

## **The Influence of Whiteness on Social and Professional Integration: The Case of Highly Skilled Europeans in Japan**

Adrijana Miladinović<sup>1</sup>

*Spurred by the ongoing globalization, an increase in mobility has diversified migrant categories and strengthened intercultural rapport. Alongside the “traditional” migrants, “White” (Caucasian) individuals are coming into greater focus of migration studies as “lifestyle migrants”. Although White migrations are not a new phenomenon, the deep-seated idea of White supremacy continues to play an important role in contemporary intercultural communication, awarding Whites across communities a “cosmopolitan” status of highly educated cultural elites. As such, the focus of this research is on highly skilled White European migrants, on their subjective experiences of integration in Japan, and whether they perceive Whiteness as an obstacle or an advantage in this process, if integration is desired at all. To discern the connection between race and integration, this research investigates the non-White majority society of Japan as it has established racial hierarchies according to the Western models, consequently influencing the status of its contemporary White immigrants. Privileged, yet singled out as racial and cultural role models, White Europeans’ integration seemingly becomes nearly impossible. The data obtained in fifteen semi-structured interviews confirms that Whiteness grants advantages when entering the Japanese job market, but remains an obstacle in everyday community integration. European professionals do not feel accepted and abandon efforts to integrate, if such were made, retreating into “cosmopolitan islets” wherein they renegotiate their White European identities.*

*Keywords: Whiteness, integration, migration, highly skilled Europeans, Japan*

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<sup>1</sup>M.A. in Sociology. This research is based on the M.A. thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology at Keio University, Tokyo, Japan in January 2020. Contact: miladinovic.adrijana@keio.jp.

## 1. Introduction

Caught within ceaseless globalization processes, societies across the world are experiencing a social transformation resulting not only in an increase in cross-border flows of finance and trade (Castles, Haas, & Miller, 2014) but also *culture* (Lash & Urry, 1994). Significant advancement in transportation and communication technologies has propelled movement, leading to a diversification of migrant categories (Castles et al., 2014), and an increased focus on the “lifestyle” migrant, an individual with the *choice* to migrate, not only within their country, but also across borders. International migration especially is influencing a change in societies, creating “a new cultural diversity, which often brings into question national identity” (Castles et al., 2014, p. 7), resulting in inequality and discrimination between the majority and the minorities, and, ultimately, the impossibility for foreigners to integrate, if they desire to do so.

Lifestyle migrants are particularly sought after in professional contexts as individuals of high skill and education, as representatives of culture(s) aspired to by the receiving communities, and can thus be highly mobile. They are frequently characterized as “cosmopolitans”, having “an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent experiences from *different* national cultures” (original emphasis, Lash & Urry, 1994, p. 308). However, this right to “consume” cultures is given only to those from certain societies (Lash & Urry, 1994), namely to those from the West, or the Global North (i.e. the United States, Europe, Australia) – the White cosmopolitans (Debnár, 2016). Nonetheless, the question remains: should they choose to relocate, can they *feel integrated* in contexts where they do not dictate cultural narratives as the racial and ethnic majority?

Therefore, this research focuses on White cosmopolitans, and more specifically on highly skilled White European migrants, in an attempt to answer whether race, and especially Whiteness, are seen as an advantage or an obstacle, if either, during integration within non-White majority contexts. This investigation is done through an analysis of subjective integration experiences of White European professionals who have chosen Japan as their destination. An additional question consequently posed was whether these individuals wish to integrate at all, or they simply accept the status of permanent foreignness awarded to them by the host society.

Modern White migrations are not a new phenomenon *per se*, having existed since the colonial endeavors of European empires in the fifteenth century, when White Anglo-Saxons settled in colonized territories, enforcing a new “White” cultural order on the natives. The legacy of privilege is evident even today, not only in intercultural communication but also in the perception of White migrants as elites in previously colonized or occupied societies (see Debnár, 2016; Lundström, 2014). Japan, as well, incorporated the idea of White superiority and adapted Western teachings and racial hierarchies already during the first contacts with Caucasians in the sixteenth century, but most prominently during the Meiji period (1868-1912), and the later post-World War II American occupation (1945-1952) (Kawai, 2015).

This research hypothesizes that Whiteness, along with the attached privileges of cosmopolitanism, and the obvious phenotypical differences, will serve to maintain White Europeans' status as perpetual foreigners in the social context of Japan. Additionally, it is assumed that, isolated in such a manner, most European professionals will abandon all effort to become full members of the Japanese society, accepting, and even embracing, the imposed perpetual foreignness, and creating "cosmopolitan islets" distinct from the more numerous circles of minorities such as the resident Chinese or Koreans. There they would be able to reconstruct their European identities and reestablish familiar racial hierarchies. Although Whiteness is considered a major influence in one's mode of integration in Japan, this research limits itself to claiming a correlation, and not a causal relationship between the two.

In order to confirm aforementioned assumptions, data was gathered through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with fifteen Europeans living for a year or longer in Japan. As the focus was on their subjective feelings of being accepted and integrated, the method used for the analysis was qualitative, focusing on the role migrants play in the *social*, *economic*, and *cultural* areas, as proposed by the Council of Europe (1997) and further adapted for this research. The interview questions were prepared based on theories postulated by Frank van Tubergen (2006) in his research on immigrant integration and "contexts of reception" (i.e. the role of the receiving context in integration and the immigrants' behavior in relation to the host community and the offered opportunities).

Research regarding contemporary White migrations and integration, especially in non-White majority host societies, is few in number with some notable exceptions (Arudō, 2015; Debnár 2016; Komisarof, 2012; Lundström 2014). Therefore, the aim is to open a discussion in previously underresearched area of academic study in order to discover the underlying mechanisms of White supremacy, dismantle them, and contribute to a creation of multicultural societies based on fairness and equality.

## **2. Race and Whiteness in Japan**

When establishing communication in social contexts, one is ascribed status based on multiple factors (e.g. one's socioeconomic status and cultural origins) including certain physical traits, such as skin color and physical characteristics (Castles et al., 2014; Cogeanu, 2015), and placed into a certain racial category (see Goldberg, 2009). "Race", and particularly the "Caucasian race" are both relatively modern concepts, promoted in the eighteenth century in an attempt to group individuals according to their physical traits (Cogeanu, 2015; see also Kevak, 2011). López (2000, p. 165) redefines race as "a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry". Goldberg (2009) and Schinkel (2017) weigh in by expanding the focus onto newly established cultural hierarchies.

Race is not only important in how one will be perceived in the host society, but also in their own expectations regarding what kind of treatment they will be given. In the case of Japan, the

established theories of race were transmitted from the West, localized and adapted within the Japanese society, and have thereafter influenced relationships between different groups within the country (Kawai, 2015). Two concepts of importance were developed: *jinshu* and *minzoku*. The former, a Japanese translation of the word “race”, denotes the imported Western view of Japan racially defined as a part of Asia, according to which the White immigrant will have a higher status compared to other immigrants, as well as his or her Japanese peers. This view was influenced by a Europhilia that caught on during the Meiji period (1868-1912) (Lie, 2001) when the Japanese received “foreign specialists for hire” from Europe, the *oyatoi gaikokujin*, learning from them about race, civilizations, and technology (Russell, 2009).

However, Japan’s technological development led to the promotion of the latter concept wherein Japan was racially differentiated from other Asian peoples, as well as from Western civilizations, creating the idea of a unique Japanese “race” (Kawai, 2015; see more in Oguma, 1998/2014). This undoubtedly influenced White European immigrants’ standing relegating them to the category of cultural and racial “Other”, along with the resident Chinese, Koreans, etc. In contemporary Japan, Whiteness is still conflated with being cosmopolitan (Lan, 2011) – a cultural upper class with high education and skills in demand (see Hage, 2000), affording White immigrants an advantage over their Asian counterparts, especially in the job market. Culturally, as well, they are not under constant pressure to “blend in” (Kawai, 2015), but, as a result, along with the strengthening idea of “Japaneseness”, this has led to them becoming the “ultimate unassimilable Other” (Myslinska, 2014), making their integration efforts essentially futile.

Additionally, what makes integration increasingly difficult, if not nearly impossible, is that the idea of an imagined community (see Anderson, 2006) of homogeneity is still being enforced in Japan through the *nihonjinron* (translated from Japanese as “the theories about the Japanese”) narratives (Dale, 1988/2012), effectively rendering immigration non-existent in the eyes of the public (Douglass & Roberts, 2000). An immigrant’s acceptance into the community will, then, most likely depend on whether they are culturally and physically similar to what is perceived by the Japanese as “Japanese”, if they can “pass” as Japanese. In the case of White Europeans, they suffer an ethnic/racial disadvantage as they are immediately recognized as “different”. Previous research (Fujikawa, 2008; Lie, 2001; Russell, 2017; Simmons & Chen, 2017) has also found that White individuals in Japan often feel isolated, in a manner of speaking like celebrities, due to being recognized and idolized for their physical appearance, and even allowed by the Japanese to avoid responsibility for any cultural faux pas by using the *gaijin* (“foreigner”) card (Arudō, 2015). The question remains: how has this treatment shaped the integration experiences of White European professionals?

### 3. Migration and Integration in Japan

#### 3.1 Immigration strategies and integration challenges

As the primary focus of this research is on highly skilled professionals, it is necessary to define them first. The Immigration Bureau of Japan (2018) describes three categories of highly skilled professionals' occupations: (1) advanced academic research activities; (2) advanced specialized/technical activities; and (3) advanced business management activities. Since the visa category of "Highly skilled foreign professional" is still not carried by many, it has to be noted that, within this research, visas such as "Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services" were also considered as the included professions were the earlier system's example of those deemed highly skilled; they require specialized professional knowledge for the individual to be eligible to apply.

Although the history of migration to Japan is not the topic of this research (detailed accounts in Lipman, 2003; Papademetriou & Hamilton, 2000), our interest lies in the patterns of migration of White individuals. These patterns are often overlooked and understudied (Debnár, 2016) as "a migrant is rarely thought of as white, and white people tend not to be seen as 'migrants'" (Lundström, 2014). Nonetheless, there are approximately 84,000 Europeans who live and work in Japan as of December 2019 (Japanese Ministry of Justice, 2019), although, admittedly, not all will be White. The largest groups come from the UK (18,631) and France (14,106), and around 18,000 hold visas corresponding to highly skilled professions, including those with the "Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services" visa.

Entering a host country's labor market can be a challenge for any group of immigrants, but White Europeans may have certain advantages, especially if we take into account the theory of segmented assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) and how it interplays with the privileges Whiteness brings. The theory states that, based on their (perceived) socioeconomic status, different segments of the host society's job market will be open to immigrants. Assuming that Whites are recognized as cosmopolitan, it is possible, but not guaranteed, that they will be granted access to the primary job market (Portes & Manning, 2018), directly competing for jobs with their Japanese peers. Being White potentially makes the immigrant more appealing to Japanese companies as a symbol of diversity that can be showcased, but it must be considered that they might not be accorded such advantage in international settings. The data will reveal if the White European professionals consider they indeed had less troubles than other immigrant groups in obtaining desired jobs owing to their Whiteness.

Along with Whiteness influencing the outcome of integration, White European professionals must face other challenges if they wish to become a part of the Japanese community. Japan is often described as a country with "closed door" immigration policies (Oishi, 2012). However, due to an aging population and an ever-smaller cohort of young workers, there has been a push to invite more highly skilled professionals from abroad (Tsuda, 2008). Some notable

changes were made, one of them being the Highly Skilled Foreign Professional (HSFP) visa created in 2012, with a point-based eligibility system (Green, 2017). Despite this development, the Japanese government, continues to spur on nationalism and exclusionist views (see Nakano, 2016; Saaler, 2016) reminiscent of the past, branding immigration policies as “foreigner policies” (Watado, 2017, p.4).

Although the main governmental policy for control and integration of immigrants in the past was straightforward assimilation, the current approach is that of declarative integration and multiculturalism, with the aim to break through the illusion of homogeneity. The term “assimilation” signifies that “immigrants abandon their original customs and practices and mold their behavior to the values and norms of the majority” (Giddens & Sutton, 2017, p. 679), while “integration” denotes the idea that “ethnic cultures are given full validity to exist separately yet participate in the larger society’s economic and political life” (Giddens & Sutton, 2017, p. 679). The latter agrees with the Ministry of Internal Affairs statement from 2006, saying that Japan is now striving for a multicultural coexistence (in Japanese “*tabunka kyōsei*”) wherein “people of different nationalities or ethnicities recognize each other’s cultural difference and live together in local society while attempting to build [an] equal relationship” (Debnár, 2011). There is, however, a discrepancy between official state policies, and the reality, where volunteers, grassroots movements, and local governments shoulder the responsibility to create and maintain such a society (Tsuda, 2008), which puts immigrants on a difficult path if they wish to integrate.

Additionally, if we take into consideration the Japanese employment system, Japan should in theory be an attractive destination for highly skilled migrants due to them being accorded a preferential treatment, especially so if they are White and perceived as cosmopolitan. However, it is clear that, once inside the company, the advantage goes to those who are able to completely fit in, be it appearance or culture-wise. The company practices in Japan are found to be highly exclusive of foreigners, who are consistently treated in accordance with the “insider-outsider” dichotomy (Yoshimura & Anderson, 1997, p. 56-59). Those who are phenotypically obviously not Japanese, like White Europeans, have a harder time being accepted by their colleagues within their working environments (more in Komisarof, 2012; Morita, 2017; Yamashiro, 2013), no matter how highly skilled or valuable they might be. The main challenges are in their ability to completely adhere to the Japanese business culture, to use formal business Japanese language, and to accept the traditional rigid seniority system, along with long working hours, no work-life balance, no chance to advance their careers, and insufficient communication with co-workers (Oishi, 2012). As they are expected to follow their Japanese peers in all aspects, Kamibayashi (2017) states that they are ultimately hired *despite* being foreigners, and not because of the contribution they ought to make toward the globalization of Japanese companies.

#### 4. Methodology

The theoretical framework used for the preparation of interview topics was based on Frank van Tubergen's (2006) research on immigrant integration. He defines social integration as "the extent to which immigrants interact socially with natives", while cultural integration is described as "the degree to which cultural values and patterns are shared among immigrants and natives" (2006, p. 8). Van Tubergen (2006) asserts that immigrants are considered better integrated if intermarriage, friendships and contacts are more common, but also when the immigrants speak the language of the majority well. On the other hand, economic integration indicates the degree of economic inequality between immigrants and natives, and, thus, immigrants' integration is stronger when they have "higher participation rates, lower unemployment levels, better jobs, and higher income" (van Tubergen, 2006, p. 8).

To be able to set certain guidelines regarding the categories that are important for integration, we use the Council of Europe's "Measurement and indicators of integration" (1997), in an adapted form. The experiences of European residents in Japan were thus analyzed in a *social* (access to housing, forming meaningful friendship networks and performing the same community duties as Japanese peers), *economic* (access to the labor market and career advancement tracks, and decision-making processes at work), and *cultural* sense (education on the host community culture, language learning, participation in events, and following customs), by asking the participants to describe relevant everyday situations. The focus was placed on participants' subjective experience of acceptance in Japan even if all the legal conditions of integration were fulfilled.

Twenty-two questions were prepared beforehand regarding language abilities, social networks, access to housing, work environments, and everyday treatment for the semi-structured interviews, a method that was deemed suitable due to its open-ended format which allows interviewees to go beyond the scope of the questions. The obtained data was divided into two categories: professional (i.e. workplace) and social and cultural (i.e. community) integration, with the subsequent analysis performed using qualitative methods.

The interviews were conducted between September 2019 and January 2020, lasting ninety minutes on average. Participants were first contacted through social networking platforms such as Facebook groups created by and for expats living and working in Japan. All participants signed a consent form, guaranteeing their privacy and anonymity, and allowing the author to record the audio of each interview and reference to and quote interviewees' experiences and opinions gathered in such a way. In addition, all participants were assigned pseudonyms reflecting popular names in their respective cultures.

Fifteen candidates were interviewed (see Table 1 for key information on the participants), nine females and six males, from various European countries, aged between 24 and 36, save for one, aged 50. The minimal length of stay was one year; a year was deemed to be long enough for

the immigrant to experience and begin settling in the new culture, especially if Japanese company practices are considered, wherein periods of 3 months up to a year are generally proposed for business and cultural exchange programs for Japanese employees. Most interviewees were in the process of learning Japanese, with only five claiming to be fluent since they learned Japanese before their relocation.

Table 1. *Summary of the participants' data at the time of the interview*

Country	Name	Age	Sex (M/F)	Education	Japanese skill (self-evaluation)	Visa status	Length of stay (years)
Croatia	Marko	32	M	Master's	Beginner	E/SiH/IS*	4
Croatia	Ana	36	F	Master's	Beginner	E/SiH/IS	2.5
France	Charles	27	M	Bachelor	Beginner	E/SiH/IS	2.5
France	Gabrielle	27	F	Master's	Beginner	E/SiH/IS	1
Germany	Klara	26	F	Bachelor	Intermediate	E/SiH/IS	2
Poland	Julia	35	F	Bachelor	Beginner	E/SiH/IS	3.5
Poland	Zuzanna	34	F	Bachelor	Fluent	E/SiH/IS	4
Romania	Andrei	34	M	Bachelor	Beginner	Highly skilled	2
Russia	Olga	33	F	Bachelor	Intermediate	E/SiH/IS	6
Serbia	Jovan	27	M	Bachelor	Fluent	E/SiH/IS	2
Serbia	Katarina	27	F	Bachelor	Fluent	E/SiH/IS	1.5
Serbia	Milica	30	F	Bachelor	Fluent	E/SiH/IS	7
Spain	Maria	30	F	Master's	Fluent	E/SiH/IS	4.5
Sweden	Sven	24	M	Bachelor	Intermediate	E/SiH/IS	3
UK	Edward	50	M	Bachelor	Intermediate	E/SiH/IS	11

*Notes.* M= male, F= female, E/SiH/IS= Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services.



## 5. Interview Data Findings

### 5.1 Professional integration

During the first analysis of the data, it became clear that participants could be grouped according to the type of company they worked for: Japanese companies, international companies, and English language teachers in private/public schools. They were asked to describe the general atmosphere (language of communication, responsibilities they were given, relationships with co-workers) in the workplace and their answers revealed clear differences among the three groups.

Among those working in Japanese companies, Maria (Spain) experienced a very stressful job-hunting process. She did not plan to stay in Japan at first, but this changed once she began dating a Japanese national. She realized that she had to partake in the same “really long and tiring” process as all other Japanese students in order to find a job, which almost made her give up her life in Japan altogether. She felt that her lack of Japanese skills was putting her at a disadvantage during most of the process, even when she applied to those companies that specifically looked for foreigners – she was surprised that the explanations were not in English. “In most cases, they spoke in Chinese when I’m clearly not Chinese!”, she explained. Her enthusiasm was curbed by the end of this process, but this motivated her to learn a lot about Japan and Japanese companies. After grasping the atmosphere of a few companies, she decided that she did not want to “suffer” in a “rigid, *senpai-kōhai* atmosphere”. In the end, she was offered a position in a “more relaxed” company as “the first foreigner they ever hired”. At first, she was feeling very isolated – she describes the looks her co-workers gave her as “Oh, there’s a foreigner! And she is a girl! In a construction company!”. She felt like there was a lack of professional respect towards her, as if she was only seen as a “symbolic foreigner” who is there to fill the (physical and cultural) difference quota. However, she also points out that she felt like a celebrity. She was complimented on her appearance, most of the people from the office and from other departments knew her, and she was always invited to after-work drinking parties. Maria tried hard to keep up the “celebrity” pace at first, going to all the parties and helping her co-workers practice English, as she thought this would help her make friendships with her co-workers. However, after months of being torn between maintaining her “celebrity” status, and attempting to learn the intricacies of being a Japanese office worker at the same time, she realized that she could never become as culturally Japanese as they wanted her to be, nor could she maintain the “celebrity” image forever. She refocused on her career, learning Japanese, and establishing herself as an employee everyone can rely on, which ultimately allowed her to make progress.

Klara, from Germany, on the other hand, had an experience similar to most other interviewees. She applied from her own country, and, quickly after her interview, she was hired in a Japanese company that was later bought by an international one. Although she was at first invited to an interview in Japan, she refused as she did not want to travel just for one meeting, something Sven, Jovan, and Katarina also mentioned. The company nonetheless wanted to hire her so the circumstances were changed to suit her availability. She was also “the first White person in the

office” which was one of the reasons, as she points out, that her Japanese co-workers did not know how to include her in the work community. As she was considered highly skilled in English, they mostly asked for help with translations, but this, as she says, is not what she applied for. This later changed as more foreigners from India, China, and other countries were hired and put in her team. Both Klara and Maria concluded that their career success came not only from working on their Japanese language skills and learning important business customs, but also from breaking the “foreign celebrity” image they projected, as it was only isolating them from the group as foreigners who do not know enough of the Japanese culture to be given any real responsibility. However, they both mention that they nonetheless feel more freedom in talking to their superiors directly, and not through managers, or stating their opinions even when they do not agree with the majority.

Both representative cases of those who work in international companies, Charles and Andrei, from France and Romania, respectively, report more flexibility in working hours, taking holidays, expressing one’s opinion, making proposals, etc. than Maria and Klara. Although Klara’s team is now more ethnically diverse, Charles and Andrei both reported higher satisfaction with how they are accepted and respected by their superiors (also foreigners). They were given more freedom with decisions regarding projects they were participating in, or leading, and they generally felt more comfortable as the main language of communication was English. Andrei, who wishes to learn Japanese, says that “this is very bad for learning Japanese that we speak only English. But it’s good for productivity”, which is something he is interested in more than simply culturally blending in. Charles and Andrei also had a few negative experiences in their companies in the beginning, mainly with Japanese co-workers, with Andrei saying that he felt like “[the Japanese] have a hard time relating to foreigners”. He mentioned that, nonetheless, international workers were limited to their own positions and projects, while their Japanese colleagues would take over communication with clients the projects were being done for. Charles gave an example of lunch breaks where, inevitably, the Japanese would sit in a group, separate from the international employees, which often made him feel like he, and other international workers, were being kept out of the Japanese circle, but he also never felt compelled to engage the “Japanese table” due to his lacking Japanese skills. Neither of them, however, had any complaints regarding their salaries or benefits, and both completely avoided the Japanese job-hunting process by applying online.

Some participants worked in companies that used to be exclusively Japanese but were recently bought by an international owner, such as Jovan and Katarina from Serbia, and Sven from Sweden. They applied for jobs expecting an international setting, but ended up working mostly with Japanese co-workers in a traditional Japanese business setting. Jovan and Katarina say they had to quickly conform to the Japanese work culture (clothes, speech, mannerisms), although they were allowed certain freedoms such as, in Jovan’s case, keeping his beard. Both adapted quickly using their Japanese skills and overcame the “token foreigner” status. Katarina, however, was not satisfied with her work-life balance. She was intent on integrating to the best of her abilities,

working hard and attending all meetings, and learning the specialized vocabulary in Japanese, but her managers and senior co-workers, she says, insisted on the traditional approach to the work she was doing, ignoring all the contributions she was attempting to make towards modernizing. She often felt angry and dissatisfied. Katarina echoed Klara's words: "You know, since we are foreigners, they don't really know what to do with us", but, nonetheless, she says that, after two years, she feels like she has found her own place at the workplace. Her manager allows her some independence that her other co-workers might not experience – she can take her time with writing reports as they are in Japanese, she can even take breaks when other co-workers have to stay overtime, and she thinks she is not given so much work, all because she is a foreigner. Interestingly, Katarina and Jovan both noticed that, although they were often forgiven for their cultural/linguistic mistakes, co-workers coming from Asian countries were not – they were expected, from the first day, to have perfect Japanese skills and behave as their Japanese peers in all situations.

Painting a more positive picture, Ana, Julia, Olga, and Edward, teachers of English from Croatia, Poland, Russia, and UK, respectively, say that they enjoy quite a lot of freedom in their work. "Being a foreigner is something that's expected from me", Julia says and the others agree. Their consumption of the Japanese culture was similar to that of a tourist who does not attempt to integrate – they accepted their "token White foreigner" status, understanding they were there to teach "foreignness" (language and mannerisms) as cultural role models. As such, none of them were making an effort to become fluent in Japanese; for most learning the language was only a hobby. Julia and Olga, for example, use Japanese only with those students who are beginners at English. Both say that the work is "easy enough", and that the company they work for is completely accepting of their different cultures and customs, although "some Japanese rules must be followed". The case of Edward is, however, quite different in that he chose to carve his social circle among the elderly Japanese in his neighborhood. This decision came after a bad experience in an elementary school he was working in, where a Japanese student gave him a hard time for being a foreigner and none of the other teachers truly considered him a friend, giving him "fake Japanese smiles". He now considers himself a "community host, an entertainer": he amuses the elderly people with his foreignness, while they introduce him to what he considers to be the "original, local" Japanese culture. This, however, does not make him a part of their community, he concludes, adding that he still prefers that kind of "easy" work to a regular eight-hour work day "back home".

## **5.2 Social and cultural integration**

With regards to their community integration, interviewees discussed their friend networks, communication barriers, relationships, and the treatment they received outside of their homes (e.g. in restaurants, bars, transportation, on the street, in hospitals, banks, etc.). Their answers revealed a deep-seated attitude of "us" versus "them" wherein the White Europeans, although expressing desire to stay longer in Japan, admitted that they felt no effort from the Japanese side to integrate them. This, in turn, influenced them to forego all attempts to become full members of the community as they felt they were not going to be successful in any case.

The first interesting revelation was that being European and White in Japan meant a certain *freedom* from responsibilities of a typical citizen. Edward and Andrei talk most of this, expressing how they have no reserves about using the *gaijin* card whenever they feel like they are not acting according to the “absurd cultural rules of the Japanese”, as Andrei describes them. Although he has been in Japan for 11 years, Edward prefers the “middle ground” he has found himself in – he does not feel he could function properly if he were to return to his home country, and he enjoys the feeling that the Japanese have no high expectations of him regarding social manners. As he is currently dating a Japanese national, he feels additionally protected, “in case of anything bad, she’ll cover for me”, he says, relying completely on his partner to provide for him. Klara and Maria mention feeling free as well because, even though they had to work hard in the beginning, now they are allowed to retain their “foreign ways”, as long as they show sufficient respect for the Japanese methods. It is relaxing, they say, not having to worry whether they are up to standard, because they will never be quite “equal” to the Japanese. Jovan and Katarina state that, despite their efforts at work, they have no intention on following Japanese mannerisms outside of the workplace, happily avoiding “polite language” among friends or in their relationships. Not only polite language, but Japanese language altogether, as Maria points out, is often a problem leading to miscommunication. She prefers talking to her Japanese partner in English when she wants to discuss serious topics as this allows her to behave “like herself”.

Sufficiently skilled in Japanese, Milica and Sven are both interesting cases to look at regarding social integration. Milica, a female from Serbia, has been living and working in a small ski resort town as a manager for 7 years. In a tight-knit community such as hers, it is difficult, she says, not to feel like you are an essential part of the group. “Everyone has to contribute for the safety and wellbeing of others. Especially in winter”, she claims, but cannot deny that the Japanese side has most likely accepted her only as a resident *foreigner*. This has not proven to be an obstacle for her: advancing her Japanese skill, and working actively on making friends, she feels content where she is. Her community integration is satisfactory, enough to consider buying a house and settling there for a longer time, but what she does not expect is to stay there forever. She understood from the beginning that she will never truly belong there, no matter how well she gets to know her neighbors and how comfortable she starts feeling. Sven, on the other hand, has been living in Tokyo for 3 years and is happy enough that he is not the only foreigner around. He nonetheless avoids using Japanese with his girlfriend, a Japanese-Korean, as it is “more natural” to speak in English. Sven has stated how he has made his peace with being considered a foreigner, but he is happy to stay in Japan for as long as possible until he and his girlfriend can move somewhere else, preferably to Sweden, revealing that his motivation is his relationship, and not the chance to stay in Japan.

In a different manner, those participants with only basic Japanese skills and not in a relationship with a Japanese national feel even more isolated. Aleksandar, who was quite satisfied

with his working environment, expressed disappointment with his social integration. Dating another foreigner, he felt as if there was no future for them in a country where his potential children would have to either learn to “be Japanese” or be ostracized as “different”. Most participants did not even consider having families in Japan, seeing as making friends was hard enough. Zuzanna, an English teacher from Poland who has been living in Japan for 4 years has nothing positive to say regarding her experiences with creating friendship networks. Zuzanna lives in dormitory-type housing, which gives her the chance to meet international, as well as Japanese people. After multiple attempts to talk to her Japanese roommates, she understood they do not “want a foreigner as a friend”, only as an English teacher. At times she even wonders if Japanese know how friendships work. The disappointment she felt for failing to become a part of the Japanese community and the consequent partially self-imposed isolation have even caused mental health issues that she has been struggling with for a few years. Zuzanna confirms that she only attempts to “hang out with other international people now” as this brings her a sense of “togetherness” she could not receive from the Japanese.

Another aspect of an unsuccessful social integration was the treatment (mostly) women received outside of their homes. Katarina and Olga, as well as Klara and Maria, mentioned how they would be walking down the street when, suddenly, a Japanese person would approach them, praising their appearance, even asking to take their photographs. This made them feel uncomfortable and out of place, although they admitted being treated like a celebrity was flattering. Gabrielle, however, had an unpleasant experience when she accompanied her Japanese friend to a bar. Assessed immediately as a foreigner due to her physical appearance, she was simply told that “foreigners are not allowed in”, even though she had never caused a problem before. As she could speak Japanese, she insisted on being told the reason why, but she was given no further explanations for what to her seemed as “racist behavior”.

Most participants say that, very quickly upon arrival, they internalized that they will “never be fully accepted”, in the words of Andrei. He says: “You’ll always be a foreigner here... The Japanese will treat Asian people more as locals, but they will treat White and Black people... they will treat them differently. You will never be accepted”. Olga confirms saying that “no matter how long” she stays in Japan, she will not “feel Japanese”, something that Milica, Zuzanna, Gabrielle, and Katarina all confirmed. In explaining how they see their integration, participants admit they feel better and, in the words of Katarina, “more normal” in the company of other internationals, especially those from their own countries. They create “cosmopolitan islets” of Whiteness surrounding themselves with other expats so they could, as Andrei contends “avoid shedding their Western identity”. This resulted in most of their interactions with the Japanese and their culture to become infrequent, as if they were mere observers.

Jovan’s friendships, however, were somewhat different. He does not allow the need to conform to Japanese rules to overtake his private life. He says: “My private life is exactly that... my private life. I am not entirely happy here, but I would not go back home. I don’t belong here, but I don’t belong in Serbia either”. He intends to absorb as much of the Japanese culture as he

can, although he sometimes “cannot stand their ways”. He enjoys spending time with “older Japanese”, saying he has “never clicked with the younger ones”, but he is happy, as well as surprised whenever he is invited to their gatherings, going with them to karaoke clubs, and discussing economy and politics. He states that, as his social status in Japan is much higher than it would be at home, and as he is more appreciated than other Asian immigrants in Japan, he would not leave unless forced.

Finally, several questions were asked regarding participants’ access to public services, such as their experiences in banks, district or immigration offices, hospitals, real estate agencies. All participants expressed that, due to being recognized as foreigners immediately by the Japanese staff in these institutions, they were given appropriate help, and, generally speaking, they believed they were treated well enough. Klara had an interesting remark regarding what she found to be racism in an online application for a credit card in a Japanese bank: “I could not write my name in Chinese characters because my name does not have them! So, I could not even apply! I had to go in person.”. In cases like these, participants, including Klara, brought Japanese friends or acquaintances to guide them through the process, translating and explaining everything. Jovan and Katarina pointed out that the beneficial treatment they received in all these institutions was because they were White – both believe that migrants from Asian countries and Black individuals do not receive such beneficial treatment unless they have Japanese nationals who can vouch for them.

## **6. Discussion**

In the previous sections, assumptions were outlined regarding how Whiteness will influence European professionals’ acceptance into the office and everyday communities in Japan. Although Whiteness has had a historical influence on intercultural communication, resulting in contemporary Caucasian immigrants being privileged as “cosmopolitans”, the development of the idea of a “pure Japanese race” has caused a relegation of all cultural others to the sidelines of the Japanese society as perpetual foreigners who have to conform to the “Japanese rules”. Nonetheless, the preferential treatment White Europeans presumably receive was assumed to give them advantage over other immigrants in the Japanese job market. On the other hand, in their everyday lives, being singled out as “cultural role models”, and as such unassimilable Others, it was hypothesized that Whiteness would impede their integration, causing them to retract into more familiar environments of “cosmopolitan islets”.

After analyzing the obtained data, the assumption that integration will not be achieved was confirmed. Although, in the professional environment, the majority (12 interviewees) was able to bypass the traditional job-hunting process and directly attain desired jobs, they nonetheless entered a separate career track from their Japanese peers. The company, they felt, hired them not for their skills and potential, but simply to showcase diversity. In order to advance their careers, they needed not only to elevate their Japanese language skills, but to also fully adopt the mannerisms and

customs of the Japanese business culture. This is not unsimilar to what is expected from immigrants in White-majority contexts, but White Europeans in Japan felt it was unfair they had to behave in ways they did not support or even like.

Nonetheless, the presented cases varied significantly in their experiences. Within previous research, Japanese perception of Caucasians was simply defined within the “celebrity”, “cultural role model”, or “token foreigner” frameworks. Although one, two, or all were experienced by the participants, it is necessary to consider what this kind of perception means in their day-to-day routine and how it influences their decisions regarding their future in Japan.

The main difference appeared between those working in exclusively Japanese companies and those with more internationally-inclined surroundings. The former, feeling like they had to “suppress their European selves” to be accepted at work, were, at first, not satisfied with their work-life balance. However, the pull of the Japanese environment had a somewhat positive influence in that they worked harder to establish themselves in the Japanese context. They showed resilience when experiencing problems at work and in their private communication with Japanese nationals, and, although they accepted the notion of being foreign, they did not want to give up their lives in Japan. The latter group, however, had a much better experience on arrival. They felt the benefits of being White and being treated as a celebrity. However, it seems that the lenient international setting they found themselves in was beneficial only short-term, as their private friendship networks were consistently limited only to other expats, preventing them from experiencing a true Japanese way of living, like the former group. Similarly, those who worked as teachers of English had no illusions about their integration: they had no choice but to embrace the awarded “foreigner” status and enjoyed experiencing Japanese customs as “guests” or “tourists”. Some stayed on because of the cultural experience, but others faced serious problems, including mental issues. Clearly, however, their end goal is no longer integration – the participants created their own small-scale “cosmopolitan islets” where they simply renegotiated their European identities to suit the new environment, attempting essentially to remain Western in a non-Western country.

The implications of the presented data for Japan and its attempts to attract highly skilled workers are twofold. Firstly, as presented, even though they are awarded privileges and welcomed as highly skilled professionals and cultural elites, all White Europeans are singled out, suffering an imposed and perpetual “foreigner” status, having a hard time feeling like they belong. There is a need to raise awareness of the issue of superficial perception of White Europeans who live in Japan as “cultural role models”, “celebrities”, and “symbols of diversity”, especially in the workplace where certain comments regarding appearance, ethnicity, or race, are considered inappropriate. Not being valued for what they can contribute, but rather for the symbolism of their race and ethnicity, has a direct influence on participants’ wellbeing, as well as their ambition to truly make an effort to contribute to the Japanese society. The lack of friendships and insufficient communication between the participants and the Japanese, due to there being “less common ground”, causes the self-imposed isolation of the participants who accept their status as a

“foreigner” and forego efforts to integrate, if they had such inclinations to begin with. The cases presented have shown that having Japanese skills helps participants to feel more comfortable in the Japanese context, but, seeing as they are constantly recognized as foreign, unable to “pass” as Japanese, just knowing the language does not produce the feeling of belonging.

The second implication is that, by openly elevating White professionals’ status in the business industries, and not automatically offering the same privileges to highly skilled workers from East and Southeast Asian cultures, Japan loses its appeal as it is seen as a discriminatory society that does little to foster a multicultural environment that offers equal opportunity and access to those with the same skillset.

Ultimately, it is possible that the idea that integration is impossible starts at home: European migrants aiming for Japan model their expectations based on the stories they hear from other expats before even going to Japan. They expect to be of a higher standing than, for example, their East and Southeast Asian counterparts with the same educational background and skills, they accept the idea of freedom and the “symbolic foreigner” and “celebrity” statuses, both results of a co-construction of Japaneseness and Whiteness. Therefore, they are ready to embrace the adjusted mode of Whiteness, still regarded as members of the superior civilization, but sidelined as foreigners. The loss of privilege of being the majority that dictates cultural narratives begins to influence the participants only once they are in Japan. They realize they have to learn, accept, and adjust to the Japanese culture they simply found enticing *as observers* until that moment. There is always a choice: they will either remain “guests” who have no responsibilities as full members of the Japanese society, respected by the Japanese as elite foreigners, but not accepted as true citizens, or they will, just like those who migrate to Western societies, learn the other cultural mode and do their best to “survive” so as to have a chance to, one day, become respected members of the society.

Although the proposed hypotheses were confirmed, certain points of refinement for future research must be mentioned as well. Due to time constraints, it was difficult to include a sufficient number of participants to represent most, if not all, European nationalities. One limitation of the small group size was that there could be no in-depth comparison between those with high and those with lower, or no Japanese language skills, possibly introducing bias, as communication was the biggest challenge in most participants’ cases. In addition, the focus here was only on those determined as highly skilled by their visas, but White Europeans employed in blue collar positions could offer deeper insight into integration possibilities as they are potentially forced to work in exclusively Japanese environments, doing irregular work, or even living in precarious conditions, without possibilities to build their own “cosmopolitan islets”. They could, therefore, be better integrated with their Japanese surroundings.



## 7. Conclusion

Focusing on White European professionals living in Japan within this research, we explored the renegotiated concept of Whiteness in the Japanese society and its influence, if any, on the integration of Caucasians. This paper demonstrated how being White is conflated with being cosmopolitan in Japan, and how that has caused White Europeans to be singled out as role models in the cultural industry and popular media of Japan, and as symbols of diversity at work. White Europeans could not avoid suffering the “foreigner penalty”, which prevents them from integrating as full members of the communities they work or live in.

As a result of the influence of Whiteness, however, White Europeans became privileged compared to their Southeast and East Asian counterparts as they have access to the primary job market. Nonetheless, they continue to be sidelined as “foreigners” and “guest workers” in Japan, be it for reasons of dissimilarity between their and the Japanese cultures, or their obvious physical difference. As such, and as the data illustrates, they felt like they have no choice but to accept this imposed status and seek refuge in private “cosmopolitan islets” where they can renegotiate their White European identities and reconstruct a familiar cultural setting, consequently giving up on integration and the idea of Japan as a home.

The presented research has potential for expansion in future iterations, especially if we consider including a larger number of participants with more varied national and ethnic backgrounds, or those with skills that would put them in different visa categories, as well as those with different levels of Japanese language skills. However, this was an exploratory attempt to open a discussion to a previously underresearched area of academic study within Whiteness studies and migration studies. By providing insight into preferential treatment White European migrants feel they receive, compared to other minorities within the host non-White majority Japan, our ultimate aim was to uncover underlying Whiteness structures that span outwards from the societies of the Global North and subsequently aid in their deconstruction.

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