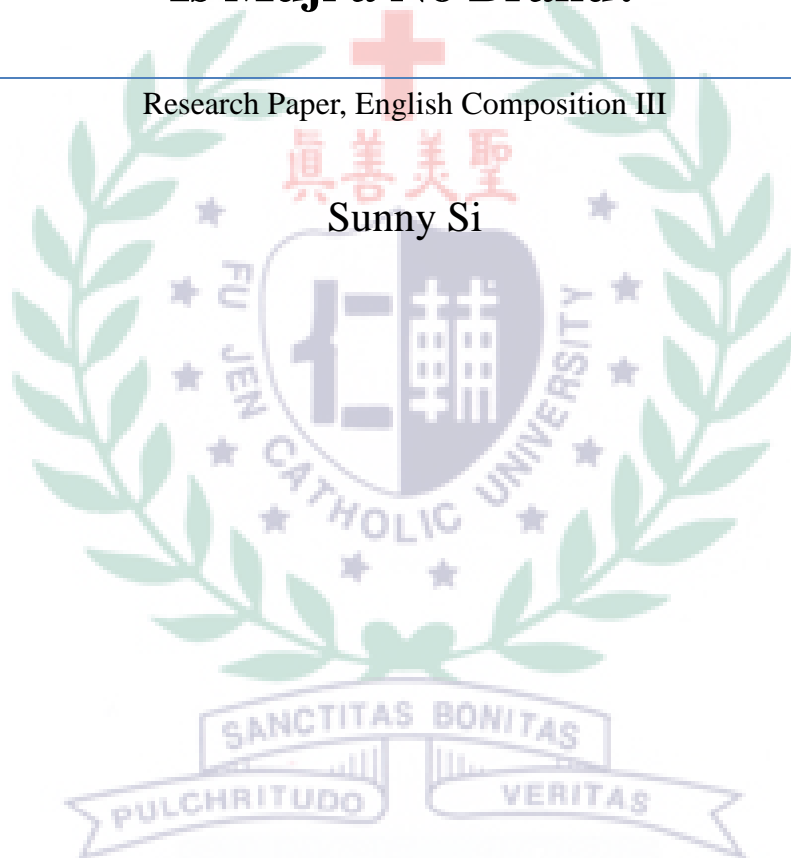


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Is Muji a No Brand?

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Research Paper Draft#3: Is Muji a No Brand?

In the market place, many companies make use of advertisements to set an image, so when people think of the brand, what occurs to them is the image that are constructed through advertising, and what people consume is the sign value behind products. According to Jean Baudrillard, this phenomenon is defined as symbolic consumption. In *The System of Objects and Consumer Society*, he points out that products can be consumed because they have sign value (Baudrillard, 1996). As Baudrillard says, “what is consumed are not objects but the relation itself—signified and absent, included and excluded at the same time—it is the idea of the relation that is consumed in the series of objects which manifests it” (Poster, 22). What people consume has changed, and the meaning of consumer good also changes. “Material goods are not the objects of consumption: they are merely the objects of need and satisfaction” (Poster, 21). Objects are not just used because they have certain usage, but are because of their fulfillment of the psychological needs. Baudrillard discusses the deep meaning between consumption, social meaning and sign value. Then his work develops a theory that with the rising of industry and the flourishing of materials, the era that we consume only for the function of products has gone, because the function of products is no longer attractive, and now we chase the meaning and sign value of objects. For example, those sports shoes companies like Nike and Addidas, invite famous NBA stars to advertise their sport shoes, since people will be convinced by the image of those stars. Hence, people would buy the shoes not because their last shoes are worn out, but because they think the shoes they buy are better than the last one, with the guarantee of famous basketball stars.

Nevertheless, there is also the company that looks down upon such marketing strategies, because they make use of people’s desire and dismiss the function of products. Muji is the example. The Japanese retail company Muji, founded in 1980, has become more and more popular these years in Taiwan. It sells a wide variety of household and consumer goods. Interestingly, Muji is distinguished by its simplicity, purity and closeness to nature in order to

eliminate the brand effect and put more emphasis on the essential usage of objects.

To discover whether Muji succeeds to de-brand, I will examine Muji's advertisements and products, and also analyze the consumption practice from five interviewees. Thus, although Muji is known for its simplicity, purity and closeness to nature, by examining Muji's advertisements and products, and analyzing the consumption practice, de-branding fails to escape from the frame of symbolic consumption.

Wen Tang and Zhitao Qian claim that Muji succeeds to de-brand in terms of three aspects, which are advertisements, products design and consumption practice. As Tang says, Muji is different from other brands because it seldom boasts the products by advertising through luxury and exaggerated images (Tang, 2013). Muji's furnishing is also pure. When people go to their stores, what comes into view is not the huge poster, on which the famous movie stars with heavy make-up attract consumers, but the clean French casement showing the products and the brand name, Muji, on the wall glimmering like the light at home. All in all, Muji is low-key in advertising.

Speaking of the product design, Muji, itself, claims that its products put emphasis on the use-value, since there is no extra decorative design or logo on the products (Hara, 2007). According to *Muji*, its products have four features. The first feature is contextual style. Products become the background of home, instead of the decorations, in order to maximize the function. For example, considering the tea pot set of Muji, it is in absolute white and only has simple appearance. Many tea pot sets care much about whether they are sand fired pots, since sand fired pots are the top-level. The second feature is the special choice of color. Muji's clothing is mainly in white, black and undertint, which is an important factor to blend in background or in nature. The third one is to de-character, focusing on the main function and eliminating the redundant features. The last feature is the combination of the former three features, and then Muji can launch new products (Morrison, 2010).

In terms of consumption practice, according to some of my interviewees, they buy Muji because they think that these products are what they need but not what they want, and buying Muji is as natural as the fact that people need to breathe. For example, interviewee A says that she will buy Muji because it provides with the products that are high quality but not luxurious. She mentions the cosmetics in Muji. They are cheap and additive free, and what is important

is that the result is the same as that using high-end product like Channel or Dior. So why not just use Muji? It seems that the reality fits what the design director of Muji, Kenya Hara, has pointed out, “what Muji wants to achieve is not what is good, but what is enough” (Hara, 2007), and what the proprietor says “Many products now are not for people’s convenience but for better sales and more benefits, but Muji is for the natural function of products. Thus, Muji will not out, with time passing by.”



Fig.1 Kenya Hara, *Muji Posters*, 2003

From my study, Muji fails to escape the frame of symbolic consumption. First of all, through examining the advertisements of Muji, we can see that this brand is similar to other famous and popular brands which construct the image that moulds and suits some consumers’ taste, and what Muji constructs is the pure and refined image. In 2003 and 2004, Kenya Hara designed a series of posters for Muji to advertise; the composition of the picture was clear and the color was clean, since there was only sky, ground and the brand name (see fig.1). The pictures are empty but the meaning of these posters is abundant. The structure of the picture is half sky and half land, and people are small, and take a trivial role in the picture so as to make a contrast with the vast nature. The relationship between human being and the nature is perfectly shown—it is not the human being but the nature that gives birth to everything. In the picture, the horizon symbolizes the vessel that gives a place for every living creature to live, and mankind is just a small part of the whole biosphere. Thus, though the picture depicts the emptiness and aeriality of the whole world, this picture, in fact, means everything due to the vast expanses of ground. Such emptiness advertising implies nature philosophy. Just like the ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu said, “Nature has its own great beauty, yet does not

speak of it; the four seasons have their clear-marked regularity, yet utter nothing of it; all things have their principles of growth, yet explain nothing of them” (Chuang). Muji has its method of marketing, yet hiding everything of it. Through their posters, Muji wants to connect the concept of emptiness, dhyana and the power of spirit to the brand.



Fig. 2 *Muji Design Manual*, 2015.

Likewise, Muji’s design manuals convey a sense of life philosophy to the consumers (see fig.2). Although there is no famous star in the design manuals, the models in Muji’s DM strongly mould a fresh and refined image. In the design manuals, the models, wearing the clothe of Muji, build a warm and happy environment at home, and there is completely no make-up on models’ faces, different from the female figures of other brands. Normally, we will think that the make-up makes females look more attractive and glamorous, but Muji does something treasonous—it simply shows the natural faces and action of women. However, these female figures are likely to be related to another group of people—artistic females who would like to wear longuette and white cloth which must be made from drapery or burlap and wear plimsolls. They love niche such as European movies or stream consciousness literature. Generally speaking, this kind of women look down upon the mainstream culture and is so called otherworldly. Muji’s cultural value—its style, reflects these females’ ideal image.

In addition, the furnishing of Muji stores can also convey and strengthen the meaning of products. As Baudrillard says, the shopping environment can arouse consumers’ fantasy of the products so as to attract consumers (Baudrillard, 1996). This can be proved through examples

around. The luxurious stores will make you feel that the products are also excellent and expensive and top-level. Similarly, if you have been to Muji stores, you will find that the store is decorated like a home, a clean and simple one. This decoration—the soft bed in the store for consumers to enjoy and the arrangement of all the products, will make people think that they need these products because of the good look and the comfortable feeling. Otherwise, they will not buy these if the products are displayed randomly on the streets. So this is the magic of furnishing, which can promote consumers' desire.

All in all, Muji successfully integrates the symbolic image with the products through its unique advertising, and it constructs the fashion of dhyana due to its simplicity and purity. Jean Baudrillard says in his *The System of Objects*, "Everything that cannot be invested in human relationships is invested in objects" (Baudrillard, 1996). Advertising makes the social meaning (sign value) possible to be built and to spread through the image that is constructed. Muji moulds the needs of the public. People nowadays care about the world and spiritual world, so Muji constructs an image that through buying its products, people can realize their dream of caring about the world outside and their inner space. In Zhong's article, it says that "in the symbol consumption society, people's desire is extended internally through systematic marketing. It is illusion that through buying some products, people's desire is set free. In fact, people's desire has never been set free, and people's freedom is dependent on the image of the products" (Zhong, 2009). In the consumption society, meanings are created by advertisements in a great quantity, and anything can be considered as trade.

Secondly, through examining the products of Muji, we can see that Muji products, like other brands' products, not only have use-value and exchange-value, but also have sign value. Sign value in Muji products is inevitable. From Baudrillard's perspective, in the consumption society, products can be consumed because they have sign value (Baudrillard, 1996). It means that products are not judged by whether they are good or bad in quality but by people's interest, and this change also reflects the changing of products' value from use-value to sign value. If we take a look at the pencils in Muji store, we will find that there are four kinds of pencil. One is wooden pencil, another two are propelling pencils in different colors, and there is a kind of high-tech pencil as well. What is the criterion for choosing different pencils? If it is dependent on the use value, then whether these pencils can be used to write is the only

criterion. Then there is no difference in these pencils. However, under the context of sign value, how others see you will become the criteria for choosing different pencils. For example, in this case, some people will say that “I do not want the wooden pencil. Only children use wooden pencils.” People notice the difference between pencils and they will choose different one according to how they think of these differences. Thus, pencils not only have the use-value—writing, but also have the sign value—showing what kind of person you are.

Generally speaking, just like Baudrillard says, when products become symbols, the meaning of the products is not between the sellers and consumers, which is Marx’s interpretation of consumption, but between the different products—how they distinguish from each other. So in the modern consumption society, sign value weights more, compared with use value and exchange value. Muji cannot escape this rule either.

However, sign value of products cannot only be shown by themselves. It has to be proved and verified under the context of society—the interaction between people, which is the most important part of symbol consumption.

So, last but not least, I will analyze the consumption practice to see the social meaning of consuming Muji products. Consuming Muji is a way of social segmentation. On the one hand, consuming Muji products promote the social mobility. Products make people aware of their own identity or the identity that they want to achieve through advertisement. It is not different to understand under the context of consuming luxury. Many middle classes want to join the upper class through changing some characters like buying Louis Vuitton’s bag, wearing Chanel’s perfume or purchasing Cartier’s earrings. They think that these things make them look like upper class (Harms, 1991). Likewise, Muji constructs the image of purity and dhyana and the detachment from the desire world, and this image is always connected to those who are full of wisdom. Because this kind of people learns a lot and sees through the material world, what they pursue is not power, wealth or status but the tranquility of life and the essence of life. For some young people who want to be looked or understood in this way, they will buy Muji clothing or other products. These products make them look like artistic females or male. However, this mock is not real. Those consumers are stuck in the symbols that companies construct for them, but the ideal can never be achieved as easily as the advertisement claims. In other words, people think that they can be aware of their identities

and achieve the identity they want to own. Muji makes people think that consuming their projects can set people's desires free, but this only works on the opposite side.

On the other hand, people want to develop their own style through consuming Muji products. In this age, people are trying hard to be special to be different so that they can stand out and be noticed by others (Baudrillard, 1996). For example, young people go against the conservative policies through speaking out their opinions on the streets. This is a way of showing what kind of person someone is and spreading the individual style and individualism spirit. Besides, the choice of daily supplies can also show someone's style. If you choose to listen post-rock, people will think that you are minority, while if you choose classical music, you are high-educated. Just like one interviewee tells me, she says "Only someone like me would use Muji, someone who pays attention to pragmatism and simplicity." However, another one gives me the answer that "I will not choose Muji because only those are sexual apathy will wear Muji cloth." Thus, it is totally not as what the Muji's design director, Kenya Hara says—Muji wants to show the fundamentality and the universality (Hara, 2007). Through consuming Muji, some consumers think that they are doing what they should do, and they think Muji reflects themselves and makes them different from others. Muji becomes a style for those people, and people make use of Muji products to distinguish.

Overall, consuming Muji products make people recognize the self and the others and distinguish the self from others as well, which is the social meaning of consumption and the purpose of sign value.

In conclusion, what Muji does is setting the fresh image that makes people think they can set their desire free and they can escape the desire world, but Muji cannot escape the frame of symbolic consumption since this is a whole system which includes the influence of mass media and the social influence. To some extent, people are controlled by objects and limited by them. Just like one of the lines in the movie *The Fight Club* says, "The things you own end up owning you." So people should be clear that we are ourselves not because the things we own or the clothing we wear but because what we do and what we think.

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