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**Traditional clothing in Bulgaria and Japan in the context of globalization:  
Tradition and transformation**

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**Groningen, 26 June 2024**

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## **Abstract**

Traditional clothing can serve as a marker of belonging as well as identity. It has the potential to express political stances and cultural meanings. Bulgaria and Japan experienced a shift in sartorial practices in the nineteenth and twentieth century which led to changes in the role of traditional clothing from everyday clothing to a national symbol. What are the global and local processes which have influenced the development of traditional clothing, and how have they affected its current role? The study examines traditional clothing as part of the outward expressions of culture. It contributes to the scholarship concerning the relevance of cultural heritage in the construction of individual, national, and global identities across different contemporary cultural contexts. The analysis of literature, media, and interviews with Japanese and Bulgarian participants reveals how traditional clothing contributes to the construction of identities and reflects broader socio-cultural, economic and political changes. Respondents associated traditional clothing with its symbolic and aesthetic value, with individual and collective memories, and with national culture. Traditional clothing is used during holidays and special events. Memories of these experiences evoke an emotional connection which highlights the role of traditional dress in shaping both individual and collective identity. The study also explores the intersections between traditional clothing and contemporary consumer culture. Those include modern interpretations such as contemporary clothing with traditional designs, upcycling practices, and the combination of traditional and contemporary clothing. Traditional clothing has also been integrated in contemporary contexts, such as events associated with consumer culture, as well as digital markets. These intersections create tensions between local and global cultures, past and present, and preservation and modernization. The investigation offers a perspective on how the distance between these dichotomies is reduced through a combination of tradition and transformation.

**Keywords:** traditional clothing, Japan, Bulgaria, consumer culture, identity

**Word count:** 25 385

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## Preface

Perhaps it was a few years ago when my grandma gifted me an old traditional costume or maybe even earlier when I became interested in traditional clothing. I have become fascinated with different traditional costumes from across the world - the meanings, the designs, as well as the stories woven into the fabrics. Consequently, I became intrigued by all aspects of clothing including its symbolic, aesthetic and pragmatic value, as well as the ethical and environmental considerations in the current fast fashion industry. Spending a semester in Japan provided me with a small window into Japanese culture and I quickly became curious about the similarities I noticed between the development of traditional clothing in Bulgaria and Japan and its integration into contemporary culture. This inspired me to conduct a comparative analysis to understand the current role of traditional clothing in two seemingly very different contexts.

I would like to thank everyone who took part in the interviews and shared their personal stories, impressions and hopes. The kind people I have met have left a memorable impression and have contributed with invaluable insights. And of course I would like to thank everyone who supported me along this intercultural journey including my friends, family, professors, and supervisors. Below is a photo of my experience wearing a kimono in Kyoto, Japan, and a traditional Bulgarian costume given to me by my grandmother in Dobrich, Bulgaria.



## Introduction

Clothing is an essential part of everyday life and material culture. It is a medium through which identity is expressed and constructed (Decheva, 2005). According to Hristov (2011) clothing is both a characteristic of the individual and an "indicator of the social dynamics and cultural changes in traditional communities" (p.251). Valk (2018) illustrates that it can be analyzed both as a system of communication expressing a variety of symbolic meanings and as a cultural embodied practice. The latter allows examination of the engagement with clothing and its role in the intricate processes of identity negotiation.

Chattaraman and Lennon (2008) who studied the emotions and meanings attributed to the consumption of ethnic clothing, note that the level of ethnic identification affects the usage of ethnic-inspired products including traditional costumes. Similarly, Forney and Rabolt (1986) state ethnic identity is formed in relation to others based on similarities and differences and is a part of the self, actualized through social participation. External markers of identity include the clothing practices of people among other aspects such as language and names (Decheva, 2017; Forney and Rabolt, 1986). Valk (2021) notes that in Japan, as a highly consumer society, consumer choices, including sartorial practices, play an important role in the process of expression of group belonging and individual identity. This idea is reiterated by Kovacheva-Kostadinova et al. (1994), according to whom, traditional clothing is a visual representation of the specifics of ethnic Bulgarian culture. Interestingly, not only wearing but also simply owning traditional dress, can be an expression of ethnic identity (Forney and Rabolt, 1986). Akinci (2022) also notes the importance of dress as a national symbol, especially in a multicultural context where dress can serve as a means to assert cultural commonalities and differences. Meanwhile, Cliffe (2017) underscores the potential of clothing in various cultures to express political stances and cultural meanings. It serves as a marker for belonging to or exclusion from certain social or ethnic groups. Holroyd (2017) argues that the engagement with traditional clothing from ownership to dressing may represent personal values, affiliations to a particular group or an understanding of the past.

Kovacheva-Kostadinova et al. share that "the national costumes, together with language and song tradition are very specific cultural phenomena which evolve during long historical development" (1994, p.10, own translation from Bulgarian). This holds true for both Bulgarian and Japanese traditional clothing, which are the focus of the current study. Both countries experienced a shift in sartorial practices at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the

twentieth century. Bulgaria has gone through significant socio-political changes in the past century which have influenced the engagement with traditional clothing. It has changed political regimes, from a kingdom after the liberation from the Ottoman Empire, through a socialist state under the direct influence of the Soviet Union, to the present democratic republic, which is part of the EU. The role of traditional clothing has shifted with the invention of the national costume, resonating with Hobsbawm's concept of invented traditions (cited in De Caro, 2013). In a similar but distinctive way, traditional clothing in Japan, which used to be everyday dress before the introduction of Western fashion, was constructed as a national symbol of Japan. There, the colonial and economical struggles exerted influence on the circulation of the kimono. Throughout these periods the use of traditional clothing as well as some of the meanings associated with it have changed in both countries. While the link between traditional clothing and ethnic identity has been highlighted by many scholars, as mentioned above, Valk (2018) has provided a new perspective by reflecting on the global consumer culture which has influenced the circulation of traditional clothing in Japan. Studying traditional clothing as a cultural phenomenon influenced by global and local processes can shed light on changes in identity construction and the role of cultural heritage.

#### Research gap

While multiple studies have emerged about the development of traditional clothing and its meanings in the areas of the Pacific, South Asia, and Africa, there remains a lack of comparative analyses. Examining distinct context and understanding the way in which traditional clothing has developed different and similar meanings and uses, can provide insights about the way global and local processes affect cultural identity and heritage preservation. There is a growing number of studies about the kimono focusing on the changing role of the kimono and the gendered aspects of it in Japan (Assmann, 2008; Cliffe, 2017; Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999; Valk, 2021). Meanwhile Bulgarian dress has been analyzed predominantly from an ethnographical point of view documenting the designs, variation and meanings encoded in traditional dress. Studies in this field emphasize the local aspects of traditional clothing associated with ethnic identity. Valk (2018) goes beyond this perception and argues that traditional clothing, while certainly a symbolic device linked to cultural identity, it is also integrated into global consumer culture. People engage with it similarly to their engagement with contemporary fashion. Most studies remain, nonetheless, focused on one region at a time, leaving a gap in comparative literature which can shed light on the way various global and local factors influence the circulation of traditional clothing as cultural



heritage and as a commodity, part of the global consumer culture and fashion system. Crane and Bovone (2006) highlight the need for cross-cultural studies identifying the shared and distinct values attributed to material culture across various cultural contexts. This thesis aims to contribute to the academic discussion by conducting a comparative study about two distinct regions, namely Bulgaria and Japan. It provides an analysis of how global consumer culture, socio-cultural, economic, and political changes influence the usage and meanings of traditional clothing and identity construction.

## Aim

In light of these perspectives, the goal of the current study is to:

1. Understand how global and local processes including socio-cultural and economic changes, shifts in the political landscape, and consumer culture and globalization, have influenced the role and use of traditional clothing in similar and distinctive ways across different cultural contexts.
2. Explore the role of traditional clothing for individuals in Bulgaria and Japan, whose identity is constructed in relation to local, national, and global identities. This includes an exploration of the values and meanings attributed to traditional clothing as well as its circulation among people with an affinity for traditional culture.
3. And lastly, to challenge the binary between Western fashion and traditional clothing by examining how the latter integrates into global consumer culture. This aspect focuses on modern interpretations of traditional designs, social media networks promoting traditional clothing, and the traditional clothing industry.

The main research questions guiding the analysis are as follows:

*1. What are the similarities and differences in the development of traditional clothing in Bulgaria and Japan and how are global and local processes reflected in the engagement, meanings and conservation of traditional clothing in Japan and Bulgaria?*

This question explores the influence of processes such as cultural, economic, and political shifts on the circulation of traditional clothing. Furthermore, it reveals whether global challenges including overconsumption and globalization are reflected in the use of traditional clothing and the associations and meanings attributed to it. Lastly, the tension between preservation of authentic forms and progress and innovation associated with traditional clothing as a contemporary fashion

choice are examined. Specifically, the study focuses on modern interpretations of traditional clothing, adaptations to contemporary fashion trends, and integration into contemporary consumer culture. The role of social media in promoting traditional clothing is also introduced.

## *2. What is the role of traditional clothing in constructing identities in the context of globalization?*

This section focuses on the association between traditional clothing and the past as well as the values and meanings attributed to it. By exploring the values and meanings attributed to national dress in each country, the study maps the common values and analyzes how they are related to different layers of identity as well as global events and processes.

In short, the analysis reveals how traditional clothing contributes to the construction of identities, reflects broader cultural, economic and political changes, and adapts to global consumer culture.

### Significance

A comparative study between Bulgaria and Japan provides a perspective on the effect of local and global processes on cultural identification, in particular through engagement with traditional clothing as a part of cultural heritage. Studies have previously focused on political and economic relations as well as cultural diplomacy between Bulgaria and Japan leaving a gap in understanding the way economic, political and cultural changes influence cultural identification (Gadjeva, 2022; Kandilarov, 2013; Kandilarov, 2021).

Cultural heritage is acknowledged as a driving force for the cultural and creative sectors, thus understanding how people engage with traditional clothing becomes crucial for informing cultural policies and projects across Europe. This comparative study can be drawn on for strengthening cultural relations and promoting cross-cultural exchange. Japan has strong ties with Europe in a historical perspective as well as in the present with multiple partnerships aimed at strategic cooperation in the area of economic development, security and technological advancement. Bulgaria, in particular, offers a unique perspective for comparison with Japan, different from countries from Western Europe because of its historical development under the Soviet regime. Clothing, including traditional attire, was regulated during the Soviet regime as a tool to promote the regime's ideology and values (Kazalarska, 2014).

Kandilarov (2013) discusses the diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Japan. While both countries took part in the Tripartite pact during the Second World War, their post-war

development took a different course. On opposite sides of the Cold War, Bulgaria under the Soviet regime, and Japan under US occupation, the diplomatic relations were discontinued until the 60s. Following the restoration of diplomatic relations, in the 60s-80s, Bulgaria sought cooperation with Japan in an effort to pursue economic and technological developments. After the end of the Cold War, the cooperation between Japan and Bulgaria decreased despite the proximity in political regimes. In 2007 Bulgaria joined the EU, which provided a renewed opportunity for partnership and cooperation. However, the lack of political stability and competitiveness in Bulgaria in combination with economic stagnation in Japan has led to weak relations between the two countries (Kandilarov, 2013). This leaves space for developing a more comprehensive strategy for bilateral relations both through cultural, economic, and political cooperation.

Despite the rich cultural histories and transformations in both regions, there is limited research on how global consumer culture and socio-political changes have influenced the engagement with traditional clothing. This study holds significance as it investigates the changing role of traditional clothing in Bulgarian and Japanese societies, contributing valuable insights into the development of cultural identity amidst global influences. The growing cultural exchange between Bulgaria and Japan provides an opportunity to explore the diverse ways traditional clothing evolves in different contexts (Kandilarov, 2013). By uncovering both similarities and differences, the study sheds light on common global factors influencing the significance of traditional clothing and offers a cross-cultural perspective that contributes to cultural sustainability strategies in the face of modernization.

Moreover, the research aims to position traditional clothing within the broader consumer culture trends, exploring its role as not only a cultural heritage but also as a dynamic component of the global fashion system. By delving into the ways traditional clothing practices align with contemporary consumer behaviors, the research seeks to challenge the binary between Western fashion and traditional attire, emphasizing its integration into the global consumer culture and its impact on identity construction, especially among the younger generations in Bulgaria and Japan.

## Structure

In the following chapters, a conceptual and theoretical framework is presented followed by an explanation of the methodology. The analysis is divided in two parts followed by a conclusion. Chapter I includes an overview of key concepts relevant for the discussion including concepts

related to traditional clothing as well as a theoretical framework relevant for the analysis discussing the invention of national symbols, the instrumentalisation of folklore, the relevance of clothing and material culture for cultural identity, the characteristics of consumer culture, and the role of collective memory in identity construction.

Chapter II describes the methodology including the method of data collection, in particular the sample characteristics, the interview design, constraints, and ethical considerations and the procedure followed during data collection and management. A section dedicated to data analysis discusses the interview transcription method, the coding process and the use of thematic analysis. In Chapter III the first research question is addressed. A historical overview of the development of the use of traditional clothing in Japan and Bulgaria is presented, highlighting similarities and differences. It includes a discussion about the effects of local and global cultural, political, and economic changes on the engagement with traditional clothing, as well as an analysis of the current role and use of traditional clothing and its intersections with global consumer culture.

Chapter IV is dedicated to the analysis of the data collected through interviews. The section provides insights into the associations participants have with traditional clothing, and their views on modern interpretations. The analysis provides a response to the second research question concerning the role of traditional clothing in processes of cultural identity construction and contributes to the understanding of the global and local processes which influence the engagement with traditional clothing. It further contributes to the discussion of the intersection of traditional clothing with contemporary consumer culture.

Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the findings highlighting similarities as well as distinctions in the way socio-cultural, political, and economic changes impacted the engagement with traditional clothing in two different cultural contexts. The role of traditional clothing in constructing individual, national, and global identity is discussed and the views towards modern interpretations of traditional clothing illustrate the tensions between past and present, preservation and innovation, traditional clothing and contemporary consumer culture. Furthermore, the relevance of the research is highlighted and limitations are discussed. Suggestions for further research are also provided.

## CHAPTER I

### Theoretical background

In order to analyze how traditional clothing contributes to the construction of identities, reflects broader socio-economic and political changes, and is adapted to global consumer culture, key concepts need to be defined to better understand the discussion. The following section problematizes and defines key terms such as traditional, ethnic and western clothing. Additionally, the concepts which help interpret the comparison are presented. The link between traditional clothing and the past is explored, the phenomenon of invented traditions and instrumentalisation of folklore are explained, in addition to a discussion about global consumer culture.

#### 1.1 Concepts

The development of the national costume in Europe is based on the idea that ethnic communities have their own characteristic way of dressing (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). Clothing in the 19th century acquired a stronger ethnic dimension and association and was constructed as an indicator of ethnic belonging. Traditional clothing in Bulgaria has been used as a "resource supporting the idea of the unity between the territorial and ethnic identity of the nation" (Dechev & Vukov, 2010, p.223, own translation). Similarly, Decheva (2017) argues that clothing reflects the periods of development of ethnic groups including economic developments, social structure, and geographical conditions of their habitat. According to her, clothing expresses the cultural variation of ethnic groups. Neuburger (2019) and Dechev and Vukov (2010) problematize the identification of traditional clothing with ethnic dress pointing out the complex relationship between ethnicity and dress. Assmann (2008) also notes that traditional clothing in Japan was referred to as Japanese clothing after the introduction of western clothing. Suzuki (2023) critically approaches the notion of the kimono as ethnic Japanese dress, highlighting its complex history.

Traditional clothing in Japan and Bulgaria is considered as the clothing which was worn before the integration of western-style clothing. The term *traditional clothing* has been subject to criticism due to its implicit dichotomy between western and non-western attire (Cliffe, 2017). The former is often associated with notions of progress and contemporary fashion, while the latter carries connotations of being static, local, and unfashionable. Scholars, notably Cliffe (2017), challenge this oversimplified perspective by highlighting the inherent diversity and evolution within traditional clothing. Despite the assertion by scholars like Hobsbawm and Ranger that

traditions are often invented, traditional clothing maintains its significance as a means of reconnecting with a pre-Western past (cited in Valk, 2018). It serves as a tangible link to historical narratives, offering individuals a means to engage with material culture and construct idealized stories of the past. This nuanced perspective underscores the complexity inherent in the discourse surrounding traditional clothing and challenges simplistic categorizations.

Traditional clothing usually combines multiple pieces of clothing thus it is also referred to as a *costume*. The traditional clothing of Bulgaria is called *nosiya*. It refers to a reinvented image of rural dress from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century constructed as the national attire (Figure 1) (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). It encompasses both authentic traditional clothing, preserved from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, usually exhibited in museums, as well as stylized versions of festive attire worn by the rural population until the 40s-50s. Stylized costumes are “copies of traditional costumes, using modern textile fabrics” and production techniques (Elnashar et al., 2017, p.79). They are modern “variants of folk costumes, which are intended for folklore compositions, public appearances, theater performances and more” contrasted with traditional folk costumes for non-commercial purposes (pp.78-79). Despite acting as a unifying symbol, the *nosiya* maintains its regional characteristics and holds similarities to neighboring nations’ traditional clothing.

**Figure 1**

*Examples of Traditional Bulgarian Clothing*



Source: Kovacheva-Kostadinova et al. (1994, p.60).

Japanese traditional clothing includes different types of garments, among which the *kimono* is the most recognized one (Figure 2). *Yukata*, a summer robe with lighter fabrics, and *hakama*, traditional trousers, are other types of traditional clothing. The *kimono* dates back to the Heian period more than one thousand years ago (Assmann, 2008).

**Figure 2**  
*Kimono, Dräkt (mid-20<sup>th</sup> century)*



*Source:* Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, published by Europeana. I have made modifications removing the background of the image.

The paper also discusses *modern interpretations of traditional clothing* referring to the integration of traditional designs and elements of traditional clothing in contemporary fashion. Examples include the application of designs of traditional Bulgarian embroidery in modern wear such as T-shirts, dresses, accessories and other apparel, as well as the remake or upcycling of fabrics from traditional clothing into new items such as coats, apparel and accessories. The latter practice is well established in Japan.

When analyzing the adaptation of traditional clothing to consumer culture, the term *western fashion* itself can be problematized as it evokes a contrast between Western and traditional clothing asserting that the West is the only source of fashion or progress in sartorial practices. As Cliffe (2017) and Valk (2018) have highlighted, traditional clothing has been subject to innovation much like contemporary fashion which has its origins as Western fashion. Historically, nonetheless, the

dichotomy exists in the associations of traditional clothing with conservative, static societies in opposition to Western attire which is associated with change and creativity (Cliffe, 2017). Thus, there needs to be caution in the way the term is used. Instead, *contemporary fashion* is preferred to refer to clothing, part of the current global fashion system.

### 1.2. Culture and levels of identity

Culture is described by Nguyen-Phuong-Mai (2017) as a compilation of “fundamental concerns, values, and outward expressions” (p.50). Traditional clothing fits into the latter category which refers to objects, symbols and behaviors including clothes. The dynamic paradigm in cultural studies sees culture as reactive to the environment: “Depending on the circumstances, culture is able to adapt to meet eco-socio-politico demands” (p. 53). One of the influential factors behind cultural change is globalization. Nguyen-Phuong-Mai points out the importance of context in cultural shifts saying “we are not only interested in understanding what culture ‘is’ but we also need to know how culture ‘responds’” (p.55). It is thus important to examine the ways in which traditional clothing has responded to economic, political and cultural changes, including globalization in order to get a better understanding of cultural shifts. According to the Inverted Pyramid Model, culture consists of “three levels of analysis: universal, collective, and individual” (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2017, p.66). The current study considers the individual level, consisting of individual background and experiences which shape one’s identity, and the collective level, consisting of group, organizational, national and global identity. The universal level is not discussed due to the nature of qualitative research, which avoids making generalizations such as describing universal concerns and values. In particular, the analysis aims to discover how individual, national, and global identities are constructed through an exploration of the engagement with traditional clothing, which is part of the outward expressions of culture.

### 1.3. Traditional clothing and identity

Valk (2018) illustrates that clothing is involved in intricate processes of identity negotiation which can be understood both as a system for communication and as a cultural practice influenced by various factors. Traditional clothing as part of cultural heritage and material culture offers a way to engage with the past, evoking both personal connections with family and friends as well as collective memories of a shared past forming the basis of a shared culture (Valk, 2017). Collective memories are constructed through interactions with others, thus it is important to understand the



role of the context in the engagement with traditional clothing (Erl, 2011). The environment is also a key element for our predisposition and choices as illustrated by the concept of *habitus* developed by Bordieu, who highlights the role of the social structures and our current context in shaping our practices and choices (cited in Maton, 2014). Following from that, the way people engage with clothing, including the context in which such practices take place as well as the relation to other people should be analyzed to reveal how these interactions influence perceptions and choices regarding clothing.

When analyzing the role of traditional clothing in identity construction, the link between clothing and the past needs to be analyzed. Holroyd (2017) notes that the engagement with traditional clothing from ownership to dressing could represent not only personal values, and affiliations to a particular group, but also an understanding of the past. According to Jenss (2015), who studies the motivation to wear vintage clothing, described as clothing associated with the past, such clothing can function as a way to reinterpret and engage with the past. In addition, vintage clothing can represent an interest in a certain historical period. In this sense, vintage fashion is explored as a way of performing the past. Traditional clothing as a national symbol and cultural heritage based on clothing worn in the past, is similarly clothing associated with the past. This association may have personal, national and global dimensions. Thus, examining the role of traditional clothing in identity construction should also consider the ways in which the past is evoked. This is also relevant due to the processes of invention and reinvention of traditions which come to represent modified versions of the past.

#### 1.4. Invented traditions

The revival of folklore has led to the re-invention of traditions thought of as authentic (De Caro, 2013). There are various ways in which folklore and traditions are re-invented today ranging from personal events to international festivals which usually encompass various aspects of folklore. These “inventions of traditions”, in Eric Hobsbawn’s words, are instrumentalized by the state or by certain political groups to consolidate the nation or spread an ideology based on nostalgia (De Caro, 2013, Luleva, 2019). This process holds significance in post-Soviet countries, such as Bulgaria, where folklore was and continues to be central to the nation-building project. In Japan traditional clothing as well was framed as a national dress as a reaction to and a result from westernization (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999).

Akinci (2022) highlights the importance of cultural symbols in the construction of national identity. States employ constructed images of the past encoded in practices and cultural heritage including traditional clothing, in order to craft a specific image of the nation. Through the invention of national symbols, a sense of national homogeneity is constructed contrasted to the cultural heterogeneity which exists within and outside of its borders. The regulation and promotion of a set of practices and symbols “achieve the illusion of ‘authenticity’ and homogeneity amongst a nation, even if the participants may in fact be a relatively heterogeneous group”.

Hristov (2013) states that traditional culture is based on an idea of cultural heritage inherited from the past. Framing a part of culture as traditional suggests that it represents an authentic reflection of the past despite the inaccuracies with which the past is represented. The mismatch between factual and imagined past in Bulgaria is a result of the contributions of ethnographers and the state to the construction of a national identity (Hristov, 2013; Luleva, 2019). Ethnographers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century across Europe influenced the construction of cultural heritage by characterizing certain elements of the culture as traditional or authentic which gives them importance necessitating their preservation (Hristov, 2013). Additionally, the state carefully crafts the narrative of cultural heritage, selecting which elements are preserved and which are discarded under the premise that they are unnecessary or even having a negative effect on the nation. The narrative of what belongs to the set of cultural traditions is ideologically constructed based on the perception of what needs to be preserved as cultural heritage, and on the narrative of the nation.

While many scholars discuss traditional clothing as a tool for constructing national identity, Dechev and Vukov (2010) point out that the idea of the national costume can also be understood as a consequence of the nation-building processes. On the one hand, specific clothing was framed as traditional clothing which characterizes the nation and its culture and values. On the other hand, the designation of traditional clothing as the national costume was the result of the process of Europeanization. According to the scholars, the adoption of Western fashion in Bulgaria is a part of the nation-building process, aligning the nation with other European nations. As a result of this modernization, traditional clothing went out of circulation and shifted its meaning, finding its new role as a national symbol.

Particular for the Bulgarian context is the instrumentalization of folklore which has its historical roots and is a lasting legacy of the Soviet regime. According to Luleva (2019), the

manipulation of folklore in Bulgaria is not a recent phenomenon but has its origins in the Soviet era, where traditions were either supported or discarded based on their alignment with the regime's narrative. This legacy continues today, with folklore and national memory being politically instrumentalized to serve the agenda of conservative populism and ethno-nationalism, even in the absence of direct regulation of sartorial practices from authorities (Luleva, 2019).

## 1.5. Consumer culture

### 1.5.1. Globalization

While traditional clothing has a significant role in the preservation of cultural heritage and the construction of national identity, it is important to consider how these garments are situated within and influenced by the dynamics of contemporary consumer culture. Consumer culture, as pointed out by Steenkamp (2019), "implies that in a modern world, core identities are defined and oriented in relation to consumption" (p.2). In recent decades, it has been shaped by globalization processes and includes not only material goods but also the consumption of images and symbols.

Globalization can lead to clashes with local cultures and identities. Steenkamp summarizes the three main outcomes of these clashes discussed in cultural globalization theory. The first is assimilation, which is characterized by the orientation towards global preferences and behavior and homogenization in detriment to local cultures. This phenomenon is described as cultural convergence in the language of political multiculturalism (Pieterse, 2009). Localization, characteristic of cultural differentialism, is the opposite outcome, whereby global influences are largely rejected favoring local and national cultures and values (Pieterse, 2009, Steenkamp, 2019). Lastly, hybridization or glocalization reflects the efforts to integrate the global into the local, and the local into the global. This can happen as an integrated response across all domains or concern the globalization of some domains and the localization of others (Steenkamp, 2019). According to Pieterse (2009), cultural mixing is the "politics of integration without the need to give up cultural identity while cohabitation is expected to yield new cross-cultural patterns of difference" (p. 70). Globalization can lead on the one hand to universalization, but on the other, it crystalizes cultural differences as they come into contact which can result in a tension between the local and the global. Cultural mixing is one way to address this tension through synthesis of global and local aspects of culture. The idea of mixing global and local influences resonates with traditional clothing practices in the present which combine characteristics of traditional culture and contemporary consumer

culture. The way traditional dress changes as a result of global and local processes can be explored in order to analyze the way cultural identity is constructed vis-a-vis the local and the global level.

### *1.5.2. Characteristics*

While Featherstone (2018) points out the shift from material to experiential consumption, Ermann (2013) argues that "consumer capitalism is not a dematerialized economy, but it is characterized by a mutual co-creation of meaning by producers and consumers (p.1346)". This neoliberal perspective on consumer capitalism is based on the added value of products through the creation of signs, meanings and lifestyles. The product itself is not the end goal of companies, as the business has shifted from production of goods to production of meanings and signs, whereby branding, marketing strategies and storytelling are of key importance. The aesthetic value of fashion is in a similar way determined by its link to the production of meanings. With the spread of globalization and the increasing social media presence, what is consumed and how it is consumed has become central in the way identity is constructed as a form of self-expression as well as a way of connecting with a wider community (Valk, 2021).

Another characteristic of global consumer culture is its inscription "in new modes of communication" (Featherstone, 2018, p.1). Shopping experience is an important aspect of consumer culture as it reflects one of the ways in which people interact with clothing. Shopping malls as well as digital markets including social media characterize the current global market. Similarly, Valk (2021) points out salient features of 21st century consumer culture such as the use of online platforms and social media, the integration of new designs, varied choices and the notion of community sharing a lifestyle or part of a subculture, understood as a reaction to or deviation from mainstream consumer trends.

Individualization is another feature of contemporary consumer culture. In Japan, the "new generation of consumers began to emerge, with more individuated and differentiated consumer tastes, making purchases that were for personal enjoyment and to build a self-image or a lifestyle." (Valk, 2021, p.122). Similarly, according to Ermann (2013), Bulgarian consumers are characterized by their "individualization of identities and lifestyle" (p.1355).

Lastly, overconsumption, including the accumulation of clothing as well as discarding it, is a symptom of contemporary consumer culture (Ertekin et al., 2020). While resources were more limited in the immediate post-war years, the current market allows for affordable goods to circulate easily, leading to overconsumption (Ertekin et al., 2020). McIntyre (2019) discovers that beyond

affordability accumulating clothing is driven by affective motives including emotional rewards from purchases, the desire to appear in a certain way in relation to others, as well as the hesitation to throw away clothing which carries emotional charge. This contributes to global environmental challenges as evidenced by multiple reports of international organizations and the attention paid to the environmental and ethical considerations in the fashion industry in recent years (Cobbing & Vicaire, n.d.; Hohann et al., 2023; Reichart & Drew, 2019). As a result, a counter-movement has emerged, advocating for circular economy, environmentally-friendly products, and corporate social responsibility (Buchel et al., 2022; Gordon & Hill, 2015). Gordon and Hill (2015) highlight that practices of upcycling fabrics into new clothing or repurposing clothing into new products have gained attention as an alternative to fast fashion. While such practices have existed for a long time mainly for economic reasons, the widespread availability of cheap mass produced clothing and the growth of textile waste has resulted in their re-emergence as a sustainable alternative (Gordon and Hill, 2015). It is thus important to consider how the engagement with traditional clothing reflects environmental and ethical issues in the fashion industry. Examining the way traditional clothing is collected, remade, and engaged with can provide insights about its alignment to or distinction from other practices part of the global consumer culture.

## CHAPTER II

### Methodology

This section provides clarity about the methodological steps that guided both data collection and analysis, including multiple qualitative instruments. First, it discusses the selection of methods, considering their relevance to the research questions and theoretical discussions of methodology for cultural and social studies. Second, the process of data collection is described, including details such as sample demographics, interview structure, limitations, additional considerations, and ethical guidelines. Lastly, the methodology for data analysis is explored, describing the approach used to derive insights from the data which respond to the research questions as well as the implications of the methodology on the quality of the findings.

#### 2.1. Research methods

The paper first compares the historical developments of traditional clothing in Bulgaria and Japan through analysis of secondary sources. This exploration provides insights about the influence of socio-economic and political changes on the circulation of traditional clothing in both countries offering a perspective on the common and distinctive or global and local factors contributing to those changes. Current uses of traditional clothing are introduced as well, based on ethnographic observations, secondary sources, as well as primary data from online sources such as social media channels and online media articles. Those have been accessed through a search on Instagram and Google with keywords including *kimono* and *носия, nosiya* alone and in combination with words like *shop, remake, upcycling, and rent(al)*. The terms were selected based on the motivation to examine practices of wearing, designing, and selling traditional clothing. Some of the social media accounts have been accessed through algorithmic suggestions on Instagram following a search of the keywords. The analysis of these sources provides insights about the intersections between traditional clothing and global consumer culture.

The second part of the study sheds light on the processes of identity construction by gathering qualitative data through interviews. It explores the way people perceive traditional clothing, revealing the associations it elicits and its role in identity construction in both contexts. Qualitative research has the advantage of eliciting responses about personal views, experiences and attitudes which cannot be quantified through a survey. Furthermore, qualitative approaches fit

with the goal of the study to explore an issue which has not received significant attention yet, allowing for new themes to emerge in the discussion.

The choice between interviews and focus groups is made considering various factors. Meyer (2008) discusses the benefits of each method in cultural consumption studies for analyzing participants as consumers who engage in certain practices and at the same time through interactions with cultural products, as producers of meanings. They both foster an environment which invites participants to share their personal views and feelings in their own words. Interviews allow for a more comprehensive understanding of individual situations while focus groups offer a space for interaction providing insights into meaning making processes relevant for the study of cultural consumption which happens in a social context. There is more space in focus groups to examine common values, experiences and attitudes which benefits intragroup comparisons. Meanwhile, during an interview, there is no interference from the answers of others, and less inhibitions as to what is shared since there is more privacy between the researcher and the interviewee. Interviews allow time and space for people to share their experiences, opinions and views on the topic of traditional clothing in more depth. Furthermore, analysing interview data offers an opportunity to make a "nuanced comparison between individual cultural consumers" (Meyer, 2008, p.76).

Cultural characteristics about communication styles are considered in order to establish an environment which allows for participants to feel comfortable to share their experience and views (Demuth & Fasulo, 2022). Based on the researcher's observation Japanese people tend to be more reserved when expressing personal opinion, especially in a group setting. In addition, longer commuting time and the hectic schedules of people within the timeframe of the research would have posed a challenge to the implementation of focus groups. The combination of online and in-person interviews, as a result of geographic distance between the researcher and the participants and an inability to conduct some of the interviews in person, was another factor which influenced the choice of interviews over focus groups. In conclusion, cultural characteristics, logistical constraints and methodological benefits formed the basis for selecting interviews as the most appropriate method.

## 2.2. Data collection

### 2.2.1. *Interviewing route*

Structured interviews were conducted to cover planned topics in order to make a detailed comparison between different respondents (Weller, 2015). Open-ended questions allowed participants freedom to explore various aspects based on their understanding and experiences. This method is not without limitations as it relies on the memory of participants and could pose a challenge to comparing answers between participants who take a different route to answering the same questions (Weller, 2015). At the beginning of each interview a brief introduction familiarized participants with the purpose of the study. Participants were then asked to share their view on the topics of personal experiences with traditional clothing, associations they have with traditional clothing, the importance of traditional clothing, opinions about modern interpretations, the relationship between traditional clothing and identity, and differences between traditional clothing and contemporary fashion. Questions varied, starting from more general to more specific allowing for the exploration of general themes and perceptions as well as more specific topics (see Annex). While the first question about associations with traditional clothing was fixed, adjustments to the order of the following questions were made depending on the responses. The length of the interviews varied between ten and thirty minutes depending on the answers of participants. Some participants shared more personal experiences and stories while others had more concise responses.

### *2.2.2. Sample*

The sample comprises individuals interested in traditional clothing, including professionals and non-professionals, selected based on their involvement with or interest in traditional clothing. This condition was established as a way to ensure that participants can discuss various aspects of traditional clothing either based on experience or interest. While they don't represent the two populations, they provide valuable insights from personal experience and their observations about the meanings and role of traditional clothing. Participants are a part of, or contacts of the researcher's network which is how they were approached for an interview. The sample includes four Japanese students and one kimono rental shop owner living in Japan, as well as a total of six Bulgarian participants including three university students who reside in the Netherlands, two young working individuals, and one traditional clothing designer residing in Bulgaria. Despite the small sample size, efforts were made to represent diverse demographics covering various ages and genders. While female university students comprise the majority of participants, each sample contains one male and one older participant, in both cases - a professional in the field of traditional clothing. It is important to take into consideration the participation of Bulgarians living abroad as



their sense of identity in relation to national symbols such as traditional clothing could be influenced by the distance from their home country. More details about the sample can be seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Sample: profile of participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Residence</b>	<b>Interview medium</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
1B	Bulgarian	Bulgaria	Online	26	Female	Young professional
2B	Bulgarian	Bulgaria	Online	25	Male	Young professional
3B	Bulgarian	The Netherlands	In-person	22	Female	Student
4B	Bulgarian	The Netherlands	In-person	20	Female	Student
5B	Bulgarian	The Netherlands	In-person	20	Male	Student
6B	Bulgarian	Bulgaria	Online	53	Female	Textiles professional
1J	Japanese	Japan	In-person	20	Female	Student
2J	Japanese	Japan	In-person	22	Female	Student
3J	Japanese	Japan	In-person	22	Female	Student
4J	Japanese	Japan	Online	45	Female	Kimono rental professional
5J	Japanese	Japan	Online	24	Male	Student

### 2.2.3. Language

Language is also taken into consideration when designing the study and analyzing the results. Interviews with Bulgarians were conducted in Bulgarian encouraging participants to think about traditional clothing in their own language. Interviews with Japanese participants were conducted in English acknowledging potential limitations in language fluency. While the participants were well-versed in English, the researcher extended efforts to accommodate participants ensuring there is a relaxed environment supportive of longer pauses and time to look up unknown terms. Admittedly, this is a limitation of the study as it may inhibit participants from sharing particular aspects of their experience available to them only in their native language. Another aspect of the multilingual research is the translation of Bulgarian responses into English. As a native speaker of Bulgarian I have provided my own translations of the sections from the interviews used in the analysis. Despite my fluency and understanding of nuances in the Bulgarian language, this is a limitation as it involves a level of inference in the process of translating

utterances which have no direct corresponding words in English or multiple possible such. Translations were approached taking into consideration the context and the rest of the text. Furthermore, sections with ambiguous meaning are either avoided in the analysis, or accompanied by an explanation of their possible interpretations.

#### *2.2.4. Medium*

I conducted both in-person and online interviews, based on availability and travel arrangements (see Table 1). The first three of the interviews with Japanese participants were conducted in-person in Osaka, Japan, at local cafes, while the other two were conducted online. Bulgarian participants in the Netherlands also joined in-person interviews in a university setting, while people residing in Bulgaria joined online. In-person interviews benefit from establishing a direct contact between participants and the researcher, which lacks in online environments. Online interviews, on the other hand, have the advantage of a neutral meeting place. The latter allows for a more diverse sample reaching participants from different locations, enriching the cross-cultural comparison (Silverman & Patterson, 2021). Moreover, participants could join from the comfort of their personal space, a more relaxed environment devoid of distractions, which could elicit more in-depth responses. Technical preparations were made in order to ensure successful collection of data through different online video call platforms depending on the preference of the participants. Jenner and Myers (2019) conclude that synchronous video interviews can produce data which is comparable in quality to or may even surpass face-to-face interviews. They found that the level of privacy during an interview has a more significant impact on the depth of the responses than the medium through which it is conducted. This finding is an important consideration for the present study as the in-person interviews are conducted in public spaces such as cafes, or common university grounds. While the participants had sufficient privacy during the interviews with no other people within a few meters, the level of privacy may inhibit them from sharing personal stories. On the other hand, in-person interviews were conducted with people from my network, thus predisposing them to feel more comfortable to share their views and stories.

#### *2.2.5. Ethics*

The research follows the ethical guidelines of the Research Ethical Review Committee (CETO) of the Faculties of Arts, Philosophy, and Science & Engineering of the University of Groningen. It includes informed consent, confidentiality, and data storage protocols which were shared with

participants. The audio recordings, consent forms and questionnaires were stored on password-protected devices offline and available only to the researcher for the duration of the study. Participants also fill out a form with demographic information including age, nationality and gender which was distributed before the study. Pseudonymization was implemented using a naming convention with a number of the interviewee based on the chronological order and the initial of their nationality. This method was used in order to protect the personal details of participants while allowing the researcher to link back the responses to the respective respondents.

### 2.3. Data analysis

This section provides a thorough overview of the methods employed for data analysis. It follows the recommendations of scholars who stress the importance of providing a detailed description of the methodology in order to account for various implications of the interpretative nature of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis involves intelligent verbatim transcription, coding and thematic analysis.

#### 2.3.1. *Transcription*

Converting audio recordings into text allows for a thorough examination and coding of the responses. Intentionally transcribing data with awareness of the implications of the level of detail, the presentation and the accuracy of translations, especially in cross cultural studies, is an important part of qualitative research as it has effects on the way data is analyzed (Bartesaghi, 2022; Vanover, 2022; Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). Given the interpretative nature of qualitative inquiries, accurate representation is crucial and the level of detail is determined by the goal of the study and the research questions (Vanover, 2022).

The current study benefits from a transcription with a medium level of detail. Fillers are omitted and grammar is corrected for easier readability, yet important forms of discourse demarcating hesitation are marked. Parts of the interviews are summarized in notes when they are deemed irrelevant for the data analysis following Bartesaghi's (2022) recommendation, for example when the interviews are interrupted by contextual events such as when the barista is taking the order during the interviews conducted in a café. This method of transcription is fit for the purpose of the research to analyze the meanings and attitudes attributed to traditional clothing and to explore how traditional clothing is viewed in relation to contemporary fashion. It matches the

choice of thematic content analysis which is concerned more with the meanings contained in the responses rather than how they are conveyed.

### *2.3.2. Coding and thematic analysis*

Inductive, deductive, and abductive approaches are integral to qualitative research methodologies, particularly in the process of coding and analysis. Coding involves the identification of parts of the text which reflect distinct conceptual categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). In inductive coding, concepts emerge without predefined categories, closely reflecting the original text (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). Passages are carefully reviewed in order to identify structures and ideas in a bottom-up direction. In contrast, deductive coding is a top down approach whereby pre-existing codes derived from literature or previous research are applied to the data set and chunks of text are coded within these categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). This study combines both methods in what is known as abductive coding (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022), allowing for new codes and themes to be identified from the data set while also drawing on the theoretical framework and previous research.

After coding the data, the patterns that emerge are categorized in themes. A thematic analysis is employed making links between as well as within different themes, providing insights about the role of traditional clothing and situating it within the global consumer culture. Thematic analysis is the process of "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). It is a common approach in qualitative studies across multiple disciplines as it benefits from flexibility to extract and interpret various meanings from the text, without being rooted in a specific theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes contain groupings of important information within the data set, identifying common patterns which are comparable across sample populations (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Katz-Buonincontro, 2022).

Braun and Clarke (2006) stress the importance of accounting for the agency of the researcher in the stages of identification, coding and organization of the emerging themes noting the interpretative characteristic of qualitative data and the role of the researcher in its analysis. This idea resonates with the acknowledgement of transcriptions as an interpretation of the data rather than a neutral account (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). An overall thematic description of the entire data set is identified as suitable for under-investigated topics in contrast with a more detailed analysis focusing on a specific theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis in this study

follows the research questions, identifying patterns which are relevant for the discussion and providing a detailed account of the data identified for each theme.

I identified thirty codes which are based on the ideas contained in the utterances and reflect the discussion in the previous chapter as well as the theoretical framework used for the study. Using the software MAXQDA, I conducted the initial coding. It was rather inductive in that it consisted of highlighting segments which I found to contain information relevant for the studied topics. While there were no predefined categories, this process had a deductive influence as my considerations were based on the discussion in Chapter III and the theoretical framework as well as based on a previous study I conducted on the topic of traditional clothing (Lozanova, 2023). This deductive aspect highlights my agency in interpreting results and clarifies the influence of different sources on the interpretation of the data. After identifying initial patterns, a second round of coding and a new data management plan using a table with codes and themes helped to refine the segments relevant for the discussion. Some segments of the interview were labeled with multiple codes as they contained an association with different concepts. Similarly, the same codes are sometimes relevant and thus found in multiple themes. A mind map was drawn to investigate the links between different codes and to see the patterns which emerged. This is how the different themes were established and further analyzed. Once all data was coded and organized, the thematic analysis moved to an interpretation of the identified patterns in light of the research questions and previous literature.

## CHAPTER III

### **Historical developments and current use of traditional clothing**

This chapter explores the similarities and differences in the development of traditional clothing and how global and local processes are reflected in the engagement, meanings and conservation of traditional clothing in Japan and Bulgaria. It provides a response to the first research question by analyzing academic and media sources, supported by ethnographic observations. The analysis goes through an overview of the historical changes in the engagement with traditional clothing which occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and the factors which influenced them. Furthermore, the current uses are discussed and analyzed in light of global consumer culture.

#### 3.1. Bulgaria

##### *3.1.2. Changes in sartorial practices*

Traditional clothing in Bulgaria is the costume, established as national attire during the process of the construction of the Bulgarian nation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dechev and Vukov (2010) provide a detailed analysis of the shift towards western clothing in Bulgaria. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century countries across Europe started crafting their national identity. Clothing as material culture with communicative and symbolic function, was subject to regulation and modification in order to fit the national image (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). At the same time, with the rise of international trade, the more and more globalized consumer culture began spreading across Europe leading to fears of cultural erasure (Dechev & Vukov, 2010; Neuburger, 2019). As a response, countries started crafting their national identity with its distinct and unique characteristics (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). This necessitated a set of national symbols to represent the constructed national identity and to promote national values on the European scene. Clothing as a very visible part of material culture, which can signify status, social class, demographics and identity, and as a central part of consumer culture is a key element in the set of national symbols.

In the 60s and 70s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as consumer culture was spreading, clothing became subject to Europeanization in Ottoman cities, including on the territory of Bulgaria (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). Elements from French and German fashion were integrated. By the time of the Liberation in the late 80s of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, urban clothing was distinguishable from rural clothing and contained fashion influences from Turkish, Greek and Western European designs

(Dechev & Vukov, 2010). The rural clothing preserved more ethnic-specific elements. Dechev and Vukov (2010) and Neuburger (2019) point out that after the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire European clothing was adopted in the city as a way to distinguish oneself from the Turkish population framed as backward and barbarian in an Orientalizing discourse. The shift was also motivated by an interest in the lifestyle of people across Europe. What is more, traditional clothing became associated with the period before the liberation which necessitated its dissolution in the process of urbanization and Europeanization.

French fashion became a demonstration of modern style and progressiveness while traditional clothing was associated with being old-fashioned (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). As a result, despite initial opposition to the unification and westernization of the aesthetic, in all European nations traditional clothing came out of circulation. Bulgarian villages started adopting urban fashion a little later, in the 1880-1890s. More rapid changes occurred in the 1920s when traditional clothing became restricted to festive occasions and maintained as such until around the 50s before its complete dissolution and shift to a national costume (Ganeva, 2017).

The reasons behind the gradual shift in the rural areas appears to be more complex. The opening of trade and the consequent introduction of new materials led to gradual changes in the design of clothing, replacing heavy materials and providing access to different ornaments, as well as introducing new cuts (Ganeva, 2017).

From an economic point of view, with technological advancements, mass produced clothing became more accessible and decreased the handmade production of traditional clothing. Skills passed down from generation to generation were lost as women were less likely to take on the responsibility of sewing the clothes of the family (Ganeva, 2017; Dechev & Vukov, 2010). Another reason for these changes, especially pertaining to the form of dress, was the result of pragmatic considerations. The adoption of Western designs facilitated working in new conditions as people switched from the agricultural sector to working in factories. The lower cost of imported fabrics and ready-made clothes alleviated the economic challenges and losses suffered during the Balkan and the World Wars (Dechev & Vukov, 2010; Hristov, 2011).

These events also led to the change of the social structure which was reflected in the sartorial practices of people (Ganeva, 2017). Clothing served as a marker of a social code. Decorations on clothing could “point to one's age, marital status, and place in the social hierarchy” (Ganeva, 2017, p.175, my own translation). These roles were strictly set in the traditional

patriarchal society. Changes in family size, family structure, the role of young people in society and in social relationships at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thus led to changes in the lifestyle of people including their dress. Simplified designs with less ornamentation reflected the disintegration of established social structures. Meanwhile, the shift from a collective to individual society, also changed the social structure and traditions whereby clothing, which once played an important role in representing the family or community and established a sense of continuity, shifted to representing individual identity (Ganeva, 2017). This process of individualization is reflected not only in the meanings of clothing but also in the modes of production, purchasing, and consumption.

Last but not least urban mobility was an important factor in changing clothing practices (Hristov, 2011). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Bulgarian cities began modernizing and industrializing, men from the villages migrated to the city as seasonal workers (Hristov, 2011). They gradually adopted urban fashion imported from the West as the new costume became a sign of prestige. The urbanization of clothing was also accelerated by the introduction of uniforms in the workplace which replaced the garments suitable for agricultural work typical in the villages. As a result, traditional clothing became restricted to ritual attire for holidays, weddings, and other important celebrations. Hristov (2011) notes that women remained longer in the villages and consequently were slower in adopting Western fashion. They were confined mostly to the household and to agricultural work and thus experienced less mobility to the urban centers. Changes occurred nonetheless, not so much in the style of clothing as in the fabrics and ornaments imported from the West which became more easily available as they got cheaper and easier to produce. Before the Second World War young girls started participating in a new form of mobility, moving to the city as servants in rich families. This led to the adoption of urban styles among women who returned to the villages to get married.

### *3.1.2. Post-disintegration: (Re-)invention and instrumentalization*

In the Balkans social and political transformations brought about by modernization were reflected in the changing sartorial practices (Vintilă-Ghițulescu, 2011). The wider movement towards nationalism across Europe in combination with post-Ottoman liberation on the Balkans resulted in states actively engaging with the construction of the nation using unifying symbols rooted in history and antiquity. Clothing representing a visible manifestation of identity and values was included in these efforts. In Bulgaria in particular, clothing associated with folklore and



traditions, represented uniqueness. The disintegration of traditional clothing thus necessitated its re-invention as a national costume in a narrative representing the unique features of the nation including its intricate aesthetics and rich history.

The criticism towards the standardization of clothing across Europe and the loss of uniqueness framed the discourse on traditional clothing as a national symbol and a part of the national heritage (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). Indeed, Bulgarian ethnography at the beginning of the 20th century was not purely descriptive but driven by ideological underpinnings. Ethnographers studied, preserved, and exhibited costumes which feature complex designs framing Bulgarian clothing as a product of the creativity and aesthetic taste of the Bulgarian nation (Hristov 2013). The selective nature of the construction of the image of the national costume reflects the view that that cultural traditions and cultural heritage is constructed based on ideology and on a designed narrative about what the nation constitutes (Dechev & Vukov, 2010; Hristov, 2013). Dechev and Vukov (2010) point out that romantic nationalism and its understanding of folklore influenced the invention of what is known today as the national costume. Instrumentalisation of traditional clothing as a symbol of Bulgarianness was promoted by Bulgarian patriots (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). Everyday clothing was simple compared to the festive costumes which featured more ornamentation such as embroidery or additional layers. As a result, the invention of the national costume is based on this festive attire which showcases variety and complexity as opposed to the everyday simple clothing (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). The everyday clothing of Bulgarians from the nineteenth and early twentieth century is absent from the imaginary as it lacks sophistication (Kazalarska, 2014).

### *3.1.3. Intersections with global consumer culture*

The invention and re-invention of Bulgarian traditional clothing was continued under socialism where clothing was an “ideological tool” instrumentalized for the construction of the image of the “socialist man” (Kazalarska, 2014, p.3). Despite the efforts to break from the past, traditional clothing was adopted as a part of the fashion scene, insofar as it served the regime’s aesthetic. Fashion in Bulgaria at the time of the socialist rule already operated within established Western norms which were difficult to break from (Kazalarska, 2014). Fashion as a product of consumerism, a phenomenon relying on change, trends and individualism, was incompatible with the socialist ideology (Kazalarska, 2014). The socialist state took an active role in promoting its values through control of the fashion scene navigating the search of national authenticity and an

opposition to Western capitalism. Traditional folklore elements were integrated in designs approved by the regime. They were framed as representing the universal and timeless aspects of culture as well as the values of purity and simplicity (Kazalarska, 2014). These designs were celebrated on the international fashion scene despite remarks about falling into ethnonationalism (Kazalarska, 2014). As they provided a counter narrative to Western modernist aesthetics, interpretations of ethnic designs became a centerpiece in the socialist aesthetic. They remained out of reach for the average consumer as they incurred complex and expensive handmade work.

This phenomenon of mixing traditional and contemporary elements in fashion is widely observed today as multiple brands have incorporated *shevitsa* (traditional embroidery) designs in contemporary fashion. These companies use digital tools such as websites and social media to reach a wider audience. While brands such as Veza offer contemporary reinvention of traditional designs resembling traditional clothing in terms of form and fabric (Figure 3), other brands such as Vezba, Kitna, and Venix incorporate traditional embroidery designs in contemporary clothing designs (Figure 4 and 5).

Additionally, many companies offer stylized versions of traditional dress produced predominantly for folklore groups. Moreover, social media has become a space for the promotion of traditional clothing not only for brands, but also for people who share their experiences with traditional clothing on their social media channels reaching a wider audience which may not otherwise be engaged with folklore. A search of “nosiya” on Instagram generates results of photos people have shared from festivals, holidays, performances, private events, and other occasions where traditional dress is worn. Some of them also share facts about the traditional clothing, such as region and date of origin. Meanwhile, the second-hand market offers enthusiasts an opportunity to access authentic traditional clothing, differentiated from the stylized versions mass-produced in the present. While the premise for selling such clothing may be to save it from going to waste, environmental considerations are not an explicit motivator. Second-hand groups such as „Продажба на народни носии“ (Traditional nosiya sale) also operate on Facebook, using social media to connect enthusiasts from Bulgaria and the world sharing a passion for traditional clothing. The use of social media, online markets, and the design of modern interpretations of traditional clothing illustrate the way traditional Bulgarian clothing circulates in similar ways to contemporary fashion.

**Figure 3**

*Skirt Lyubimets (Пола Любимец)*



*Source: Veza.*

**Figure 4**

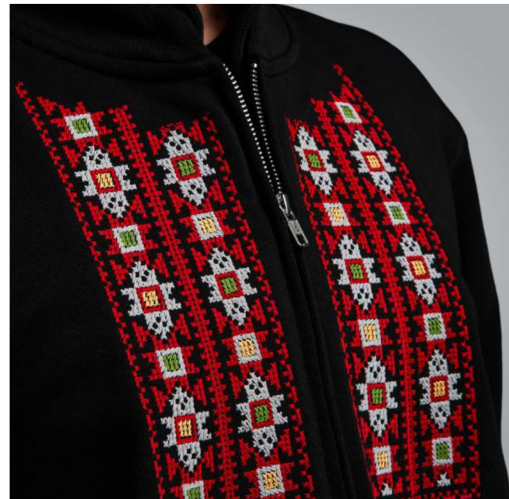
*Female shirt “Trakiyska”*



*Source: Vezba.*

**Figure 5**

*Hoodie with a zipper “Pazitel”*



*Source: Vezba.*

#### *3.1.4. Current use of traditional Bulgarian clothing*

In Bulgaria the current use of traditional clothing is most prominent at folklore festivals and traditional dance or music performances (Luleva, 2019). This is also the most common use evoked by the interviewees in a research conducted by Lozanova (2023) among Bulgarians about their views towards traditional Bulgarian clothing. Interestingly, it is not only traditional festivals where nosiya is worn, but also at contemporary festivals which promote closeness with nature and a community spirit. This reflects the association of the nosiya with values such as harmony and community (Lozanova, 2023). Traditional clothing as a national symbol also features in tourism campaigns, highlighting its importance in shaping the national image (Bulgaria Travel, 2020).

Based on ethnographic observations, nosiya also has ceremonial use at life events such as weddings and graduations. It is important to note, however, that this is not commonly practiced. Wearing nosiya at graduations has particularly been problematized. It has been celebrated by some, while framed as a theatrical performance by others (Dichev, 2017). These contrasting views problematize the context in which traditional clothing is worn and the role of traditions and cultural heritage in the present. A distinction is established between traditions and contemporary consumer culture, with which graduations in Bulgaria are typically associated (BNT, 2021). The use of traditional clothing at events associated with consumer culture such as high-school graduations is contested which shows the resistance toward cultural mixing and a preference for cultural differentialism in the domain of cultural heritage, rejecting global influences (Steenkamp, 2019).

### *3.2. Japan*

#### *3.2.1. Changes in sartorial practices*

The kimono has had a significantly longer history dating back to the Heian period (794-1192) although its contemporary look was established during the Meiji period (1868 - 1912) when it gained its image as national attire (Assmann, 2008). Wearing the kimono was part of the sartorial practices in Japan for a long time. The introduction of western clothing led to its reinvention as a national costume symbolizing Japanese uniqueness and distinguishing it from new clothing styles (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999). During this era Japan's effort to compete with the Western powers was translated in the sartorial practices adopted from the West as a way of declaring its equal status with Western powers. The shift was led by the state officials. First the Emperor appeared in a suit followed by the rest of the political and bureaucratic elite (Cliffe, 2017). Campbell (2020)

problematizes this discourse pointing out its limitations in accounting for the complexities of integrating western clothing into Japanese culture. The scholar proposes that western clothing was also adopted in an effort to create the modern image of the imperial state, distinguishing it from previous ruling systems and giving it a new prestigious image. Molony (2007) notes that Japanese people adopted western clothing in the Japanese colonies as a way to distinguish themselves from the local population reaffirming their dominant status. In addition, western formal attire resolved status issues by universalizing clothing for people coming from different ranks, each with its characteristic sartorial practices (Campbell, 2020). Thus, gradual institutionalization of western clothing took place for men. Notably, it became a marker of class distinguishing bureaucrats from the working class. Similar to the Bulgarian context, although women are often associated with innovations in fashion, it was men who led this new fashion trend (Valk, 2018). The reason for this is the patriarchal societal structure. For a long time only men took part in the state apparatus and were the only one who enjoyed employment and thus mobility to the urban centers. According to King and Rose (2021), however, the Meiji Empress Masako, also played an important role in the adoption of western female formal dress. She contributed to the legitimization of the process of westernization by pointing out the similarities between western dress and the clothing worn in Ancient Japan (King and Rose, 2021).

The kimono remained the predominant piece of clothing during the first half of the twentieth century, especially in rural areas (Cliffe, 2017). The changes occurred first at the edges of the outfit replacing footwear and accessories. Innovations in kimono designs also ensued, especially after the imports of fabrics with brighter colors. This trend is similar to the changes in Bulgaria where new fabric and production methods were adopted before the complete shift to western clothing. Western clothing was appropriated differently than the kimono. It offered less variety for personalization and individual expression. The kimono with its variety in textiles and patterns was still considered more fashionable at the time. Furthermore, nationalism was reflected in the kimono, not only as it was the national dress but also in designs featuring or symbolizing war scenes (Cliffe, 2017). While western clothing became a part of the image of a modern lifestyle, it was perceived by some as embodying “the values of the enemy” in opposition to the morals of the Japanese people (Cliffe, 2017, p.50).

King and Rose (2021) discuss the way duality between nationalism and internationalism is negotiated by the current royal family through clothing. They analyze the integration of traditional

symbolic into contemporary formal dress, as well as the mix of western and traditional outfits in the presentation of the Reiwa Empress Masako. The outfits, according to the scholar, reflect national gender norms rooted in traditional perceptions of femininity. It is interesting to note that only female members of the royal family can sometimes be seen in traditional garments at formal events such as receptions and ceremonies (25 Ans, 2023).

In the postwar period, kimono-wearing declined as more children grew up wearing western garments. As a result, the kimono became restricted to formal occasions and knowledge about how to dress in kimono faded. *Kitsuke* (dressing schools) emerged as a way to promote the kimono and bring confidence to people interested in wearing it properly who lacked the knowledge. However, they promoted a strict, rule-governed way of putting it on, which discouraged some people from wearing it (Goldstein-Giddoni, 1999; Hall, 2017; Valk, 2017). During the 1980s, the kimono transformed and became confined to ceremonial wear for the rich (Goldstein-Gidonna, 1999; Valk, 2017). Its use as everyday clothing declined, becoming a symbol of affluence. Consequently, daily kimonos became increasingly scarce in stores. This shift was driven by factors such as the establishment of rule-governed kimono schools, artificial price inflation, and a lack of accessible options for everyday wear in retail outlets.

As the 1990s unfolded amidst an economic downturn, a critical reevaluation of cultural practices emerged including a reassessment of Western influences. This period witnessed a renewed appreciation for traditional Japanese attire (Cliffe, 2017). In this cultural climate, the kimono experienced a resurgence, evolving beyond its ceremonial confines to once again grace the streets. This "kimono renaissance" reflected a broader cultural shift, with the garment symbolizing a return to Japan's rich sartorial heritage and offering a distinctive alternative to prevailing Western fashion trends (Cliffe, 2017). Changes from a family centered to a more individualistic social structure meant the kimono no longer represented the whole family but rather expressed personal choice and individual expression (Valk, 2017). This was another reason for the decrease of its use during ceremonial occasions.

On the other hand, the renewed interest was owed to a large extent to the changing market which adapted to the decrease in use by de-formalizing customer experience. Second-hand shops emerged, following global interest in second-hand and vintage styles associated with nostalgia and authenticity (Valk, 2021). They offered an opportunity for less experienced customers to freely

browse through kimonos at their own pace similarly to how they would experience shopping for contemporary clothes (Valk, 2021).

### *3.2.2. Current use of traditional Japanese clothing*

Based on ethnographic observation, traditional Japanese performances and parades are a venue where kimonos grace the stage and offer observers a glimpse at various intricate designs from different ages. Kimono rental shops which emerged after the post-war period promoted its use during sightseeing activities by offering assistance and reducing stress among customers who were afraid of making a mistake about the way to wear it properly (Valk, 2021). This practice situates the kimono as an economic object part of the kimono industry generating not only cultural meaning but also financial capital (Valk, 2018). As such, besides being a part of cultural heritage, traditional clothing has been integrated into a system of consumer-oriented society. In addition, the revival of interest combined with the availability of affordable second-hand kimonos has led to the use of the kimono as everyday wear. In Japan ritualization of traditional clothing is also observed. The coming-of-age ceremony is strongly associated with beautiful and intricate kimono costumes worn by girls, emphasizing traditional gender values (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999). Other types of kimono are worn during graduations and sometimes at weddings and funerals.

When it comes to modern interpretations of traditional clothing in Japan, it is rather upcycling practices repurposing kimono fabrics, which reflect mixing of traditional and contemporary consumer culture. Combining kimono with contemporary accessories is another practice which can be analyzed as cultural mixing.

### *3.2.3. Intersections with global consumer culture*

These shifts demonstrate the adaptation of the kimono industry, including larger companies as well as locally owned shops and brands, to global consumer culture. The shopping experience is made similar to that of contemporary fashion. Additionally, the kimono industry relies on a renewed interest in the past and a search for authenticity. Second-hand shops offer that in addition to an alternative to the universalized fast fashion. Social media and digital marketing also plays a significant role in Japan. The operation of online kimono shops as well as the presence of social media channels promoting kimono practices signifies a shift to digital markets, characteristic of the global contemporary fashion industry. Retailers have engaged with digital tools integrating new ideas for relating to and engaging with customers (Valk, 2021).

Another phenomenon which can be identified as mixing traditional clothing and contemporary fashion is the proliferation of upcycling practices and mixing traditional and contemporary fashion elements. While upcycling practices have been a part of the culture of *mottainai* (preventing waste) for a long time (McCarthy, 2021), they have been integrated on the one hand into global consumer narratives, as a practice offering unique interpretations of traditional clothing, and on the other hand, into discourses addressing overconsumption, as a sustainable alternative to fast fashion. The latter reflects global movements in recent years to make the fashion industry more sustainable (Buchel et al., 2022; Gordon & Hill, 2015). K'FORWARD is one such company, which offers upcycled kimono designs globally:

We want to be a company that not only opposes the trend of mass production and mass disposal and reduces burden on the environment, but also conveys the beauty and the history of the kimono in a new form to the future and to the world (K'FORWARD, n.d.).

The brand's vision demonstrates alignment with sustainability goals in combination with efforts to promote the cultural values associated with the kimono, to both local and global audiences through the use of English in addition to Japanese language on their website. With a varying degree of proximity to traditional form, Acote, Relier 81, and KIEN, to name just a few brands, offer contemporary fits featuring upcycled traditional textiles (Figure 5 and 6).

**Figure 6**

*Kimono Dress (Raglan Sleeve)*



*Source: Kimono KIEN.*

**Figure 7**

*Upcycled obi belt bag (Fumidai bag)*



*Source: Relier 81.*



**Figure 8**

*KEITO & Marianna Seki for  
KIMONOanne vol.5*



Source: sumire\_ishioka on Instagram.

**Figure 9**

*KIMONO*



Source: ohariya\_kimono on Instagram.

### 3.3. Similarities and differences

Upon analysis of both contexts, multiple factors have been identified as influencing the traditional clothing landscape, its use and dissemination as well as its intersections with global contemporary consumer culture. While similarities have become evident, so have differences in the reaction to similar phenomena.

#### 3.3.1. Factors influencing traditional clothing

Both countries experienced a shift towards Western clothing influenced by modernization, globalization and the processes of constructing national identity. The shifting historical context in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century influenced many aspects of culture, including clothing. As the West gained more power and influence, political shifts in the periphery ensued to keep up with the developments in global affairs leading to cultural Westernization. Political alignment was accompanied by cultural transformations including sartorial practices. The shift towards Western

clothing in both Bulgaria and Japan was a declaration of the political and cultural orientation towards the West. In addition, it was an effort to break away from the Orientalizing discourse which framed certain customs and practices as barbarian. As Bulgaria and Japan sought to fulfill a more dominant role in the discourse, traditional clothing was framed as a sign of underdevelopment. In Bulgaria, traditional clothing was associated with the Ottoman past, while Western clothing was considered a sign of progress. In Japan, wearing traditional clothing in general was considered as a sign of under-development. Adopting Western clothing served as a means to distinguish Japan from other Asian nations which maintained their local dress. It also signified alignment and equal footing with other Western nations part of the Imperial order. The shift to Western clothing was initiated by the male-dominated political elite, reflecting the patriarchal structure of both societies. During this period, women were predominantly confined to the household or agricultural sector where traditional clothing remained the longest.

It is important to note, however, that this position towards the West was not unanimous as fears of cultural erasure rose following rapid changes in the lifestyle of people and the shrinking of the local crafts industry (Neuburger, 2019; Valk, 2021). Traditional clothing represented a counter narrative to the Western modernist aesthetic. In Bulgaria this was relevant for the socialist regime, whereas in Japan, it reflected moral contradictions about adopting clothing from the occupier, during the postwar occupation from the United States. Thus, the process of assimilation of cultural practices from the West was accompanied by establishing unique symbols representing the nation in a globalizing world. Clothing was a part of these symbols and was re-invented or framed as a national costume distinguished from clothing from the West. Important nuance is the view that traditional clothing was established as national cultural heritage not only as part of the nation building processes but simultaneously as a result of those (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). The decline in the use of the *nosiya* in Bulgaria due to orientation towards the West but also because of practical and economic considerations led to its preservation as cultural heritage. Consequently, specific designs, inspired by festive rural clothing began representing national dress. This view offers an alternative more complex perspective on the construction of national identity. Similarly, in Japan the introduction of Western clothing necessitated the distinction of the kimono as national attire. In particular, the present image of kimono is largely based on the festive clothing which was worn by the elite on special occasions (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999).

In both Bulgaria and Japan, traditional clothing has been instrumentalized to varying extents and in different ways. In Bulgaria, under socialism, the image of the national attire was adapted to fit the ideology of the state. In recent years it has served as a tool for ethno-nationalism and patriotism emphasizing continuity in the preservation of cultural heritage and its importance for national identity. Kyobashi (2023) argues that national identity in Japan is “translated into a commercial sign” produced and represented in marketing campaigns employed by companies, organizations, and the state (p. 271). He adds that gender norms, work ethic, and social relations are some of the characteristics incorporated in advertising campaigns which “promote and reinforce a particular view of Japanese ethnicity, culture, and identity” (Kyobashi, 2013, p.272). This suggests that nationalism in Japan is not as reliant on traditional culture and historical narratives, but rather on certain images of the nation. While the kimono may not be as strongly linked to the nation-building processes, it nonetheless holds significance as a national symbol relevant for the construction of the cultural image of femininity (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999). This is evidenced in the presentation of the Emperor’s family at formal occasions, whereby females of the royal family can sometimes be seen wearing traditional clothing, reflecting the persisting patriarchal structure and gender norms. A similar pattern is observed at coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings and graduations where men are only occasionally seen in traditional clothing (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999).

Another factor for change was urbanization and the changing social structure. As society moved from agricultural to mechanic industries, the clothing changed accordingly to fit the new workspace and lifestyles of people. Urban clothing in both countries became a sign of progress and social distinction reflecting urban mobility, contrasted to traditional clothing worn in the rural areas. Those changes were then brought back and integrated in the villages. Yet the predominantly rural society which dominated the demographic distribution in both societies until after the World Wars was one of the factors which contributed to the preservation of traditional clothing. Interestingly in Japan, following the formalization of the kimono and the market shifts, the ceremonial kimono became once again a symbol of class distinction.

Changes in the social structure also include the individualization of society. As a result, clothing no longer represented the family or community as it used to, but started reflecting an individual choice and personal expression. In Bulgaria this shift was reflected in the simplified designs of traditional clothing. In Japan, these changes led to a decrease in the use of traditional

clothing at life events. Urbanization and the changing social structure also reflect economic challenges.

Economic factors influencing traditional clothing include technological advancements and economic decline after the wars. Industrialization and opening of trade led to the introduction of cheaper fabrics as well as more affordable mass produced simplified designs overtaking handicraft practices. Changes occurred in the materials, design and form of the Bulgarian nosiya in a period of scarcity. In Japan, initial economic hardships resulted in similar changes. Consequently, when the economy stabilized and began excelling, the rise of consumer culture led to a change in the market designating the kimono as luxury wear. In recent decades, market changes have contributed to the rising interest in the kimono as shopping experiences were adapted to contemporary consumer culture including second-hand and rental shops. The platforms of dissemination of traditional clothing are particularly important as they are an attestation that it is not restricted to museums, but also a part of a consumer culture. The use of digital markets and social media channels in both countries further aligns shopping experience with global consumer culture.

### *3.3.2. Intersections with global consumer culture*

In both Bulgaria and Japan traditional clothing has been adapted to some degree to global consumer culture. Modern adaptations and interpretations circulate with a varying degree of proximity to authentic traditional clothing. The way traditional clothing is integrated into the global fashion scene can be read as a form of hybridization in consumer culture or cultural mixing in the theory of multiculturalism (Pieterse, 2009; Steenkamp, 2019). It is integrated into global markets through the utilization of digital markets and social media, targeting both local or global audiences. In addition, mixing local and global fashion elements to fit the contemporary fashion scene can be observed as a form of cultural mixing. An interesting distinction is the targeted audience. Japanese designers attract global audiences evidenced by the use of English in some of their marketing campaigns, which is uncommon for the Bulgarian market of traditional clothing and its contemporary interpretations.

In Japan, some kimono enthusiasts wear kimono in an unconventional way, crossing rules by combining it with contemporary accessories. Additionally, upcycling designers integrate kimono fabrics in new forms of clothing fitting everyday wear in Japan and across the world. A possible explanation for the proliferation of such practices is the excess of kimonos which does not evoke an urgency in the preservation of its authentic form. Moreover, the kimono is still worn

today as everyday dress and for tourism and thus often seen in the context of contemporary culture. The closer alignment of kimono practices to global consumer culture may have been the result of the earlier development of capitalism in Japan compared to Bulgaria where the Socialist regime regulated sartorial practices until the 80s. In Bulgaria traditional clothing today is predominantly worn at folklore events linking it with traditional culture and the past. As it is categorized as cultural heritage, it presupposes the need for its preservation. The combination of these factors, and the lack of comparable amounts of excess could explain the lack of similar upcycling practices. The role of folklore and traditional culture and its adaptation to global consumer culture is nonetheless evident in the integration of traditional embroidery designs in contemporary clothing and the dissemination of stylized versions adapted to the entertainment sector. These adaptations both reflect a renewed interest in traditional clothing in an age of globalization and simultaneously contribute to the promotion of traditional clothing.

Interestingly, traditional clothing has characteristics aligning it closely with slow fashion such as circularity across generations, handicraft production, the use of natural fibers, limited mass production, and in Japan, upcycling practices. However, it is rarely explicitly associated with environmental or ethical considerations that are prominent in the fashion industry. While some upcycling designers focus on sustainability, it is rarely a part of the discourse. This could point to the integration of traditional clothing into consumer culture, lack of awareness of environmental and ethical issues in the fashion industry, or the prevalence of cultural associations obscuring the product value of the clothing and focusing more on its cultural symbolism.

### *3.3.3. Current use*

Traditional clothing has been reintegrated in society in Bulgaria and Japan in different ways, nonetheless leading to similar uses and associations in the present. In Japan, following a critical reevaluation of Western culture, the resurgence of second-hand kimono shops offered people to once again reconnect with traditional clothing. In Bulgaria traditional dress is a part of folklore, featuring in performances of folklore groups, tourism campaigns, and ceremonial occasions. In terms of the ways in which traditional clothing is used today, there are similarities and differences between Bulgaria and Japan. The most significant difference is the use of traditional clothing for sightseeing and as everyday wear which is not observed in Bulgaria. See Table 4 for an overview. The current use has been influenced by the economic, political and socio-cultural shifts discussed above.

**Table 2***Contemporary use of traditional clothing in Bulgaria and Japan*

	<b>Everyday wear</b>	<b>Sightseeing</b>	<b>Ceremonial use</b>	<b>Festivals</b>	<b>Traditional Performances</b>	<b>Modern interpretations</b>
Bulgaria	x	x	•	•	•	•
Japan	•	•	•	•	•	•

In summary, while both Bulgaria and Japan exhibit shared practices in the use of traditional clothing, they diverge notably in its everyday use. Japan embraces the kimono as everyday fashion and as a costume for sightseeing, with second-hand and rental shops facilitating these experiences. These applications can be analyzed as a form of symbolic cultural mixing as traditional attire is emplaced in contexts dominated by consumer culture. In Bulgaria nosiya can only occasionally be seen at weddings and graduations blurring boundaries between traditional and contemporary culture. Traditional clothing is, however, predominantly reserved for ceremonial occasions, performances and festivals, contexts in which the kimono can be seen as well. Indeed, the kimono is still widely used at coming-of-age ceremonies and festivals.

Ceremonial use of traditional clothing can be understood in relation to its role in the processes of constructing national identity and notions of cultural uniqueness. From another point of view, the use of the kimono as a fashion choice and a lifestyle, reflects more outward-looking trends related to global consumer behavior (Valk, 2018). Consumption practices within the network of kimono enthusiasts who wear it as a fashion item examined by Valk (2018) illustrate how identity is constructed driven by a sense of community and belonging, characteristic of global consumer trends. This could be applied to the modern interpretations of traditional Bulgarian designs as well. While national attire is related to cultural identity construction, and nationhood-building, the integration of *shevitsa* designs in contemporary clothing creates a link between cultural identification and the apparel industry driven by economic interest.

### 3.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of the sartorial practices in Bulgaria and Japan reveals how global and local processes are reflected in the engagement, meanings and conservation of traditional clothing in both countries as well as the similarities and differences in its development.

Despite the distant cultural contexts, there are many similarities in the way political, economic and socio-cultural shifts have influenced engagement with traditional clothing.

In both societies, as a result of the westernization of clothing, late 19th and early 20th century traditional dress became first restricted to ritual attire and then fully replaced by western clothing. While in Japan, mostly the female dress remained, symbolizing class and femininity at ceremonies, in Bulgaria, both men and women could be seen wearing *nosiya* during festivities in the villages symbolizing a link with tradition, community, and the past. The shifts towards western clothing were mainly driven by modernization and globalization. Political elites led these changes as part of the nation-building processes including political and cultural alignment with the West. This movement was to some extent a reaction against perceived underdevelopment and an effort to signify progress and modernity, but it also reveals the complexity of the nation-building process in which the state was not only a receiver of cultural norms from outside but also the producer and interpreter of such. Economic and social changes further influenced the adoption of urban clothing which signified progress and modernity. Traditional dress persisted in rural areas until later but evolved to meet new practical and aesthetic needs before it came out of circulation. Technological advancements and economic conditions led to the introduction of new materials and designs, as well as mass produced clothing which began to replace traditional attire.

While Bulgaria and Japan share common trajectories in their adaptation of western clothing, the role of traditional clothing developed distinctively. In Bulgaria, it is more strongly associated with nationalism reflecting the role of cultural heritage for national identity. Meanwhile in Japan, while also seen as a national symbol it has been more extensively integrated into everyday life, facilitated by second-hand and rental markets and embraced in contemporary consumer culture.

Cultural mixing or hybridization as a result of globalization can be interpreted on the level of clothing itself and the platforms used to disseminate it. On a more symbolic level the integration of traditional clothing in contexts which are presently associated with consumer culture can also be viewed as a form of hybridization. While these processes are observed in both countries, in Japan traditional clothing is more strongly adapted to global consumer culture possibly influenced by the earlier development of capitalism and consumer culture. This includes upcycling practices, efforts to reach global audiences, the use of traditional clothing during sightseeing, and although rarely, also as an everyday dress. These practices call into question the scope of cultural

assimilation, convergence, and mixing and highlight the complex relationship between traditional clothing, national identity, and contemporary consumer culture.

Building up on this analysis, the following chapter contributes with insights from interviews with Bulgarian and Japanese participants. The interview data improves the understanding of the current use of traditional clothing and how people view its development and its adaptation to contemporary markets and to global consumer culture. The interviews also reveal how different economic, political, and cultural processes are reflected in the meanings attached to traditional clothing and the engagement with it.



## CHAPTER IV

### Interview Analysis

Interviews with Japanese and Bulgarian respondents were conducted to gain a better understanding of the role of traditional clothing in the construction of individual and collective identities in the context of globalization. The comparative analysis explores the associations with traditional clothing in different contexts, the meanings attributed to it, and the tension between preservation and innovation. Additionally, personal accounts contribute to the discussion in the previous chapter by providing reflections on the impact of socio-cultural, economic and political factors on traditional clothing.

#### 4.1. Results

Interviews with five Japanese and six Bulgarian participants in the study examined the experiences and associations people have with traditional clothing as well as their views towards modern interpretations of traditional attire. The coding process resulted in the identification of multiple categories which can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Coding*

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	Experience	Describing experience of engaging with traditional clothing
2	Current use	Talking about how traditional clothing is used today
3	Friends	Mentioning an experience with friends
4	Family	Mentioning an experience or association with family members, with generations and with kin and one's origins
5	Elderly	Referring to elderly people, including experiences with them, memories, stories they have told, as well as discussing them as a source of knowledge
6	Feelings and emotions	Discussing the feelings and emotions which traditional clothing evokes
7	Meanings	Discussing the meanings encoded in the design of clothing including regional differences, social norms, social status, and values
8	Social norms	Discussing social norms reflected in traditional clothing as well as the current existence and disintegration of

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		social norms; restrictions to certain demographic groups or to certain contexts
9	Wearing traditional clothing	Discussing the process of putting traditional clothing on and the norms about how to wear it
10	Social status	Including marriage status, wealth
11	Production	Production techniques and their value
12	Material value	Discussing the fabrics, the materials they are made from, their properties and their quality
13	Aesthetic value	Discussing the visual aspects of traditional clothing and its decorative function
14	Practicality	Practicality of the clothing, how fit it is for certain uses
15	Authenticity	References to what is perceived as authentic clothing
16	Traditions	Associating clothing with national traditions and customs
17	Memory	Individual and collective memories with the clothing and encoded in the clothing
18	Past	Making a reference to the past including individual and historical collective past
19	Preservation	The preservation of traditional clothing
20	Nation	Evoking the nation, its history, traditions, cultural and national identity
21	Political consideration	Reflecting on the political use of traditional clothing by nationalist and populist groups
22	Comparison	Comparison between authentic and stylized or contemporary traditional clothing; Comparison between the present and the past
23	Shopping experience	How the clothing is purchased, from where, from whom, how the experience was remembered
24	Consumer culture	Second-hand, overconsumption, accumulation of clothing, fashionability, shopping experience, and sustainability considerations
25	Economic factors	Discussing the price and affordability
26	Globalization	Referring to the effects of globalization
27	World	Referring to other countries, their traditions and traditional clothing and to experiences in different countries; also discussing the effects of globalization

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28	Positive views towards modern interpretations	Including positive views towards contemporary clothing with traditional elements and the mixed use of traditional and contemporary clothing
29	Negative views towards modern interpretations	Including negative views towards contemporary clothing with traditional elements and the mixed use of traditional and contemporary clothing
30	Technologization	Referring to the use of technology and social media

Once the interviews were coded, these codes were grouped into themes, based on identified patterns which relate to the research questions. In the course of coding the data and designing the analysis, nine themes emerged based on observed patterns including common topics, associations, meanings, and concerns. Some of the themes such as economic and political considerations as well as the intersections of traditional clothing with consumer culture and the discussion of modern interpretations were expected based on the previous sections and the interview questions.

Associations people have with traditional clothing are grouped into eight themes: experiences, people, the past, the nation, political considerations, economic factors, symbolic value, and the world. Additionally, views towards modern interpretations are grouped in a separate theme. These themes are explored in order to answer the second research question about the role of traditional clothing in constructing identities in the context of globalization.

Additionally, references to political processes and economic factors as well as the evaluation of the intersections of traditional clothing with consumer culture contribute to the understanding of the similarities and differences in the development of traditional clothing in Bulgaria and Japan which was analyzed in the previous chapter.

#### 4.2. Analysis

The role of traditional clothing in the construction of identity is discovered through the analysis of the interviews which considers the association with traditional clothing as well as the views on mixing contemporary fashion with elements of traditional clothing. While all themes are intricately linked together, the strong link in the association with the past and the nation in the case of Bulgaria necessitates its joint analysis. Each theme is explored in a comparative way analyzing examples from Bulgaria and Japan and discussing the implications of the similarities and differences. The responses of the interviewees are referenced according to Table 1 from the Methodology section.

#### 4.2.1. Experiences

One of the first things that came to mind for a lot of the respondents was the personal experience each of them had with traditional clothing. These experiences are important for understanding the value traditional clothing holds for people. Some of the Bulgarian respondents discussed the process of dressing by evoking different senses such as “seeing” and “touching” (1B). Others mentioned the different forms of engagement they have experienced including performances such as dancing, singing, acting, and taking part in various national and international festivals.

Japanese interviewees commonly associated the kimono with special occasions including festivals, weddings, graduation and coming-of age ceremonies. A lot of people wear kimono “for the experience” and the excitement which they feel when wearing it (5J). They associated it with the feeling of being special and standing out (1J, 2J, 5J). In addition, it is related to traditional culture professions such as working in a tea ceremony, or in a traditional Japanese hotel. One Japanese student shared he occasionally wears the kimono in a modernized way, referring to a simplified design made easier to put on and combine with other elements. This allows adaptations to one’s individual style: “I feel very special. Because people don't wear it, so I feel special... and I also recognize people who look at me so maybe people think I wear something special” (5J).

Interestingly, memories of experiences with traditional clothing go back to childhood. One of the Bulgarian respondents reflected positively on his experience in kindergarten, “to learn from a young age to adhere to traditions in this way” (2B). Similarly, Japanese participants remembered how they were dressed in kimono as young children during the annual *shichi-go-san* (seven-five-three) holiday which celebrates the well-being of children who turn three, five and seven years old (1J, 2J, 4J). These celebrations provide a more fleeting experience compared to traditional performances practiced in kindergarten, but in both cases they are an important part of the family history and memory. Especially in Japan where they are associated with a holiday, more prominence is given to these experiences. In Bulgaria it shows the role of institutions in the preservation of cultural heritage. This influence continues at school where multiple respondents had their first experience with traditional clothing as they joined the school folklore group. The Bulgarian state is involved in the preservation of traditional clothing and in shaping national identity through giving importance to folklore and legitimizing its position as a national symbol.

A few other uses came up such as during a private event organized with the aim to bring people together and celebrate the opening of a guest-house. It reflects the use and importance of traditional clothing in tourism campaigns in Bulgaria. Multiple Japanese participants discussed the kimono use for tourism purposes. A Japanese person I met outside the scope of this study shared an interesting perspective about this phenomenon describing it as a form of entertainment. Engagement with traditional clothing for the purpose of taking photos which are shared on social media can be analyzed as a form of entertainment or commercialization, highlighting the aesthetic value of the kimono. This practice also illustrates cultural mixing between traditional culture and aspects of contemporary consumer culture (Pieterse, 2009). One of the Bulgarians shared a negative view towards wearing traditional clothing only for the purpose of taking pictures while not respecting its symbolic value. She viewed it as a superficial experience and explained the importance of accurate representation:

This is not just a piece of clothing. It is fabrics woven with history, and you have to leave something adequate after you so that kids in the future can preserve this (1B).

This view reflects the idea that traditional clothing is a part of the culture and history which needs to be preserved and that the responsibility for its preservation falls to everyone who engages with traditional clothing. Furthermore, it reflects the view that traditional clothing should be differentiated from consumer culture, supporting cultural differentialism (Pieterse, 2009).

International experiences are also mentioned a few times by both groups. Those include memories with traditional clothing at folklore festivals, fashion shows, and in a context where a person wants to show their culture, highlighting the role of traditional clothing as a national symbol representing national culture (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999, Luleva, 2019). A particularly memorable experience for one of the Bulgarian respondents was her participation in a fashion show in Milan with a dress inspired by traditional Bulgarian clothing. She shared an initial feeling of inferiority next to more lavish costumes from other countries, a feeling which quickly passed once she saw the strong interest in her design (6B). These experiences reflect how Bulgarians compare their national dress to other countries' national costumes.

#### *4.2.2. People*

Traditional clothing is experienced and perceived in relation to other people. Bulgarians' experiences with friends range from performing in the same folklore group to meeting with other folklore enthusiasts. These experiences were described as emotionally charged and were linked to

the memories people have created which add symbolic value to traditional clothing. One Bulgarian student living in the Netherlands shared:

When we were in school we dressed each other and wrapped our belts, it's called *prepasvane*. And this was somehow a very unifying moment, by the way. You feel a sense of belonging and community (3B).

She expressed that the last time she wore *nosiya* before graduating from high-school was very emotional because of the awareness that it was perhaps the last time she was wearing it before moving to the Netherlands. This awareness shows the value of traditional clothing as a national symbol which brings out a feeling of nostalgia, both for the country from which the student is away, but also for the community which was formed around the experiences with traditional clothing. In Japan, various events at which traditional clothing is worn such as graduation ceremonies and summer festivals are celebrated with friends. More commonly associated is the family. In particular, the female figure, the mother and grandmother, are often evoked in memories of dressing in traditional clothing. One Japanese girl shared:

And also usually I visited my grandma to get dressed in kimono yukata because I don't know how to do it by myself. And (it also) comes with some memories with my grandma and you know with some relatives. So basically (...) older family. I think that's why I like wearing kimono (...) because of the memories that come (3J).

The association with these fond memories with family members adds symbolic value to the clothing. Similarly, in Bulgaria the family is evoked by all participants who described a joint experience together with other family members or simply memories of their relatives. Traditional clothing is associated with continuity as an object passed down through generations which has the memory of the people who have come before. Some interviewees also associated it with their imagined ancestors (5B, 4B). Thus traditional Bulgarian clothing is perceived as an object which contains the history and memory of one's family and kin. A young male living in Bulgaria shared:

And I think that more and more people are starting to return to seek their roots. And perhaps the *nosiya* is the easiest way to do it. I mean, folklore is the easiest path to reach your past. Because back in the days it was the everyday clothing of our grandparents. (2B)

Traditional clothing in Bulgaria is also linked to one's origins and "roots" (2B, 4B, 5B). The metaphor of roots implies a strong lasting connection with the past, relatives, and location (Luleva, 2019). Traditional dress is also associated with the community of elderly people more generally. In Japan, it is rather the elderly who are known to still wear traditional clothing as everyday garments in contrast to the young generations which wear it predominantly on special occasions.

Furthermore, except for the instances when it is received as a gift from the parents, participants acquired their kimono from grandmothers or mothers, or from second-hand shops supplied with kimonos which the elderly no longer wear. Similarly, a few Bulgarians mentioned the current use of traditional clothing or rather aspects of it by elderly women as everyday garments (1B, 3B). Although it is mostly headcovers, or aprons which are still worn, according to interviewees, this adds nuance to the view that traditional clothing has completely disappeared from everyday life in Bulgaria (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). Elderly women are also seen as a source of knowledge about traditional clothing. A woman living in Bulgaria shared her experience learning from grandmas about the reflection of social norms in the designs of traditional clothing and about the way different parts of the *nosiya* are worn and combined:

I recently went to Pirin for Grandmother's Day, and it's really cool to blend in with the grandmothers who are dressed the same way. It's amazing because, for them, this is everyday clothing. Some things, yes, they wear their aprons as well. It's very interesting, you blend into a community. [...] I was very proud and happy to be dressed from head to toe in the way it used to be worn (1B).

She also recalled a story about her experience acquiring traditional clothing which differs from the mainstream experiences of contemporary consumer culture, characterized by digital markets and shopping malls (Featherstone, 2018). The experience is more intimate and personal as people meet and exchange stories. The respondent stressed the value in the stories which accompany the clothing. Clothing for Bulgarians is a way to preserve the memories of and with elderly people: "It's true, clothing carries the energy of the people...you go back in time" (1B).

Memory is indeed one of the most commonly mentioned aspects which people consider important in the value, engagement and preservation of traditional clothing. In general, these examples illustrate the role of the traditional clothing in both countries in the construction of individual identity which is rooted in family experiences and traditions as well as experiences with other people from one's social circle.

#### *4.2.3. Past and Nation*

The most commonly evoked theme in Bulgaria is that of the preservation of memories and history. Traditional clothing is seen as an object, the engagement with which preserves traditions, memories and history. It is thus strongly associated with the individual past and the national past. In Bulgaria, the *nosiya* makes participants think about a period in the past because these were the

clothes worn back then. While this may be true for authentic nosiya, reproductions are made more recently, yet they are perceived as an object from the past because of their symbolic link with the past and with traditions. In Japan it is rather personal memories that prevail over the association with the national history. A lot of participants first shared that kimono reminds them of their own memories with friends and family. However, some also considered national history, and the history of the kimono itself, remarking that the way kimono looked and the way it was worn in the past differs from present day: “How to wear it is totally different between now and 300-400 years ago. (It was) more simple and easier. Now it is more complicated. Because of the magazine (maybe)” (4J). The kimono rental shop owner explained that the kimono imagined today is way more intricate than it used to be a long time ago due to its formalization and intricate designs. This illustrates that the image of the kimono as a national symbol is based on festive clothing, similarly to Bulgarian nosiya. Another Japanese participant added that the kimono reflected the lifestyle of people back in the day:

As for Kimono. It's very different, (it) depends on the situation. One is very gorgeous kimono which was worn by some Princess in the Japanese castle (...) and another kimono is the clothes worn by the ordinary people. And they wore kimono when they were doing some agriculture or merchandise, yeah, daily life. So, that kimono is very simple and not so gorgeous at all. So I am reminded of both (2J).

The view that kimono has significantly changed over time is shared by multiple participants who pointed out that traditional clothing looked different and was worn in a different way. This acknowledgement of change in combination with the present use of traditional clothing could explain why Japanese people are overall more open to modern adaptations of the kimono today. It is already associated with an evolving clothing compared to traditional Bulgarian dress which, having very restricted everyday application, and being understood as cultural heritage, is understood as more static and in need of preservation. For some, it is in particular this change which leads them to associate traditional clothing with the present and one's personal experiences rather than the past and collective memory:

Of course people used to wear kimono and yukata, but somehow I don't associate it with an old image. Maybe, because when I think about it, it's very colorful and very gorgeous. And it is so beautiful. But when you think of history, it's always black and white somehow. I don't see them wearing the same thing as I wear. It's kind of weird. I think they are different. What we wear right now and what they used to wear. Although it's the same thing basically (3J).



This signifies the weaker association for Japanese people between the kimono and the nation as compared to Bulgaria where traditional clothing evokes not only individual memory but also collective national memory, including the national history and traditions. The interviews confirm the status of traditional clothing as a national symbol in Bulgaria. A Bulgarian designer who works with traditional clothing shared:

Actually, traditional clothing is what characterizes a nation. In the clothing there are motifs which express a message for something good, be it for protection or with another meaning (...) so traditional clothing is linked to the culture and the way of life.

And:

Bulgarian clothing balances forms and colors. This is perfection, based on the perfection which nature gives us (6B).

The fact that traditional clothing is linked to the national past and is part of the cultural heritage necessitates its preservation. This was pointed out by all Bulgarian participants who stressed the role of traditional clothing in the preservation of memories, traditions and history. It is celebrated for the richness of the meanings encoded in the design, for its symbolic value, as well as for the richness of regional diversity. The nosiya “is a distinctive mark. For example, Bulgaria is famous with a lot of different types, with different folklore regions and it is very interesting” (2B).

Similar thoughts by multiple respondents refer to the transporting function of traditional clothing, as a way to travel through time. One of them shared: “My aim is to rewind time a bit and bring back the memories” (1B), while another added that it “transports you to a different time” (2B).

The role of traditional clothing in Japan in constructing cultural identity however, should not be disregarded. Despite weaker association with the past, kimono is still perceived as a central element of Japanese culture. It is described as a “big part of Japanese wearing” (4J) and a symbol of Japanese culture, used as a way to express cultural identity. Furthermore, multiple respondents discussed the compatibility and the perceived unity between the clothing, the culture, and the Japanese society: “Because kimono was originally made for Japanese people. So the length and the design and the color, that suits that much Japanese style” (4J) and “So I think it definitely reflects the culture, how simple it is, but you have to put some effort to wear it in a nice way but I think it is very Japanese thinking in this way” (3J). Japanese people showed openness towards people from different ethnicities wearing traditional clothing and appreciated the public interest in their traditional clothing, yet they were prone to see it as a mismatch. Seeing traditional clothing

worn by other nationalities provided them with a perspective to re-evaluate traditional clothing and appreciate its perceived harmony with Japanese society.

In sum, traditional clothing is an important national symbol in both Bulgaria and Japan. In Bulgaria the strong link with the nation is found in the perceived continuity with the past preserved through the history and memories embedded in the clothing. In contrast, in Japan the kimono is reflects cultural values and is seen as harmonious with Japanese society and architecture. Individual and collective memories are evoked in the discussion of traditional clothing by both Bulgarian and Japanese respondents stressing the importance of collective experiences and memories for the formation of individual and cultural identity (Maton, 2014; Valk, 2017).

#### *4.2.4. Political considerations*

As discussed, national identity is co-constructed with the involvement of the state. In Bulgaria the role of traditional clothing in the construction of national identity has been instrumental since the designation of nosiya as cultural heritage (Dechev, 2010; Luleva, 2009). The ongoing instrumentalisation of folklore in Bulgaria is reflected in some of the responses. One of the Bulgarian students in the Netherlands refrains from wearing clothing with traditional elements because of his association of such clothing with people who instrumentalize it for their own purposes:

Another thing is also when such clothes are politicized with certain nationalistic movements creating division. And whoever doesn't wear traditional clothing or listen to folklore is framed as betraying the nation, not being a true Bulgarian (5B).

He shared that traditions and history are easily used in populism at protests without respect for the actual clothing. Similarly, another student expressed disagreement “with some patriotic displays which are very common in Bulgaria lately” (4B). According to her, traditional clothing “has no place at protests and such events” (4B). These views reflect Luleva’s (2019) observation that traditional clothing is used by ethno-nationalists as a tool for exclusion of those who do not share the same values, framed as national traitors, and those who cannot prove their ethnic Bulgarian origin. The instrumentalization of traditional clothing in such ways is based on the idea of ethnic clothing representing the unique characteristics of Bulgarians (Decheva, 2017).

From another point of view, traditional clothing is perceived as a symbol of national culture and values providing an alternative to ideas from the West and the East perceived as a threat: “Today, we are swayed in different directions, we follow Western or Eastern radical ideas. We

don't think about the traditions and customs we have" (2B). This perspective reflects a romantic nationalist view of folklore, where traditional elements are seen as preserving the authentic national spirit and character (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). Yet, this perception also illustrates the dual nature of folklore's instrumentalisation. While it can serve as a means of cultural preservation, it can also be used for divisive political purposes, highlighting the complex interplay between tradition, identity, and politics in the Bulgarian context.

No similar observations were shared by participants from Japan, suggesting that the national costume there is not associated with political motives and with the political structures of the state. While nationalism exists in Japan it is expressed through different means as evidenced by Kyobashi (2023). Furthermore, it reflects the stronger influence of the market and socio-cultural shifts on the use of traditional clothing in contrast to Bulgaria where the state has had an active role in regulating the image of traditional clothing and cultural heritage. In this way the kimono is also more aligned with the contemporary consumer culture which is driven by the market and the consumers.

#### *4.2.5. Economic factors*

In the course of the interviews many Japanese respondents discussed the price of the kimonos. The formal kimono used at ceremonies, however, is still a financial choice made by the family with options to purchase or rent the clothing. Multiple participants highlighted the high quality of the formal kimonos and their high price which makes them more valuable, pointing out that the value of clothing is also material. This is the result of the shifting role of the kimono in the 80s when it became a symbol of social status as a result of its formalization and price increase (Valk, 2021). Japanese participants also reflected on the affordability of second-hand kimonos which have led to a recent increase in consumption. Concerns about the impracticality of the clothing beyond the specific holiday additionally hindered some from making a purchase.

To a lesser extent the subject came up in interviews with Bulgarians. The Bulgarian clothing designer discussed the price, pointing out that stylized costumes for folklore groups are machine-made with different fabrics and with less details compared to reproductions of authentic clothing. This allows ensembles to afford a large number of costumes (6B). The production method was discussed by multiple respondents who highlighted that it used to be customary to make one's own clothes. The process of making clothing by hand is appreciated for the added value it brings to the clothing. This reflects the view shared by Fletcher and Grose (2014) who claim that

engagement in the production process can increase the appreciation of clothing and that “craft supports many sustainability values” (Fletcher & Grose, 2014, p.149). The sustainable dimension of these practices, however, did not come up in the interviews. Instead the focus was on the cultural and affective value of the clothing.

Another participant noted that back in the day traditional clothing was owned by everyone, however, today it is a privilege to own a whole costume due to its high price (2B). He compared it to buying a prom costume and added that some people may prefer to wear a piece of clothing with a traditional element which is more budget friendly. This confirms the view that graduation proms in Bulgaria are associated with consumer culture and reflects the idea that traditional clothing can be used by some as a counter-narrative to the commercialization of these events (BNT, 2021; Luleva, 2019).

Wearing traditional clothing at graduation ceremonies is similarly controversial in Japan. One girl showed me a photo of a *montsuki hakama*, a family crest kimono worn at graduations, similar to the one in Figure 4 (1J). She expressed a negative view towards men who choose to wear traditional clothing during their graduation ceremony perceiving it as a display of social status and associating it with danger. Yet she acknowledged that her judgement may be influenced by the fact that it is uncommon for men to wear traditional clothing at such an event. In this instance, context, as addressed by Maton (2014), determines how wearing traditional clothing is perceived by others. On the one hand, this view highlights the idea that traditional ceremonial clothing is linked to social status (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999), on the other hand, it illustrates the gender associations which the kimono evokes. In particular, it contrasts grace, beauty and vibrancy with which the female traditional clothing is associated, to the association of danger and high social status which graduation male crest hakama evokes. The use of family crest kimono further illustrates the symbolic value of traditional clothing in the way it is used to construct identity and show belonging to a certain family lineage, and highlights the cultural significance of family crests in today’s society pointed out by Stone Bridge Press (2007).

**Figure 4**

*Montsuki hakama*



*Source: Mitsuwa Furisode.*

#### *4.2.6. Symbolic value*

The symbolic value of traditional clothing extends beyond its association with traditions and memories of the past. It encompasses the symbolism and hidden meanings in its design, reflecting regional differences, social norms and values, as well as the affective responses such as the feelings and emotions evoked while wearing it. A key aspect of the symbolic value of traditional Bulgarian clothing is the meanings encoded in its design. As discussed earlier, traditional Bulgarian clothing has regional variation. This variation was recognized by the respondents, some of whom associated traditional clothing with the region they come from. This diversity of designs on the one hand highlights the richness of traditional Bulgarian clothing, while on the other. Meanwhile, it also problematizes the uniform image of national clothing established in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which is based on regional clothing (Dechev & Vukov, 2010). One of the respondents expressed a concern about the mixing of clothing from different regions,

which could lead to the loss of knowledge about regional differences in the future (1B). Mixing in this context is seen as a process of homogenization on the local level, which dilutes regional cultural differences (Steenkamp, 2019). In Japan, the color and design of the kimono are considered especially important for ceremonies. The kimono is chosen to match not only personal tastes, but also changing trends, highlighting its dynamic nature an evolution similar to contemporary fashion. It is not its designs which require preservation, but rather the clothing as a whole, as well as the set of values and cultural meanings it represents. Furthermore, a few of the Bulgarian interviewees associated the designs and types of traditional clothing with certain social norms and contrasted it to contemporary fashion for which these codes no longer apply. As discussed by Decheva (2017) and Ganeva (2017), traditional Bulgarian clothing used to reflect a system of social codes including the age, gender, social status, and origin of the person. While the existence of these norms in the past is acknowledged and sometimes viewed with nostalgia, the majority of the respondents share the view that there shouldn't be restrictions as to who wears a certain type of traditional clothing. There is nonetheless slight doubt in the opinions towards ethnicities other than Bulgarian wearing the national costume, which point out the idea of traditional clothing as ethnic clothing (Decheva, 2017). However, participants agreed that those who have an interest in traditional culture should be able to engage with it because this is a way for it to be preserved.

In my opinion, there is nothing problematic about gender and age groups. However, to be honest, I'm not sure how I feel about other nationalities wearing traditional clothing that doesn't belong to them [...]. But personally, I think I don't really have a problem with it. I think we are currently in a stage where everyone is wearing different clothes anyways. I don't see it as a problem. Personally, I don't find it problematic, although I can see how it could be (3B).

Japanese people also shared the view that kimono should be accessible to everyone despite the idea that it is most suitable for the Japanese body. The majority also acknowledged the fact that norms about how to wear the kimono in the correct way hinder its use.

In Japan there are many restrictions. We don't need to care actually, but old people think that oh this kimono is only for a wedding (...). We don't need to care about it because this is the time we need to rethink how to take over the culture and keep on the culture conserved (...), but some people think that culture includes the rules. But I think that kind of rule will change (4J).

This example shows that there is tension between preservation and adaptation but also differing views on what culture contains. There is agreement that there should be more flexibility regarding the rules in order to promote the engagement with traditional clothing.

Another aspect of the symbolic value is the emotions and feelings associated with wearing it. These range from joy, excitement and pride to nostalgia. Nostalgia in Bulgaria is felt for an imagined historic past and personal memories. Those living abroad also shared feelings of nostalgia for the country, signifying the relevance of traditional clothing in constructing national identity. In Japan the feeling of nostalgia is not explicitly expressed, but can be inferred in the way people discussed personal memories.

The aesthetic value was another aspect considered in the discussion. In Bulgaria it was given less consideration and was evidenced by the desire to own *nosiya* as a decoration. Two participants shared they wouldn't want to own a whole costume as it would not be used, highlighting the importance of practicality and a consideration against the accumulation of clothing which has no practical application. Another respondent also pointed out that she would only keep traditional clothing with special meaning rather than accumulate it. These views contrast traditional clothing to contemporary clothing which has not only aesthetic but also practical value. Furthermore, the engagement with traditional clothing reflects more considerate practices where aesthetic and symbolic value take precedence over the accumulation of clothing, which is a characteristic of contemporary consumer culture (Ertekin et al., 2020). In contrast, Japanese clothing is more strongly associated with its aesthetic value. Respondents often stressed its aesthetic features including its sophisticated designs, different colors and patterns, as well as different texture of the fabrics: "And I think because kimono has a unique design. It's very colorful and has a very gorgeous style, and also very special fabric" (3J). The majority of participants expressed that the kimono makes them feel special and beautiful, which is owed not only to the fact it is rare to see it on the streets but also because of its aesthetic evaluation.

The combination of appreciation of the aesthetic and symbolic value reflects Featherstone's argument that contemporary fashion consumption is characterized by the production of both aesthetic value and symbolic meaning (2018). Furthermore, the engagement with traditional clothing, including collecting, buying, wearing and discarding it, produces similar types of affective responses to contemporary clothing (McIntyre, 2019).

#### 4.2.7. World

When discussing traditional clothing, respondents also made references to other countries and external influences. The cultural shifts towards the West are acknowledged. This reflects the process of cultural assimilation and convergence described by Pieterse (2009), where global preferences and behaviors lead to the homogenization of local cultures. While Bulgarians take pride in the unique features of Bulgarian clothing, they are also aware of the similarities to other Slavic countries' national dress highlighting the shared history of the region. Japanese people also considered the kimono in relation to clothing in the rest of the world. A Japanese student shared his appreciation for the kimono in contrast to the otherwise globalized fashion scene which "sometimes feels a little boring" (5J).

Globalization according to multiple Bulgarian respondents is breaking down local differences compared to the past when there was more division and when more traditions existed. One interviewee shared they cannot imagine traditional clothing being worn today at a wedding, although this is where it used to be worn (4B). It shows traditional clothing is detached from its original purpose as a result of the shift in sartorial practices. On the other hand, a renewed interest in the past and in local traditions is observed as a result of which traditional clothing is becoming more trendy. This process aligns with cultural differentialism which is characterized by the countering of global influences and promoting local practices, as well as hybridization, characterized by a combination of global and local influences (Pieterse, 2009, Steenkamp, 2019). Meanwhile the use of social media is appreciated for its effect on the increase of interest in kimono outside of Japan.

When they wear the kimono they take photos of themselves and they want to show how they look on Instagram or other social media. That's why I think kimono is getting more and more popular outside and inside Japan (1J).

The same girl also shared that seeing the kimono being worn by other nationalities is "a good opportunity for us to review how our traditional clothing looks and how unique it is. We can get an objective perspective" (1J). This perspective further illustrates the role of traditional clothing as a national symbol. Taking it out of its traditional context and seeing it worn by other ethnicities can foster appreciation and pride.

Overall, globalization blurs local differences but at the same time it provides new ways of engaging with traditional clothing. It fosters a renewed awareness and interest in local culture,



illustrating the complex relationship between traditional clothing, national identity, and contemporary consumer culture.

#### 4.2.8. *Modern interpretations*

Modern interpretations of traditional clothing in this section refer to the adaptations to contemporary consumer culture analyzed in the previous chapter including the combination of elements of traditional clothing with elements of contemporary fashion, contemporary clothing with traditional Bulgarian designs, and upcycled kimono. The view and attitudes towards these sheds light on the tension between preservation and modernization of traditional clothing.

Mixing traditional and contemporary elements is linked to the norms about how the clothing should be worn, discussed earlier. Both *nosiya* and kimono combine multiple elements which come together in a specific way and order. While these norms are cherished as cultural heritage, they are also considered an obstacle, alienating young people from traditional clothing.

In Japan the dressing code established with the formalization of the kimono in the 80s, influenced by magazines and *kitsuke* dressing schools, is considered a hassle today which hinders the use of the kimono (Valk, 2021). Some practices have emerged which challenge these norms by integrating designs which facilitate its wearability or by adding contemporary accessories and elements to the outfit. Among the participants in the interviews, overall there was agreement that traditional kimono should be preserved including the norms about how to dress in it. Yet, the majority agreed that in order for people to continue having an interest in traditional clothing, there needs to be flexibility about the introduction of new designs and forms of dressing, which are adapted to the present:

When I choose a kimono, I always go for a very, very traditional pattern, traditional color like red, very normal, not like beige or a modern color. But you know at the same time If you find new ways to wear the kimono or yukata in a more comfortable way, that means that people would start wearing it more often (...). I think both (traditional and adapted) are needed to keep this tradition and beauty (3J).

In Bulgaria mixing traditional clothing with contemporary accessories is observed sometimes, due to practical considerations, for example wearing traditional dress with contemporary shoes. Such practices are not common as a fashion choice unlike in Japan. When asked to imagine a combination for example of a traditional apron with a contemporary dress some people viewed it

in a positive light, while others were reserved about it, indicating the tension between preservation and modernization.

I am not sure, honestly, if it would look good (...). Perhaps if it is introduced in modern clothing in a subtle way (...). So it can be seen that this is an element, rather than changing something completely, pretending that it is traditional clothing. An element can be added to modern fashion, rather than modernizing traditional clothing (5B).

This example illustrates the distinction between the modernization of traditional clothing and the incorporation of traditional elements in contemporary fashion. The former is perceived as a threat to traditional clothing, while the latter promotes and preserves traditional culture.

Contemporary clothing with traditional embroidery elements is perceived positively, yet with a dose of caution. People generally viewed it as preserving the beauty of traditional clothing, since it is affordable, easy to wear, and has practical use today compared to traditional clothing which has gone out of circulation. It is appreciated because it brings people closer to traditional culture. There is, nonetheless, reservation towards how the designs are implemented. Some pointed out that the meanings and resemblance to the authentic embroidery design needs to be preserved. The clothing not only holds aesthetic and practical function but also hold symbolic value and as such should preserve and represent the meanings of traditional design. Additionally, the instrumental political use of such clothing fueling ethno-nationalism was problematized. Wearing clothing with traditional elements is seen as a rising “trend”. The use of a term associated with contemporary consumer culture in which trends often change suggests the integration of traditional clothing as well as its modern interpretations into contemporary fashion.

When it comes to upcycling kimono practices there are also mixed feelings. One girl shared her reservation:

Some Japanese people have a critical opinion. This is not a kimono and this is not a dress (...). If the kimono dress only uses the fabric and they don't respect that feature, I don't think it's good clothes. So I thought that in Japan there are a lot of ideas that Western culture, American culture has more priority. That's why I think kimono dress is boring. Because there are no such dress kimono clothes. Using dress fabric making a kimono, yes that's strange. So kimono dress shows how culture priority exists in Japan and in the world as well (1J).

She viewed this practice with a critical stance highlighting the cultural dominance from the West which is implied in it as the clothing is adapted to a form characteristic of western fashion. Others viewed upcycling in a positive light as a way to preserve the sophisticated fabrics, to show creativity, and to preserve the memories associated with the kimono. They pointed out the

symbolic value, in particular the memories related to family members, which are encoded in the fabrics used to create a new product with everyday practicality. These views reflect McCarthy's (2021) findings about the associations of upcycling kimono practices with maintaining Japanese culture and keeping family memories.

Much like in the analysis in Chapter III, sustainability issues which are the central in the promotion of upcycling of contemporary clothing (Gordon & Hill, 2015), were absent from the discourse. While some recognized the benefits of upcycling in reducing waste, they did not explicitly share environmental concerns. McCarthy (2021) suggests such practices may be motivated by cultural tradition, rather than environmental concern.

I have also analyzed practices of dissemination of traditional clothing and its contemporary adaptations as a form of cultural mixing between traditional and contemporary culture. Multiple students from Japan discussed Instagram as a source where they have come across contemporary kimonos, especially linked to contemporary adaptations. This further strengthens the perspective on the importance of social media for the dissemination of traditional clothing in a globalized age, especially among young generations. Bulgarians also mentioned social media on few occasions as a platform where people have shared their experiences wearing traditional clothing.

#### 4.3. Discussion

The study reveals the relevance of traditional clothing in the construction of individual, national, and global identities. While it is a national symbol, traditional clothing plays an important role of shaping both collective as well as individual identities. Many of the experiences related to traditional clothing in Japan concern important life events, celebrated with family and friends. Furthermore, much like contemporary clothing, the kimono can express individual style and make one stand out. In contrast, in Bulgaria, traditional clothing is seen as a way of blending in with a community reflecting Ganeva's observation about the universalizing and unifying role of traditional clothing (2017). In Bulgaria, family and friends are also central figures in private experiences. Interaction with traditional clothing is seen as a way to discover oneself, one's origin and roots, which evokes an emotional connection. Both Japanese and Bulgarian respondents shared appreciation of collective family memories. Family memory, according to Erll (2011), is a type of collective memory which plays a role in the processes of both individual and collective identity construction. The combination of generational memory about the past and family

experiences of national holidays is a bridge between individual and national levels of identity. These personal experiences highlight the importance of traditional clothing in constructing various levels of one's identity. Furthermore, the discussion of memories and history reveals the way the past is reinterpreted through traditional clothing resonating with Holroyd (2017) and Jenss (2015) who describe the function of clothing to reflect one's understanding of the past.

At the national level, traditional clothing embodies the collective memory and cultural heritage of a nation. It is associated with cultural values, traditions, and practices. Traditional clothing is a way to express one's cultural identity and belonging. It is perceived as special and beautiful, and it evokes a feeling of pride and a sense of uniqueness on the international stage. In Bulgaria, *nosiya* is not only a symbol of national identity, but it also reflects regional diversity and belonging. These views reflect a universal tendency to view reality from the perspective of our own culture, referred to as ethnocentrism in Nguyen-Phuong-Mai (2017). According to the scholar, the folklore of most cultures across the world is based on the idea of uniqueness and superiority, which has universally evolved as a survival mechanism. While described as a natural tendency, it is problematized when it becomes the basis of exclusionary and discriminatory practices. In Bulgaria, some of the interviewees have criticized the politicization and instrumentalisation of traditional clothing for political purposes rooted in ethno-nationalism. The state holds an active role in the promotion of traditional clothing as a national symbol evidenced by public performances, festivals, and educational programs that celebrate Bulgarian folklore. In contrast, in Japan, the dissemination of traditional clothing in society today is rather driven by society and the kimono market which share similar views regarding the kimono as a unique cultural practice in harmony with Japanese society. In both countries traditional clothing is a national symbol which connects the past and the present. The views towards the future of traditional costumes are more complex due to the tension between preservation and modernization.

On a global scale, traditional clothing navigates the interplay between national cultural heritage and global consumer culture. As a national symbol its appearance at international events is a way to promote global understandings of local cultures, serving the purpose of cultural diplomacy. The analysis reveals that traditional clothing is not isolated from global trends but is actively reinterpreted within a global context. Furthermore, the binary between Western and traditional clothing is challenged by illustrating the dynamic nature of traditional clothing. On the one hand, the study highlights the changing nature of traditional clothing, on the other, it illustrates

the creative practices of hybridization which create a bridge between global and local cultures through contemporary interpretations. In Japan the element of mixing is more widely accepted due to factors such as the current use of the kimono, the commercial tourism practices which are a major venue for traditional clothing, as well as the widespread availability of traditional fabrics. In Bulgaria traditional clothing is perceived as cultural heritage which is at risk of being lost if not preserved in its original form, which is why some people contrast it to consumer culture associated with the disintegration of social codes. There, everyday clothing incorporating traditional embroidery designs is appreciated and considered as a rising trend which promotes traditional culture but does not threaten it. These creative outputs highlight the dynamic nature of traditional clothing, and signify the role of adaptation to global consumer culture in its preservation. The study reveals that traditional clothing is not only an object of the past but is to some extent a component in global consumer culture which nonetheless maintains its significance as a cultural symbol.

In sum, wearing traditional clothing and its contemporary adaptations is a way to construct a multitude of individual, national and global identities in the context of current developments in global consumer culture. It is incorporated in private and collective practices as a way to celebrate its aesthetic properties, appreciate its symbolic value, and express individual style as well as cultural belonging.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing the current use of traditional clothing as well as the intersections of traditional clothing with consumer culture. It has contributed to a deeper understanding of how global and local processes such as socio-cultural, economic, and political changes, as well as consumer culture and globalization have influenced the role and use of traditional clothing across different cultural contexts. By uncovering both similarities and differences, the study sheds light on common global factors influencing the significance of traditional clothing and offers a cross-cultural perspective that contributes to cultural sustainability strategies in the face of modernization.

Traditional clothing in Japan and Bulgaria has been impacted by socio-cultural changes such as the cultural shift towards the West and towards globalization, the changing social norms, and the change in the social structure from collective to individual, and from rural to urban society. Traditional clothing has been replaced by western clothing due to cultural shifts, the market, and the search for individual expression of style and values over collective expressions of identity. The cultural shift towards the West is not straightforward. It is a gradual shift which incorporated elements from global and local cultures into a process of hybridization.

Economic changes including changing markets and economic struggles also impacted the evolution of traditional clothing. In both countries, the import of new fabrics and materials led to change in designs and forms. Industrialization led to mass produced items replacing handmade clothing as a more affordable alternative. The economic considerations are present today, when the ownership of traditional clothing is also an economic choice. In Japan, the kimono market has a strong influence on the engagement with traditional clothing. With the growth of second-hand shops offering an affordable alternative to the formalized kimono shops, there has been a renewed interest in kimono among the younger generations. In Bulgaria, contemporary clothing with traditional designs offers not only a more practical but also a more affordable alternative to for those who want to engage with traditional Bulgarian culture.

Political processes are another factor influencing the way traditional clothing has developed. The political alignment of states in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and the processes of shaping national identity have had an impact on the role of cultural heritage. In Japan, imperialism, the political positioning as a global force in Asia, and the American occupation after WWII have impacted clothing practices leading to the integration of western clothing and the adoption of

cultural practices and products from the West. In Bulgaria the initial alignment with the West following the liberation from the Ottoman empire and the role of the Soviet regime after WWII have also impacted the way traditional clothing was established as the national costume. The current role of traditional clothing as a national symbol in Bulgaria is reinforced by the state in public performances, folklore activities integrated in the educational system, as well as in political and cultural expressions of ethnonationalism which have been problematized by scholars as well as participants in the interviews.

Globalization of consumer culture has also influenced traditional clothing. On the one hand, it has reduced engagement with traditional clothing, on the other hand, it has led to the re-emergence of traditional clothing practices as an alternative and a reaction to universalization. Tensions between preservation and modernization show the complex developments of traditional clothing both as a national symbol, and a part of global consumer culture. In Bulgaria this tension is more pronounced in views that traditional clothing should be preserved. However, some people also share a positive view towards modernization and the hybridization of *nosiya*. Meanwhile, upcycling kimono has existed for a long time in Japan as a cultural practice of preventing waste. Additionally, cultural mixing occurs between contemporary context where traditional clothing is worn and its value as cultural heritage. The study has challenged the binary perception between Western fashion and traditional attire by illustrating the ways in which traditional and contemporary clothing is interpreted within the context of global consumer culture shaping multiple layers of identity.

Traditional clothing intersects with global consumer culture in some aspects and differentiates from it in others. To some extent the shopping experiences have become similar with the use of digital markets, yet acquiring it can also be accompanied by a transfer of personal stories, memories and knowledge. Additionally, pragmatic concerns have led to innovations in the way it is worn, however, concerns remain about the preservation of traditional techniques and designs. The investigation offers a perspective on how the distance between these dichotomies is reduced through a combination of tradition and transformation. While aesthetic and symbolic value are also characteristic of contemporary, traditional clothing, is strongly associated with the family, the past, and cultural identity.

Although the engagement with traditional clothing can be framed as a sustainable practice, the environmental concern is hardly present in the discussion. Traditional clothing circulates as

second-hand clothing. It involves limited handmade production over mass produced clothing and upcycling practices preventing waste. While participants in the interviews are aware of overconsumption and emphasize the value of each garment their engagement with traditional clothing lacks explicit association with environmental and ethical concerns which are some of the global challenges consumer culture is facing. This shows that the countermovement to contemporary consumer culture has not had a significant impact on the engagement with traditional clothing in Bulgaria and Japan. In order to better understand this gap, the overall level of environmental awareness and concern needs to be analyzed.

Furthermore, the study has explored the role of traditional clothing in the construction of individual and collective layers of their identity. One of the significant differences is the level of presence of traditional clothing in the everyday life of people. In Bulgaria such use is only recorded in villages, where some parts of traditional clothing are still worn by the elderly. In contrast, in Japan, although rarely, both young and older people can sometimes be seen wearing traditional clothing not only in the rural areas, but also in urban centers. Additionally, wearing a kimono during sightseeing increases its visibility. In other aspects, the use of traditional clothing is similar in both cases, reserved mainly to ceremonial or performative occasions. Traditional clothing is experienced both in private events with the family as well as during collective national holidays, which signifies its role in the construction of both individual and collective identities. In both cases the association with the family and the past generations is strong. In Bulgaria, where collective experiences are commonly discussed, the association with national memory, history, and values is more salient. In combination with the instrumentalisation of folklore for political purposes, this tendency shows the role of traditional clothing as a national symbol forming national collective identities. In Japan, cultural specificity is also evoked, however, to a lesser extent, which suggests the role of traditional clothing as a national symbol is less explicit. Yet both Bulgarians and Japanese people see the possibility to represent one's own culture through traditional clothing on the global scene. Traditional dress is thus linked to layers of individual, national, and global identities.

All three levels are also present in the way traditional clothing is adapted to the global consumer market. Bulgarians are more reserved towards changes to traditional clothing. They view contemporary clothing with traditional designs as separate from authentic costumes which require preservation. Cultural mixing in the domain of cultural heritage is resisted in favor of cultural



differentialism rejecting global influences. Meanwhile in Japan, kimono remake practices as well as the combination of traditional clothing with contemporary accessories engages the kimono in a process of hybridization where both aspects from the local and global culture interact with each other. The combination of hybridization and the desire for preservation, or cultural differentialism in the domain of traditional clothing, demonstrate that traditional clothing is not only cultural heritage but is also a dynamic component of the global fashion system.

The comparative approach provides a better understanding of the ways in which different cultures react to socio-cultural, economic and political changes. Identifying the similarities in the role and current use of traditional clothing in Bulgaria and Japan can inform strategies for cultural cooperation and diplomacy. Furthermore, analyzing both cases comparatively has led to the identification of broader patterns along with specific distinctions which may otherwise be overlooked. The study contributes to the overall discussion about cultural identity, material culture, the role of clothing in shaping identity, and the impact of local and global changes on material cultural heritage. Additionally, it highlights common challenges and trends in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and contributes to the understanding of how cultural identity is constructed in different socio-cultural contexts. By highlighting the innovations in the development of traditional clothing and its intersections with consumer culture, the study offers countries in Europe and globally a new perspective on promoting intercultural understanding through cultural heritage.

The research demonstrates that there is more to cultural heritage than traditional culture, nationalism, and associations with the past. Instead, it reveals a dynamic interaction between different socio-cultural, economic, and political processes on the local and global level impacting the role and engagement with traditional clothing. It provides a perspective on the innovation within traditional culture and its adaptation to the global consumer market. Furthermore, it sheds light on its current role in the construction of individual and collective identities as an important cultural symbol which also holds relevance in individual experiences with friends and family.

These different nuances observed in the analysis of both literature and media sources, as well as in personal accounts provided from interviewees illustrate the similarities and differences in two seemingly different contexts. The findings highlight the similar ways in which different societies react to global changes. They show that traditional clothing is not a remnant of the past, but continues changing and adapting in the present with varying degrees of evolution.

Analyzing responses from interviews implies a level of interpretation, additionally, the reduced size of the sample may not encompass the whole range of ideas. Nonetheless, personal accounts contribute with nuances which may not be detected in a quantitative study. The comparative analysis included a multicultural sample which has its limitations. Firstly, my cultural distance from Japanese people may have led them to omit some culturally specific information. Instead, they may have elaborated on other aspects they felt were necessary for me to understand their perspective. Conversely, Bulgarian interviewees may have omitted certain explanations believed to be common knowledge requiring no discussion. Secondly, the language of the interviews poses a limitation. For Japanese speakers, the English-medium interviews may have prevented them from sharing certain ideas. Meanwhile, the interviews conducted in Bulgarian required my own translation and thus interpretation into English. Lastly the interviews mixed online and in-person approaches each offering advantages and disadvantages. These limitations could be addressed in a larger research project which allows for the interviewer to gather feedback from participants and discuss the accuracy of the analysis. Such an approach would also allow a more in-depth analysis, mitigating the level of subjectivity, influenced by the background knowledge of the researcher.

While I have aimed to objectively analyze and illustrate the role of traditional clothing in both countries, my positionality as a Bulgarian national with an interest in cultural heritage and fashion, should be considered. Cultural history and belonging can indirectly influence the presentation of the results. Influences include the accessed sources, which were subject to my language abilities limited to English and Bulgarian, my relatively limited experience in Japan, as well as my previous research focus exploring the role of traditional clothing in Bulgaria. I have addressed these limitations by aiming to stay as objective as possible, looking at how each issue is represented in data from both countries, and by seeking diverse peer-reviewed sources for both case studies.

The study provides a comprehensive overview of socio-cultural, economic and political processes and their impact on traditional clothing and its role in shaping identity. The research also explores the intersections between traditional clothing and consumer culture, highlighting different degrees of adaptation. The analysis is not exhaustive and thus provides a starting point for the examination of each of these issues in greater detail. In particular, some suggestions for future

research include the following topics which can deepen our understanding of the interplay between cultural heritage, identity, culture, and globalization.

Firstly, the influence of traditional clothing on global fashion trends and the tensions arising from its appropriation could be explored. This includes the tension between local and global identities, and between fashion brands and culture groups. Such research would contribute to the understanding of the bi-directional process of influence including the way traditional or local cultures influences global fashion and in turn, the way global fashion impacts the evolution of traditional clothing and culture. It would result in a better understanding of how local and global cultures influence each other.

Secondly, examining the way traditional clothing is perceived by ethnic minorities and its role in the construction of their identity could provide a new perspective to the dominant discourse of traditional clothing as ethnic dress. Studying the relationship ethnic minorities have with national cultural heritage would provide valuable insights in understanding whether and how they construct their cultural identity and how their identity is represented in national narratives.

Lastly, an analysis could be conducted to find out how traditional clothing and customs are incorporated into festivals around the world, and how they contribute to the overall experience and to the sense of community and belonging. This study would explore the role of cultural heritage in shaping festival culture and collective identity, as well as the role of festivals in the preservation of cultural heritage. It could provide valuable insights about the significance of traditional practices within globalized festival environments.

Considering global influences on traditional clothing and its role in the construction of individual, national and global identities, I would like to leave readers with a question about the relevance of traditional culture in cultural relations. Is there a place for it beyond promoting nationalism and its role in constructing national identity, and what does it look like? How can cultural heritage and innovation in tradition be simultaneously celebrated and promoted? What if the focus shifted from highlighting differences and unique features to seeking intercultural dialogues celebrating both differences as well as similarities in the cultural responses of society to global changes and challenges?

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## **Annex**

### **Interview questioning route**

This is the questioning route of the interview which was adapted in the course of the interview. Some of the questions were not asked in this order, and some were omitted based on the answers of the respondents.

#### In English

1. What comes to mind when I say traditional (Bulgarian) clothing?
  2. How did you become interested in traditional clothing? What is your experience with it?
  - (3). Do you own traditional clothing? (If yes, how did you acquire it? If not, would you like to own it?)
  4. What do you like about traditional clothing? Why is it important for you?
  - (5). Is there a difference for you between traditional clothing and the rest of fashion? Do you consider traditional clothing to be fashionable?
- How is traditional clothing different from contemporary fashion?
6. What about modern interpretations, do you consider them as traditional clothing (such as upcycled kimono)?
  7. Would you like to see traditional clothing preserved in its traditional image, or would you like to see people adapt it to fit the fashion scene? (You could think about the design, materials, accessories, way of dressing/combinations with other non-traditional elements of the outfit)?
  - (8). How do you feel when wearing traditional clothing?
  9. Does traditional clothing make you think of the past? (Which period, how)?
  10. Are there any restrictions to wearing traditional clothing in terms of occasion, location, gender, or certain groups of people in your opinion?

#### In Bulgarian

1. Какво ти идва наум, когато кажа традиционно българско облекло? За какво си мислиш, на какво ти напомня?
2. Как започна интересът ти към традиционното облекло? Какви а преживяванията ти с него?
3. Притежаваш ли носия? Ако да, как си я придобил/а? Ако не, бих ли искал/а да го притежаваш?
4. Какво ти харесва в традиционното облекло? Защо е важно за теб?
5. Има ли разлика за теб между традиционното облекло и останалата мода? Смяташ ли традиционното облекло за модерно?

6. Какво мислиш за съвременните интерпретации, смяташ ли ги за традиционно облекло? Като например модерно облекло (примерно тениска, рокля, суичър) с традиционен дизайн
7. Би ли искал/а да видиш носията запазена в традиционния си облик, или предпочиташ да има адаптации, за да се пригоди към модната среда (Свързано с дизайна, материалите, аксесоарите, начина на обличане/комбинациите с други нетрадиционни елементи на тоалета)?
8. Как се чувстваш, когато носиш традиционно облекло?
9. Кара ли те носията да мислиш за миналото по някакъв начин? Обвързваш ли я с миналото (кои периоди, как)?
10. Според теб има ли ограничения за това от кого и как може да се носи традиционното българско облекло? (По отношение на повод, местоположение, пол или определени групи хора, примерно етнически произход)?