

# **Bridging the gap: a phygital service system to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.**

A case study of Kyoto.

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# Abstract

This final project has been developed during my five-months journey at **Kyoto Institute of Technology**.

During this time, I had the opportunity to get in touch with locals and explore a culture very different from my own.

Despite our differences, we all crave the same thing: **to feel connected with reality** and the world around us.

Yet, this project also acknowledges the challenges of achieving such engagement when faced with significant **linguistic barriers**, as encountered in Japan.

Research conducted through qualitative questionnaire and interviews reveals that, while technology provides a safety net, it actually prevents authentic connections, leading to a sense of dissociation from the physical environment, a problem significantly amplified by the high wall of linguistic barriers in Japan.

To address this, the project proposes a service system that transforms local cafès into connection hubs for locals and international residents. By substituting the pressure of conversation with low-barrier craft activities, the project utilises the universal language of making as bridge for cultural integration.

The system serves as a grounding antidote to digital overwhelm while, simultaneously, deconstructing social anxiety.

A mobile platform facilitates discovery and access but also provides workshop instruction, allowing the physical activity to remain autonomous and giving participants interaction hooks.

This structure removes the need for a moderator, creating a space where participants can embrace friction, errors, beauty of imperfection and collaboration in a relaxed, peer-to-peer environment.

Finally, to make tangible these encounters, the system includes a physical repository. This archive acts as a tool box for useful utensils and materials but also collects traces of participants, creating a fil rouge that transforms individual craft into a shared community memory.

## Introduction

# Offline life across Japan and Italy

My master thesis has been inspired by my journey in Kyoto as an international student. It is a project that exploits Systemic Design and Interaction Design tools to assess real life problems, taking into account also the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by United Nations in 2015.

In particular, the thesis aims to align with UN 2030 Agenda by tackling urban isolation (SDG 3), bridging the inequality gap caused by language barriers (SGD 10) and activating inclusive community spaces (SDG 11).

The project wants to act as a bridge between different cultures and languages, exploiting activities that may be grounding and helpful for slowing down in a world that moves fast and that is being reshaped by technology.

The outcome of this research is indeed a system that has been designed site-specifically for the city of Kyoto but that can be scalable to any other place with the same characteristics and issues.

This system draws relationships between people, places and artifacts, shaping new opportunities in multicultural cities and promoting social inclusion.

## MOTIVATIONS & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research questions the cultural differences between Japanese and Western societies: how we behave differently with people and especially with objects (both physical and digital ones).

So, I began this research by observing the profound relationship that Japanese culture maintains with the material world. It is a context where even inanimate objects are often treated with a reverence, and that implies that they possess a spirit or a weight.

So, at first I focused my interest on seven different subtopics about human-object relationship, from how animistic and individualistic societies shaped the world differently, the cultural rules and the traditions, I then focused on the paradox of digital world.

The respectful relationship that people have with objects, stands in a stark contrast to the relationship with the digital interface.

The smartphone screen offers a frictionless, glass surface where content slides past without resistance. Unlike the physical object, which occupies space and holds history and memories, the digital feed is defined by weightless.

We scroll through infinite information, yet because this action lacks physical friction, the content often feels ephemeral and meaningless.

So we are efficiently connected, yet physically dissociated.

This project argues that, in order to counter this digital dumbness, we must reintroduce the positive friction of tangible materials.

However, this digital retreat is often a survival strategy, especially when living abroad, in a country that has a complete different culture from yours and where language barrier is a high wall.

Here, I started to question myself and other international students about how we feel in this context and what induces to a sense of dissociation from reality and overwhelm.

Thus, a second critical need was identified: we must not only ground the user through materials and tangible objects, but also design a mechanism to bypass the language barrier that drives into isolation in the first place.

In the following pages I will further explain the mental process that led me to move connect these two topics, following the chronological steps of my journey in Japan.

## 1. Objects

Making a step back, here is what pushed me to investigate objects in societies and why I moved from this first research topic to the second one. Walking through the city of Kyoto, it is difficult to orient yourself because, even though every street has its own personality and is completely different from another one, trying to remember a reference point between the countless architecture elements, plants, small statues, decorations and other random objects, feels to be impossible.

Despite this, on the whole, every street appears clean, harmonious and peaceful. Every object has a meaning or a function and nothing is left to chance, not even the smallest thing.



What I noticed most was the obsession with the smallest details and especially the perfect harmony that Japanese people achieve through the juxtaposition of numerous elements, creating simplicity through complexity. That feeling provoked a sense of curiosity that induced me to explore the relationship between humans and everyday objects both in Japanese and Italian societies.

What makes Japanese society appear so orderly, yet so complex? How can Western society be so minimalistic, yet so chaotic? What is a common

Picture 1: an example of a cluttered housefront, photo taken by me in Kyoto

point? Objects and tools are what shape societies from the beginning of human history: just consider how we define human history as the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age. It is not just history but our daily reality, we shape our objects, and thereafter, they shape us.



*“We design the world and it, in turn, designs us”*

– Donald A. Norman

## **2. Digital and reality**

However, one of my first memories of Japan is the train from the Osaka International Airport to Kyoto Station: a quiet, unsettling coach crowded with local people looking exclusively at their phone. No chatting, no gazing out the window.

Japanese society is very respectful of the order and the silence in public spaces, so locals are not used to talk or answer a call on public transportation, but instead they are very focused on technology.

And this is a serious concern in Japan, since “phone addiction” in the country is leading to the introduction of regulatory measures and cam-

paigns for digital detox (World Economic Forum, 2025). But this phenomenon is a threat all over the world and, together with technology innovations, humans are adapting in a faster and faster life, which is, at the end, "liquid" and lacking of real experience.

Contemporary digital life is reshaping our present. We tend to go faster and to appreciate seamless, easy experiences and we avoid friction. So, after moving from physical to digital objects, I researched how people behave with technology and what are the issues that they may encounter. Since many people study and work a lot of hours every day in front of a screen, experiencing digital overwhelm is very common and I noticed that engaging with crafts and hands-on activities is a popular practice to feel relief and disconnect.



### Language barrier

During the field research and interviews with other international students, a recurring theme emerged that overshadowed all other logistical and emotional difficulties: the profound impact of the language barrier.

Getting in touch with a local is not so easy and many of them lack of English speaking skills. As an international student, it feels more like living *besides* them than *with* them.

On the other side, Japanese people often hesitate to engage due to a lack of confidence in English or a cultural fear of making mistakes.

This mutual anxiety often creates a deadlock, where potential connections are lost in silence. That is why I thought about connecting the dots and exploit hands-on activities to connect people, substituting conversation and language requirements with the making.

Picture 3: restaurants, even in the city center, are often reluctant to welcome non-Japanese speakers. This is an example taken from Reddit, from [https://www.reddit.com/r/japan/comments/8vns1b/is\\_this\\_a\\_new\\_trend/](https://www.reddit.com/r/japan/comments/8vns1b/is_this_a_new_trend/)

## METHODOLOGY AND SYSTEMIC DESIGN

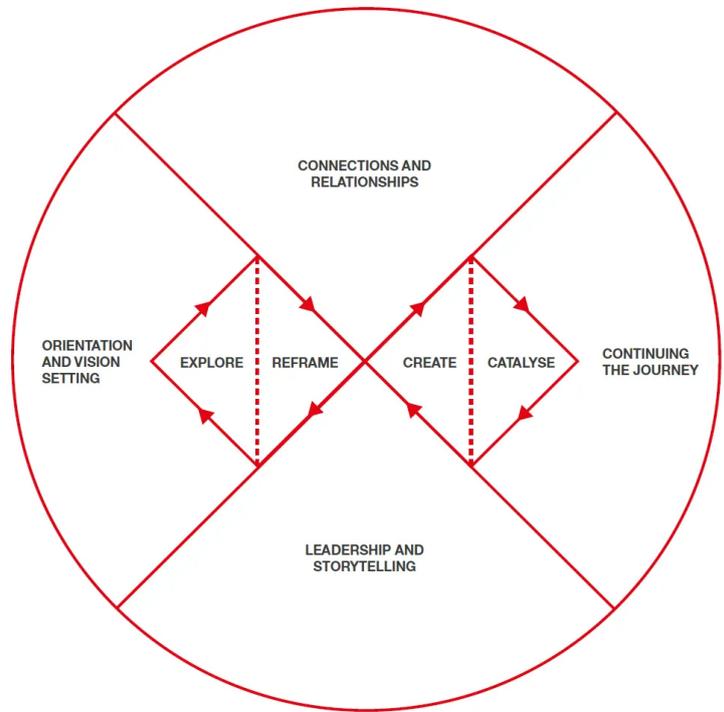
This thesis adopts a Systemic Design methodology, an approach that moves beyond traditional product-centric problem solving to address complex, interconnected challenges.

By viewing the social challenge of international students in Kyoto not as a singular user problem, but as a symptom of a broader disconnected network, the project aims to design a relationship rather than just a tool.

In fact, systemic design is not just about complexity, it is about relationships.

In this project, it allows me to map the hidden connections between language, technology and mental well-being.

Exploring how humans behave with objects and new technologies and taking into account the two different points of view of Italian and Japanese societies can be seen as a complex research goal.



This framework integrates principles of Human-Centered Design (HCD) to ensure usability and Territorial Analysis to ensure that the solution is deeply rooted in the specific cultural and material context of Kyoto.

Moreover, I would like to exploit the influence of Japanese culture and traditions in the development of my project, in order to honour the time spent in this amazing country and put into practice my new expertises.

The process has been interative, going back and forward every time that I felt the need to go deeper in a topic and explore more.

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## Chapter 1

# Desk Research

Inspired by my living and studying experience in Kyoto, the following research explores the world of **objects and possessions**: we own various objects and treat them in different ways based on context, value, perception and traditions.

The way we behave with an object is not always strictly related to the actual monetary value of it; in the relationship between humans and objects emotions play a key role, but also culture.

In fact, it is possible to notice a significant yet curious difference in this relationship across Japanese and Italian culture: the first is more focused on a collective utility and aesthetic while the second moves between utility and pragmatism. The research begins with traditions and habits but will touch also contemporary topics: how we relate to digital objects, how the human-object relationship changes with the involvement of non-objects, dematerialized products.

## 1.1 IN-ANIMATE OBJECTS: ANIMISM VS INDIVIDUALISM

Japan's main tourist attractions and fascinating places are for sure the numerous religious sites: the country counts for more than 160000 sacred sites (Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, 2018), between Shinto shrines (*jinja*, *taisha* or *jingu*) and Buddhist temples (*tera* or *ji*).

The two religions coexist harmoniously and some people even practice both religions at the same time: the annual statistical study on religion conducted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2018 shows that the number of adherents exceeds the Japanese population.

Buddhism was introduced in Japan from the Asian continent around the sixth century but Shinto is the indigenous religion of the country, an animistic faith based on the idea of the existence of *kami* (spirit): supernatural entities believed to inhabit all things, included nature forces.



The absence of a line between human, nature and objects and the belief that none of those entities can exist independently, leads to the development of a society that is more careful for others. This attention is not reserved only to people, but indeed, also to objects.

A proof of this deep connection with non-animate things are the folk Japanese entities of *tsukumogami*, household objects that acquire a *kami* after 100 years of usage, and *yōkai*, spirits often related to mischievous and naughty behavior. In fact, the common conviction is that an object can turn into a *tsukumogami* if the owner mistreats it or has not enough care for

Picture 5: *Tsukumogami*, illustration Hyakki Yako Emaki.

it (Reider Noriko T., 2009).

Strictly related to this concept is the tradition of treating tools with extreme respect, craftsmen are very bonded to their own instruments.

Just consider that every February the Hari-Kuyō is held in Kantō and Kansai regions: it is the “festival of broken needles”, a memorial to all the sewing needles broken during the year and an opportunity to pray for improving in the art of sewing. This is only one example of the copious events dedicated to objects and tools, honouring their service.

Furthermore, another connection between animism and care for object lays in the work of craftsmen. People believe that the object that has been crafted for long time, with effort, patience and care, keeps in itself the soul of the person who has worked on.

That is why craftship in this country is seen with extreme respect and high value.

The *shokunin-damashi* (craftman’s spirit) embodies an attitude and willingness of the craftsman that goes beyond the commitment to their craft: time, effort, expertise and continual development are all embodied in their creations.

Moreover, in order to be recognised as a traditional crafts in Japan, the product “must be primarily used in everyday life, the parts of the manufacturing process that have the greatest impact on the characteristics of the product are mainly done by hand” and “be manufactured using traditional techniques and methods that have a history of over 100 years and are still in use today”, as have been designated by the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry under the Law Concerning the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries (Law No. 57 of 1974, hereinafter referred to as the “Traditional Crafts Law”).

Note how the 100 years old thing is a recurrent precondition in Japan.

So, animism belief lead to the development and the opening of the concept of caring for others beyond interpersonal relationship, and it is extended not only to objects but also to public spaces, creating a form of civic intimacy.

A case in point of this collective care is the extreme attention in the management of public toilets, which is something that is recognised to Japan all over the world.

This phenomenon has been made popular recently by the Wim Wenders’ film “*Perfect Days*” (2023). The film focuses on The Tokyo Toilet Project (Shibuya City, 2020), a city requalification process that involved many famous architects for the transformation of public restrooms into architectural landmarks.

The narrative of the film is centered on the main character, the cleaner, who treats the maintenance of these facilities with the dedication of a



craftsman (shokunin).

This is aligned with the animistic view that objects and spaces are part of the community and their spirits must be honored through maintenance and care.

In western societies, the relationship we have with non-humans and nature is a bit different: we see nature from another point of view, often from an higher point of view.

For decades, humanity has exploited natural resources with disregard for the consequences on other living entities and its own species alike.

Only around the seventies, thanks to the commitment of the Club of Rome and the publication of the report *"The limits to growth"* in 1972, industrial and economic society started to reflect on topics like growth, development and resources exploitation in relation to the consequences for the future of the planet.

In the same years, the spread of the picture of the Earth seen from space taken by Apollo8 in 1968 has been one of the first moment in which the modern society realised the importance of taking care for our planet: the metaphor of the "spaceship Earth" positioned humanity as the crew responsible for maintaining the vessel on which survival depends, recognising the importance of maintaining and respecting a planet, a non-living system.

Moreover, in the same context, the Earth has been described as "fragile" and "delicate", almost referring to the planet as a living entity (Buckmin-

Picture 6: *Mini Park* by Shigeru Ban for The Tokyo Toilet Project, Shibuya City, 2020.

ster Fuller R., 1969).

Even if Western society in average does not recognise itself in the animistic view and belief, there are other signs of this kind of animist-inclined behaviour towards our planet: in 1970s two scientists from California, Lovelock and Margulin, formulated the “*Gaia hypothesis*”, according to which living organisms and the inorganic surrounding (rocks for instance) are a self-regulating system that maintain conditions for favorable life (Lovelock & Margulis, 1974).

So, if even the scientific community atcs with a sort of animistic belief towards natural elements, maybe also the normal society often performs animism in daily life.

Just consider the big advertising companies, which put pressure on animism to affect consumer behaviorus (Mathews-Pett, 2019), or the fact that we “talk”, “chat” and “brainstorm” with Google Alexa or Chat GPT.

The use of AI technologies is for sure an example of application of animism in our non-animist society: we chat with a tool that gives answers using kind words, that is careful to use the appropriate language and that

remembers our previous conversations. This is only one example of animist behaviour but we practice it also when we develop a sort of affection for our possessions.

When we refer to an object giving it a name, a meaning, a personality, we invoke a sense of comfort, trying to imbue in that object with human qualities so that it can sostitute for missing of human interaction or connection (Norberg & Rucker, 2021).

Consider games like Tamagochi, our favourite pair of jeans or even our computer that seems to contain our entire life and we will be lost if one day it refuses to turn on. Even now, in the previous line, I endowed an inanimate object with the faculty and the freedom to decide for itself.



However, especially in academic environments, we often discuss about Human-Centered Design (HCD) which is an approach that, somehow, could be seen as the phylosophical opposite of animism. In fact, HCD establishes a hierarchy where the human is the subject and the object is just the tool, shaping the world to fit human needs (Chapman, 2005). The design of a

Picture 7: Tamagotchi game by Bandai, 1996.

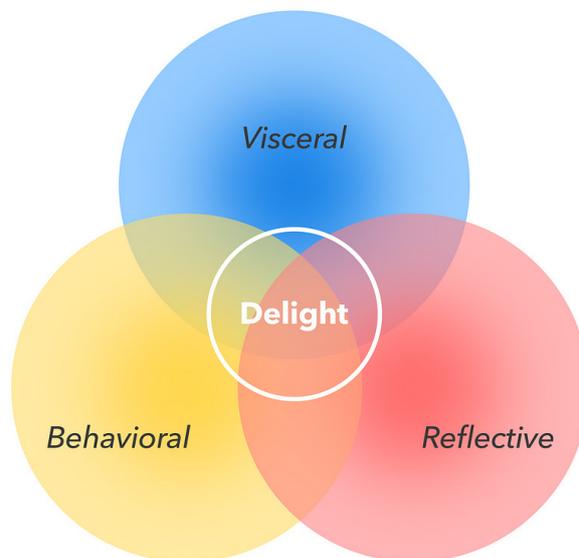
product is in fact evaluated based on the usability and the utility for the user. The modern evolution of HCD, which moves from “User-Centered” to “Humanity-Centered”, let designers include in the study not only humans but also other living beings, the environment, cultures and societies.

## 1.2 EMOTIONS AND ATTACHMENT TO OBJECTS

Object attachment can be defined as “the psychological or emotional bond that individuals experience between their sense of self and an object” (Norberg & Rucker, 2021).

Inspired by the animistic view of the world, we can explore how humans create bonds with inanimate objects, how our behaviorus can be affected from them and how we create empathy.

The concept of empathy with an object dates back to 1912, when the German pshychologist Theodor Lipps referred to the appreciation of a work of art being possible “only if the spectator would have been able to project itself into it” (Chapman, 2005).



Nowadays, we can relate that same concept to the three levels of emotional system theorised by Donald Norman. When the user gets in touch with an object, he or her can experience three different moments and levels of empathy and emotions:

- Visceral: at first, it is possible to feel only the perceptible qualities of the object and how they make the user or observer feel. This is an immediate and untoughtful feeling.
- Behavioral: this second step is something that “has to do with the plea-

Picture 8: *Don Norman's 3 levels of Emotional Design*, illustration by Parina Patel, 2021. From <https://medium.com/@parinapatel2407/design-for-emotions-not-just-functionality-5ea5c404cbc4>

sure and effectiveness of use”, with the usability of the object. So we can explore functionalities and understand if it fits our needs or not.

– Reflective: lastly, a conscious thought layer in which the user judges the design according to his/her more nuanced and rational side, determines what it means to him/her as an individual (Norman, 2004).

So, the process of understanding and creating empathy with an object is not immediate, but instead it is a resonant process of awareness acquisition. This bond is not merely a projection of human emotion onto a passive object. Indeed, the object acquires a “affective affordance” (Gygi, 2022), that is a capacity to trigger specific emotional responses and invite engagement.

We develop affection to objects based on our unique needs and feelings, often without any relation to the actual economic and material value of the thing (van den Hoven et al., 2021). In fact, through usage, ownership, maintenance and memories we develop a connection with an object and that is why very often we struggle to get rid of the most insignificant things or why we keep using the same old tools for years.

“They invade our lives and literally depend upon our care and attention in order to survive” (Chapman, 2005)

We even feel a sense of responsibility towards some items, often when it comes to objects that require maintenance as clothes. Consider a wool sweater that needs to be washed in cold water, with a specific detergent and has to be dried with a very meticulous technique of squeezing and hanging. When we practice those kind of “rituals”, we feel more attached to the object and we feel somehow caregivers.

The point is that, when taking care for our possessions, we indirectly take care for ourselves.

As every relationship, a connection between human and object can come to an end, this is what Marie Kondo has widely discussed in her books about tidying up.

She talks about a method, *Tokimeki* (spark of joy) that is not just about a minimalist mindset but more about a dialogue with the object itself. She invites to thank the object for its service before discarding it, giving the user the possibility to acknowledge the value of the object (Kondō & Hirano, 2014), a concept that is very similar to the sewing needles funeral festival mentioned earlier.

### 1.3 CRAFTSMANSHIP

In the contemporary world, where reproducibility of digital content and industrial mass production define the present, craftsmanship can be seen as a form of resistance.

Craftsmanship is, in fact, a fundamental human activity that binds the maker to the material, and the user to the maker. It is one of the first forms of systemic relationship.

The objects created are not just commodities, functional tools or art: they are repositories of time, skill and cultural memories, as discussed earlier when introducing the concept of *shokunin-damashi*.

The importance of crafts lies also in the visible traces of the hands-on struggle that created them: the unpredictable process, the flawness and the mistakes are what make those objects authentic and meaningful.

The Japanese approach to craftsmanship is frequently characterized by a profound spiritual devotion to the process and the material itself.

The *shokunin* commitment can be seen also as a repetitive, meditative act (Wong, 2020): in this context, the object becomes a vessel for the artisan's spirit.

The concept of *wabi-sabi* is often just translated and considered as an aesthetic centered on finding beauty in imperfection but is something deeper, influenced by Zen Buddhism.

For instance, a ceramic tea bowl that cracks can be repaired with gold lacquer (*kintsugi*) and assumes more value than a perfect one. The unpredictable result here is not a failure of control but an acknowledgment of nature's role in the creative process.

The total control is impossible and the craftman accepts the autonomy of the material

In the Italian tradition, craftsmanship is historically intertwined with art, design and also daily life. The *mestiere* (trade or job) is a form of living knowledge, it is an intelligence which lies in the hands of the maker, where thinking and doing are inseparable (Cavalli, 2014). The importance of the object for the user lies in its ability to transmit the sense of pleasure, mastery and lifestyle. Unlike for standardized luxury goods, the irregularities that signs human touch



Picture 9: *Kintsugi* bowl by Mandy Pang

are considered the value of the craft and sometimes the signature of the craftman: the object, as in the Japanese case, is the result of an individual's lived experience and judgment, rather than a calculated output.

Moreover, the resistance of the material itself is crucial to the experience: when the material "fights back" and does not behave as expected, the craftman must adapt.

This "friction" is where skill is forged and where meaning is generated (Sennett, 2008).

If the outcome were perfectly predictable, the process would be mere execution rather than creation. The unpredictable result forces a state of awareness and presence which is a result of strong connection with reality.

Today, craftsmanship is moving from nostalgia of a tradition to the center of discussion about sustainability, ethical consumption and human well-being. The role of the contemporary artisan is to offer what machines cannot: objects with a biography, an idea. In a world of disposable and replicable objects, handcrafted objects demands care and repair and foster a relationship with the human that is carried on by longevity rather than consumption.

Furthermore, the "*makers*" movement demonstrates the necessity of developing environments, technologies and communities inherent in hands-on creations.



Picture 10: *washitsu* traditional house, photo by Machiya Inns & Hotels, Kyoto. From <https://www.machiya-inn-japan.com/blog/where-to-stay-in-kyoto-higashiyama/>

## 1.4 SITE-SPECIFIC AND ORDER

Japan is the realm of minimalism: despite the consumerism society, the cult of small statues and figures, gatcha gatcha and numerous materialistic inventions, at the base of the culture there is still a strong bond with Zen principles, and, therefore, minimalism. Minimalism does not mean just to own as less things as possible, but instead it is a philosophy centered on reducing cluttering, living with intentionality and therefore emphasizes balance and respect for objects.

In the Japanese tradition, space is viewed as a field of relationships where an object's position is dictated by the harmony of the whole. There is a word, *Ma* (space, gap, pause), which represents the negative space but also what creates harmony between objects.

The act of placing an object is never neutral in Japanese culture, it is indeed a way to contrast chaos and restore the *Ma*.

The *washitsu*, the traditional house, is a perfect example of how object placement and order are considered quite important.

The archetype of Japanese site-specificity is the *chashitsu* (tea room): here, objects do not exist independently and they are not just placed as a in a storage, the tearoom is more a "abode of vacancy" (Kakuzo, 1906), meaning that all the elements follow a strict path where the arrangement is a practice of aesthetic self-cultivation.

Another important space is the *tokonoma*, where important elements such as *ikebana* (flower arrangement art), *bonsai* and special pottery items are placed in a detailed order.

In the *ikebana* art itself it is possible to notice the same concept: the flower arrangement is not just a matter of aesthetic, the position and the inclination of flowers can reveal different meanings.

There are specific layouts for funerals, for expressing love and joy and other emotions.

Even when hosting someone in the *tokonoma* room, there is a specific setting to follow while sitting: the hosted should never face the *tokonoma* but instead give the back to it.

This type of rules are being followed religiously even nowadays, because it is not a matter of good manners but principles that rule every aspect of life. In fact, this philosophy extends beyond the traditional house into the domestic sphere, where the placement of daily objects follow a sacred hierarchy. For instance, the placement of the rice bowl on the left and the soup bowl on the right is not a matter of personal preference but a cultural imperative rooted in the identification of rice with the Japanese self and historical cosmology. Every object has an *aru-beki tokoro* (a place where it belongs) and placing it elsewhere is a violation of the order.

The same approach to space management is applied again also in daily life: walking through the streets of Kyoto it is possible to see so many queues, at the stations there is always a sign indicating the boarding spots and, in general, so many signs explain how to do anything in the proper way. Indeed, the common space is not just an open area but a grid subdivided in zones (Barrie Shelton, 1999) and this allows to maintain the balance between negative space, objects and people.

Similar to the function of ikebana, in Western society, people use objects to define their own identity and their current internal state (Miller, 2008): chaos and cluttered desks are not symbol of failure of order but, instead, a manifestation of a “lived-in” authenticity.

We tend to be messier when we are not feeling good and instead tidying up and living in a organized space makes us feel relaxed and calm.

An interesting aspect of our society is that we think in terms of functionality: Donald Norman describes this idea as relying on “knowledge in the world”, where placing keys on a table serves as a visual reminder of a task (Norman, 1986). That is why the clutter of a room can be considered as a biographical map, a sign that life is happening.

## 1.5 PRECIOUS THINGS: FEAR OF USING

There is a term in Japanese, *yo-no-bi*, that is often translated as “the beauty of everyday things” but the literal translation is “the beauty of usage”, as explained by the philosopher Yanagi during the industrialization of the country: beauty is born from utility (Yanagi, 2019). He wanted to emphasize the kind of beauty that is proper of an handcrafted object and it is different from the aesthetic appreciation of an art piece, because it resides in practical items.

So the notion of beauty for practical things extends beyond the materialistic values, signifying how people should live their lives.

According with animism belief, an object cannot be beautiful if not used, if not nurtured. In particular, this concept is applied to clothes made of “living” fabrics such as leather that acquire its patina, or denim jeans that can fade overtime.

The value of the object is given by time and the signs of its lifetime.

In Italy, the relationship with precious objects is often associated to preservation rather than consumption: think about the *servizio buono* (the nice dish set) that is used only for special occasions, or that dress that is too elegant and is left in the closet forever.

This mechanism of leaving things untouched can be explained with the visceral level of the emotional experience discussed earlier (Norman, 2004): often, when we appreciate something that is new and pristine, we avoid using it because of the fear of ruining it.

And moreover, sometimes we perceive an object's value as higher just because we own it, just because it is ours. This is called the endowment effect (Reb & Connolly, 2007) and explains why we can be reluctant at using the porcelain set: when we look at the porcelain, we do not see only the beautiful cup, but also a projection of our status and identity.

Scratching it would mean reducing its value, therefore the rational choice is to never use it.

And so we fill our houses with objects we like and we love but that we cannot use. And if using an object leads to create a stronger emotional bond with it (as discussed about the craftsman and his tools), this means that we actually feel a different kind of love for these untouchable objects, a feeling that is more detached and abstract.

Moreover, the emotions we feel for everyday objects are more concrete, related to memories and satisfaction of completing a task. These objects are like an extension of our persona, become part of our life. Daily usage objects become our companions, we spend time with them and we know them perfectly.

On the other hand, vintage items are becoming always more popular in recent years: the app Vinted surpassed 105 million registered users in 2023 (Chavan, 2025) and, even though the app is more referred to second-hand items rather than vintage ones, it means that the appeal for used things is still popular and an increasing trend between younger generations. As discussed earlier, vintage objects acquire a higher value with time: the memory, the story and the impossibility to go back in the past give to the object a sense of uniqueness and irreplicability.

In contrast, when a product is designed to be perfect and clean, like the new iPhone, we fear the first scratch. But here comes a contradiction.

At the beginning, during the honeymoon phase, "a period of intense synergy within which everything is new, interesting and the consumption of one another is feverish" (Chapman, 2005), we have extreme care of the object and treat it as a baby.

But, as the term honeymoon refers, this period is really short, the excitement fades and we proceed in a phase of normalcy. That is because the initial excitement is just driven by high expectations that do not reflect the reality.

And after some time we just start to do not mind about the object's care and maintenance.

This mechanism is activated with our expensive phone, our computer desk

that is always full of random downloaded files, our photo gallery full of useless screenshots, our new pair of leather boots that will never see a polishing cream, and more other things.

When an object is not new anymore, it just loses its sparkle (Chapman, 2005).

The same phenomenon is discussed by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who coined the term "*liquid modernity*" to describe our current society, in which changes happen so rapidly that habits and routines do not have time and chance to solidify (Bauman, 2000).

But this is a topic that will be discussed in the next subchapter.

## 1.6 DEMATERIALIZATION AND DIGITAL ARCHIVES

The capacity for attachment to object is becoming challenging in the modern world: the digital era is shifting our consumption methods from ownership to access (Spotify, Netflix etc).

Since objects are now replicable and identical, they acquire a "liquid" state, meaning that the relationship we develop with them is temporary, flowing. Because one object can be identical to millions of others, it has no weight in our life and creating a bond is increasingly difficult (Bardhi Fleura & Eckhardt Giana M., 2017).

Despite this, there are some realms in which the attachment to digital, replicable objects seems to be possible: some examples are game avatars, NFTs or social network feeds .

This suggests that the psychological need of "taking care" exists independently of physical matter (Koles & Nagy, 2021).

In fact, the transition from analog to digital is not just a technical evolution, but a shift in how humans see and experience the world. From the era of "solidity" and ownership, we are moving, or we are already, in the era of "liquidity" and access-based products.

We are moving from owners of things into owner of informations.

This idea can be explained using music as object of interest: moving from vinyl, CD and MP3 to streaming music, the musical product had disappeared but we gained an infinite access to any kind of tune.

We lost rituals and the feeling of touching, holding an object, reducing music to data without a body.

This shift from analog to digital is not just a sign of the technical evolution, but it also plays a key role in promoting sustainable development. Compressing multiple functions of different tools into a single handheld device (we can call, text, take pictures, listen to music, setting an alarm and even pay just with our smartphone) allows to reduce raw materials, manufactu-

ring and physical logistics. Theoretically, dematerialization reduces carbon footprint (Han, 2022) but, at the end of the day, we are just shifting the problem from material extraction to energy consumption for data storage.

But when an object disappears and we reduce the physical experience into a digital 2D interface, we feel a sense of disorientation. That is why often design employ skeuomorphism: a design style in which appearances of the physical world are imitated in digital interfaces in order to make them more familiar and intuitive.

Common examples are the icons of the smartphone applications that look like physical objects (for instance gears for settings).

Despite being a technological driver of innovation, Japan expresses a profound cultural resistance to dematerialization.

Living here, or just visiting the country as a tourist, it is possible to notice from the first moment that so many actions that are fully digitalised in Europe, here are still analog: one example is the use of cash. Cashless payments are very often not consented, in shops and restaurant but also in museums, and even ticket machines for the fastest bullet train in the world sometimes accept only cash payments.

That is because cash is viewed as a reliable in case of natural disasters and absence of electricity.

The act of money exchange in Japan has rituals too: there is always a blue tray in front of the counter where the customer is supposed to lay his money. Placing money on that tray, rather than in the worker's hands, is a form of respectful distance and another example of site-specificity in Japan.

Moreover, while the world is moving towards electronic signature and Face ID technology, in Japan the *hanko* (personal seal) is still required for contracts.

The physical act of holding the seal and stamping with red ink carries the importance and the "weights" of an identity. In the moment of signing a contract, the *hanko* is not just a tool but a real driver of identity.

In addition, the need of haptic experiences is something that has been discussed widely by Kenya Hara in "Designing Design" (2007): she argues that dematerialization starves the sense



Picture 11: *hanko* seals, photo from Chidori Vintage.

of touch, which is necessary to perceive the world: we need to feel the paper and the coin to verify reality.

The digital lag in Japan is very common to experience: lots of websites, even institutional ones, are visibly dated, printing files in shops is possible only by using a USB pen drive, even electricity bills can be paid only at the konbini by cash.

Many resources are still not available online, for instance the Kyoto bus routes map: the network is a patchwork of private and public operators whose have maintained their own separate data formats. And this happens basically for everything in Japan, from public transportation to payment services (PayPay, LINE Pay, Rakuten Pay, d-Barai and Merpay, each requiring a separate app and account).

## 1.7 LOST AND FOUND: MORALITY AND SYSTEMS ACROSS CULTURES

“In 2018, over 545,000 ID cards were returned to their owners by Tokyo Metropolitan Police – 73% of the total number of lost IDs. Likewise, 130,000 mobile phones (83%) and 240,000 wallets (65%) found their way back. Often these items were returned the same day.” This is how BBC defines Japan as the country with the higher rate of returned items (BBC , 2020). In fact, the system of lost and found in Japan is very efficient: it is based on a dense network of *kōban* (small neighbourhood police stations) where people can leave items that they find on the street.

The number of these stations is very relevant: in Tokyo there are 97 koban per 100 square meters (compared to 11 police stations per 100 square meters in London) and this allows to return objects more easily (Olin & West, 2002) because there will always be a *kōban* in a short walking distance. Héra Gábor (2024) argues that this community policing model fosters trust and interaction, making the police a “service” for lost items rather than just a force for crime prevention. In addition, the architecture of *kōban* is often designed to be playful, welcoming, in order to dissolve the barrier between citizen and state (Alison, 2021).

But here a question arises: is the system that makes the morality, or the morality that makes the system?

As previously discussed, the restoration of the equilibrium in a space by placing an object in its *aru-beki tokoro* is fundamental in Japanese culture. Therefore, returning a forgotten item to the owner or to the police is a sign of respect and culture preservation. On the other hand, the *kōban* exists also as “eye” of the community: police officers are part of the community



and returning something to them is a social transaction within the community itself, reinforcing the system of trust.

This concept can be referred again to the architecture and the placement of *kōban*: these police stations are often designed with big glass windows and are placed in trafficated intersections, in order to be integrated in the community and be always present, available.

In contrast, the social anthropologist Ruth Benedict popularised the idea of a separation between a shame culture and a guilt culture in American and Japanese societies in her book *"The Chrysanthemum and the sword"* (Benedict, 1946).

The separation is about cultural norms: in a shame (Japanese) society, the fear is of social disapproval and dishonour, while in a guilt (American) society, the fears are internal and rely on conscience and inward feelings, since the individualism is stronger.

So, as a consequence, western society is also more focused on individual possessions and personal inner state.

Picture 12: *Kōban* police station, photo taken by me in Sapporo.

And moreover, the experience of returning a loss item to the police is not as quick and pleasant as in Japan: detached behaviour, waiting time and bureaucracy to be signed are all elements that contribute to build a regrettable experience.

Beyond the system, if our relationship with objects can employ the emotional sphere, it is worth to explore how this relationship evolves when we lost an object.

Our reaction to a loss depends on our empathy with the object (Chapman, 2005) and the story that it holds.

When the loss is physical, like loosing a pair of keys, it blocks our day and we need to retrace our steps. This kind of loss is annoying and instills in us negative feelings, the objects becomes a ghost that actively disrupts the routine (Holmes & Ehgartner, 2021).

In other cases, when we have an emotional attachment for a lost object, we experience a profound sadness. This mechanism is explained by the "extended self" theory (Belk, 1988): we do not just own things but we integrated and incorporated them in our ego, making them part of our identity. So, losing a object that is somehow a part of us, feels like a physical amputation. The sadness and panic we feel is not about the cost and the value of the object, but instead about the memories and the story we have lost with it.

## 1.8 CONSIDERATIONS

The themes faced in this chapter are very wide and could be examined more in depth but the goal of this thesis is to understand what is not working in our relationship with objects and why. In particular, the subchapter 1.5 is what will be taken into account the most for the following research activities because in the topic of dematerialization but particularly in the topic of digitalization lies a big contradiction of our contemporary world. The materiality and the relationship that objects can generate between people is what makes as humans feel alive, but the digital era lacks of all of this: on a digital screen, we search for flawless and seamless experiences, we want to do not waste time and complete easy tasks. What is missing here is friction.

Chapter 2

# Kyoto: contextual diagnosis



## 2.1 THE ANCIENT CAPITAL

Located in the central part of the island of Honshu, Kyoto is the beating heart of the Kansai region, situated approximately 450 kilometers southwest of the current capital, Tokyo, and just 40 kilometers from the bustling commercial hub of Osaka. However, unlike the sprawling coastal plains of its neighbors, Kyoto is an inland city, defined by its containment. It is nestled in a valley basin (Kyoto Bonchi), surrounded on three sides by mountains: Higashiyama (East Mountain), Kitayama (North Mountain), and Nishiyama (West Mountain).

This unique topography acts as a natural fortress, historically protecting the capital but also isolating it. The basin effect dictates the city's infamous climate: the mountains trap heat in summer and cold air in winter, creating a humid, stifling environment known as *Kyoto no Sokobie* (bottom-chilling cold). These intense seasonal extremes have deeply influenced local aesthetics, from the architecture of *Kyomachiya*—townhouses designed with open corridors to force airflow—to the seasonal rhythms of the textile industry, where delicate silks (like *Ro* and *Sha*) were developed specifically to make the humid summers bearable.



Picture 13: *Gion*, the traditional district of Kyoto.

While the mountains form the walls, the rivers form the veins. The Kamogawa River cuts through the city from north to south, serving not just as a geographical divide between the imperial center and the eastern temples, but as the city's primary "public living room." In a dense urban grid devoid of European-style plazas, the riverbanks (Kamo-gawa Yuka) serve as the only true neutral ground where students, locals, and tourists coexist.



Furthermore, the city sits atop a massive underground water table. The quality of this soft groundwater (*fushimizu*) is the root of Kyoto's "Three Whites" (sake, tofu, and tea) and historically powered the dyeing processes of the Nishijin silk industry. The city's culture is literally fluid, built on a resource that is invisible from the surface.

Founded in 794 AD as Heian-kyo ("Capital of Peace and Tranquility"), Kyoto served as the Imperial capital of Japan for over a millennium,

until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Unlike the organic, sprawling growth of Tokyo (Edo), Kyoto was a master-planned city, modeled strictly after the ancient Chinese capital of Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an).

The city is built on a rigid grid system (*jobo-sei*) that has persisted for 1,200 years. The streets are numbered from one (*ichijo*) to Nnine (*kujo*), creating a navigation system so logical that residents use cardinal directions (*agaru* for up/north, *sagaru* for down/south) rather than street numbers.

However, this grid is not merely a navigational tool, but it mirrors the city's social architecture.

The grid divides the city into clear, manageable blocks (*cho*), fostering strong, self-policing neighborhood associations but also reinforcing a sense of exclusivity.

This desire for separation is physically manifested in the traditional *machiya*. These wooden townhouses are defined by *koshi* (lattices): slatted wooden facades that allow insiders to look out while preventing outsiders from looking in.

## 2.2 DEMOGRAPHICS AND OVERTURISM

Kyoto is currently navigating a crisis that threatens its social sustainability, creating a tense environment for any newcomer trying to integrate.

There are three main reasons: expensive housing, vacant houses and overtourism.

### **The shrinking city**

While Kyoto remains a massive global brand, its physical reality is shrinking. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2023), Kyoto City has experienced the largest population decline of any designated city in Japan for several consecutive years.

This demographic hollowing-out creates a strange atmosphere: the streets are crowded with tourists, but the community is fracturing.

For an international student arriving nowadays, they are entering a community that is already defensive and retreating.

### **Expensive housing and akiya**

Young families are fleeing the city center due to soaring real estate prices driven by hotel development, leaving behind an aging demographic.

Despite the housing shortage for residents and also students, the city is dotted with *akiya* (vacant houses), creating pockets of urban silence in historical neighborhoods (Kyoto City Housing Bureau, 2023).

This phenomenon of vacant houses is really spread in Japan and it is a issue given by the aging population index.

### **Overtourism**

The resurgence of post-pandemic travel has brought the issue of overtourism to a breaking point.

In 2019, Kyoto welcomed over 53 million visitors, in 2024 numbers are projected to exceed this.

Local residents, including elderly citizens and students, often cannot board city buses due to overcrowding by tourists with large luggage. In fact, now is not possible anymore to board buses with luggages.

This phenomenon has birthed a new friction known as *Kanko Kogai* (tourism pollution). The result is a psychological wall: local residents have developed a defensive reflex against anyone who looks foreign, assuming they are a noisy, rule-breaking tourist. But this is only a part of residents.

## **2.3 STUDENT CITY**

Kyoto operates under a unique demographic condition that distinguishes it from Tokyo or Osaka. Functionally, it is a Campus City.

With a population of approximately 1.45 million people, recent municipal data indicates that roughly 150,000 residents are university students (Kyoto City, 2023).

This results in a ratio where one in ten residents is a university student, the highest density among Japan's designated major cities (Consortium of Universities in Kyoto, 2024).

This density is supported by the Consortium of Universities in Kyoto, a unique systemic actor established in 1998 that binds roughly 50 universities and junior colleges. Theoretically, this creates a massive, interconnected network.

Kyoto is not just a tourist city; it is functionally a "Campus City." With a population of approx. 1.45 million, statistics indicate that one in ten residents is a university student, the highest ratio among Japan's major cities.

This density is supported by the Consortium of Universities in Kyoto, a unique systemic actor established in 1998 that binds roughly 50 universities and junior colleges. Theoretically, this creates a massive, interconnected "knowledge network" (Consortium of Universities in Kyoto, n.d.). However, a systemic diagnosis reveals that this network is physically fragmented and socially siloed. The student population is not a cohesive whole but a

collection of isolated clusters, separated by institutional walls.

As of 2024, Japan reached a record high of 336,708 international students, a rapid V-shaped recovery post-pandemic (JASSO, 2024). Kyoto serves as a primary hub within the Kansai region. However, the composition of this demographic is critical for the design of communication tools.

The "English Myth": Contrary to the "Western" image of international exchange often depicted in university brochures, the reality is overwhelmingly Asian:

- China (~40-50%): The dominant majority.
- Nepal & Vietnam: Rapidly surging demographics, often filling labor shortages while studying.

The common assumption that "English is the bridge language" is flawed. For a Nepalese student and a Vietnamese student trying to communicate with a Japanese local, English is often a third language for everyone (Kramsch, 1998). This data validates the thesis argument for non-verbal, object-mediated communication (Knorr Cetina, 1997) over purely linguistic solutions.

## Chapter 3

# Research questions

**1** What if we need imperfect, flawed experiences to reconnect with reality? What if what we actually need is *friction*?

**2** How do we get in touch with *imperfection*?

### 3.1 DIGITAL LIFE AND LACK OF FRICTION

Friction derives from the interaction between people, people and objects. It involves emotions, senses, objects and whenever there is a movement, there is also friction.

As in the example of the shokunin, the more friction is present and the more we engage and care. What drives our engagement is basically friction, which we can consider not as a negative characteristic but instead as what makes up our humanness and our experiences.

Friction is also what we have lost in the digital world.

Online, on a screen, everything is fluid and perfect. The juxtaposition of pixels create a flawless world that reliefs us because we do not need to wait, we can correct mistakes and the experience is designed to be easy. Nowadays, a device can be every object we want, it is the same object for each function (Sheikh, 2023).

Everything can be immediate and effortless behind our screen, movement is minimum.

And also possibilities are not really infinite, because everything is predictable. All our actions are recorded and translated into data, making them readable and predictable. Just think about the algorithm on social medias like Instagram, the app knows what we want to buy next before than we know. Luna Maurer and Roel Wouters propose some guidelines for designing friction:

- Discomfort: here is where we can learn and discover the world because we get creative, adaptive, alive.
- Time delay: sometimes the fastest solution is not the right one but instant gratification is what the digital world is optimized for. However, being bored can lead to new ideas, to creativity and production.
- Engage the body: screen interaction requires only the movement of a finger, we lack resistance. As discussed earlier, the relation between human and things is the fundament of our existence.
- Non positive: smoothness does not produce resistance but it is the disagreement, the doubt, the uncertainty that make us human. (Maurer & Wouters, 2012-2023).

So, what I am going to research through a questionnaire and some interviews is how we get in touch with imperfection: how we behave with digital devices, what are the activities that make us feel relieved, how we reconnect with reality after a digital overwhelm and so on. The goal is to understand what are the pain points in the use of technology in our daily life and how we can rediscover the beauty and the meaning of the unpredictability and imperfection.



## 3.2 QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire has been spread with the name “Living at 2x: understanding friction across digital and real life”, using a non formal tone of voice. The same tone has been used also in the formulation of questions: I spread the questionnaire mainly with people of my age so I wanted to use a relaxed and friendly tone, in order to make users feel closer to the theme and the experience more engaging.

In addition, the questionnaire has been spread between italians, international students in the dorm I live and japanese students of Kyoto University of Technology.

This multicultural level let me assume that the informations acquired from the responses can be shared and acknowledged across different cultures and backgrounds.

The questionnaire has been subdivided in 3 different sections:

### - Demographics and ice-breaking

The total number of respondants is 91: 90% of them are young, between 18 and 35 years, and a lot of them are students (56%) or employed (33%). After 3 questions about generalities, there are two quick questions on the relationship with technologies: time spent in front of a screen per day and how they feel about it.

This got users to know the goal and the topic of the survey in case that someone had not read the description at the top of the Google form.

### - What's your pace?

This section is dedicated to understand the velocity and the patience that people have with digital devices and applications.

For instance, a simple question asks the velocity speed used for listening a Whatsapp voice message, and this allows me to map if there is a relation between one person's pace and digital overwelmt.

### - Connection with reality

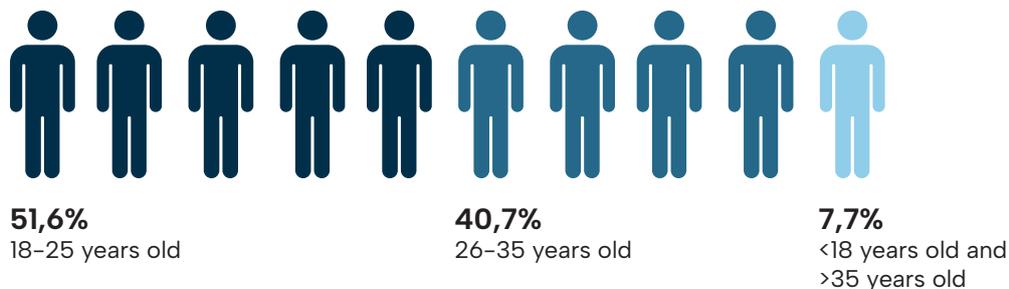
These questions are more related about daily life, expectations and feelings about the fluidity of digital world.

An interesting insight from this section is the willingness to feel more unpredictable and have more unpredictable features even on social media. More than half of the respontants agreed to the possibility of having a “chaos” mode on social media: a button that could interrump the algorithm and let users exit from the “bubble” made of tailored, studied contents. About doing something more difficult instead of a fast and easy task, people showed willingness to engage in time consuming activities.

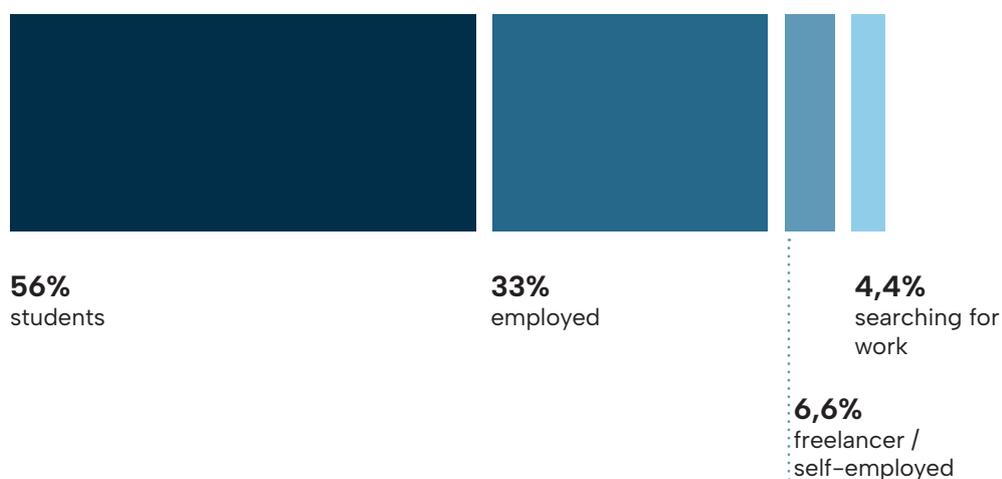
Walking seem to be the favourite activity for release after experiencing digital overwhelming: almost 40 people wrote that they go out and walk or meet friends.

91 respondents

18-35 average age

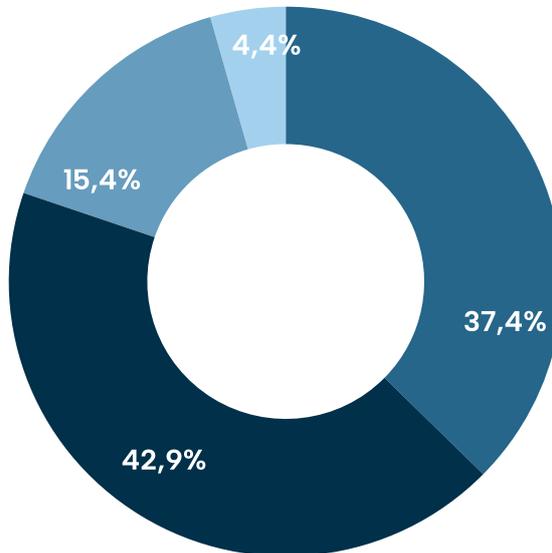


mainly **students**

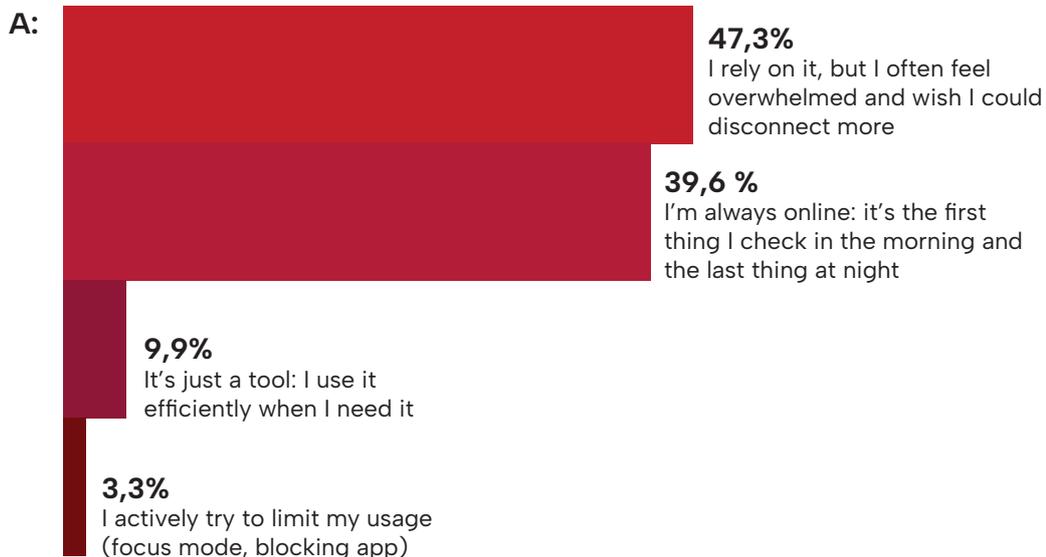


Q: On an average day, how many hours do you spend in front of a screen for work or study?

- A:
- 7-9 hours
  - 4-6 hours
  - <3 hours
  - >10 hours



Q: Which statement best describes your current relationship with technology?



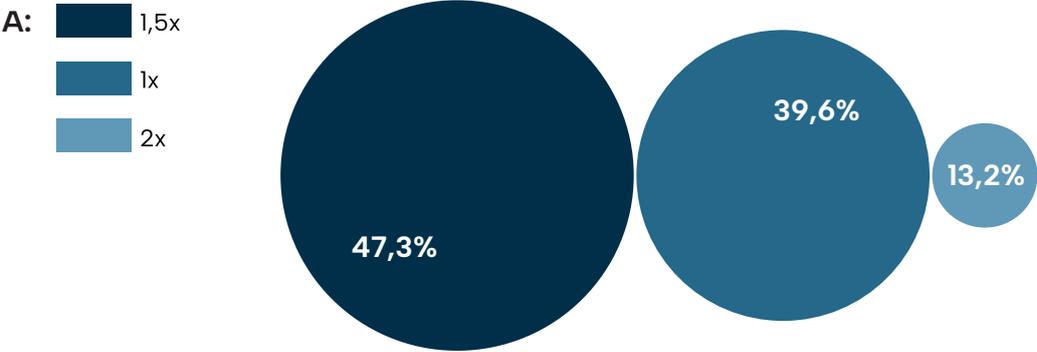
The first section allowed me to get in touch with the respondents and to understand who they are.

To sum up, these people are mainly students who, as a consequence of their main activities, spend a lot of time in front of a screen (almost 7 hours per day, on average).

This is an important information because the project could take into account the fact that people spend already too much hours looking at a screen.

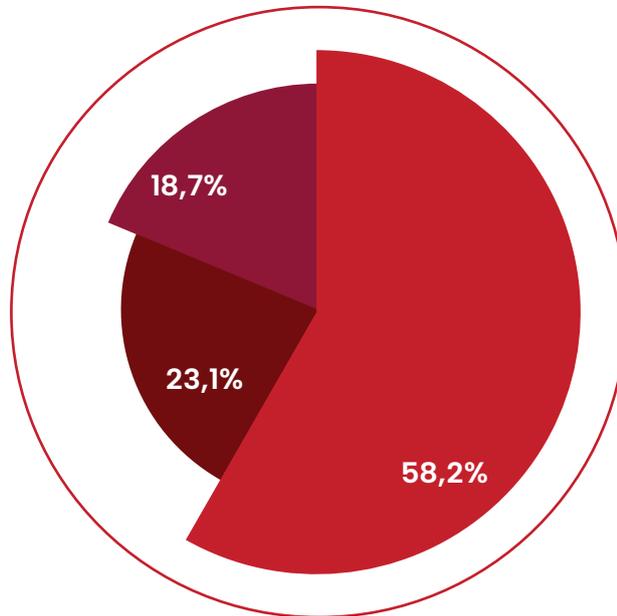
Then, the 47,3% of people who said that would like to decrease this time spent online could maybe be the target of the project since they already expressed a need of slowing down and disconnecting.

**Q:** When you're listening to a voice note (Whatsapp, Instagram), what is your default speed?

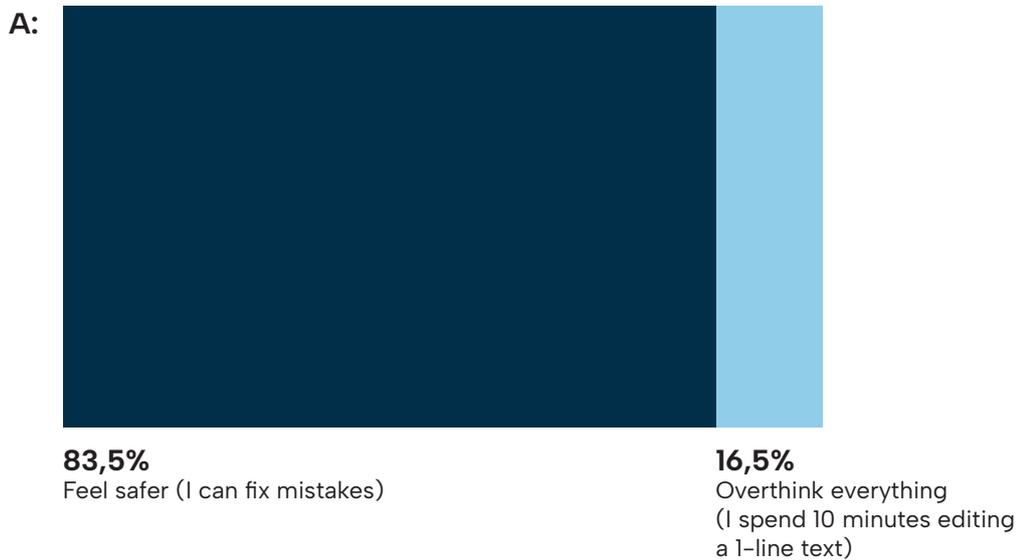


Q: When you want to learn to do something, which tutorial format would you choose?

- A:
- long video (YouTube)
  - blog/text
  - short video (TikTok, Instagram)



Q: Does the ability to constantly edit, delete, and undo your digital messages make you...

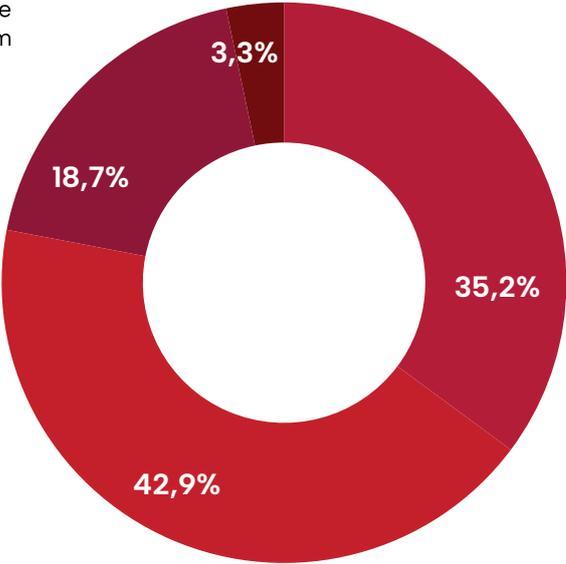


From the section “What’s your pace?” it is possible to understand that people often rush in daily, repetitive activities such as sending a message. But the same happens also when using the phone is just a way to spend time (scrolling on social media for instance).

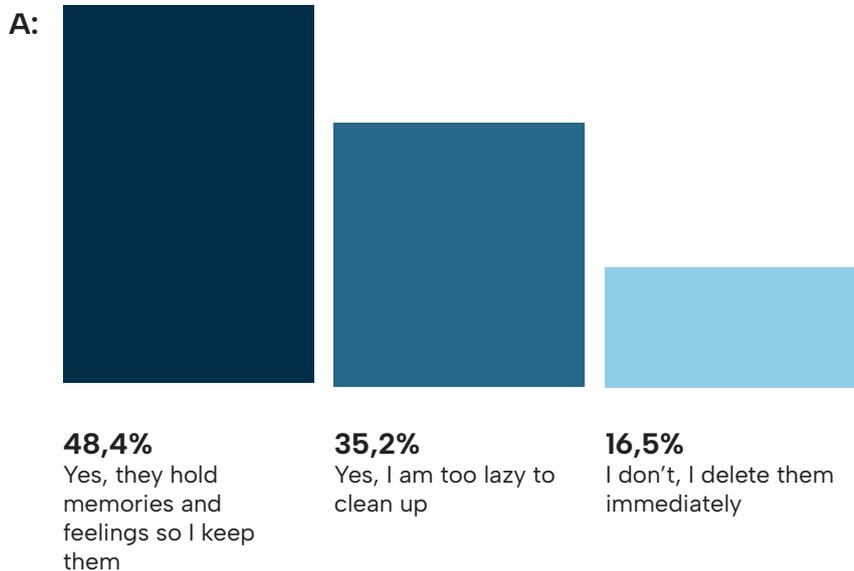
When it comes to learn something, to complete a task which requires more concentration, the answers show that people are available to dedicate more time.

**Q:** Would you use a ‘chaos mode’ button on social media that interrupts the algorithm and shows content you do not usually like, just to break the echo chamber?

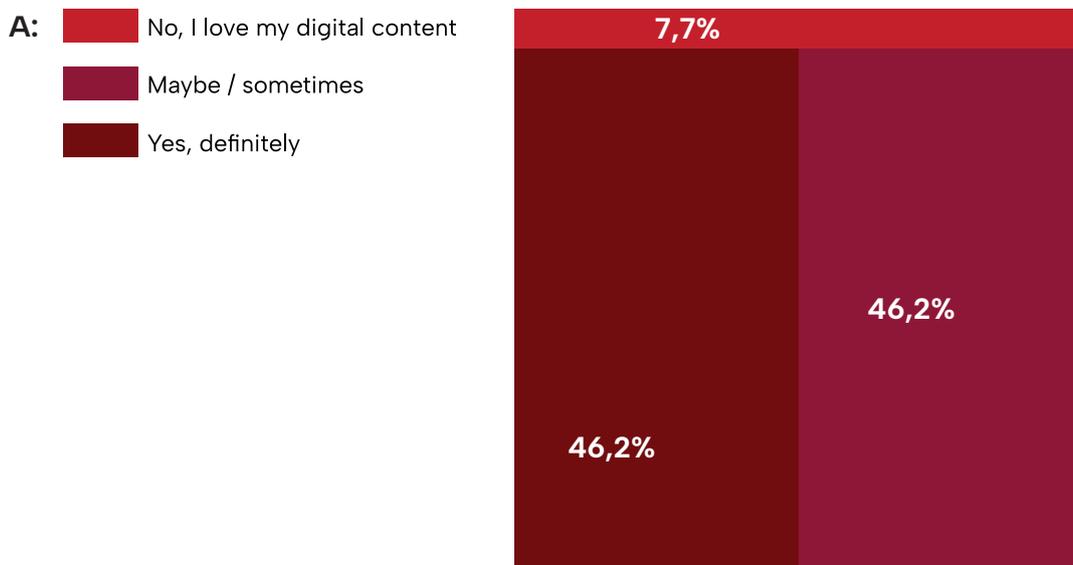
- A:**
- Often, I wish it would show me something completely random
  - Sometimes, it feels like I'm in a bubble
  - No, that sounds annoying
  - I do not use social media



Q: Do you keep photos that aren't "perfect" (blurry shots, random objects, bad lighting)?

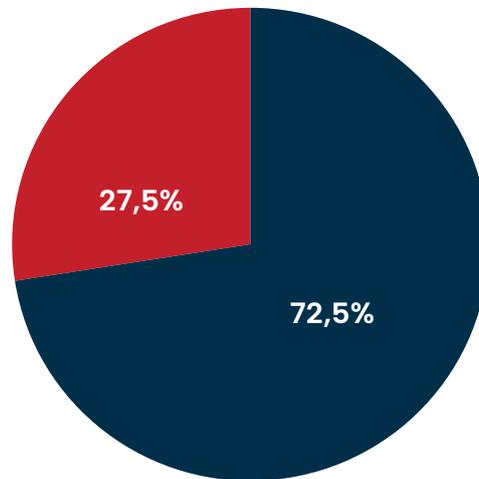


Q: Do you wish your digital devices were less interesting so you would get bored enough to do creative things?



**Q:** Do you ever intentionally choose a “slower” or “harder” way of doing something just to feel the experience? (e.g. walking instead of driving, writing a text instead of delegating it to AI..)

**A:**  Yes  
 No



**Q:** What do you do when you experience digital overwhelm?

**A:**

- I stay on the sofa for hours scrolling the reels on Instagram and feeling completely stupid
- I quit social
- Jump out of it.
- Force myself to get out and see people, anything but the digital eco chamber
- I take a break from screens, go for a walk, or do something offline to reset.
- Crashed a little bit but keep going then i just put myself on « do not disturb » mode and i just do something creative or i read (it can be on my phone)
- I put on some music and go for a walk.
- I can't get off the screen, keep using it till I am tired and fall asleep
- I text my closest friends, and let them know, and then I try to get out to fresh air, or I do something analog.
- I go out for a walk with my dog
- Stay away from my smartphone and go around or find some book to read
- I put my phone in airplane mode or I leave it in a different room and engage with some manual activity/craft
- I cannot stop, it's a vicious cicle
- I try to be offline and i go to the nature
- Go for a walk or read a book

- Shut down devices
- I would just talk to a real human being and connect to them through normal conversations.
- Try to stay away from devices and focus on real life things
- I like games like puzzles or building blocks, they help me to relax and not to think
- Disconnect for a couple of days
- Sports, meditate, cook, projects
- I put music on a podcast in the background and stop for a few minutes
- Leave everything at home and go for a walk or to the gym.
- I hang out with my friends or i take care of my house
- I leave my cell phone and start doing things that interest me like reading a book
- Has never happend
- I turn everything off
- I take a break and go outside
- I stop doing what overwhelm me (stop playing games/read/work if it's too much)
- I try to turn off the phone, but not always it works
- I shut everything down and ether take a book, start to draw or go for a walk
- Craft
- I would hide those apps where I can't find easily, but I don't logout because I know I would miss them when I get better.
- I'm still trying to figure out, I would like to disconnect but I'm too addicted
- I close all the apps and turn my phone so I can't see the screen
- Go for a walk and listen to music - go for drinks with friends or do something. See art? call a friend - eat food , sleep go for another walk
- Trying to stay away from screens and get myself busy with other activities ( books, music, working out, going on walks).

The last question I reported has been really useful because I noticed that almost everyone who answered the survey (I did not reported all the answers here because of repetitions) seems to experience often digital overwhelm. The most common response to it is going for a walk, disconnecting the phone and try to meet people. Try to stay in the reality through talking with other humans.

### 3.3 CRAVING IMPERFECTION

The insights gained from the questionnaire made me define the second question: how do we get in touch with imperfection? How do we value it?

We are used to find seamless, clean experiences online and, as a consequence, we do not get in touch very often with something that is not smooth, easy and quick.

This velocity that we experience online does not correspond to the actual life: things can be slow, difficult, non-linear and, therefore, imperfect.

And imperfection is what we actually enjoy when we disconnect from our devices; imperfection is a high value for a crafted, handmade object and gives us a feel of exclusivity and uniqueness.

But why does imperfection make art, craftsmanship and handmade objects to powerful?

Because perfection make things appear sterile or mechanical, while flaws show the artist's hands, the humanity behind the object. And moreover, imperfection tells a story, it adds depth and meaning that would not be there otherwise (Sustainability Directory, 2025).

### 3.4 INTERVIEWS

The insights gained from the questionnaire helped me to define some questions for interviewing 4 students in the dormitory where I live here in Kyoto, 1 colleague from KIT who is an international student from South America and 1 stakeholder who works everyday with Japanese and international students.

I have chosen to investigate the lives of other students because, since they have all different background and nationalities, they could represent a variegated sample of young users.

The questions move from the questionnaire topics to their personal behavior with objects and crafting activities.

While working on the layout of this printed book, I decided to use photos of their possessions and of the objects they brought from home to describe the interviewee.

I think that, in this case, objects can express better the concept of these talks and the feelings that these person have towards possessions that had flight all the way to Japan not because of their functionalities but because of the deep bond between the human and the object.

At the end, the interviews move towards talking about personal experiences in Japan, asking issues and thoughts.

I have used Gemini AI for interviews transcription.



## Interview 01

# Nura

**Age**  
25

**From**  
St. Petersburg, Russia

**Profession**  
Material Science  
Master student

**Period in Japan**  
1 year



**Q: Did you brought any object from home, here in Japan?**

**A:** I have huge amount of Harry Potter figures, they're very small. There was an offer in one supermarket, you know when you buy something and you get large collection of credits. Also I have a fox, it was sculpted by hand on wood by my father's friend. Also, I have a large picture which was made in by my best friend. She sent it for me and I also brought a lot of pictures and postcards, I have just large amount of postcards and maybe some photos of my parents and from my childhood.

**Q: We are all living far from home, so we use our phones a lot. Do you think that your relationship with technology is changing here? If yes, how?**

**A:** Yeah, I have been living abroad for 4 years so I use my phone more due to the fact that I couldn't just go directly to my parents or to my friends.

So, in Russia sometimes you write to your friends because you don't live nearby, the city is very large and everybody is in a different part but more or less you can meet each. Sometimes I'm scrolling but usually I do it to connect with my sister or something like this.

On Instagram usually we message by sending Reels each other, and this is not the most productive conversation but then we answer in other ways too.

**Q: Have you ever sat down to check one notification, looked up, and realized an hour had passed? How often does it happen? How do you feel about it?**

**A:** Usually I try to separate my study time and free time, so I never really feel to waste time on my phone.

**Q: Did you feel any sense of 'non-real' or dissociation during your first weeks here? Did you make any activity that helped you feel more grounded?**

**A:** I don't think so because I was living alone also before Japan. So I already was prepared to living alone but of course there are some moments that made me feel nostalgic. Just like I don't have my dogs, in my bed or something like this.

Of course you change some feelings but the first week I think it's the most hardest week. Maybe not only the first week, maybe the first half year. Because you move abroad in a different country and you don't understand rules of this country, I mean not law rules.. you don't understand cultural codes because you have never lived for a long time in this country and you should try to understand how people communicate with each other. This was my experience in Italy but also for Japan, even though I think in Japan it was a little bit easier because I've already experienced. So it's more elegance connecting with the culture than in Italy.

**Q: When the pressure of studying or just living a different life here gets too much, what do you do to 'turn your brain off'? Do you prefer passive things (Netflix) or active things (cooking, cleaning)? Would you do something different at home?**

**A:** If I feel pressure from education or from everything else, I turn off every social media and I have only maybe music. Just offline version of Spotify and walking, something like this. Because it's you staying with your mind only, with yourself, and I think very important.

**Q: How do you feel about things that are not perfect? Maybe broken or faded, or just made with a “wrong” shape?**

**A:** I think it depends on what it is. Because, for example, if it’s a plate or any kind of glasses which you use for food, in Russia we usually throw away immediately. No maybe not throw away, maybe just let them on shelf because it’s maybe dangerous if you not pay any attention and you can cut yourself or small piece of glass will go inside you.

So it’s not good, so maybe for some glass stuff I’m a little bit more streak but if it’s something I don’t know, a not perfect t-shirt, maybe I will first use it at home.

Because, who cares? Then maybe put it in the garbage bin, one of those for recycling this textile and make something new.

If it’s something other like shoes, I prefer to be honest to throw away shoes. I know that there are some people who can repair it, I can give to them. But if I don’t know, I will just throw away it, it happens. Nothing in our life is infinite.

**Q: Do you enjoy craft things with your ends? How much time would you spend for a project?**



**A:** I’m doing crochet. I can show it if you want. Also sometimes I draw something but not really often. Nowadays mostly I just do things with my hands.

I don’t have limited time. I just like doing it when I have inspiration and when I feel that I want to do it. Sometimes I can crochet very fast, like I did my hat in, I think, one day because I just wanted to do it fast, but I couldn’t finish my gillet for one year because I know it’s very large and the last part will take a long time. So when I’m thinking about it I don’t really want to do it, but I should.

If I see my mistake and it really annoys me, I will re-do it one more time. But if it doesn’t annoy me and only me knows that there are some mistakes, it’s fine.

**Q: What would you say about your experience here in Japan? Did you encounter any challenge?**

**A:** At first, my laboratory colleagues were very shy, you know, they always talk in Japanese and it is difficult to understand what they really want to do. There is such a thing with politeness, they have to behave in a polite

and kind way everytime. And on one hand I like it because they are teaching me how to be more patient. But very often they only talk in Japanese and I am there, waiting, you know, just that they finish. And they laugh and talk but I never know what they are saying and sometimes it's annoying. I would like to be more part of the group, even if we had the bonenkai together.



## Interview 03

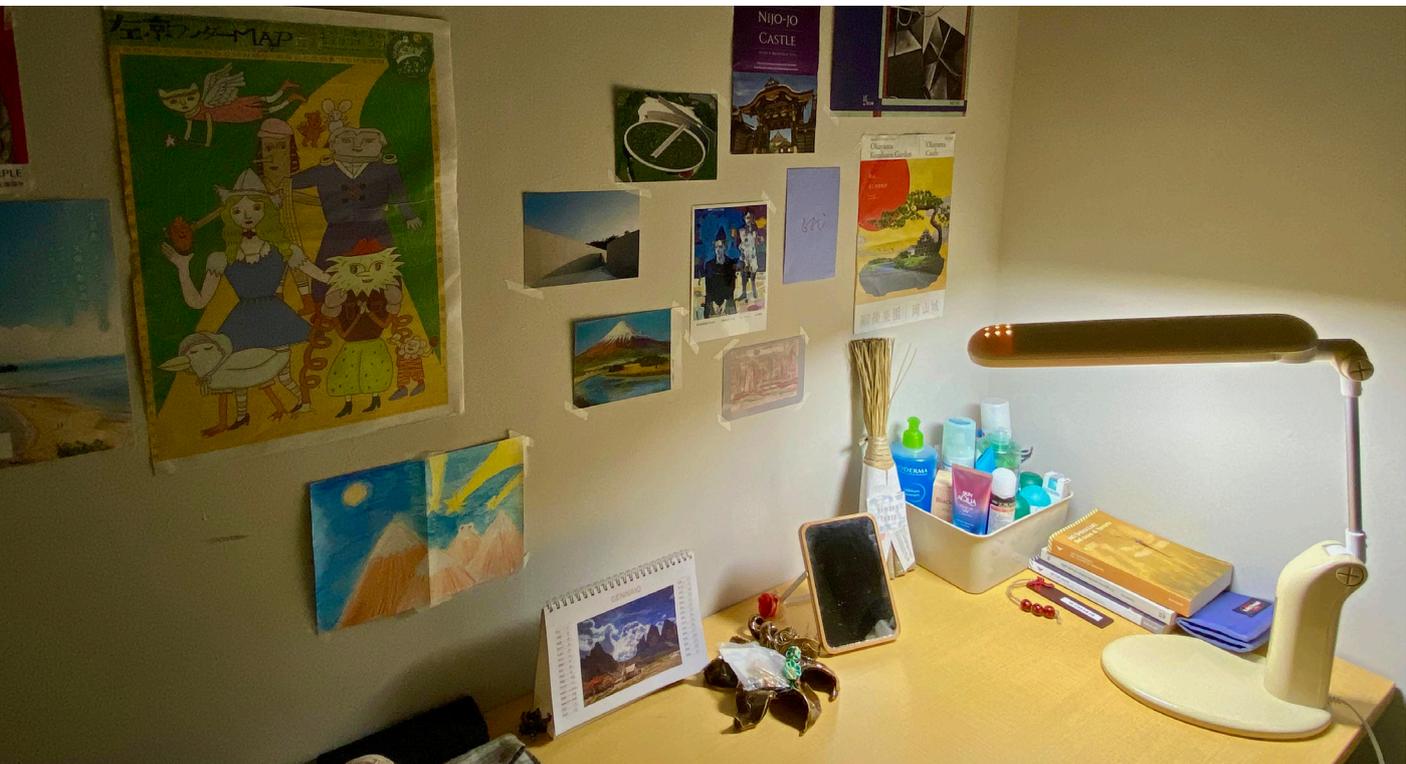
# Erica

**Age**  
26

**From**  
Turin, Italy

**Profession**  
Material Science  
Master student

**Period in Japan**  
1 year



**Q: Did you brought any object from home, here in Japan?**

**A:** Yes. A little octopus. Because it is a present from my boyfriend and it means a lot to me, it's like I brought the connection with my boyfriend also here and so I feel him closer to me.  
And it is also, like, a memory of when I was in Venice and he went to visit me.  
And another thing that I brought is my incense. I have sticks of incense both from my boyfriend and also my mom. so it also means home for me.

It is the smell of home. And I brought printed photos of my family, my friends and my boyfriend also.

And also some lights where I hang it on my photos. So I look at them every day and I feel more at home. Some books to read.

**Q: We are all living far from home, so we use our phones a lot. Do you think that your relationship with technology is changing here? If yes, how?**

**A:** Yes. I'm using more my phone to have calls with my parents and friends and boyfriend. and also I think I have more free time here. So sometimes I'm just brain walking a lot because sometimes I don't have anything to do so I just lay on my phone and it's not very good. that's it. Maybe I do more photos because I'm in another country. Mhm. So I use more the translator for Japanese, every day basically. I use my phone more also to stay more in touch with what is happening in Italy and in the world in general. Since of the different time zone, while news are spread in Italy I am sleeping, and the opposite. So I feel that I need more time that the usual to discover the news and understand the situation. If back in Italy I was super updated, I was living it, now I need to check social networks to stay in touch with reality. Crazy, isn't it?

**Q: Have you ever sat down to check one notification, looked up, and realized an hour had passed? How often does it happen? How do you feel about it?**

**A:** A lot of times, yes. And also sometimes I don't reply, I just open my phone and do something else and then I remember that I open my phone because of the notification. So yeah and maybe that's why I don't transfer to the messages the texts suddenly immediately. The notifications are just an excuse to use my phone maybe.

**Q: Did you feel any sense of 'non-real' or dissociation during your first weeks here? Did you make any activity that helped you feel more grounded?**

**A:** Mh, maybe during the first weeks because I felt like a tourist. For me it was all new and I went around a lot visiting, walking and I really liked it. I really enjoyed it. But after a while, I think, after I started university here, I felt a lot lost and I felt like it wasn't my place and I felt like, I think, it was just a cultural barrier. And also disorientation I think mainly. Yes. Then after some weeks I started to feel more at home.

**Q: When the pressure of studying or just living a different life here gets too much, what do you do to 'turn your brain off'? Do you prefer passive things (Netflix) or active things (cooking, cleaning)? Would you do something different at home?**

**A:** Here I think that I do active things like painting and drawing, while in Italy maybe I had more opportunity to hang out in a different way. I maybe called my friends and ask for hang out, those are friends that I don't see very often. So it's a different relationship with my with friends that I have in Italy and friends that I have here. It's a different way to, I don't know, overcome these type of moments.

**Q: How do you feel about things that are not perfect? Maybe broken or faded, or just made with a "wrong" shape?**

**A:** At first, I'm really disappointed because I think I'm a very perfectionist person. For example, when we did the craft with clay I wasn't so happy about the result of my little cup. So I was very disappointed and I looked at it a lot of times trying to figure out how to change it. And then I just accept it.

I think it also happens for the things that I buy: at first I'm very disappointed. I think "what can I do?" Maybe I could sell them.

Then I'm very lazy and I don't do it. I just accept.

Sometimes I don't even use them at all. If I buy some clothes that I don't like really much, it just lays in my wardrobe, and then maybe after some time, I will sell it when I'm not lazy anymore.



**Q: Do you enjoy craft things with your hands? How much time would you spend for a project?**

**A:** Yes, I love a lot. I think that time depends on what I do.

I did many things with clay when I was back in Italy and I spent, I think, entire days doing earrings and this kind of stuff.

But if I try to draw or paint maybe just few hours, like two or three but then I have to finish it.

It doesn't happen so often that I leave works to be ended.

If I have a big project that I have in my mind and I want it to be perfect, then I will be very on it. Like, I spend a lot of time on it. And I use many days, not only because I want to do it.

I started many project that I didn't finish.

But if I have things that is clear in my mind and it's going well because I'm doing it very well, I'm very happy, I will spend a lot of days. But if I start a project and it doesn't correspond to what is in my mind, then it's not sure that I will finish it.

**Q: What would you say about your experience here in Japan? Did you encounter any challenge?**

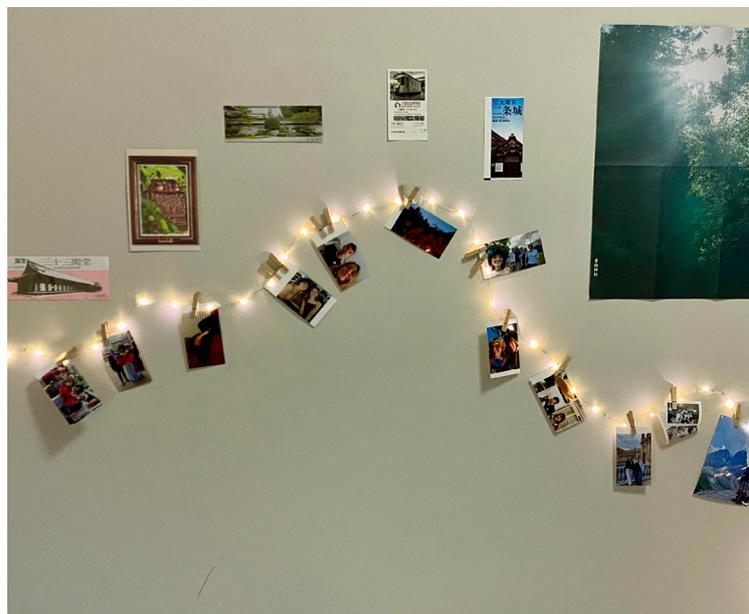
**A:** A lot of cultural challenges, of course, and social challenges.. because I didn't find many friends here.

I think they are so close that you cannot get close to them. Japanese people cannot speak English. So it's very difficult to communicate to them and so to be friends with them.

And they are not so friendly. As we know, in an Italian manner also. Mhm. And I also experienced a little bit of racism..

I am facing also a university challenge, because it is very different from what I used to do back in Italy. Laboratory environment is completely different and very often I do not understand what I have to do and what they expect from me.

I feel a bit sad of not having Japanese friends here. The only two people in my lab who can speak English sometimes try to be friendly but then it is like they do not know what to do or say or they are just tired.



## Interview 04

# Marie Bjørk

**Age**  
25

**From**  
Wageningen, Norway

**Profession**  
Textile engineering  
Master student

**Period in Japan**  
1 year



**Q: Did you brought any object from home, here in Japan?**

**A:** Yes. I brought with me a flag. I found it while I was packing and I brought with me, you know we are so far from home.. Then some handmade sweaters that my grandma made for me, I am really bonded with these sweaters and they remind me of my family and my grandma. It is also very cold now in Kyoto.

**Q: We are all living far from home, so we use our phones a lot. Do you think that your relationship with technology is changing here? If yes, how?**

**A:** I think I use my phone maybe less, because of the time difference. So I lived in multiple countries, when I lived in the Netherlands for example I talked to my friends way more because we were in the same time zone, but now it's bit difficult. I'd say that my phone usage is more related to contacting people like or just gets used for music and videos.

**Q: Have you ever sat down to check one notification, looked up, and realized an hour had passed? How often does it happen? How do you feel about it?**

**A:** I wish I didn't. It's mostly Tik Tok the problem, even if I have time limits I will override the time limits. Tik Tok is crazy because it's too short, so you just say "Okay, another one." It's so easy to do that.

**Q: Did you feel any sense of 'non-real' or dissociation during your first weeks here? Did you make any activity that helped you feel more grounded?**

**A:** Actually yes, the two first months in Japan I felt like "this is not real life" and the feeling continued for weeks. I felt I was living in a movie. I don't know why but everything was just so different from my normal life and even if I have been living abroad for years, Japan is way different from the other places and from Europe.

**Q: When the pressure of studying or just living a different life here gets too much, what do you do to 'turn your brain off'? Do you prefer passive things (Netflix) or active things (cooking, cleaning)? Would you do something different at home?**

**A:** Yes, I do knitting. So, journal or I will just watch Netflix or videos on Youtube. But I love to journal, I write and draw, glue pictures and drawings.

**Q: What would you say about your experience here in Japan? Did you encounter any challenge?**

**A:** I think the biggest challenge is language. I hate not knowing what's going on, so I should learn Japanese. But I gave up on Japanese immediately because it's very difficult. So, not that they should know English. It would be easier, but it's also just like reading sites and stuff. I don't expect sites to be in English.

## Interview 05

# Helimar

**Age**  
30

**From**  
Maracaibo, Venezuela

**Profession**  
Design  
Master student

**Period in Japan**  
2 years and 9 months



**Q: Did you brought any object from home, here in Japan?**

**A:** I do have one peluche, like a puppy peluche that my family gave me when I was 5 years old. I used to sleep with it like every night and I brought it with me even if I do not sleep with it anymore. It is like that it makes me feel at home. When I was alone here, in my empty new room apartment.

**Q: We are all living far from home, so we use our phones a lot. Do you think that your relationship with technology is changing here? If yes, how?**

**A:** I think technology is convenient. I think my relationship with technology changed from that I, like, expected everything to be perfect and kind of modern, to having papers and ancient stuff all around home. Like the bathroom, the toilet, or the trains in Japan, those I really love. I like this kind of technology for efficiency and the services, not for my home. Now I'm getting used with exhibitions with lights or projections..you know, the TeamLab in Kyoto is really amazing. Or, all the technology in the college, in KIT. I think I have a different relationship with technology, before it used to be just smartphone or tv, but now technology is more around me and I feel more dependent than before.

When I arrived to Japan, I thought I was dreaming and that i was not real. Every day when I woke up or before going to sleep I was like "I can't believe I live here", I tought I was going to wake up in my room, in my country. That was my case.

**Q: Did you feel any sense of 'non-real' or dissociation during your first weeks here? Did you make any activity that helped you feel more grounded?**

**A:** When I arrived to Japan, I thought I was dreaming and that i was not real. Every day when I woke up or before going to sleep I was like "I can't believe I live here", I tought I was going to wake up in my room, in my country. That was my case.

**Q: When the pressure of studying or just living a different life here gets too much, what do you do to 'turn your brain off'? Do you prefer passive things (Netflix) or active things (cooking, cleaning)? Would you do something different at home?**

**A:** When I feel the pressure of something, the first thing is breathe. I breathe and also I go to do exercises at the gym. Something different that I do here and I would not do in my country is that sometimes I go to the river. The Kamogawa river, or some park with many trees and green spaces make me feel relieved. And now, recently, I have my cat so I pet it.

**Q: Do you enjoy craft things with your hands? How much time would you spend for a project?**

**A:** Yes, I really enjoy to do crafts but in Japan I think there is a pressure for you to always success. If you fail, it is a very akward feeling how others react or how they see you. It is like.. I don't know, mistakes are part of the process but I feel the

pressure of having to do something good.

I did not feel this at home.

And at the beginning I did not know where to find materials and the second year here was tough for me, because to be honest none guided me deeply at college. I did not know things, most of the information I found out by myself or international classmates told me about it. So, for materials it was a bit difficult but yes, with time I can understand my surroundings.



**Q: What would you say about your experience here in Japan? Did you encounter any challenge?**

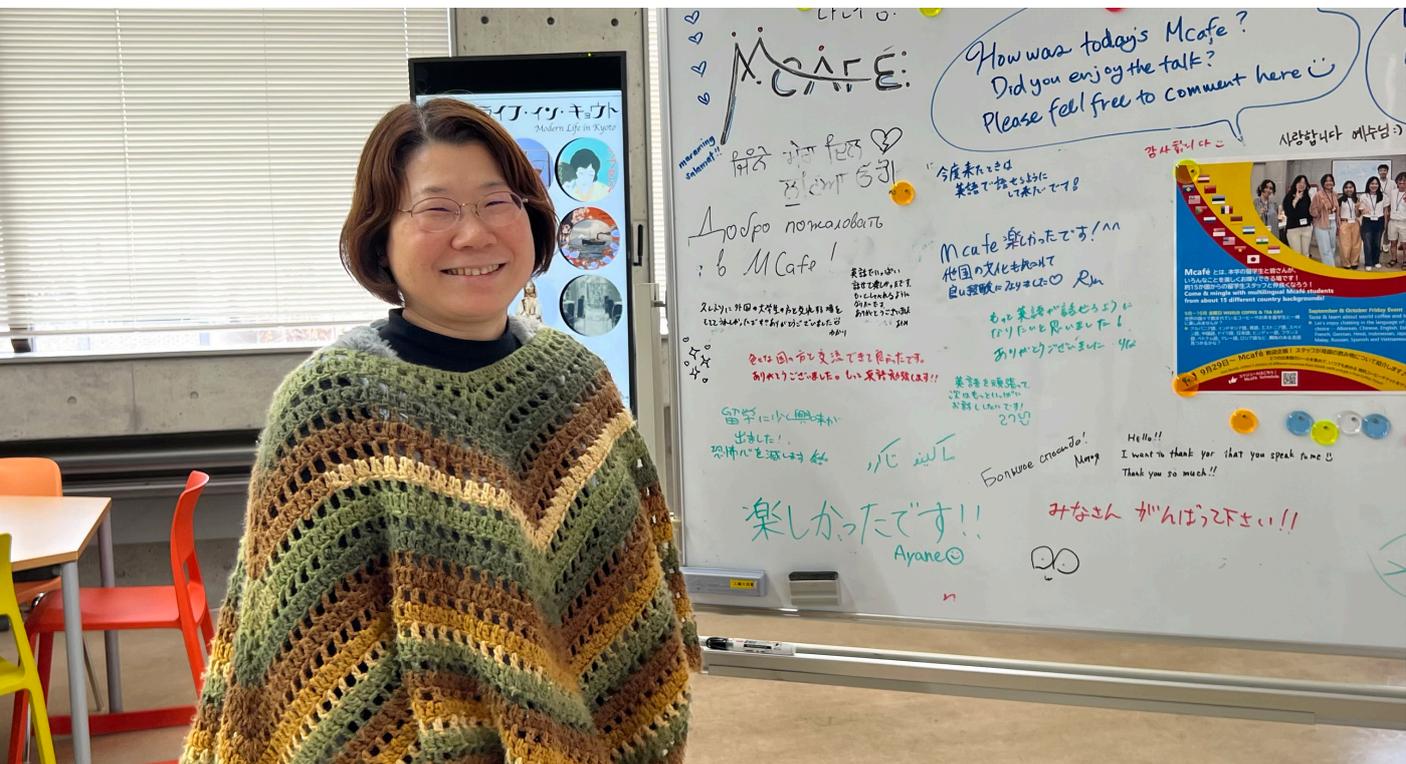
**A:** I think the biggest challenge is to feel comfortable with Japanese people, because at the beginning, and I am still working on it, I felt stressed because they are always aware of many things. Like, respect and harmony and respect the environment.. and I did not know how to read some environments, so I get stressed when I am not sure if I am reading the environment correctly.. So, the fact that they do not speak directly, this was something that shocked me because in my country, if we just need to say things we go straight forward and we do not need to, like, what the person just did was what they really wanted to. So here is a bit difficult, yes. And of course I am still working on it but I think that of reading the environment and being aware of everything, do not disturb anyone etc.. I think that is the hardest cultural shock.

## Interview 06

# Yasuko - Mcafe (KIT)

### Profession

Organization & Management at Mcafe



**Q:** How is the vibe at Mcafe? Quite and study-focused as today or more lively sometimes?

**A:** I don't know, I think often is quiet like right now.. because I think many students are in the class right now. So it depends on the time of the day. Maybe the most busy time it's usually Friday, because we offer free coffee, so there are more people.

**Q: Mcafé plans many events during the year, from small workshops to some of the school festival activities. Which events are the most successful at getting people to actually talk to each other?**

**A:** Open campus. We actually have expected students and most of them are Japanese. Yeah.

So, it is an event held for the high school students who are thinking about applying for this school. They visit this school with their parents. And so we usually have the Open Campus event just for two days in the summer. Often there are students who have one of their parent international, like Russian, and another parent who is Japanese.

Maybe they prefer to come when they have already a connection with Japan, maybe from a parent or just a family relative.

Then, many Japanese students have as a class assignment to come here and interview people at the cafe. Yeah. So those times they are kind of forced to come through.

But also many Japanese students are shy. So they are kind of afraid to come here, they're too shy to visit and speak to international student. But when they have a class assignment, they have to come here and they do it. A couple of times in a year I think there are two or three professors who gives the assignments here. So those students come very often.

**Q: Do you find that doing something with your hands (like calligraphy) makes it easier for students to chat compared to just sitting and drinking coffee?**

**A:** Yes, a lot. There are many students who come for the calligraphy activity in these days, there is always someone who comes.

I think they are engaged when it is about something they know how to do.

I think in general is easier when an activity is simple and fast.

Last year, during the school festival, we organized a kind of speed date. Students were in a group and they sit one in front of the other and had two or three minutes to talk and introduce themselves. Then, after some minutes, they changed person and it was really fun.

I think they liked it. Maybe the school festival was the best activity of the year.

**Q: Do you prefer events to be fully facilitated by staff, or activities run by students?**

**A:** The staff here is composed by students too. Japanese and international students.

They often propose activities and they organise it, I supervise them.

I think it is a chance to know each other and to vary the activities.



**Q: Do you find it hard to attract Japanese students who aren't already interested in English? How do you reach the ones who are just curious but intimidated?"**

**A:** So, if they come in group they're more relaxed.

There's one class in which the teacher gives as one of the assignments to introduce their favorite Japanese snack, it doesn't have to be Japanese, just a snack.

Everybody wrote about their favorite snack and, at the presentation days we were in a group and at that time we had four or five international students. We were sitting in a group and then everybody introduced their favorite snacks.

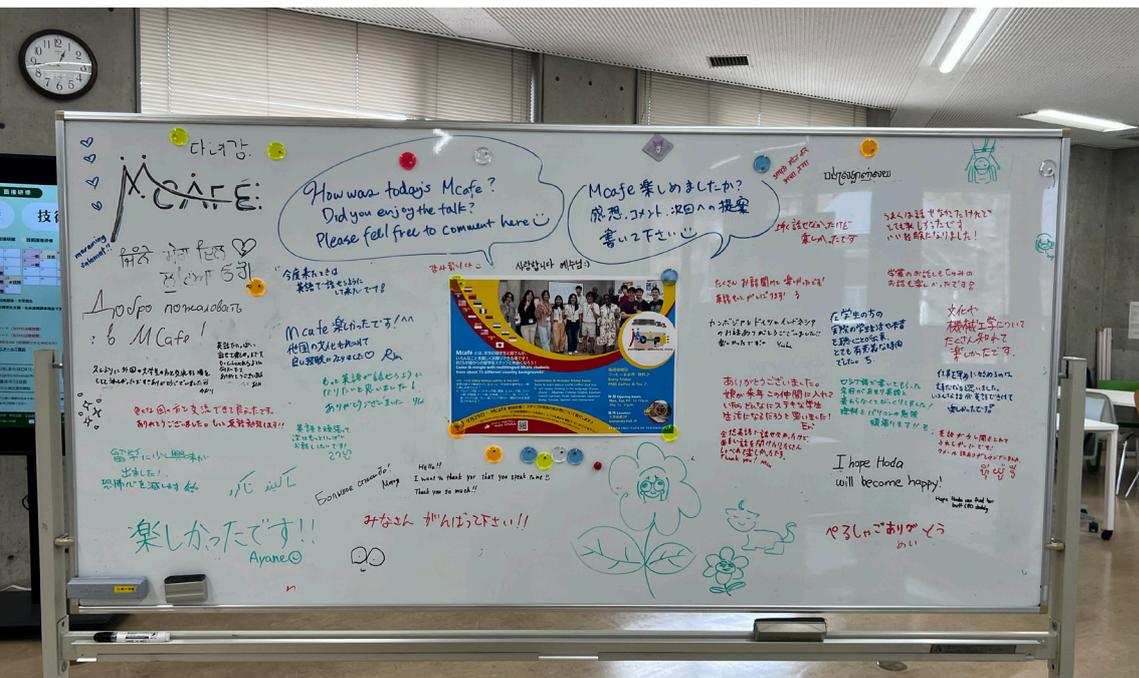
And then, after the presentation is over, we had a snack party. So that was fun. So if they have instructions or something that they know they have to do, maybe they're more open to do it. Maybe they know that they just have to come here and start to chat and talk.

**Q: In your experience, do Japanese students stay silent because they actually don't understand, or because they are afraid of making a grammar mistake?**

**A:** They are really shy. And I think they do not know how to approach other students. Maybe they need some activities or some push from their teacher.

Some of them work here and come often and try to chat with international students. I think, yeah, they need a comfortable space and maybe to be in small groups. So they feel less shy.

They have English courses at university too, so they know the language but they are not used to talk in English.



### 3.5 LANGUAGE BARRIER

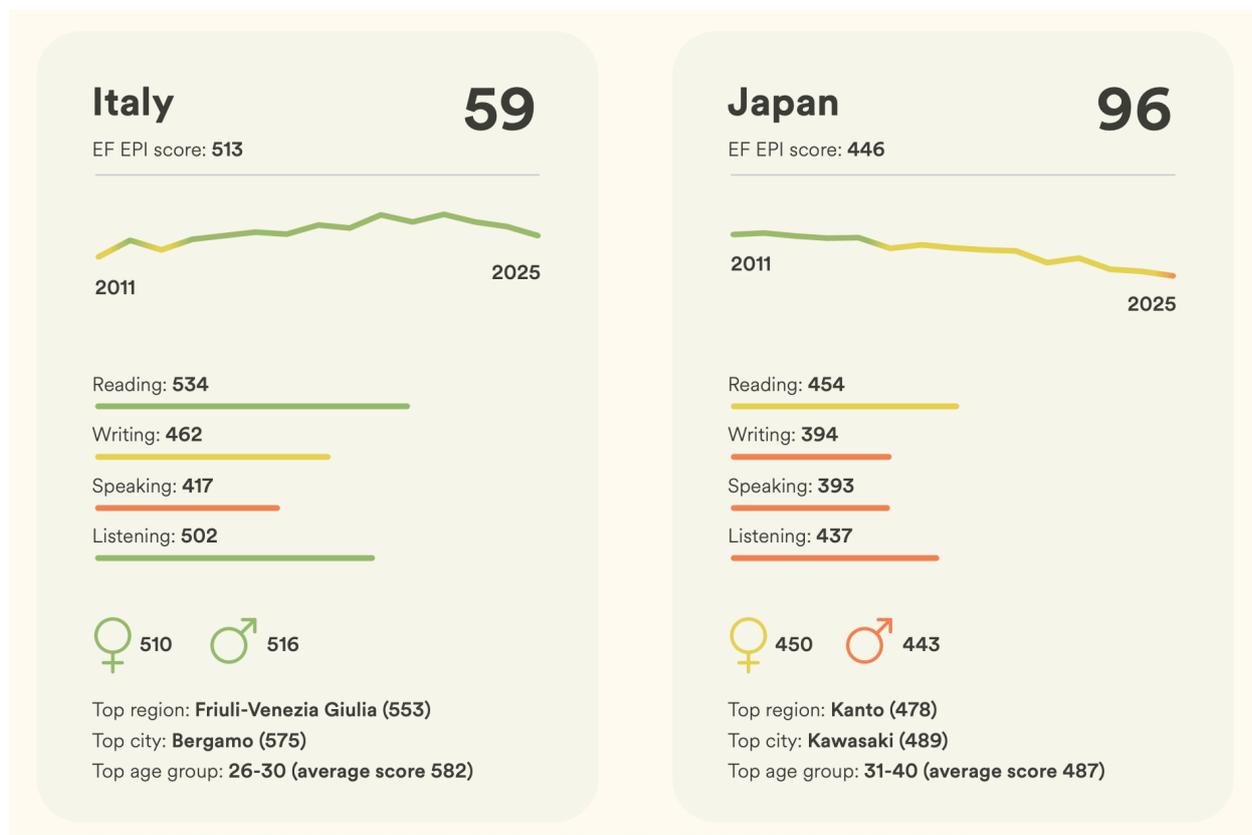
One of the main issues encountered by international students in Kyoto is the struggle of communicate with locals: very few people, often not even university students, are able to speak in English.

This leads to some forms of isolation of international residents who often spend time with other internationals or with people of the same nationality instead of with locals, resulting in a lack of integration.

Language barrier becomes in fact a psychological wall that dictates social integration, mental well-being and daily autonomy (Oberg, K., 1960).

In fact, despite its status as a global technological powerhouse, as seen previously with the digitalization lag, Japan remains linguistically isolated: according to the EF English Proficiency Index (2025), Japan is at the 96th place (of 123 countries) in the global ranking, resulting in being defined as a “very low proficiency” country, significantly behind other Asian nations like South Korea or Vietnam.

In addition, in picture 6 it is possible to notice that the language proficiency index is decreasing year after year and that the speaking skills are very very poor. That is because English is yet taught at school but mainly focusing on grammar and writing skills, leaving behind speaking interactions. I had the opportunity to get to know some Japanese students and they explained that their English has improved because they used to go in train stations after school and help tourists with directions or information, in



Picture 14: EF English Proficiency Index (2025). From <https://www.ef.com/assetscdn/WI-Blwq6RdJvcD9bc8RMd/cefcom-epi-site/reports/2025/ef-epi-2025-english.pdf>

order to practice the language.

But this phenomenon is not so common because many of them feel ashamed or not comfortable in speaking a language they do not know, they fear mistakes and also they get embarrassed when do not understand. This is a mechanism that I experienced in first place but it is discussed also in the interviews, in the previous pages.

This creates also a unique paradox for international students: while physical infrastructure (trains, convenience stores) is highly efficient, the social infrastructure remains inaccessible.

And moreover, the complexity of the Japanese language given by the use of the three writing system (*Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji*) and the rigid hierarchy of honorifics (*Keigo*) creates a steep learning curve that prevents casual integration and easy learning.

All of this results into the inability to complete basic daily tasks for international residents: buying grocery, finding the right bus stop or paying bills become impossible without the use of a translator or assistance.

In fact, even in common tourist spots in the city center, very often restaurant personell or museum staff cannot speak in English. And this is a detail that seems very strange because usually the personell employed in tourism sector is trained for interacting with foreigners.

Then, a common misconception is that English is the universal bridge.

Data show that in Japan there are diverse foreign communities of non-English speakers: according to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, as of 2023, there are approximately 581,000 foreign residents living in Tokyo and a big portion of these residents come from non-English speaking countries (China, Nepal).

Recognising this phenomenon, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has been promoting the "Plain Japanese", a simplified version of Japanese language that uses reduced vocabulary and short sentences.

And moreover, the same institution has implemented in their offices and in other service centers such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library, or Tokyo Tourist Information Center Haneda Airport, a transparent display that converts conversations into text in real time, translating with accuracy 32 languages (Tokyo Updates, 2024).

## 3.6 PERSONAS

The personas defined in the following pages are basically the outcome of the process I have been carried out until now.

Questionnaire, interviews but also field research made me tailor some fictional target users and these will be a tool for developing the project later.

Each persona has been defined following this framework:

### **Demographics**

Basic informations that can define a persona at first sight. It is important because, in a multicultural context, people with different backgrounds can experience situations in a different way, based on culture and social codes.

### **Time in Japan**

In order to make visible the difference between cultures and also the presence or non-presence of cultural shock, timing is crucial. It is a factor that helps to define the psychological vulnerability and openness to new experiences.

### **Goals**

Conscious motivations that drive the user's actions.

### **Needs**

Functional and emotional desires that must be met for them to participate and be engaged.

### **Pain Points**

Frictions, frustrations and barriers that users experiences in their daily life, these represents the points the project could aim to solve.

### **Behaviours**

User's current habits and mechanisms, including digital and physical habits. This allows to design for existing habits, rather than against them.

### **Social life**

This aspect helps me understand what could be useful to move away from digital, online life since many people expressed the value of meeting people and connecting with friends in moments of overwhelm.



The newcomer

# Anais

**Age**  
23

**From**  
Lilles, France

**Profession**  
Architecture  
student

**Time in Japan**  
2 months

## Character

linguistic anxiety



social battery



online life



attention span



## Goals

She is artistic and crafty back home but currently withdrawn and insecure due to language barrier.

She wants to feel capable again and create something tangible.

She also wants to find a place away from the crowds of tourists, a place where she can feel she is living the city and not just passing by.

## Needs

An environment where she does not have to perform linguistically or be afraid of using the wrong words and risk social embarrassment.

An activity that does not require shopping or to buy tools because she is tired of the daily navigation and she also will not stay for long time so she does not want to buy things that she will use only once.

## Pain Points

She misses her creative moments but she has no tools or materials.

Finding specific things in Japanese stores is not always so easy, especially if in a non touristic area.

She is still feeling to live a life that is "not real" because of the cultural shock she experienced in Japan.

## Behaviours

She goes back to her dorm room early and spends hours on social media.

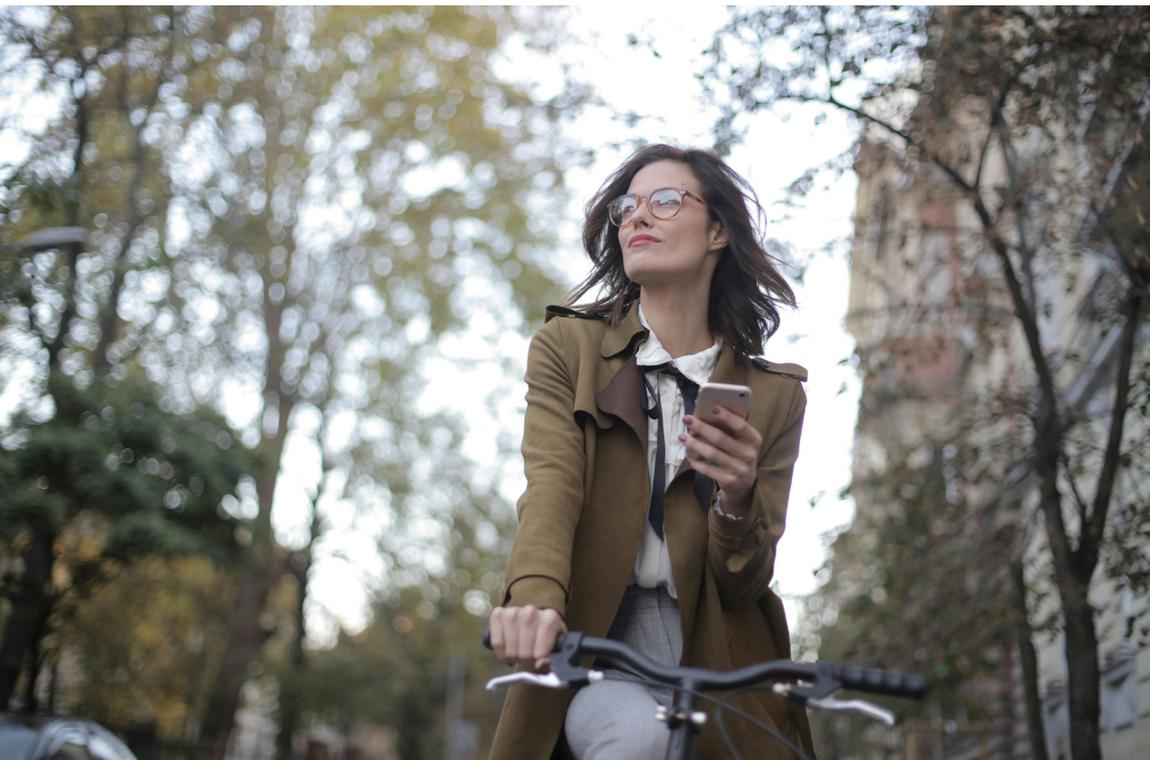
She always keeps tickets, postcards and anything that comes from the activities she does because she likes to have memories, even though she does not write a diary so she does not know what to do with all those mementos.

## Social life

She usually prefer to speak with other French people in the dorm or at University, so she does not have to worry about the language.

## What's in her bag





The pragmatist

# Matia

**Age**  
25

**From**  
Novosibirsk,  
Russia

**Profession**  
Engineering  
student

**Time in Japan**  
3 years

## Character

linguistic anxiety



social battery



online life



attention span



## Goals

She wants to find a way to repair her belongings rather than throwing them away.

She would like to move from being an outsider to a guide, by sharing her knowledge about the city and its hidden gems.

## Needs

She needs manual activities to ground her physically, it helps her for relaxing and feeling more calm after days spent in university laboratories.

She has to work alongside other people in order to maintain the focus, otherwise she will just get distracted from other activities and never finish a project.

## Pain Points

She loves knitting but, without a community energy, she leaves large projects unfinished.

She spends too much time scrolling on social medias instead of just calling family and friends.

## Behaviours

When she feels that she needs time offline, she turns off the phone and goes for a walk on her own.

She loves to buy postcards in every place she goes, and keeps all of them in a box in her room.

## Social life

She has friends but she misses the spontaneity of casual meetings.

## What's in her bag





The local  
**Yuki**

**Age**  
22

**From**  
Kyoto, Japan

**Profession**  
Mathematics  
student

**Time in Japan**  
lifetime

**Character**

linguistic anxiety



social battery



online life



attention span



## Goals

He would like to interact more with the international world and improve his English skills.

He would like to find a space where mistakes are allowed and escape the pressure given by education environment and his part-time job.

## Needs

He needs an environment where silence is socially acceptable, as in his culture, so that he can focus better, observe and interact at his own pace.

He needs an environment where imperfect English is accepted, so that he can feel free to try and engage with foreigners.

## Pain Points

He reads English well but freezes when speaking because he fears making grammar mistakes.

## Behaviours

He likes to craft things and loves to see different objects at flea markets, where he always buy some pottery with crazy shapes or unexpected gadgets.

## Social life

Surrounded by other Japanese engineering students. He feels a wall between him and the global world.

## What's in his bag



## Chapter 4

# Concept

Connect people who speak different languages with the aim of **by-passing the language barrier**, which is particularly strong in Japan, establishing a system of relationships between locals, international residents and the city.

This system revolves around an accessible **DIY workshop**: simple tools, few materials and easy instructions to exploit the international language of making.

A digital tool, the mobile app, will support the arrangement of the activities while a physical one, a tool box, will assist the actual workshop.

By distributing social tool boxes across third places, the system transforms the solitary act of DIY into a collective ritual of exchange, where users are free to bring materials from home to share and exchange with others.

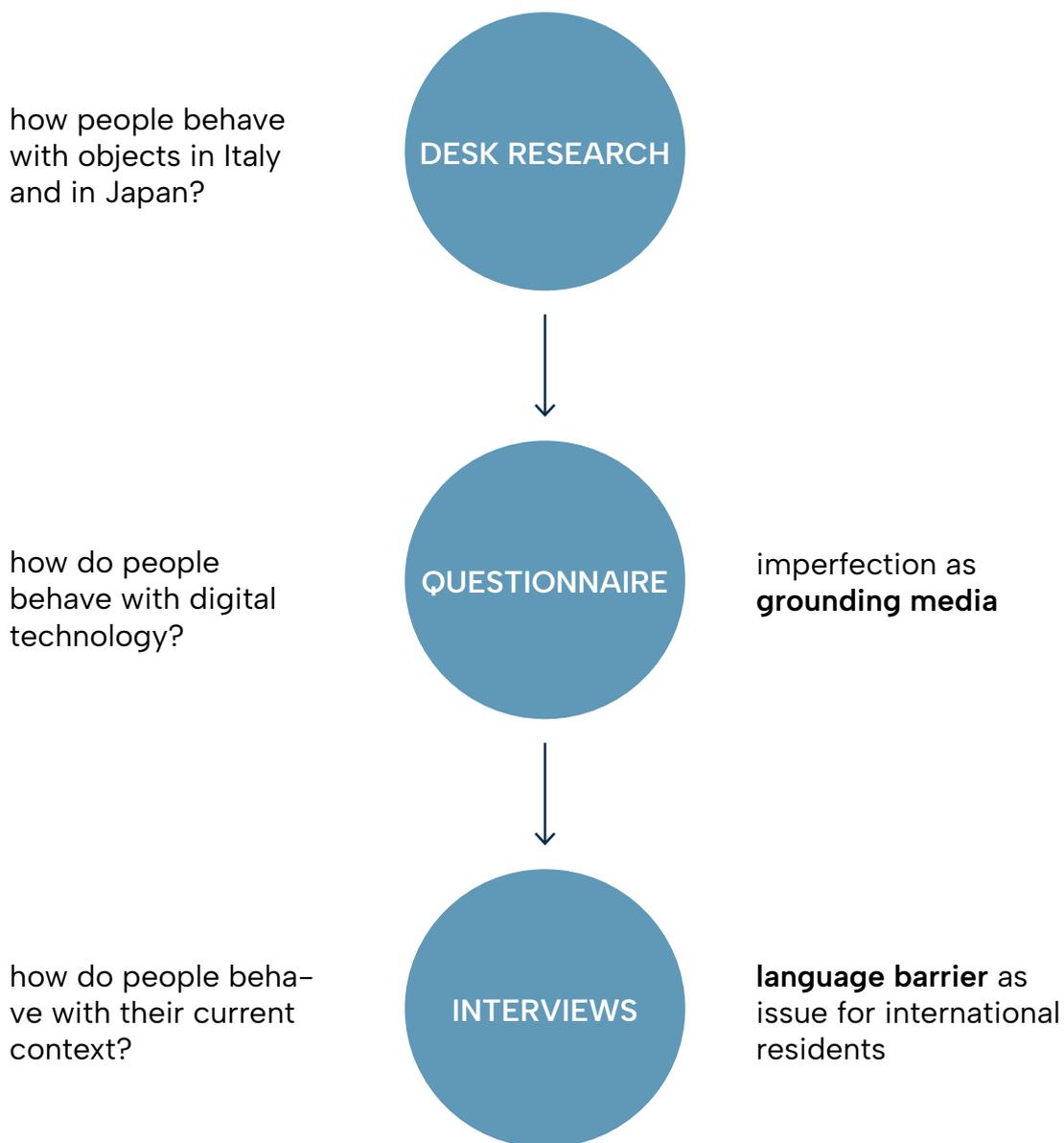
This open infrastructure enables users, particularly international students, to craft products without the need to purchase tools, proposing a system that invites collaboration and connection.

# crafts as language barrier-free activity





## 4.1 GOAL AND SUB-OBJECTIVES



Let's zoom out.

My research began by exploring the spiritual and behavioral differences between Western and Japanese culture, specifically investigating human-object relationship and how this one shifted in the digital age.

Field studies revealed that the seamlessness of modern technology creates a sense of dissociation and overwhelmth, especially if associated with the cultural shock that a person encounter when living abroad and, in particular, when living in a country like Japan where language barrier is very strong.

In this context, this is how I define the objective of my project:

**to facilitate social  
inclusion between  
international  
residents and Japanese  
locals bypassing  
language barriers with  
collaborative crafting,  
in order to reintroduce  
tactile friction as  
grounding antidote to  
digital isolation.**

In order to better define the project structure, here a list of sub-objectives address personas' needs, goals and pain points.

### **1. support activities that do not require speaking skills**

In order to bypass language barrier, the project should focus on activities that are not based on speaking interactions.

### **2. create a neutral third place, where differences between cultures can be embraced**

Different behaviorus may be socially accepted in a culture and not accepted in another one, so the interactions should take place in a environment where rules are yet defined but allow a relaxing and comforting atmosphere.

### **3. design interaction mechanisms to engage and prevent small talks or isolation**

In order to reduce speaking pressure, the project proposes a framework in which people are more focused on making and using their hands but this does not mean that interactions may be designed in order to engage and push participants to share information and ideas.

### **4. provide grounding experience**

Reintroduce positive friction using the tactile resistance of crafting to counter the seamlessness of digital life is at the core of the project.

### **5. democratize material access**

Especially international residents and expats usually do not possess specific tools or a wide range of materials (have to buy tools or materials is a reason why people do not carry out crafting activities).

So, providing the necessary instruments or a way to access to them is very relevant.

### **6. create a physical repository**

A material place where to store the traces of the interactions fits with the conducted desk research: memories are one of the main reasons for developing affection to objects and, moreover, touching the emotional sphere may lead to increase engagement.

#social

#materiality

### **7. create a network between people, places and material**

The duration of the workshops may be short but the connection between people has not to be necessary temporary: in fact, participants could arrange other meetings and maybe propose activities themselves.

As for the materials, these could be shared or exchanged between participants, but also left in the physical repository for upcoming workshops, creating a fil rouge between different activities. Even places are connected and not only because they are all partners of the same project but because the same people may move from location to location, resulting in a dynamic community.

### **8. flexibility**

Structure the activity with micro-engagement in order to fit into the busy schedules of the participants but also to do not clutter the venues.

In fact, the activities must be easy to set up and to conclude, just as hang out to have a coffee.

### **9. autonomy**

A self-facilitating system, in which there is no moderator (or it is embodied by a mobile app), may reduce pressure and make the activity less formal and more relaxed.

### **10. generate economic value**

The host of the event could be induced to participate and offer the space in change of foot traffic or small revenues.

## 4.2 CONTEXT

The concept focuses on the making of a product in a social environment, so the project will be addressed to people who enjoy crafting things by hand or wants to explore new hobbies, activities and ideas.

But also, it could be an opportunity to meet people and go out of home for international residents.

Particularly this last category of users could lack of DIY opportunities, mainly because of tools and materials availability. When moving abroad or living in a different city, it is difficult to collect and buy utensils any time you feel the need or the willing to craft something.

The nature of the system that I picture is open to anyone, but especially to people who have a need to connect: for instance, who wants to learn a language.

Language barrier, as highlighted during the interviews, is a serious issue in Japan because locals very rarely speak in English.

And sometimes they only use Japanese not because they do not know the English language, but because they do not feel confident in using it.

So, in order to address this problem, a relaxing and non-formal environment could invite to jump out of the comfort zone. This could happen more easily if locals are connected with people who yet speak English but not as natives: international residents and students.

Referring again to the interviews, it is possible to notice that the level of English proficiency is very different from person to person, meaning that someone who is not fluent in English could be more motivated to engage and try to talk using that language.

Moreover, the DIY project should not involve complicated instructions but an easy step-by-step process that allows to go wrong and still have a nice result.

In this way, language can be just a tool for getting to know each other rather than a prerequisite to participate in the activity.

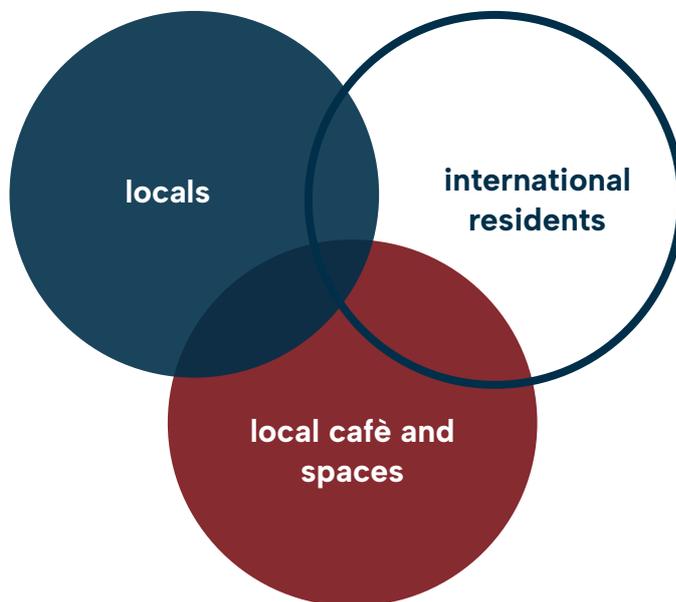
I would define the target as:

- Craft/hand-made enthusiasts
- Locals
- International residents (students, expats).

The place where to host the activity could be a relaxing, non-formal space such as third places, cafès, community houses or similars.

The requirements of these places are that they have to offer a small space with a table and chairs for 4-5 participants and be available to keep in storage a box with the needed tools.

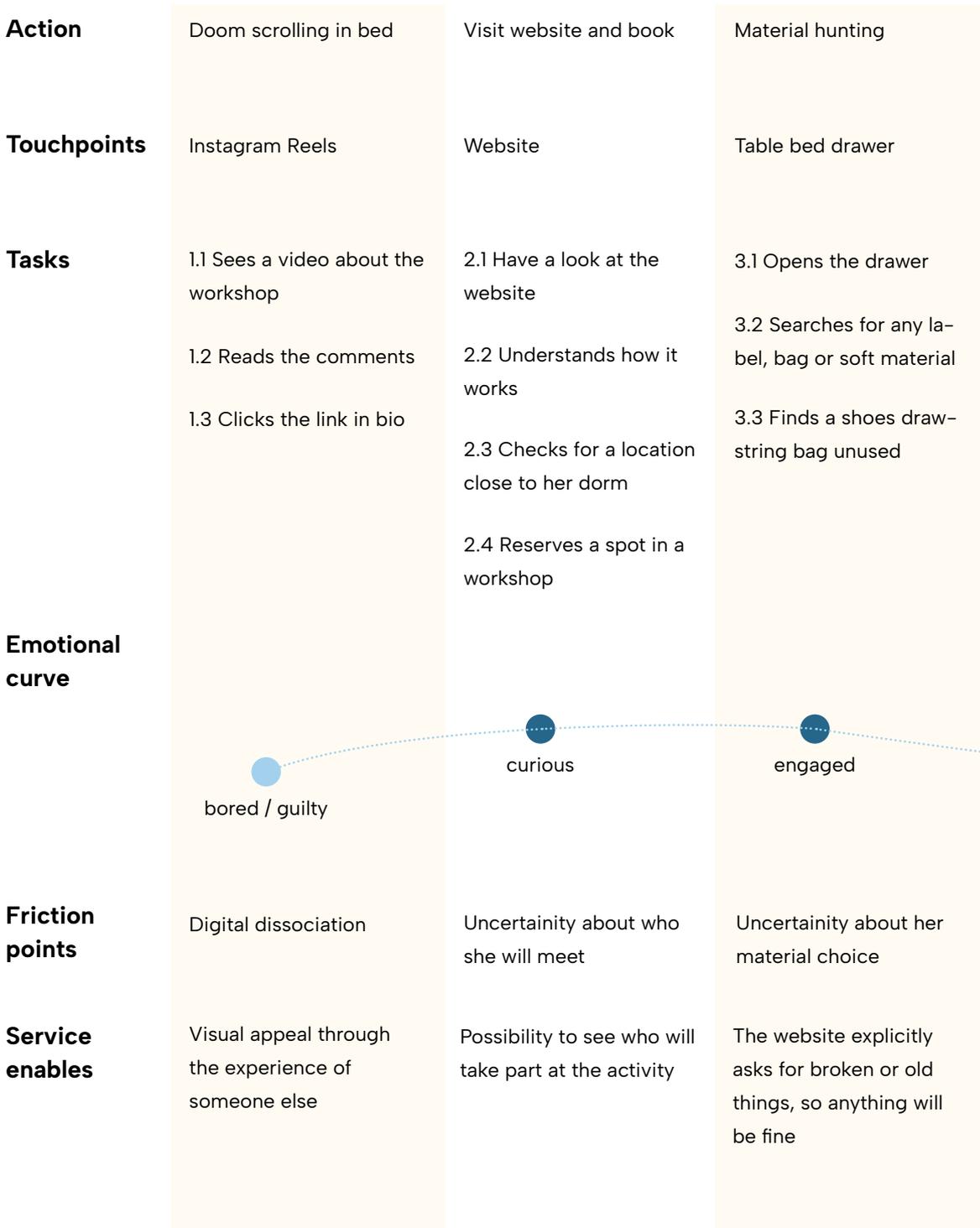
These places could gain the possibility to have more clients in less crowded hours and be known from a wider community.



## 4.3 JOURNEY MAPS

The newcomer

# Anais





## The settled-up

# Μαρία

|                        |  |   |   |
|------------------------|--|---|---|
| <b>Action</b>          | Seeks the kit on a table   | Visit website   | Booking   |
| <b>Touchpoints</b>     | Kit, QR code   | Website   | Website, pass   |
| <b>Tasks</b>           | <p>1.1 Notices the box on a table while drinking a coffee</p> <p>1.2 She scans the QR code</p> <p>1.3 She discovers about the project and thinks about participating, she often stops at this café</p> | <p>2.1 Have a look at the website</p> <p>2.2 Verifies the values of the project</p> <p>2.3 Checks if she needs to buy something and fees</p> <p>2.4 Thinks about what material she could use or if she has something that could be upcycled</p> | <p>3.1 Select her favourite cafe and a time that fits her busy scheule</p> <p>3.2 Saves the pass on Files</p> <p>3.3 She prepares an old tshirt</p> |
| <b>Emotional curve</b> |  <p>curious</p>  | <p>curious</p>  | <p>motivated</p>  |
| <b>Friction points</b> | Passive isolation  | Avoids to spend money   | Hates throwing away things  |
| <b>Service enables</b> | Visible design as a curiosity hook   | Possibility to join activities in different times of the day  | She wants to make a easy DIY project  |



The local

# Yuki

## Action

Get to know the project

Visit website and book

Material hunting

## Touchpoints

Poster in a café

Website

Closet

## Tasks

1.1 He sees the poster

2.1 Have a look at the website

3.1 Opens the closet

1.2 He notices “exchange activity”

2.2 Understands how it works

3.2 Searches for any old cloth that could be used

1.3 He takes a photo of it

2.3 Checks for participants in available activities

3.3 Finds a little towel he never uses

2.4 Decides he wants to try and book a spot

## Emotional curve

curious

anxiety

engaged

## Friction points

Language barrier

Fear of speaking with foreigners

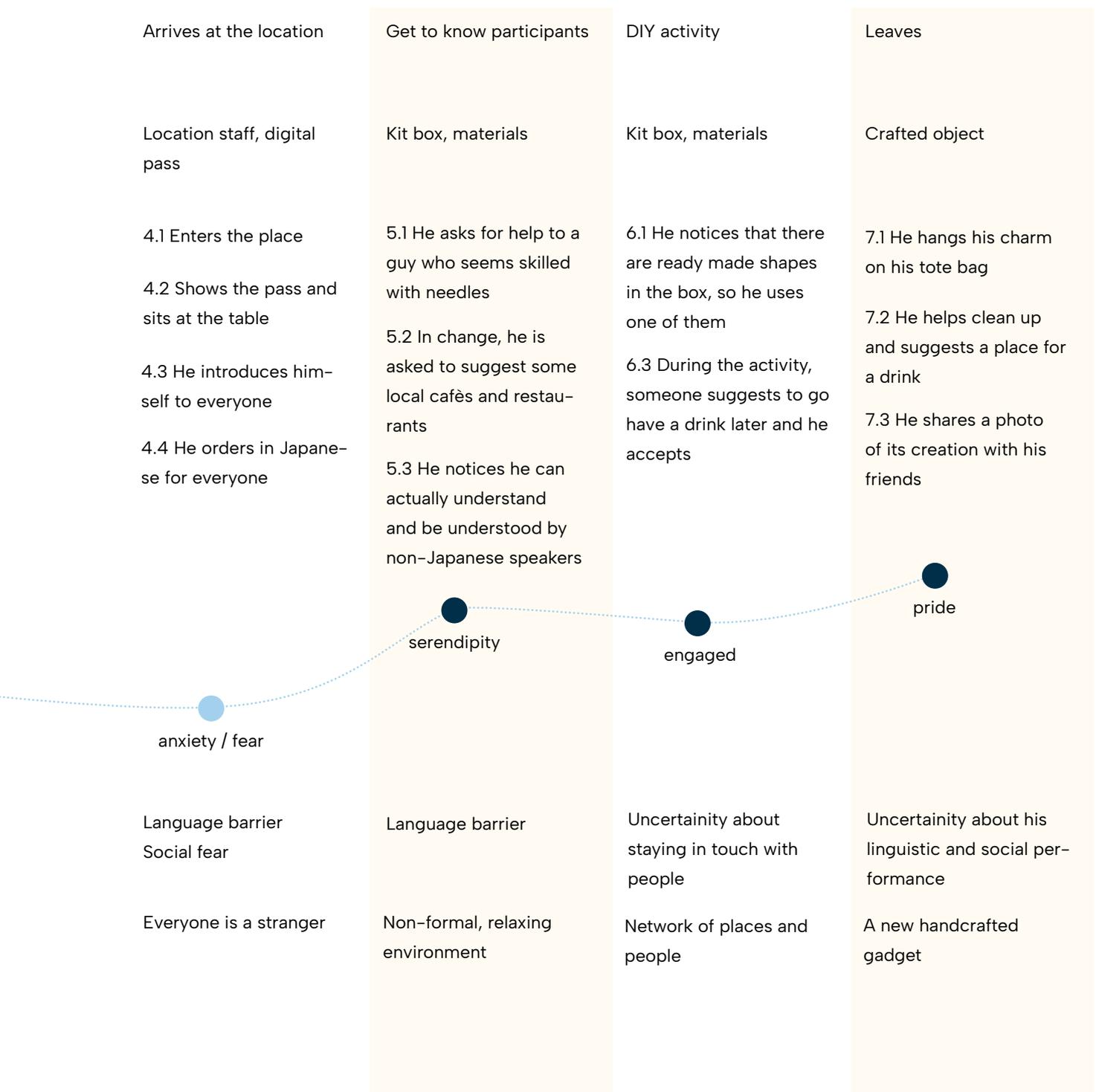
Uncertainty about her material choice

## Service enables

The project is based on doing with hands, not on conversation

Possibility to see who will take part at the activity

The website explicitly asks for broken or old things, so anything will be fine



## Chapter 5

# Case studies, comparables and competitors

To define the design opportunity, this chapter analyzes the current ecosystem through three key lenses: global trends for communication and meeting new people, existing digital platforms for booking activities and workshops, and successful physical workshops. This comparative analysis highlights the gap between digital tools and physical spaces, establishing the foundation for the proposed solution.

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I analysed some case studied in order to gain insights and understand the state of art of my context.

I categorized them in different topics:

language  
exchange



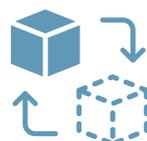
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



For what concerns digital platofrms, I evaluated them also following the Jakob Nielsen's 10 Hueristics for Interface Design.

This helped me later to understand how to go on and design my project but also what is already available for users.

## 5.2 CASE STUDIES, COMPARABLES AND COMPETITORS

01

# Timeleft

Digital platform

2023,  
52 countries

Maxime Barbier  
Adrien De Oliveira

Timeleft is a social platform designed to battle isolation in big cities. The concept is to connect strangers through planning dinners and meetings based on personal compatibility. In fact, right after the sign up process, the app asks the user about its inclinations, emotions and also personal information, then an algorithm matches you with other compatible groups in your city. Every dinner is planned for Wednesday evening, so on the same morning the user will receive a notification with the information regarding the location. To assist the flow of the conversation, the app proposes ice-breakers and games to bypass small talks.

This app proves that people are available to pay for a service, if it really provides to meet strangers in a safe, structured way.

Some interesting features:

- The app chose the location for the user, avoiding the decision fatigue and the anxiety of inviting someone out. So the app acts basically as a mediator.
- Meetings are planned with a number of people that cannot be higher than 6, so that everyone can participate actively and prevents subgroups.

### Topics

language  
exchange



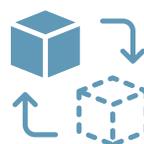
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



# The weekly gatherings turning strangers into friends

Find your group

## How it works

### Choose your activity

Meet new people in your city, your way.



Pick between dinners, drinks, or runs. Each meetup has its own vibe, so you can find what fits your mood and schedule.

### Book your spot

Pick your city, language, and availability. We'll handle everything else: the venue, your group, and all the logistics.



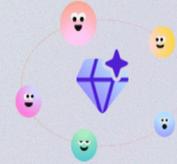
### Show up and settle in

We reveal the location and your group just before. Don't be nervous — walk in knowing everyone chose to be there, too. Come once, come back, and make friendship your new ritual.



Sign up now

## Our plans



Members are up to 93% more likely to find long lasting connections

- 1 Month  
¥2,290 **¥573/week**
- 3 Months  
¥6,879 ~~¥5,390~~ **¥449/week** Save 22%
- 6 Months  
¥13,748 ~~¥7,190~~ **¥300/week** Save 48%

¥5,390 every 3 months

You will get notified before autorenewal

Continue

Hey elisa

## Meet people in Tokyo

### Book your next event

- Dinner  
Wednesday, January 7  
7:30 PM
- Dinner  
Friday, January 9  
7:30 PM
- Dinner  
Wednesday, January 14  
7:30 PM
- Drinks  
Thursday, January 15  
7:30 PM

### Personality

Do you consider yourself more of a...

Author's film enthusiast

Mainstream blockbuster lover

# 96%

The percentage of our dinner groups that rate themselves as compatible

### Dinner

What language(s) are you willing to speak? (Required)

English

Japanese

What are you willing to spend at dinner? (Required)

\$

\$\$

\$\$\$

I have dietary restrictions (Optional)

Continue

02

# Meetup.com

Digital platform

2002,  
worldwide

Scott Heiferman, Matt  
Meeker, Peter Kamali

This is a website launched after 9/11 in order to restore community trust in New York.

It is born as first “online-to-offline” (O2O) social networking platform but, unlike Facebook or Instagram, which are designed to keep users scrolling, Meetup’s core metric of success is getting users off the internet.

It allows users to find events, meetups, lessons, clubs etc.. filtering activities across copious categories.

There are free events but also there are available events that require to pay a fee.

Moreover, this website allow to create longer connections, planning recurrent meetings and, as a consequence, generating subcommunities.

Some interesting features:

- There is no generic meeting, the user can choose the activity he/she is interested in. The connection is based on the activity and the principles shared by the same passion.
- It is possible to see who will participate in the activity.
- Waiting list is a simple but comfortable feature for activities that are often full booked.

## Topics

language  
exchange



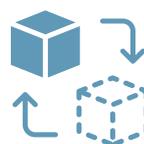
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space





@ Vicino a te

# La piattaforma per le persone. Dove gli interessi diventano amicizie.



Gruppo di lettura



Corso di danza

Qualunque sia il tuo interesse, dall'escursionismo alla lettura, dal networking alla condivisione di competenze, ci sono migliaia di persone che lo condividono su Meetup. Gli eventi si svolgono ogni giorno: iscriviti per unirti al divertimento.

Iscriviti a Meetup



Ogni giovedì

## Esplora le categorie principali

- Viaggi e attività all'aperto
- Attività sociali
- Hobby e passioni
- Sport e fitness
- Salute e benessere
- Tecnologia

## Eventi vicino a Yokohama, JP

Visualizza tutti gli eventi

- Gratuito**  
17 gen 2026 16:00 JST  
歴史を共に学び、分かち合う交流Cafe会  
da 歴史を共に学び、分かち合おう！交...
- Gratuito**  
05 gen 2026 18:00 JST  
Monday Beginner Volleyball Training @ Sugamo...  
da Balls Deep
- Gratuito** LLEYBALLS DEEP  
06 gen 2026 17:50 JST  
Tuesday Volleyball (2 courts) @ Minamimagasaki Sports...  
da Balls Deep
- Gratuito**  
11 gen 2026 10:30 JST  
Tokyo Fresh Strawberry Picking - Meet New Friends  
da NEXT Tokyo
- Gratuito**  
09 gen 2026 18:45 JST  
Japanese! 国際交流新年会! International Welcome 2026 Party...  
da 国際交流パーティー(横浜) Yokohama Int...

### Tokyo Fresh Strawberry Picking - Meet New Friends



Ospitato da Emi

NEXT Tokyo 4.4 ★★★★★ 1422 recensioni

#### Dettagli

日本語は下にあります。

Hello Homies! 🍓🍓  
Welcome to the long-awaited strawberry season! 🍓 This time, we're thrilled to announce an event at Ichigo House Mitaka, where we'll be indulging in the joy of strawberry picking. 🍓 Join us at this strawberry haven, known for offering almost pesticide-free strawberries. Let's savor the sweetness of fresh strawberries together! 🍓🍓 Can't wait to see you there! 🍓🍓

Off

11 gen 2026 10:30 JST

Tokyo Fresh Strawberry Picking - Meet ...

GRATIS

0 posti rimasti



Iscriviti alla lista d'attesa

Visualizza tutto



Emi

Co-organizzatore



Abhilash

Iscritto



Komal

Iscritto



+94

più di +97  
16 in lista d'attesa

03

# Repair Cafè

Digital platform /  
gatherings

2009,  
worldwide

Martine Postma

Repair Cafés are free gatherings that revolve around repairing (together). At the location where the Repair Café is held, tools and materials are available to carry out all kinds of repairs. On clothing, furniture, electrical appliances, bicycles, toys, etc. Expert volunteers are also present, with repair knowledge and skills in a variety of areas.

Those who have nothing to repair, take a cup of coffee or tea. Or will help with someone else's repair.

Started in Amsterdam, now more than 3500 Repair Cafès exists worldwide, proving that the activity carried on by volunteers is meaningful.

Some interesting features:

- Map and agenda on the website, so people can just show up without any booking.
- People who do not need to repair anything can also join, maybe volunteering or just ordering something from the café.
- It allows to people who have no access to tools or expertises to actually solve a problem and, at the same moment, get in touch with new people.

## Topics

language  
exchange



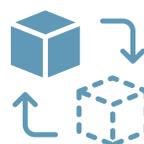
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people

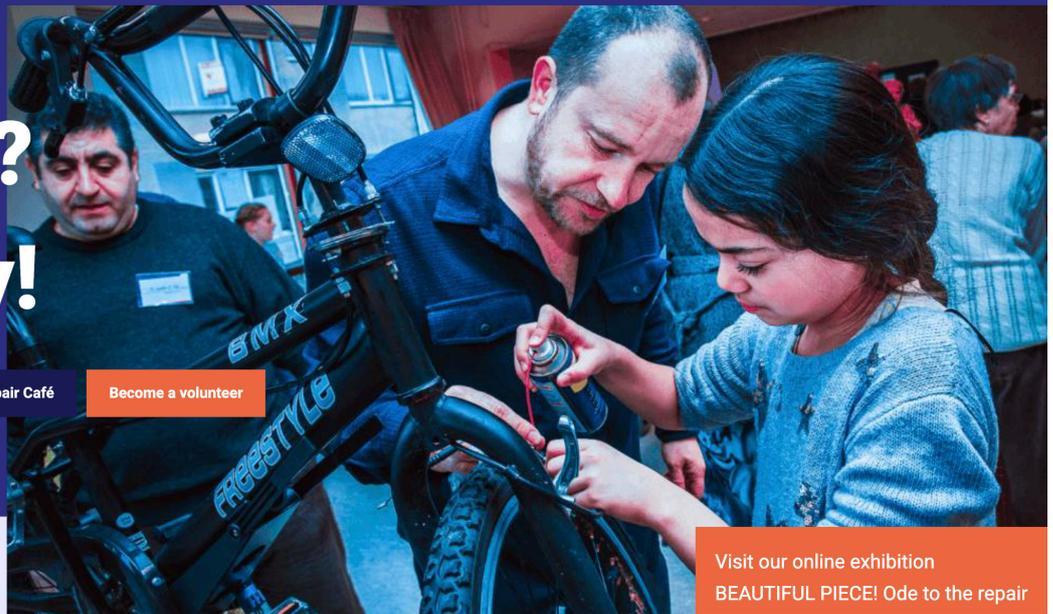


from digital to  
physical space



<https://repaircafe.amsterdam/en>

## Toss it? No way!



Find a Repair Café

Start a Repair Café

Become a volunteer

Visit our online exhibition  
BEAUTIFUL PIECE! Ode to the repair

## REPAIR CAFES in Amsterdam

EN

Agenda Map About Repair Cafés About us

District   Open in weekend or evening

Monday, January 5

- De Coenen**  
10:00 - 12:30 in Zuid >
- Kleding Repair Café**  
10:00 - 11:30 in Noord >
- De Boomspijker**  
13:00 - 15:00 in Centrum >

Tuesday, January 6

- De Boeg**  
10:00 - 12:00 in West >
- Geuzenveld**  
10:00 - 12:00 in Nieuw-West >
- Rijnstraat - Rivierenbuurt**  
10:00 - 12:00 in Zuid >
- Gliphoeve Kinderboerderij**  
10:30 - 12:00 in Zuidoost >
- ABC Community bike repair**  
13:00 - 17:00 in Centrum >
- AC REEL Tussen de Bogen**  
13:00 - 15:00 in Centrum >

**De Boeg**

**Open on**  
Every Tuesday morning 10:00 - 12:00

**Next time**  
Tuesday, January 6

**Closed on**  
Christmas, New Year's Eve.

**Address**  
Hoofdweg 495 a

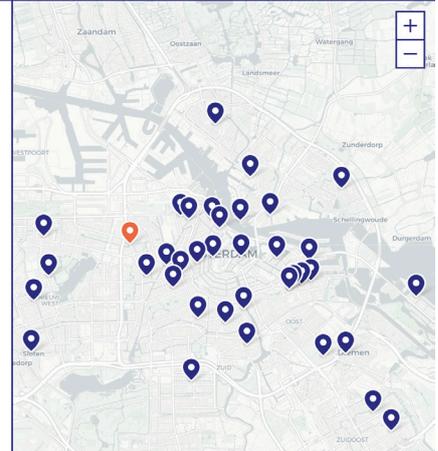
**We repair**  
Electronics, Clothing, Bicycles

**We do not repair**  
Phones, laptops

**Contact**  
repaircafedeboeg@gmail.com

**Links**  
Repaircafe.org page of De Boeg

> Read more about Repair Cafés



## Visit



Visit one of our 3827 Repair Cafés



Repairing coffee makers



Repairing laptops



Repair guides

04

# Eventbrite

Digital platform

2006

Kevin Hartz, Julia Hartz,  
Renaud Visage

Eventbrite is a platform that allows users to scroll and purchase tickets for events all over the world.

Anyone can become an organizer and there are specific features for payments and host necessities, democratizing the ability to be an host.

Some interesting features:

- The user can personalize the feed, making it easier to find targeted events.
- Trending events in your area: it is a section on the website that allows the user to know what is crowded and where people are going, ensuring to participate in events that are popular.
- Everyone can become an host and organize events.

## Topics

language  
exchange



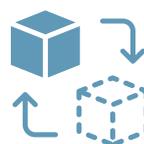
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



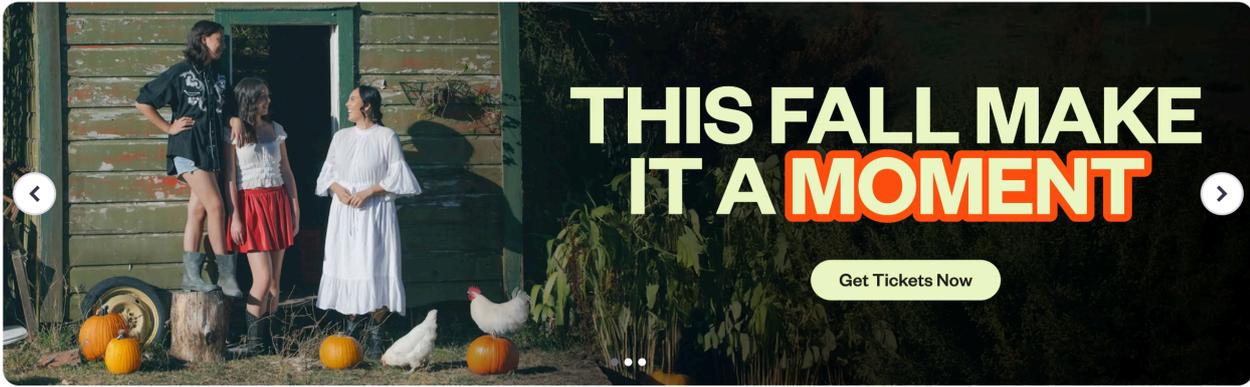
connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



<https://www.eventbrite.com/>



Music



Nightlife



Performing & Visual Arts



Holidays



Dating



Hobbies



Business



Food & Drink

Browsing events in **Kamakura**

All For you Today This weekend

### Events in Kamakura



Sales end soon

**Strategic Visioning 2026 Clarity for Wealth, Money, and Career Decisions**

Today • 8:00 PM GMT+9



**ISTQB® Foundation Training Course for your Testing team - Yokohama**

Mon, Jan 12 • 9:00 AM

Regus - Yokohama, Blue Avenue



**Educational Futures, Today**

Sat, Jan 31 • 1:00 PM

The Innovation Fellowship (TIF) International High School



**The INDIA Investment Opportunity for Japanese Investors**

Fri, Feb 27 • 10:00 AM

Tokyo

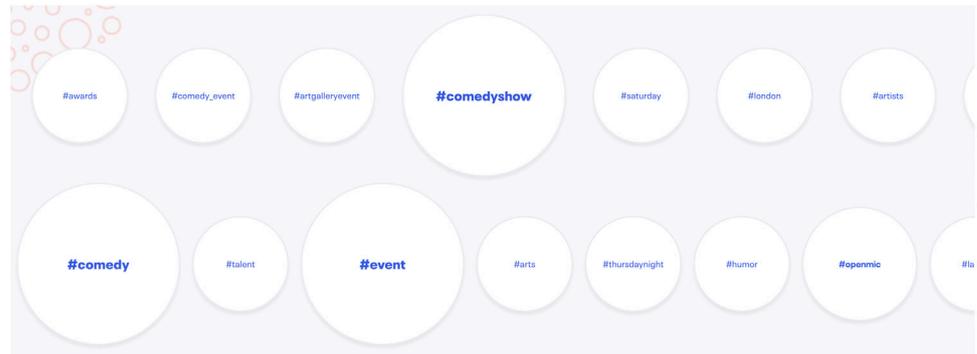
### Let's make it personal

Select your interests to get event suggestions based on what you love

- Comedy
- Food
- Education
- Pop
- Design
- R&B
- Hip Hop / Rap
- Film
- Personal health
- Blues & Jazz
- Travel
- Rock
- Yoga
- Country
- Startups & Small Business
- Classical
- Mental health
- TV
- Alternative
- Musical

[View all interests](#)

### Trending event tags in your area



05

# Hopin

Digital platform  
App - concept

2025

Taisia Ovdienko

Hopin is a playful mobile app concept that aims to help the user in finding creative activities and workshops, based on daily mood.

It integrates an AI buddy that would help the user through the proposal and choice of the activity.

By selecting the mood of the day, the AI tool would generate some cards for carrying out easy and quick creative activities in order to help the user to go through the day.

The app also features the concept of learning as a primary value: the goal is to improve and get in touch with new techniques, but also with new people.

Some interesting features:

- It does not focus on meeting people but just on the activity that the user will do. This allows to do not feel the pressure to get to know the other participants.
- AI generation of small activities could be a gamification tool to engage the user more.

## Topics

language  
exchange



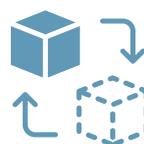
craft as  
(grounding)  
media

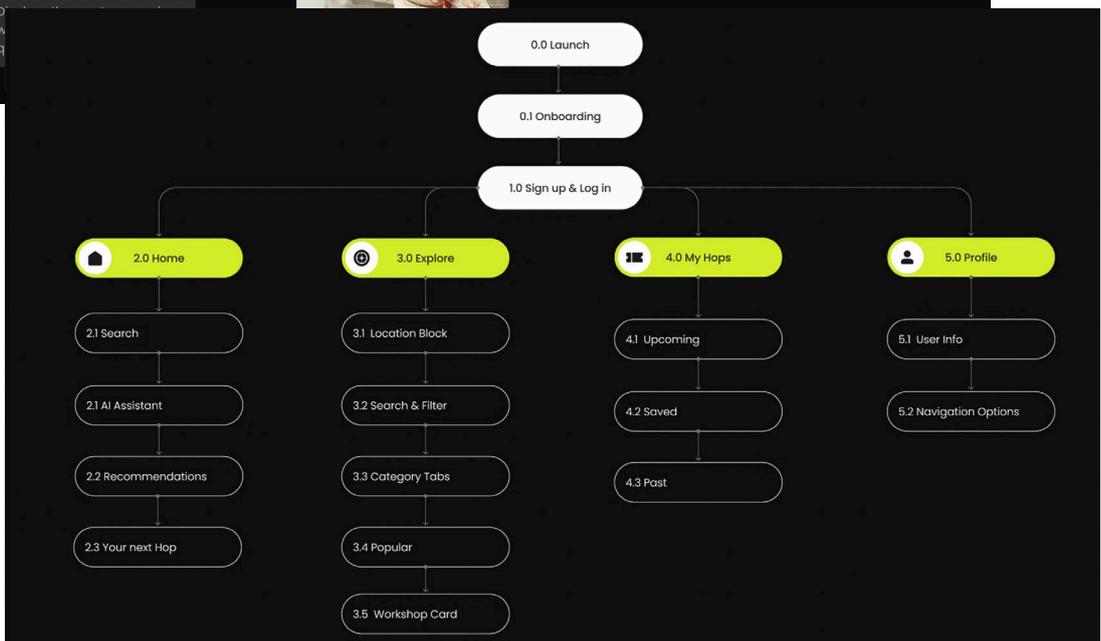
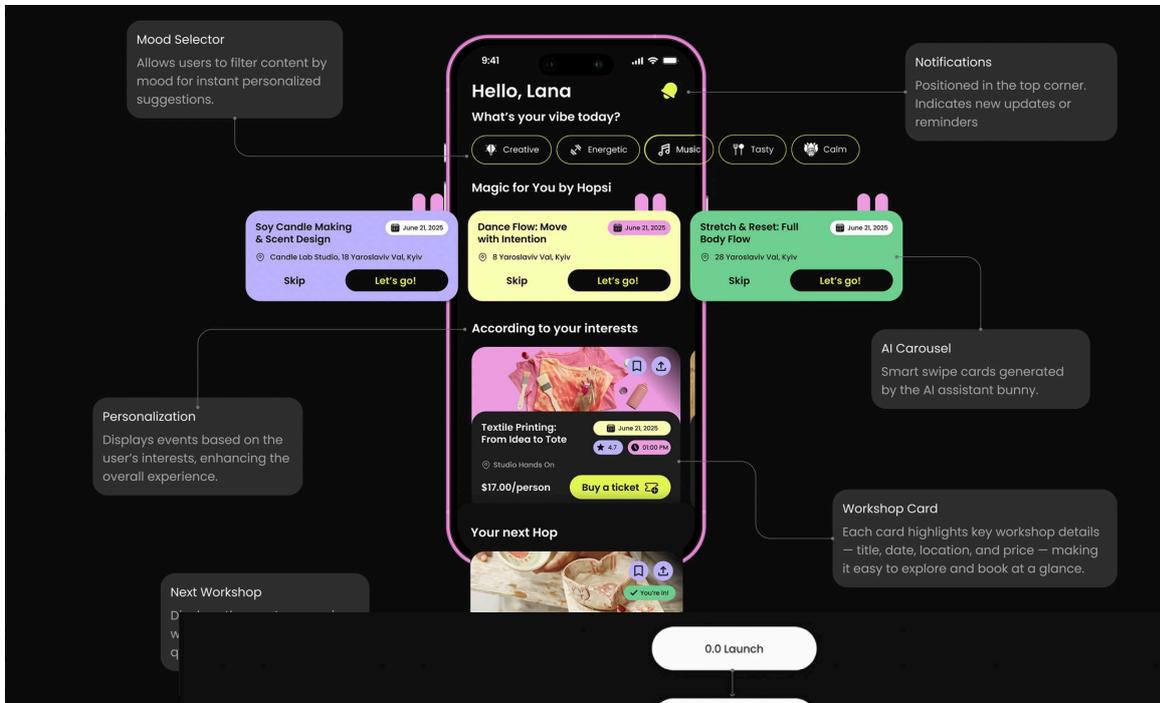
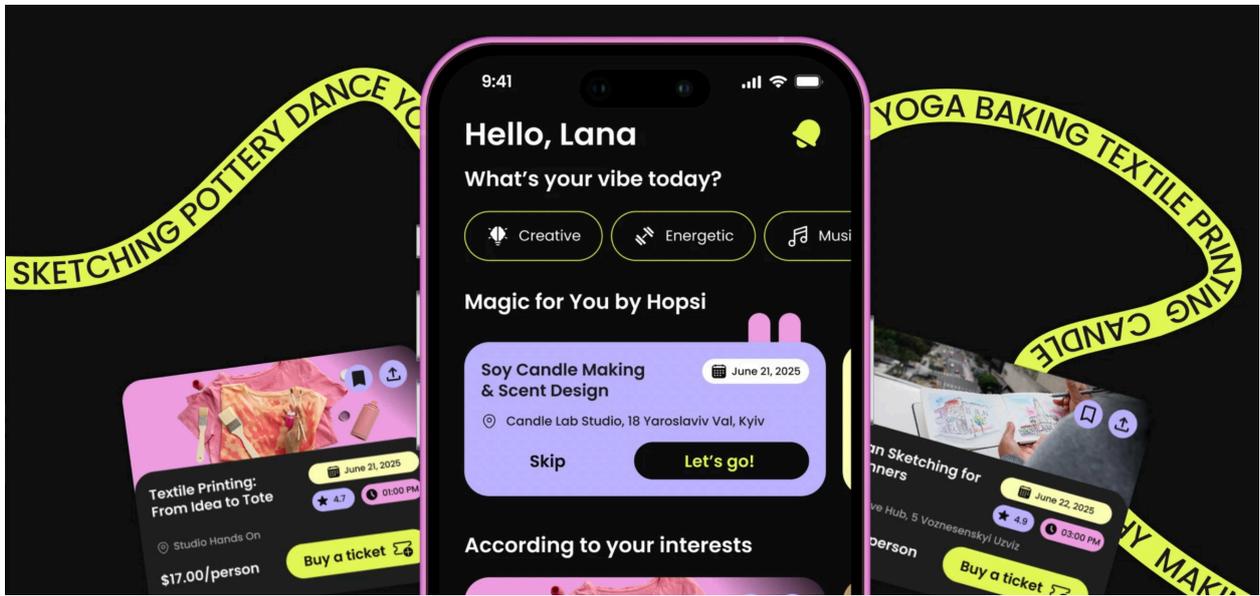


connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space





06

# Kokoca

Foundation

1978

Kyoto City International  
Foundation

This is a public corporation that helps primarily international expats in Kyoto City but also connects them with locals through language classes, traditional crafts and arts workshops, counselling and other supporting activities.

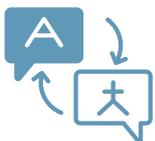
The website provides lists of event that can be accessed in particular by international students but also events and classes open to anyone living in the city.

Since 2006, the foundation manages the he Kyoto International Community House, which is a place where anyone can access during opening hours. There there is a café but also tables free of charge, a library, a children play area, japanese language classes and other services. Often some workshops are held in this building because it also foster integration between cultures: there are small Japanese artworks around the place and also a Japanese style garden that can be visited sometimes.

For international students, the corporation also plans meetings such as pic-nics or free activities and involves Japanese university students in the organization, generating a sharing and multicultural environment without any pressure that may be given by institutions.

## Topics

language  
exchange



craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space





Event Calendar

For the general public

- [kokoka Open Day](#)
- [Volunteer Activities](#)
- [Global Matchmaking "kokokon"](#)

For companies and organizations

- [Collaboration Project with Corporations](#)
- [Jointly Coordinated Projects / Backed Projects](#)
- [kokoka International Exchange Organization Network](#)

For children

- [Hotto Chat](#)
- [koko kids](#)

For foreign students and schools

- [Kyoto International Students Information Site](#)
- ["PICNIK"\(Program for Inter Cultural Nexus In Kyoto\)](#)
- [kokoka Family Program](#)
- [Checking Out Global Understanding Education](#)

Latest Articles

Japanese

Chinese language

English



**A guide to eating at the 2025 Gion Festival Yoiyama**

When people think of summer in Kyoto, one image springs to mind: the Gion Festival. This grand festival, which lasts for a month, is more than just an event; it is the soul and pulse of the city's summer. "I don't have time during the..."

© 2025.12.21



**"Umeda Yukata Festival 2025" A Japanese summer filled with song and dance**

The Umeda Yukata Festival is a large-scale regional event themed around yukata and traditional Japanese summer culture. It has been a staple of Umeda's summer scene since 2012. Although the name is "Yukata Festival,"...

© 2025.09.28

Readings from Kyoto



**Blog Team**

Hello! "Reading from Kyoto" is a blog aimed at foreigners living in Kyoto. Members, mostly international students, write in multiple languages about topics of interest to foreigners. We cover a variety of topics, including seasonal topics, traditional events, travel, and food, and introduce them based on the experiences of our members. We hope this blog will inspire you and add color to your life in Kyoto.

07

# TikTok trends

Communication

TikTok

users

TikTok feed propose users contents that are specific for them, based on the algorithm and the preferences of the user.

A strong feature of this social media is that trends can go viral very fast and almost always these viral contents are shooted and uploaded by users with not many followers.

It is a system that allows to anyone to imagine, create a trend and spread it out to the world.

For instance, a creative trend is the #painting switch: two participants paint at the same time their own canvas and they switch it with the other person every 10 or 15 minutes. This creates interesting contents for TikTok users but at the same time enjoyable games and activities for people who seeks creative activities.

Moreover, physical workshops can be advertised in the same way and generate flows of users on the host profile, resulting in a good promotion campaign carried out just by letting customers to share their journey.

## Topics

language  
exchange



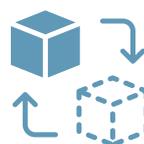
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



<https://www.tiktok.com/discover/switching-painting-challenge>

switch canvas challenge

Top Videos Users Sounds LIVE Photos



#switchcanvas #paintchallenge Switch... Alexis B 155,8K

#paintingswapchallenge #canvaspainting andrepalais 568



Date night ✨🎨 Paint night but switch...

start a timer for 5 min & then switch paintings

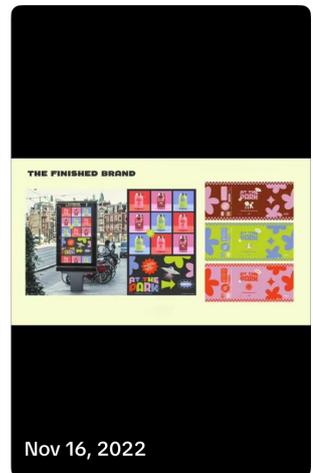
creative workshops

Top Videos Users Photos Sounds LIVE



My full list of workshops and activities you can... Mikaella london | tr...

February's Wellness and creative workshops sch... WellNest Space 1900



Looking for fun

Here's a recent

08

# Imperfect Art Cafè

Cafè and workshops

London

Linda

This cafè is a place where people can come, drop their guard, and rediscover the playful side of creativity. Where perfection doesn't matter, but connection does.

Imperfect Art hosts creative workshops and cafè services, proposing a relaxing format for people to experience crafts and meet up.

Moreover, this space explicitly rejects the "Fine Art" mentality. It offers workshops where the goal is to make ugly things. Its core philosophy is that the pressure to be good at art stops people from being creative.

Customers can choose to just spend time and enjoy art making on their own, attend workshop and classes or book a private event.

All of these options have different prices but still accessible to anyone, having the opportunity to find tools and materials directly at the place.

The interesting characteristic of this place is that all the activities have a duration of about 2 hours, allowing to be a simple activity but that gives instant gratification and is easy to fit in a busy schedule.

## Topics

language exchange



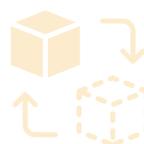
craft as (grounding) media



connecting people



from digital to physical space



# London's creative third space, where making something, matters more than making it perfect

Welcome to **Imperfect Art**, a cosy, mindful café where you can make art that's all heart.

Tired of the same old dinner or drinks?

When did you last give yourself permission to just... slow down?

Over 500 Londoners have already found their escape in our Islington art café: a place to pause, play, and reconnect with creativity.



Here's what we do:



Art Café sessions - from £15

2 hours of pure creative freedom.

No lessons, no pressure. Just space to play, paint, doodle, or craft with all materials provided.

Our friendly hosts will guide you to your table, and then it's your time to unwind.

- ✓ All supplies included
- ✓ Drinks and snacks available
- ✓ No experience needed

[Book an art café session](#)



Guided workshops & events - from £35

If you prefer a bit of guidance, our workshops offer a balance of structure and freedom.

Led by our facilitators, you'll learn simple techniques - like tote painting, ceramics, and seasonal crafts - in a relaxed, social setting.

- ✓ Great for beginners
- ✓ Take home your creation
- ✓ Perfect for mindful moments

[Explore upcoming workshops](#)



Private events - custom pricing

Looking for something more personal? We host private creative events for birthdays, hen dos, and team-building sessions.

We'll help you curate a creative experience that fits your group, whether that's a guided session, a themed workshop, or just time to create and connect together.

- ✓ For groups of 6+
- ✓ BYOB available on request
- ✓ In our cosy Islington studio

09

# AperìPottery

Pottery lab and  
workshops

2016  
Torino, Italy

Romana Pavan

PotteryLab is a workshop located in Turin that hosts pottery workshop almost every day.

This new format is a way to connect more with the city: it consists in having a ceramic activity at Pottery Lab and then an aperitivo at a café nearby, PanDan.

They encourage sharing in a friendly environment, connecting different people in activities of 5–6 participants at the time. This allows to interact with everyone in the group and to have the opportunity to be more engaged with tools and the clay.

While the first moment can be more focused on the craft and the learning process, the second one at the café is an opportunity to bond with the participants. Now that everyone has something in common to talk about ( even simply the workshop), it could be easier to go beyond small talks and engage.

Moreover, PotteryLab offers other related activities like Un te con gli amici (a tea with friends), Aperibrunch, teambuilding.

## Topics

language  
exchange



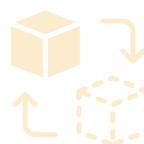
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space





# M-Cafè

University Cafè

Kyoto, Japan

Kyoto Institute of  
Technology

M-Cafè is a chat space located inside KIT (Kyoto Institute of Technology) campus where students can hang out, chat or study.

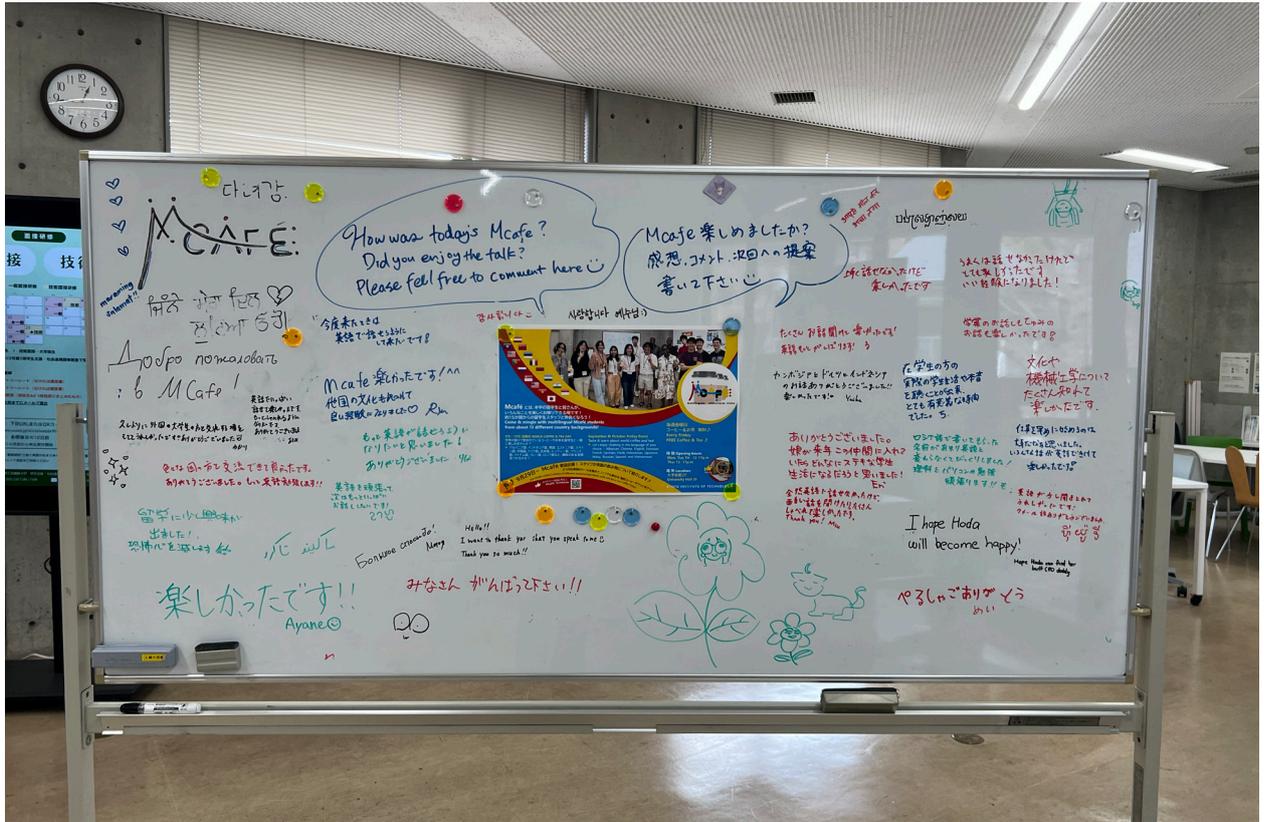
The Global Learning Commons program, which conducts communication space “M (Multicultural, Multilingual and Minna-no [everyone’s]) café”, offers every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday free activities carried out by international students.

There, students can find also international students who speak Japanese and Japanese students who speak English or other languages, encouraging also who is not confident in their English.

Global Learning Commons holds events that allow students to experience diverse cultures. International Fairs, such as African Fair, Asian Fair, and European Fair, which are mainly led by international students, are very popular events. International students from all over the world introduce their cultures, cuisine, playing instruments, etc.

## Topics

language  
exchangecraft as  
(grounding)  
mediaconnecting  
peoplefrom digital to  
physical space



11

# Hello Talk

Digital platform  
App

2012  
China, worldwide

Zackery Ngai

HelloTalk is a global community for practicing languages, exploring culture, and making friends with native speakers from around the world.

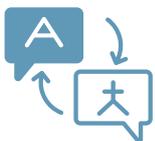
A global language exchange application that connects learners with native speakers. It includes integrated tools for correction, translation, and voice messaging to facilitate communication without a formal teacher

While this app relies only on online presence to support language exchange, my projects wants to bring this exchange in real life.

So, some features of this app could be useful to understand how the interactions could happen but then the formal is different.

## Topics

language  
exchange



craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



<https://www.hellotalk.com/en>

### Chat & Messaging

Text, voice, and video conversations

### Voice Rooms

Join live audio conversations

### Live Streaming

Interactive classes and language sessions

### Moments

Share your language journey

### Language Exchange

Practice with native speakers worldwide

### Translation Tools

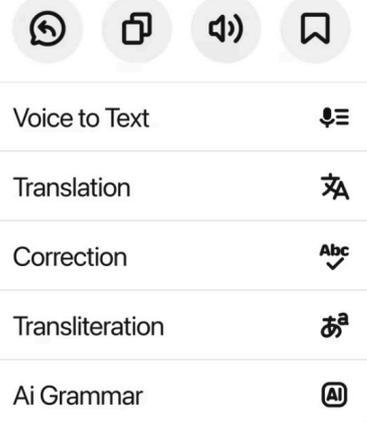
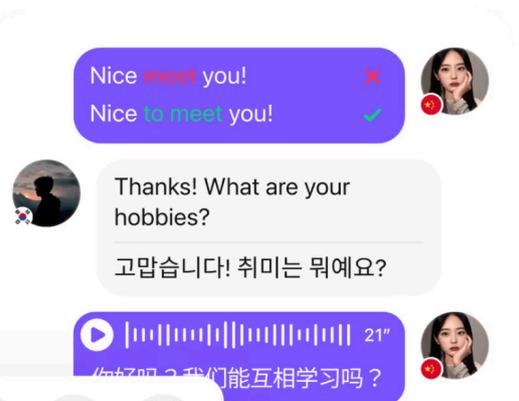
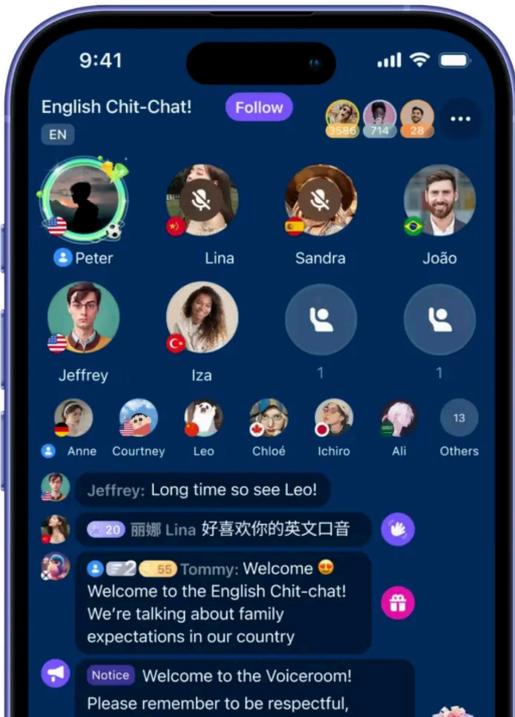
Instant translation between any languages

### Immersive Learning

Learn everywhere with instant translations

### Certified Teachers

Learn from professional language instructors



NEW

## Express Yourself in Voicerooms

Discuss interesting topics and meet HelloTalkers in the community. Practice your speaking and listening skills in Voiceroom's supportive and casual space.

Set the languages you want to practice, pick a topic, and start your very own Voiceroom that other community members can join for free!

12

# Slowly

Digital platform  
App

2017  
Hong Kong,  
worldwide

Kevin Wong

An app that recreates the experience of having traditional pen pals. Messages are not instant; they take hours or days to be delivered based on the physical distance between users.

It uses a "stamp collection" gamification system.

Slowly is created for those who yearn for the meaningful conversations that are lacking in the era of instant messaging. It connects people around the world at a slower but better pace.

The app lets the user find pen pals, but it enforces a "real-time delay."

If you message someone in Brazil from Japan, the message takes 30 hours to arrive (based on actual distance).

By artificially slowing down the interaction, this app creates anticipation and emotional weight.

My project will maybe adopt a similar philosophy: by forcing users to physically travel to a location to unlock the experience, prioritizing quality of connection over speed.

## Topics

language  
exchange



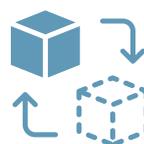
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



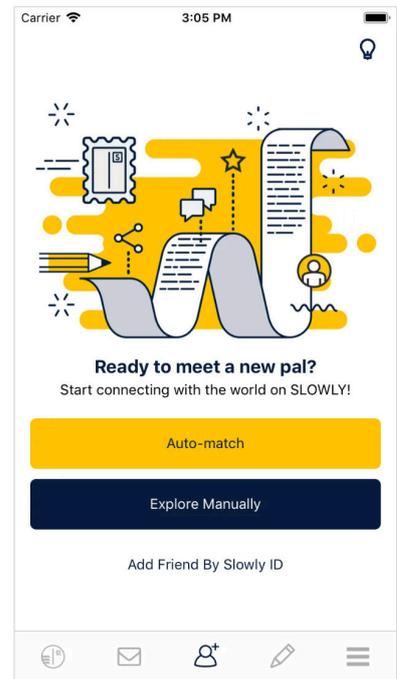
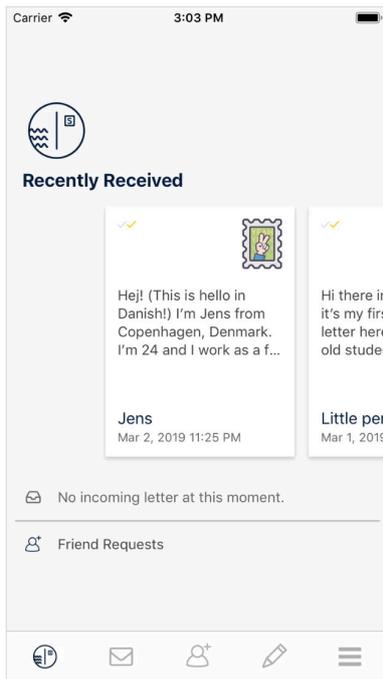
connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



<https://slowly.app/>



## A nickname & an avatar is all you need

Who says a picture is always worth a thousand words?  
*No swiping involved here*—speak your mind freely to your pen pals!



## Share your passion with the world.

Matches are based on language and common interests. Practice a language, exchange thoughts on your passions—the first letter is simply exciting!

- Languages
- Relationships
- Movies
- Music
- Science
- Art
- Casual
- Reading
- Family
- ...

13

# Tandem

Digital platform  
App

2015

Arnd Aschentrup, Tobias  
Dickmeis, Matthias  
Kleimann

A peer-to-peer language learning community. Unlike HelloTalk, it focuses heavily on the community aspect, allowing users to find partners based on shared interests and learning goals.

Tandem excels in community policing and trust. Users review each other not just on language skills, but on politeness and punctuality.

Some interesting features:

- After a chat, the user can leave a reference ( "Good listener," "Punctual"). This builds a "Trust Score" visible to others.
- Topic cards: when starting a call, the app suggests topics to guide the conversation if it stalls.
- "Near Me" filter: paid feature that allows users to find partners in their immediate vicinity, bridging the gap to offline meetings.

## Topics

language  
exchange



craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people

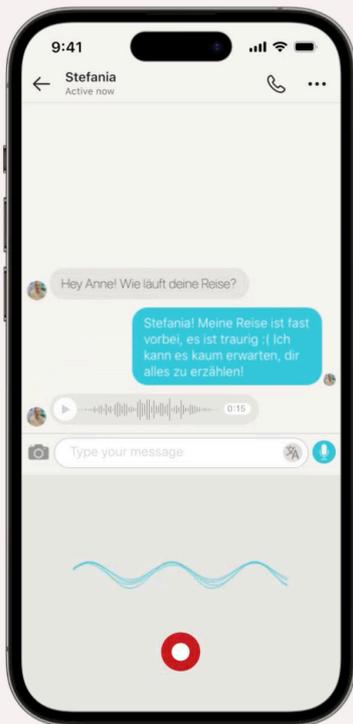


from digital to  
physical space

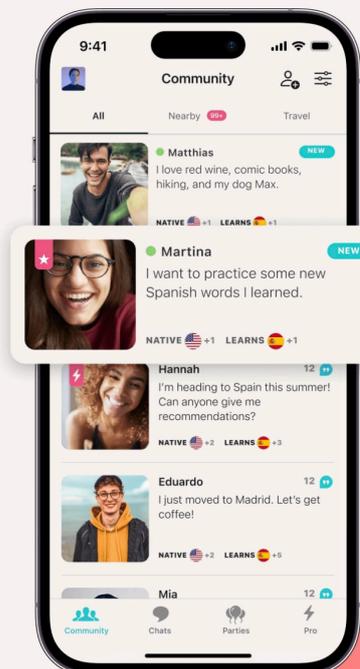


<https://tandem.net/>

## I want to practice...



...and use Tandem's intuitive messaging features and language tools to practice their target languages together! Stefania helps Anne with German and Anne helps Stefania with English.



### 1. Join the community

Download the app and sign up for free. We review every application to make sure that the Tandem community remains safe and fun for everyone.

# Airbnb Experiences

Digital platform  
Webiste / App

2016  
USA, worldwide

Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia,  
Nathan Blecharczyk

An expansion of the Airbnb platform used for finding stays, Airbnb Experiences provides unique workshops, tours or activities all over the world. It is a marketplace where locals host activities ranging from cooking classes to craft workshops. It focuses on immersion rather than just sight-seeing.

Some interesting features:

- A clear visual inventory of what is included in the price, supported by icons. This manages user expectations perfectly.
- Reviews are often long and include photos of what users made or did, serving as social proof of the outcome.
- A dedicated section that humanizes the host, transforming a transaction into a real, deep connection.

## Topics

language  
exchange



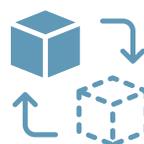
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



Where  
Search by city or landmark

When  
Add dates

Who  
Add guests



### Popular experiences in Tokyo

- Explore Tokyo's Car Scene in a Nissan Skyline**  
From ¥ 23,500 / guest · ★ 4.88
- Unlimited Local Night (ALL-Y-CAN-DRINK) Shinjuku Gam**  
From ¥ 16,500 / guest · ★ 4.98
- Toshi Experience World's largest fish market tour**  
From ¥ 36,000 / guest · ★ 4.96
- Tokyo: Shinjuku Local Bar and Izakaya Crawl**  
From ¥ 6,000 / guest · ★ 4.82
- Explore Tokyo's music scene with an insider**  
From ¥ 9,000 / guest · ★ 4.96
- Explore Shinjuku's nightlife**  
From ¥ 20,000 / guest · ★ 4.97
- Tokyo Coffee & Culture Discovery Tour**  
From ¥ 10,000 / guest · ★ 4.97



## Savor organic matcha in a tea ceremony in Shibuya

Immerse yourself in an ancient Japanese custom, under the guidance of a tea expert.

★5.0 · 266 reviews  
Shibuya · Cultural tours

**Hosted by 達也**  
Founder of EAST GREEN MATCHA

**Jinnan Paicity building 502 room**  
Shibuya, Tokyo Prefecture

**4th-generation tea farmer**  
Learned leaf-to-cup principles from childhood

From ¥ 6,000 / guest.  
Free cancellation

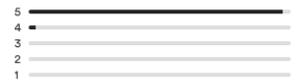
Show dates

**4.97**

Guest favorite

One of the most loved homes on Airbnb based on ratings, reviews, and reliability

#### Overall rating



|               |     |
|---------------|-----|
| Cleanliness   | 4.9 |
| Accuracy      | 5.0 |
| Check-in      | 5.0 |
| Communication | 4.9 |
| Location      | 5.0 |
| Value         | 4.9 |

### About me



**達也**

Founder of EAST GREEN MATCHA

Message 達也

To help protect your payment, always use Airbnb to send money and communicate with hosts.

My family hails from Shizuoka Prefecture, one of Japan's most famous tea-growing regions, and I grew up on a tea farm that has been in my family for four generations. I founded East Green Matcha in 2023 to share the highest-quality organic matcha from first-flush leaves. I can't wait to share my knowledge about the art of tea with you.

### What you'll do

- Talk matcha**  
Dive into the history of matcha and its health benefits.
- Study tea quality**  
Learn the elements of rare, premium organic matcha.
- Start the ceremony**  
Taste authentic matcha in a formal, age-old tradition.
- Make your own tea**  
Use proper tea-making techniques to make your own matcha.
- Wrap Up**  
Wrap up the experience and question&answer time.

This experience is hosted in Japanese and English.

15

# Peatix

Digital platform  
App

2011  
Tokyo, Japan

Taku Harada

Peatix is a community event platform and ticketing service that is ubiquitous in Japan. It is known for its simplicity and community-driven approach, allowing anyone to publish an event.

This concept is very similar to Eventbrite.

Its dense information hierarchy and reliability contrast with Western minimalist trends.

Some interesting features:

- Users don't just buy tickets, they "follow" groups to get notified of future events. This builds long-term loyalty.
- QR Code Check-in: a seamless, paperless entry system that is now the standard expectation for Japanese users.
- Since Japanese often pay in cash and cashless payments are not always accepted, this app allow "pay on door" payments.

## Topics

language  
exchange



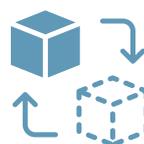
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



<https://peatix.com/>

# JAN 25 なぜ、いま畳なのか？イグサの力を次世代につなぐ

Sun, 1:00 PM | 京都市下京区東塩小路町9 3 9 | By 海外と日本文化



- 趣味/実用
- ものづくり
- インテリア
- 暮らし
- 建築
- オーガニック

畳は、ただの「伝統」ではありません。調湿性、消臭性、防音性、耐衝撃性、そして防菌・防カビといった衛生機能。最新の研究が明らかにするのは、現代の暮らしにこそ必要とされる畳の力です。一方で、産地の縮小や職人の高齢化により、畳文化はいま大きな岐路に立たされています。本シンポジウムでは、科学・現場・未来の視点から、「畳のこれから」を考えます。

- 日時 2025年1月25日（日）  
13:00~17:00 (12:30受付開始)
- 定員 250名・申込先着順 参加費無料
- 【第1部：基調講演】秘められたイグサ・畳の機能性（北九州市立大学 "イグサ博士" 森田 洋 教授）
- 【第2部：現場からの提言リレー】ニッポンの畳を残すための挑戦  
現状と危機（文化財量技術保存会代表理事 磯垣 昇 氏）  
次世代の挑戦（奥井畳店・神戸 奥井 啓太 氏）  
海外展開の挑戦（森田畳店・東京 森田 隆志 氏）
- 【第3部：パネルディスカッション】2030年、畳は生き残れるか？会場からの質問やご発言も大歓迎！
- 場所 キャンパスプラザ京都（JR京都駅北側出口から西へ徒歩5分）5階第1会議室
- 問合せ suzuki-ar@tachibana-u.ac.jp（京都橋大学教授 鈴木あるの）
- 後援 農林水産省、京都新聞

## TICKETS

なぜ、いま畳なのか？

## DATE AND TIME

Sun, Jan 25, 2026  
1:00 PM - 5:00 PM GMT+09:00  
[Add to Calendar](#)

## LOCATION

キャンパスプラザ京都 (京都市大学のまち交流センター) 京都市下京区東塩小路町9 3 9 Japan  
[View map](#)

ORGANIZER  
海外と日本文化  
116 Followers

Contact

Follow

[Get Ticket](#)



All Categories

Search Events

Near me

Upcoming

Show online events only

## Search results

**FEB 20** Fri, 7:00PM  
At GOCONC 京都リサーチパーク店 京都市下京区中堂寺粟田町91番地 KRP10...  
ダブルリードと夜の音楽の共鳴 / KRP創発ライブVol.47  
By 京都リサーチパーク (KRP)



**FEB 28** Sat, 1:30PM  
At 楽月庵 京都市左京区八瀬花尻町  
【マツダ相談役 金井氏、オムロン元専務CFO 日戸氏 参加決定！】『なぜあなたはマネジメントを間違えるのか』出版記念 Goldrattフェス  
By Goldratt Japan



**FEB 10** Tue, 9:00PM  
Online event  
明日から使える！可能性を引き出すコーチング術  
By あすもっとよくなるプロジェクト



**FEB 10** Tue, 10:00PM  
Online event  
明日から使える！可能性を引き出すコーチング術  
By あすもっとよくなるプロジェクト



## Promoted



**FEB 5** Thu, 1:30PM  
Online event  
【2026年2月5日開催】若手採用カンファレンス ...  
By 株式会社学情



**FEB 9** Mon, 2:00PM  
Online event  
その中期経営計画は、経営を前に進めているか？ - ...  
By Speeda / スピーダ

# Sofar Sounds

Digital platform  
Website

2009  
London, UK

Rafe Offer, Rocky Start,  
Dave Alexander

A global music community that hosts secret gigs in intimate spaces like living rooms and retail shops.

The exact location and lineup are revealed to guests only a day before the event.

It validates the mechanism of curiosity and exclusivity: by transforming mundane spaces into temporary event venues, it changes the user's perception of the city.

Some interesting features:

- The exact address is hidden until 24 hours before the event. This builds anticipation and creates a feeling of being an insider.
- BYOB (Bring Your Own Booze) policy. It is a mechanism that allow guests to bring drinks, lowering the cost barrier and making the event feel like a house party, rather than a commercial concert.
- A norm at Sofar gigs is that people can sit on floors, this forces a change in posture and breaks down social hierarchy, making the vibe instantly more intimate.

## Topics

language  
exchange



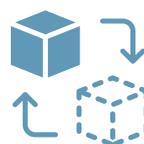
craft as  
(grounding)  
media



connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space



## Unlock one-of-a-kind shows in unique spaces

EMAIL ADDRESS

UNLOCK NOW

By adding your email, you agree to receive updates from Sofar and our [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

## What to expect



### Intimate shows

Connect with local artists, up close and personal, at every show.



### Unexpected venues

From iconic city landmarks to private backyards, enjoy live experiences in memorable spaces.



### Limitless vibes

Choose from laid-back to feel-good, high energy to laugh-out-loud funny — and everything in between.

## Open your doors to a world of new music

Sit back, relax, and let the good vibes and music come to you! All you have to do is open your door to our global community, and we'll take care of the rest. Meet new people, see artists up close and personal in the comfort of your own space and unlock hosting benefits like free tickets to attend Sofars around the world.



### Tell us about your space

Get in touch with the form below, and tell us where your space is located. If we think it's a good fit for a Sofar, someone will come do a walkthrough of your space with you in person.



### Book a date

Everything looks good? Once your space qualifies as a great Sofar venue, we'll offer you some dates to host your first show.



### Open your doors

It's showtime! On the day of the show, all you have to do is welcome everyone and enjoy. Our team will arrive early to set everything up and handle clean-up at the end. Sofar shows usually last for 2-3 hours.

[APPLY TO HOST A SOFAR](#)

# ClassBento

Digital platform  
Website

2016  
Sydney, Australia

John Tabari, Iain Wang

A curated marketplace specifically for creative workshops and artisan kits that becomes popular in the UK and Australia. It focuses on the mental health benefits of crafting.

Relevance to Koko: A direct reference for the "Craft" vertical. ClassBento classifies workshops by difficulty and material type. Koko can adapt their categorization logic to help users choose between "Easy/Quick" kits (for a coffee break) and "Hard/Long" kits (for a dedicated session).

Some interesting features:

- Workshops are tagged not just by craft ("Pottery") but by benefit ("Stress relief" or "Focus").
- This platform is heavily focused on gifting experiences rather than things.
- A "love it or money back" promise that lowers the risk for first-time crafters who fear they aren't creative enough or that will not enjoy the activity. This encourages to try the experience with no fear of losing money.

## Topics

language  
exchange



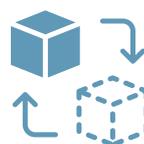
craft as  
(grounding)  
media

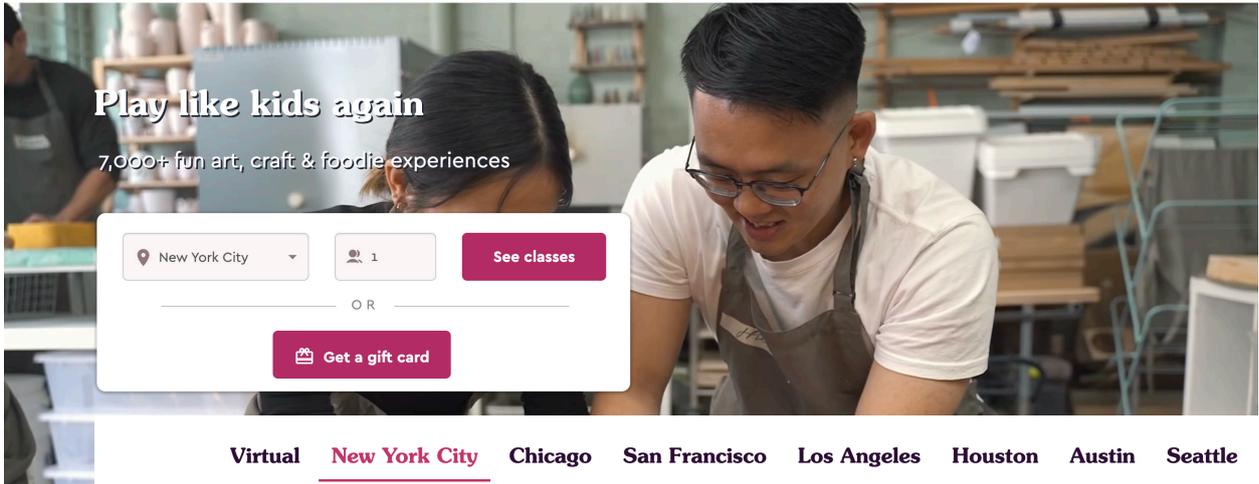


connecting  
people



from digital to  
physical space





Play like kids again

7,000+ fun art, craft & foodie experiences

New York City | 1 | See classes

OR

Get a gift card

Virtual | New York City | Chicago | San Francisco | Los Angeles | Houston | Austin | Seattle



Turkish Mosaic Lamp Workshop

★ 5.0 (55)  
 7 years in business  
 Runs regularly  
 Manhattan  
 \$84 - \$99



Pottery Wheel Throwing Class

★ 4.9 (824)  
 Runs regularly  
 Manhattan & Hell's Kitchen  
 \$70 - \$150



Fresh Pasta Cooking Class: Agnolotti, Cavatelli, Fettuccine

★ 5.0 (186)  
 Runs regularly  
 Greenwich Village  
 \$135



French Croissant Baking Class

★ 4.9 (129)  
 Runs regularly  
 East Village  
 \$85 - \$99



Craft Cocktail Making Class

★ 4.9 (67)  
 Runs regularly  
 Kips Bay / Mobile  
 \$115 - \$130



See more

NYC Activities | Craft | Pottery | Wheel Throwing | Experience Gifts

# Pottery Wheel Throwing Class

Learn how to throw clay on the potter's wheel in this NYC workshop.



Pottery NYC  
 ★ 4.9 (1,155)

ClassBento donates with every booking to



2 hours | 1 to 14 (public classes), 15 to 20 (private classes)

\$70 - \$150 (price varies across dates)

## Book into a public class

Date & time  
 Tap to pick a time | Buy

- Book soon - this class often get sold out
- Free to reschedule (with 3 days notice)
- Book at least 1 hour before each date

## Request a private class

- For groups of 15 to 20 guests
- We've accepted 100% of Requests, usually within minutes

Request

Get a gift card for this class

## What you'll do



### Get Ready to Play with Clay

Step inside this light-filled Manhattan studio and get comfy. With all materials provided and expert guidance throughout, you're all set for a fun, hands-on session.



### Meet Your Wheel

Get introduced to the pottery wheel as instructor demo how it spins and how to something special.

Rouan Esmail • Jan 2026

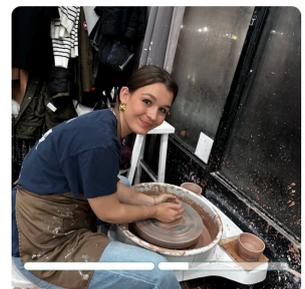
★★★★★

Great class! Anna was a really helpful hands on instructor. She really helped a lot when needed. You get enough time to get the hang of things. Definitely recommend Zerimar Clay studio!

Linda Motosko • Jan 2026

★★★★★

Loved the class! Mariana was outstanding in teaching the class, with an overview and personal help for each attendee. We were there as a birthday celebration for a family member!! What a fun experience



## 5.3 EVALUATION MATRIX

In the previous pages different case studies had been analysed, involving competitors and comparables that touch several topics.

Now, the focus of the analysis moves specifically to digital platforms: looking at the 10 Nielsen Heuristics for User Interface Design (Nielsen Jakob, 1994), here has been developed an evaluation matrix for comparing in a objective way websites and mobile applications.

| Nielsen Hueristics                                       | 1. Visibility of system status | 2. Match between system and real world | 3. User control and freedom | 4. Consistency and standards | 5. Error prevention |
|--|--------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Connection and Language exchange platforms</b>        |                                |  |                             |                              |                     |
| Timeleft   | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| Meetup.com   | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| Hopin  | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| HelloTalk  | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| Tandem   | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| Slowly   | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| <b>Events, Workshops and Local Experiences platforms</b> |                                |  |                             |                              |                     |
| Eventbrite   | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| Airbnb Exp.  | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| Peatix   | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| Sofar Sound  | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |
| ClassBento   | ●                              | ●                                      | ●                           | ●                            | ●                   |

-  5, excellent (standard setter)
-  4, good (minor friction)
-  3, average (functional but needs work)
-  2, poor (significant pain points)
-  1, critical fail (breaks usability)

| 6. Recognition rather than recall   | 7. Flexibility and efficiency of use  | 8. Aesthetic and minimalist design  | 9. Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors                          | 10. Help and documentation  | Total value |
|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|
|    |    |    |    |    | 41          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 42          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 47          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 46          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 49          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 40          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 46          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 50          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 37          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 38          |
|  |  |  |  |  | 49          |

## 5.4 STAKEHOLDERS IN KYOTO

A service system lives within a complex web of social and economic relationships.

While the project relies on tangible touchpoints like the mobile app or the toolbox, the ecosystem of stakeholders is the true engine of the system.

Systemic design approach acknowledges that for the project to be sustainable, it must generate value not just for internationals and locals (the users) but also for the café owner (the host), the local municipality (the institutional support) and the community at large.

This concept of value creation posits that the service is actively constructed through the participation of all actors involved.

Furthermore, designing for a specific territory like Kyoto requires a deep sensitivity to local dynamics.

This project does not aim to build a new infrastructure from scratch, but rather to stitch itself into the existing network of the city.

By identifying and mapping these stakeholders, it is possible to understand better the flow of resources, influences and legitimacy required to bring the system to life.

## **Users**

- locals
- international students
- international residents (workers)
- tourists

## **Community & Promotion**

- Kokoka (Kyoto City International Foundation)
- University Co-ops (Seikyou)
- Study Kyoto: International Student Study Kyoto Network
- Facebook Groups: where foreigners sell their stuff before leaving. A prime place to find people.
- Kyoto City Tourism Association
- Language schools, for instance KICL, ARC Academy, Kyoto Minsai
- Share Houses, for instance Sakura House, Borderless House Kyoto
- Hospitality facilities and hostels
- Shotengai Associations: those are communities that manage the covered shopping streets, promoting community welfare, local culture, events.

## **Institutional Support**

- Kyoto City Government (Arts & Culture Division): Kyoto actively funds Traditional Industry x Modern Design projects.
- Consulate General (French, etc.): Often sponsor cultural exchange events. Good for funding the initial kits.
- Kyoto Museum of Crafts and Design: they actively look for ways to make traditional crafts accessible to youth
- Chonaikai (Neighborhood Associations)
- The Consortium of Universities of Kyoto: this organization reunites roughly 50 universities in Kyoto and runs the International Student Study Kyoto Network. It gives access to all the students in the city.
- The Japan Foundation: it is the primary government agency for cultural exchange
- TELL Japan: a non-profit providing mental health support and counseling to international community.

## Potential hosts



Kyoto International  
Community House



FabCafe Kyoto (MTRL)  
They attract creators and  
have the infrastructure for  
making.

Len Kyoto Kawaramachi  
(Hostel + Café)  
A high-traffic hub where  
backpackers and stylish  
locals already mix. The  
large ground-floor tables  
are ideal for the kit.



Impact Hub Kyoto  
Located in the Nishijin  
weaving district. Great  
for connecting with the  
sustainability and social  
impact crowd.



## Potential hosts



### Mumokuteki Café

Focuses on sustainability and organic living, offers a relaxing space and sometimes hosts events.



### Mcafé (Kyoto Institute of Technology)

Already hosts activities that promote the connection between local and international students

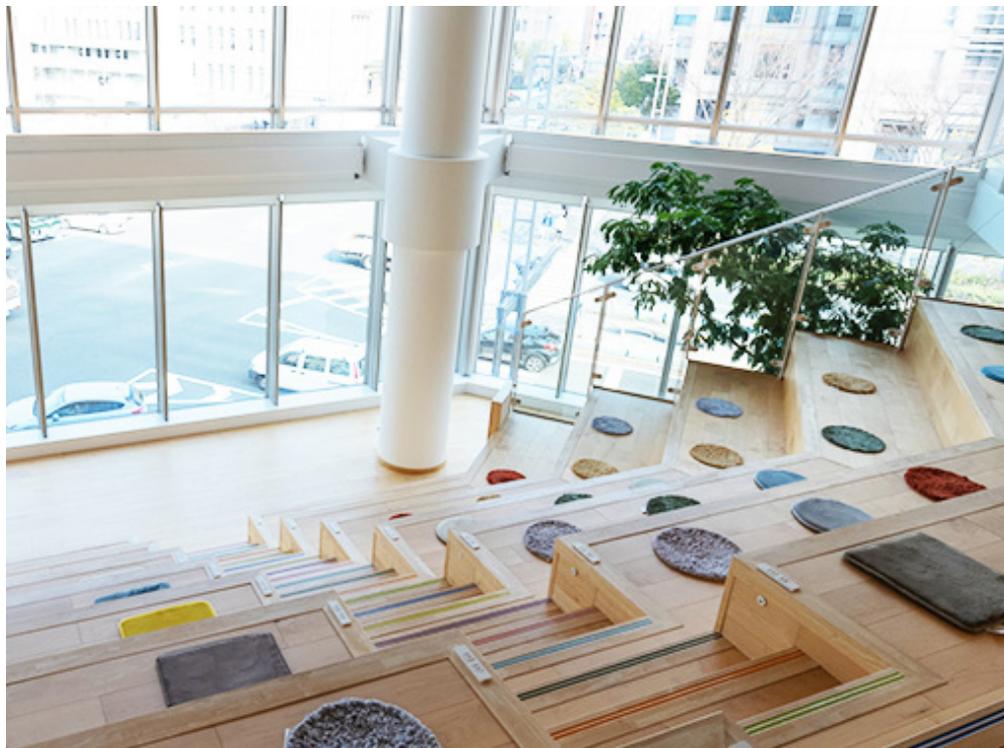
### Peripheral cafès

For instance, Whatever Coffee Base: a coffee that offers free space for working or studying with no limited time. Frequented by internationals, could attract more poeple.



### Question Building

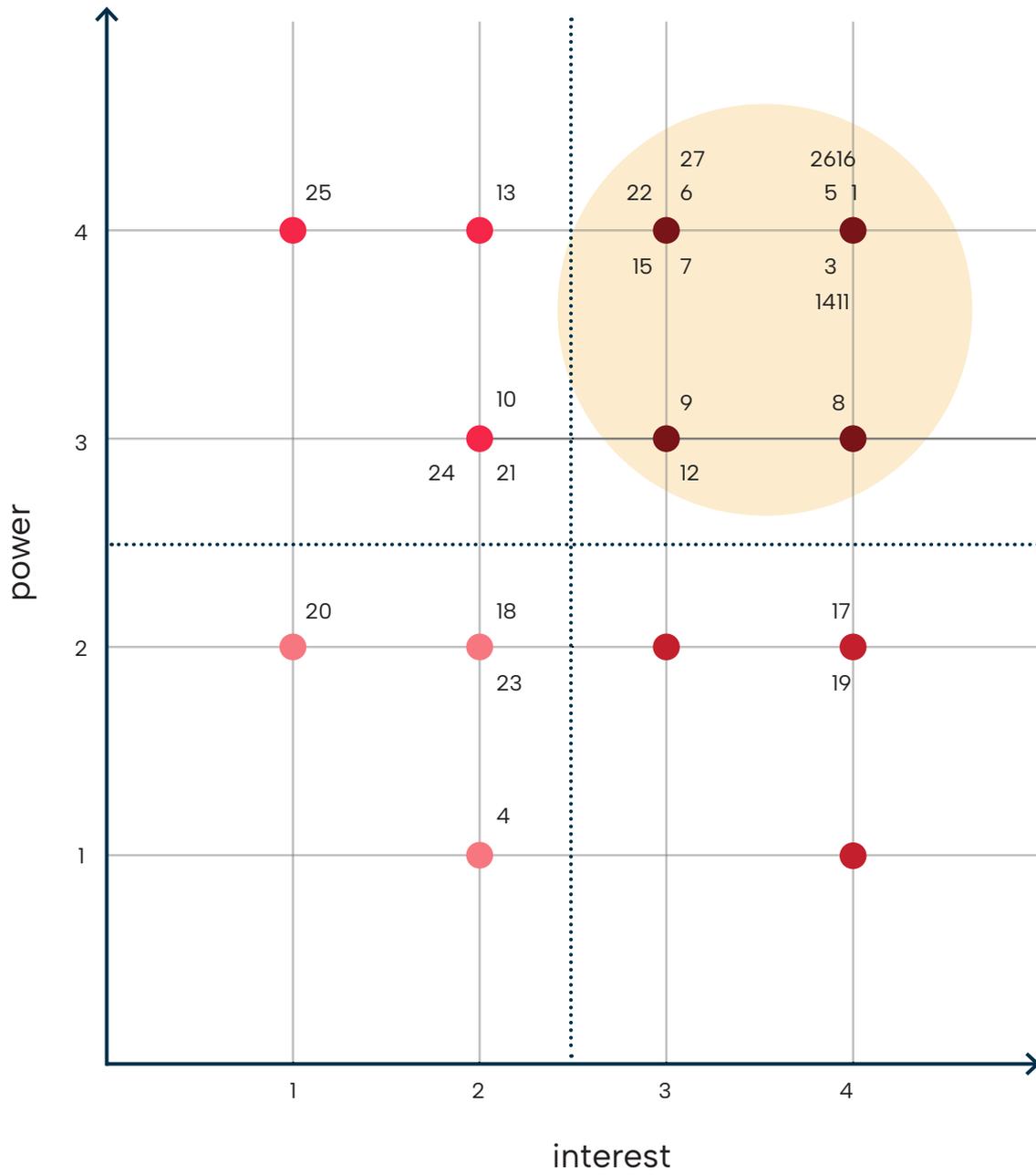
Kyoto: hosts events and accepts proposals from organizations. The building has multiple venues and events infrastructure.



## 5.5 STAKEHOLDERS MATRIX

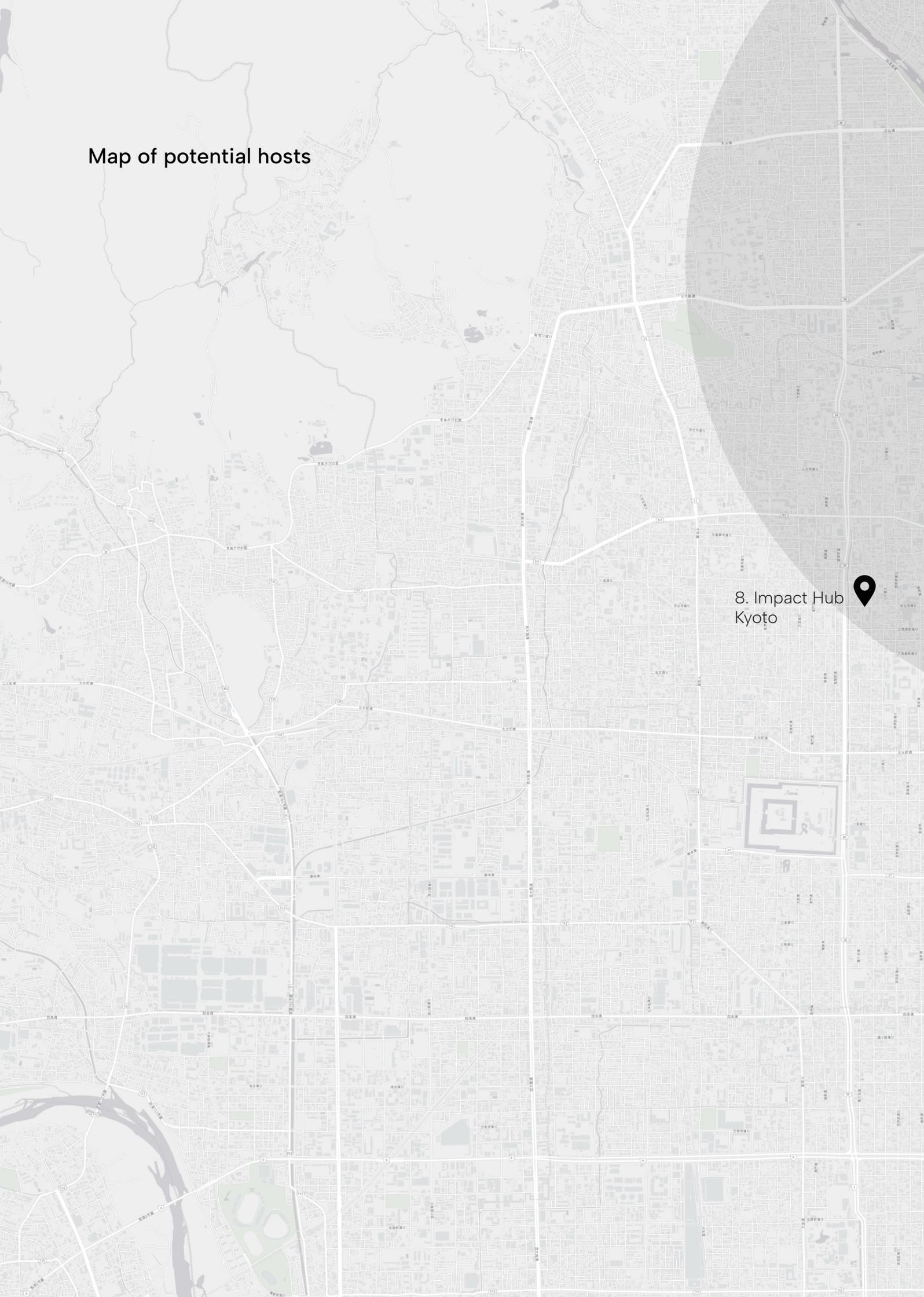
The following analysis categorizes the actors based on their power and interest, defining the strategic alliances to transform a design concept into a viable, site-specific reality.

| Stakeholder                                 | Power value (1-4) | Interest value (1-4) |
|---|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. International Students                   | 4                 | 4                    |
| 2. Locals                                   | 4                 | 4                    |
| 3. International residents (workers)        | 4                 | 4                    |
| 4. Tourists                                 | 1                 | 2                    |
| 5. Kyoto International Community House      | 4                 | 4                    |
| 6. FabCafe Kyoto / MTRL                     | 4                 | 3                    |
| 7. Len Hostel                               | 4                 | 3                    |
| 8. Impact Hub Kyoto                         | 3                 | 4                    |
| 9. Mumokuteki Café                          | 3                 | 3                    |
| 10. University Cafeterias                   | 3                 | 2                    |
| 11. Mcafé (KIT)                             | 4                 | 4                    |
| 12. Peripheral Cafés                        | 3                 | 3                    |
| 13. Question Building                       | 4                 | 2                    |
| 14. Kokoka                                  | 4                 | 4                    |
| 15. University Co-ops (Seikyoku)            | 4                 | 3                    |
| 16. Study Kyoto                             | 4                 | 4                    |
| 17. Facebook groups                         | 2                 | 4                    |
| 18. Kyoto City Tourism Association          | 2                 | 2                    |
| 19. Language Schools (KICL/ARC)             | 2                 | 4                    |
| 20. Hospitality Facilities and Hostels      | 2                 | 1                    |
| 21. Shotengai Associations                  | 3                 | 2                    |
| 22. Kyoto City Gov (Arts/Culture)           | 4                 | 3                    |
| 23. Consulates                              | 2                 | 2                    |
| 24. Kyoto Museum of Crafts and Design       | 3                 | 2                    |
| 25. Chonakai (Neighborhood Associations)    | 4                 | 1                    |
| 26. The Consortium of Universities of Kyoto | 4                 | 4                    |
| 27. The Japan Foundation                    | 4                 | 3                    |
| 28. TELL Japan                              | 1                 | 4                    |



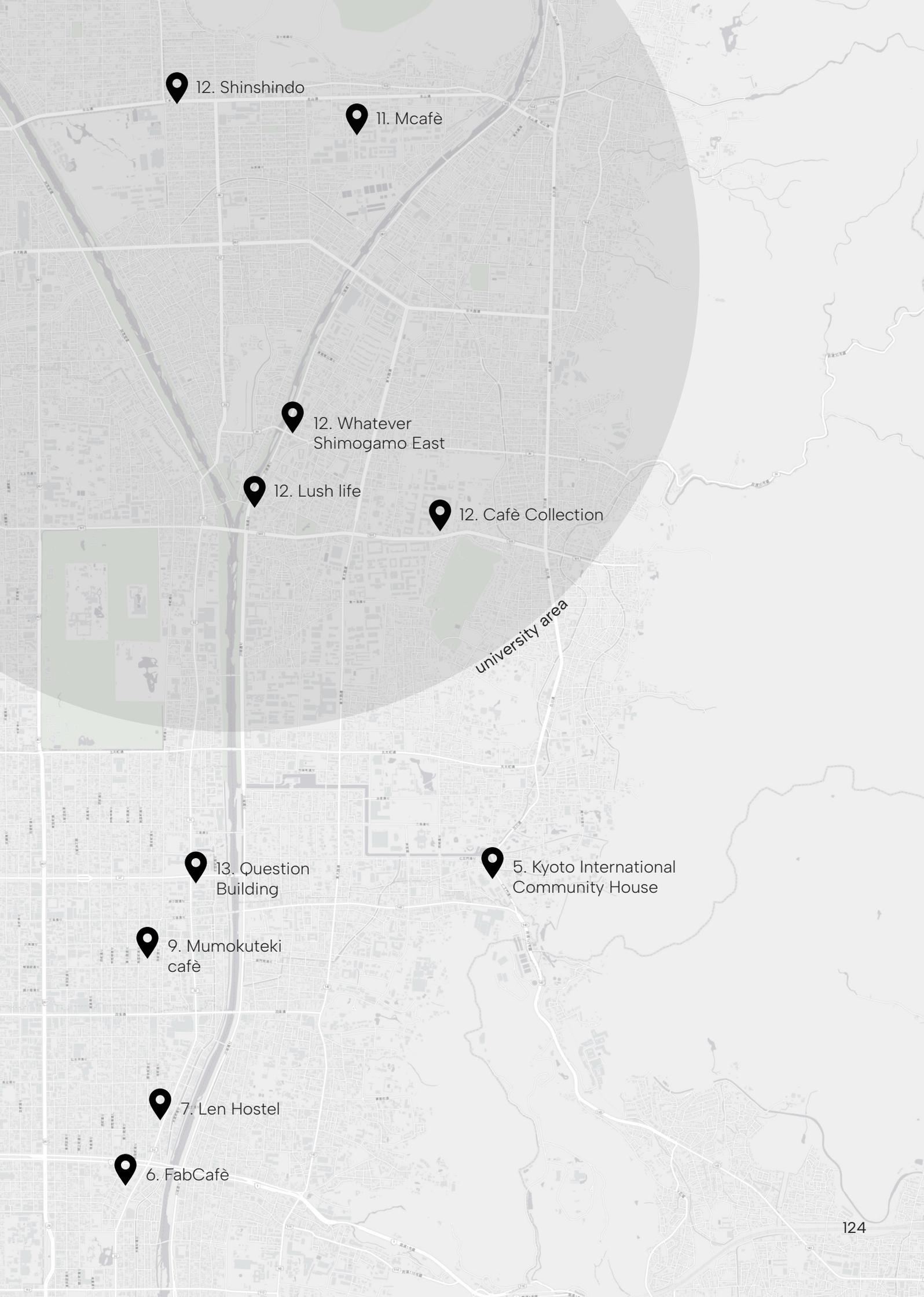
- engaged supporters
- key decision makers
- minimal impact stakeholders
- potential influencers

# Map of potential hosts



8. Impact Hub  
Kyoto





12. Shinshindo

11. Mcafé

12. Whatever Shimogamo East

12. Lush life

12. Café Collection

university area

13. Question Building

5. Kyoto International Community House

9. Mumokuteki café

7. Len Hostel

6. FabCafé

## Chapter 6

# The Project

A system designed to enjoy offline life, where international residents and locals bridge the **cultural gap** through the universal language of making.

By replacing the pressure of conversation with intuitive, **low-barrier crafts**, the project offers a grounding escape from digital overwhelm and, at the same time, turns the simple act of creation into a powerful medium for **community integration**.

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of Systemic Design, the aim of this project is to generate meaningful relationships and connections between people, territories and products in order to improve social sustainability.

This challenge is faced by transforming an existent issue on the investigated territory (Japan), such as the language barrier, into an opportunity. In fact, the focus of the project is to replace conversation with practical activities which could lead naturally to share objects and materials but also tips, informations and something more.

On the other hand, practical activities like crafts and small workshops resulted to be, into accord with interviews and research, very powerful grounding activities, capable to make us feel the present, appreciate errors and imperfection. Moreover, DIY activities can give a sense of gratification that is different from the instant gratification we experience with digital technology.

In fact, the first is a feeling that comes by the proud and the effort that we put into the act of making, a feeling that we transferred into the object, as explained by the shokunin-damashi belief (Chapter 1.3).

In contrast, the second type of gratification is given by the velocity and the smoothness of the fluid digital experience, which please us with removing any kind of friction.

The system proposed through this project is applied to the city of Kyoto because of its cultural nature.

But international residents are popular, of course, also outside Japan and there are other countries in the world with the same problem of language barrier.

So the framework designed for this thesis could be applied to any place with similar characteristics.

To go deeper in the organization of the designed ecosystem and to understand how it actually works, we can define the main touchpoints:

- a mobile app where users can primarily individuate activities, reserve them and join the community
- a small tool box with essential objects and materials that usually non-locals do not possess and in which participants can leave their trace.

In order to link the users with the city and the existing community, these small workshop will be held in local cafès, community hubs or even maker-spaces, leaving them a small fee in exchange for the space.

## 6.2 KOKO: A PHYGITAL SYSTEM



### **Koko**

ここ(*koko*) is a Japanese pronoun that means "here" or "this place", physically close to the speaker. It also means "now" or indicate a specific, close or individual point (Jisho, 2026).

It is a very common word in Japanese language and it can be found everywhere, moreover it is really easy to remember and sounds warm and welcoming.

I choose to use this word as name of my project because the goal is to invite people to stay in the present, here, and also to make them reach a place where to meet new people.

### **The tool box**

People who live abroad are often stopped to do crafts because of the lack of tools and materials.

The function of the tool box is to fill this gap and represent a repository of the workshops hosted: inside this small box kept at each location, participants will find basics tools such as scissors, needles, ruler etc that allow to create different objects.

Moreover, inside the box participants can leave their trace: a pattern they designed, a note, a scrap of their material and so on.



## The mobile app

This is the entry point for the community: here users can sign up and discover the available opportunities.

At the first download, the onboarding process will collect personal information of the user such as name, age, current city and language.

Then, it will propose also a quick personality test that will allow the app to match the user with the most related activities in the city.

The home will present the user the oncoming activities through cards and an intuitive UI.

Here, the user will be able to scroll through activities, check locations, materials needed and fees and then reserve a preferred activity.

An important feature will be the section dedicated to see who will attend, that will show others participants' photo, name and language.

When the activity reaches the maximum number of participants, it will be possible to apply for the waiting list.

There will be a section about the reserved activities and the relative e-tickets, which will be showed to the staff of the workshop's location.

As the staff scan the e-ticket, the instructions for making the project will be unlocked in the app.

This last design choice is given by the willingness of people to experience unpredictation and it is also a way to interact with participants and try to understand together how to carry out the small project.

This feature promotes a supporting environment and generates share between participants.

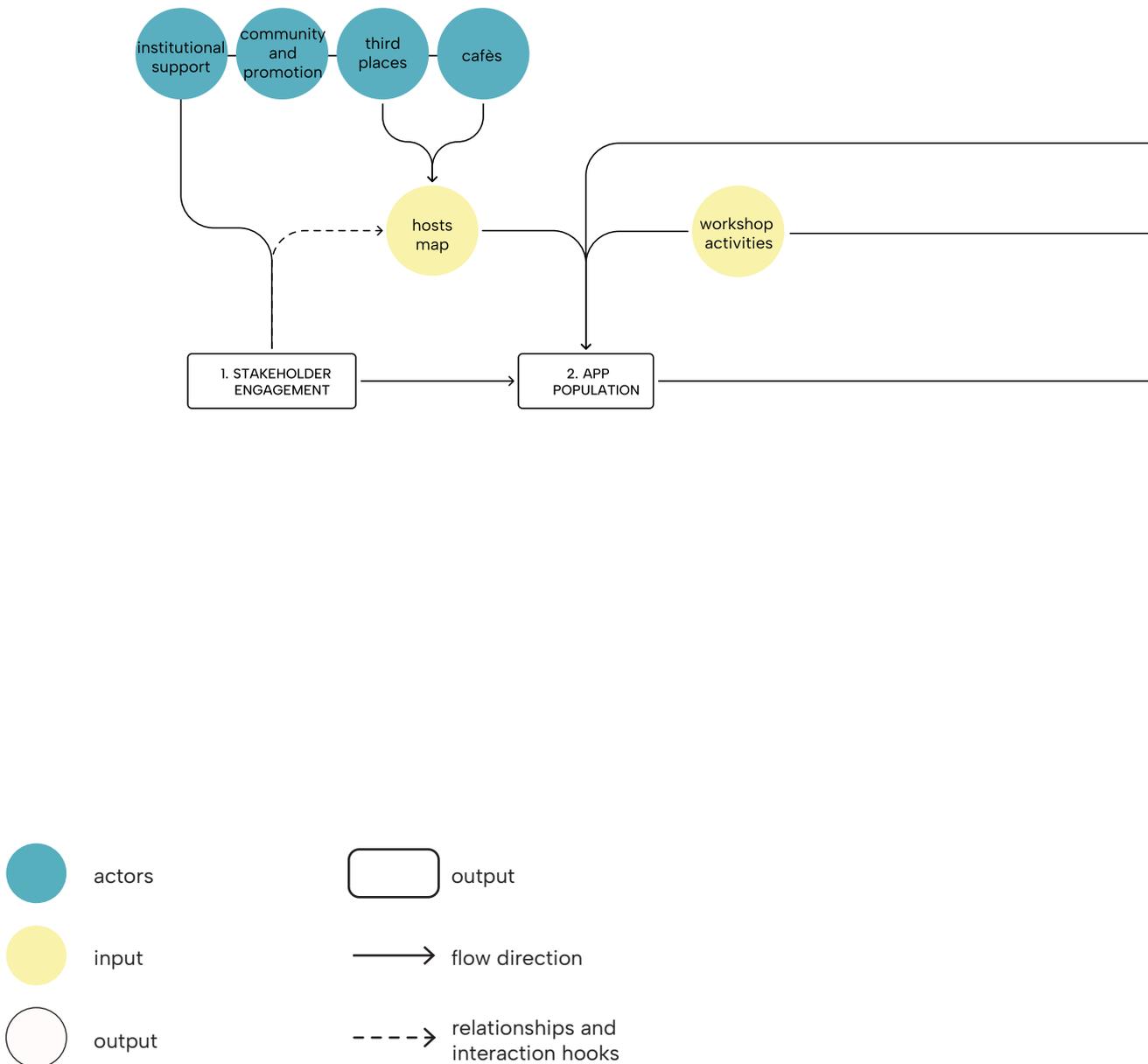


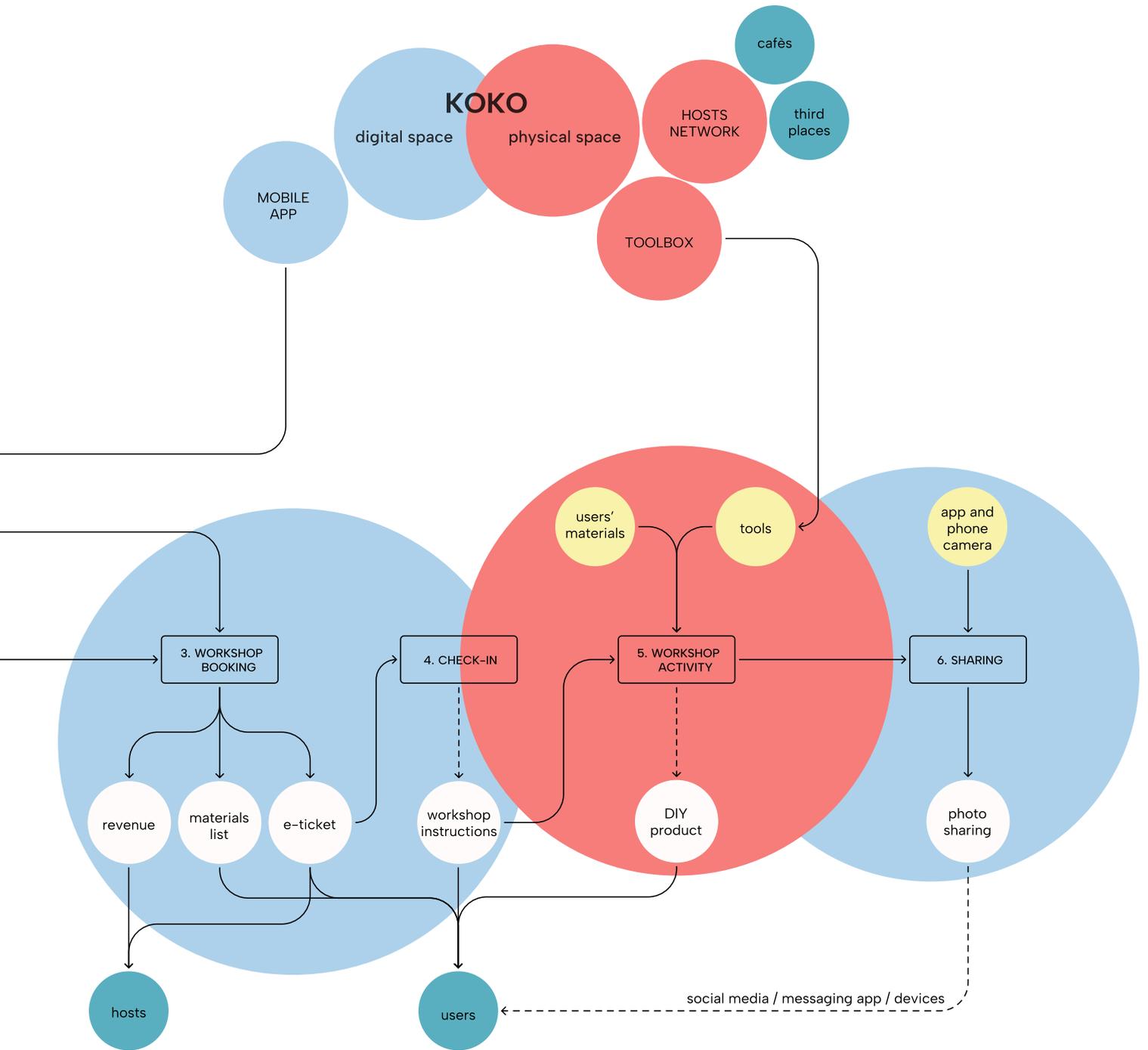
### 6.3 SYSTEM MAP

This map explains how the project actually works, who are the stakeholders involved and how they are connected with the users.

This system is applied to the city of Kyoto but, as mentioned earlier, it represents a case study that could be applied also on other places with similar characteristics.

At the center there are the steps carried out by the user, a sort of summarised journey map, and around there are all the actors, tools, materials, media and resources involved, taking into account also the location in the city.





## 6.4 WORKSHOP EXAMPLES

### a. Keychain

This is an entry-level sewing workshop, suitable for those who have never tried to sew at all. In fact, it consists in cutting two identical shapes on fabric and using a blanket stitch.

Time: 1 hour

Tools: scissors, needle

Materials: fabric scraps, thread



### b. Sashiko embroidery

A Japanese technique for embroidery textiles, it can be applied on any item and cloth that the participant already owns, after trying on a scrap fabric.

Time: 1-2 hours

Tools: needle

Materials: fabric scraps, thread



### c. Hand knitting

It is a textile craft where people can create fabric by looping yarn with hands, using fingers instead of a loom or of traditional knitting needles.

Time: 1 h

Tools: /

Materials: yarn



### b. Collage project

Just an old magazine or newspaper and a topic. Then, participants can exchange images and tell each other the reasons of their choices.

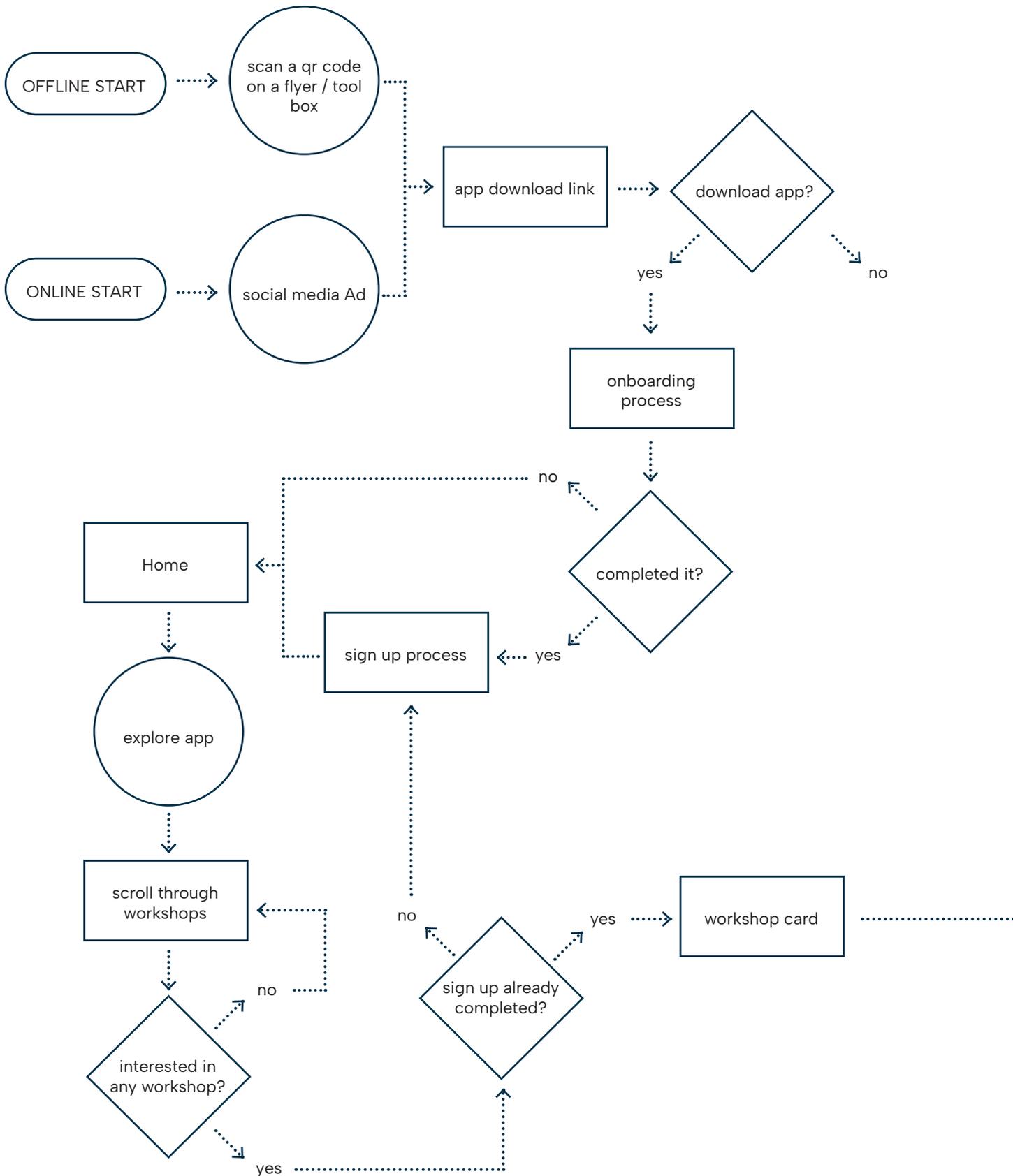
Time: 1 hour

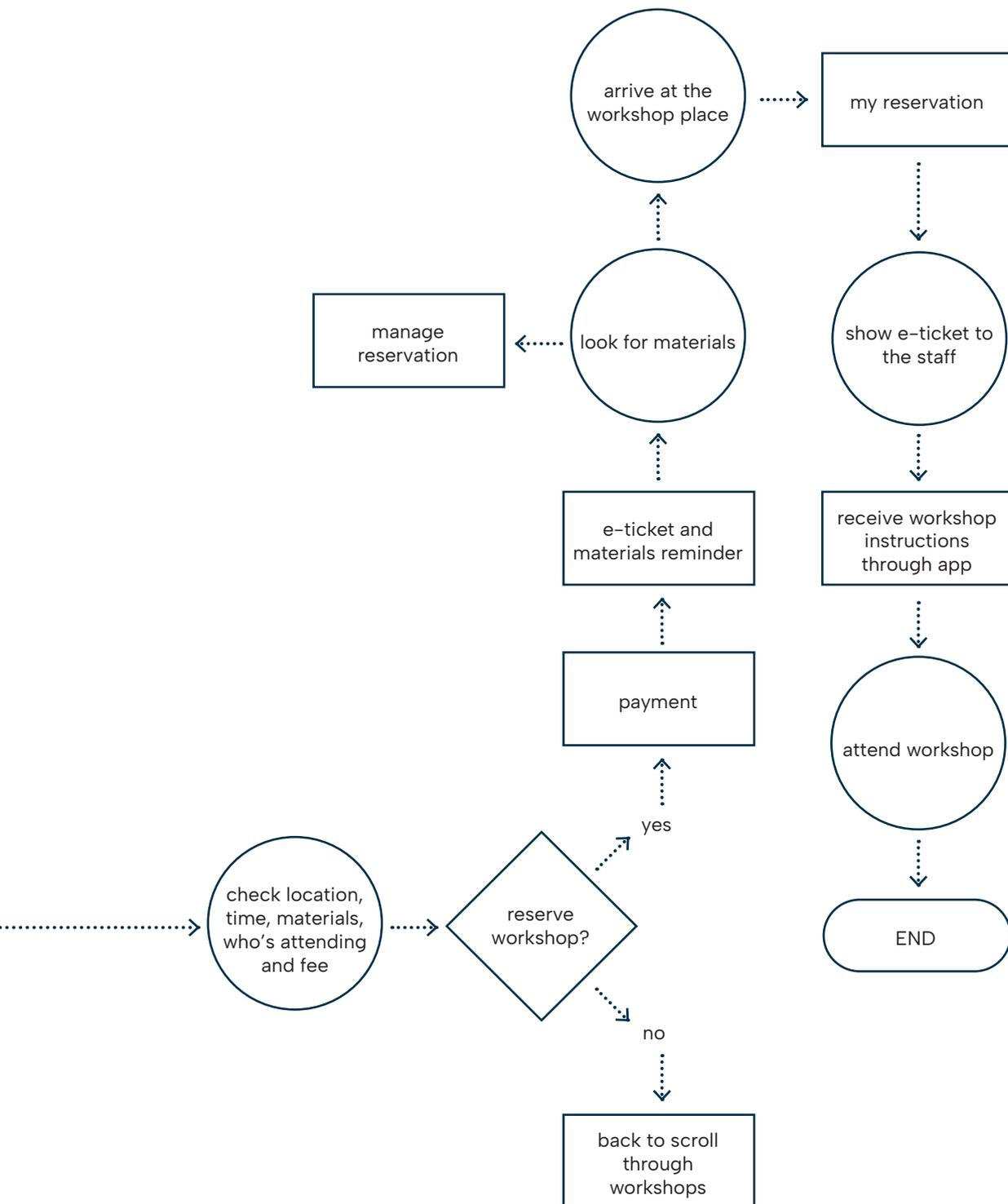
Tools: scissors, glue stick

Materials: magazine, newspaper, flyers



## 6.5 USER FLOW





## 6.6 PROJECT VALIDATION AND TIPS

During the experience at Kyoto Institute of Technology, I had the opportunity to join and be active part of the Laboratory Design for Sustainability of my supervisor, Tsuda Kazutoshi.

We used to meet every Thursday afternoon: everyone had the opportunity to present updates about their own project and to gain suggestions and opinions by students and the sensei.

The class was composed of circa 15 students and that the majority of them were Japanese, only me and another colleague were from other countries.

At this point of the design process, I presented my work to the class and I was able to note some useful comments and ideas given by my colleagues. Firstly, I received a positive feedback about the concept itself: everybody agreed about the fact that making friends in Japan is very difficult for internationals.

In particular a colleague, Yuki, told me about his experience: he had the opportunity to go on exchange in Turkey last year and he noticed that in Europe has been really easy for him to get in touch with other students and young people. He underlined his awareness about the big difference in Japan: he confirmed that, in his opinion, an European student on exchange in Japan would not have the same social experience.

Also Helimar, a colleague from Venezuela who I also interviewed, confirmed that it is not really easy to interact with Japanese people, mostly because they are very shy about speaking in English.

Moving to the project itself, I gained so many interesting feedbacks that I plan to take into account for the development of the project's ecosystem:

### **tip 1: organize a workshop**

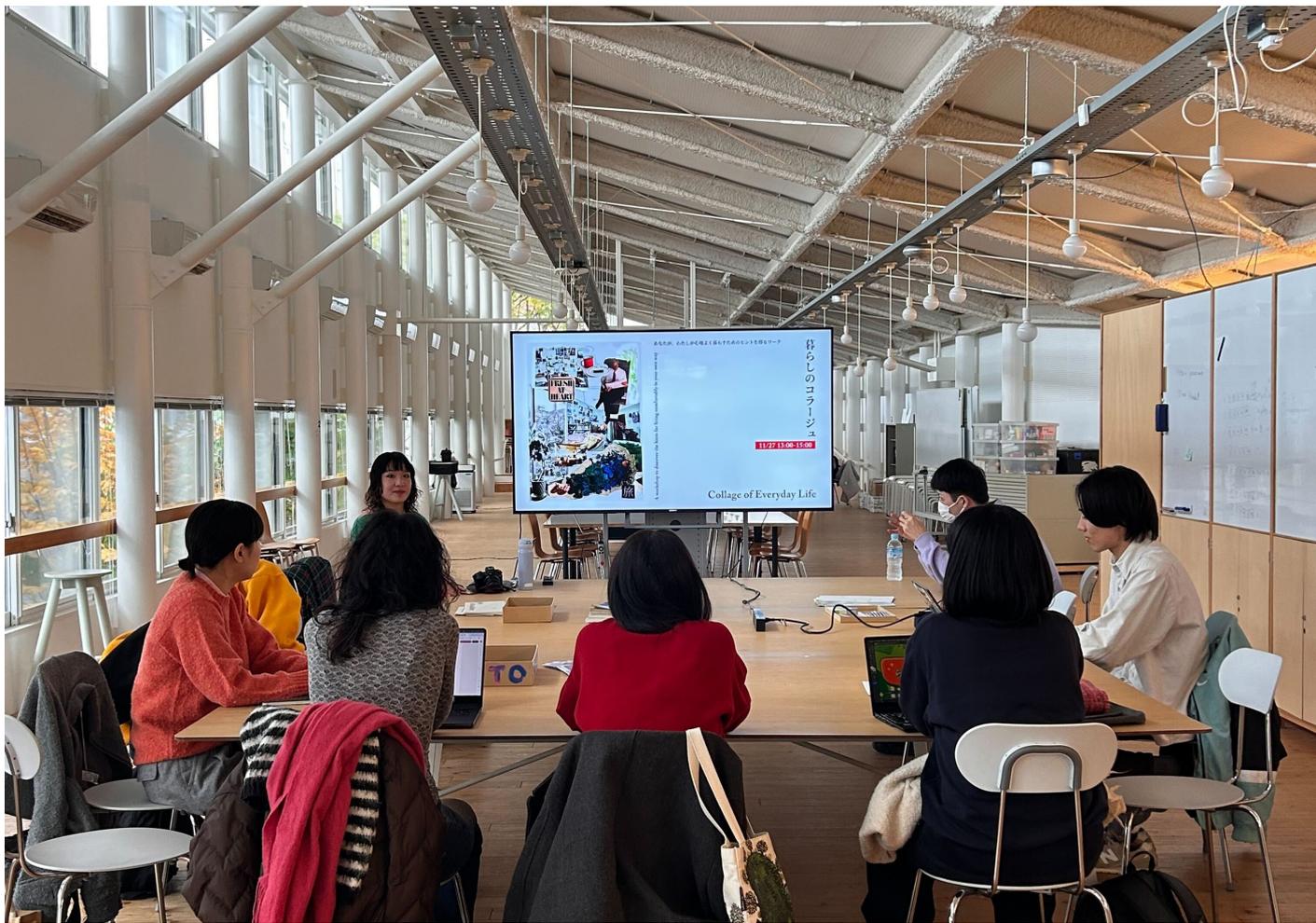
The first thing that has been suggested was to try to organise a small workshop in order to gain real data and test if crafty activities could effectively be useful for interacting with strangers and without conversation pressure. Students suggested locations in the city and we discussed about small project ideas.

Someone also invited me join other workshop that were going to be held in the same week by some international students.

### **tip 2: plan people interaction on the app**

At the moment when I present the project, the user journey of users ends with taking part to the workshop. Someone suggested to design also a digital final interaction between people, using the app as medium.

In this way, it could be easier to stay in touch with other participants and the hook given by the app could avoid an embarrassing moment for asking someone contacts, phone number or a social media nickname.



Picture 15 and 16: Tsuda seminar in D-Lab at Kyoto Institute of Technology, workshop and class discussions about student projects.

## Chapter 7

# The tool box: usage and storage

This box is not only a place where to put back materials and tools.

It is a **physical repository** of the interactions taken place in a specific location: here participants can leave a message, a memory, a material for the next person who will open the box.

In this way, it becomes an interaction touchpoint itself, between different workshops.

The design is inspired by the iconic Japanese **bento box**: the minimalistic and organized segmentations allow to design a functional product, avoiding cognitive load.



## 7.1 INSPIRATION

Koko's toolbox takes inspiration by the iconic Japanese bento box: a traditional single-portion, packed meal in a compartmentalized container.

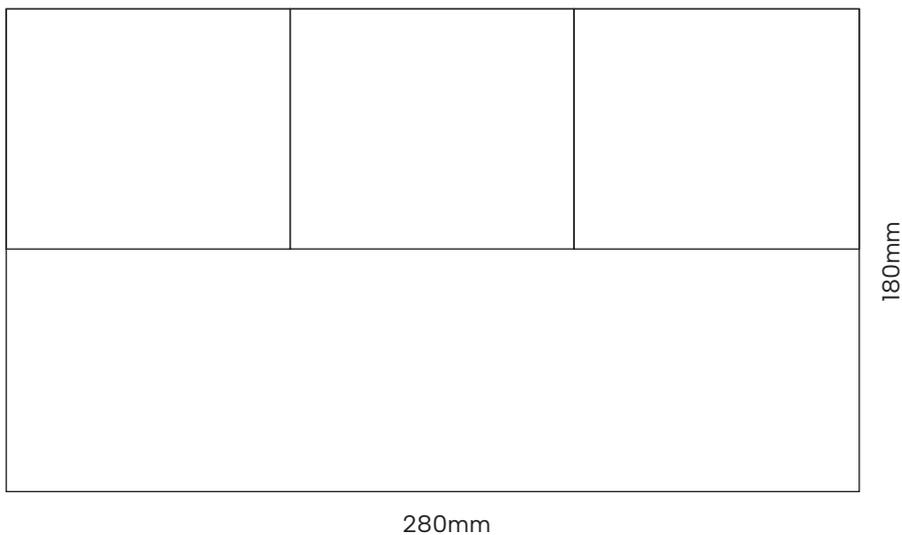
It is designed for convenience, portability and aesthetic appeal.

The function of the compartments is to keep food separate, preserving flavour and texture.

This last concept seemed to me very useful for designing a product that can be used by multiple people overtime: it has to be easy to maintain in order and the contents has to be visible at first sight.

This toolbox reimagines the chaotic workspace as a curated landscape of tools and materials, representing a fundamental artifact for the activities.

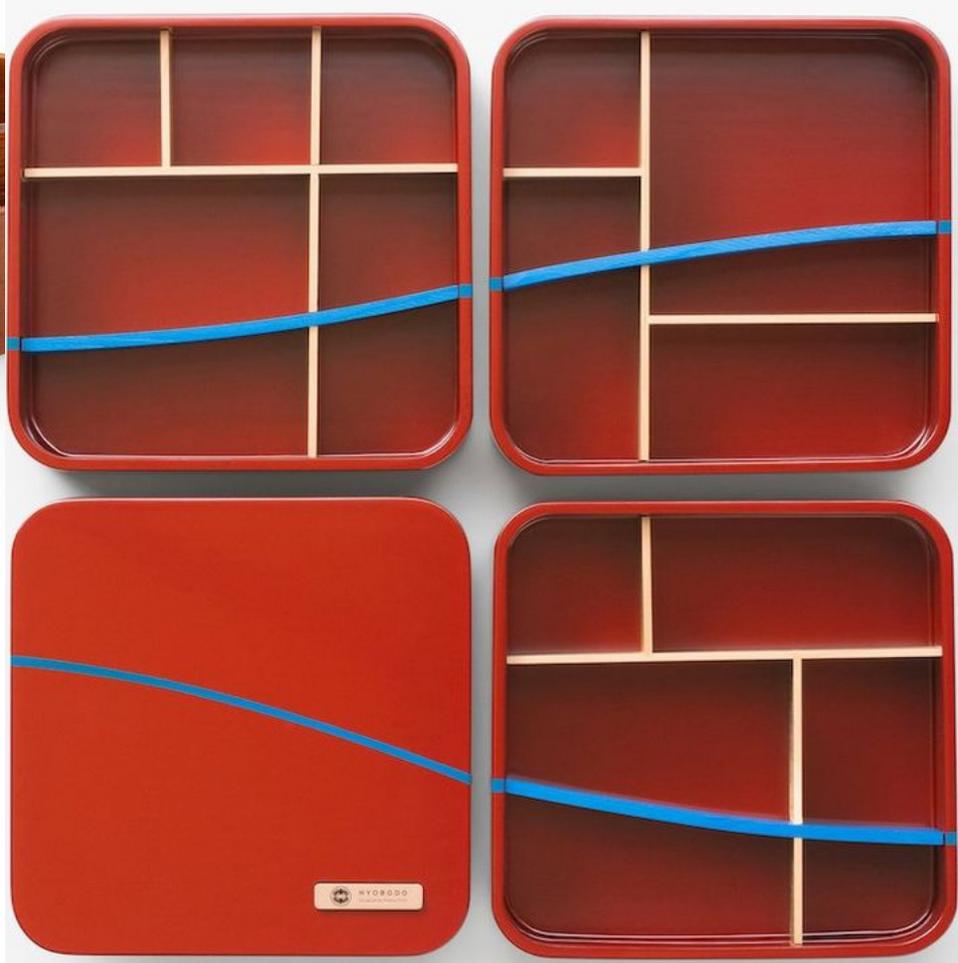
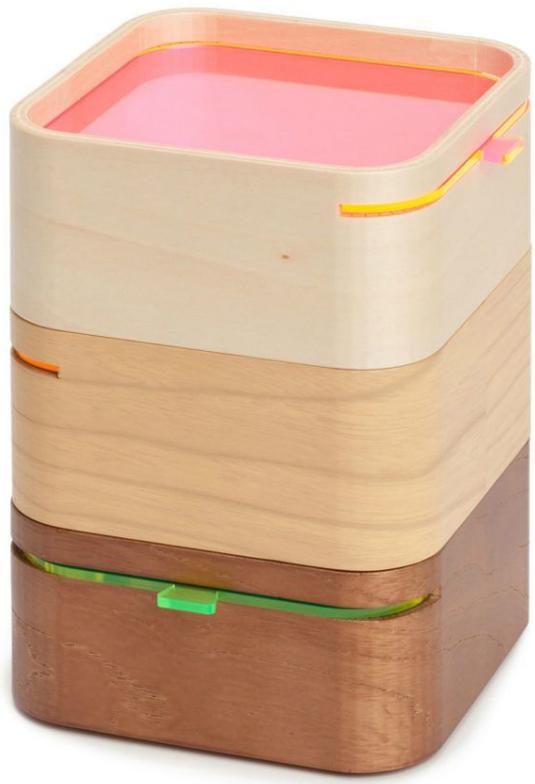
This transforms the act of setting up from a chore into a moment of centering, ensuring that every tool and material has a dedicated home, much like the thoughtful arrangement of a well-packed lunch.



Each compartment has a specific role and content, the idea is to make it easy to maintain.

In fact, a well-maintained toolbox is very important in order to let the workshop go on without any problem.

In this context, Japanese minimalism is not just a choice of style but a functional, practical design direction.



## 7.2 THE PRODUCT

The box is divided in 3 main compartments, assembled together in vertical thanks to simple male and female cuts.

Starting from the top, there is the lid: it closes the entire box but also acts as phone holder. That way, participants can put their phone on it and look at workshop's instructions.

The central compartment is dedicated to memories: here participants can leave notes, maybe a in a shared notebook, some interesting scraps and also small materials for future participants.

The bottom part is designed to contain main tools: these may be very common tools but also some specific objects that not always people have at home.

In fact, especially for international residents, it is not so common to possess needles, pliers or screwdrivers.

In the smaller compartments of the bottom it is possible to find also some materials such as fabric, thread, beads, paper.

The more the Koko ecosystem grows, the more the toolbox becomes rich in content and memories that carries.





## Chapter 8

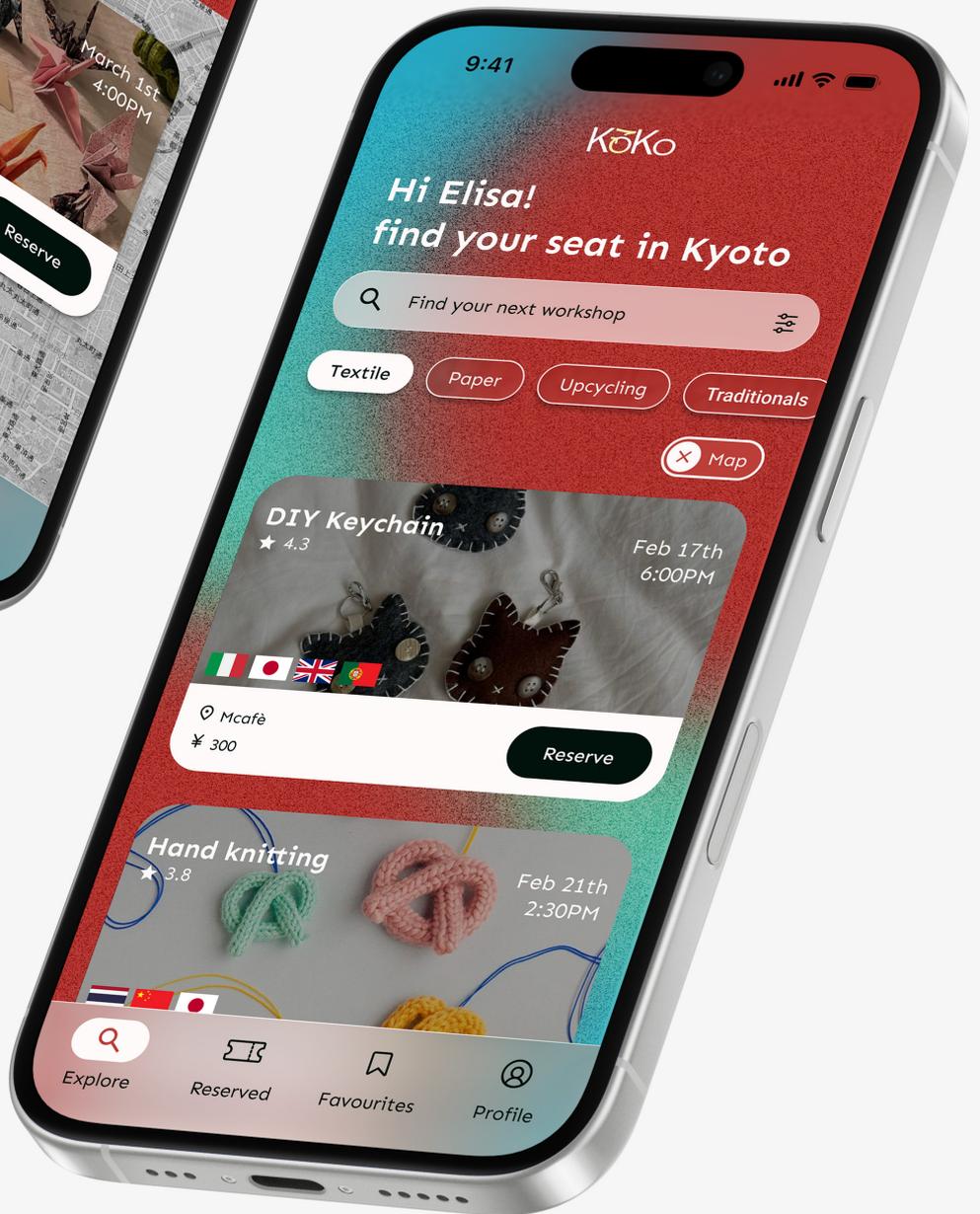
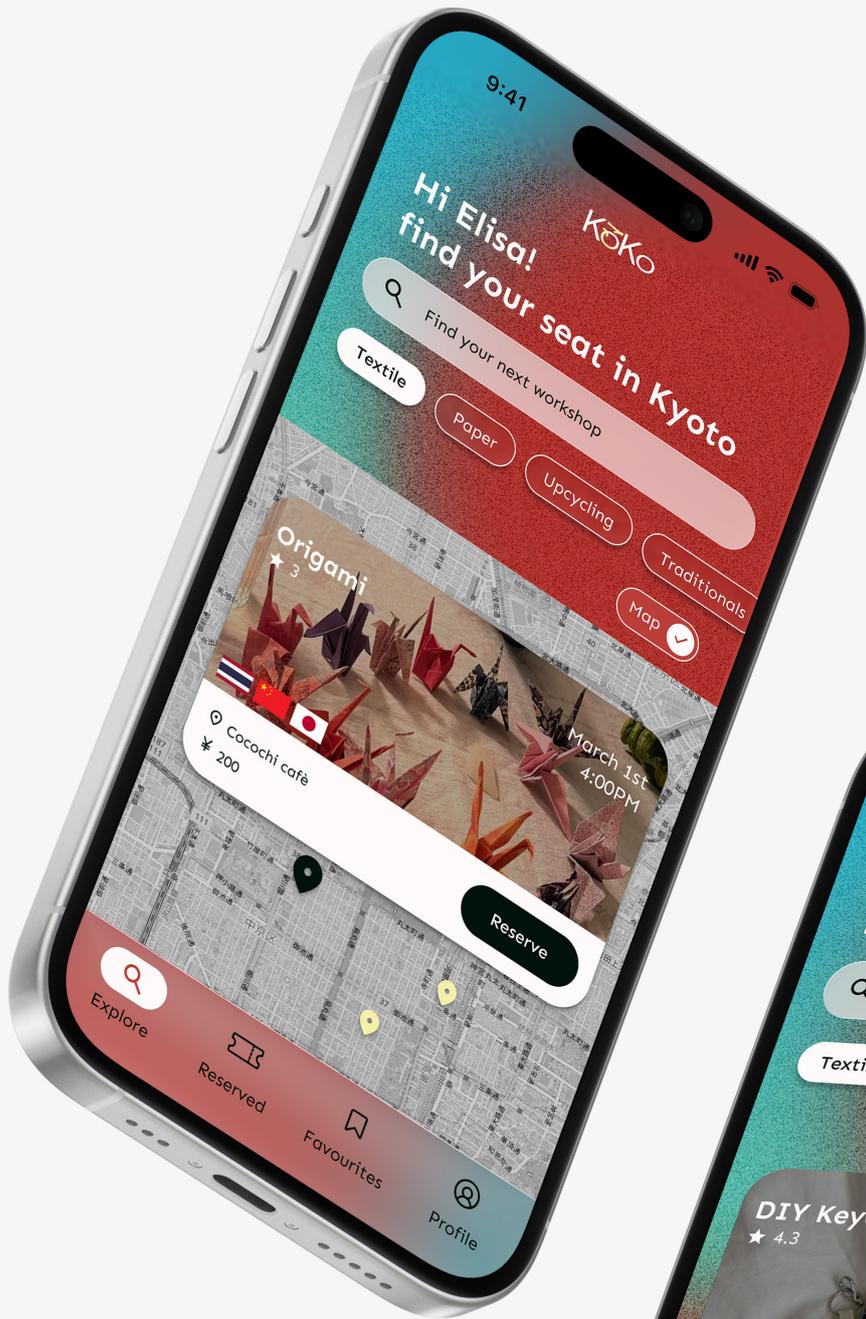
# Koko app: crafting connections

This app aims to connect people from different nationalities.

By designing interactions during craft activities, it proposes a way to bypass the language barrier.

Koko app exploits **interaction hooks** to encourage people to engage and share information.

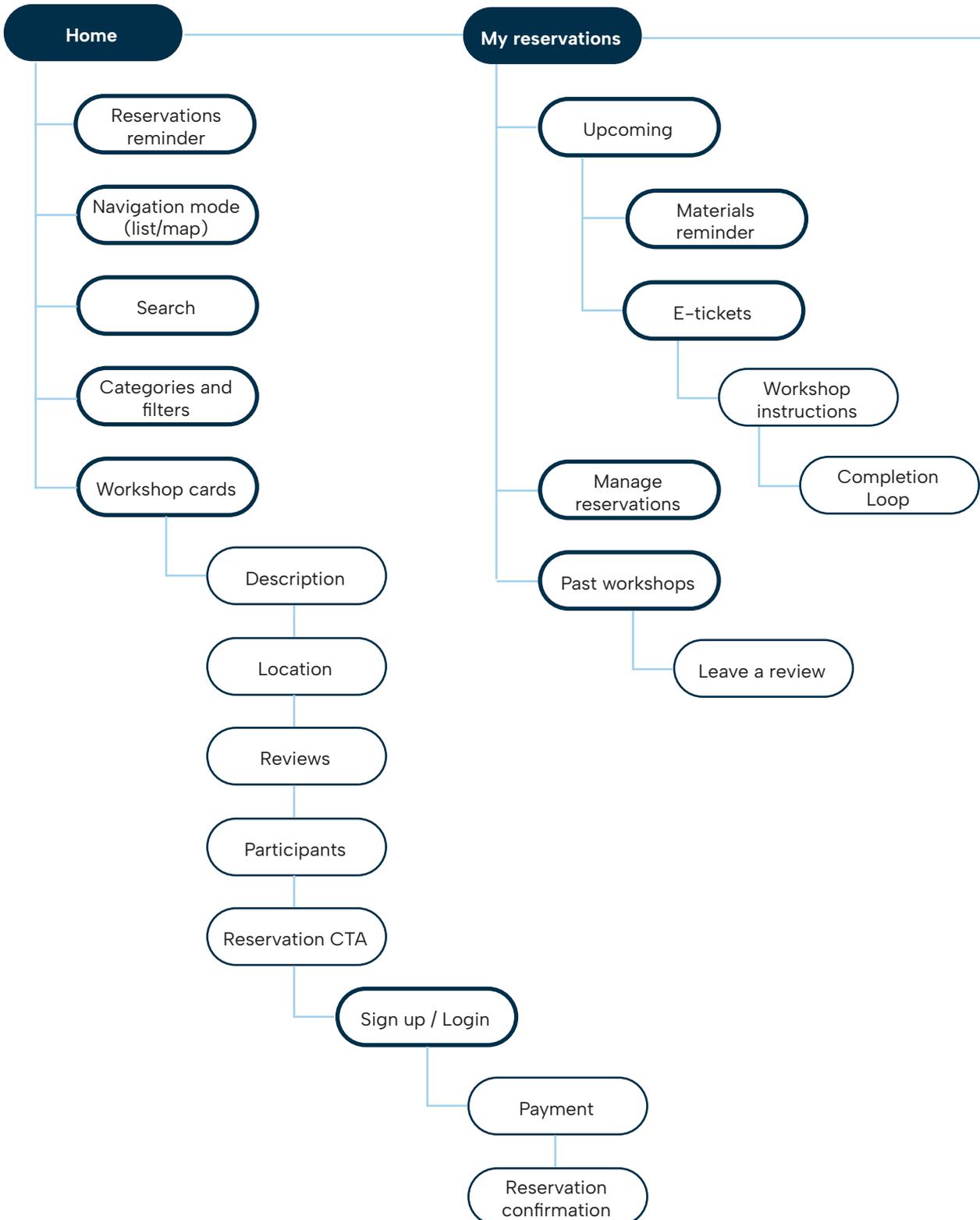
The user can choose a workshop and reserve it but the instructions will be provided only once reached the location. This will push people to interact and learn together.

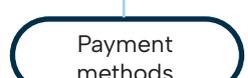
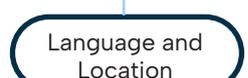
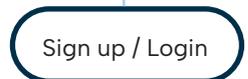
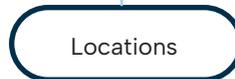
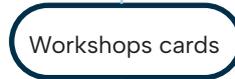
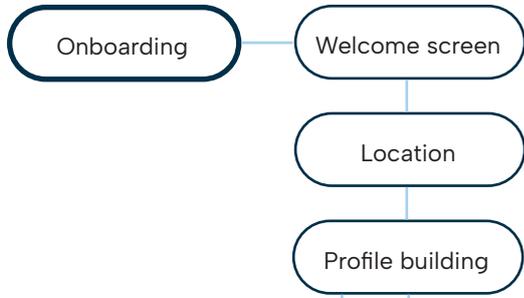


## 8.1 INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

The IA of the app Koko is built on a paradox: it is a digital tool designed to minimize the digital presence.

Its primary function is to act as a bridge, guiding the user from the screen to the physical location. To achieve this, the IA follows a linear path centered on two core phases: discovery and action.



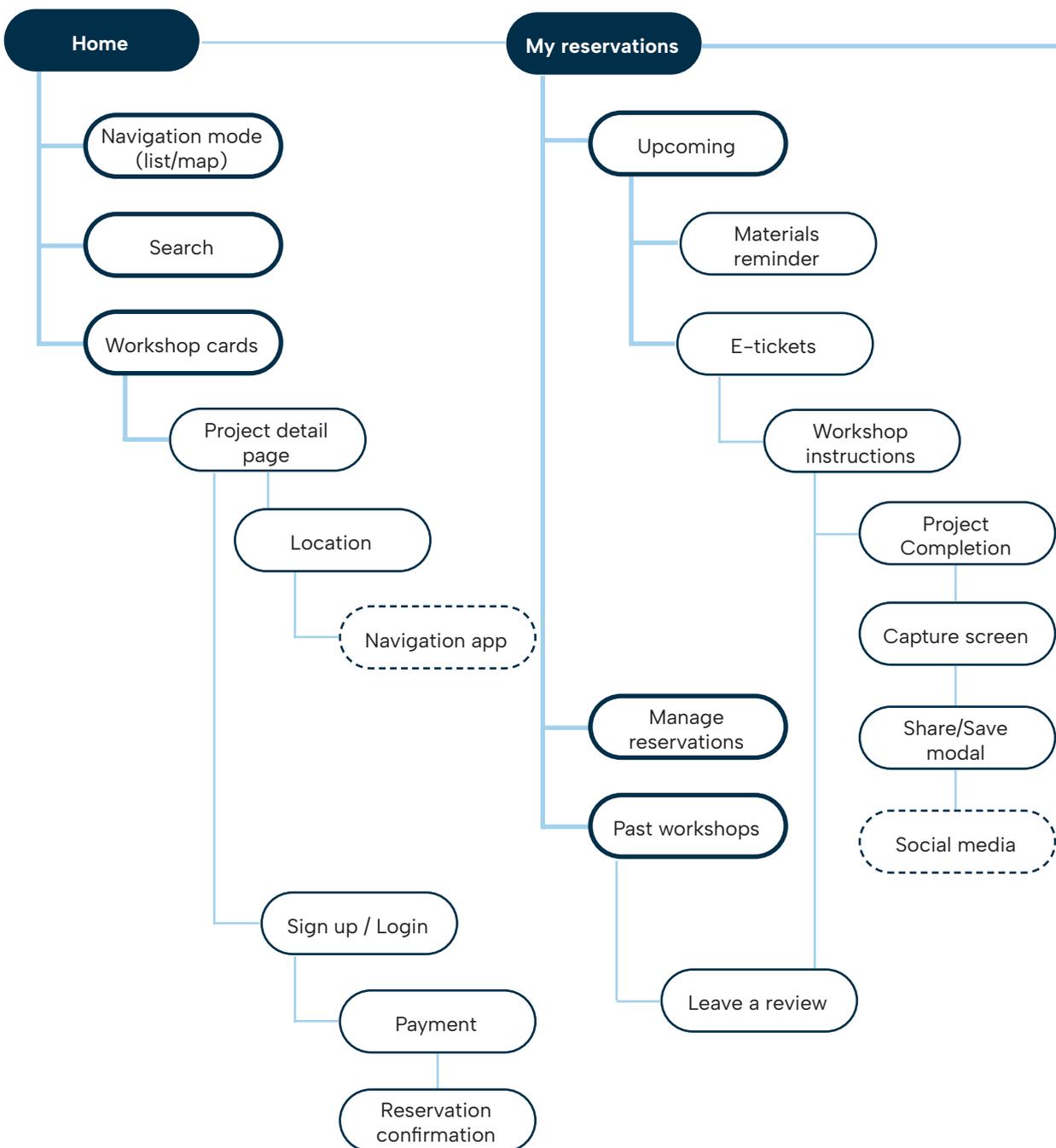


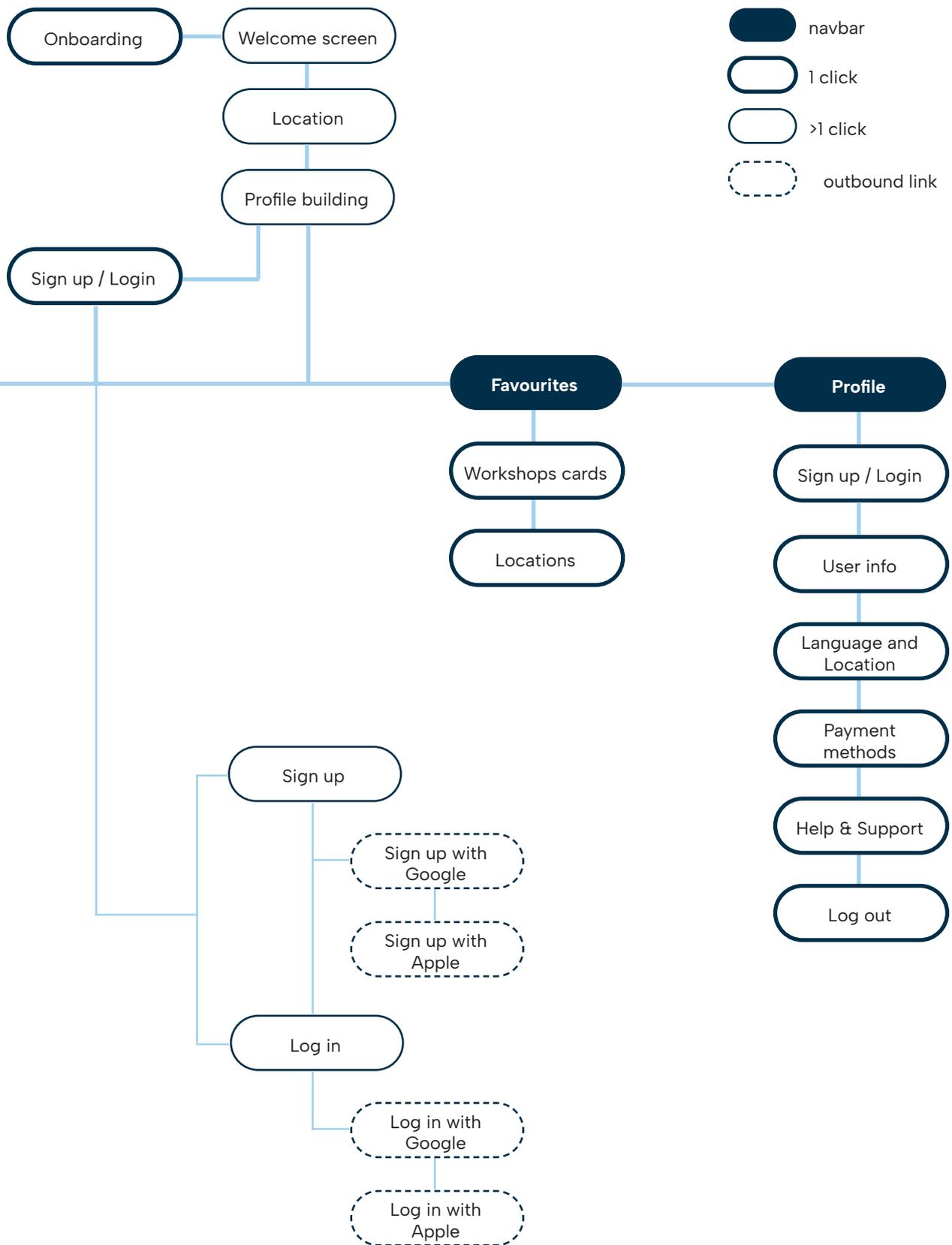
## 8.2 SITEMAP

This map represents the app's structure and hierarchy.

The core functionality of the app is to help the user book a workshop, so all the other pages are strictly related to the workshop cards.

The sign up is proposed after the onboarding of the app but Koko lets the user explore the app even without logging in. The log in is required when the user wants to reserve an activity.





## 8.3 WIREFRAMES

The low-fi wireframes were constructed using a component-based approach, leveraging the Google Material Design 3 (Material You) kit as a foundational framework.

By adopting an established design system, the wireframe process prioritized usability and cognitive familiarity.

The wireframes focus on layout, hierarchy and flow to validate the information architecture before the high-fidelity refinements.

### Home

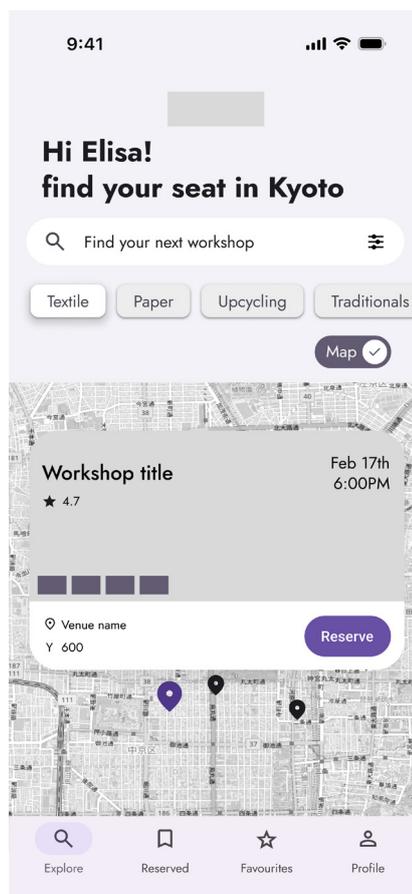
The Home screen serves as the central hub of the user's journey, designed to facilitate two distinct modes of exploration: list, to discover the workshop cards, and map, to explore where the locations are.

To accommodate these different needs without cluttering the interface, a segmented button (toggle switch) was implemented at the top right of the screen, allowing the user to easily switch between list view and map view. In order to facilitate the search process, also a search bar with filters and some category chips has been implemented in the design of the Home.

### Home - Map View

In this view, the user can explore the map through interactive location pins.

Selecting a marker triggers the display of a summary card, showcasing the next workshop scheduled at the specific venue.



## Home - List View

This is the default view and presents the available workshops and projects as a vertical feed of card components.

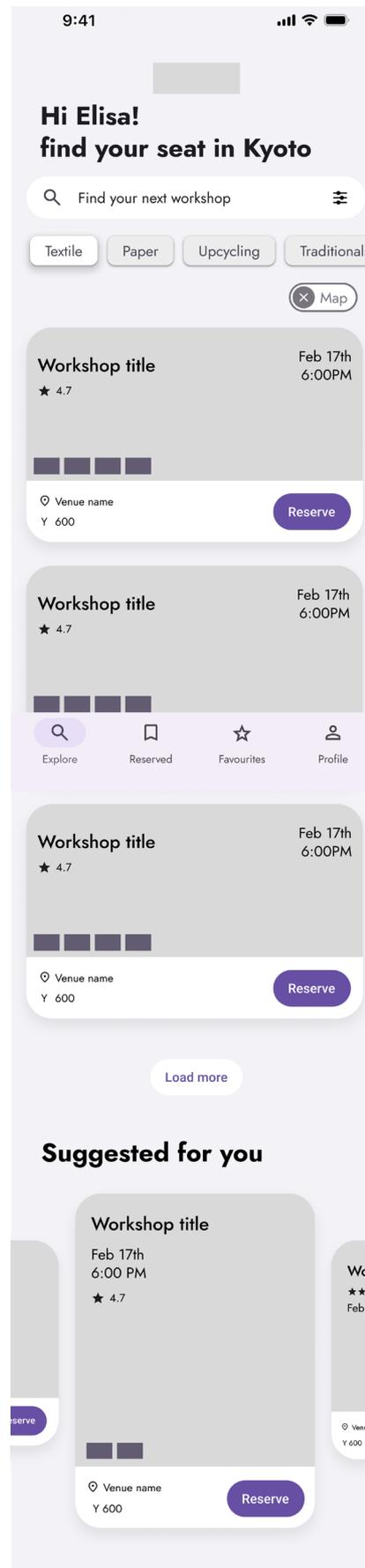
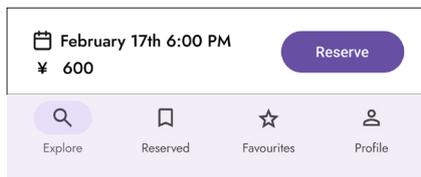
Each card is designed as a self-contained unit of information, displaying the project title, the reviews overall rating, the scheduled time and location, and the price.

The main CTA invites the user to reserve a workshop.

At the bottom, there is a section dedicated to the suggested workshops. These cards are chosen by the algorithm, based on the choices made by the user during the Onboarding process.

It is possible to see here also the navigation bar that features the four main pages: Home, Reserved, Favourites and Profile.

If the user taps on any "Reserve" CTA, a sticky cart bar will appear right on top of the navbar.



## Onboarding process

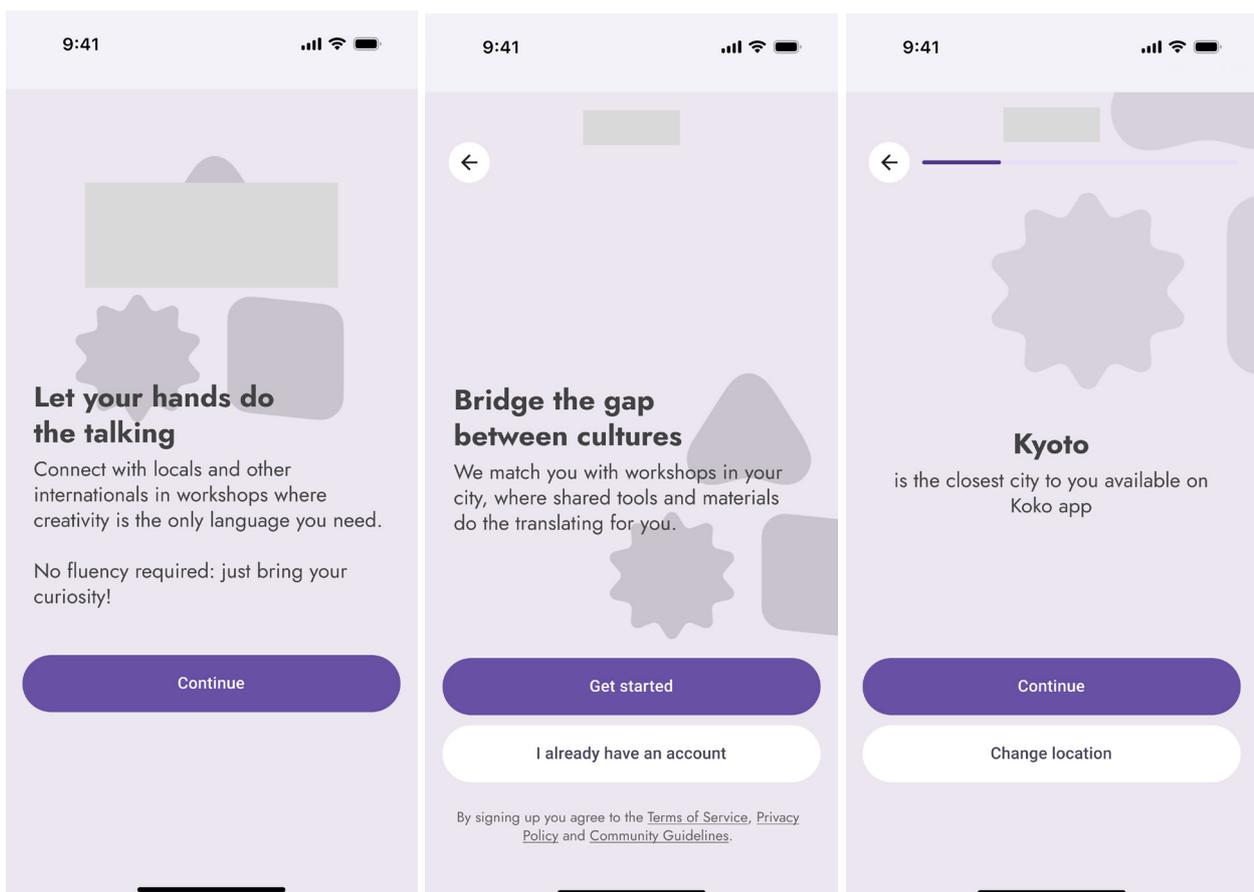
The onboarding process is structured as a linear, six-step narrative designed to introduce the user into the Koko app.

In the first two slides, the user can understand what is the app for, acting as a visual anchor. Through images and copywriting that will be implemented later, the user is pushed to tap on the CTA and go on building the personalised profile.

The concise tagline and description introduces the contents and functionalities of the app, explaining briefly what is Koko.

The third slide features a geolocalization process, that works if the user has the localization on on the device. Otherwise, the app will ask the user to turn it on through a pop-up.

Once found the closest city available on the app, the user can choose to continue or to change location and city.



The slides number 4 and 5 are the ones that allow personalization on the Koko app.

In fact, the fourth slide asks the user to build a language profile through dropdown input fields.

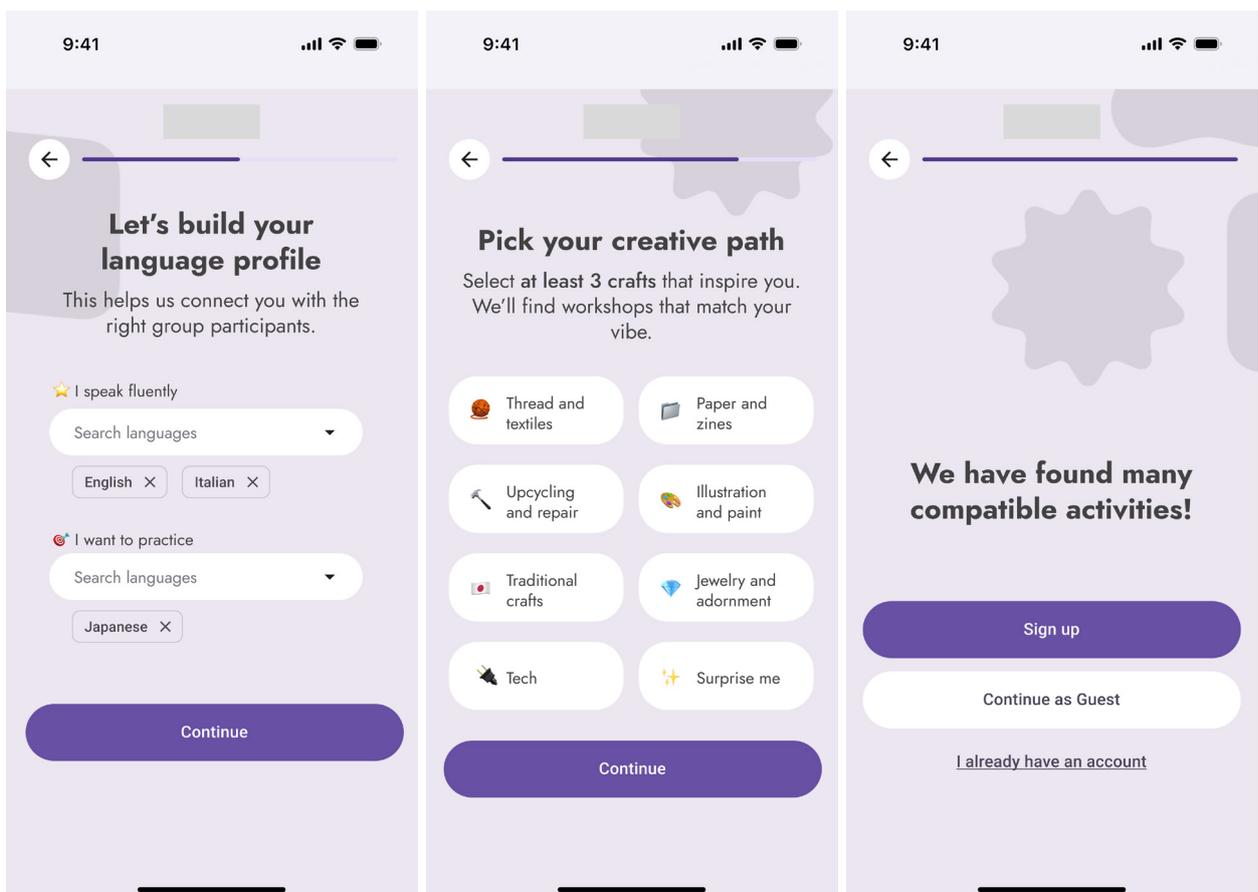
This will help the app to match the user with others who speak the same language, or a different one, based on these choices.

Then, the user can select some categories of crafts. Thanks to this selection, the "suggested" section in the Home will be built.

The progressive bar on top of the screen helps the user to be aware of the process length and status.

At the end of the process, the progressive bar will disappear and the three CTA will suggest the user to sign up.

It is possible to sign up after the onboarding process, but the user is free to tap on "Continue as Guest" and explore the app.



## Sign Up / Login

It is possible to sign up after the onboarding process, but the user is free to tap on "Continue as Guest" and explore the app.

This page is a form page that asks the user to input fields with their personal information and set up an account via mail and password.

There is also the option to sign up with Google or Apple accounts.

The third screen is the Sign Up / Login page that appear to users who did not create an account right after the onboarding. It appears when users click on CTA for reservation when there is no account logged in the app.

The image displays three mobile app screens related to account creation and login. The first screen is the 'Sign up' page, featuring a 'Save your seat' header, a 'Sign up' title, and form fields for Name, Email, Home Country (with a search dropdown), Birthday (with date pickers), Password, and Confirm Password. It includes a purple 'Create account' button, a white 'I already have an account' button, and a footer with legal links and social login options. The second screen is the 'Log in' page, with a 'Welcome back' header, 'Log in' title, and form fields for Email and Password. It features a purple 'Login' button, a 'Forgot password?' link, and a 'You do not have an account? Sign Up' link. The third screen is the 'Save your seat' page, showing a 'Save your seat' header, a community introduction, a purple 'Sign up' button, a white 'I already have an account' button, and a footer with legal links and social login options. All screens show a time of 9:41 and standard mobile status icons.

## Workshop page

This page is accessible by tap on a workshop card.

It showcases all the information needed for the workshop, such as materials to bring, location, who else is coming, overall rating and a section that explains briefly how the activity works.

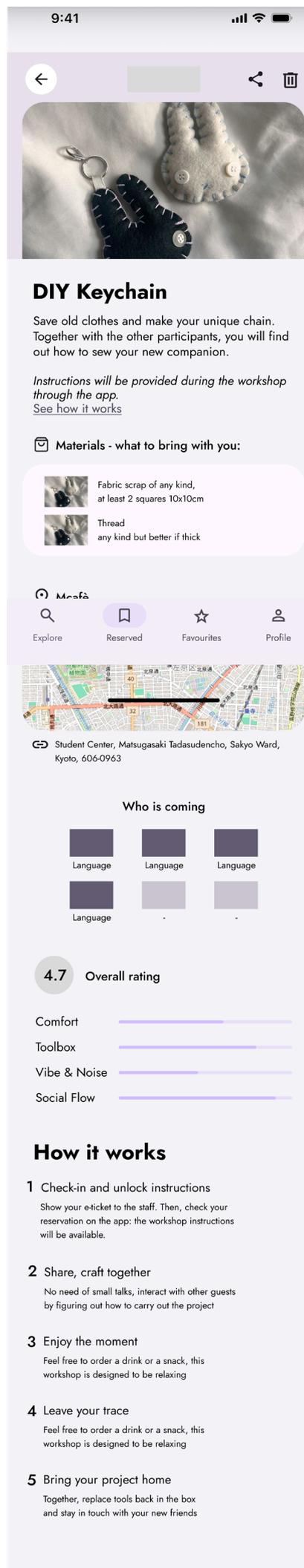
The section on top of the screen is a carousel of images related to the specific workshop and the description explains that the instructions for the workshop will be provided at the location.

The map section allows the user to tap on it and discover the page dedicated to the host location and, obviously, the exact location.

"Who is coming" is a section dedicated to showcase the flags of the primary language spoken by other participants who have booked the activity already. This could help the user to feel more at ease, having the possibility to know in advance what to expect.

The reviews section is structured by taking into account four criteria: comfort (of the location), toolbox (if it's well maintained or not, if it's equipped enough or not), vibe & noise (if the location is quiet enough for a workshop or if it's too crowded) and social flow (if the activity itself is suitable for the meeting-strangers format).

At the bottom, there is an explanation (that is reachable also by tap on a third-level CTA that is placed right after the top description): here the user can understand the main steps of this Koko system: from the reservation and material discovery, to the end of the workshop.



9:41

← [Redacted] [Share] [Trash]



### DIY Keychain

Save old clothes and make your unique chain. Together with the other participants, you will find out how to sew your new companion.

*Instructions will be provided during the workshop through the app.*  
[See how it works](#)

📋 Materials - what to bring with you:

-  Fabric scrap of any kind, at least 2 squares 10x10cm
-  Thread any kind but better if thick

Marefa

🔍 Explore 📖 Reserved ⭐ Favourites 👤 Profile



📍 Student Center, Matsugasaki Tadasudencho, Sakyo Ward, Kyoto, 606-0963

#### Who is coming

|          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|
| Language | Language | Language |
| Language | .        | .        |

4.7 Overall rating

Comfort \_\_\_\_\_

Toolbox \_\_\_\_\_

Vibe & Noise \_\_\_\_\_

Social Flow \_\_\_\_\_

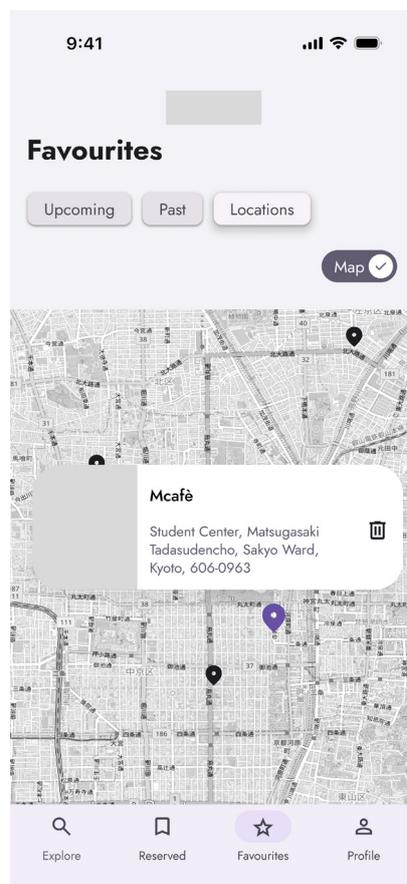
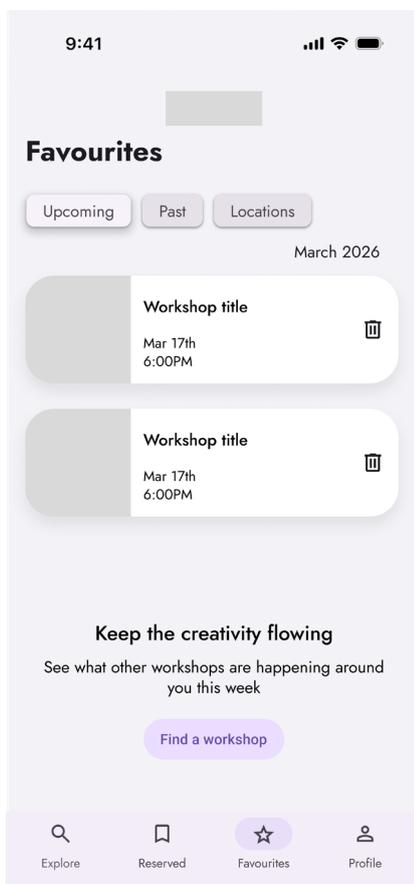
### How it works

- 1 Check-in and unlock instructions**  
Show your e-ticket to the staff. Then, check your reservation on the app: the workshop instructions will be available.
- 2 Share, craft together**  
No need of small talks, interact with other guests by figuring out how to carry out the project
- 3 Enjoy the moment**  
Feel free to order a drink or a snack, this workshop is designed to be relaxing
- 4 Leave your trace**  
Feel free to order a drink or a snack, this workshop is designed to be relaxing
- 5 Bring your project home**  
Together, replace tools back in the box and stay in touch with your new friends

## Favourites

Favourites workshop and locations can be saved here and the three suggestion chips at the top of the screen allow the user to switch between them.

The Favourites Locations page offers, as the Homepage, also the possibility to see not the Hosts in a list but on the map through location pins.

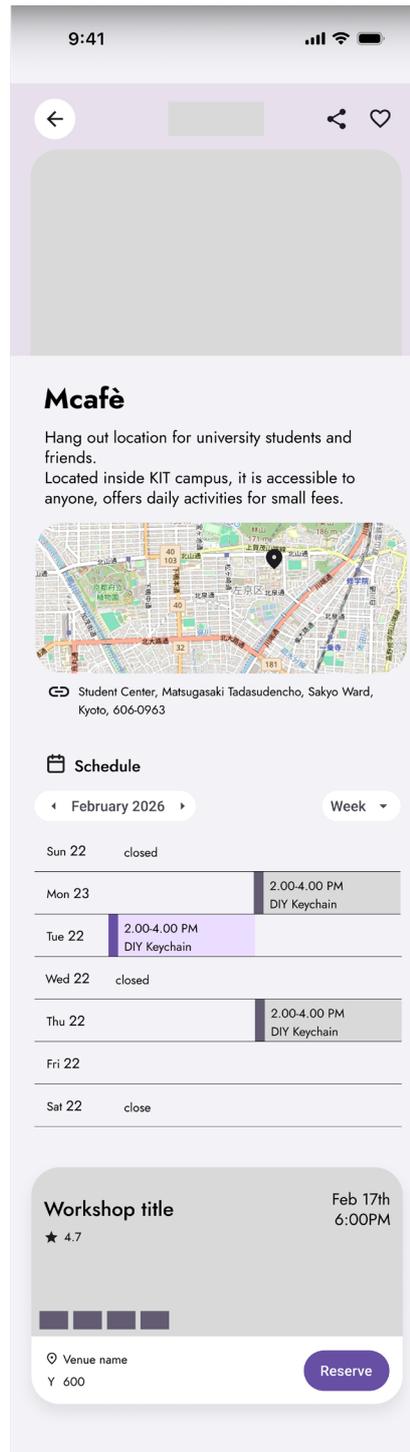


## Host page (location)

The layout of this page is very similar to the one of Workshop page.

At the top, a carousel of images showcases the location, then there is the link to the map that opens the default navigation map on user's device.

The weekly schedule help the user to discover when and which workshop will be held in that specific location. At the tap on the workshop summary showcased on the calendar, the correspondent workshop card will appear right at the bottom of this section.



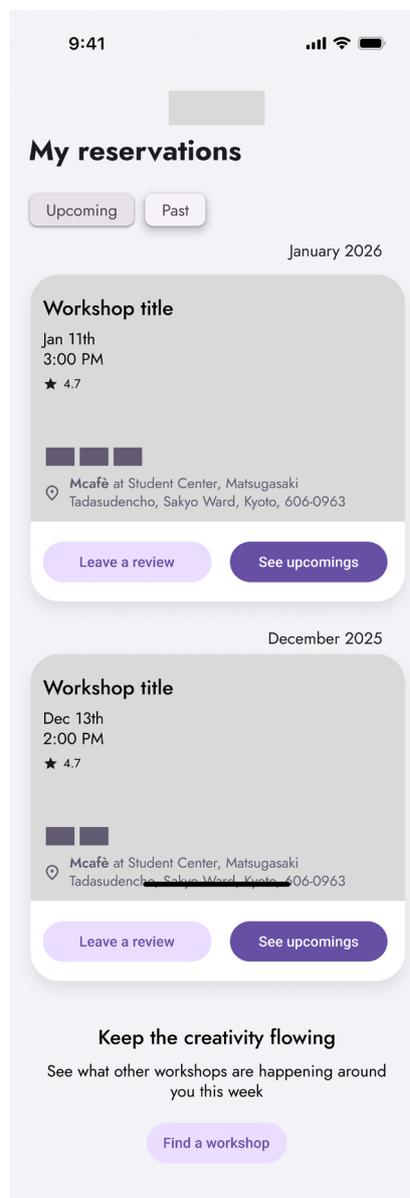
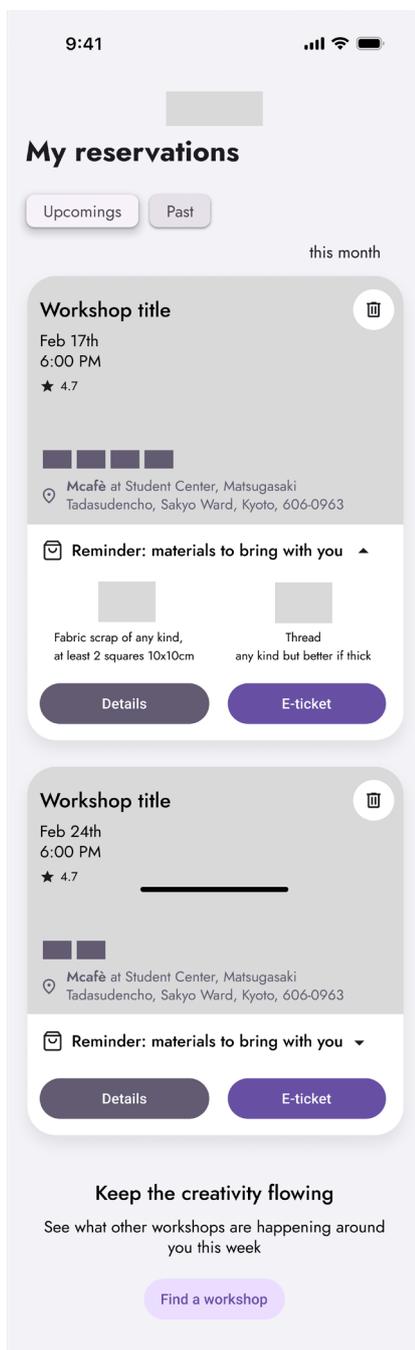
## Reserved

This pages display upcoming and past reservations. The user can switch between the two views thanks to the suggestion chips at the top of the screen.

In this views, workshop cards are organized in a list and following the timeline.

For the upcoming workshop cards, there is also a dropdown that reminds the materials that the user has to bring at the workshop. From each card it is possible to access the workshop page or the e-ticket.

For the past workshop cards, users can leave a review or see if there are any upcoming similar workshops.

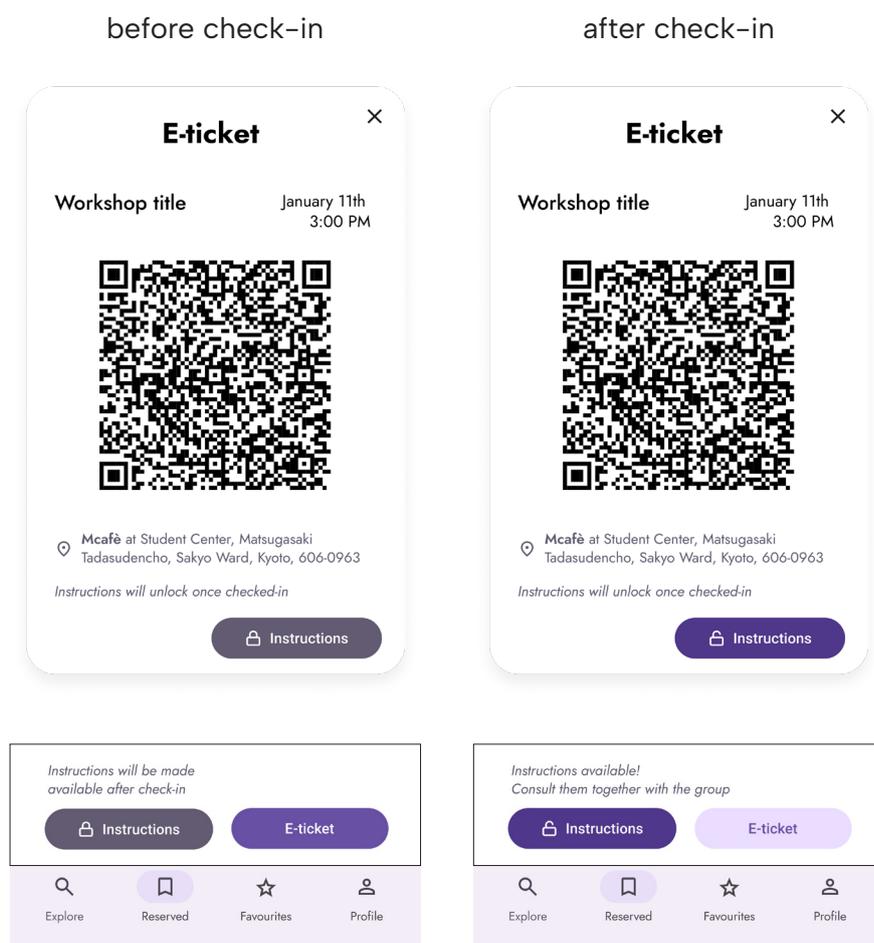


## E-ticket

This is a pop-up that appears on the workshop page or workshop card after the tap on "E-ticket".

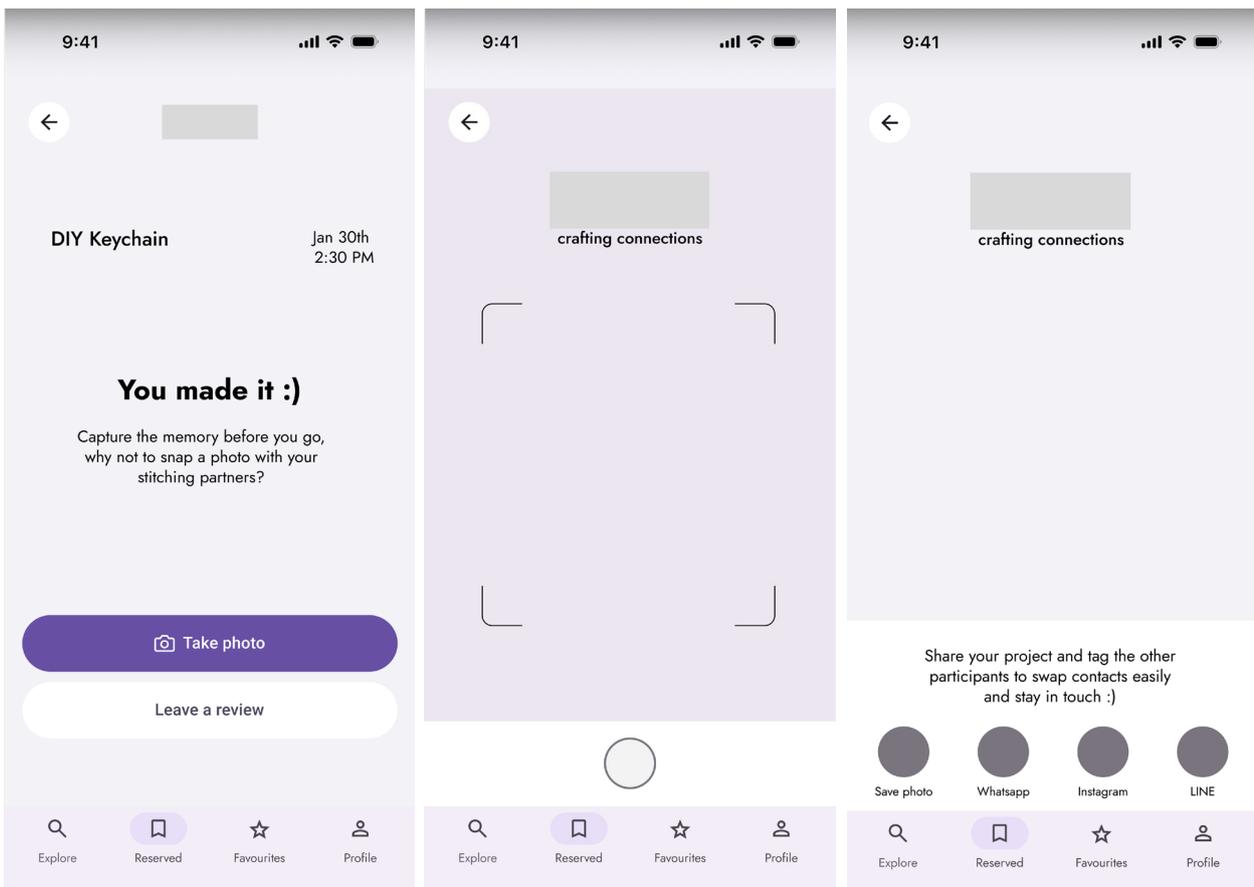
The CTA "Instruction" will be disabled at first. When the user shows the QR Code to the Host staff, the CTA will be clickable.

Similarly, when the user is on the workshop page that has reserved already, the sticky ticket bar will appear and CTA hierarchy changes based on check-in status.



## Completion Loop

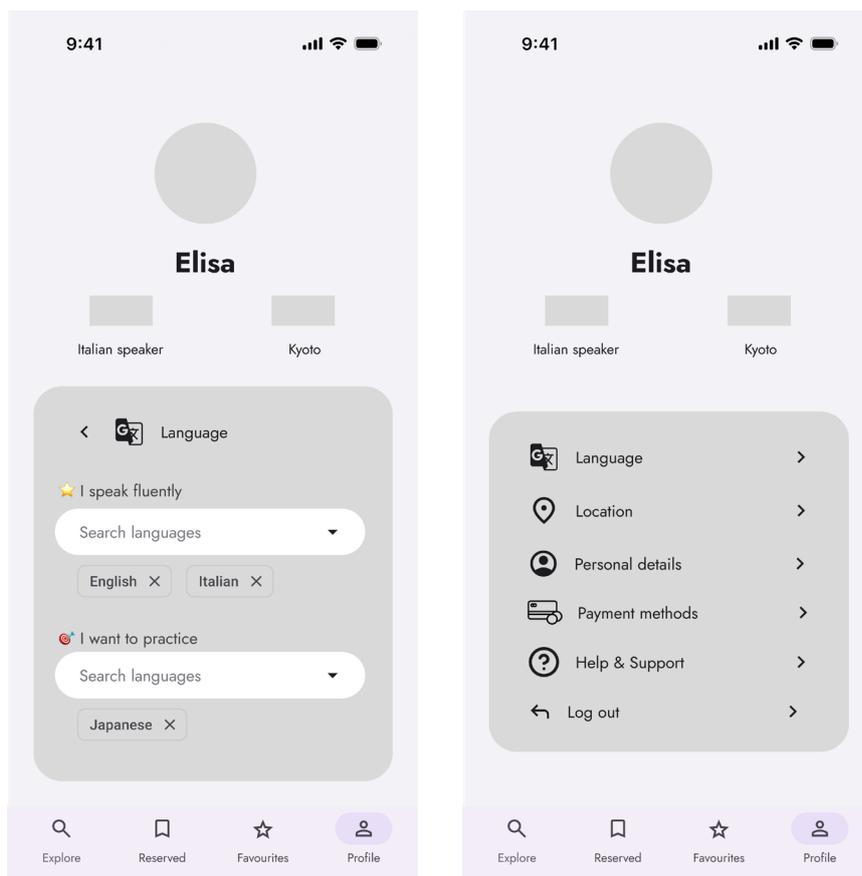
This is the completion loop that is at the end of each workshop instructions. The first screen below appears right after the last instruction slide and it showcases a rewarding copyright and engages the user inviting them to take a picture together with the other participants through a primary CTA. The secondary CTA instead invites to write a review of the experience. If the user clicks on the "Take photo" CTA, the screen will turn in a capture screen (image 2 below) with the Koko logo on top. Lastly, the photo can be saved on the device or shared on social media, becoming an interaction hook useful to ask to everyone to share contacts or social media nickname.



## Profile

The profile page helps the user to manage their personal details and preferences: from language or location change, to the payment methods.

At the top, an account image and the overview: primary language speaking and current city: there are the only information that will be visible to other users.



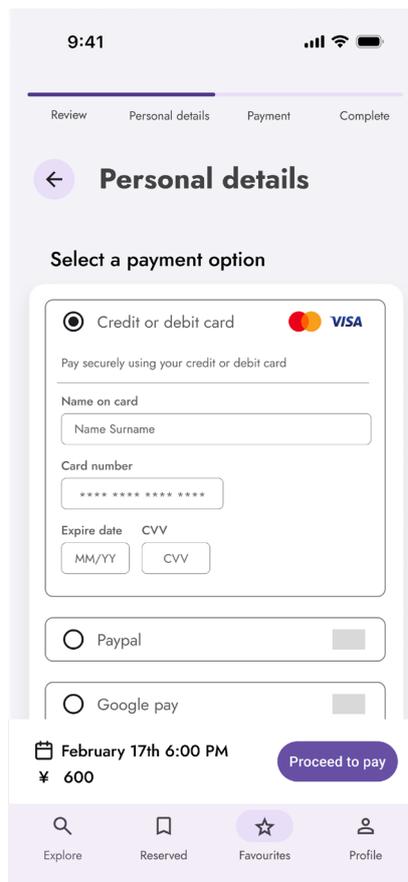
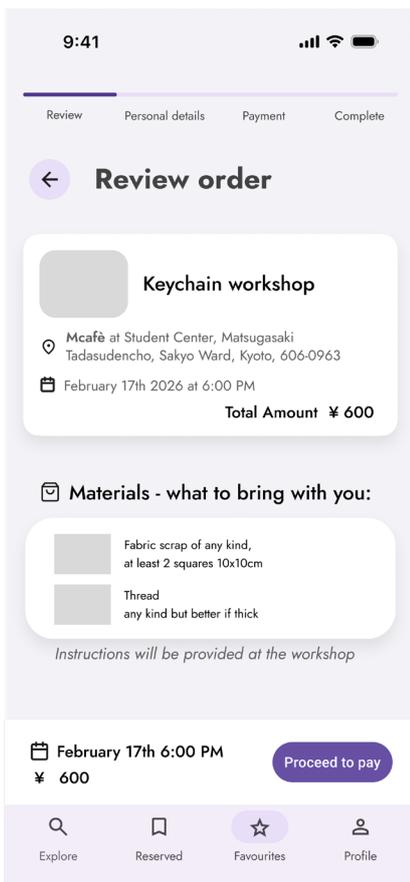
## Payment process

The payment process still features the sticky cart bar but the CTA copywriting is different: instead of "Reserve", the user reads "Proceed to pay".

The progress bar on top helps the user to be aware of the process status and completion steps.

At first, the Review Order page shows a summary of the workshop details and reminds the necessary materials.

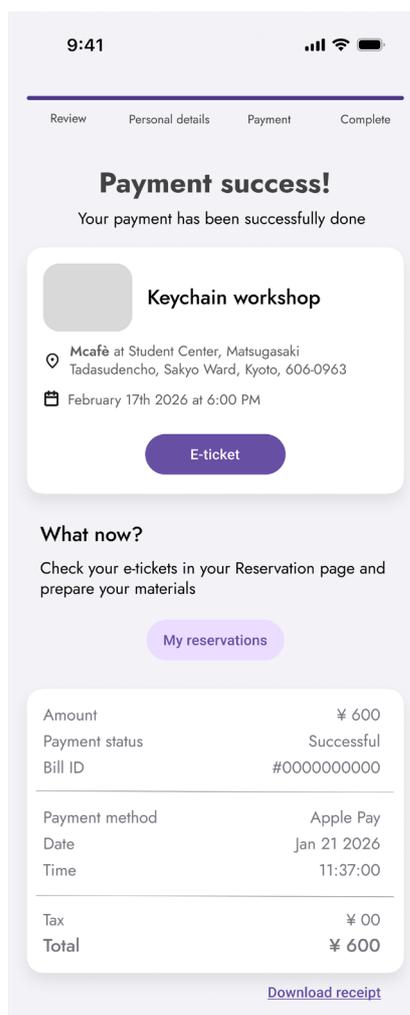
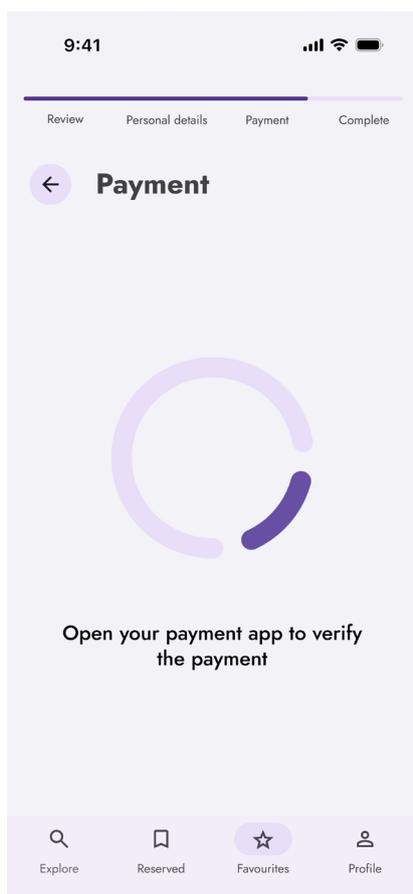
Then, the user can choose a payment option



The payment page shows a circular progress indicator that ensure the user to verify the payment status and, at the completion of it, the last page shows a summary of what has just been paid for.

The receipt is also showcased and available for the download.

The primary CTA lets the e-ticket pop-up appear directly on this page.



## 8.4 UI INSPIRATION AND MOODBOARD

The references for developing UI elements and the visual identity of the project comes again from Japan.

Nowadays, gradients are everywhere: from tech branding to UI packs, they represent modernity and innovation.

In Japan, gradients are not just a trend or a decorative afterthought. They are structural, emotional and symbolic elements embbed in Japanese visual culture (Open All Hours, 2026).

There is a traditional Japanese technique called *Bokashi* (graduated printing), which is used in *mokuhanga* (woodblocks printing) to create graduated colour transitions.

It is a technique developed during the Edo period (1601–1868 AD) and it consists in applying ink to woodblock and manipulating its distribution by hand.

As all the crafts, the result is not really predictable and never perfectly uniform: "colours fade, bleed, and soften into one another, creating atmosphere, depth, and a sense of time passing. Emotion sits quietly between tones" (Open All Hours, 2026).



Picture 12: "Fine Wind, Clear Morning" (also known as "South Wind, Clear Sky and Red Fuji"), Hokusai, Japan 1830–1832. Woodblock print.

The bokashi tradition subsequently influenced European movements such as Impressionism and Art Nouveau. Then, with the advent of mass production, techniques like silkscreen printing and split fountain inking democratized the use of bold graphic gradients. This evolution continued into the 1960s, where Art Nouveau influences merged with vibrant colors to form the psychedelic visual language synonymous with the era's music culture.

As styles progressed, the 1970s utilized air-brushing for surreal, cosmic effects, while the 1980s introduced early computer graphics and vaporwave aesthetics. The onset of the digital age saw gradients transition from the novelty of early web tools to the functional, texture-mimicking skeuomorphism of the early 2000s.

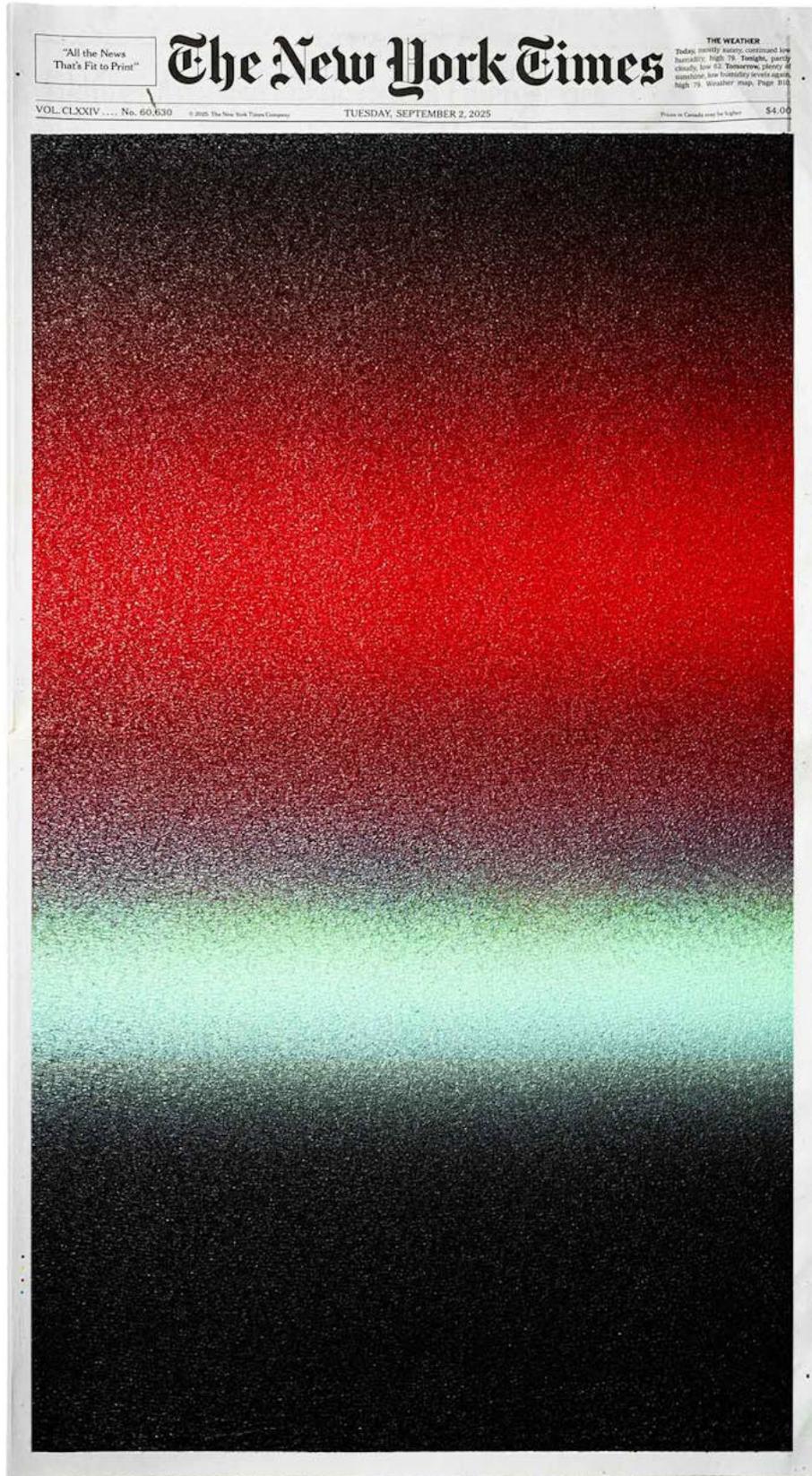
In recent history, design trends have oscillated between flat design and the resurgence of vibrant gradients in the 2010s, popularized by major tech platforms.

Currently, it is possible to notice a saturation of gradients within the AI, crypto, and tech sectors. These industries rely on gradients to convey futuristic themes, motion, and transformation in the absence of physical products.

Despite the risk of visual homogenization in the marketplace, gradients remain a permanent fixture in design. It suggests that differentiation is still possible through unique organic applications, exemplified by brands like Twelve-labs and CoinTracker that uses gradients for different purposes.



Picture 13: "The Beach at Takashi in Izumi Province", Hiroshige, Japan 1853. Woodblock print.



165 Picture 14: "Red Aurora, September 2, 2025", Shio Shibuya, Brooklyn 2025. Paint on newspaper. From [https://www.shoshibuya.com/works/250902\\_red-aurora/](https://www.shoshibuya.com/works/250902_red-aurora/)

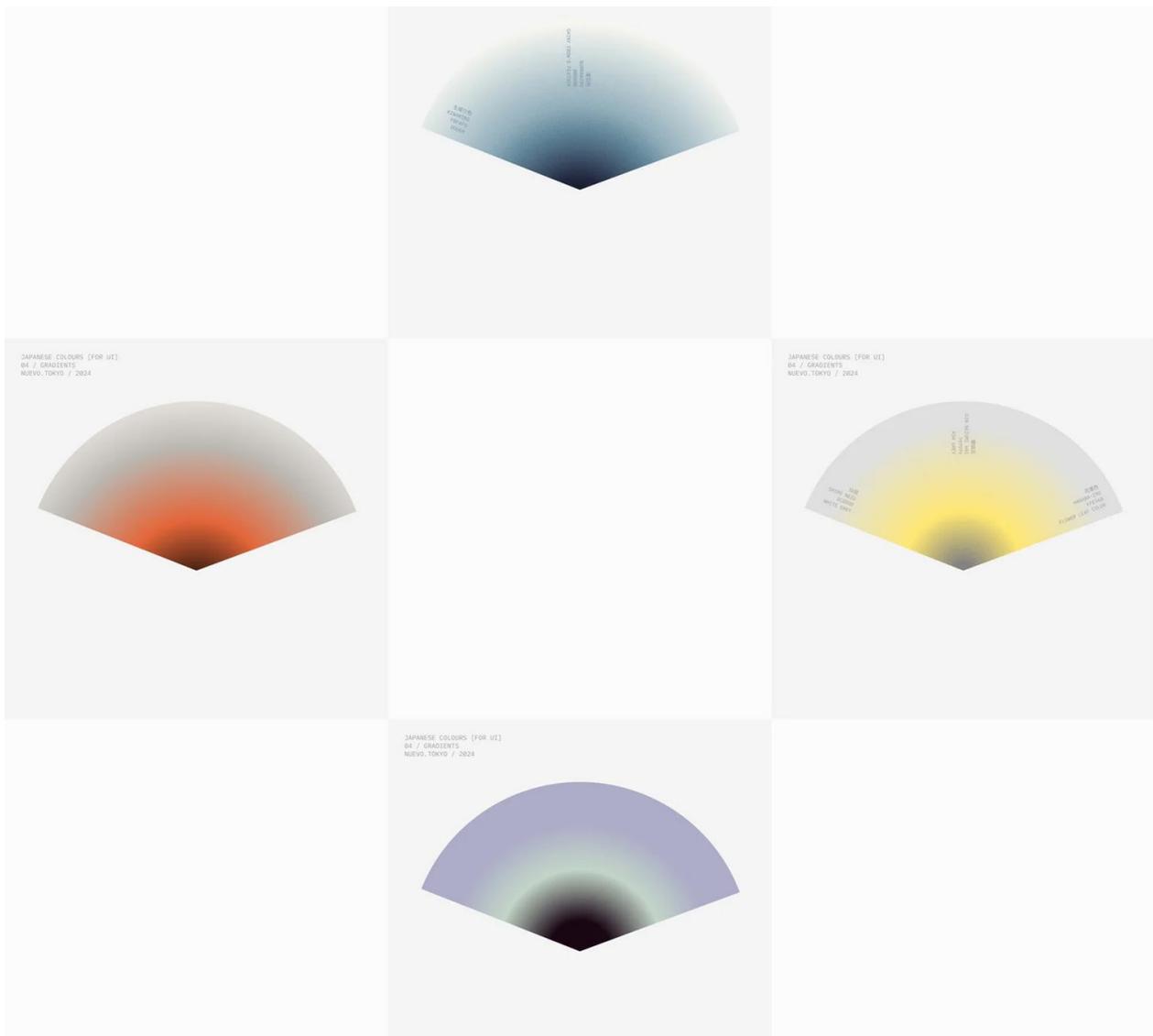
Going back to Japan, in the present day, Japanese graphic designers still uses gradients as active surfaces that introduce moviment and rhythm.

A contemporary expression of this philoshopy can be seen in the works of Sho Shibuya. He is a designer based in Brooklyn who paints daily the cover pages of The New York Times.

Each day, he paints directly on the newspaper, interpreting and covering current events with soft gradient of colour.

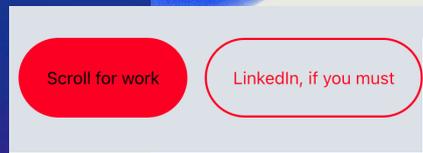
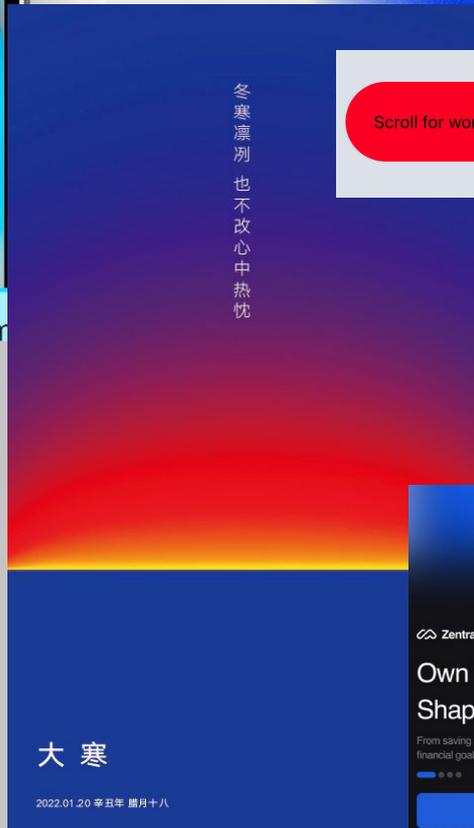
Moreover, JAPANESE COLOURS [ FOR UI ] is an ongoing R&D project series presente by the Japanese studio Nuevo Tokyo.

It is a set of colors, gradients and UI elements that showcase the adaptability of Japanese traditional gradients to the modern digital landscape.



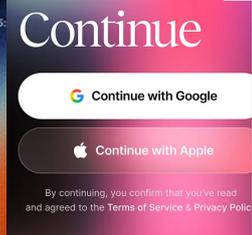
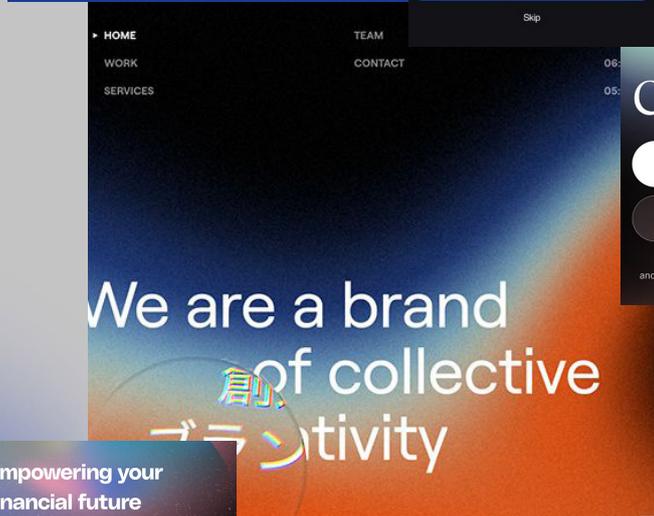
Picture 15: "JAPANESE COLOURS [ FOR UI ]", Nuevo.Tokyo studio, Japan 2025.

From <https://www.nuevo.tokyo/japanese-gradients-for-ui>



28.02—2020

J ARCADE YEACHI—CLUB GIRONA



We are a brand of collective 創 activity





minitap Blog Careers Get merch



ge is  
everything

Trends come and go, but providing a genuine connection is timeless. That connection is your ultimate competitive advantage, and realizing that first impression is crucial. You cannot compromise on the critical piece that sparks that connection: the imagery.

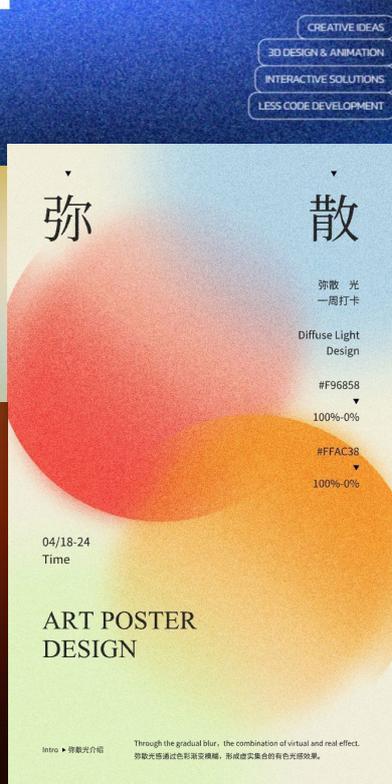
Stills exists to help you foster that connection. With curated, authentic, and pre-cleared imagery you won't find anywhere else, Stills empowers you to maximize your budget and streamline your workflow with photos that capture and keep your audience's attention.

Discover the ne search tools, ac exclusive photo Remember: the they'll never for



# Name-dropping, *briefly*

It's the past. Not that important, but people seem to care



# ative way to trade cry

## 8.5 VISUAL IDENTITY AND UI

Koko's logo has been developed starting by the Japanese word *ここ* (*koko*) that means "here" or "now".

It is an invite to stay in the present and to connect with people in person.

This is a very common word to hear in Japan, so also foreigners are used to listen it and they could recognise the meaning instantly.

The logo for 'Koko' is rendered in a bold, black, sans-serif typeface. The word 'Koko' is written in all caps. The letter 'o' in the middle is stylized with a red outline and a red arrow that starts at the top of the 'o', curves around its right side, and points towards the right. A second red arrow starts at the top of the 'o', curves around its left side, and points towards the left. This graphic element serves as a visual pun on the Japanese characters for 'here' or 'now'.

Kōko



#BD3F38  
tomato jam

#00120B  
onyx

#FEFAFA  
snow

#FAF1A1  
vanilla custard

#23B5D3  
turquoise surf



# Aa

Medium

Cabinet  
Grotesk

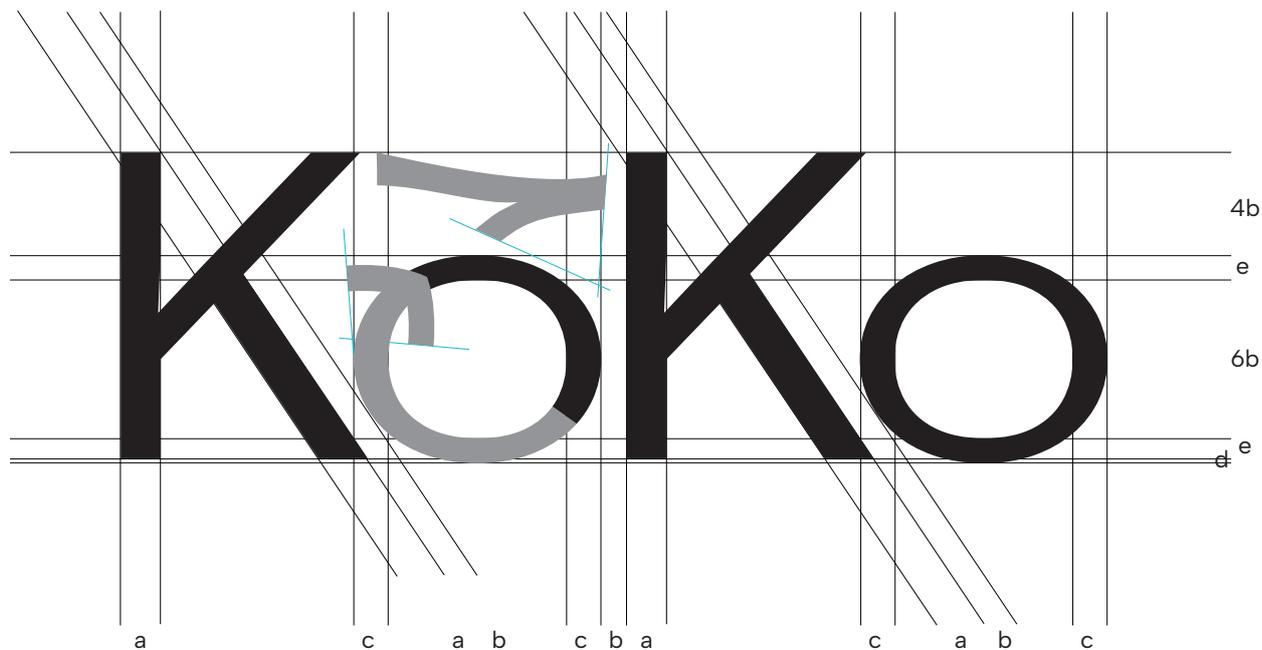
Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn  
Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uv Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz  
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

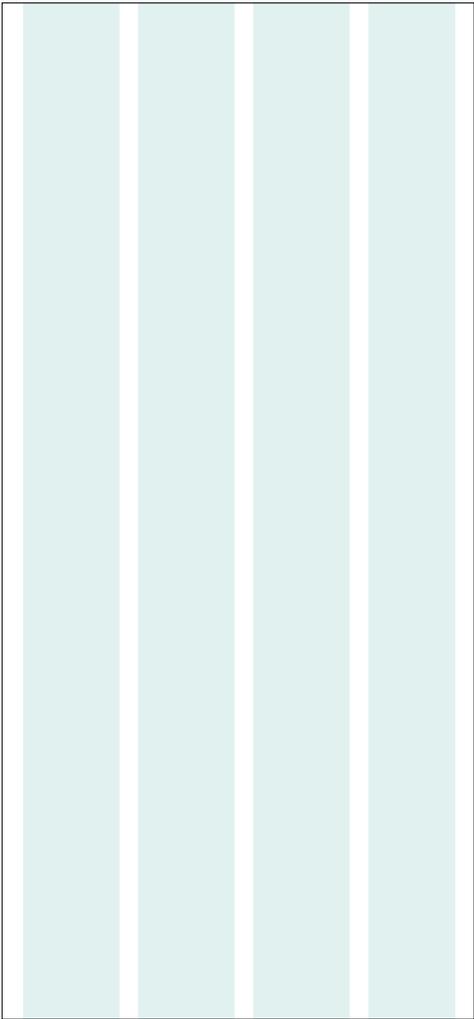
# Aa

Regular

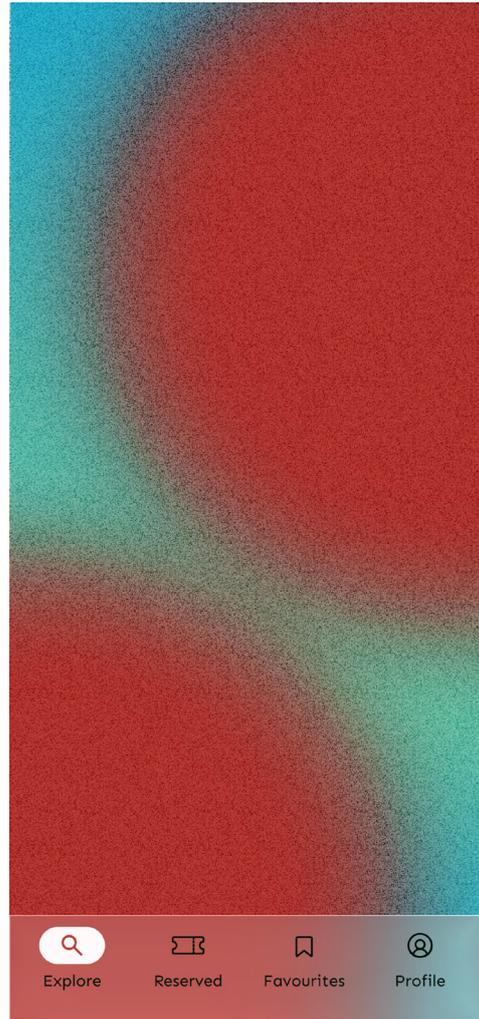
Kozuka  
Gothic  
Pr6N

こ ん に ち は で す ね  
コ ン ニ チ ハ デ ス ネ  
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9





Grid  
Screen 403 x 874



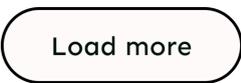
Background and  
Navigation Bar (liquid glass)



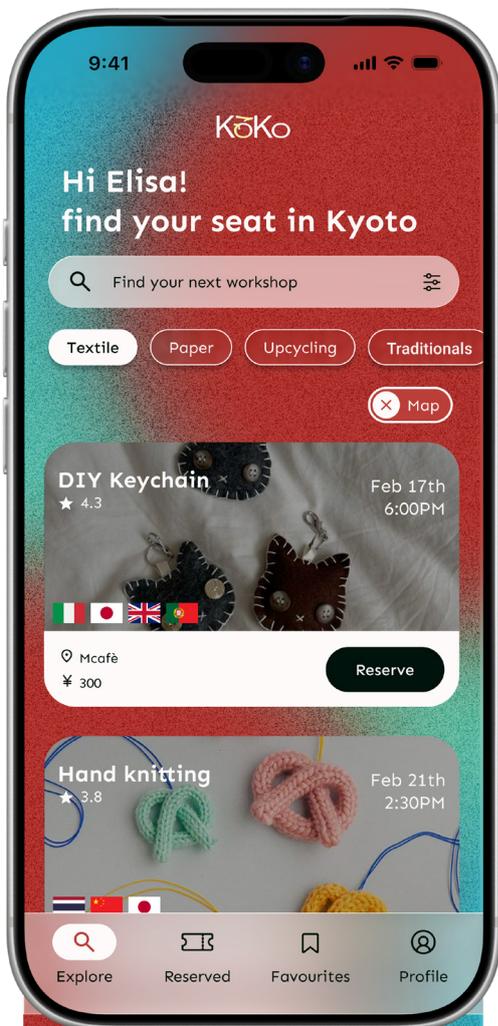
Primary CTA



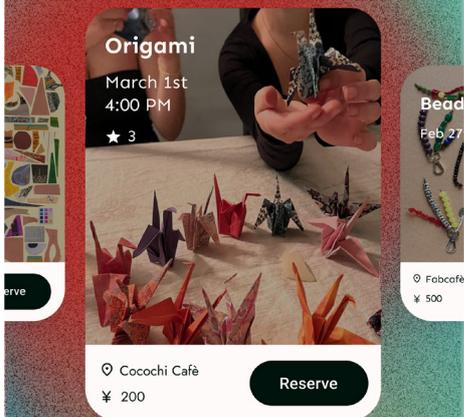
Disabled Primary CTA



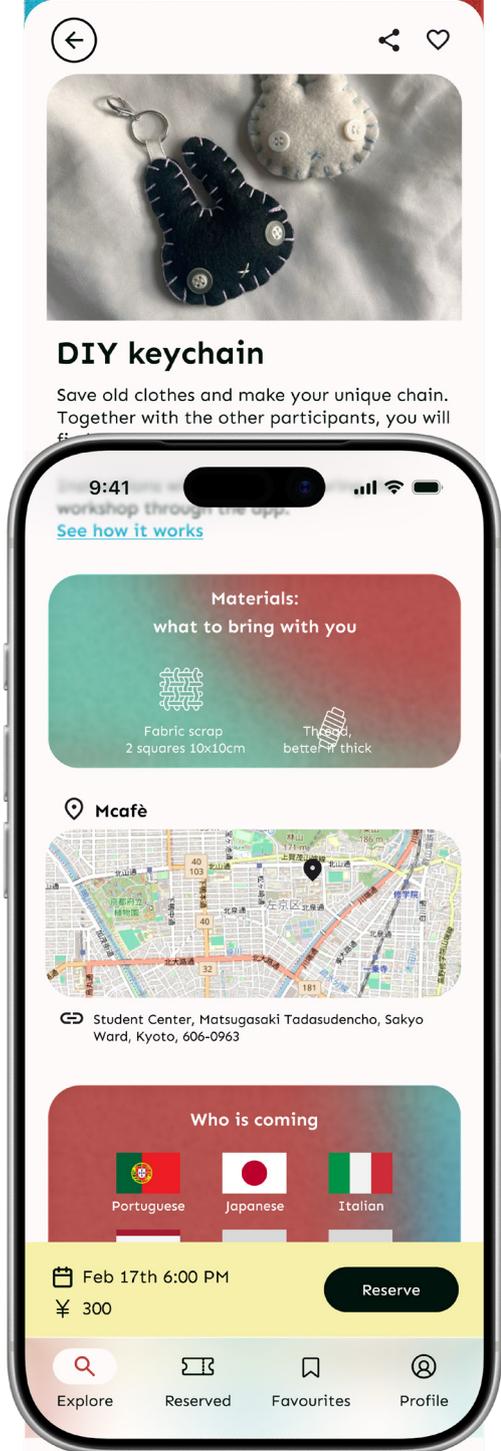
Secondary CTA



## Suggested for you



Home and Workshop Page



## How it works

### 1 Check-in and unlock instructions

Show your e-ticket to the staff. Then, check your reservation on the app: the workshop instructions will be available.

### 2 Share, craft together

No need of small talks, interact with other guests by figuring out how to carry out the project

### 3 Enjoy the moment

Feel free to order a drink or a snack, this workshop is designed to be relaxing

### 4 Leave your trace

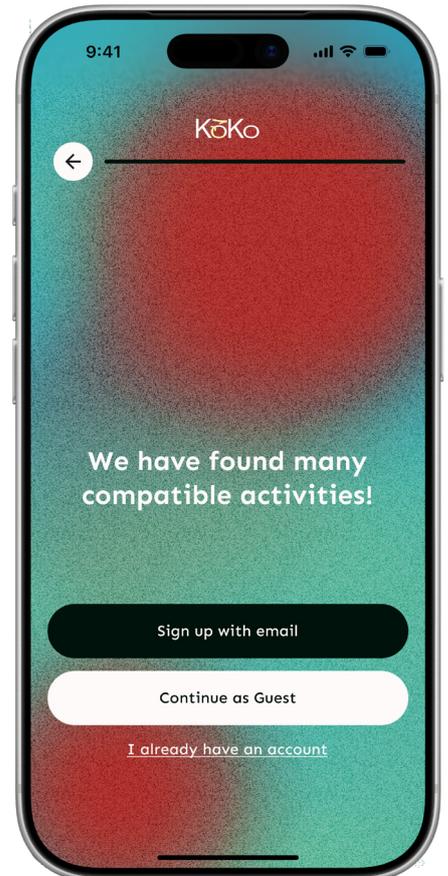
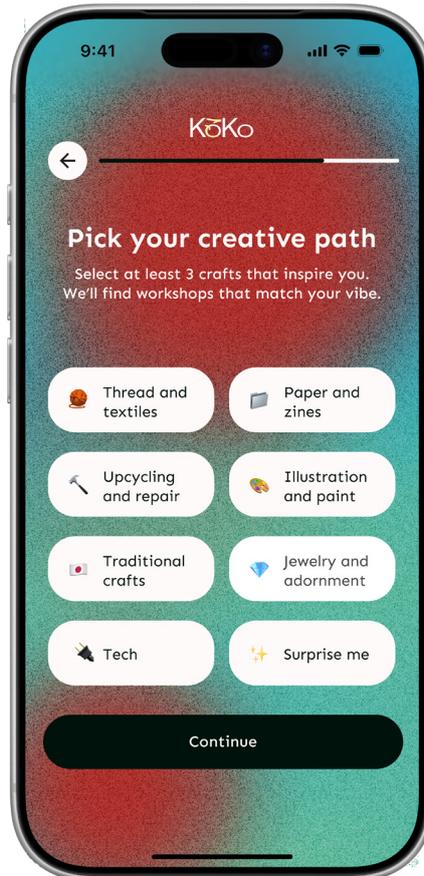
Feel free to order a drink or a snack, this workshop is designed to be relaxing

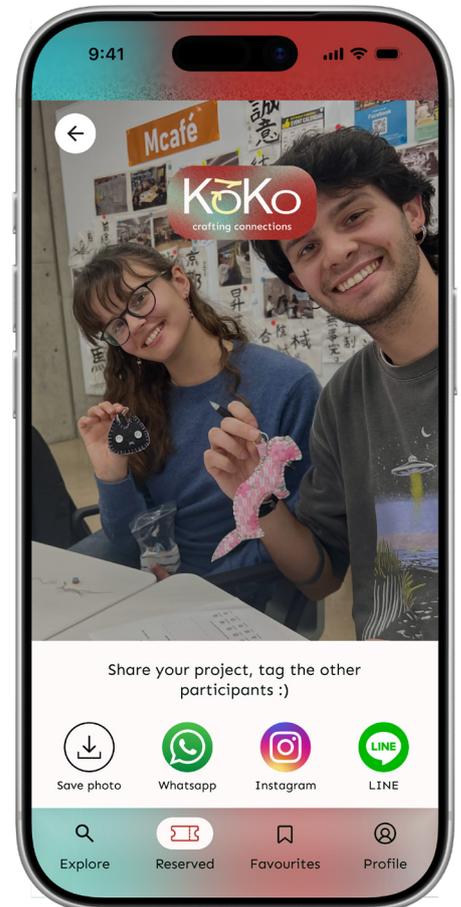
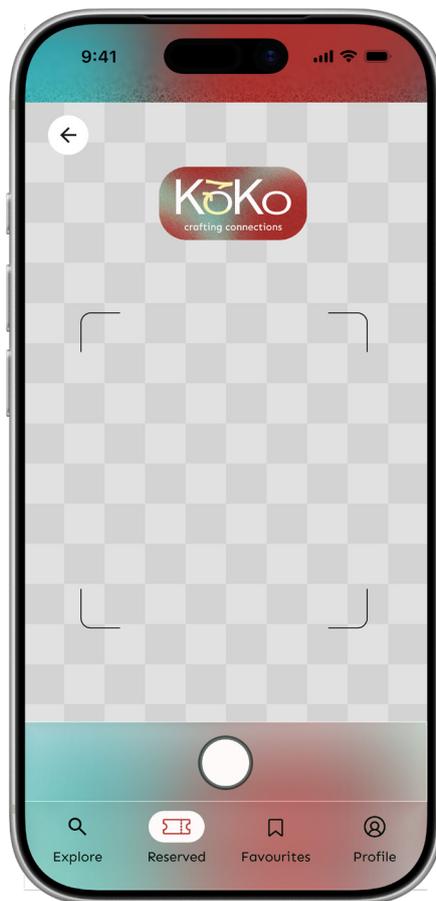
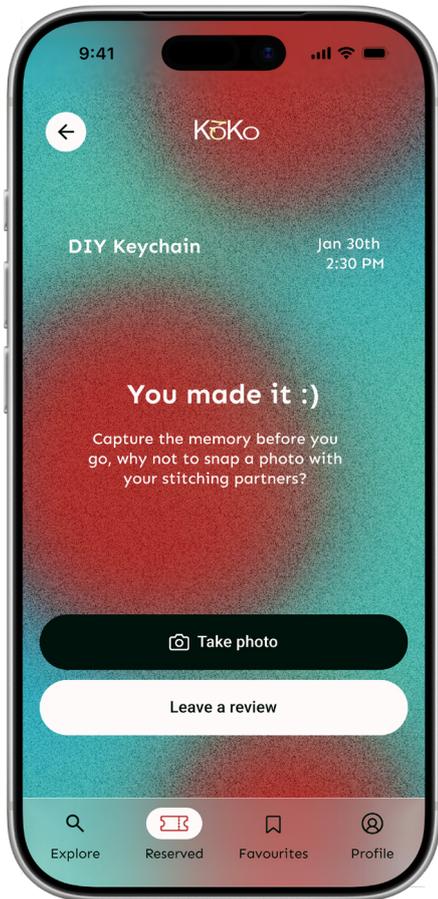
### 5 Bring your project home

Together, replace tools back in the box



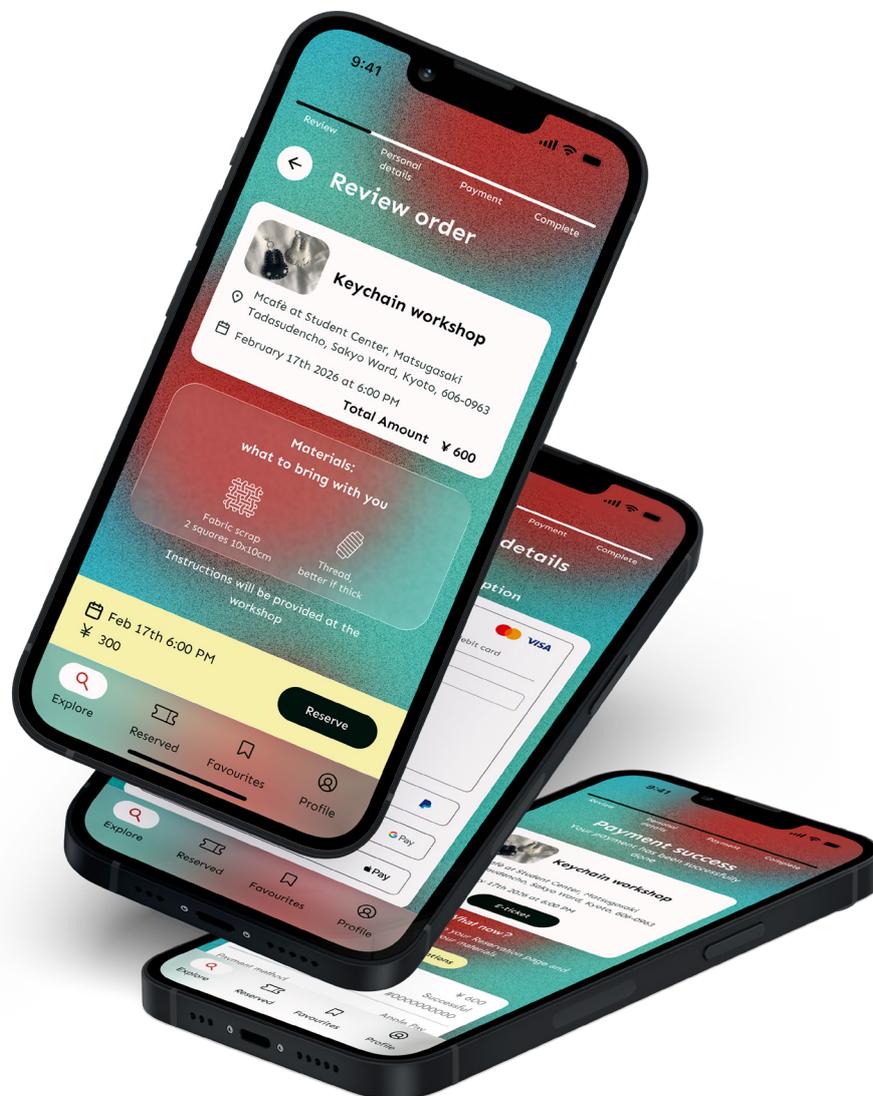
Onboarding process





### Completion Loop

Users can share the experience at the end of the workshop and, at the same time, share contacts, social nicknames and keep in touch.



### Payment process

Each workshop requires a payment that represents a small revenue for the Hosts. In Japan it is common to pay a fee for the table you use at cafès or restaurants. In this way, the venue manager still expect a small amount for the time spent at their place and for the availability to manage the service.

## Chapter 9

# **A Kyoto case study: Koko.01 at Mcafé**

On January 30th, a small DIY workshop has been held at Mcafé: the multicultural and multifunctional space inside Kyoto Institute of Technology Campus.

During the activity I organised, international and Japanese students had the opportunity to sit on a table together, make their hands busy with sewing and chat, help each other, laugh and get to know new people.

# DIY WORKSHOP



ig: emisbasta

just bring any small fabric  
scrap :)

小さなハギレを持参してね。



★ホルダーを縫ってみよう  
sew your keychain

**Mcafé - KIT**

Student Center,  
Matsugasaki Tadasudencho,  
Sakyo Ward, Kyoto, 606-0963

**FRI JAN 30<sup>th</sup>**

**2.30-4 PM**

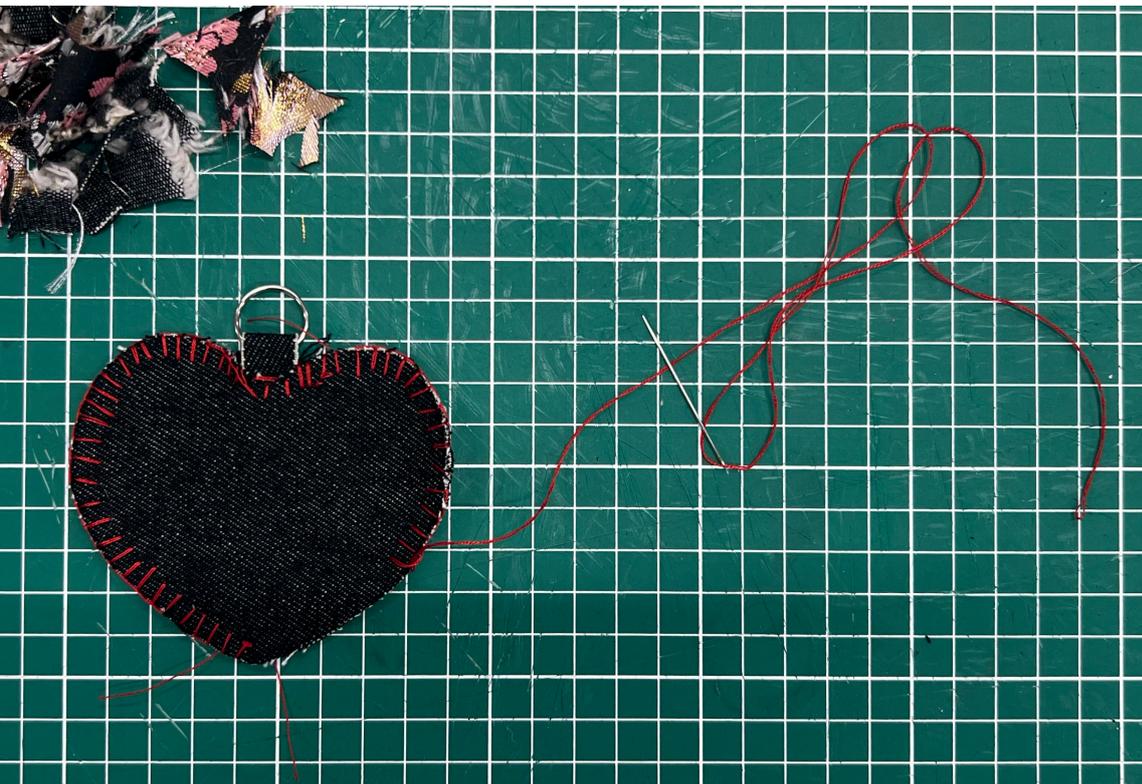
## 9.1 WORKSHOP PREPARATION AND RESULTS

In order to design the workshop activity, I began by selecting an easy DIY activity. I choose to propose a small sewing workshop because participants could have the opportunity to bring their own material and share it, but also allowed to use creativity.

In fact, the goal of the activity was to sew a keychain, starting from choosing a shape and drawing it, and finishing with sewing the shape into fabric. Participants may discuss ideas about shape, fabric and colours.

Since I could not propose the app as instruction provider, I decided to actually mentor and facilitate myself the activity, providing sewing instructions and help.

So the goal of this workshop was not to test people engaging with instructions but mostly to test if people actually interact easily when they have a manual, crafty task to complete.

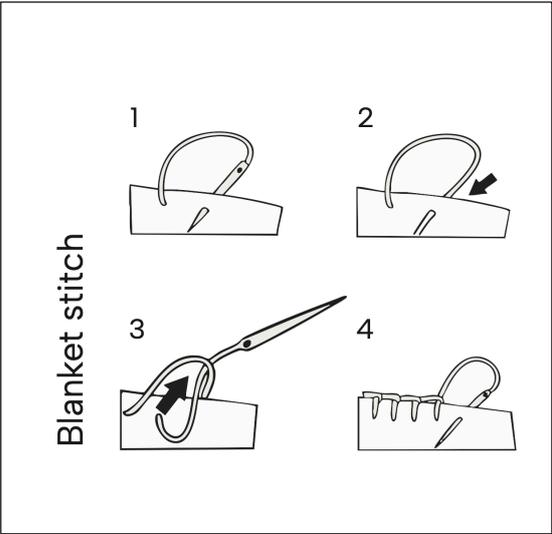


So, in the days before the workshop I tested myself the feasibility of sewing a keychain by hand in 1 hour time limit, without having any knowledge about the used stitch, the blanket stitch.

I watched a YouTube video and I followed the instructions, completing the keychain in around 40 minutes, from scratch to finish.

Then, I prepared some paper instructions that shows visually how to make the blanket stitch, so that participants could always have a reference to use in case of need.

I also designed some feedback sheets to be filled at the end of the workshop by each participant. These may be very useful to understand if the activity could actually be feasible to be done in autonomy but especially to know if participants interact during it



I also asked a friend with no sewing skills to try to make a keychain with the same technique: I explained him the process of cutting the shape and assembling it and I gave him only the instruction above. This is the result.



The feedback for has been designed in four A5 pages: it asks participants to reflect on how they interact with other people during the activity and why. But it is also a trace of their activity that gives a meaning to the moment used to stop and create with hands.

**How did it go?**  
workshop fieldnotes

How hard was the sewing activity?

super easy (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) I panicked a little

Glue you stitch test here:

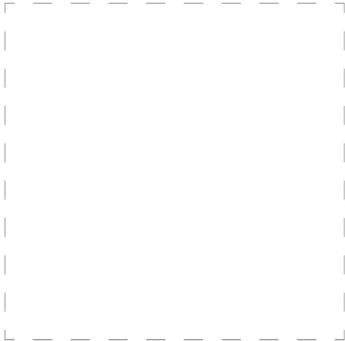


How did you feel during the activity?

|  |  |  |   |   |
|--|--|--|---|---|
|  excited  |  joyful |  grateful |  energized |  sensitive |
|  stressed |  angry  |  insecure |  confused  |  bored     |

**Your small project**  
workshop fieldnotes

Glue here your keychain shape:



Name it in your language \_\_\_\_\_

In the first page, participants can express their opinion about the sewing activity.

This could be useful to understand if a project like the keychain could be feasible for people who are not sewing experts or not, the goal is not to test specifically this but it is still a relevant information to gain.

Participants are also invited to express their feelings about the workshop and how they have been feeling, helping me to understand if the atmosphere was relaxed enough to make everyone feel at ease.

It would be nice also to have a trace, a material memory of their work. So, since everyone will bring home their project, I think that participants could leave the shape they draw and give it a name in their own language.

**Beyond sewing**  
workshop fieldnotes

What is your native language? \_\_\_\_\_

Did working with your hands make it easier to interact with strangers?

yes  no

Did you interact with someone you didn't know?

yes  no

If yes, what was the reason (ice-breaker) to interact?

Asking for a tool/material       "How did you do this?"

Complimenting their project       Just chatting

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you learn any new word/expression today?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you think creative workshops (like today's activity) could be a good way to improve language skills?

yes  no

Leave a message or a tip, if you'd like :)

In the last two pages the form moves from the activity to questions about the interaction participants can have. So it asks if participants got in touch with someone new, with a stranger, or if they knew any new word or expression.

I also left a blank part for tips and messages since I think that after a new activity, after trying to do something new, anyone could have a thought about it.

**Beyond sewing**  
workshop fieldnotes

What is your native language? Japanese

Did working with your hands make it easier to interact with strangers?  
 yes  no

Did you interact with someone you didn't know?  
 yes  no

If yes, what was the reason (ice-breaker) to interact?  
 Asking for a tool/material  "How did you do this?"  
 Complimenting their project  Just chatting  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

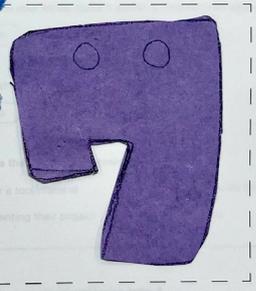
Did you learn any new word/expression today?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you think creative workshops (like today's activity) could be a good way to improve language skills?  
 yes  no



**Your small project**  
workshop fieldnotes

Glue here your keychain shape:



Name it in your language 私の名は「おは」です ^^

What is your native language? Japanese

Did working with your hands make it easier to interact with strangers?  
 yes  no

Did you interact with someone you didn't know?  
 yes  no

If yes, what was the reason (ice-breaker) to interact?  
 Asking for a tool/material  "How did you do this?"  
 Complimenting their project  Just chatting  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you learn any new word/expression today?  
needle

Do you think creative workshops (like today's activity) could be a good way to improve language skills?  
 yes  no



**Beyond sewing**  
workshop fieldnotes

What is your native language? Japanese

Did working with your hands make it easier to interact with strangers?  
 yes  no

Did you interact with someone you didn't know?  
 yes  no

If yes, what was the reason (ice-breaker) to interact?  
 Asking for a tool/material  "How did you do this?"  
 Complimenting their project  Just chatting  
 Other: Asking ideas for shapes

Did you learn any new word/expression today?  
spanish word(?) for finish finale??

Do you think creative workshops (like today's activity) could be a good way to improve language skills?  
 yes  no



Leave a message or a tip, if you'd like :)

It was a so fun project for a short time!  
I'm more interested in exchanging  
culture now!



Leave a message or a tip, if you'd like :)

Grazie mille Elisa, e' stato molto divertente  
I will do all the pokeman like this.

◎) / 05.

⑨ 楽しかったけど、疲れた。これは言葉が通じない  
縫うのが疲れたので。初めての縫い方だったので、  
のお手本を見れば、理解できたので、何も問題なかった。

Leave a message or a tip, if you'd like :)

Workshop was very very fun!  
Thank you for giving me time  
that I can practice talking with foreign strangers.



Leave a message or a tip, if you'd like :)

I enjoyed very much attending to this workshop.  
I think that activities like this connect people  
and also let your own creativity to burst out.  
I felt quite relaxed and focused, something  
that unfortunately I don't experience very  
often, as everyday I work on computer and  
not with my hands even if I ~~think I do~~ ~~really~~  
really enjoy it. When I was young I spent  
hours everyday doing craft things by my hands  
and this activity reminded me of these  
beautiful times and reminded me that life  
is not only work, but you have to take care  
of yourself dedicating time to what really  
passionates you.

Leave a message or a tip, if you'd like :)

Thank you maestra ♡  
It was so fun ♡  
Grazie, Elisa !! ♡





## Chapter 10

# Conclusions

This thesis set out to explore how crafts, DIY and digital convenience could coexist in the modern living space and, at the same time, help people bypass the language barrier and interact with non-English speakers.

The result is the design of Koko, a phygital system comprising a modular physical toolbox inspired by the Japanese bento box and a digital app designed for reserving workshops and connect with international residents.

## 10.1 KEY FINDINGS

The development process highlighted several critical insights regarding the intersection of physical tools and User Experience (UX):

### **Physical–digital synergy**

The integration of the app system demonstrated that digital tools should not replace physical skills but support them. The app acts as a silent facilitator, handling the cognitive load of planning and helping people to just turn up.

While the prototype validates the core concept, certain limitations remain. The current application relies on a manually curated database of workshops and hosts, which would face scalability challenges in a real-world deployment outside of Kyoto.

### **Cultural sustainability**

By grounding the design in the local context of an ancient city like Kyoto, the project proposes to exploit also traditional crafts.

Kyoto is a city with an enormous heritage but often young people lack of knowledge about their own traditions. This is a common issue pointed out by artisans in the city. The project could be an innovative proposal for trying and experiencing activities that normally would not be considered in everyday life.

### **Crafts as media for interaction**

As experienced during the workshop organised at Mcafé, doing manual activities really help people to connect and get in touch. The reasons to start chatting are infinite and having a common task makes the conversation more relaxed, less focused on finding the right words.

Moreover, people enjoyed the moment and someone also said that it allowed to disconnect from the phone. So the activity has been actually grounding.

## 10.2 NEXT STEPS

Looking forward, the project opens several avenues for further exploration:

### **User testing within the app**

Conduct several user testing could be useful to understand if the designed user flow is correct and if there is the need to reconsiderate the sitemap.

In addition, it would be interesting to take into account how to use visual graphics to support instructions for workshops.

### **Scalability**

The project is designed specifically for Kyoto, a city that experiences a strong language barrier for foreigners (as the whole country). But the same issue could be identified in other cities in the world, so the project could be adjusted to new places, integrating more locations.

### **Final Thoughts**

Ultimately, Koko is more than a design for a toolkit; it is a proposal for a lifestyle. In an era increasingly dominated by screen time and intangible digital assets, this project argues for the profound importance of making. By giving tools a "home" as thoughtful and beautiful as a bento box, we invite the user to respect their instruments, value their time, and find grounding in the simple, human act of building something with their own hands.

My time in Kyoto has been one of the most precious experiences of my life. I realized that living in a country where neither my native language nor English is spoken can be incredibly challenging, sometimes funny. In this context, my friends and colleagues from the Marikoji Kaikan international dorm have been indispensable. Their support was fundamental, and I could not have completed this project without them.

ありがとうございます！

エリサさん

## Chapter 11

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