I just got into it because I was interested and that's all. It happened once that I start watching anime and I found them interesting.

R.C.                So, you wouldn't say you used anime or manga to distance yourself from unpleasant situations such as, for example, bullying?

Fabrizio            Frankly, no. Maybe it happened sometimes, but in general I'd say no.

Roberta, when asked the same question, replied negatively too:

Roberta            (...) I don't think so. My interest was based purely on personal enjoyment of the topics represented by Japanese media.

Greta, on her part, has a mixed opinion regarding this aspect:

R.C.                (...) Do you think your passion towards Japan represented a form of escapism from some specific context or situation of your life?

Greta                I wouldn't say it was escapism from a specific situation, but reading manga or books was a way to relieve stress and relax... Well, technically it is escapism, since it was a way to focus on other things (*than her daily life*) that were maybe fictional and especially set in a country on the other side of the world, so it was something independent from my reality. I mean, if I wanted to relax, I'd never read an essay, or a story set in Milan (*the city where she lives*). So, maybe it has been a form of escapism, but as a way to relax mainly (...). Maybe, a form of escapism for me was volleyball or, I don't know, going out with my friends (...).

The case of these last three interviewees is interesting because it confirms the fact that the passion for Japan and Japanese culture does not necessarily indicate that said interested is perceived by a form of escapism from an unpleasant situation of their lives. In Greta's case, she mentioned that her passion for Japan could be considered as a form of escapism if

intended as a way to relax and to de-stress from one's daily life. In fact, she mentions that, if her purpose is to relax, she does not enjoy stories set in a place tied to her reality (in her case, Milan), but she prefers fictional stories set in different places and realities, and manga possess this requirement. Nonetheless, Greta denies the possibility of using this form of entertainment as a form of escapism from more serious conditions such as bullying or family issues. It is interesting to mention that during their interviews, both Roberta and Greta stated they didn't experience episodes of bullying or other issues (or, possibly, they purposely omitted it for personal reasons), therefore their experience is coherent with the fact that they didn't experience their interest towards Japan as a form of escapism. However, Fabrizio's situation is different. During his interviews, he admitted he has experienced episodes of bullying not only for his physical appearance, but also for the fact that he enjoyed Pokémon or other elements of Japanese pop culture. Despite these experiences, he stated he does not consider his interests to be a form of escapism from said unpleasant situations, but rather that he simply enjoys the entertaining aspects of it.

To conclude this chapter, given the feedbacks and the point of view of the interviewees, in combination with the data gathered through the survey, it is safe to assume that more than often one's interest towards Japan (independently from the typology of it but mainly intended as Japanese popular culture) can be considered as a form of escapism from the reality. The most prominent conditions from which the interviewees needed to distance themselves from were bullying, family conflicts, and a series of issues such as loneliness, isolation, lack of a more active life, boredom, and repetitiveness of their everyday lives.

From the interviews that has been conducted, a dichotomy between the discomfort regarding the "inner" condition of the self, connected to one's feeling, perceptions about life and desires, and the discomfort regarding the "outer" conditions, meaning the environment, the people, and the context one needs to interact with, can be traced. For most of the interviewees, Japanese culture represented an "alternative reality" where to hide in and de-stress from the daily life hardships they were facing, whether them being a serious issue such as bullying or depression, or simply the need to relax and take a break from an everyday life considered unappealing in some way or another. "*Alternative*", or in a broad sense, "*different*" is the key: the scenarios and the situations represented in Japanese culture are perceived as different from the reality the interviewees are living in, and therefore are considered optimal choices when they feel it has come the time to empty their minds and

relax. This is important in the context of their “outer” aspect of their lives: when the environment they live in is afflicted by negative episodes or unpleasant conditions, then it is preferable that the setting of the stories or the contents of the media they enjoy are from a diametrically opposite culture, such as the Japanese one. This can be observed, from example, in Greta’s, Franco’s and Luca’s experiences: for them, Japan represents an alternative as distant as possible to the reality they are living in, and therefore appealing useful in terms of immersion in the media. According to Franco’s words, it is easier to spend time alone while performing activities that transfer one’s mind in worlds different to the ones already know, and for Italian people, Japan and its culture are worthy candidates in filling this role. Loneliness, episodes of bullying, dissatisfaction towards one’s daily life or job and boredom are all connected to the discomfort concerning the “outer” condition of people, and what is in common with these experiences is the need of alternatives that make people distance themselves, at least for the time they enjoy those alternatives, from the reality they are living. Unfortunately, even though more data regarding this aspect is needed to give an objective overview of the phenomenon, Japanese culture doesn’t necessarily have a “healing” effect in such cases. According to Tiziana’s words, while her enjoyment for anime made her feel better about her bullying, it isolated her and distanced her from what she perceived could have been the solution to her school performance related anxiety she was suffering from: studying more.

In relation to the discomfort regarding the “inner” conditions of the self, they are to be considered linked to one own’s experiences of inner discomfort, such as depression, sense of dismay and uncertainty towards the future, perceived pressure from society to conform to certain standards and so on. In this case, the “*different*” or “*alternative*” aspect of the Japanese culture is not as relevant as it is when considering the outer discomfort. On the contrary, it is the research of the validation of one’s feelings and experiences through the parallelism between oneself and the character’s experiences that stimulates and motivates people’s interest toward Japanese media. This particular case concerns more Japanese popular culture and Japanese literature because it is through these media that different stories and their characters’ feelings can be expressed more easily. Sara’s experience is a clear example of this phenomenon: her sense of disappointment and inadequacy was rooted in the societal pressure of becoming someone characterized by a set of qualities she didn’t feel her own. She also stated that western media proposed an idea of role model that regarded perfectionism as the main goal to achieve, which was an ideal she

didn't recognize as suitable for her personality. However, she founds characters' development process of Asian media to be more accepting towards the possibility of making mistakes and therefore more suitable for her set of values. Marco too has enjoyed *Neon Genesis Evangelion* because he could see the parallelism between his depression and his conflicting relationship with his mother and the same experiences lived by the main character of the show. Therefore, finding the common points between one own's life and the lives of the characters depicted in anime becomes more important than the presence of inherently "diverse" elements, whether them being cultural, societal, or linguistic.

It must be mentioned that the two aspects of the "inner" / "outer" discomfort dichotomy do not necessarily contrast with each other. It comes without saying that a negative experience concerning outer aspects of one's life can (and most certainly will) influence one's psyche and therefore their inner conditions too, and vice versa. Being consistently bullied throughout school years could lead to the development of a form of depression, and therefore one could watch *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as a way to distance themselves from the negative context they are living, but at the same time to find validation for their depressive feelings, since depression is a pivotal point of the show. In such cases, both the "diverse" and the "familiar" aspects of the media are considered as appealing and influent in the development of an interest towards them. Of course, especially regarding Japanese popular culture, not every media possess both the "diverse" and "familiar" aspects, but, as previously stated in Chapter 1 of this study, the variety of the media that can be enjoyed makes the chances to find something that satisfy one's needs very high.

That being said, as two of the interviewees have stated, one's interest towards Japan will not necessarily become a form of escapism. While more information on why this phenomenon occurs (or doesn't occur) are needed, from Fabrizio's experience it can be assumed that having suffered from negative life circumstances is not necessarily a condition that triggers an interest in Japanese culture. One of the reasons that can be mentioned is the presence of other hobbies or activities that already serve as a form of escapism, like Greta stated in her interview, therefore making Japanese culture as a pure source of enjoyment of the media.

## *Conclusions*

Through the tools of quantitative research (the online questionnaire) and qualitative research (the interviews), an attempt was made to trace a common identity of people who are passionate about Japan and the motivations that led them to develop the said interest. As the excerpts extracted from the interviews and included in the various chapters of this study show, it is reasonable to assume that at the root of an interest in Japan may lie a situation of discomfort and inadequacy regarding one or more aspects of one's life or the society in which one lives (in the specific case, the Italian society).

The difficulty in integrating into Italian social dynamics, especially those taking place in the school environment, may trigger the desire for the search for a viable alternative to reality in which to take refuge and feel safe. The behavioral role models exerted by people with whom one shares one's daily life, such as parents or classmates, or by characters presented in works of Western entertainment, such as movies or TV series, may be incompatible with the intrinsic characteristics of one's personality and way of being. However, the pressure exerted by society and imprinted with conforming to the most common behavioral patterns and the strong stigmatization of the less socially accepted ones gives rise to a feeling of inadequacy in those who are unwilling, or unable, to conform to the aforementioned patterns. The search for a behavioral paradigm of reference, inferring from the statements of the interviewees, could take place concurrently with the beginning of middle school, a period when the interests of boys and girls, still malleable, begin to take shape, shaping themselves also on the basis of external influences exerted by different actors. The moment one fails to conform to that group of people whose interests and attitudes are regarded as socially accepted, one feels a sense of rejection and exclusion from the same and tends to seek a space in which to feel comfortable. The same is true for issues such as bullying, episodes of discrimination on the basis of race or related to people's physical aspects or sexual orientation: the rejection or stigmatization suffered by the stronger social community pushes the sufferer to have to seek an alternative that reflects and satisfies one's needs and requirements, or, on the contrary, that distances one from the reality in which one lives.

In this study, underlying the need for escapism, two types of dissatisfaction related to the self were in fact formulated, both possible origin of the approach to Japanese culture. One of the two typologies is related to a sense of dissatisfaction coming from the person's

inner sphere, such as episodes of depression, sense of loss, lack of self-confidence or toward the future, and generates the need to find, for example in the entertainment media, behavioral patterns that reflect the difficulties, fears and feelings experienced by those who use them. The other typology, contrary to the previous one, refers to what is external to people's intimate sphere, and thus to the circumstances of daily life, living conditions or events related to other people; in other words, to the reality in which people live. The dissatisfaction felt toward these aspects generates the need to find a type of entertainment that distances itself as much as possible from the current reality, providing elements and stories that do not remind one of what is already familiar and associated with the episodes of dissatisfaction.

Japanese culture, and especially entertainment culture, thus including comic books, animation, and video games, effectively fulfills both of the above-mentioned needs. On the one hand, cultural, literal, folkloric and environmental elements that are presented in Japanese media are perceived by almost all respondents as "different," sometimes "diametrically opposed," to those of the Italian and, by extension, Western culture to which they are accustomed. They represent windows to look out of to see a different world far removed from the vicissitudes of everyday life, while providing an effective form of entertainment with which to spend time. Many of the respondents, in fact, admitted to watching anime even for many hours a day to banish memories and feelings arising from bullying episodes suffered at school, unpleasant family situations, or lack of social relationships. On the other hand, Japanese media characters are described as inclined toward greater introspection and self-analysis of their own insecurities and fears and are often characterized by a growth path designed to improve themselves, while still remaining far from perfection and, in a sense, from the rules imposed by society. They thus provide alternative behavioral models to those offered by Italian forms of entertainment (and by Italian people), allowing those who enjoy them to see a characteristic of themselves represented that would normally be judged or frowned upon in the eyes of society. Viewers, therefore, not only have the opportunity to appreciate stories, contexts, and settings distant from those to which they are accustomed and to which they attribute unpleasant feelings and experiences, but at the same time they see their own feelings and inadequacies represented and, more importantly, validated.

As to why it is precisely Japanese culture that is transformed into a means of externalizing one's insecurities, the reported excerpts clearly testify to the influence of



Italian television in the process of popularizing Japan's popular culture, especially considering the age group in which the interviewees are placed (25 to 41 years old). During childhood and adolescence, it was easy to stumble upon Japanese cartoons broadcast by TV stations in particularly popular channels such as, for example, *Italia 1*, just after returning from school. Nevertheless, the spread of the Internet and the first streaming services (whether legal or illegal) also helped to bring young Italians closer to the distant Japanese culture and allowed them to consider it as a valid alternative pastime to the more common and popular ones in the country here.

Special mention, therefore, should be made precisely of Japanese entertainment culture, to which two main features were attributed by the interviewees mainly: the first, as mentioned earlier, is the "diversity" from the known realities and characteristic elements of Italian culture; the second, on the other hand, is the "variety" of the range of themes, stories and characters offered by entertainment media, which exponentially facilitates viewers' ability to identify with what they see according to their feelings and mood of the moment and allows them to create a kind of virtual safe space in which they can validate their own needs. In this regard, what makes such a wide range of possibilities possible is, according to part of the interviewees, the technique by which such media are made: drawing and animation. These techniques make it possible to visually represent the authors' creativity limitlessly, being able to express certain themes in a much more direct manner and thus, as a result, more easily capture the attention of the viewer who shares the thoughts, experiences and differences presented by the work.

Works in animation, however, according to the interviewees' statements, are subject to strong stereotyping and stigmatization by all those who are not interested in this type. Animation is not seen as a storytelling technique, but rather as a monolithic genre that touches two far-flung extremes: on the one hand, animated works are seen as material for an audience of children. The moment it is realized that their contents are not, precisely, for a very young audience, they are automatically categorized as erotic or, even, pornographic material. This phenomenon fuels the generation of stereotypes against those who use this type of media, sometimes actually worsening their living conditions. Among the commonplaces mentioned by respondents' statements, the figure of a socially inept, relatively isolated person with difficulties in relating to others, sometimes presenting obsessive behaviors toward their hobbies (Japanese culture), or tedious toward others, emerges in the main. Consequently, although Japanese popular culture provides, in

principle, a possible support in dealing with personal and daily life difficulties, the possibility that it also represents, in some cases, an additional motivation for distress and social isolation cannot be entirely ruled out. Not surprisingly, especially during the middle school period, many of those interviewed admitted to hiding their interests, particularly from classmates, for fear of being rejected or ridiculed. It seems to be during high school, however, that with the support of a group of friends with whom to share one's passions or the adoption of a more assertive behavior, one is able to experience them more serenely and sometimes share them to individuals outside one's trusted circle.

Unfortunately, the author, not being a professional researcher but a mere student, is well aware of the limitations of this study and the mistakes made when creating primary sources and collecting information through them. For one, despite the fact that the research was to be conducted on a national field, most of the respondents to the questionnaire and the entirety of the respondents originated from the Veneto region. In the event that the research related to these issues were to be continued, wide-ranging research should be carried out to delineate a national picture of the phenomenon. In addition, some of the aspects such as geographic location in relation to a place with a high population density and the influence of multicultural cities such as Milan in spreading Japanese culture should be further investigated through more efficient empirical methodologies. Lastly, regarding the types of discrimination experienced, a focus on the correlation between the LGBTQ+ community and the development of a deep passion for Japanese culture would be welcome, in an attempt to verify a possible correspondence between the two elements.

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