

QUIET CONSUMPTION

MUJI, MINIMALISM, AND THE AESTHETIC MANAGEMENT OF ABUNDANCE

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.
Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: 10.36253/fh-3929

Abstract

This research examines how MUJI constructs and commercialises a discourse of minimalist consumption through retail aesthetics, packaging, and lifestyle branding. Combining semiotic analysis of retail space and brand design with discourse analysis of minimalism, restraint, and ethical consumption, the paper investigates how MUJI's "no-brand" philosophy became globally legible as a cultural language of calmness, simplicity, and moral moderation. Drawing from autobiographical reflections on encountering Japanese minimalist culture in the 1990s, the article first analyses MUJI's semiotic strategies, including muted colour palettes, generic packaging, unobtrusive typography, and orderly retail presentation. Rather than treating Buddhist notions of emptiness (空, *kū*) and nothingness (無, *mu*) as direct explanations of MUJI's corporate practices, the study approaches these concepts as broader cultural contexts through which minimalist aesthetics acquire emotional and ethical resonance. The article then argues that MUJI's significance lies not in rejecting consumer culture, but in reorganising it aesthetically. Through minimalist design and restrained retail atmospheres, consumption becomes visually disciplined, psychologically calming, and morally legitimised. Consumers may continue purchasing extensively while perceiving themselves as restrained and non-excessive. In this sense, MUJI transforms accumulation into a quiet and aesthetically coherent practice. Finally, the paper situates MUJI within contemporary sustainability discourse and the wider transformation of minimalist aesthetics under consumer capitalism. As minimalism becomes institutionalised across global retail culture, the language of restraint increasingly functions less as a critique of excess than as a commercially scalable model of ethical lifestyle consumption. MUJI's enduring relevance therefore lies not in its delivery of "nothingness," but in its ability to aestheticise abundance while softening the visibility and moral tension of consumption itself.

Keywords: *Muji; Nothingness; Simplicity; Anti-brand; Semiosphere.*

ENCOUNTERING MUJI

This research emerges from a long-term, embodied engagement with MUJI as both a cultural object and a lived practice. As a consumer who first encountered MUJI in the 1990s and has followed its evolution for more than three decades, the analysis is informed by sustained, situated observation rather than nostalgic attachment. This positionality is mobilised not as anecdotal evidence, but as a reflexive standpoint that enables attention to the subtle shifts in MUJI's aesthetic and discursive strategies over time. The analysis is informed in part by an autoethnographic engagement with MUJI's retail environments, shaped by a longer trajectory of cultural and personal experience. I first encountered MUJI in

1994 while travelling in Tokyo, at a moment when Taiwan was experiencing a broader wave of Japanophilia. Visiting the brand's early flagship store in Aoyama, I was struck by an aesthetic that differed markedly from the visual environment in which I had grown up. In Taiwan, where written Chinese characters structure everyday visual culture, urban signage—particularly billboards and neon displays—tended toward density, multiplicity, and sensory intensity. Against this backdrop, MUJI's restrained use of space, material, and text presented a radically different semiotic experience: one that privileged absence, quietness, and visual coherence.

This encounter was not only aesthetic but also biographical. Growing up in a lower-income

household that gradually transitioned into a middle-class condition, I witnessed the accumulation of goods as a marker of security and progress. Domestic space was often defined by excess and storage rather than curation. MUJI's philosophy of simplicity and sufficiency therefore resonated as both an aesthetic and ethical alternative. This orientation deepened as I later worked as a media journalist and participated in design-related projects and workshops, while travelling extensively across East Asia and Europe. Encounters with MUJI stores in cities such as London and Paris reinforced the sense that its visual and material language operated transnationally, articulating a recognisable sensibility often associated with wabi-sabi and everyday minimalism. This positionality is not presented as personal testimony *per se*, but as a reflexive standpoint that informs the selection and interpretation of empirical materials. It enables sustained attention to how MUJI's design grammar is encountered across different cultural contexts and over time. At the same time, the analysis moves beyond individual experience by grounding its claims in systematic observation of retail environments and brand-affiliated materials, including catalogues, in-store displays, and corporate communications. In this way, the autoethnographic dimension serves as an entry point into a broader semiotic analysis rather than as its evidentiary basis.

Given this context, the article adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach combining semiotic analysis and discourse analysis methodologically.

Given my autobiographic reflection, this research first explicate how nothingness are mobilised to provide cultural and intellectual context; they do not address MUJI directly and are therefore not treated as empirical evidence of the brand's practices. The empirical materials under examination include:

1. MUJI's official design statements, catalogues, and corporate publications;
2. Retail environments and spatial merchandising strategies observed across stores in Japan and East Asia;
3. Selected product lines that exemplify MUJI's cross-category expansion from apparel into lifestyle goods.

These materials are analysed as a coherent signifying system rather than as isolated design objects. Analytically, the study draws on Roland

Barthes's account of visual signification in *Rhetoric of the Image* (Barthes 1964), which provides a vocabulary for examining how visual and material elements—such as colour, texture, layout, and spatial arrangement—produce meaning through the interplay of denotation and connotation. In addition, Yuri Lotman's notion of the semiosphere situates these signifying practices within a broader cultural field of circulation, boundary-making, and transformation.

MUJI'S DESIGN GRAMMAR AS SEMIOTIC PRACTICE

This section uses brand-affiliated materials—including corporate publications, catalogues, and design statements—to be analysed as primary data that articulate MUJI's self-representation rather than as independent analytical support. Existing scholarship on MUJI and fashion is engaged as secondary interpretation.

Maintaining this distinction allows the following analysis to ground its claims about MUJI's design and retail strategies in empirical observation, while situating them within broader semiotic and philosophical frameworks.

In terms of material selection, MUJI consistently employs unfinished wood, cotton, linen, recycled paper, and rice-based products. These choices are neither luxurious nor technologically spectacular. Rather than reading them as direct expressions of philosophical doctrines, they are approached here as semiotic resources that evoke associations with everyday subsistence and ordinariness. Through their repetition across product categories and retail environments, such materials come to signify modesty, durability, and a restrained form of ethical consumption (Abe and Heine 1997; Niigata 1998).

These materials do not simply “represent” simplicity; they organise how simplicity is perceived. Drawing on Roland Barthes's account of visual signification in *Rhetoric of the Image*, MUJI's design grammar can be read as a structured interplay of denotation and connotation.

At the denotative level, objects appear functional and unadorned. At the connotative level, however, their consistent presentation across catalogues, packaging, and retail displays produces a stabilised reading of simplicity as ethical, rational, and desirable. Meaning, in this sense, is not inherent in the materials themselves, but generated through their systematic arrangement within a broader

semiotic environment. Wood, in particular, occupies a central symbolic role. Unlike lacquered or polished luxury wood, MUJI's wood often appears Zen-influenced, pale, lightly treated, and visibly grained (Abe & Heine, 1997).

As seen in Figure 01, wood and clothes in its indoors poster, signals *process* rather than perfection—an object that has not been fully aestheticised. Rice color - while pale and white with warmth –meanwhile, carries deep cultural resonance in Japan as a staple of survival rather than indulgence. Its inclusion in MUJI's food lines reinforces the brand's alignment with basic life maintenance rather than desire production. Yet these materials do not simply “mean” simplicity; they actively organise and discipline perception. Drawing on Roland Barthes's account of visual signification in *Rhetoric of the Image*, it becomes possible to understand MUJI's aesthetic as operating through a structured interplay of denotation and connotation.

At the denotative level, neutral colours, unadorned materials, and minimal spatial arrangements appear to present themselves as functional and self-evident. Yet, as Barthes argues, such apparently “natural” images are always already coded, carrying connotative meanings that are culturally produced rather than inherent (Barthes 1964). In this sense, MUJI's retail environments and product displays do not merely present simplicity; they frame and stabilise a particular way of seeing simplicity as ethical, restrained, and desirable. Extending Barthes' insight from the analysis of images to the domain of material retail space, this research treats objects, layouts, and atmospheres as components of a broader semiotic ensemble. While Barthes' original focus was on the image as a bounded visual text, the present analysis argues that contemporary retail environments similarly function as signifying systems, in which material forms, spatial composition, and sensory cues work together to guide interpretation. What is at stake, then, is not the intrinsic simplicity of MUJI's objects, but the semiotic work through which simplicity is produced, naturalised, and rendered consumable. MUJI's materials instruct consumers to read restraint as virtue, neutrality as ethics, and Zen ordinariness as authenticity (Abe & Heine, 1997) (Fig. 02). Another important that revolves around Muji's semiotic practice is that Colour functions as Anti-Language – it is dominantly black,

white, grey, brown – everyday life nothingness, or colorless (Yanagi, 1972). MUJI's chromatic discipline—dominated by black, white, grey, beige, and brown—functions as a deliberate anti-language within fashion discourse (Hara, 2008).

Colour, traditionally associated with emotion, individuality, and seasonal change, is here neutralised.

By minimising chromatic variation, MUJI suspends fashion's temporal logic: there are no obvious “this season” colours, no urgent visual cues demanding replacement. This palette resonates strongly with Buddhist and Zen aesthetics, where neutrality and repetition enable contemplation rather than distraction (Kawamura, 2005).

Emptiness, in this sense, is not a void but a condition for attentiveness. The absence of colour excess creates visual silence, encouraging consumers to slow down and notice texture, form, and utility (Nikkei Design, 2015)

However, this chromatic minimalism has now become globally reproducible. When fast fashion brands deploy the same neutral palettes at lower prices, MUJI's colour language loses its peripheral status and becomes part of fashion's core grammar. What once disrupted fashion's noise now blends seamlessly into it.



Fig. 01



Fig. 02

THE REFUSAL OF MASS MEDIA: SILENCE AS BRAND STRATEGY

One of MUJI's most distinctive practices is its near-total refusal of television commercials and mass media advertising. Instead, MUJI relies on in-store posters, catalogues, and understated print visuals, often featuring anonymous or semi-anonymous models.

These models are neither celebrities nor aspirational icons; they resemble “good-looking next-door” figures whose identities remain opaque (Yanagi, 1972). This strategy performs a crucial semiotic function. By refusing celebrity culture, MUJI rejects fashion's typical identification mechanism—the invitation to become someone else. Instead, the consumer is invited to remain themselves. The anonymity of models produces a mirror effect rather than an aspirational one: *this could be you, but it does not have to be* (Yanagi, 1972).

From a Lotmanian perspective, this media silence once placed MUJI at the periphery of the fashion semiosphere, where meaning is generated through negation rather than assertion (Lotman, 1990).

Yet silence, when institutionalised, becomes another form of language. The refusal of advertising is no longer radical; it is expected.

The absence itself has become a recognisable sign. If MUJI speaks anywhere, it speaks most clearly through its retail environments. MUJI stores are meticulously designed as anti-clutter spaces: wide aisles, low shelving, consistent lighting, and carefully spaced products (Kunitomo, 2009). The store does not overwhelm; it reassures (Niigata, 1998). Even the mild, woody fragrance contributes to a sense of Zen-like calm continuity rather than stimulation (Abe & Heine, 1997).

This spatial language does important ideological work. By removing visual noise, MUJI reframes consumption as Zen school's contemplation (Abe & Heine, 1997). Buying becomes an act of reflection rather than impulse. The store approximates what might be called a secularised Zen environment, where the consumer experiences temporary relief from urban overstimulation.

Yet this calm is not neutral. The store disciplines desire rather than eliminating it. Products are displayed sparsely, but the range

is extensive. The consumer is encouraged to move slowly, touch everything, and imagine an entire life organised according to MUJI's logic. Emptiness here is not the absence of goods, but the absence of friction in acquisition

SEMIOTIC “INTERNAL RESERVES OF UNCERTAINTY”

MUJI's early positioning can be understood, following Yuri Lotman, as operating from the cultural periphery, where systems retain what he terms “internal reserves of uncertainty.” Rather than analysing MUJI through philosophical claims about nothingness *per se*, this section treats its design and retail practices as empirical instances of semiotic organisation.

Across product lines and store environments, MUJI consistently foregrounds muted colour palettes, functional forms, and the minimisation of visual persuasion. These strategies do not simply communicate simplicity; they suspend familiar distinctions—such as new/old or trendy/outdated—that typically structure fashion meaning.

This suspension can be read as a weakening of the oppositional codes that sustain fashion's temporal logic of renewal.

As Joanne Entwistle (2015) and Yuniya Kawamura (2005) argue, fashion operates institutionally by defining what counts as fashionable through cycles of differentiation. MUJI's early design grammar complicates this process by offering goods that resist clear classification within those cycles.

The result is not the absence of meaning, but a redistribution of it: value is articulated through sufficiency, durability, and restraint rather than novelty or display (Fukasawa, 2011).

From a semiotic perspective, this effect can be further clarified through Roland Barthes's account of signification in *Rhetoric of the Image*. MUJI's visual and material forms operate through a controlled interplay of denotation and connotation, where apparently neutral elements—colour, texture, spatial arrangement—are coded to signify ethical modesty and rational consumption.

These meanings do not emerge naturally from the objects themselves, but from their systematic organisation across catalogues, retail displays, and product design.

However, as Lotman (1991) emphasises, peripheral codes do not remain marginal indefinitely.

Once translated into the dominant grammar of a system, they lose their destabilising capacity.

MUJI's aesthetic of restraint has followed this trajectory. What initially functioned as a disruption of fashion's excess has been widely incorporated into mainstream consumer culture, where “timeless basics” and “essential design” now circulate as standard marketing vocabulary. Minimalism, in this context, no longer introduces uncertainty but stabilises expectation.

This shift can be understood, in Barthesian terms, as a process of re-mythologisation (Barthes 1972). MUJI's anti-brand language, originally positioned against conspicuous consumption, now participates in a broader myth of ethical consumption—one that reassures consumers of moral awareness while leaving underlying structures of production and accumulation largely intact.

The issue, then, is not that MUJI has become inconsistent, but that its semiotic coherence has become predictable. As its language stabilises into a recognisable formula—neutral tones, simple forms, understated messaging (Kunitomo 2009)—its capacity to generate new meanings diminishes. This moment of stabilisation aligns with broader concerns about fashion's epistemological limits. When a system's self-description becomes too coherent, it risks excluding contradiction and lived complexity. MUJI's early significance lay in its ability to operate at the margins of the semiosphere; its current challenge lies in the reduced interpretive flexibility of its now-institutionalised aesthetic.

PERFORMING NOTHINGNESS: MUJI'S DISCOURSE AND THE LIMITS OF RETAIL MINIMALISM

MUJI's philosophy of “no brand” operates less through explicit ideological statements than through carefully managed material and spatial practices. Its rejection of logos, celebrity endorsement, and aggressive advertising is inseparable from what brand-affiliated sources describe as a “careful orchestration of texture, colour, smell, and retail choreography” (Nikkei Design 2015).

Within MUJI stores, sensory restraint is communicated through muted colours, orderly arrangements, soft lighting, unobtrusive packaging, and relatively calm retail atmospheres. However, the relationship between these practices and philosophical notions of emptiness should not be overstated.

Buddhist discussions of emptiness (空, *kū*) (Abe & Heine 1997) and nothingness (無, *mu*)

(Heisig 2001) provide an important cultural and intellectual context for interpreting MUJI's aesthetic language, particularly its emphasis on reduction, ordinariness, and restraint. Yet these philosophical works do not address MUJI directly, nor do they fully explain the company's retail environments or commercial strategies. In practice, MUJI stores are not spaces of literal emptiness. Most sections—including apparel, furniture, backpacks, stationery, and household goods—resemble highly organised contemporary Japanese retail environments rather than embodiments of Zen absence or Buddhist austerity. The discourse of “nothingness” is therefore most visible not in the elimination of products, but in the moderation of sensory intensity. This is especially apparent in cosmetic and skincare sections, where lightly fragranced lotions, toners, and diffusers are packaged in generic transparent or white containers with minimal graphic intervention. Here, restraint is communicated through subtle smell, understated packaging, and the suppression of luxury cues rather than through actual absence. MUJI's retail discourse thus operates through controlled neutrality rather than emptiness itself. This distinction is important analytically. Buddhist-inflected concepts of emptiness function in this article as cultural context rather than as direct explanations of MUJI's design practices. What MUJI appropriates is not Buddhist philosophy in any rigorous sense, but a globally recognisable aesthetic vocabulary associated with calmness, reduction, simplicity, and moral moderation. Through branding, packaging, and retail presentation, these associations are translated into a commercially legible lifestyle discourse. Rather than embodying emptiness in any strict philosophical sense, MUJI more selectively mobilises culturally familiar associations with reduction, restraint, and ordinariness. This distinction becomes especially important when considering the company's scale and breadth. From its early development, MUJI was never solely an apparel brand, nor was it organised around the literal elimination of commodities. Instead, it operated as a comprehensive lifestyle retailer spanning household goods, stationery, furniture, food, clothing, and cosmetics. The significance of its minimalist discourse therefore lies not in the production of absence, but in the management of abundance.

Through consistent packaging, muted visual presentation, and restrained retail atmospheres, highly diverse product categories are made to appear coherent, calm, and non-excessive. Minimalism functions less as the removal of consumption than as a mode of organising and legitimising it aesthetically. MUJI's presence across furniture, food, kitchenware, cosmetics, clothing, and household goods can be understood not merely as a business model, but as the articulation of a broader lifestyle discourse. Rather than anchoring itself to a single product category, MUJI constructs a coherent vision of everyday life organised around restraint, ordinariness, simplicity, and functional calm. Through consistent packaging, muted colour palettes, unobtrusive branding, and orderly retail presentation, highly diverse commodities are unified within the same aesthetic and moral framework. Brand-affiliated materials consistently frame this coherence not simply as commercial diversification, but as the cultivation of an ideal everyday environment. This coherence helps explain MUJI's ability to operate across multiple consumer sectors while maintaining a recognisable identity. Yet it also reveals an important contradiction. Because the brand relies heavily on neutrality and universality, products across different categories are absorbed into the same minimalist discourse regardless of their actual necessity or functional specificity. Furniture, cosmetics, stationery, packaged foods, storage containers, and travel accessories are presented through a shared visual language that softens distinctions between essential needs and discretionary purchases. In this sense, MUJI's minimalism performs an important psychological and cultural function. The absence of decorative excess reduces the visual intensity typically associated with consumerism and accumulation. Products appear calm, rational, and non-intrusive, allowing consumption itself to feel disciplined rather than excessive. Consumers may continue purchasing large quantities of goods while experiencing little of the guilt traditionally associated with overconsumption or hoarding. Accumulation becomes aesthetically invisible because minimalist commodities occupy space quietly and coherently. This dynamic is especially significant because MUJI does not primarily encourage consumers to buy less. Instead, it encourages consumers

to buy appropriately within a carefully curated aesthetic order. Minimalist design transforms many discretionary objects into items that appear necessary, practical, or morally justified. Storage boxes, notebooks, aroma diffusers, plain shirts, refillable bottles, and organisational accessories are framed less as indulgences than as components of a rational and orderly lifestyle. Ethical value becomes attached not to material reduction itself, but to the manner in which consumption is visually organised and emotionally experienced.

MUJI's development therefore reflects a broader transformation within contemporary consumer culture. A language once associated with anti-excess, anonymity, and restraint has become fully integrated into scalable lifestyle consumption. The significance of MUJI lies not in rejecting consumer capitalism outright, but in demonstrating how minimalism can reorganise consumption into forms that appear calm, ethical, and socially responsible while still sustaining continual acquisition. What emerges is not emptiness in any philosophical sense, but a highly aestheticised management of abundance. MUJI's current challenge is therefore not failure, but over-coherence. Its discourse of restraint and minimalist ordinariness has become highly recognisable, stable, and commercially codified. The ambiguity that once distinguished the brand from the excesses of late twentieth-century fashion culture has gradually hardened into a predictable visual formula. Minimalism itself is no longer oppositional. It has become institutionalised across fashion, hospitality, technology, and lifestyle branding more broadly.

As a result, MUJI increasingly competes not only with fast fashion retailers, but also with the widespread mainstreaming of minimalist aesthetics. When restraint becomes a reproducible market style rather than a critical ethical position, its disruptive capacity weakens.

The brand risks functioning less as an alternative to consumer excess than as a familiar and nostalgic version of minimalist consumption adapted to contemporary retail culture.

If MUJI is to remain culturally relevant within sustainability discourse, it may need to move beyond the aesthetic performance of reduction toward more substantive forms of material accountability: fewer product lines, slower cycles of expansion, shorter supply chains, and greater

transparency regarding labour and production. At present, however, the company primarily offers consumers a discourse of ethical reassurance. Consumption is reorganised aesthetically and morally, but not fundamentally diminished. MUJI therefore illustrates a broader contradiction within contemporary consumer culture.

Anti-consumerist language does not necessarily reduce accumulation; it can also legitimise new forms of it. MUJI-style accumulation remains visually disciplined, orderly, and socially acceptable. Consumers may continue purchasing extensively while still perceiving themselves as restrained and ethically responsible. The aesthetics of emptiness thus risk obscuring the persistence of material expansion rather than confronting it directly. The cultural significance of MUJI lies not simply in its minimalist aesthetics, but in how those aesthetics reorganised the experience of consumption itself.

By presenting commodities through neutral colours, unobtrusive packaging, orderly display systems, and the rhetoric of functional simplicity, MUJI helped construct a form of accumulation that appeared calm, rational, and morally disciplined. Consumers could continue purchasing extensively while feeling detached from the excess traditionally associated with consumer culture.

Minimalism did not eliminate abundance; it rendered abundance visually quiet and psychologically guiltless.

This proved to be an extraordinarily influential retail logic. From the 2000s onward, the broader retail environment increasingly absorbed and reproduced MUJI's discourse of restrained consumption. In apparel, retailers such as UNIQLO, H&M, and later fast-fashion "basics" lines adopted neutral palettes, simplified silhouettes, and functional everyday wear marketed through the language of practicality and essentialism. In furniture and household goods, IKEA and regional retailers such as Nitori integrated minimalist interiors and organisational aesthetics into mass-market consumption at highly competitive prices. Even low-cost retailers and dollar stores, including Daiso, increasingly adopted MUJI-like visual conventions: subdued packaging, simplified typography, transparent storage systems, and everyday organisational products framed as tools of orderly living.

What spread globally was therefore not "nothingness" in any philosophical sense, but

a commercially adaptable discourse of aesthetic restraint. Minimalist design became detached from its earlier associations with critique, reduction, or anti-consumerism and transformed into a highly scalable retail language capable of supporting mass consumption itself.

Across industries, consumers were encouraged to perceive simplified commodities not as decorative excess, but as practical necessities and instruments of self-management.

This shift fundamentally altered MUJI's cultural position. The company once distinguished itself through the rejection of conspicuous branding and visual excess. However, once restraint, simplicity, and ordinariness became dominant retail conventions, MUJI's aesthetic language no longer appeared disruptive or singular.

The visual markers that once differentiated the brand—neutral colours, “good basics,” functional storage, plain packaging, uncluttered retail space—became industry standards reproduced across multiple price points and market sectors.

As minimalist consumption became normalised, MUJI also faced a deeper conceptual problem.

The more successfully its discourse circulated, the less exclusive or philosophically meaningful it became. What had once appeared as an alternative to consumer excess increasingly functioned as one of consumer capitalism's most effective contemporary forms.

Consumers were not asked to reject accumulation, but to accumulate more quietly, more neatly, and with less visible guilt.

In this context, MUJI's anti-consumerist rhetoric risks losing much of its critical force (Nikkei Design 2015). The issue is not simply that competitors copied its aesthetics, but that the broader retail industry successfully incorporated minimalist restraint into mainstream market logic. Minimalism became not a challenge to consumer culture, but one of its most adaptable and commercially productive languages.

At the same time, philosophical discussions of nothingness, emptiness, and restraint provide a broader cultural and intellectual context for understanding why MUJI's aesthetic language resonates so strongly within Japanese and global consumer culture (Heisig 2001).

However, these philosophical frameworks should not be mistaken for direct explanations of MUJI's actual production systems, labour practices, or environmental performance.

Rather, they illuminate the cultural vocabulary through which MUJI's discourse becomes meaningful and emotionally persuasive to consumers.

CONCLUSION: MINIMALISM, NOTHINGNESS, AND THE QUIET MANAGEMENT OF CONSUMPTION

This article has argued that MUJI's significance lies not simply in minimalist design, but in the way it transformed restraint, ordinariness, and “nothingness” into a commercially scalable lifestyle discourse (Kawamura 2005).

Earlier sections examined how MUJI's visual language—plain packaging, muted colours, generic typography, orderly retail presentation, and the rejection of conspicuous branding—functioned semiotically as a refusal of fashion excess and spectacle. However, the analysis also demonstrated the limits of interpreting MUJI too directly through Buddhist philosophy. Concepts such as emptiness (空, *kū*) and nothingness (無, *mu*) are more useful here as cultural and intellectual contexts than as literal explanations of MUJI's retail environments or corporate practices.

MUJI stores are not spaces of absence in any strict philosophical sense; rather, they selectively mobilise culturally familiar associations with calmness, reduction, restraint, and moral moderation.

Through discourse analysis, this article further demonstrated how these aesthetic associations became translated into an everyday ethics of consumption. MUJI does not fundamentally ask consumers to withdraw from consumer culture. Instead, it reorganises consumption into forms that appear rational, disciplined, and emotionally non-excessive.

Minimalist commodities occupy space quietly, reducing the visual intensity and psychological guilt traditionally associated with accumulation. Consumers may continue purchasing extensively while still perceiving themselves as restrained and ethically responsible. In this sense, MUJI's most important innovation was not emptiness itself, but the aesthetic management of abundance.

This logic proved highly influential within global retail culture. The minimalist discourse once associated with MUJI was rapidly absorbed by fast fashion retailers, furniture chains, dollar stores, lifestyle brands, and digital consumer culture more broadly.

Neutral palettes, uncluttered packaging, “good

basics,” organisational products, and calm retail atmospheres became mainstream commercial conventions rather than alternative values. Competitors ranging from IKEA and Nitori to Daiso and fast-fashion basics lines reproduced versions of MUJI’s restrained aesthetic while often operating at larger scales and lower price points. What circulated globally was therefore not Buddhist nothingness, but a commercially effective language through which consumption could appear quieter, cleaner, and more morally legitimate. This diffusion also reveals a deeper irony at the centre of MUJI’s identity.

The absence of strong logos and overt branding initially distinguished MUJI from late twentieth-century fashion culture, yet this same visual modesty also weakened the distinctiveness and protectability of its aesthetic identity. The widespread emergence of copycats, imitations, and “MUJI-like” retail formats—particularly across East Asian markets—raises a broader philosophical and legal question: can “no logo” itself function as a proprietary logo?

MUJI’s identity depends precisely on qualities that resist singular ownership: neutrality, anonymity, and ordinariness. The more successfully these qualities circulate, the more difficult they become to contain within a single brand.

At the same time, MUJI’s quietness may also explain its relative immunity from the scale of backlash and greenwashing criticism directed toward many global lifestyle corporations. Unlike brands that aggressively promote themselves as morally transformative or environmentally redemptive, MUJI rarely makes expansive ethical claims. Its communication strategy relies instead on understatement, atmosphere, and modesty. As a result, the company avoids presenting itself as a heroic solution to consumer capitalism and therefore reduces the discursive terrain upon which accusations of hypocrisy can easily attach. Ethical contradiction is not resolved so much as softened aesthetically.

The broader implication of MUJI’s case extends beyond a single company. It reveals an important transformation within contemporary sustainability discourse itself. Under advanced consumer capitalism, ethical critique is increasingly absorbed into aesthetic experience and lifestyle management. Sustainability becomes recognisable through visual coherence, spatial calmness, and behavioural moderation rather than through structural changes

to production, labour, logistics, or material reduction.

Consumers are encouraged to perform restraint aesthetically while remaining fully integrated within systems of continuous acquisition.

MUJI therefore illustrates a central paradox of contemporary minimalist culture: the closer anti-consumerist discourse moves toward the centre of market logic, the more effectively it can facilitate consumption itself.

What began as a critique of branding and excess has gradually become one of consumer capitalism’s most adaptable and commercially successful aesthetic languages.

The enduring question is no longer whether minimalism can resist consumer culture, but whether any discourse of restraint can remain critical once it becomes fully institutionalised as lifestyle consumption.

CAPTIONS

[Fig.01] Wood and clothes in its indoors poster, signals process rather than perfection—an object that has not been fully aestheticised,

Rice color - while pale and white with warmth -meanwhile, carries deep cultural resonance in Japan as a staple of survival rather than indulgence.

[Fig.02] Muji in Bangkok One shopping center.

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