

# JAPONISME 3.0 BUSINESS MODELS FOR THE FUTURE

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## *Abstract*

*The current paper uses an interdisciplinary approach (business and anthropology) to situate a business model case study in the context of Japanese culture, in an attempt to elucidate what Japonisme 3.0, the third wave of Japanese influence in the world, might represent. The solution proposed by the authors lies in a new concept, kinôbi, an idea with roots in traditional Japanese attitudes towards artisanship, creation, and production. Kinôbi, translated by the authors as “beauty in function,” suggests a potential business model that uses understanding, knowledge, and technique as indispensable skills for value creation.*

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**Keywords:** kinôbi, business model, Japonisme, craftsmanship, Japanese culture.

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2026/22/1.05

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## ***1. Introduction. Japan and the world***

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From a business perspective, it has been a while since Japan was present as a significant force on the global market. The fantastic 70s~80s are gone, the economic bubble burst over 30 years ago<sup>3</sup>—a period called “the lost decades.” Japan is acutely aware of this, which led to it losing its confidence and trust that it can successfully compete with other economies. However, the influence of Japan on other cultures is still there —as evidence, it was number one in the top of Condé Nast Traveler Reader’s Choice Awards 2025, as well as the number one choice for countries people want to visit, according to research<sup>4</sup> done by Dentsu, Japan’s largest advertising and marketing company. Although no longer a new territory accessible only to a limited group of privileged people, Japan continues to fascinate as a land where deep philosophical ideas combined with meticulous craft and a specific approach to work

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<sup>3</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica defines Japan’s bubble economy of the 1980s as “an era that combined easy credit with unbridled speculation and eventually drove Japanese equity and real estate markets to astronomical price levels,” and which burst at the end of the decade, triggering a deep depression.

<sup>4</sup> The results are based on 12,400 responses received from people aged 20 to 59 from 20 different countries.

in general can represent the key to future innovation.

The first historical moment when Japan took the world by storm happened in the 19th century, when Japan opened its borders to the Western world, and Japanese arts and crafts determined a new direction in the Western art—the current known as Japonisme. Japanese “works” and “products” held an undefinable charm and value which triggered momentous innovation in the old-fashioned Western art.

One hundred years later, Japan again became a worldwide phenomenon by rising from the ashes of the Second World War as a great economic power and world leader. Japanese products became household names on all continents: they were well made, did not break, and did not break the bank either. Everybody was familiar with the Walkman, NES (the Nintendo family computer), or Toyota cars. The end of the 20th century was the era of Japanese domination: Sony bought Columbia Pictures, Mitsubishi Estate Group acquired Rockefeller Center. Impressed by Japan’s rapid rising, American sociologist Ezra Vogel coined a phrase that would become symbolic: “Japan as Number One.” This phenomenon is what we would call Japonisme 2.0—a movement based on “process”<sup>5</sup>, while the original Japonisme (Japonisme 1.0) was based on “product”, that is, during the first stage, Japan-made arts and crafts were the focus of the movement, while during the second stage, Japanese attitudes and practices represented a global model.

An objective look at the current economic situation, where the yen is at a historically low point and Japan does not seem able to successfully compete in the digital and AI age, indicates that a reform is needed. As specialists in business models and Japanese culture, we believe that Japan has the strength to re-invent itself once again, and the purpose of this paper is to offer a potential solution using elements of what is considered traditional Japanese culture combined with a business model approach. The sense of value preserved by Japanese companies is something that needs revisiting and might hold the key for future progress and success.

Japan has lost its prominent economic position on the global scene, but it has become one of the most visited places in the world. Despite using a unique (and very hard to learn language), its entertainment industry has made a profound impact on world cultures. Sushi, both low and high-end, has become a world staple, and people all over the world look at Japanese philosophy in their search for personal growth and happiness.

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<sup>5</sup> “Product” and “process” are keywords in the field of business models. “Product” can be defined as the solution to improve the life of users/ customers, which includes things necessary for everyday life, as well as various services such as educational or financial. “Process” represents the mechanism through which product is developed and delivered, the practical application of a business model.

This unique cultural phenomenon cannot be explained only through product (the 19th century Japonisme 1.0), or through process (the 20th century Japonisme 2.0). The most important lesson from the Japan is the ability to preserve this very important “value”, something that we hope to be able to explain by offering a case-based approach to Japanese business models. This approach represents Japonisme 3.0, a concept the authors first submitted to the 5<sup>th</sup> Global Business Anthropology Summit in November 2024 (presented during the 2025 Tokyo conference), and also discussed by Nobuyuki Hayashi in a blog entry from December 30, 2024<sup>6</sup>. The phenomenon could also be called “business Japonisme”, and we aim to explain in our analysis that, while there may be a tendency to ignore Japan as an economic power at the moment, the underlying cultural background of Japanese business practices is still strong and has the potential to yield creative innovation. The Japanese mindset and culture are what supports these businesses which, while they may not be the lightning bolts on the global firmament they used to be, they hold lessons for new practitioners and the potential to offer an alternative to the constant “update mode” of the digital era.

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## 2. *Beyond craftsmanship*

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In 2025, almost two centuries after the first World Fair opened its gates to visitors in London, Japan became its host for the third time (an indication of the continuous involvement of Japan in all things “glocal”)—an occasion that included a series of cultural events meant to promote Japanese culture among international guests. One of these was the “Neo Japonism”<sup>7</sup> exhibition held at Tokyo National Museum between March 25~ August 3, 2025. The exhibition focused on objects of art that were deemed “national treasures” by the Japanese Ministry of Culture—examples of art and craft that have exerted significant influence on world art, and even triggered the birth of new artistic trends (hence the re-use of the concept of “Japonism”). The walk through the museum halls was chronological: one would start with ancient Buddhist statues and end with items that had been displayed at previous world fairs, such as painted lacquer boxes, porcelain vases, or decorative objects (such as an incense burner in the shape of a flower basket) made by connecting thin sheets of metal—a technique developed by Japanese artisans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The last room of the exhibition included something unexpected: tools used to create some of the objects, and videos showing how crafting techniques are preserved through the centuries. The importance placed on these techniques—some used for restoring the old pieces, some to create new ones—shows that the process through which a

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<sup>6</sup> <https://medium.com/@nobi/japonisme-3-e5df7a09350f> (retrieved on January 29, 2026)

<sup>7</sup> The English version of the French word “Japonisme” is “Japanism,” while Japan adopted the version “Japonism.” Throughout this research project we chose to use the original “Japonisme,” preserving “Japonism” where it was utilized as such for various events.

precious object is created is regarded within the Japanese tradition as equally valuable as the finished product.

Craftsmanship and nature are the two elements most often associated with Japan, and they exist in a symbiotic relationship. Japanese people love nature that is crafted by humans to suit an almost otherworldly aesthetic vision (such as the Japanese gardens, who are created not just for aesthetic pleasure, but also are embody religious and philosophical ideals), while some of their crafts are imbued with the transience of seasons (for example, the exquisitely crafted *wagashi*, Japanese traditional cakes shaped from bean paste to look like flowers, dolls, and even cartoon characters). Most cultures built massive temples to worship their gods, monumental constructions meant to survive millennia (the oldest monumental church, Etchmiadzin Cathedral in Armenia, founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, is young by comparison with the Göbekli Tepe complex in Turkey, which is estimated to date to the 9th–10th millennium BCE). Japan's most sacred shrine is built with an included expiry date: 20 years. Naiku, the shrine dedicated to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu within the Ise Grand Shrine Complex, is rebuilt every 20 years, the goal being to preserve its purity, connection to nature through the materials used, and most importantly, the special construction techniques.

The work of Japanese artisans is a true labor of love, the philosophy behind it having deep roots in the traditional Japanese way of thinking: every single thing, from material to final product, must be approached and treated with respect, because everything in nature is connected and contains a spark of divinity. This pattern of behavior is connected to an ancient religious ideology “characterized as animism or belief in spirits generally referred to as *tama*,” which represented “the most important part of both imperial and village-level rites” (Mori 1979: 528).

Exquisite craftsmanship is not, of course, something limited to Japanese culture. Most cultures of the world excel in one area or another: the Italians make shoes, the French make perfumes, the Indians make fabrics, and the list could continue. Then what is it that sets Japanese craftsmanship aside from all the other techniques that have been transmitted (and preserved) carefully from one generation to another in all cultures across the globe? Our answer is one word: 機能美 *kinōbi*, “functional beauty” with a twist. More than a mere approach to functionality and aesthetics, *kinōbi* represents one of the core concepts of this paper, and the key to an innovative approach to value creation.

Any creative enterprise must be supported by three indispensable elements: knowledge, understanding, and technique. In other words, in order to create something of value, one must possess knowledge in that specific field, a deep understanding of that knowledge, and the skills to put the two into practice. We believe that *kinōbi*, a concept profoundly connected to Japanese culture and

philosophy, adds an extra layer to the formula above: respect. The creator's attitude towards creation, towards the primary materials and the finished product, the awareness that there are interconnected not only with the culture they belong to, but also with the wider natural environment and the intended user is what can turn a regular flower vase, or a comb, or a tea bowl from an object of daily use into a national treasure.

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### *2.1 Functional beauty and kinōbi*

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The idea that objects are a combination of functionality and aesthetics is neither new nor is it specific to Japan. The ancient Greeks (Xenophon, Plato) argued over beauty as something determined by the usefulness of an object, or the way it accomplishes its intended purpose. In 2008 philosophers Glenn Parsons and Allen Carson formally defined “functional beauty” as “a thing’s function being integral to its aesthetic character,” or “beauty as fitness for function” (Parsons & Carson, 2008: 46). Kinōbi is the Japanese translation of “functional beauty,” but applied in the current context, we believe that the order of the words should be inverted to express “beautiful function.” “Functional beauty” as discussed by philosophers appears to be connected to efficiency, order, survival. Something that serves its purpose in the way it was intended is beautiful—because it is useful, and obviously not flawed. “Functional beauty” thus becomes daily and ordinary, while the “beautiful function” we will be referring to belongs to the realm of art.

“Functional beauty” is pure craftsmanship, the aesthetics of a job well done, while the “beautiful function” representing the focus of our study refers to the primordial instinct of carving a pattern on a water jug, or a flower on the handle of a wooden spoon, or weaving fantastic patterns on a modest carpet that might soon be covered in mud. The water jug, and the spoon, and the carpet would function just as well without any embellishments, and could even be beautiful in their usefulness.

Japanese craftsmanship and the attitudes behind it represent of the core elements of Japanese culture, and one of the most admired outside of Japan, where “made in Japan” has consistently been a quality label. Fueled by the industrial revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent consumerist trends, Western users lost the original awe towards carefully crafted objects, and society shifted towards fast fashion and a culture based on replacement and updates. From a social perspective, the phenomenon is not difficult to comprehend: mass production allowed regular people access to objects that had until then been unreachable due to high production costs, and later technological developments made most things necessary to daily life accessible and convenient. The emphasis was placed on function/ usefulness and cost, to the detriment of craftsmanship. This social and economic trend seems to have gained less momentum in Japan, even if when the production of higher quality items

meant higher costs and less profit, and this phenomenon can only be explained by looking at traditional Japanese culture.

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## 2.2 *Kinōbi, the heart of things*

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Japanese culture is the stage for a practice that is very rare, if not unique, in the world: objects that have outlived their usefulness are not simply discarded, they benefit from solemn funerary rituals. Burying objects together with the dead is an almost universal practice, but in that case, it is the owners who are honored, not the possessions that are supposed to accompany them in the afterlife. In Japan, needles are buried in salt at Awashima Shrine in Wakayama, calligraphy brushes are ritually burned at Tōfukuji Temple in Kyoto, while at Hattori Tenjingū in Toyonaka, Osaka Prefecture, a wide array of things receive a similar farewell: dolls, stuffed animals, shoes, wallets, pencils, photo albums, letters, cards, paintings, accessories, school bags. These are all objects that have been used and have been useful for a long time, and as such deserve to be disposed of with reverence and gratitude.



Needles being offered a salt funeral (Awashima Shrine, February 8, 2012, photographed by the authors)



The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the Japanese belief that every little thing has a “spirit”, is endowed with at least a divine crumb which makes it worthy of care and respect. This way of thinking belongs to the category of what Edward B. Tylor called in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century “animism”. Animism as a concept fell into disgrace and was controversial during the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to its initially being presented as a characteristic of the religious thought of “primitive peoples,” in contrast to the more “evolved” and “civilized” mentality of their discoverers/ colonizers. This

Eurocentric perspective has largely fallen into oblivion, and nowadays animism is seen as a set of beliefs and practices that can be observed in numerous cultures across continents, from with the ancient Greeks, who saw the world around them as inhabited by various spirits more or less powerful (and different from the gods on Mount Olympus), to the Irish realm of fairies and sprites, to the myriad deities of India or Nepal—to give just a few examples.

Japan is also a place where spirits come in all forms and shapes: 神 *kami* (deities), 先祖 *senzo* (ancestors), 怨霊 *onryō* (vengeful ghosts), 幽霊 *yūrei* (ghosts that are often sad and desolate), 妖怪 *yōkai* (monsters) (Rambelli, 2021: 3). These spirits are clearly defined entities, but beyond them, everything in the natural world is supposedly endowed with a soul 魂 *tamashii*, and as such interconnected and worthy of care and worship. This trend of thought was developed and explained, with reference to Japan, by Takeshi Umehara, one hundred years after Edward B. Tylor:

*Not only human beings but all living creatures have a soul which, after death, leaves the body and goes to the other world. In particular, living beings which are important to humans must be sent off carefully to the other world.* (Umehara, 1991: 166)

The importance of this ideology in Japanese culture is apparent in various Shinto and Buddhist practices, and has become universally famous through Hayao Miyazaki's productions. Most readers are probably familiar with the tiny translucent creatures called *kodama* from the animated movie *Princess Mononoke* (1997). They are symbols of the spirits that are omnipresent in the natural world, as well as symbols of the author's belief in animism as an all-encompassing system that explains the world and the human place in it. This belief is clearly explained in Miyazaki's manga series *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*: "A life is a life, regardless of how it comes into being. [...] Every life form, no matter how small, contains the outside universe within its internal universe" (Yoneyama, 2021: 253).

Both the philosopher Umehara and the artist Miyazaki only refer to living creatures, not needles or brushes, yet considering the examples above, we could safely argue that the Japanese apply a similar view to all surrounding objects, be they animate or inanimate. Japanese culture is focused on the deep connection with nature, but that does not exclude the modest objects of our daily life. Japanese texts and illustrated scrolls from the Medieval Period mention that objects that had been used for more than 99 years can suddenly acquire a soul and transform into mischievous little monsters categorized as *tsukumogami* ("the spirit attached to death"). In the Japanese imagination and system of beliefs, animism is not limited to living creatures; 魂 can be found in everything, from the humble needles and pencils we use every day to the magical *kameosa*, the anthropomorphic jug which is always full of water or sake, to *suzuhikohime*, the dancing bells, to the *narigama*, the kettle that can predict the future, and the list could continue (*Yōkai Database*, Murakami 2005).

In contemporary Japan, many people may not always be aware of this belief, but that does not limit its power and influence. The “heart of things” is an idea not restricted to fairy tales and ritual practices; it is implemented into daily life as well. It is visible into the care and attention to detail characteristic to the Japanese when they craft an object, any object, be it a toilet brush or a silk kimono. The idiom “god is in the details” became popular in Europe and the United States during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being attributed to either German art historian Aby Warburg or German-born architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe<sup>8</sup>, and its Japanese counterpart (神々は細部に宿る・*kamigami wa saibu ni yadoru*) is similarly well-known. While the fact that it is impossible to indicate a clear author suggest that this principle has existed for a long time, in various cultures, it is nowhere more obvious than in Japan, where even the humblest of objects is made with minute care, to be both useful and pleasing to the eye. 機能美 *Kinōbi*—when function and beauty are not separated.

In our analysis we are going to use *kinōbi* order to explain how the Japanese way of thinking can be applied to transform regular projects into remarkable successes. 10,000 years ago, the Jōmon people took objects that were necessary to everyday life (vessels for food and drinks) and created designs that continue to represent a source of inspiration for contemporary artists. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese arts and crafts revolutionized European art, and one hundred years later Japanese businesses became a model for the entire globe. We believe that *kinōbi* is one of the sources of these innovative successes, and following is a case study that illustrates the practical applications of this concept.

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### ***3. Kinōbi and business. A case study***

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When it comes to the design of a new product, its intrinsic objective qualities are not enough to determine its value, which highly depends on its role within the general activities of the company and the satisfaction it brings to users. A business model helps acquire an overall view of a company’s activity and goals.

Here we are going to present the case study of a Japanese company which tried to distance itself from the traditional business models and move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century based on ideas that clearly reflect the concept discussed above, *kinōbi*. This is still a new enterprise, and as such there are many aspects still in progress, but we hope this particular example will provide a better understanding of how *kinōbi* can be used to enhance and improve their business activities. The case study is based on M. Kawakami’s experience, who worked as a business advisor for the company discussed.

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<sup>8</sup> There are no written documents that would attribute the statement to either Warburg or der Rohe, but they are mentioned in reputable sources such as the websites of the Courtauld Gallery in London, or The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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### 3.1 *Takumi Kougei (Takumi Crafts)*

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In 2008, a young Japanese man graduated from high-school and decided to reject the job he had been offered in order to establish a billboard making company in the countryside of Hyogo Prefecture. The name of the young man is Orii Takumi, and his company was Takumi Industries<sup>9</sup>. By sheer coincidence, the meaning of the word *takumi* is “artisan”. True to his name, Takumi was skilled at using the various machines necessary in his line of work, and his products came to be highly appreciated. He had introduced a new machine called NC router, and started receiving numerous orders for plastic billboards, replicas, and other similar products, to the point that restaurant signboards and company billboards in the area were all made by his company. The young company reached a level of success that enabled its owner to independently support his family, a moment which from a professional perspective signaled that it was time to move forward.

Once the immediate goal—survival—was accomplished, Takumi considered a more creative approach to his business, and one that would bring his customers not only from professional but also personal satisfaction. It was at this particular stage in his career that he approached M. Kawakami, the author of several books on business models, and their fortuitous meeting gave birth to his new and innovative project. In 2014 he established an armory for weapons used in cosplay. This represented Takumi’s attempt at using skills so far devoted to making practical objects in order to create something different, something that would test his artistic senses. His original business continued unhindered—functional beauty was the foundation of his activities, but Takumi aimed at offering the world beauty in function—*kinōbi*.

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### 3.2 *Takumi Armory*

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The name of the new business was Takumi Armory—a cosplay weapon production factory. The new project was connected to Takumi’s personal interest in video games and anime (especially *Dragon Quest* and *Gundam*). Takumi had visited related events such as comic markets (Comiket) and the globally known Comicon, which boasted over 150,000 participants per day from Japan in the 2010s, and realized what the market needed. These events are stages for the participants to enjoy not only the display of new games and comic books, but also to dress up as their favorite characters and take photos to share with similarly minded people. The increased use of social media triggered a sharp increase in the number of participants, who were no longer limited to *otaku*<sup>10</sup>, but were also regular people, with regular jobs, who

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<sup>9</sup> The data was obtained by M. Kawakami during his collaboration with Takumi Kougei, and it is used with permission from Mr. Orii Takumi.

<sup>10</sup> The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *otaku* as “a person having an intense or obsessive

simply wanted to indulge in their passion for manga, anime, video games, and cosplay. It was this increasingly large market that Takumi wanted to address, by offering cosplayers a special product. His project was not random: it was based on his personal interest in and knowledge of pop culture, as well as the Japanese roots of this contemporary trend. His new business, a weapon making workshop, was based on the armory present in *Dragon Quest*.

Takumi's weapons revolutionized the world of cosplay. Cosplay aficionados usually create their own costumes, a combination of ready and handmade garments to imitate those of their favorite characters, but making weapons, especially big swords, axes, machine guns, was obviously much more difficult than sewing a dress. Since such weapons could not be bought, they had to be made, but realistic looking weapons made of metal were prohibitively heavy. Domestic and international travel for events cannot be easily done when one has heavy metal weapons; even if it were possible to bring them to venues, it would be almost impossible to move around carrying them, or to strike the desired poses for photos. It must be mentioned here that one of the favorite activities of cosplayers is dressing up as their favorite characters and trying to imitate as closely as possible their signature gestures and postures. The existing weapons were objects that could not fulfill their intended purpose—beauty without function. This is exactly the situation Socrates suggests when comparing a basket for dung to a spear made of gold: “Then I presume even a basket for carrying dung is a beautiful thing? Soc.: To be sure, and a spear of gold an ugly thing, if for their respective uses—the former is well and the latter ill adapted” (Xenophon Book III Ch. VIII Section 7).

On the contrary, available weapons that were light and easy to use looked like toys that may be functional (practical, portable), but would definitely lack beauty. Considering the ubiquity of social media and the fact that the goal of most participants was to take (and share) photos in specific poses, Takumi thought that shoddy accessories would poorly represent Japan on the international stage. His solution was to create cosplay weapons that would look as realistic as those made of metal, without any of the inconveniences caused by weight—weapons that appeared as fantastic as the worlds they came from, and which could be used to travel the world and strike the desired poses and embody one's favorite heroes in the best way possible.

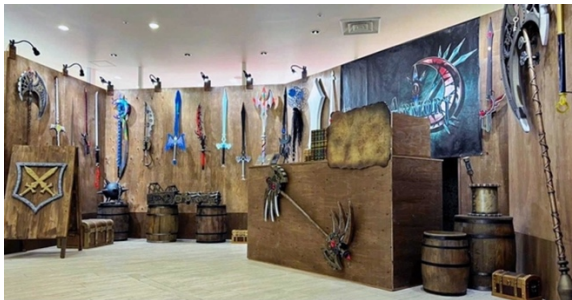
Takumi did not find his quest difficult; all he had to do is transform his aesthetic ideal into reality, while not losing sight of one vital element: function. The most important feature of the weapons he was about to make was not lightness, but their suitability for striking a pose, in other words, helping users transform into characters.

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interest especially in the fields of anime and manga,” while in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* it appears as “geek” in reference to a new culture movement.

This was the issue that previous products could not solve, and the essence of kinōbi: function + beauty.

Since Takumi Armory was founded in 2014, their weapons have been in high demand, especially those attached to famous characters achieving remarkable sales. However, Takumi was not only about imitation; possessing both passion and extraordinary creativity, he did not limit his products to items from games or comic books, and started selling original design weapons. In January 2023, the most famous anime magazine in Europe, L'AnimeLand X-TRA, dedicated an ample article to his designs, clearly establishing Takumi Armory as a leading cosplay weapon producer, as well as a pioneer in the field of otaku culture (68: 49-50).



Takumi Armory (photos reproduced with the owner's permission)

Takumi did not stop at designing and producing the weapons that made him famous. His creativity attracted the attention of the Japanese game company Square Enix, who asked him to design the weapons for their new game and anime *Nier Automata*. That was the same company which made his beloved *Dragon Quest*—a defining experience for his life and career. Takumi was relentless in pursuing a product whose functionality would satisfy users while making no compromises on the beauty aspect. A user himself, he did not find this pursuit an overly difficult one, and his efforts were rewarded with the opportunity to collaborate with a company he admired, where he could create new weapons, whose designs would be used in video games. Moreover, since most recent games are three-dimensional, weapons must be made in real life—an enterprise where Takumi's skill and talent are indispensable.

In 2025, after the pandemic, Comiket had 250,000 participants. Considering Comicon events worldwide, the market is incredibly vast, and Takumi Armory—a prominent weapon creator. This can be seen not just as a business success story, but also as a way for a passionate fan to give back to the fantasy world that fueled his creation.

### 3.3 *Takumi's business model and kinōbi*

After having described the creative and innovative aspects of Takumi Armory, let us have a look at his business model from the perspective of this paper's key concept, *kinōbi*. The theoretical framework for this analysis is Kawakami's Nine Cell theory (2013), according to which customer value is of the highest important dimension of business because it highlights what any company should regard as its essential goal: providing value to customers (Customer Value Proposition). For a customer value proposition to be successful, three dimensions must be clearly identified. First:

- 1) "Who" is the customer—a category which includes the specific actions that must be taken by a company to meet the needs of the target customers
- 2) "What" is the solution—that is, what is the concrete solution that the company offers to the customers
- 3) "How" is it different from the others—in other words, what are the original characteristics of the solution offered by the company by comparison with other similar products on the market.

The subsequent dimension is Profit Generation, profit being a *sine qua non* of the survival of any business, as it represents both the source of investment towards future customer value, as well as a safety net for the continuity of the company. Companies can clearly establish a mechanism for profit generation—the "profit formula":

- 4) "Who" brings profit—the company identifies profit sources which may extend beyond targeted customers
- 5) "What" brings profit—the company defines the specific objects or mechanisms that generate profit, which are not limited to the primary products
- 6) "How" profit is recouped—the company can recoup the profit not only immediately such as through product selling but also overtime through methods such as subscription or freemium.

The final dimension is Process. Process serves as the operational vehicle to actualize the business blueprint, which consists of customer value and profit generation. It entails:

- 7) "How" the company implements the plan—the company must identify the necessary implementation steps and execute them efficiently and effectively
- 8) "What" are strengths of a company—the company leverages its core competencies and internal resources associated with the implementation steps
- 9) "Who" are the complementary partners—strategic partners provide necessary support and additional resources to materialize the blueprint where internal capabilities are insufficient.

Ultimately, by asking "Who," "What," and "How" within the three dimensions of Customer Value Proposition, Profit Generation, and Process, the framework reveals nine distinct components that shape a complete business model.

*First stage—billboard manufacturing*

The first stage in Takumi's business (and business model) was the establishment of his billboard making company in 2008 (Fig. 1). At this point, his approach was to offer cheaper products and speedier delivery than his competitors—a classic business-to-business model known to most entrepreneurs. The billboard factory was a well-rounded, solid business who provided high-quality, reliable products, but where there was almost no hope for growth or expansion beyond a diligent approach to non-creative labor.

This situation is not limited to Japan: companies find themselves stuck in a pattern where there are only three opportunities for increasing profit: (a) increase the product value and raise prices, (b) lower prices, or (c) attempt to drastically cut costs. Since competition is usually fierce for companies who adopt the business-to-business approach, (a) requires extraordinary effort, and the presence of strong competitors means that (c) is also difficult to implement. As a result, (c) remains the only viable option, one which does not necessarily yield more profit. Differentiation in such cases is determined by technical developments, which only happen gradually, meaning that it can be extremely challenging to gain an advantage over big companies that had already made a name for themselves. Takumi was well aware of that when he founded Takumi Armory.

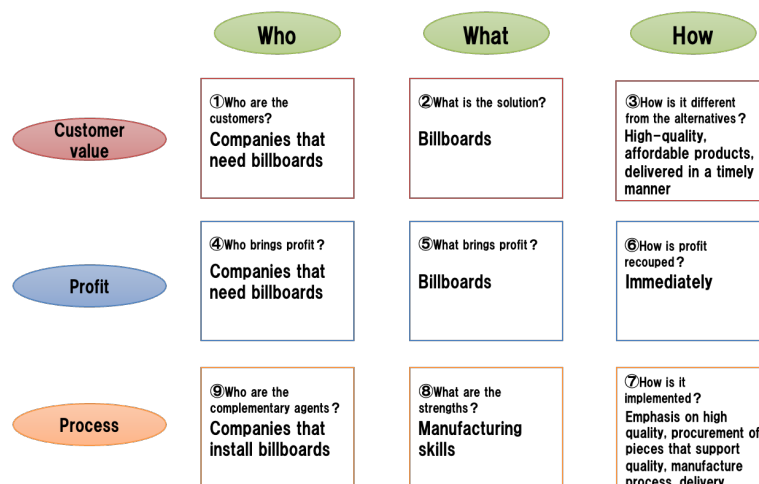


Figure 1. Business-to-business model

*Second stage—Takumi Armory*

The second stage of Takumi's business development was based not on the mere pursuit of profit, but on a combination of his aesthetic sense, personal interest and

passion for cosplay (Takumi himself identifies as a member of otaku culture), and the desire to create a product necessary but not yet present on the market, which would combine beauty and function. At this point he did not take into account the idea of a steady revenue, quite the opposite, he used the stable income from his billboard factory to support the new project. From a profit perspective, the new enterprise was a billboard making factory pretending to be an armory. This business model is illustrated in Figure 2. It is important to notice here that when he started his armory, Takumi did not expect it to bring profit; instead, he maintained his efforts that made the original business a source of reliable income while pursuing the new project.

For a company established based on the need for functional products, it could have been quite hard to determine whether there was a real demand for products that combined function with beauty. The creator's inner passion (what Wassily Kandinsky, in his short treatise on art from 1955, called "inner necessity") may be enough to have him move forward with the project, however, a source of steady revenue was also necessary. Takumi's venture could not rely on retained earnings, nor on bank loans, all he had was his original business. And thus he continued his pursue of beauty and function (*kinōbi*) while relying on profit from his billboard factory, and with the awareness that this was a billboard maker.

As Takumi became famous in the pop culture world and his media appearances increased, so did the orders for his billboards. This is how he made a name for himself as a billboard maker not through the classical methods, but through the unexpected path of otaku culture, gaining a clear advantage over his competitors. His success was not random; it was due to Takumi's focus on what we explain here as *kinōbi*, enhancing function through beauty, an effort which eventually led to the increased value of his original business.

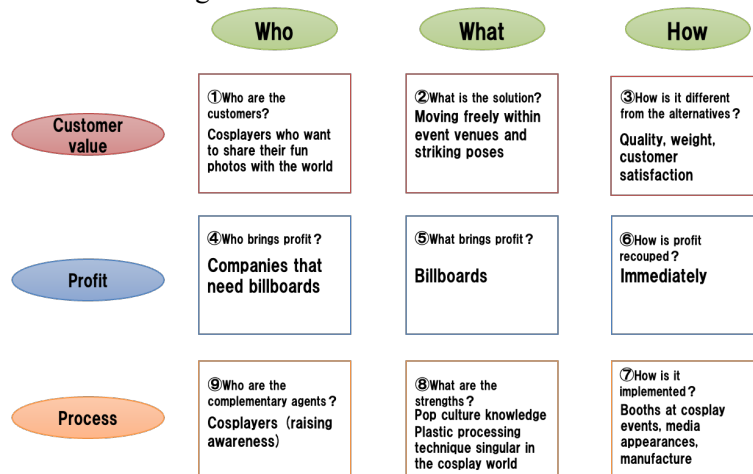


Figure 2. The establishment of Takumi Armory

*Takumi as a creator*

Nowadays Takumi is a consultant who works with major game companies on their new designs. He is also well-known in the world of cosplay and often gives talks as a creator at Comicon and other similar events. His products are used not only by cosplayers, but also by a multitude of Japanese pop culture fans. His armory is bringing in profit, and his fame has made the profits of the original parent company soar as well. However, the type of profit Takumi is aiming for is intellectual property: he sells his knowledge, expertise, and sense of beauty that make up paramount concept of this book, *kinōbi*, to companies pursuing similar business ideals. In other words, profit is derived from the full use of his pop culture related design and consulting skills. Figure 3 explains how passion and creativity can be used to make a profit while bringing satisfaction to users.

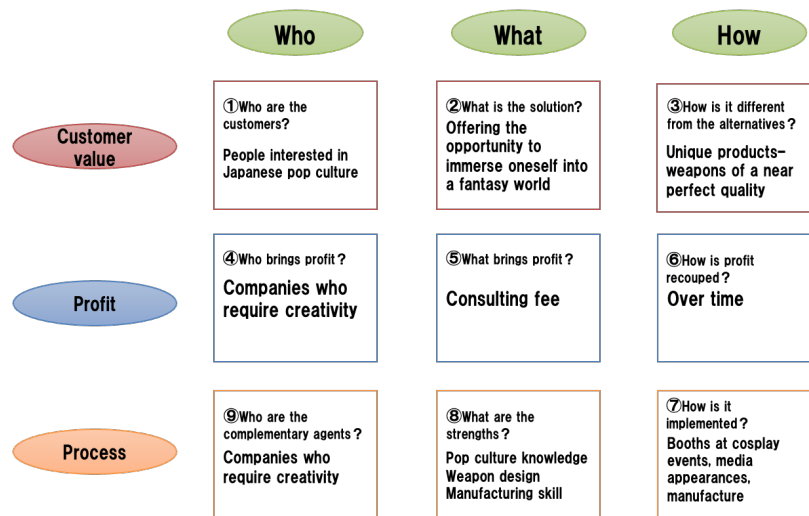


Figure 3. The present and future of Takumi

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#### 4. Conclusions. Business models for the future

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The current research project, which does not simply analyze existing data and past phenomena, but also looks into future possibilities and offers potential solutions, may seem unusual, yet it is not singular in the field of business anthropology. Ulrike Schaede's "Japan Re-Emerges" (2024) and "The Business Re-Invention of Japan. How to Make Sense of the New Japan and Why It Matters" (2020) also discuss the patterns apparent in Japanese business. Schaede argues against the idea of a "stagnant Japan"—a perspective contradicted by Japan's constant present in the world's top economies, and suggests that Japan might "serve the world as a model for a different kind of Number One, one that operates at the innovation frontier and

has traded in dog-eat-dog races to the top for a new type of balance – such as between economic growth and social stability, technological progress and sustainability, and corporate performance with human well-being” (2024: 8). Mireya Solis’ “Japan’s Quiet Leadership. Re-Shaping the Indo-Pacific” (2023) is another volume that addresses and tries to correct the perception of a Japan which has lost its power of influence in the world. Solis provides data to support the idea that Japan has constantly moved towards globalization and remains a significant player on the international stage.

The goal of this paper is not completely different from the previous approaches. We too looked at data on how Japan’s economy and business influence shifted through the decades, but we did not limit our scope to an analysis, but also added a case study based on direct involvement with its subject, in an attempt to suggest how future business models may be developed. We use the concept of kinōbi to explain the process of creating new project, based on the specific case of Takumi Kougei. Using the Nine Cell framework we hope to clarify how kinōbi could represent the kindling flame of a successful business. The conclusions drawn here are: 1) kinōbi is a concept vital to product development; 2) completing the creation of a product does not mean completing the business; 3) readers can imagine the story behind profit capture; 4) they can acquire a wider view of the mechanisms from delivery process to establishing a business; 5) business models change depending on the stages of a business.

Many Japanese businesses possess the ability to create new products whose entire philosophy is based on the kinōbi concept; what they unfortunately lack is the ability to develop value capture (profit capture) in a way that makes a business successful. On the other hand, if we look at innovative business models with a high future potential like Takumi Kougei, we can understand how kinōbi may be used for future business enhancements. Understanding the concept of kinōbi and how to use it in business can lead to the possibility of successful updates of existing business models—and this is the most important lesson to be learned from Japonisme 3.0.

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