



Aalto University
School of Business

STANDING OUT WHILE BLENDING IN: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE VISUAL
LANGUAGE OF INCONSPICUOUS BRANDS

An exploratory study

Master's Thesis
Johanna Koponen
Aalto University School of Business
Department of Management
Fall 2020



Author Johanna Koponen

Title of thesis Standing out while blending in – a semiotic analysis of the visual language of inconspicuous brands

Degree Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration

Degree programme Management and International Business

Thesis advisor Henri Weijo

Year of approval 2020

Number of pages 92

Language English

Abstract

Objective of this study. This paper conducted a visual semiotic analysis of the visual brand communication on Instagram of two popular brands well-known for their minimalist approach in branding: British-Swedish fashion brand COS and Japanese lifestyle brand MUJI. Exploratory in nature, the aim of this study was to put forth the discussion about the visual language of inconspicuous brands. The main objective of this study was to find out what constitutes the visual language of inconspicuous brands on the social media platform Instagram. In detail, the study analyzed the semiotic signs of 15 images from both brands.

Methodology and the Theoretical Framework. The study used a visual semiotic approach, where most salient signs in each image were individually interpreted and analyzed. The interpretation framework was built upon three main theories: that of inconspicuous consumption, visual brand identity, and semiotics.

The data set consisted of 30 business-to-consumer brand images, gathered from the Instagram accounts of both case companies.

Findings and Conclusions. The study resulted in findings revolving around three semiotics meta-functions: the representational, the interpersonal, and the compositional. These findings were then used to make inferences on the two themes, further divided into (1) brand identifiers, functionality, stillness and models, and (2) information value, salience, and framing. These findings build a much clearer picture of the visual language of inconspicuous signs than before established in the literature. However, these findings ought to be further studied in order to gain insight on the effectiveness of inconspicuous branding, how this approach works in different channels as well as to understand the underlying motivations for consumers engaging in inconspicuous branding.

Keywords business communication, brand communication, visual communication, visual brand identity, Instagram, visual semiotics



Tekijä Johanna Koponen

Työn nimi Kuinka erottua massasta sulautumalla siihen – semioottinen tulkinta huomaamattomien brändien visuaalisesta kielestä

Tutkinto Kauppätieteiden maisteri

Koulutusohjelma Johtamisen laitos

Työn ohjaaja Henri Weijo

Hyväksymisvuosi 2020

Sivumäärä 92

Kieli Englanti

Tiivistelmä

Tutkimuksen tavoite. Tutkimuksen tavoite oli luoda ymmärrystä huomaamattomien brändien visuaalisesta kielestä sosiaalisessa mediassa. Tutkimuksen lähestymistapana on Kress ja van Leeuwenin (1996) luoma visuaalisen semiotiikan teoria, jota kautta analysoidaan kahden minimalistisen ja huomaamattoman yrityksen, COSin sekä MUJIn visuaalista sisältöä Instagramissa. Tarkemmin, vastatakseen tutkimuskysymykseen, tutkimuksessa analysoitiin tapoja, piirteitä ja ominaisuuksia semioottisista merkeistä, jotka luovat pohjan brändien visuaaliselle viestinnälle.

Tutkimusmenetelmä ja teoreettinen viitekehys. Tutkimuksen lähestymistapa, semiotiikka, perustuu ajatukseen, että kuluttajat rakentavat itse mainoksissaan ja viestinnässään näkemistä kuvista tulkinnan ja merkityksen. Teoreettinen viitekehys pohjautuu kolmeen teoriaan: huomaamattomaan kulutukseen, visuaaliseen brändi-identiteettiin sekä semiotiikkaan.

Tutkimuksen aineisto koostui 30:sta B2C kuvasta, jotka kerättiin COSin sekä MUJIn Instagram tileiltä: aineistoon kuului molemmilta brändeiltä 15 kuvaa.

Tutkimuksen tulokset ja johtopäätökset. Tutkimuksen löydökset jakoutuivat Kress ja van Leeuwenin (1996) luoman viitekehysten mukaan kolmeen eri semioottiseen meta-funktioon. Semioottisesta tulkinnasta tehtiin johtopäätöksiä, jotka haarautuivat kahden eri teeman alle (1) huomaamattomuus: bränditunnisteet, funktionaalisuus, tyyneys sekä valokuvamallit, ja (2) visuaaliset variaabelit: informaatioarvo, keskeisyys sekä leikkaus. Löydökset antavat syvemmän ymmärryksen huomaamattomien brändien visuaalisesta kielestä, kuin mitä aikaisempi kirjallisuus on antanut. On kuitenkin tärkeää, että löydöksiä tutkitaan syvemmin ymmärtääksemme huomaamattoman brändäyksen tehokkuudesta, kuinka huomaamattomuutta tulisi hyödyntää eri kanavissa sekä kuluttajien motivaatiosta kyseiseen lähestymistapaan.

Avainsanat talouselämän viestintä, brändiviestintä, visuaalinen viestintä, visuaalinen brändi-identiteetti, Instagram, visuaalinen semiotiikka

Table of contents

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Research objective
- 1.2 Structure of this report

2 Literature review

- 2.1 From branding to inconspicuous branding
- 2.2 Inconspicuousness – standing out while blending in
- 2.3 Semiotic interpretation
- 2.4 Relevant framework for this study

3 Data and methods

- 3.1. Data
- 3.2. Methods
- 3.3. Trustworthiness of the study

4 Findings

- 4.1 Representational metafunction
- 4.2 The interpersonal metafunction
- 4.3 The compositional metafunction

5 Interpretation

- 5.1 The inconspicuous visual brand identity
- 5.2 Visual variables

6 Discussion

- 6.1 Research summary
- 6.2 Theoretical implications
- 6.2 Managerial implications
- 6.3 Limitations of the study
- 6.4 Suggestions for future research

7 Conclusions

References

Appendices

List of Tables

Table 1: Types of demand relations

Table 2: Types of social distances and intimacy

Table 3: List of channels used to acquire the data

Table 4: List of images for analysis

Table 5: Findings of the representational metafunction for MUJI

Table 6: Findings of the representational metafunction for COS

Table 7: Findings of the interpersonal metafunction for MUJI

Table 8: Findings of the interpersonal metafunction for COS

Table 9: Findings of the compositional metafunction for MUJI

Table 10: Findings of the compositional metafunction for COS

List of Figures

Figure 1: Visual variables

Figure 2: MUJI8

Figure 3: MUJI15

Figure 4: COS3

Figure 5: COS10

Figure 6: MUJI1

Figure 7: COS1

Figure 8: COS8

Figure 9: COS5

Figure 10: MUJI9

Figure 11: MUJI4

Figure 12: Gucci's Instagram page

Figure 13: Information value comparison, COS9 and Nike

Figure 14: MUJI9

Figure 15: MUJI2

Figure 16: COS2

Figure 17: COS6

1 Introduction

We live in an era of abundance. In today's market, brands exist in a higher number than ever before. Competition is ferocious between rivals, pushing brands to resourcefulness and creativity to find new alleys through which to entice customers. Whilst conventional and distinct brand identifiers – such as the name, logo, and tagline have been proven to be effective and create conventions in general, there's an increasing number of both consumers and brands opting for subtly marked goods (Berger & Ward, 2010).

Research shows us that consumers use brands to build identity and non-verbally communicate with peers. Take my 17-year old sister for a personal example – in order to be perceived as one of the cool kids, she bought a North Face puffer jacket, Nike Air Force sneakers, and a Louis Vuitton purse. This consumer behavior is known as conspicuous, or obvious, consumption. On the contrary, this paper will discuss the notion of inconspicuous consumption and subtly marked goods. People with more cultural capital in a specific domain aren't relying on obvious brand identifiers, but aim to differ from the mainstream through other means. Subtle signs. A specific color, certain fabric or material, a particular shape or design. Subtle signs are the kind that require knowledge and connoisseurship if you will, in order to be decoded and understood. While inconspicuous consumption used to be something only the very upper class participated in, it has lately been proven to apply to the general population too (Eckhardt et al., 2015). A large majority of the population can associate a Chanel purse with wealth, yet it takes a more experienced observer to understand the meaning of Ligne Roset's Togo sofa in a living room.

These subtle signs also come through in the marketing communication of brands opting for inconspicuousness through an absence of the same

obvious brand identifiers as in product design. Such “bland” advertisements give room to the observer to decode their meaning within the realms of their cultural knowledge and conventions. Inconspicuous ads have no call-to-action nor specific brand signs. Social media platforms like Facebook have become taken-for-granted parts of a brand’s marketing communication strategy, but what makes Instagram especially interesting for companies is its heavy focus on visuals. This paper will analyze the subtle themes and notions *below the surface* in the visual communication of two case example brand’s Instagram channels. Following Berger & Ward (2010), these case brands are ones operating in identity-relevant domains where consumption is more public. Exploratory in nature, this study will aim to contribute to the gap in literature where brand management, minimalism, and visual communication have not yet been extensively studied.

Learning about the pillars of inconspicuous branding targeted for subtle consumers will provide brand managers with practical insight about the contemporary consumer of today. It will also provide an understanding of how to pursue minimalistic branding as well as how not to. In addition to the empirical reasoning for the importance of this topic, I have a personal motive for this study. I find this niche in consumer behavior fascinating and will strive for interesting results and discussion for the sake of my internal interest and motivation for the topic.

While the phenomena of branding has been extensively studied from different perspectives for generations (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Holt 2002 & 2004; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán 2005; Muniz & O’guinn, 2001), inconspicuous brands have been left on the back burner. Inconspicuous branding has been noted in the literature (e.g. Berger & Ward, 2010; Eckhardt, Belk & Wilson, 2014; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020), but the ways in which it’s manifested on social media are little studied and understood. They are important to study and understand since the rise of inconspicuous

consumption as well as the ever-growing popularity of social media as one of the main channels through which brands are able to connect with consumers 24/7 provide huge potential for an inconspicuous marketing approach.

1.1 Research objective

Previous research on social media and branding has revolved around social media adoptance and performance as well as it's the key drivers, barriers and enablers (Dutot & Bergeron, 2016; McCann and Barlow, 2015; Virtanen, Björk & Sjöström, 2017), on social media influencers and the use of celebrities (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017) as well as on the implications of social media to brand consistency and storytelling (Kohli, Suri & Kapoor, 2015; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). In this paper, I will broaden the understanding of the topic by diving headfirst into the building blocks of an inconspicuous visual brand identity building in social media. I will discuss the results and implications of these for brand management, communication of identity and building a social media presence.

It's important to note that talking about this topic doesn't refer to the relationship between consumption and creativity for the population at large (Tokatli, 2018). Individuals work within the realms of their cultural knowledge and conventions, making each consumer behavior unique and different from one another.

Due to the lack of previous research on the topic, the exploratory study will aim to answer the following research question:

What constitutes the visual language of inconspicuous brands on the social media platform Instagram?

Since the entire inconspicuous brand landscape cannot be researched in the length of a Master's thesis, I will single out a smaller niche: international lifestyle and clothing brands represented by MUJI and Cos. By placing my focus on two brands, I do not mean to suggest that the visual communication of all minimalistic brands follows the same direction - but I intend to draw attention and open a discussion about the topic.

1.2 Structure of this report

This report is divided into six sections. This chapter began introducing the concepts as well as established the objective of this study. In Chapter 2. existing literature and established frameworks of branding, inconspicuousness and visual semiotics are laid out, resulting in an analytical framework fused from the three. In Chapter 3, the research method for this report is introduced, along with the actions taken to carry out the visual interpretation analysis. Next, in Chapter 4, the findings from the analysis are laid out which are next discussed in Chapter 5. Lastly, the concluding Chapter 6 will summarize the entire research and discuss how the results will advance the understanding of inconspicuous branding, together with its practical implications and limitations, guiding the way for future research.

2 Literature review

2.1 From branding to inconspicuous branding

The synthesis framework for the visual semiotic interpretation of the marketing communication of inconspicuous brands on Instagram consists of three parts, namely, brand as a signal of identity, inconspicuous consumption and visual semiotics. In this chapter of the paper, existing literature of the three are presented, each with their unique sub-topics. First, theoretical concepts revolving around branding and its importance in the identity-building for individuals is discussed. Second, the growing phenomena of inconspicuousness, both in consumption and in branding, is laid out. Third, the theory of visual semiotics is discussed. In the final section of this chapter, a framework for this study will be fusioned out of these three distinct concepts.

2.1.1 Definition of brand

What is a brand? When reading about branding in current literature, definitions for terms such as brand loyalty and brand equity are way easier to come across rather than a definition for simply the concept of a brand. de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley (1998) created a thorough and multifaceted snapshot of the term. The authors divided the term brand into 12 different themes, which will next be shortly exhibited.

1. **Brand as a legal instrument** - a legal statement of ownership, a trademark (Crainer, 1995)
2. **Brand as a logo** - a name, term, sign, symbol or design which help differentiate a product or a company from its competitors (American Marketing Society, 1960)

3. **Brand as a company** - the name and corporate image can be associated with a company. This view includes the company culture and people, everything that defines the personality of a company
4. **Brand as a shorthand** - a shorthand device of characteristics: a brand makes it easy for consumers to recognize a product with very little information. E.g. the word Snickers on a product is enough to make sense that the product in question is chocolate
5. **Brand as a risk reducer** - a guarantee for quality
6. **Brand as an identity system** - a brand is not a product or a sum of component parts, but the product's essence and its meaning
7. **Brand as an image in the consumers minds** - a brand is nothing more than what consumers perceive of it
8. **Brand as a value system** - a brand is seen as an extension to an individual's core value system - the brand becomes a part of the individual's culture once they interact with it
9. **Brand as a personality** - a brand can differentiate itself from competitors by stressing unique psychological features, resulting in consumers associating a brand with a human-like personality
10. **Brand as a relationship** - a logical extension to a brand being perceived as a personality. If a brand can be personified, an individual can go one step further from just perceiving a brand: having a relationship with it
11. **Brand as adding value** - a brand brings added value in addition to a product's functional characteristics and utilitarian attributes
12. **Brand as an evolving entity** - a brand can develop from one of the aforementioned themes to another - a brand personality can transform into an essential part of the company itself, into a part of its consumer or even into a part of the society as a whole

Next, we'll examine branding through the lens of consumer culture.

2.1.2 Brand in the contemporary consumer culture

“Anthropologists have always known we live in an experience economy. All consumption is about experience. And once you take that view, products are not simply tools or benefits or practical utilitarian kinds of things, but they’re really all about meaning. They’re the way people create meaning and transform meaning and so forth.”

- John Sherry Jr., Professor of Marketing

In order to discuss the contemporary consumer culture of today, we need to look back in history to where it all started - the modern consumer culture. Stern (2006) suggests that the term *brand* made its first appearance in marketing in 1922, meaning a proprietary name. As the advertising industry started gaining more foothold as an institution, branding became more than just a visual identity. In the 1930s, different psychological theories and insights started enriching branding thinking (Bastos & Levy, 2012). One of the earliest branding gurus, Earnest Elmo Calkins, pioneered the idea that marketers should visualize their brand as their customers aspire to be - be it feminine, ordinary, or to portray a certain place in society, and appeal to consumers on an emotional level (Schorman, 2008). This shifted branding from the previous way of highlighting product attributes to highlighting social and psychological properties. Women stayed at home making sure to greet their husbands with an ice-cold Heineken, cosmetic ads started flaunting wrinkle-free skin and all the manly men smoked Camel. After the Second World War with increasing amounts of both demand and capital, the modern consumer culture was going through a so-called “*Consumer Revolution*”.

The phenomena led to rigorous competition between brands, which resulted in successful brands like Coca Cola and McDonald’s becoming household names. Brands had a lot of power, which Holt (2002) refers to as a cultural authority. The modern consumer culture was happy and accepting with marketers telling them how to act and live their lives.

In postmodern society, consumers were living in a new kind of world. With the advent of personal technology in the 1990s, the modern consumer was living in an environment rich with information mediated by the TV, VCRs, and computers (Ozanne & Murray, 1995). With more information available, consumers started questioning the dialogue between brands and themselves. They became increasingly critical and started rebelling against brands as a counter-reaction. It was the people versus the corporate machine. In the postmodern society, the *"reflexively defiant"* consumer defined the hegemonic control of marketers, resisted brands and sought new marketplaces where they were no longer defined by external forces but instead got to build their own identities (Ozanne and Murray 1995). This view stems from the notion that consumption doesn't take place solely due to reasons of nature and human needs, but from the realms of culture and social vision.

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas talks about the theory of communication, in which an "ideal speech" is both-sided, clear and undistorted - both parties have an equal chance to take part in the conversation, without one party controlling the discussion due to a position of power (Habermas, Honneth & Joas, 1991). He finds communicative action, a reciprocal, day-to-day communication to be the solution to this imbalance. Holt (2002) notes that marketing as it is isn't an ideal speech as marketers have exploited their agency and dominate the conversation with the consumer. The communication is distorted from the viewpoint of the repressed - the consumer. During the brief history of branding, marketers have been the authorities who feed the gullible consumers information, who in turn have no choice but to swallow it. In the postmodern era where the informed and reflexively defiant consumer started fighting back and avoiding brands, branding started losing its efficacy. To reflect on this, Holt (2002) puts it:

"In modern consumer culture, consumers looked to companies for cultural guidance. In postmodern consumer culture, consumers strive to deflect the perceived paternalism of companies."

- Holt, 2002

However, as the dialogue between the marketer and the consumer has evolved, this paper argues indifferently. The contemporary consumer isn't avoiding brands anymore. Inconspicuous brands are creating a cultural space, where consumers are not being told what to do and how to behave - they're creating a space where consumers do have a choice whether to participate in it, and how. Instead of joining the anti-brand-movement, the contemporary consumer engages with brands that allow them to freely explore and create their own cultural authority. What Holt (2002) discusses as the pursuit of personal sovereignty through brand avoidance has now shifted to the same pursuit through brand engagement.

2.1.3 Brand as a signal of identity

In today's world, the leisure class has been replaced by a new elite. Highly educated and defined by cultural capital rather than income bracket, these individuals earnestly buy organic, carry NPR tote bags, and breastfeed their babies. They care about discreet, inconspicuous consumption--like eating free-range chicken and heirloom tomatoes, wearing organic cotton shirts and TOMS shoes, and listening to the Serial podcast. They use their purchasing power to hire nannies and housekeepers, to cultivate their children's growth, and to practice yoga and Pilates.

- Currid-Halkett, 2017

Existing literature demonstrates time and time again that consumption and identity are strongly intertwined. The meaning consumers attach to possessions is that knowingly or unknowingly, we consider possessions as parts of ourselves, of how we perceive our own identity (Belk, 1988).

What is identity? I follow Oyserman (2009) in defining identity as two different constructs – the personal identity and the social identity. Personal identities, like being funny, smart or a bohemian individual focus on traits, characteristics and goals which are not built as connected to a membership in a particular social group (Oyserman, 2009). Moreover, social identities are formulated of traits, characteristics and goals based on their memberships in social groups. E.g., a social identity can be based on a football team, on an occupation like being a lawyer or on being a very vocal Black Lives Matter activist. Social identities are contextualized. It's this side of an individual's identity which one is able to curate and modify by engaging in brand consumption. Basketball players want to distinguish themselves from soccer players, Slipknot fans want to distinguish themselves from Justin Bieber groupies and creatives want to distinguish themselves from technology nerds.

Consumption choices work as signals of identity, where consumers are able to non-verbally communicate their identities to others around them (Berger & Heath, 2007). Consumers use objects and actions to classify themselves, to belong to a certain social class "in relation to relevant others" (Holt, 1995). We are attracted to products and brands that are both in line with our social identities and which enable us to showcase our sense of self to the people around us (Kleine & Kernan, 1993). This notion is rooted in what Oyserman (2007) defines as identity-based motivation. O'Cass and Frost (2002) talk about status consumption – the process of gaining status or social prestige through the consumption of goods and brands that the consumer believes to be high in status. The never-ending quest for status has been thought to relate to the trait of materialism some individuals possess (Eastman et al., 1997) – which is the driver behind one of the seven deadly sins, envy (Belk, 1988). A desire to own products and brands a little bit better than our family members', friends' or neighbours'. Social comparison means that we will forever compare ourselves to the social class one level above us (Festinger, 1954).

Indeed, in social and cultural terms, fashion and consumption are perhaps the biggest factors dominating the modern consumer psyche (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004). They affect our daily lives in a major way - not only by identity signaling through brand consumption but also by what and where we eat, what music we listen to, what clothes we wear, how we style our homes and how we communicate with others. It is important to note however, that consumption does not steer the behavior of the population at large but to varying degrees. For individuals ranking higher on susceptibility to interpersonal influence, consumption has a stronger influence on behavior. This is a trait that varies across individuals and is strongly related to other traits and personal characteristics. Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence is defined as *“a need to identify with or enhance one’s image in the opinion of significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others”* (Bearden et al., 1989). It can therefore be expected that inconspicuous consumption interests those individuals who rank higher on the susceptibility to interpersonal influence scale.

This works both ways - brand-avoidance and anti-consumption is also an important tool in the construction of consumer identities (Cherrier, 2009). Sure, consumers avoid brands for reasons such as having had a bad first hand experience or finding the brand management and operations to have a negative impact on the environment or society, resulting in a moral clash (Lee, Motion & Conroy, 2008). But the third recognized reason for an individual to avoid a certain brand is the inability of a brand to meet and fulfil the individual’s symbolic identity requirements: the brand is perceived as incompatible with the individual’s social identity (Lee, Motion & Conroy, 2008).

2.1.4 The pillars of a brand identity

A brand identity is the unique set of brand associations that stem from the core identity of the brand: the central and timeless combination of brand attributes that remains the same through each channel and touch-point while the brand ages and moves to new products and markets (Wheeler, 2017).

In the postmodern marketplace, brand communication is increasingly visual (Salzer-Morling & Strannegård 2004; Phillips, McQuarrie & Griffin, 2014). Particularly in brand advertising, visual elements have surpassed verbal elements (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008). As our brains are able to process visual information faster than textual, this trend has been taking over brand activities in social media channels as well (Neher, 2013). Visual branding can appear in all touchpoints of a brand: in product design, package design, spatial design as well as in advertisement and promotion (Phillips, McQuarrie & Griffin, 2014). A visual brand identity (VBI) typically consists of a brand logo, typography, color, and layout. In addition, other elements play a role in building a brand's VBI too: the layout of elements in an ad or product design, the type of photography used, distinct shapes, textures, and patterns as well as advertising spokescharacters (Phillips, McQuarrie & Griffin, 2014).

2.2 Inconspicuousness - standing out while blending in

In 1899, Thorstein Veblen claimed that wealthy people buy expensive, premium products and consume them visibly in order to advertise and signal their wealth to the people around them, achieving a higher social class. This phenomenon was later on coined as the Veblen effect (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996). Conspicuous, or obvious if you will, consumption has

been of interest to researchers ever since (e.g. Berger & Ward, 2010; Eckhardt, Belk & Wilson, 2015). Brands aim for distinguishable logos, patterns, colors, and taglines in order to be identifiable and memorable (Berger & Ward, 2010). Such brand identifiers work as easy signals to decode to the population at large without much prior knowledge. Starbucks logo on a disposable coffee cup, Nike's Swoosh on a pair of sneakers and Louis Vuitton's brown Damier Canvas pattern are all fairly explicit markers and carry certain meanings about the person wearing them. Conspicuous consumption is a form of the aforementioned identity constructing behavior.

However, a considerably less researched topic of consumer behavior is the notion of inconspicuous consumption. Some consumers prefer to signal their identity in a more subtle way without explicit identifiers (Berger & Ward, 2010; Eckhardt et al., 2015). Following the Veblen (1899) view of conspicuous consumption, the *raison d'être* for luxury brands is to be easily recognized and convey meaning (Holt 2004; from Eckhardt et al., 2015). Contrary to this view, many now argue that Veblen's time of conspicuousness is running out, as status and wealth are being conveyed in more subtle, covert ways (Mason, 1992; Trigg, 2001). Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that as material possessions have become accessible to a larger part of the population, the power they hold as symbols of social class is decreasing. Through the increasing popularity of inconspicuous consumption, price and visible brand identifiers seem to follow an inverted U relationship - the more expensive a product, the more subtle its brand identifiers are (Berger & Ward, 2010).

The rise of inconspicuous consumption may be attributed to three major reasons - the diminishing of traditional luxury products, a desire to blend into the masses in times of economic uncertainty and a preference of more sophisticated design in order to signal identity to a more narrow group of peers (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Although it may be more difficult to notice and

recognize such signals, subtle signs offer the wearer with a way to differentiate from the masses by blending into the masses. Inconspicuous consumption will require more knowledge in a certain domain, more cultural capital and as Berger & Wards (2010) put it, the necessary connoisseurship in order to decode and understand the meaning. A black checkered leather chair on a criss-cross steel frame by Knoll, a bright red sole on a black logo-free high stiletto by Louboutin and a plain beige trench coat with Burberry's Tartan pattern only inside the pockets are examples of branded products that would go unnoticed for many, but not for the ones with the required cultural capital. The notion of inconspicuous consumption goes on to demonstrate that luxury isn't synonymous with conspicuous (Berger & Ward, 2010; Eckhardt, Belk & Wilson, 2015; Currid-Halkett, 2017).

Currid-Halkett (2017) goes on to argue that the new elite is grounded in meritocracy as well as the acquisition of culture and knowledge. The poor can't trick their way into the elite social class by purchasing expensive branded products because the elite social class is no longer defined by an economic position. It is the connoisseurship and cultural capital, knowledge of the inconspicuous that work as a signal of today's luxury. While any middle-class member can acquire expensive things, it's the motivation to acquire knowledge and to use this information to make socially conscious choices that sets this behaviour apart. Which in turn is why a green juice made with local kale and organic ginger carries more symbolic weight to an individual rather than a gigantic black Hummer or a Canada Goose jacket. Currid-Halkett (2017) dubs these people engaging in inconspicuous consumption as the *aspirational class*.

"Today's aspirational class prizes ideas, cultural and social awareness and the acquisition of knowledge in forming ideas and making choices ranging from their careers to the type of bread they purchase at the grocery store. In short, unlike Veblen's leisure class, this new elite is not defined by economics. They reveal their class position through cultural signifiers. - These new elites are consuming fewer conventional conspicuous consumption items,

and instead look to more subtle status markers that come through the forms of inconspicuous consumption."

- Currid-Halkett, 2017

2.2.1 Inconspicuous branding - the new luxury

Traditionally, marketing literature has seen conspicuous consumption and luxury as synonyms to one another (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996; Mason, 1998; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998; Sundie et al., 2011). But as mentioned, luxury has lost its meaning as it has been watering down from what it used to be like (Thomas, 2007).

This phenomenon could be explained by what Wilson et al. (2014) identify as an inward hedonistic turn, where the aim of impressing everyone around oneself and communicating identity through consumption has switched to an aim of impressing only a smaller group of like-minded elites. Inconspicuous branding revolves around the notion of cultural capital - it isn't aimed at the mass market since not everyone is able to fully comprehend it and its subtle visual cues and aesthetic language.

By definition, inconspicuous is not about what is displayed but more about what is chosen to hide. It isn't certain visual cues, but the lack thereof. It's important to note however, that inconspicuous does not mean blank. This research aims to explore the visual language of such inconspicuous brands.

2.3 Semiotic interpretation

"A message is a construction of signs and through interaction with the viewer it produces meaning."

- Fiske, 1990

This study is based on the visual semiotic interpretation of marketing images of inconspicuous brands on Instagram – that is, how meaning is construed through the visual signs which build the content.

Semiotics, also known as the science of signs, provide a set of assumptions and concepts that facilitate a systematic analysis of symbolic systems (Cullum-Swan & Manning, 1994; Mick 1986). Such signs can be words, colors, sounds, and images – which all carry meaning or represent something. Semiotics is based on language and understanding. Examples of various semiotic systems are morse code, etiquette, flirting and mathematics. Such sign systems can be clear or ambiguous, loosely or tightly connected or articulated and relations within them can vary. As per Cullum-Swan and Manning (1994), a sign is something that represents something else in the mind of a person. In the first instance, a sign comprises an expression, be it a word, sound or a symbol. In the second instance, it comprises content – of something that gives meaning to the expression. A red lipstick mark at the end of a letter is conventionally linked to romance, a high five is an expression linked to triumph and green light to “go”. A sign is essentially incomplete without an interpretant – someone who links the expression with the content to bring it to life (Short; from Peirce, 2007). In order for consumers to decode signs in advertisements and derive meaning from them, they must do so within their own sign systems. Individual sign systems are dependent on personal interpretation, language, context, culture, and history. Semiotic analysis of visual communication highlights the notion that people take part in the creation of meanings in messages – that is, take part in the creation of an advertisement or other visual communication, rather than being mere observers. As we live in a homogeneous society consisting of groups with various interests, visual communication can be interpreted in as many different ways as there are interpreters (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). In recent years, semiotics has been used to study consumer behavior linked with e.g. advertisement and

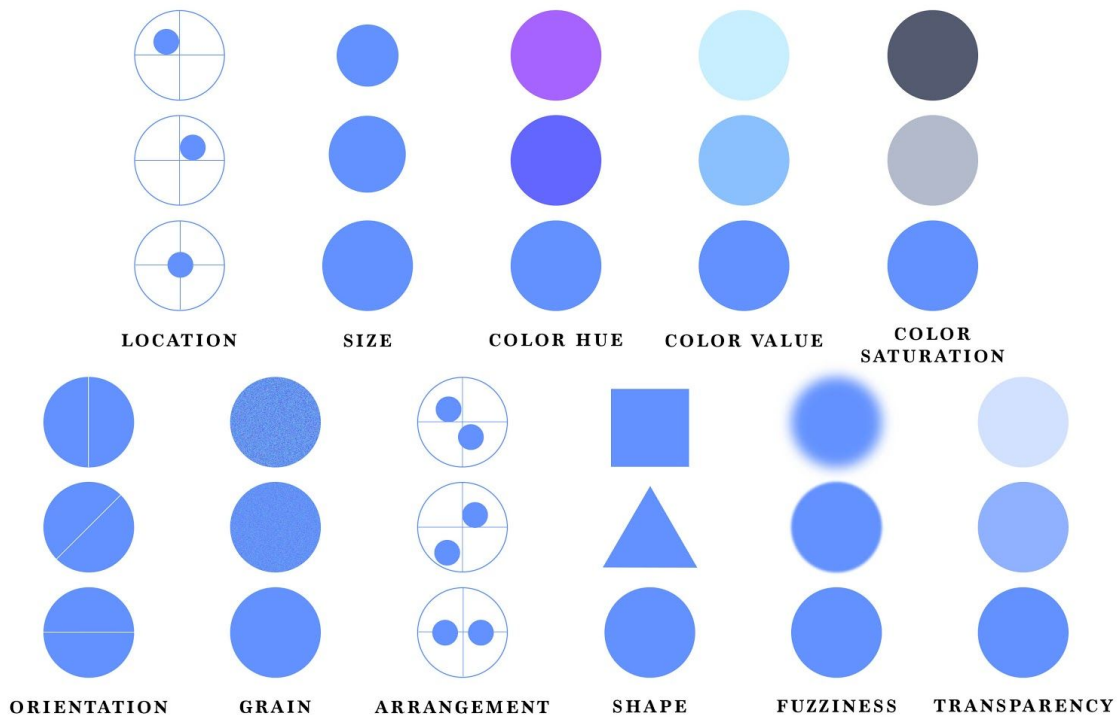
fashion and it has become an important framework to study meaning (Ogilvie & Mizerski 2011).

That being said, it's important to verbally lay it out that as any meaning-making device can be seen as a sign, the exact number of signs in an image is virtually uncountable and infinite.

2.3.1 Visual semiotics

To start with, the concept of visual variables used in the interpretation of images was introduced in 1967 by Bertin. The idea is that there are a set of fundamental visual variables from which any kind of visual content can be built. With a few additions over the years, the 11 visual variables are the following: location, size, color hue, color value, color saturation, orientation, grain, arrangement, shape, fuzziness and transparency. In this study, Bertin's visual variables will come into play when analyzing the compositional metafunction in section 2.6.4. These visual variables are presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Visual variables



In addition to the aforementioned visual variables, the Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) framework identifies three kinds of meta-semiotic tasks that create meaning to a visual message. These tasks are known as the *representational* metafunction, *interpersonal* metafunction, and the *compositional* metafunction. With the three image categories, these metafunctions will create the methodological framework for this study. All of these tasks, in varying extents, will be utilized in this research. It is worth noting, however, that although the meta-semiotic tasks applied in this study are from the Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) study, the sub-questions guiding this research are all adapted from Harrison's (2003) study. Details of these three metafunctions will be discussed further in chapter 2.6, where the analytical framework will also be presented.

2.4 Relevant framework for this study

The previous sections of this paper discussed three frameworks: the one of inconspicuous consumption, the one of visual branding and the one of visual semiotic interpretation. In this section, these three are now fused to create a framework for this study.

2.4.1 The representational metafunction

The *representational*, also known as ideational, metafunction is about what you see in a picture. It's about the people, places, and objects, and sets out to answer the question "*What is the picture about?*". As per Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), there are two kinds of representational images - narrative and conceptual. It's important to note that instead of talking about *objects* or *elements* or *people* in the image, the term *participant*, or more precisely *represented participant* (RP) will be used from now on. This highlights an important point in the matter: there are two participants in visual semiotic interpretation, the interactive participant (viewer) and the represented participant (the objects, elements and people in the advertisement).

The *narrative* image is dynamic. It creates a story in the mind of the viewer, due to vectors of motion. In short, in a narrative structure, the RPs are doing something to one another. The narration can be created either through *action* vectors, such as tools, holding hands or moving bodies or through *reactional* vectors, meaning that the motion is created by eye contact.

In an action process, as per Kress & van Leeuwen (1994), the active RP is the *actor* who emanates the vector towards the passive RP, known as the *goal*. The *actor* is oftentimes the most salient RP in the image, and should hence be easy to identify. In a reaction process, where the vector is formed by eyeline or a glance, the active RP is called the *reactor* and the passive RP the *phenomenon*.

On the contrary to the narrative, the conceptual image is static. They do not include any action vectors, and therefore do not create a story. The RPs in the image are grouped together to provide the viewer with the so-called concept of who or what they are. There are three concepts: *classificatory*, *analytical*, and *symbolic*.

In the classificational concept, the taxonomic relations between the RPs are represented in one of three ways. Firstly, the image can be structured as *covert taxonomy*, where a set of RPs (subordinates) are distributed symmetrically across the picture, equal in size and distance from one another, oriented towards the camera in the same way. Secondly, the image can be structured as either *single-levelled* or *multi-levelled overt taxonomy*. In single-levelled overt taxonomy, the main RP (superordinate) is connected to two or more RPs (subordinates) in a so-called tree structure, in no more than two levels. In multi-levelled overt taxonomy, the main RP (superordinate) is connected to other RPs (subordinates) in two or more levels.

For an image to be *analytical* by its conceptual representational meta-nature, RPs must be displayed as a part of a bigger picture. The two components of the analytical structure are *possessive attributes* (the parts) and the *carrier* (the whole). In relation to this study, fashion advertisement and posed images can be analytical in a way where the entire outfit is the carrier and parts of the outfit are possessive attributes (Jung, 2015). When comparing a fashion shot to a map for example, they may seem very different images at first - but on a second thought, their analytical meta-nature is the same: the map of Finland is the carrier and municipalities are the possessive attributes. The difference between the two lies within their interpersonal structures - for example, in their modality: for illustrative purposes, maps are oftentimes not realistic at all in regards to their natural attributes like rivers and mountains, instead they're visualized as either blue, brown or green. This concept will be discussed in more detail

in the following chapter, but the differences between and importance of each of the metafunctions is good to keep in mind. Abstract art can also be analytical - where it is up to the viewer to perceive which RPs are the possessive attributes and what is the carrier. For the sake of this study, only two types of analytical processes are reviewed: the *unstructured analytical process* and the *exhaustive analytical process*. In an unstructured analytical process, the image shows the possessive attributes but not the carrier itself. In an exhaustive analytical process, possessive attributes are assembled together to build a complex whole.

Lastly, for the *symbolic* concept, the importance of the RPs lies in what they mean to the viewer. In such an image, there can again be two components: the *carrier* who's meaning or identity is established through the *symbolic process*. There are two types of symbolic processes: symbolic attribute in which the identity of the RP is established in relation between the carrier and the attribute; symbolic suggestive, in which the RP is the only participant and his or her identity is established through other means. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) highlight that in the symbolic concept, human RPs in ads are oftentimes either sitting, standing or posing somewhere for no reason instead of being involved in an action process.

In relation to Harrison (2003), the following questions are used to analyze the sample of advertisement through the representational metafunction:

- 1) Who are the RPs - both human and non-human - in the image?
- 2) Are there vectors in the image indicating action? If so, what kind of a narrative do these vectors tell?
- 3) Are the human RPs looking at each other, creating eyeline vectors? What does this tell me about their history?
- 4) If there are no vectors, what is the image trying to tell me in terms of social/cultural concepts? What types of conventional thinking do different objects evoke in me?

2.4.2 The interpersonal metafunction

The second, *interpersonal* metafunction is about the actions and feelings among the people involved in both the production and viewing of an image – the creator, the RPs and the viewer. It sets out to answer the question “*How does the image engage the viewer?*”. The features for this function are *Image act and gaze, Social distance and intimacy and Perspective* as well as their subjective processes, which will not be described in detail here for the sake of the study.

In the first function, *Gaze*, vectors are formed between the viewer and the RPs by eyeline – that is, by looking directly in the camera. This creates a connection on an imaginary level between the RPs in the image and the viewer. Such images make “demands” where the RPs gaze is asking the viewer to connect with him or her. The type of connection depends on the facial expressions and gesture of the RP, which are summarized below in table 1.

Table 1: Types of demand relations (Adopted from Jung, 2015)

Facial expression or gesture	Relationship between the RP and the viewer
Smile	Asks viewer to enter relation of social affinity
Cold stare	Asks viewer to relate to RP as an inferior
Seductive pout	Asks viewer to desire the RP
Looking up	Asks viewer for pity
Defensive gesture	Asks viewer to stay away

In an image where RP does not look directly at the viewer (or the camera), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) call them *offer* images instead of demand as the RP is “presented to the viewer as items of information, objects of

contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case”.

The second function, *Social distance and intimacy*, relates to the different relations the distance between the RP and the viewer suggests. The shorter the distance, the more intimate the relation becomes and vice versa.

Table 2: Types of social distances and intimacy (Adopted from Jung, 2015)

Distance	Field of vision	Relation between the RP and viewer
Very close	Face is visible	Intimate
Close to personal	Face and shoulders are visible	Intimate
Far personal	Everything from the waist upwards is visible	Personal
Close social	Whole body is visible	Impersonal
Far social	Whole body and the space around it is visible	Impersonal
Public	The torsos of at least four other people are visible	Strangers

The third function, *Perspective*, comes in two angles: horizontal and vertical. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) suggest that the vertical angle in which the RP and the viewer engage in reveals the power position between the two: the viewer has power over the RP when the RP is seen from a high angle and vice versa; the power position is equal when the vertical angle is at eye level. Horizontal image suggests the involvement of the viewer and the RP: a frontal angle implies involvement whereas an oblique angle where the two participants diverge from one another implies detachment.

In relation to Harrison (2003), the following questions are used to analyze the sample of advertisement through the interpersonal metafunction:

- 1) If the image includes human RPs - what type of an image act is taking place, a demand or an offer? How does this make me feel?
- 2) How close do I feel to the RPs in the image? Distant, or like friends? Why has the producer chosen to evoke these feelings in me, the viewer?
- 3) How does the horizontal/vertical angle affect me, my sense of involvement with the PRs and the power distance between us?

2.4.3 The compositional metafunction

The *compositional* metafunction is the set of rules that enable the visual signs in the image to be organized in a way that the viewer can make sense of it. It sets off to answer the question “*How do the representational and interpersonal metafunctions relate to one another and create a meaningful whole?*”. The compositional function is divided into four systems: *information value*, *salience*, *framing*, and *modality*. As mentioned in section 2.3.1, Bertin’s (1967) visual variables will be integrated into this meta-function for analytical purposes.

With *information value*, the placement of RPs is the key point - they take on different information roles, depending on whether they are located in the middle or margin, on the left or right, or on the top or bottom. *Salience* is defined as the RPs capability to capture the viewer’s attention. This happens through elements such as sizing of the RP, the sharpness of focus, tonal and color contrast and foreground/background composition. Next, RP’s *framing* affects whether they are seen as separate or interconnected: this happens through the arrangement and orientation variables. Lastly, *modality* refers to how genuine a viewer finds the image - how a viewer feels about the validity and reliability of the image. Visual cues that determine the authenticity of an image in the eyes of a viewer run along a spectrum of

possibilities. In this study, the factors for modality are simply either reliable or unreliable.

In relation to Harrison (2003), the following questions are used to analyze the sample of advertisement through the compositional metafunction:

- 1) How have the RPs been placed in the image to provide information?
Why do I think that is?
- 2) Which RPs are more salient than others, and how does this salience affect the impact and meaning of the image?
- 3) How are the RPs held together or separated within the image and why do you think that is?
- 4) How does the use of color or lack of it affect the rhetorical message of the image?
- 5) How real does the image appear to the viewer?

2.4.4 Analytical framework

Representational	Represented participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Person - Product - Background
	Narrative structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Action vectors - Reactional vectors
	Conceptual structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Classificational - Analytical - Symbolical
Interpersonal	Gaze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demand - Offer
	Social distance & intimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intimate - Personal - Impersonal - Strangers
	Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Horizontal - Vertical
Compositional	Information value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location
	Saliency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Size - Fuzziness & Grain - Color - Logo
	Framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arrangement - Orientation

3 Data and methods

In this chapter, first, the research approach, the process and the data gathering will be discussed. Next, the research methods and actions to implement the visual semiotic interpretation to analyse the data will be laid out.

3.1. Data

To carry out the visual semiotic interpretation, a collection of sample images shared by the two case companies was acquired from Instagram. The sample images were chosen after careful consideration. They are exemplary images of the social media accounts of both brands - while they intend to provide a visual summary of the visual content of the companies, it is impossible for the images to represent the entirety of the accounts of the brands.

The data was gathered from the Instagram pages of MUJI and Cos. There are three main reasons for why social media was chosen as the medium of visual communication to be analysed in this study. Firstly, Instagram provides easy access to data - both for the researcher as well as for the end-user of the ads, the viewer. Hundreds of images and advertisements can be accessed in a blink of an eye without actually having to move from place to place. Secondly, still images were chosen as they are not multi-modal - they do not contain sound or 3D elements nor the time dimensions. Still images on Instagram are a concise and well-defined representation. Thirdly, by choosing the brands' own Instagram channels, it can be considered that the viewership and followers of those pages are somewhat more niche and have some knowledge required to construe the

meanings. However, similar imagery is still used in the brands' advertisement in other channels too, making the content inclusive.

The timescale of the images posted ran from January 2019 to October 2020. It was decided that a span of two years would offer a wide enough range of different images. The timescale was limited to the year 2020 since it was expected that a sufficient number of images would be found within this timeframe.

Table 3. List of channels used to acquire the data

Instagram page name	Language of post	Date published from	Date published to	Images selected
muji_global	Japanese	1.1.2019	1.10.2020	15
cosstores	English	1.1.2019	1.10.2020	15

Although Muji is a multinational brand with several local Instagram pages, it is a Japanese company headquartered in Tokyo, Japan. Hence, Muji's Japan-based global Instagram page was chosen as the medium for the data. The page muji_global has the highest number of followers and engagements compared to its local pages. Number of followers at the time of this research: muji_global, 2.4 mil; mujiusa, 190k; mujifinland, 17k. The content on each page follows essentially the same guidelines, but the original muji_global is visibly the most simplistic and inconspicuous - staying true to the brand. Cos only has one Instagram account.

The images were chosen on the following criteria: they are to be visual, high-quality, brand advertisement images, not a repost from another user nor something text-based.

As a result of browsing the brands' Instagram channels, a total of 30 images were acquired for the analysis. These images are all listed in Table 2 below. Table 2 describes the case company as well as the product type that is being advertised - image tag refers to the name under which a large print of each image can be found in Appendix B.

Table 4: List of images for analysis

Brand	Product	Image tag
MUJI	Face mask	MUJI1
MUJI	Outfit	MUJI2
MUJI	Sofa	MUJI3
MUJI	Shirts	MUJI4
MUJI	Mountain view	MUJI5
MUJI	Muji Café	MUJI6
MUJI	Scissors	MUJI7
MUJI	Outfit	MUJI8
MUJI	Outfit	MUJI9
MUJI	Skatepark	MUJI10
MUJI	T-shirt	MUJI11
MUJI	Outfit	MUJI12
MUJI	Bouquet	MUJI13
MUJI	Tote bags	MUJI14
MUJI	Underwear	MUJI15

Brand	Product	Image tag
COS	Outfit	COS1
COS	Outfit	COS2
COS	Dress	COS3
COS	Underwear	COS4
COS	Outfit	COS5
COS	Outfit	COS6
COS	Swimwear	COS7
COS	Dress	COS8
COS	Outfit	COS9
COS	Outfit	COS10
COS	Shapewear	COS11
COS	Outfit	COS12
COS	Scrunchie	COS13
COS	Jeans	COS14
COS	Outfit	COS15

3.1.1 Introduction to case companies

MUJI is a Japanese lifestyle brand established in 1980 under The Seiyu Ltd. The name MUJI is short for Mujirushi Ryōhin which translates to *No brand, good quality*. From the very beginning, MUJI's vision has been to offer neutral, everyday products that work together, without charging a higher price for brand-name products. MUJI's aesthetics are minimalistic, not trend-oriented, and their clothes are known for not having logos on them. Their products are reasonably priced: pricier than fast fashion, yet cheaper than design products. In addition to clothes, MUJI's product offering also includes homeware, furniture, stationary, food and cosmetic products. The company is present in 27 countries globally, as of 2018.

MUJI

MUJI 無印良品

Search for clothes, furniture, household products and more than 2,000 products



Fashion & Accessories

Furniture

Storage

Home Living

Stationery

Beauty & Skincare

Travel

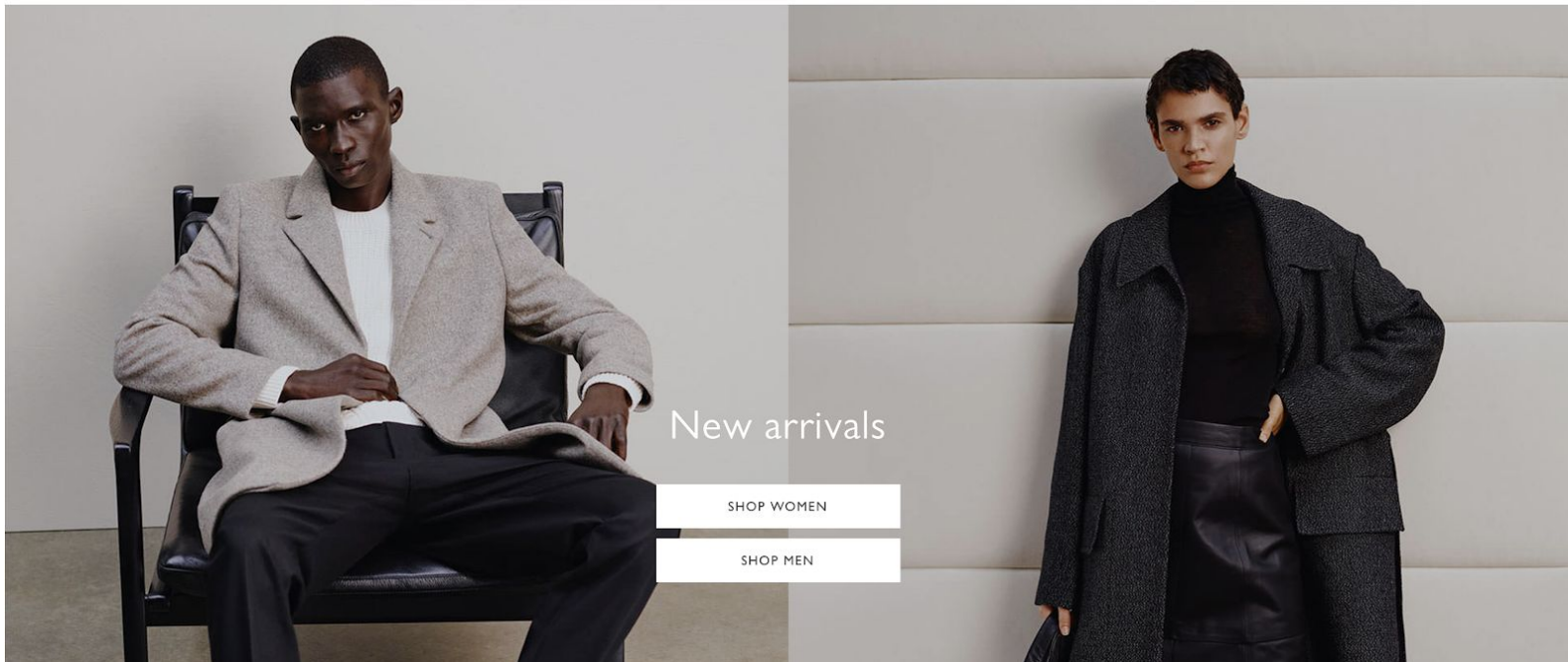
Sale

Menswear





COS, Collection Of Style, is a British-Swedish functional fashion brand established in 2007. COS is known in the ephemeral world of fashion as a minimalist brand, aspiring for longevity and timeless pieces with its restrained color palette, use of natural textiles and simplistic silhouettes (Budds, 2016). Their products are also priced reasonably: significantly lower than high-end fashion brands but higher than its parent company H&M's.



3.1.2 Instagram as the brand building tool of today

We live in an era of unforeseeable technological development, which has resulted in what Swaminathan et al. (2020) call a hyperconnected world. This has enabled brands to be able to employ far-reaching technologies to create interactive platforms through which consumers share, co-create, discuss and create user-generated content and word-of-mouth (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social platforms enable brands to connect with consumers constantly through a ubiquitous network (Kaplan, 2012). The increasing popularity of social media has fundamentally changed the contemporary consumer culture, consumer attitudes as well as the way in which consumers make purchase decisions (Labrecque et al, 2013).

Instagram is a visually dominated social media platform. Following the growing trend of consumers preferring information in a visual form, Instagram too has been steadily increasing in popularity (Chen, 2020). At the time of writing this paper, Instagram has over 1 billion active monthly users (Instagram, 2020). From a marketing point of view, 73% of marketers worldwide use Instagram as a channel, making it the second most popular social media platform in the world, right after its parent company Facebook (Statista, 2020). This paper will focus on Instagram solely for the sake of its visual dominance.

3.2. Methods

To better understand the hidden meanings and signs in the brand communication of inconspicuous brands, visual semiotic analysis was chosen as the means of qualitative research. This data collection method was chosen to signify the message in the advertisements where brand signs aren't obvious.

As this study focuses on the visual characteristics that build coherent inconspicuous brands as well as how these characteristics are perceived by consumers, the collection of primary data is essential in order to gain a profound and detailed understanding of the topic. The nature of the research suggested a qualitative research method for data collection. As the topic of visual communication on social media by inconspicuous brands hasn't been very popular and researched among scholars, prior insights of the topic are modest. As the issues related to the topic are *unstructured*, flexible and exploratory qualitative research is apt (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, visual semiotics provide a framework to facilitate and enhance visual literacy - to interpret and make meaning of images in advertisements. Kress and van Leeuwen were essentially the first to establish visual semiotics in the Western culture in 1996 with their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Hence, their framework works as a natural base for this research. However, the methodological framework will extend to Harrison's (2003) theory, where Kress and Leeuwen's (1996) visual semiotics framework was applied to still images, with applicable additions.

For the purpose of this study, the analysis will combine Harrison's (2003) framework with Bertin's (1967) visual variables. Due to the exploratory nature of the topic, some questions may prove to be of more significance than others. Furthermore, the collected data was analysed using ATLAS.ti software.

3.3. Trustworthiness of the study

3.3.1. Philosophical Viewpoint

Ontology focuses on answering the question: *what is there in the world* (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008)? It is important to take note of the ontological assumption in research, as interpretation plays a crucial part in the analysis of qualitative data and materials (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). This research takes on a subjective ontological research assumption, which is also known as constructivism. Inherent to this approach is a concern with subjective and shared meanings – how do people, individual consumers of the world economy interpret and understand social events and settings (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008)? A constructivist approach assumes that each person has a different understanding and interpretation of the world, based on their attitudes, personal opinions, context, and viewpoint (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Moreover, as per Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), epistemology sets out to answer the question *What is knowledge, and what are the sources and limits of knowledge?* In other words, epistemology implies how knowledge can be produced and argued for. This research takes again a subjectivist assumption of epistemology. This position finds standards of rational belief as those of the individual or the individual's community. Meaning, that reality is socially constructed, through social actors and personal conventions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Due to the analytical nature of

this research, it is important to note the subjectivity from the philosophical standpoints.

4 Findings

In this section, the findings of the visual semiotic interpretation are laid out and introduced. As discussed earlier, essentially any mean-making device can be interpreted as a sign, hence the amount of signs in a certain image can be infinite. Moreover, the relevancy in the context of branding may vary and be limited. Therefore, only the most salient signs in the context of this study will be discussed.

The findings are presented based on the analytical framework presented in chapter 2.4.4 and are elaborated according to the three metafunctions: representational, interpersonal and compositional, each with their unique sub-questions and categories.

4.1 Representational metafunction

The representational metafunction sets to explain what the image is about - the people, the places and the objects in it. Following the analytical framework, the representational metafunction has three different focus points for interpretation - the represented participants, the narrative structure as well as the conceptual structure of the image. First, a summary of key findings is presented for both case companies individually in tables 5 and 6. Next, each of the three sub categories will be discussed in more detail.

Table 5, Findings of the representational metafunction for MUJI

	Represented participants			Narrative structure		Conceptual structure		
	Person	Product	Background	Action	Reaction	Classificational	Analytical	Symbol
MUJI1	x	x	-	-	-	Single	Unstructured	-
MUJI2	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Exhaustive	-
MUJI3	-	-	x	-	-	Single	Unstructured	-
MUJI4	-	x	-	-	-	Multi	Unstructured	-

MUJ15	-	-	x	-	-	Multi	Unstructured	-
MUJ16	-	x	x	-	-	Single	Unstructured	-
MUJ17	-	x	x	x	-	-	-	-
MUJ18	x	x	-	-	-	Covert	Unstructured	-
MUJ19	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Exhaustive	-
MUJ110	x	-	x	x	x	-	-	-
MUJ111	-	x	-	-	-	Covert	Exhaustive	-
MUJ112	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Exhaustive	-
MUJ113	-	x	x	-	-	Single	Exhaustive	-
MUJ114	-	x	-	-	-	Multi	Unstructured	-
MUJ115	-	x	-	-	-	Single	Unstructured	-

Table 6, Findings of the representational metafunction for COS

	Represented participants			Narrative structure		Conceptual structure		
	Person	Product	Background	Action	Reaction	Classificational	Analytical	Symbol
COS1	x	x	-	-	-	Covert	Unstructured	-
COS2	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Unstructured	-
COS3	x	x	x	-	x	-	-	-
COS4	x	x	x	-	-	Single	Unstructured	-
COS5	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Unstructured	-
COS6	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Exhaustive	-
COS7	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Exhaustive	-
COS8	x	x	x	x	-	-	-	-
COS9	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Unstructured	-
COS10	x	x	x	x	-	-	-	-
COS11	-	x	-	-	-	Covert	Unstructured	-
COS12	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Unstructured	-
COS13	x	x	-	-	-	Single	Unstructured	-
COS14	-	x	-	-	-	Covert	Exhaustive	-
COS15	x	x	x	-	-	Covert	Unstructured	-

Tables 5 and 6 summarize the results of the ideational metafunction for both brands. In the following subsections, each aspect of the ideational metafunction will be elaborated further.

4.1.1 Represented participants

The three main categories for RPs were identified to be either a person or multiple people (humane), different kinds of products or clothes being advertised (inhumane) or the salient use of backgrounds.

First, MUJI's images featured a person or people as the RP only 6 out of 15 times. The brand's visual content oftentimes features just the advertised product as the RP and no people. It is also notable that the brand publishes

images completely out of the context of clothing and food, perhaps for the aesthetics or to create strong connections to life outside of their business. Examples of such images in the data set were a scenic image of a lush mountain view and an image of a skatepark at dawn, taken from afar. MUJI utilizes whitespace: one out of three images had a blank white background behind the RPs. This was even more prominent when the only RP is a product or a cloth: in such cases, the background is white every single time.

Figure 2: MUJI8 & Figure 3: MUJI15



Next, COS's images seemed to follow a clear pattern in regards to their RPs. 13 out of 15 images featured a person or people, posing in the clothes or outfits advertised. All of the images featured a product or cloth from COS: there were no images completely out of the context of fashion. When there was a person as the carrier of clothes in the image, they were almost always posing in front of a salient background, not just a white screen. However, when the only RP is a product or a cloth, the background is always white.

4.1.2 Narrative structure

As discussed in section 2.4 of the report, an image of the narrative structure is dynamic. In such an image, RPs are doing something to one another. In an action structure, action vectors are created by motion whereas in a reaction structure, the action takes place through eyelines and eye contact.

In MUJI's images, 2 out of 15 images had a narrative structure. MUJI7 displays scissors cutting through white fabric, perhaps suggesting the image is from a production phase of the cloth where a tailor is prepping the fabric. MUJI10 is of a skatepark, where a total of six people are skating. The image has two active RPs in the front, creating both action and reaction vectors.

In regards to COS, 3 out of 15 images had a narrative structure. COS3 is a beautiful black and white shot of a woman in a black dress looking back on a street, with the camera focused on her and leaving the rest of the street view soft and blurry. COS8 features a woman in a blue dress reading a book. COS10 is of a woman in a white dress, hailing a black wind-breaker in the wind in a desert-like environment. COS3 and COS10 are displayed below.

Figure 4: COS3 & Figure 5: COS10



4.1.3 Conceptual structure

The conceptual structure is divided into three themes: the classificational, analytical as well as the symbolical. In the classificational concept, taxonomic relations of the RPs are presented in one of three ways: covertly, single-levelled overtly or multi-levelled overtly. In the analytical concept, RPs must be a part of a bigger whole: the carrier and the possessive attributes are either all displayed (exhaustive) or only partly shown (unstructured). As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) suggest, fashion shots are indeed oftentimes conceptual and analytical which seems to be the case in this study as well. *Individual items of clothing are oftentimes presented*

In the case of MUJI, 13 images from the data set are all of the conceptual structure. Majority of the images represent covert taxonomies, where the RPs don't have any hierarchical structure of importance. Three images followed a single-levelled overt taxonomy structure, and two images followed the multi-levelled taxonomy structure. Full outfits tended to be presented in an exhaustive manner, whereas product images tended to be unstructured, only displaying some parts of the items very closely. Example

of an unstructured, covert taxonomy can be found in Figure 3: MUJI15. Another example of an unstructured single-levelled taxonomy can be found below, in Figure 6.

Cos again seems to follow a more consistent route. 10 out of 12 conceptual images followed a covert taxonomy structure, and the remaining two a single-levelled overt taxonomy. Majority of the conceptual images were unstructured in their analytical nature, which points out that on the contrary from MUJI, Cos prefers close-ups and imagery that leaves something for the imagination without showing it all. An example of an unstructured, covert taxonomy can be found below in figure 7.

Figure 6: MUJI & Figure 7: COS



4.2 The interpersonal metafunction

The interpersonal metafunction sets to explain how the image engages the viewer. It's about the actions and feelings among the people involved - the creator, the RPs and the person engaging with it. Following the analytical framework, the interpersonal metafunction has three different focus points for interpretation - gaze, social distance and intimacy as well as perspective.

Table 7, Findings of the interpersonal metafunction for MUJI

	Gaze		Social distance	Perspective	
	Demand	Offer	Intimacy	Horizontal	Vertical
MUJI1	-	-	Intimate	Oblique	Low angle
MUJI2	x	-	Impersonal	Front	Eye-level
MUJI3	-	-	Personal	Oblique	Eye-level
MUJI4	-	-	Intimate	Oblique	High angle
MUJI5	-	-	Impersonal	Front	High angle
MUJI6	-	-	Intimate	Front	High angle
MUJI7	-	-	Intimate	Oblique	High angle
MUJI8	x	-	Personal	Front	Eye-level
MUJI9	x	-	Impersonal	Front	Eye-level
MUJI10	-	x	Public	Oblique	Eye-level
MUJI11	-	-	Impersonal	Front	Eye-level
MUJI12	x	-	Personal	Oblique	Eye-level
MUJI13	-	-	Impersonal	Front	Eye-level
MUJI14	-	-	Public	Front	High angle
MUJI15	-	-	Intimate	Oblique	High angle

Table 8, Findings of the interpersonal metafunction for COS

	Gaze		Social distance	Perspective	
	Demand	Offer	Intimacy	Horizontal	Vertical
COS1	-	x	Personal	Front	Eye-level
COS2	x	-	Personal	Front	Eye-level
COS3	-	x	Personal	Oblique	Low angle
COS4	-	x	Intimate	Front	Low angle
COS5	x	-	Personal	Front	Eye-level
COS6	-	x	Impersonal	Front	Eye-level
COS7	-	x	Personal	Back	High angle
COS8	-	x	Persona	Oblique	High angle

COS9	-	x	Personal	Oblique	Low angle
COS10	x	-	Personal	Oblique	Eye-level
COS11	-	-	Intimate	Front	Eye-level
COS12	-	x	Personal	Oblique	Low angle
COS13	-	x	Personal	Back	Eye-level
COS14	-	-	Impersonal	Front	Eye-level
COS15	-	x	Personal	Oblique	Eye-level

4.2.1 Gaze

As per Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the gaze in an image can either be a demand as in direct eye contact, or an offer as in looking away from the camera.

Here is where the visual semiotic analysis makes it clear that MUJI has a stronger emphasis on it's products alone than on people in the content of its marketing communication. 5 out 15 images include people making a gaze of some sort. All the four demands are neutral in nature. Offers appear only once, in the image MUJI10.

Cos on the other hand gets a lot more personal in their images. Almost all images display a gaze: more often in the form of an offer rather than a demand. Images with an offer make the viewer feel like the RP isn't necessarily even posing to the camera: they feel like they're happening in real life and someone just happened to be there to take a picture. An example of an offer and a demand from COS can be found below in Figures 8 and 9.

Figure 8: COS8 & Figure 9: COS5



4.1.3 Social distance

For MUJI, around half of the images have a Social distance of either intimate and personal and the other half have either impersonal or public. It is interesting to note that all of the images with people as RPs are impersonal, whereas all the intimate images are close-up shots of clothing or other products. Comparison of the two can be found below in Figures 10 and 11.

Figure 10: MUJI9 & Figure 11: MUJI4



In regards to the social distance of Cos, 13 out of 15 images are either intimate or personal. Vast majority of the images in the data set are cropped in a way that brings the viewer personally close to the RP. Even images where the only RP is the cloth are zoomed in closely, similarly as MUJI does in Figure 11.

4.1.3 Perspective

In regards to the vertical and horizontal perspectives, neither one of the brands seems to play around with power positions between the viewer and the RPs.

4.3 The compositional metafunction

The compositional metafunction sets to explain how the two previous metafunctions relate to another and create a meaningful whole. It's the set of rules that enable the visual signs in the image to be put together in a way that the viewer can make sense of it. Following the analytical framework, the compositional metafunction has four different focus points for interpretation - information value, salience, framing and modality.

Table 9, Findings of the compositional metafunction for MUJI

	Information value	Salience				Framing	
	Location	Size	Fuzziness & grain	Color	Logo & Brand	Arrangement	Orientation
MUJI1	High	x	-	Contrast	-	High, left - cut from nose	-
MUJI2	Center	-	-	Saturated	-	Centered	-
MUJI3	Left	-	-	Saturated	-	-	-
MUJI4	Center	x	Sharp in the middle, fuzzy around	Shadows	-	All around, cropped from all sides	Tilted to the right
MUJI5	Left	-	-	Bright greens & blues	-	Left	-
MUJI6	Center	x	-	Black & white	-	Center	-
MUJI7	Right	x	Sharp in the middle, fuzzy around	All white, emphasis on scissors	-	Bottom right corner, cut	Tilted to the right
MUJI8	Center	-	-	Colourful clothes against white background	-	Centered	-
MUJI9	Center	-	-	White shirt & ochre pants against white background	-	Centered	-
MUJI10	Right	-	x	Mostly white, light, couple darker spots for contrast	-	Bottom right corner, continues blurry on left	-
MUJI11	Center	x	-	White shirt white background; shadows create wave-like texture	-	Centered	-
MUJI12	Center	-	-	Green tones, earthy	-	Center to top	-
MUJI13	Center	-	-	White & light; bright green bouquet	-	Centered	-
MUJI14	Center	x	Sharp in the middle, fuzzy around	Beige totes against white background	-	All around, cut from all sides	Slightly off
MUJI15	Center	x	x	Grey on white, shadows create texture	-	From top right corner to bottom left corner	Tilted to the right

Table 10, Findings of the compositional metafunction for COS

	Information value	Salience				Framing	
	Location	Size	Fuzziness & grain	Color	Logo & Brand	Arrangement	Orientation
COS1	Center	-	-	Grey set, tanned skin against white background	-	Centered, crop from face & legs	-
COS2	Center	-	x	Black & white, contrast, shadows, pitch black background	-	Centered, crop from legs	-
COS3	Top	-	Sharp in the middle, fuzzy background	Black & white, contrast	-	Centered, from bottom to top	-
COS4	Center	x	Soft, background blurry	Sepia	-	Centered, crop around	-
COS5	Center	-	Sharp in the middle, fuzzy background	Black & white, contrast, shadows	-	Centered, crop from head & legs	-
COS6	Center	-	-	Muted, earthy	-	Centered	-
COS7	Center	-	Sharp in the middle, fuzzy background	Contrast between skin and swimwear	-	Centered	-
COS8	Center	-	x	Blue dress & orange wood - opposite colors	-	From top right to bottom left	Tilted to the left
COS9	Center	-	-	All white outfit against dark wood	-	Centered, crop from face & legs	-
COS10	Left	-	Sharp in the middle, fuzzy background	Muted, earthy	-	More to the left	-
COS11	Right to center	x	-	Nude tones, play with shadows	-	White space on top left, otherwise all over	Folded, tilted to the right
COS12	Center to right	-	-	Bright red background, sand coloured clothes	-	Centered, crop from top & legs	Side profile
COS13	Left	x	-	Neon colors against white background	-	To the left, crop from head & torso	Back
COS14	Center	x	-	-	-	Centered pile rising up	-
COS15	Center	-	-	Green tones, heavy contrast	-	Centered, faced left	45 degree

5 Interpretation

In this chapter, the findings of the visual semiotic interpretation are summarized and relevant inferences from the data are laid out. These inferences are discussed in two sections: first by summarizing key findings in the case companies' inconspicuous brand identities, and second by drawing conclusions from the visual variables of the images.

5.1 The inconspicuous visual brand identity

This study aimed at gaining an understanding of the type of content inconspicuous brands share on their Instagram channels in order to express their identity. While Berger & Ward (2010) find that brands aim for distinguishable logos, patterns, colors and taglines in order to be identifiable and memorable in the minds of the consumer, the same does not apply for inconspicuous brands.

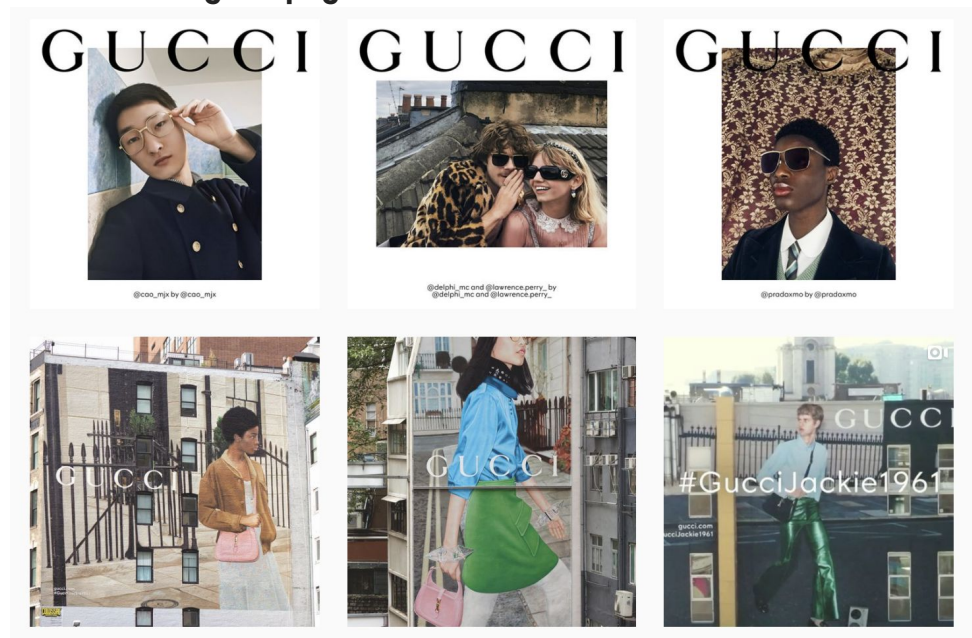
5.1.1 Brand identifiers

As established in chapter 2.1, a visual brand identity typically consists of a brand logo, typography, color, and layout. Both MUJI and COS have a very simplistic logo with just the brand name on it. Neither of the brands have a brand symbol which could be used just by itself, without the brand name next to it. Examples of such symbols are Nike's swoosh, Gucci's double G and Louis Vuitton's crossed L and V.

Not a single logo was visible in the entire data set of 30 images. None of the clothes had a logo on them clearly stating whose product it was. With no logo on the products, it can only be assumed that all of the outfits were in fact from the collections of the brands. It's also worth noting that none of

the pictures had a logo added e.g. on the corner of the image during image editing. Figure 12 displays an example of Gucci's Instagram content displaying logos on both the products in the image as well as on the image in a graphic form.

Figure 12: Gucci's Instagram page



5.1.2 Extreme functionality

Functionality over aesthetics: this is where the two brands slightly differ from one another. MUJI's prominent use of whitespace and tendency to focus more on the products, not on the people gave a strong impression of appreciation for extreme functionality. Products were oftentimes represented flat in front of a white background with no one wearing them, as if not to show how to wear them or how to style them. The question of practicality is left to the user. *Feel free to wear this any way you like, we're not going to show example and tell you how to do it.* Extreme functionality also comes clear through the fact that the items in MUJI's images aren't really a reflection of the current mass market trends.

5.1.3 Still life

A common theme for both brands was stillness. A vast majority of the images were not dynamic: they had a conceptual structure rather than a narrative structure. The models were either standing still or sitting down, gazing at the camera with a very neutral look on their face. None of the images displayed a model laughing or being expressive in one way or another. In images with more than one person, no action was taking place.

5.1.4 Everyday people

It's safe to say a vast majority of brands use celebrity endorsement in their content, either by using a famous person as the model wearing the brands products or by utilizing a celebrity as a customer testimonial, complimenting the brands' products. This wasn't the case for the case companies. Both brands featured regular, everyday people as their models: not a single celebrity endorsement took place.

Celebrity endorsement has an influence on marketing effectiveness, brand recognition, brand recall, purchase intention and even purchase behavior (Spry et al., 2009).

As per McCracken (1989), celebrities carry different meanings. This meaning is derived from the professional persona and environment of the celebrity, which is then transferred onto the product and the brand. For example, consumers attach different meanings to celebrities based on the kinds of roles they play in movies, series or athletics.

The strategic move of a brand to opt out on endorsements is what inconspicuousness is all about. The type of celebrity a brand uses has a huge impact on its brand and it sends out a certain message. For an inconspicuous brand, the aim is the bare minimum, not to speak out and be affiliated with specific people.

5.2 Visual variables

The second and final part of the analysis concerns the visual variables of the case companies' visual language. The findings were divided into three themes: information value, salience, and framing. From studying the data, an inference arises that there indeed is a visual pattern the case companies follow.

5.2.1 Information value

For both companies, a conclusion can be drawn that the main RP is always the piece of clothing or the outfit, the main focus point is never on the model carrying the cloth. This can be through the fact that multiple images in the data set were cropped in a way that either leaves out the face or parts of the body of the model: but displays the brand's products fully. This way, the information value is always centered, even though at first look it may feel like the model's eyes and gaze is placed peculiarly on the top of the image.

In cases where the brand uses celebrity endorsement, the main RP is the celebrity, and not the piece of clothing the model is wearing. This again highlights the fact that inconspicuous brands are looking for the bare minimum in regards to their presentation: the product and it's functionality is the king. Figure 13 below displays a comparison between COS (conceptual structure; RP: outfit) and Nike (narrative structure; RP: Serena Williams).

Figure 13: Information value comparison, COS9 and Nike



5.2.2 Saliency

Saliency is built from three factors: size, fuzziness, and color. In regards to saliency, perhaps the main key take-away is the restrained color palette innate to both brands.

MUJI's color theme involves a considerable amount of white and light beige tones. While an image of a white t-shirt in front of a white background sounds dull and perhaps even impossible, the company plays around with shadows to create depth and texture. MUJI has incorporated notably little color in their images. The color palette they utilize consists of earth-tones like grey, beige and blue but never black. The colors are saturated, oranges and greens are highlighted. Where there's people as passive RPs in an image, the foreground colors are of the same color palette as the background colors, which make the outfit blend into the background: as is the clothes are a part of the scenery (Figures 14 and 15).

Figure 14: MUJI9 & Figure 15: MUJI2



COS on the other hand is a lot more colorful than MUJI, excluding image COS13. The brand follows a similar kind of color palette, consisting of neutral tones like different shades of sand, grey and blue. Colors that are familiar to us in nature, here in the Nordics. Like MUJI, COS utilizes whitespace to bring out the salience in product images, but the company breaks this airiness regularly with either black or dark brown and grey. COS's visual language is built out of black-and-white imagery side by side with muted colors.

Figure 16: COS2 & Figure 17: COS6



Another key inference from the data set is prominent use of the fuzziness variable in the images. While this isn't instantly palpable while analysing the data set, it comes clear once comparing the images to imagery of other brands (Figures 13 and 14: Information value comparison). This isn't to suggest that the images are blurry and unsharp, but they aren't as sharp as current photography technology is able to provide us with. This creates a very soft impression and feeling to the imagery.

5.2.3 Framing

Framing consists of arrangement and orientation. The visual semiotic analysis did not find any recurring patterns within the data set, regarding either one of the two factors. The only notable inference is the aforementioned use of image cropping, in order to create more emphasis on the pieces of clothing instead of on the models.

6 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to use visual semiotic analysis in order to gain a better understanding of the visual language of inconspicuous brands on Instagram. The motivation for the study was the palpable gap in research around the topic of inconspicuous branding on social media. Although literature around inconspicuous consumption has been growing over the past years (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; Currid-Halkett, 2017;), there's a discernible lack of semiotic understanding in the sense of how brand managers and content creators employ inconspicuousness in social media.

In this final chapter of the paper, first, my attempt to fill the gap of the above-mentioned issue is summarized. Then, practical implications as well as the limitations of the study are laid out. Finally, suggestions for future research are discussed.

6.1 Research summary

Social theorists, economists and psychologists have all studied the link between humans and material objects as means of projecting social roles and communicating identity to the people around us (Appadurai, 1986; Bettie, 2000; Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Loasby, 2001; Schiffer & Miller, 1999). We as humans are materialists. Some care less about what people think about us, some care more: status consumption is more important to those ranking higher on the susceptibility to interpersonal influence scale. Inconspicuous consumption is on the rise, especially during times of economic uncertainty. Global economic growth is projected at -4.9 percent in 2020, and the IMF is noting that we're headed towards an economic crisis like no other. Which in turn suggests that inconspicuous consumption is on

the rise like never before. Hence, understanding the kind of content such brands engage consumers with on social media is crucial.

This paper conducted a visual semiotic analysis of the social media brand communication of two popular brands well-known for their minimalist approach in branding: British-Swedish fashion brand COS and Japanese lifestyle brand MUJI. Exploratory in nature, the aim of this study was to put forth the discussion about the visual language of inconspicuous brands. The main objective of this study was to answer the research question:

What constitutes the visual language of inconspicuous brands on the social media platform Instagram?

To answer the posed question, a collection of 30 brand images were gathered from the Instagram accounts of two case companies. These images were interpreted semiotically through the framework of inconspicuous branding and visual brand identity.

The findings were then used to make inferences on the two themes, further divided into (1) brand identifiers, functionality, stillness and models, and (2) information value, salience and framing.

For the first theme, inconspicuous branding, it was found that the case companies did not display any kind of brand identifiers nor logos on their images or products. Secondly, the recurring pattern of having clothing as the main RPs instead of people gave a strong impression of functionality. Extreme functionality was more prominent for MUJI, but COS also displayed similar signs. Thirdly, both brands had a conceptual approach to their image structures. This stillness, lack of dynamics, leaves space for the viewer instead of having the image create a story in the mind of the viewer. Lastly, neither MUJI nor COS utilizes celebrity endorsement in their marketing. This strategic move could be because of many reasons, but the most

prominent reasoning is the fact that celebrity endorsements are stigmatizing; inconspicuous brands prefer not to be labelled and associated with specific individuals since all celebrities carry different meanings.

For the second theme, visual brand identity, different visual variables were identified. The main inference for information value was the notion that the main RP is always the product, highlighting the utilitarian value of it. Secondly, both brands have a very distinct color palette. Prominent use of white space and earth-tones such as shades of sand, grey and blue were found to be at the core of the brands' visual language. Lack of sharpness and a recurrent use of fuzziness in the images also play a part in creating a soft appearance.

6.2 Theoretical implications

Social class used to be marked and displayed explicitly through distinguishable logos and other brand identifiers: the *raison d'être* for luxury brands was to be easily recognized and convey meaning (Holt, 2004). Later on, Berger and Ward (2010) argued that the more expensive a product, the more subtle its brand identifiers are. As material possessions have become more accessible to the population at large, Currid-Halkett (2017) suggests that the power they hold as symbols of social class are watering down. While in the past, only the very upper classes engaged in inconspicuous consumption, it has lately been proven that it's coming true for the general population as well (Eckhardt et al., 2015).

This study has provided practical insight into the visual language of such inconspicuous brands through a comprehensive visual semiotic analysis of the clothing brand COS and lifestyle brand MUJI's Instagram content. The visual brand identity of inconspicuous brands has been neglected as it is

such a recent phenomena: this study started filling the existing gap in literature to provide more insight into the inconspicuous visual brand identity.

Both case companies sell their products way above the price point of fast-fashion brands, yet neither of the companies utilize any of the traditional brand identifiers both on their products and on their brand communication. Holt's (2004) belief of *the bolder the brand better* does not seem to apply for inconspicuous brands in today's multidimensional brand landscape. Like Currid-Halkett (2017), Berger and Ward (2010) and Eckhardt & Bardhi (2020) put forth, status signaling for consumers does indeed lie increasingly upon inconspicuousness. The second case company COS has a whopping 2,1 million followers on Instagram as of October 2020, which speaks volumes for itself.

The two case companies seemed to display differences in the characteristics of their semiotic languages, which suggest that inconspicuous branding has many subcultures which the existing literature hasn't yet put forth. In order to understand more about the types of cultural knowledge and connoisseurship required to decode visual content of inconspicuous brands from different subcultures, a more comprehensive research ought to be conducted in the future.

6.2 Managerial implications

The main focus of this study was to paint a picture of the visual language inconspicuous brands use to engage consumers on their Instagram pages. As per the findings of this study, creative directors for brands looking to turn to subtle and discreet signs instead of the conventional *the bolder, the better* kind of thinking should opt for voluntary blandness. The main

challenge is to recognize what is the bare minimum for their company and learn how to emphasize those aspects instead of adding layers of extra.

Brand managers and creatives have to start by realizing that today, consumers are overwhelmed by choice. Be it in clothing or homeware, there are thousands of brands to choose from: many of which are selling almost exactly the same products. Because of this information overload, increasingly more consumers are leaning towards inconspicuous brands. Through inconspicuous brands, consumers are able to find a space where they aren't told what to buy and how to behave. Purchase decisions are based on 20% logic and 80% emotion. Hence, storytelling and brand identities hold immense power. An inconspicuous visual brand identity stems from the notion of subtleness. Instead of huge logos and patterns, inconspicuous brands should focus on discreet ways of identifying and communicating themselves. As per the findings of this study, these subtle visual signs include a muted color palette, earth-tones, using little contrast, focusing on the products instead of the models, creating a feeling of stillness through conceptual structures rather than creating dynamic narratives, using a bit of blur to create a soft look and opting for a lot of whitespace and emptiness. To build an inconspicuous brand means to opt out on anything that creates distractions from the products themselves. Using celebrity endorsement may increase brand equity to some, but for inconspicuous brands, it sends out the wrong message. It should also be noted that inconspicuous brands shouldn't be too politically active: they shouldn't try to get themselves labeled as anything more than aesthetic, beautiful and functional. The rest is up to the consumer to interpret and decode, to create meaning through their conventions and personal sign languages.

6.3 Limitations of the study

This study was based on a qualitative analysis in the form of visual semiotics, which helps to understand the meaning-making that visual marketing communication may elicit, but not what they necessarily most often and most strongly elicit in the population at large. This limitation is intrinsic to a semiotic analysis, where the interpretation is done by a sole researcher. This limits the usefulness of a semiotic analysis in how meaning is made, since it is more about how meanings are received by viewers.

In addition, this study did not compare the visual language of inconspicuous brands to the visual language of conspicuous brands: hence, the findings may be limited. The data set of this study included only images from Instagram where only a specific audience can be reached instead of including images from other social channels as well.

This study broadens the understanding of inconspicuous branding on social media, but its results aren't generalisable to advertising at large. This study did not test the strength of inconspicuous branding in quantitative terms but instead creates a stronger basis for theoretical constructs that could potentially be later on utilized to study the same phenomena in a quantitative manner. To summarize, the interpretations of this study apply only to the brands and images studied, but the takeaways and the framework can be used to better understand the visual marketing communication of other brands as well.

6.4 Suggestions for future research

Since the nature of this test was semiotic, the findings and conclusions should be further studied by reader-response studies and in a quantitative format in order to form generalisable results. As inconspicuous consumption

is on the rise, possibilities for future research in this area are fruitful. Three suggestions of future studies are made.

Firstly, inconspicuous branding goes way beyond Instagram. Hence, a qualitative cross-channel study could help gain a broader understanding of the visual language of inconspicuous branding.

Secondly, as this study didn't measure the effectiveness of inconspicuous branding, a quantitative reader-response research measuring that would be highly relevant for future research.

Lastly, understanding the type of consumers that are drawn to inconspicuous consumption and their underlying motivations to do so could give us important insight, on which brand managers and creatives can further develop and perfect their inconspicuous brands.

7 Conclusions

We are living in an era of visual abundance, where consumers are bombarded with advertising 24/7 at all touchpoints through various social media channels. Brands are viciously competing for consumers' attention. While the common belief used to be that the more bold, colorful and eye-catching a brand is, the better - more and more brands are opting for minimalism, simplicity and voluntary blandness which stems from the notion of inconspicuous consumption. Arguably, social media is one of the most influential channels for transmitting a brand image in today's global world. The aim of this study was to analyze the visual content such inconspicuous brands engage their followers with on Instagram. This research looked beneath the surface for hidden meanings in the visual communication of two case companies', MUJI and COS, Instagram content through the lens of visual semiotics. Semiotics highlight how consumers aren't mere objective observers to whom advertisements are produced and displayed to, but they, in fact, play a huge role by creating meaning in imagery. The theoretical framework for this study consisted of three main theories: inconspicuous branding, visual brand identity and semiotics.

This study aimed to answer the research question:

What constitutes the visual language of inconspicuous brands on the social media platform Instagram?

The findings for the visual interpretation suggest a clear pattern, which include two main aspects: brand identifiers and visual variables. This study began filling the gap in research, that of visual inconspicuous brand identity, which ought to be studied further to better understand the effectiveness and different forms of inconspicuous consumption on different channels.

References

- Appadurai, A. (Ed.) (1986). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bagwell, L. S., & Bernheim, B. D. (1996). Veblen effects in a theory of conspicuous consumption. *The American Economic Review*, 349–373.
- Bastos, W., & Levy, S. J. (2012). A history of the concept of branding: practice and theory. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*.
- Bearden, W. O., Netemeyer, R. G., & Teel, J. E. (1989). Measurement of consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence. *Journal of consumer research*, 15(4), 473–481.
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of consumer research*, 15(2), 139–168
- Bettie, J. (2000). Women without class: Chicas, cholas, trash, and the presence/absence of class identity. *Signs*, 26(1), 1–35.
- Berger, J., & Heath, C. (2007). Where consumers diverge from others: Identity signaling and product domains. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(2), 121–134.
- Berger, J., & Ward, M. (2010). Subtle signals of inconspicuous consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(4), 555–569.
- Cherrier, H. (2009). Anti-consumption discourses and consumer-resistant identities. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(2), 181–190.

Cullum-Swan, B. E. T. S., & Manning, P. (1994). Narrative, content, and semiotic analysis. *Handbook of qualitative research*, 463-477.

Currid-Halkett, E. (2017). *The sum of small things: A theory of the aspirational class*. Princeton University Press.

De Chernatony, L., & Dall'Olmo Riley, F. (1998). Defining a "brand": Beyond the literature with experts' interpretations. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 14(5), 417-443

De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: the impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798-828.

Delgado-Ballester, E., & Munuera-Alemán, J. L. (2005). Does brand trust matter to brand equity?. *Journal of product & brand management*

Douglas, M., & Isherwood, B. (1996[1979]). *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. London: Routledge.

Dutot, V., & Bergeron, F. (2016). From strategic orientation to social media orientation. *Journal of small business and enterprise development*.

Eastman, J. K., Fredenberger, B., Campbell, D., & Calvert, S. (1997). The relationship between status consumption and materialism: A cross-cultural comparison of Chinese, Mexican, and American student. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 5(1), 52-66

Eastman, J., Iyer, R., & Thomas, S. P. (2013). The impact of status consumption on shopping styles: An exploratory look at the millennial generation. *Marketing Management Journal*, 23(1), 57-73.

Eckhardt, G. M., Belk, R. W., & Wilson, J. A. (2015). The rise of inconspicuous consumption. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(7-8), 807-826.

Eriksson, P., & Kovalainen, A. (2015). *Qualitative methods in business research: A practical guide to social research*. Sage.

Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human relations*, 7(2), 117-140

Harrison, C. (2003). Visual social semiotics: Understanding how still images make meaning. *Technical communication*, 50(1), 46-60.

Holt, D. B. (1995). How consumers consume: A typology of consumption practices. *Journal of consumer research*, 22(1), 1-16.

Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Harvard Business Press.

Habermas, J., Honneth, A., & Joas, H. (1991). *Communicative action* (Vol. 1, p. 202). Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Kaplan, A.M. (2012), "If you love something, let it go mobile: mobile marketing and mobile social media 4x4", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 55 No. 2, pp. 129-139

Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.

Kleine III, R. E., Kleine, S. S., & Kernan, J. B. (1993). Mundane consumption and the self: A social-identity perspective. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 2(3), 209-235.

Kohli, C., Suri, R., & Kapoor, A. (2015). Will social media kill branding?. *Business Horizons*, 58(1), 35-44.

Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Psychology Press.

Labrecque, L. I., vor dem Esche, J., Mathwick, C., Novak, T. P., & Hofacker, C. F. (2013). Consumer power: Evolution in the digital age. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 27(4), 257-269.

Loasby, B. J. (2001). Cognition, imagination and institutions in demand creation. In U. Witt (Ed.), *Escaping satiation: The demand side of economic growth* (pp. 13-27). Berlin: Springer

Mason, R. (1992). Modelling the demand for status goods. *ACR Special Volumes*.

McCann, M. and Barlow, A. (2015), "Use and measurement of social media for SMEs", *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 273-287.

McCracken, G. (1989) Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process. *Journal of Consumer Research* 16 (December) : 310 – 321 .

McQuarrie, E. F., & Phillips, B. J. (2008). It's not your magazine ad: Magnitude and direction of recent changes in advertising style. *Journal of Advertising*, 37(3), 95-106.

Mick, D. G. (1986). Consumer research and semiotics: Exploring the morphology of signs, symbols, and significance. *Journal of consumer research*, 13(2), 196-213.

Muniz, A. M., & O'guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of consumer research*, 27(4), 412-432

Neher, K. (2013), Social media marketing. Harnessing images, Instagram, Infographics and Pinterest to grow your business online, Boot Camp Publishing, Cincinnati, OH.

O'Cass, A., & McEwen, H. (2004). Exploring consumer status and conspicuous consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour. An International Research Review*, 4(1), 25-39.

Obendorf, H. (2009). *Minimalism: designing simplicity*. Springer Science & Business Media.

Ogilvie, M., & Mizerski, K. (2011). Using semiotics in consumer research to understand everyday phenomena. *International Journal of Market Research*, 53(5), 651-668.

Oyserman, D. (2007). Social identity and self-regulation

Oyserman, D. (2009). Identity-based motivation: Implications for action-readiness, procedural-readiness, and consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19(3), 250-260

Ozanne, J. L., & Murray, J. B. (1995). Uniting critical theory and public policy to create the reflexively defiant consumer. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 38(4), 516-525.

Phillips, B. J., McQuarrie, E. F., & Griffin, W. G. (2014). The face of the brand: How art directors understand visual brand identity. *Journal of advertising*, 43(4), 318-332.

Ryall, J. (2019). How Muji went from household product line to retail empire. *South China Morning Post*

Salzer-Mörling, M., & Strannegård, L. (2004). Silence of the brands. *European Journal of Marketing*.

Schiffer, M. B., & Miller, A. R. (1999). *The material life of human beings: Artifacts, behavior, and communication*. London: Routledge.

Schorman, R. (2008). Claude hopkins, earnest calkins, bissell carpet sweepers and the birth of modern advertising. *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 7(2), 181-219.

Singh, S., & Sonnenburg, S. (2012). Brand performances in social media. *Journal of interactive marketing*, 26(4), 189-197.

Smitti, R. "Rebranding" - The Move Towards Minimalist Branding, from <https://www.jbidigital.co.uk/blog/the-move-towards-minimalist-branding>

Sparke, P. (2009). *Japanese design* (Vol. 5). The Museum of Modern Art.

Spry, A., Pappu, R., & Cornwell, T. B. (2011). Celebrity endorsement, brand credibility and brand equity. *European journal of marketing*

Stern, B.B. (2006), "What does brand mean? Historical-analysis method and construct definition", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 216-23.

Social media platforms used by marketers worldwide 2019, Statista, (2020) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/259379/social-media-platforms-used-by-marketers-worldwide/>

Strickland, E. (2000). *Minimalism--origins*. Indiana University Press.

Swaminathan, V., Sorescu, A., Steenkamp, J. B. E., O'Guinn, T. C. G., & Schmitt, B. (2020). Branding in a hyperconnected world: Refocusing theories and rethinking boundaries. *Journal of Marketing*, 84(2), 24-46.

Trigg, A. B. (2001). Veblen, Bourdieu, and conspicuous consumption. *Journal of economic issues*, 35(1), 99-115.

Wheeler, A. (2017). *Designing brand identity: an essential guide for the whole branding team*. John Wiley & Sons

Appendices

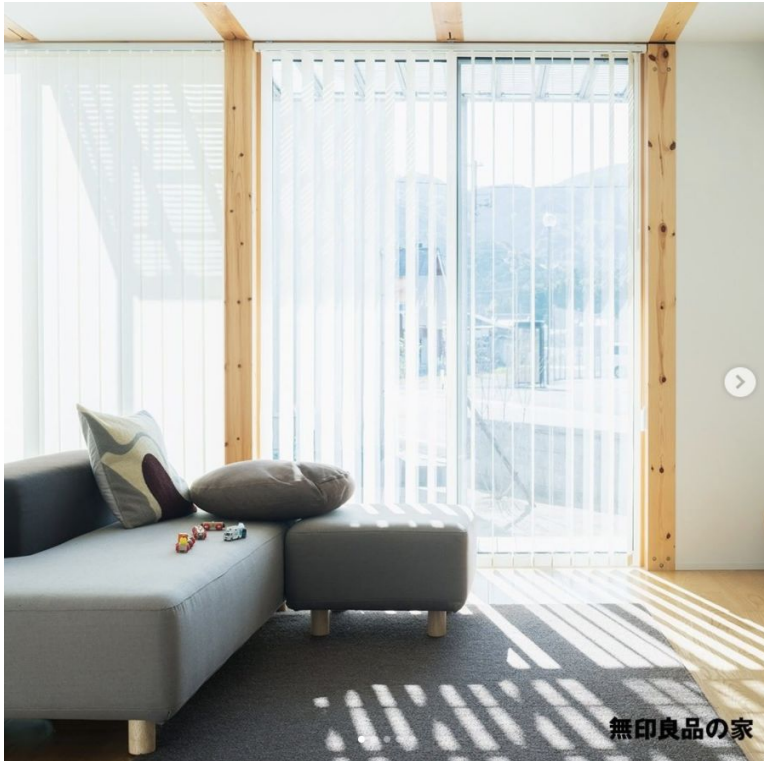
MUJI1



MUJI2



MUJI3



MUJI4



MUJI5



MUJI6



MUJI7



MUJI8



MUJI9



MUJI10



MUJI1



MUJI2



MUJI13



MUJI14



MUJI15



COS1



COS2



COS3



COS4



COS5



COS6



COS7



COS8



COS9



COS10



COS11



COS12



COS13



COS14



COS15

