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**I shop, therefore who am I?
Purchasing, consuming, transmitting and receiving traditions- Tokyo
2020**

Keywords: *change of consumption patterns, consumerism, consumer culture, national identity, SDGs*

ABSTRACT

In this study I will consider consumption of goods as an everyday cultural practice in order to analyze its symbolic dimension, along with its contribution to the formation of an individual's social and national identity.

The participant observation performed during my work experience (2018-2020) in a *wagashi-ya* (Japanese confectionery store) will be subjected to analysis. During the two years I have spent working in a *wagashi-ya*, I had the chance to observe and analyze consumers' expectations and attitudes towards *wagashi* (Japanese sweets), which are targeted as luxury goods and are associated with high symbolic and cultural value. Moreover, during my work, I was trained in the specific and correct knowledge about Japanese traditions that I had to communicate to the customers. Such participant observation made me question the potential impact that the consumption of cultural goods can have in the transmission of values, in the context of contemporary Japan.

The commodification of culture and traditions as a consequence of the phenomenon of national branding (brand-building process which involves symbols and images of a nation) has an inevitable impact on consumers' perception (Dinnie, 2008). On the other hand, the continuous desire for goods reflects both the individuals' need to position themselves in society and the commodification of individuals' identity (Bauman, 2007).

Consumption of goods can therefore be considered as a symbolic exchange of values, and I plan to verify, through this case study, to what extent values are transmitted and perceived throughout the act of consumption.

I will hereby follow a holistic approach to consumerism, interdisciplinarily adopting concepts from economic anthropology (Douglas 1979, Miller 1998, Campbell 2003), emotional marketing (Boero, 2009), and social semiotics (Bauman, Baudrillard, Featherstone), with the aim of clarifying its role in individuals' identity formation, and suggesting a tentative theoretical framework to explore the potentials of marketing, production and consumption, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1. Introduction: National Branding, Banal Nationalism, Everyday Nationalism and the necessity of a bottom-up perspective

Among the most recent studies on nationalism and its diversification in less political and more economical or social forms, the study of the practices of national branding (brand-building process that involves symbols and values of a specific nation) and its importance in consumerism has received significant attention by marketing studies and in the human sciences. (Aronczyk, 2013)

As Castelló and Mihelj pointed out, the majority of recent studies of economic nationalism (set of practices to create, bolster and protect national economies in the context of world markets) (Prike, 2012) both marketing and social sciences studies, are concerned with states or commercial actors in a “top-down” rather than “bottom-up” perspective on the dynamics linked to individual consumers and everyday life. (Castelló, Mihelj, 2017)

In fact, although there are many different theories on banal and everyday forms of nationalism (Billig, 1995), only a few studies (mostly from marketing studies) are based on empirical research and fieldwork. (Castelló, Mihelj, 2017)

In this paper, I will introduce the fieldwork performed in a *wagashi-ya* (Japanese sweet confectionery store) in 2018-2020 with the objective of examining how consumption of traditional goods can contribute to the creation of a sense of community and nationhood and how are they perceived by the customers through the branding process. After having

analyzed the way these goods are perceived and consumed by the customers, the issue of sustainability for this type of business in the post-2020 era will be introduced.

2. The practice of transmitting and receiving, methodological specifications

The subject of this analysis is a *wagashi-ya* (traditional confectionery store) located in Tokyo and the fieldwork took place in its flagship store from 2018 to 2020. I have chosen to analyze this subject for the following reasons: - the high symbolic and cultural value associated with traditional sweets (used during *Shinto* celebrations, tea ceremony, and other special ceremonies and events); - the fact that they are marketed as luxury goods; - the long tradition of this business (500 years), enabling a connection with the history of Japan.

The objective of this research is to examine how specific values (national values and traditions) are transmitted at the moment of purchase and consumption of *wagashi*. The act of consumption, following Grayson's framework, is hereby intended as symbolic exchange (Grayson, 1998). The two main agents of this symbolic exchange have been identified as: the seller (enterprise, employee) and the buyer (customer), with the first considered as *transmitter* of a specific message and the second as *recipient* of the message.

Please note that although the two terms, the transmitter and the recipient, imply a directionality, this is only to be considered on a temporal scale, meaning that messages and values are transmitted from the enterprise to the employees at an initial stage and from the employees (seller/ transmitter) to the customers (recipient) in a later phase (See 5. Limitations, future research directions).

With the objective of clarifying how specific values and symbols are transmitted by the seller and received by the customers, a mixed method of data collection and analysis took place as follows:

-Transmitter (the enterprise): qualitative method -Interpretative-self analysis report (Addis, 2005)/ consumer-oriented ethnography (Arnould, 1999); participant observation performed throughout my employment period 2018-2020, during which a special focus

has been given to: branding practices, the seller/customer relations, and the act of purchasing *wagashi*. Other relevant data have been collected through participation in educational trainings and celebrations, study sessions of history and traditions, interviews with the management, executives and public relations department.

-Recipient (customer): mixed qualitative/ quantitative method (Pratono, Arli, 2019). The first step consists of an analysis of the comments that a range of 78 people left online after their shopping experience (period: 2019 to 2021). After having analyzed all the comments, the presence of categories (tradition, Japaneseness, history, service, environment) have been evaluated and quantified, to understand to which extent they have an impact on the overall shopping experience of the customers and how they are associated with the *wagashi* brand.

The second step is again based on the participant observation performed during my employment, this time with particular focus on the customers' behavior, needs and opinions collected during the interactions of the author with the customers.

The relationship existing between transmitter and recipient, and consequently the exchange of values during the act of purchase and consumption has consequently been analyzed and interpreted following interpretative semiotics in order to understand how the meaning is constructed during the act of interpretation (Boero, 2008).

Finally, with the aim of contextualizing the practice of purchasing and consuming *wagashi* within the broader context of urban Tokyo (2020), and to discuss the current issue with sustainability for this specific business, statistics data and news from governmental/business websites and newspapers have been taken into consideration.

3. Brand image, transmission and reception

The two agents involved in the practice of purchase and consumption of *wagashi* that are hereby put into examination are: - the transmitter (enterprise, employee) and - the recipient (customer).

3.1. Business overview

For privacy and image rights reasons, it is not possible to share the name of the *wagashi* business here, and it will therefore be referred to as “Y.Ltd”. Certain specific information about product names and location of the stores has been omitted too.

Y. Ltd is a large enterprise and the number of employees, as of June 2021, is 904. It is uncertain what year it was founded, although historical evidence proves that it was already in existence during the XVI century. The business comprises *wagashi* production and sales in 84 shops located in different prefectures of Japan and abroad (one store) as well. There are 12 departments divided into three main sectors: production (4 production sites distributed in different areas of Japan), headquarters (including marketing, finance, human resources, etc.) and the shops.

Due to the exclusive quality of the products by Y. Ltd and its long tradition and popularity with Japanese people, their goods are marketed as luxury goods.

3.2. More than sales alone: *wagashi* knowledge and etiquette

In order to explore the specific role of the enterprise's branding strategies and the transmission process of certain values (tradition, history, "Japanese-Ness"), some relevant details that emerged during my fieldwork, which I conducted as an employee in the flagship store of Y. Ltd. (2018-2020), will be hereby taken into consideration.

3.2.1 Knowledge

During the first two years as a *wagashi-ya* employee, it is mandatory to attend training courses four or five times a year. During these training sessions, senior employees train junior employees on several topics. Among them, the history of seasonal, traditional, and religious celebrations, along with specific information about ingredients and products, wrapping techniques, business and honorific Japanese, polite manners are the most relevant topics every employee is expected to have a correct and solid knowledge about. The demand for and usage of *wagashi* is particularly high with respect to some events of the year (e.g. *Obon* festival of the ancestors, new year celebration, the five *Sekku*, calendar celebrations, etc.) and they are also widely used as gifts on important occasions such as marriages, funerals, etc. (Yabu, 2018). These exchanges of gifts have to follow specific protocols and rules, depending on the relationship with the recipient, the timing when the gift is exchanged, the intention behind the gift exchange, etc. The rules regard decorations

(*noshigami*) and inscriptions (*omotegaki*) to be put on the gifts, as well as the colors of the wrapping, the way the gift is wrapped, etc.

After the training sessions, at the end of the first year all new employees have to take written and practical tests (evaluated by their supervisors) in order to prove that they have acquired the correct knowledge, and that their customer service and wrapping skills have improved and have improved to a level that allows the employee to operate independently.

The final test takes place in the presence of the sales management team and human resources department representatives. The first session consists of a wrapping competition between all employees. The second test is a written test about product knowledge, history, traditional celebrations, and quizzes about gift-giving procedures. Lastly, the correct usage of honorific Japanese and customer service manners (the way to bow to the customer, the way to indicate something, the tone of voice, etc.) are also evaluated.

The overall scores of this test feed into the final marks given to each employee every year, which affect how the salary of the following year, together with their career advancement in the next years are calculated.

3.2.2 Customer service and etiquette

All the notions acquired through the training are to be applied during the customer service. Employees are often asked by customers about traditional events, the correct practices to be followed and products, and for this reason, the enterprise issues updated documents before every event, which must be memorized on time by every employee and correctly shared with the customers.

Customers have a high degree of trust in the Y. Ltd brand (deriving from the quality of products and customer service, long history and tradition, etc. (see 3.3.1) They also have high expectations of the service (see 3.3.1), and every employee has to improve their skills, knowledge and professionalism with the main objectives of meeting and exceeding the expectations of the customers and making every customer feel safe and secure when shopping at Y.Ltd (training seminars, 2018~2020).

As can be deduced from the two aspects examined below, the enterprise makes a continuous and active effort, through its educational training and rules, to transmit correct knowledge (of traditional culture, tradition, history, techniques) that themselves have

become one of the distinctive features of its brand and of the service provided to its customers.

It can be noted that that all the notions and behaviors to be acquired by the employees see the customers as their ultimate target or as the ultimate recipient of them.

The main reasons why all employees are subject to training and must acquire specific knowledge can be summarized as follows: 1) To meet the customers' high expectations of the brand (luxury, tradition); 2) To transmit correct and authentic information to the customers during their interaction (the purchase/consumption).

3.3 Customers (expectations, experience, brand perception)

This section moves the focus to the reception of specific information and values by the customers, using an analysis of comments shared by customers and the introduction of some relevant elements reported during the writer's interaction with them (2018-2020).

3.3.1 Experiencing the flagship store

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how Y. Ltd's brand image is perceived among customers, 78 comments shared online have been examined. All the reviews were shared between 2018 and 2021 by approximately 74 Japanese nationals (age, gender unidentified) and 4 foreigners visiting Japan.

All the comments have been analyzed and the presence of the elements Atmosphere, Service, Products, Japaneseness, History, and Traditions in their comments has been kept track of and quantified.

As an example, the comment listed below was shared in August 2021. The content references history, service, products, and Japaneseness, which are perceived as elements of satisfaction after the shopping experience at Y. Ltd.



(Originale)

日本人でよかった、としみじみ思う、そんな場所ですね。心のこもった接客は名実共に一流店であることの証。歴史に胡座をかくことない真摯さに頭が下がります。本店限定商品も多数あり、いつも目移りしてしまうのですが、やはりこの季節は...!

ENG: “This place made me realize how lucky I am to be Japanese! The staff is so warm-hearted and this proves the exclusivity and top-class service you can only find here. Plus, I sincerely respect the profound history of this place. In the flagship shop you can buy several limited products but, in this season, my choice was....”

The shopping experience at Y. Ltd (2019~2021)



Graph 1. The shopping experience at Y. Ltd

The presence of the categories described above was evaluated in a body of 78 comments shared from 2018 to 2021, with the following results:

-Products 64.10% (added by 50/78 respondents as relevant in their overall experience): Products represent the most frequent category in the reviews. According to the comments examined, their exquisite taste, ingredients and artisanal manufacturing are highly appreciated. The variety of sweets include some standard products available year-round, some seasonal products, and some limited-edition confections available only in this store, that are highly appreciated by the customers.

-Atmosphere 58.97% (in 46/78 answers): The reviews have shown that the atmosphere of the Y.Ltd flagship store represents a relevant element in the overall purchase experience. It is important to note that the shop was opened in 2018 and the design is by a renowned designer who combined specific materials and techniques to represent the brand concept and put emphasis on the brand's history and tradition. Two exhibition spaces were added to the building for periodic events and cultural exhibitions.

-Tradition & History 39.74% (31/78 answers): Despite not being as high as the two categories **above** the high number of comments that include these elements reflects the importance of history and traditions and their strong association with Y. Ltd.'s brand image.

According to the comments examined, customers see traditions and history reflected in the manufacturing of products and in the company's historical background.

Moreover, the coexistence of tradition and innovation are highly appreciated by the customers and considered a distinctive feature of the company. In several comments, customers expressed satisfaction because they were able to learn something new about the history of Y. Ltd and Japan after visiting the exhibition.

-Service: 32.05% (25/78): The professionalism, kindness and attitude of the staff is also an element that has relevant impact on the overall shopping experience at Y. Ltd.'s flagship store, as demonstrated by the relatively high number of mentions (32.05%) in the customers' reviews.

-Japaneseness: 29.48% (23/78) A fairly high number of respondents also mentioned the relationship between Y. Ltd.'s sweets and Japan's traditional heritage. *Wagashi* is also often depicted as an emblematic product that condenses Japanese aesthetics, history, and traditional pastry and helps non-Japanese subjects too understand *wa* (harmony, typically Japanese sense of peace).

3.3.2 Customer and seller: inquiries and consultancy

As explained in (3.2.1. Knowledge), demand for *wagashi* is particularly high with respect to specific annual events and ceremonies (marriages, funerals, etc.).

Gift exchanges during these ceremonies must follow complex protocols, depending on the timing of gift exchange, as well as on the relationship to the gift recipient or the type of religious occasion, etc. This is the reason why, as already mentioned, all employees must have solid knowledge of these rituals and protocols.

In my interactions with customers during my employment at Y. Ltd., there were some recurring topics I was frequently asked about and that required certain specific knowledge to answer. Below are some examples:

-Inscriptions and decorations for special events: there is a range of inscriptions that can be added to a gift for events (e.g. funerals), and various factors have to be evaluated in order to choose the most appropriate one.

Customers often appeared to be confused about what the most appropriate inscription would be on their presents and for this reason they required the assistance of Y. Ltd. staff, especially when it came to gifts for important events, such as funerals or marriages. Upon sharing accurate professional knowledge with customers, staff will offer a range of different options, all similar and priced slightly differently, so that the customer can take these into consideration before proceeding with the purchase.

-Products and inscriptions when gifts are exchanged in apology: besides important events that require appropriate choices (funerals, marriages, etc.), another type of question I was frequently asked (across generations) was about what products to give and how to present them when given as a form of apology. In the specific case of a gift being given to apologize, there are no particular religious or cultural guidelines to be followed, and this used to be the most confusing element for customers. Only a few rules apply in this case, and the choice ultimately depends on the mood the “apologizing” subject wants to emphasize.

However, even though there are no specific protocols to be followed in the case of an apology and customers had a high level of freedom when making their choices, customers seemed less confused after having consulted with the staff, as they received a reliable opinion on how to appropriately give gifts as an apology.

-After the interaction with the seller: the degree of satisfaction (and the decision whether to purchase a certain product or not) depended on the seller's performance, on his/her ability to answer all the questions received and guide the customer through the process of deciding how to present their gifts. Sometimes guests were not satisfied or convinced by the service they received and asked to be served by someone else (the fact that I am not Japanese may have influenced their choices). On the other hand, when satisfied, some guests were extremely grateful and visibly happy as they felt reassured that they had chosen the most appropriate gifts for the most important occasions of their lives.

After having analyzed both customer reviews and some common patterns in the interactions with the sellers, we can summarize as follows:

- 1) According to the comments customers left after visiting Y. Ltd's flagship store, environment, products, service, tradition and history are the elements that impressed them most;
- 2) The atmosphere of the flagship store received a significant number of reviews, and it can be considered as a key element in the shopping experience;
- 2) The six categories identified and listed above shape the shopping experience and are associated with the brand image;
- 3) Customers have high expectations of the Y. Ltd brand, and they have a high level of trust not only in the company's products but also in the customer service;
- 4) Trust and expectations, deriving from the authentic knowledge of its employees along with the long history and tradition of the business, make Y. Ltd. an authority concerning specific rules and protocols to be followed when exchanging gifts;
- 5) When purchasing gifts for special occasions, customers seek advice and knowledge sharing from the sellers, with the objective of behaving appropriately and performing their gift-exchanges correctly according to the traditions.

4. Legitimation and transmission of traditions- Tokyo 2020 (results-discussion)

A few conclusions can be drawn from the results of the author's analysis in relation to the research question of this study: how can consumption of traditional goods contribute to

the creation of a sense of community and nationhood and how are they perceived by the customers through the branding process?

4.1. Consuming traditional culture

The recent phenomenon of national branding is a process that could eventually involve key stakeholders interested in shaping the nation brand (government representatives, commerce, not-for-profit organizations, tourism, and the media). (Leslie de Cheratony, 2008).

Despite the fact that the phenomenon of nation branding started under the influence of global capitalism and with the initial objective of promoting and improving a country's image internationally, the consequent processes of commercialization, commodification and spectacularization of culture also has potential impacts on the consumption of cultural goods (Aronczyk, 2014, Iwabuchi, 2007). In this context, economic nationalism has different manifestations and has social and cultural implications (Castellho, Mihelj 2017). As Aronczyk (2014) pointed out in the analysis of National Branding and Castellho, Mihelj (2017) in the context of Consumer Nationalism, commercial entities use nationalism to sell goods and services and in doing so they do have an impact on the consumers' national identity formation, and a sense of empowerment and community are created through the everyday act of shopping. As Edensor (2002) pointed out, nationhood is constructed through mundane performances that are not necessarily recognized as having a national component, and often take the shape of “unconscious” forms of nationalism (Castellho, Mihelj 2017).

Furthermore, as Boero observed (2010), contemporary consumers are not only looking for products but for experiences, sensations and emotions. In this context, consumption can be interpreted as a language and practices of consumption can resemantize a specific object or place, leading to variations in its original meaning. Again, in a post-modern society, consumption goods are to be considered as de-materialized and their symbolic aspect leads to their usage as signs/ symbols that individuals use to express their identities (Featherstone, 2007; Baudrillard, 1970; Bauman, 2007;).

During the branding process, the targeted consumers are involved by playing on their experiences, their imagination and their sensoriality (Boero, 2010), and this lies at the

origin of the creation of emotional communities of individuals who share emotions by sharing atmospheres. In doing so they contribute to the creation of unedited social forms in a phenomenon similar to tribalism, which is to be considered as a cultural rather than a social phenomenon (Maffesoli, Fabris, 2003).

In this context, the main finding of this study lies in the observation of how customers and employees of Y.Ltd. contribute, during their interaction and flagship store experience, to the creation (preservation and transmission) of additional meanings and cultural symbols that are associated in first place with the Y. Ltd. brand and, indirectly, with specific traditions of Japan.

Even though further data collection is still necessary to explore whether and how the creation of a “tribal community” takes place in this specific case, this study has taken into consideration how, (before and) during the everyday practice of consumption and purchase of *wagashi* and the overall experience deriving from it, consumers are exposed to symbols and signs representing the nation. This element, associated with the company's brand, constitutes a significant part of their shopping experience.

Secondly, the analysis of the active effort made by the enterprise to preserve, transmit and legitimize some values and practices through education and campaigns, made it possible to reconfirm the role of this enterprise in the transmission of national symbols and values, and it showed how and to what extent these factors have been incorporated in the company's brand image.

Furthermore, it is also of fundamental importance to further analyze the high level of importance given to the environment in the shopping experience at Y. Ltd (see 3.3.1). As to be furtherly discussed in the following paragraph (4.2. Consuming the city), the importance given to this specific element indicates how the environment can be a key element during the shopping experience and also for branding processes.

Finally, by highlighting a connection to the company's branding strategies and some traditional practices connected to the nation, an innovative, tentative theoretical and empirical framework is suggested that could be a starting point both for social sciences and marketing studies in the research of Brand Nationalism.

4.2. Consuming the city

In order to gain a more complete understanding of the specific context within which the consumption of *wagashi* takes place, it is important to relate it to the urban context of Tokyo, where the flagship store of Y.Ltd is located, and to consider the major structural changes that have taken place in the last decades as well.

In an analysis of the socio-historical processes involving the new middle class in Interwar Japan, Louise Young observes that starting in 1920, the development of department stores in Tokyo led to significant changes in leisure practices and urban entertainment, and these brand-new shopping centers were the new leisure practices, that constituted the modern consumer culture. (Young, 1999)

Furthermore, Martyn David Smith describes how the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo became the trigger not only for large-scale urban improvement in the city, but also for the recognition of Japan's existence in the world. At the time, symbolic politics of image management to reconstruct national identities as "global" came together with the emphasis on a global modernity epitomized by Tokyo. In this context, consumption sought to effectively represent the new individual experience of urban life and became key to the national economic and social development in the postwar phase. (Smith, 2020)

The event of the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, similarly, had impacts on the urban structure of Tokyo as well as on its consumer market.

In the last two decades, Tokyo is increasingly seen as a flagship destination and the Olympics encouraged retailers to invest in Tokyo, being it recognized as a global key city where retail sales totaled \$1.35 trillion in 2019. (Lung, 2020)

This element, along with the significant increase in the number of flagship stores, designed by renowned designers and built in the last 5-7 years, is a fundamental factor in understanding the dynamics observed in Y. Ltd's flagship store. ¹

Through their differentiated customer service, design and configuration of spaces and products, each of these stores entertains its customers and makes their shopping experience a form of leisure and a way through which it is possible to experience each brands' values, images, symbols and concepts (Sabbadin, Aiolfi, 2019).

¹ This information has been collected from the websites of different brands' flagship stores in Tokyo

Y. Ltd.'s flagship store is also strictly related to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, as it was opened in 2018 with the specific purpose not only to represent the enterprise's concept and values, but also to expand the target audience of the customers and gain popularity among new generations and foreign customers. Before the Covid-19 pandemic started, the Tokyo Olympics represented a crucial opportunity for this business to be presented to an international public and gain global recognition.

4.3. The aftermath of Tokyo 2020 and the issue with sustainability

The events of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020 and the consequent postponement of Tokyo Olympics led to a drastic change of direction in Y. Ltd.'s business planning and of the reception of its products as well.

Despite all the investment made in expectation of the increased number of tourists that were supposed to visit Tokyo for the Olympics, the current situation shows not only a collapse of foreign visitors, but at the same time a significant decrease of domestic customers and, consequently, of sales revenue. According to the *wagashi* national association annual report, the total sales revenue of Japanese sweets has decreased by 14.9% during the last year (*Wagashi* National Association, 2021) and ceremonies such as funerals, graduations, marriages etc. decreased (the number of public funeral ceremonies had decreased by 68% (*Shokuhin Shinbun*- Food newspaper, 2021). Furthermore, consumers' lifestyles in the urban context of Tokyo have been subject to significant changes due to the shift to remote work, which caused a drastic decrease of mobility as well as occasions of gift exchanges. (*Fnn puraimu-onrain*-FNN prime online, 2021)

Businesses like Y. Ltd that, as we have observed in this study, are closely related to a consumer culture, are being forced to reinvent their branding and readapt to a constantly changing market due to a significant decrease and change of demand.

When forecasting the next steps to ensure stability of this business in the post-Covid19 (post-Olympics) era, strategical and technological developments must be taken into account.

As highlighted by this study and by the data concerning the sales peaks for *wagashi* business (Yabu, 2018), due to its strong association with the traditions and annual events

that have become part of its branding strategy, *wagashi* reception and consumption has to be considered in the context of its relationship with traditional culture.

As a consequence, when considering possible ways for innovation of *wagashi* merchandise and consumption practices in line with Sustainable Development Goals, they cannot be separated from the traditional elements at the core of this business (interview with Y. Ltd. management performed in May 2019).

Due to the drastic change of direction as a result of the pandemic and the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics, the necessity of readaptation and change emerged, and the problem with sustainability for this type of business, along with sustainability embedded in food, brought up several issues that need a new theoretical framework to be analyzed.

In light of the approach adopted in this study, I would like to introduce three key questions that are potential starting points for a new debate on sustainability and consumption in contemporary Japan:

- What does sustainability mean for businesses closely connected to traditional culture such as *wagashi-ya* and why is it important to preserve, as Y. Ltd. is doing, such traditions?
- Will the most recent changes in management and marketing strategy, occurred due to market readaptations, also affect the consumer culture related to a specific brand?
- Will the “communities” created around this consumption practices be affected in their identity formation as a consequence?

By introducing the sustainability issue in contemporary Japan from a critical perspective, the questions above highlight the “culture-making” and “community-making” function of consumption activities, and therefore production-consumption as everyday cultural-symbolic practices.

If these aspects could be taken into consideration in future business strategies, with particular attention to sustainability (in reference to targets 8.3 and 12.b of the Sustainable

Development Goals)², they could potentially lead to new developments in consumption and marketing practices, especially but not exclusively, in the *wagashi* business.

“Markets are people” (Martins, Yusuf, Swanson, 2012)

5. Limitations and future research direction

This study focused on a limited period of time (before and during) of the whole consumption process of *wagashi*. Although the objective of the research is to analyze the practices of consumption in relation to national branding and their contribution to the creation of a sense of nationhood, it only focused on two of the many agents involved in this process.

As a consequence, since the interactions between customers have not been analyzed, the nationhood and community-making functions of shopping in a *wagashi-ya* are still only an assumption that needs to be empirically verified in subsequent research.

Secondly, by focusing exclusively on the interaction between seller and customer and implying a directionality in the exchange of symbols and values, this analysis tends to depict the customer as passive. To provide a more complete and methodologically coherent picture of the dynamics of transmission and reception of specific meanings, it is necessary to take account of the activity of the consumers in other contexts as well. As already mentioned, analyzing the interactions *between* customers in the shop or the interaction with the recipients when a *wagashi* gift is made could lead to further developments in the “community-making” function of *wagashi* consumption.

As a result of the analysis of data collected from customers, the impact of the environment during the practice of consumption has emerged. Considering the urban changes in the background of this process, the role of the environment and its contribution to the creation of additional symbolic meanings to the practice of consumption can be further investigated in future research.

² Target 8.3

Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services

Target 12.b

Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products

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