

Branded: Bad Girls Go Shopping

Jan Bardsley and Hiroko Hirakawa

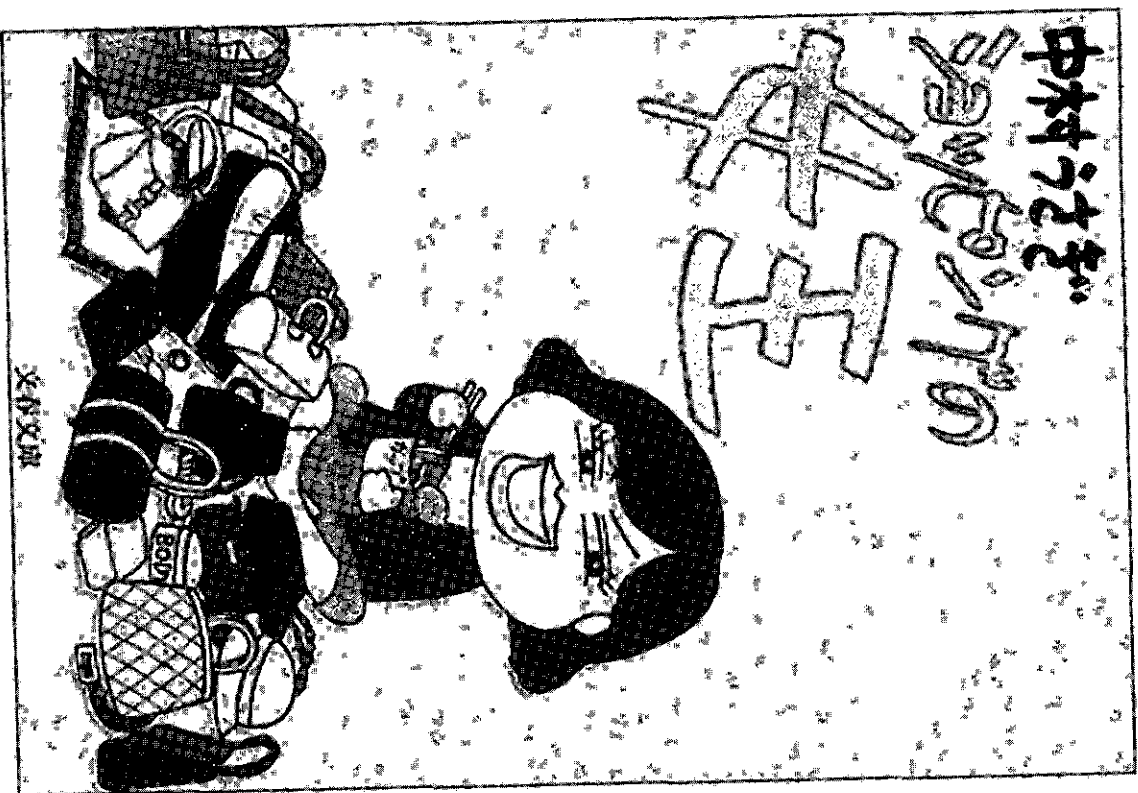
With her party imminent, Muffy was as hyperactive as a Japanese tourist in a Louis Vuitton outlet store.¹

Plum Sykes, *Beyrdorf Blondes*

Introduction

The Japanese fascination with high-end luxury goods has captured worldwide attention for good reason. Japanese have become by far the largest group of consumers of American and European designer-brand fashion goods, their purchases accounting for 40 percent of this multi-billion-dollar global market.² In 2002, a Merrill Lynch analyst stated that the dozen largest fashion houses in Europe owed one out of every three dollars in worldwide sales to Japanese consumers.³ Websites for leading brands such as Cartier, Chanel, and Louis Vuitton include Japanese-language pages and many high-end boutiques abroad regularly employ Japanese-speaking sales personnel.⁴ Among these brands, Louis Vuitton has been particularly successful in Japan since it was first promoted in 1977 by a new magazine for young women, *J*.⁵ By 1999, an estimated 40 percent of Japanese women owned at least one Louis Vuitton product⁶ and more than half of Japanese women in their twenties had a Louis Vuitton handbag.⁶ When Louis Vuitton opened its flagship store in the stylish Omotesando shopping district in Tokyo in September 2002, it earned \$1 million in opening day sales.⁷ Store openings for Hermès and Prada in 2001 were remarkably successful as well.⁸

The visibility of this consumption, especially among young, single women, provoked reaction of all kinds in Japan in the 1980s. Celebrations of conspicuous consumption took many forms, including foreign shopping tours, gold-dusted desserts, and a best-selling novel (*Somehow Crystal*, 1981) that also functioned as a shopping guide.⁹ The "bubbly life," as popular writer Hayashi Mariko dubbed it, was initially explained by the booming Japanese bubble economy of the 1980s and the increase in single women who wanted to delay marriage, live rent-free with



Book cover, *Shopping Queen* by Nakamura Usagi (Tokyo: Bunsyun Bunko, 2001). Reprinted with permission from Bungei Shunju.

their parents, and spend the money gained from their low-level office jobs on leisure activities such as shopping, travel, and entertainment.¹⁰ In 2005, long after the bursting of the bubble economy, the age of first marriage is still rising, the birth rate still falling, and luxury goods are still selling extraordinarily well in Japan. The success of Western designer brands cannot be explained by the tastes of single working women alone. Teenagers and matrons alike are part of the market, too—or, as some would say, equally part of the problem.

Brand love has also given rise to moral panic, cautionary tales, and stories of heroically thrifty mothers. In 1989, for example, the climactic final year of the bubble economy, "A Bowl of Buckwheat Noodles," a short story by an anonymous male writer about a young, frugal widow raising her two young boys on her own, became a hit, and was later made into a film.¹¹ Conservative (male) politicians immediately saw the value of this story as a counter-narrative to tales of spoiled young women in Japan, and praised this sentimental story as a much-needed gem. When asked in 1985 what he was looking for in a wife, Crown Prince Naruhito emphasized that he wanted a partner who shied away from luxury and that he'd be troubled by someone who became excited over "this and that at Tiffany & Co."¹² (although in 1993, the prince presented his bride with an enormous diamond ring). More recently, a 2003 ladies' comic warned readers against excessive spending by running a reportedly true story describing how a young mother's purchase of a pricey handbag, bought to keep up with richer, brand-conscious neighbors, sent her spiraling downward into lying, gambling, and bankruptcy.¹³

Extreme shopping can get one into trouble, but does purchasing a Western designer brand really qualify the consumer for inclusion in this volume devoted to *Bad Girls of Japan*? If so, what about such a purchase stigmatizes it as "bad," and how does this indictment not only serve to disparage the individual consumer but women in general, producing "bad girls"? In turn, how do these definitions of deviant shopping frame opposing notions of consumer correctness? This chapter explores these questions by investigating a range of discourses in Japanese popular culture that purport to explain how women should and should not consume fashion products.¹⁴ Sources include recent fashion guides, a novel, a top-selling series of shopaholic confessional books, feminist debate, and a popular television drama. Considering these sources, all directed primarily to female audiences, allows us to understand what girls' and women's motivations are *imagined* to be and how these imagined desires are deployed to influence brand consumption and encourage feminine virtue in contemporary Japan.

Stories that tie feminine virtue to careful shopping are not new in Japan, though they have changed over time. The long-held ideal of the Japanese woman as the good wife, wise mother who practices frugality, saves religiously, and makes sacrifices for the sake of family and nation, although still part of the Japanese imaginary, seems quaintly old fashioned when compared to the lifestyles often promoted to women today. Self-expression has replaced self-sacrifice as the new orthodoxy and permits a certain degree of self-indulgence as well, especially when it's in service of developing a sophisticated palate. In popular fiction from the 1970s to the present, the figure of what we call the enlightened career woman has embodied this ideal. Her years of hard work have not only enabled her to buy

luxuries on her own, but have given her the refined taste to appreciate them without losing her personal sense of chic. A deserving consumer, the enlightened career woman emerges as the good girl of brand shopping, and simultaneously represents an embrace of the new opportunities open for women in post-BEOL corporate Japan.¹⁵ Bad brand-girls come in many forms in contemporary popular culture, the nature of their transgression defined differently by different critics. They are reprimanded as badly behaved, as badly duped, as badly overindulgent, as badly impulsive, and, most often, as badly lacking in a mature sense of self. The loudest retort to such charges comes from our featured bad girl, author Nakamura Usagi, self-described Queen of Shopping and brand addict, who disdains the good girls of shopping and defends the bad as launching a legitimate protest against the constraints forced upon women in Japan. Interestingly, images of the wise wife continue to circulate, but as psychologist Ogura Chikako shows, this new wife's wisdom echoes Nakamura's cynicism: she aims to beat the system, getting her brand fashion and having her self-expression, too.

Elegant and Entitled: The Enlightened Career Woman

The bad girls of brand shopping turn up regularly in fiction and fashion guides devoted to celebrating the deserving brand consumer. Functioning as the foil in these narratives, the badly behaved girls' immaturity highlights the worldliness of the enlightened career woman. They play the annoying trick to her borderless chic. To discuss the politics involved in this hierarchy, we begin by introducing two fictional examples of the enlightened career woman: Kawashima Midori, the heroine of the hit TV drama, "Brand" (2000), and Kitamura Sami, the lead character in Hayashi Mariko's best-selling novel, *Cosmetics* (2002).¹⁶ We also describe how the same hierarchy operates in Suzuki Rumiko's 2001 fashion guide, *Don't Take Hermet's Lightly or You'll Be Sorry*. This section concludes with some thoughts about how "Brand," *Cosmetics*, and *Don't Take Hermet's Lightly* pave the way for the continued consumption of luxury fashion—as long as one plays by the career woman's new rules and does not sink to becoming a bad girl.

Styled as single, attractive, 30-something urbanites, Kawashima Midori and Kitamura Sami enjoy management positions in the fashion industry and exciting, complicated love lives. They resist parental pressure to marry, are absorbed in their work, earn a good salary, and ultimately triumph over the challenges presented by their competitive work environments. Their consumption of chic fashion reflects and rewards their hard-won career achievements and their sense of personal identity. Although they face disappointments and agonizing decisions, both revel in taking control over their lives—a theme strongly emphasized in the narratives. At the conclusion of their stories, still chic and single, Kawashima Midori and Kitamura Sami are happy with their lives and themselves. In past decades and for some critics today, such concentration on creative work, multiple suitors, and resistance to marriage and motherhood would brand these characters bad girls or at least defiant ones. But "Brand" and *Cosmetics* depict Midori and Sami as bravely struggling to embrace the new orthodoxy of personal expression.

Several aspects of Kawashima Midori's connection to luxury brands are relevant here. As the press manager at Dion Japan, an elegant French boutique (modeled on the Christian Dior firm, which consulted on this production), 35-year-old Midori must plan fashion shows and arrange advertisements. Always elegant, Midori (played by Inai Miki) rarely wears a recognizable brand, although the camera lingers on what appear to be her expensive handbags. She is never shown shopping or even thinking about what to wear. What does consume Midori's attention is her search for the true meaning of her life. A beautiful, white silk Dion blouse, a memento of her late mother, symbolizes authenticity for Midori. Shots of the blouse, which was a romantic, first-anniversary gift from Midori's father, are soft and brilliantly lit so that it appears radiant, pure, and almost other-worldly. Midori learns that her mother did not initially wear the garment, but had to develop a self-confidence that would make her feel as if she were not "giving into the blouse." The stronger the mother's sense of self-worth became, the more comfortably she could wear the blouse. Midori grew up closely associating the fine blouse with her mother, as if it were a part of her. Over the course of the drama, Midori looks at the white blouse, wondering if she, too, will discover her true self and be worthy of the blouse and her mother.

Kawashima Midori is angelic. She venerates the craftsmanship that goes into Dion products, generously forgives the competitors and subordinates who betray her, and works so hard that the company finally forces her to take a vacation. One of Midori's self-defining moments in "Brand" arises when she must confront publicity attacking Dion advertising as leading to teenagers' compensated dating (*enjo kôsai*) practices, in which flirtation and sex with older men is traded for expensive brand fashions. Against all advice from her superiors, Midori declares at a press conference that Dion does indeed bear some responsibility. But her most important message, one that she describes as her own and not Dion's, is that young girls must learn that it is they "who make the brand shine," that a brand's authenticity is nothing without their own. Here, Midori brings in the example of "a friend's" path to self-discovery and how the friend matured into an elegant white blouse.

Midori decides to quit Dion after this incident and also turns down marriage proposals from two handsome Japanese suitors: her former lover, the brilliant marketing manager at Dion and her newer and true love, a man ten years her junior, who is heir to a long line of tea ceremony practitioners. In the drama's final scene, one that blends French haute couture and the quintessentially Japanese, Midori, resplendent in her mother's blouse and a white pant suit, walks buoyantly through a grove of cherry trees abloom with pale pink blossoms. In a voice-over, Midori says that she has realized that authenticity lies in the discovery of her deepest self, and when she discovered that, she says in the final line of the drama, she knew that happily, "I had become my own brand."

Whereas Midori is goodness personified, 30-year-old career woman Kitamura Sami, although presented sympathetically, is frankly ambitious and even cunning. Chief of the press section for a French cosmetics firm in Japan, Sami learns to be wary of the competition. She has an edge that scares men away from long-term relationships. The liaison to which she continually returns is with another

executive, a cynical, brilliant, sensuous—and married—Japanese man with a European flair for fashion, who gives Sami advice on how to reach ever greater career heights. Luxury brands figure in Sami's narrative as a means to measure her success. She evaluates her life as if examining it through the lens of a fashion advertisement. When she goes to meet a potential mother-in-law, Sami wears a Chanel suit that she bought on a shopping tour in Singapore with the intention of displaying herself as a successful, self-supporting career woman. At the outset of the novel, Sami sits at a sidewalk café in Paris, wondering whether or not to spend \$4,000.00 on a Birkin bag at Hermès. Turning over the reasons to buy the handbag (more color selections and a better price in Paris than in Tokyo), Sami considers how this decision entwines with choosing what she will do next in life, particularly in her career.

Kitamura Sami is no angel, but she is not the badly behaved Japanese girl of Parisian shopping. She and her friend Kanako, who resides in Paris, complain about the "waves" of Japanese tourists pushing and shoving in the Gucci and Prada boutiques, beside themselves to grasp the latest items touted by the magazines back home. Sami makes sure her fashion sense sets her apart from these Japanese, even at De Gaulle airport:

Sami's suitcase, made by Zero, was fashioned in metallic gold. It was not an ordinary sort of suitcase, the kind that Sami disliked, but one that she had sought out in Hong Kong. It came equipped with casters and handles, and was intended to be pulled upright. There were many women who were hunched over enormous suitcases that they had to push and drag. Sami couldn't stand the horrible clanking noise those made. Sami's philosophy of beauty held that, especially in an airport, a woman must walk smartly. No doubt Sami stood out among all the ordinary young women lining up at the economy counter. In situations like this, Sami would not be caught dead wearing jeans like them. Instead, she wore slim slacks bought in Paris and topped them with an old Agnes B. leather coat.¹⁷

At the end of the novel, Kitamura Sami is on a plane to Paris for a major fashion event that she has organized. While she remains fashionable and involved in the cosmetics industry, her growing maturity has given her a certain distance from designer brand fashion, which she imagines proves her more sophisticated than other women. Soaring across the world from Tokyo to Paris, Sami knows that "all the choices to make in her life are hers alone."

The hierarchy of the elite career woman as the deserving consumer and the naive one as the bad girl is most overtly expressed in fashion guides like Suzuki Rumiko's book, *Don't Take Hermès Lightly or You'll Be Sorry*.¹⁸ Suzuki argues that the truly self-aware, elegant woman does not like brands simply because they are brands as naive consumers do, but feels a natural affinity with them. Suzuki includes herself among the elite in this homage to boardroom chic:

Each had much experience in her own line of work and each had her say. They epitomized the label, "Career Woman." When I glanced down at their hands, I saw they were all using the same kind of notebook. It was the same Hermès notebook that

I had. Was this merely coincidence? These women were not at all the sort to pursue trends or imitate others, nor were they friends who enjoyed dressing alike. These women, who had achieved position and worked with such enthusiasm, were naturally at home with a brand appropriate to their status. It was their competence in their work and their maturity, I suspect, that led them to choose quality items that did not follow trends. That is the point of having top-quality things. That is, I believe, what makes one deserving of Hermès.¹⁹

Don't Take Hermès-Lightly is a how-to guide geared to women, which sports a paper cover that resembles Hermès packaging. Deep, dark orange in color, the cover is made to appear pebbled like leather and looks as if it is wrapped in the brand's trademark slender, brown ribbon which here, too, bears the imprint "Hermès—Paris." Purchasing this volume for a mere 1,600 yen (around \$15.00) can make one feel as if obtaining an elite Hermès product at a bargain and also as if capturing a bit of the elite career woman's glamour. The book is not so much a guide to Hermès products as a primer on how to become the discerning woman who deserves to own them. The guide does not pretend that modeling such behavior will bring career success, only style.

Enter the bad girl. Suzuki instructs through testimonies to the career women described above but, even more forcefully, with horror stories about spectacularly unqualified Japanese shoppers. As Suzuki sees it, the sad state of Hermès consumption by Japanese has resulted from newly moneyed consumers' lack of self-awareness, their distasteful shopping habits, and their failure to appreciate the fine craftsmanship of Hermès. Much like Sami's lament over Japanese shoppers in Paris, Suzuki describes how shocking French people find it when Japanese crowd into chic boutiques, dressed down in sloppy sneakers and blue jeans as if they were going on hikes, pawing all the goods, yelling excitedly to each other, and behaving in a demanding manner toward the poor sales people forced to serve them. Suzuki recounts the scene of a shop suddenly engulfed by a wave of uniform-clad school-girls on a fieldtrip from Saitama, imagining that the incident must surely have frightened the French into wondering if a Japanese cult had landed in Paris. She advises that if you are so young that you need to buy on credit, have your parents buy your luxuries, or work hours at a part-time job to obtain your designer bag, then you are really too young for Hermès. Young or old, she warns, one must never stoop to buying an Hermès knock-off. Echoing the admiration for authenticity extolled in "Brand," Suzuki holds that the most pathetic of all consumers are those who possess a real Hermès product but are themselves fakes. In contrast, Suzuki's enlightened career woman has developed a personal authenticity that draws her to intrinsically fine things, which simply happen to be designer brands, and has a restraint that meshes with the traditions of the tea ceremony. Suzuki sees the career woman's inner and outer polish combining to form a seamlessly perfect Total Look. This sophistication renders her borderless, a cosmopolitan with global panache, who would never be mistaken for one of the fakes among waves of Japanese pushing and shoving at Gucci.

The enlightened career woman, as embodied by Kawashima Midori and Kitamura Sami, and extolled by Suzuki Rumiko has earned a special admission

into the world of high French fashion, almost passing for a European aristocrat. Yet references to the aesthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony and cherry blossoms show that the career woman is no poor step-cousin to European high taste, even as she rejects contemporary mass culture in Japan. As anthropologist Karen Kelsky has discussed, some women in Japan of different ages and classes have used the idea of the West as an imagined space of utopian possibilities, to launch a critique of Japanese society. Kelsky observes how this process has tended to focus on a project of developing "good manners" that "entails above all a disciplining of the body, mind, and voice in accordance with the 'rules' of a predetermined West. . . ."²⁰ In this female competition over achieving class through classiness, the desirability of the luxury fashion itself goes unquestioned. Reading the brand good solely as a sign of personal authenticity shifts scrutiny away from conglomerate profits, global marketing schemes, and a more complex politics of class and gender in Japan.

Confessions of a Dis-Fased Shopping Queen

Some people like to say in the most pretentious way, "Oh, no, I don't love brand goods simply because they are brand goods, but because they are so well made that we can use them for decades." That's a lie! We buy brand goods because they are brand goods.²¹

Nakamura Usagi, *The Shopping Queen*

This quote offers a taste of the radically different picture of luxury shopping presented in the confessional books written in the late 1990s and early 2000s by our featured bad girl, Nakamura Usagi. This self-styled "queen of shopping" makes no claims to being elite, enlightened or even very elegant. Indeed, it is Nakamura's unabashedly frank, even bawdy approach toward brand-love that has turned this bad girl into a best-selling author.

Fans of Nakamura's writing are familiar with her biography. Born in 1958, Nakamura Usagi (Noriko) spent some post-college years as an OL, got married, and then divorced in the 1980s.²² She initially earned fame and fortune as a fantasy novel writer in the early 1990s when her story, *Adventures of Gokudō-Kun* was turned into a successful anime.²³ Nakamura squandered her new fortune, spending her income in brand shopping—approximately 500 million yen over five years—while letting her taxes fall into arrears. In 2001, at the age of 43, Nakamura met a young man working at a host club in Tokyo, became infatuated with him, and ended up spending 15 million yen on him in that year alone. This infatuation also piqued anxiety over her appearance, leading Nakamura to undergo a series of expensive cosmetic surgeries. All the while, Nakamura professed disillusionment with heterosexual love, and was married to a gay man from Hong Kong whom she had met at a gay bar in Tokyo.

As a woman in her 40s with a successful writing career, Nakamura earns more money by far than most Japanese women could ever hope to make. One might expect that a woman of her age and position could present herself as the

enlightened, Westernized sophisticate, who happens to buy luxury fashions because of their quality, not their brand cache. Yet, as we shall see, Nakamura's books do everything possible to distance her from this ladylike image. Not only does she openly acknowledge that she hungers after brands because they are brands, she loves to use vulgar male speech and works scatological humor into her shopping essays. Unlike her self-restrained, enlightened sisters, Nakamura comes across as desire itself, ready to devour anything she wants, spewing out the "excrement" of vile language and bodily waste, denying any etiquette that would contain her.

Nakamura claims that we all live in a gendered, capitalist world, and we all want to feel superior and gain worldly success in this world, where every woman is treated unequally because of her gender, class, and nationality. Why bother to make up all these excuses to rationalize this desire, Nakamura challenges. If something helps us *feel*, even momentarily, like a winner in this not so fair world, then why not make use of it? In the process of asking such questions and exposing her own vulnerabilities, Nakamura also exposes the arbitrary nature of the gender, class, and national boundaries that are rendered natural and inevitable through the rhetoric of the deserving consumer. Nakamura is a buster of such boundaries. She is a very bad girl—and not apologetic in the least.

Nakamura's satiric criticism of the popular 1992 tract, *Living Pure and Poor* by Nakano Kōji²⁴ exemplifies her bad girl attitude. According to Nakano, at the height of the Japanese bubble economy, the materialistically driven, or even worse, the nouveau riche became the dominant image of the Japanese abroad. The Japanese were in danger of being seen, as indicated in the quote at the outset of this chapter, as the frenetic fans of luxury brands. Concerned with the unflattering nature of this international image, Nakano traces the works of such famous forefathers of high Japanese aesthetics as poets Saigyō and Bashō, among others, in hopes of showing that Japan has a long tradition of valuing simple, plain living. (Nakano conveniently neglects to consider the extent to which such simplicity was a pose for these privileged men.) The fact that Nakamura never read the book, as she admits, does not stop her from satirizing "the pure and poor" (*seihin*) by coining a new term, "dirty and poor" (*dakuhin*). Nakamura's dirty and poor live "an evil, gaudy, greedy, and stingy life soiled by materialistic desires."²⁵ Asserting herself as an embodiment of the dirty and poor, Nakamura challenges Nakano Kōji as follows:

Yes, I, the dirty and poor, LOVE money, I spend it all, when I have an income (or even when I don't), which, of course, makes me poor. In contrast, the "pure and poor" do have money because they don't spend it. They say, "Yes, I live pure and poor," yet, in fact, they have millions of yen in their bank accounts. Isn't this nothing but cheating? . . . They are the enemy of a capitalistic society. Think of it this way. If we stop spending money, what will happen to our industries? If all of us begin to live, self-sufficiently, our farmers, fishermen, and store managers will be in trouble. Our salarymen will become unemployed. Okay, let me be honest and say that I don't really care what would happen to them. What about ME if all of you become self-sufficient and stop buying my books? How can I make a living? Are you going to take care of me then, Nakano Kōji?²⁶

Nakamura's books direct equal sarcasm to narratives of the enlightened consumer as lauded by Suzuki Runkiko who simply happens to choose brand goods. She sees this claim as an alibi for brand love; Nakamura asserts that all women who buy brands do so "because they make you feel superior even though you may be ugly, dumb, or from a poor family."²⁷ They are "rewards for the winners of a game that is called capitalism."²⁸ She explains as follows:

Brand goods are so expensive, aren't they? Why? Well, the way I see it, we lose our appreciation of them if they aren't. Imagine a Chanel T-shirt that costs only 500 yen. At that price, no one could say, "Hey, I wear Chanel," and feel superior. If you want to present yourself as the "rich-lady-in-her-brand-clothes" type, then even a T-shirt needs to cost 100,000 yen . . . Even if it costs 250,000 yen or so, people will still forgive that if it is a Chanel or Hermès T-shirt. They need to. But if a Daiso Supermarket's original T-shirt cost that much, people would either be carried away in shock to the emergency room, or start a riot.²⁹

Nakamura claims brand fashions are rewards precisely because they are expensive and not because of any intrinsically high value. They need to be expensive in order to maintain the illusion of high quality that, in turn, supports the claims to sophistication made by their owners. Nakamura seeks to expose the tale of the deserving consumer as a capitalist story that naturalizes the hierarchy of tastes marked along class and national lines. She sees all luxury brand owners, including elite career women, as aspirational consumers, buying expensive brands in hopes of feeling as if they have climbed the global ladder of success. She argues that when Japanese buy Western brand goods over inexpensive domestic ones, they are consuming this illusory feeling, although the rhetoric of "happening to choose brands" conveniently allows them to avoid admitting that the love of brands is motivated by this wannabe mentality.

Empire of Marriage, the 2004 book that records a dialogue between Ueno Chizuko, famous feminist and sociology professor at the University of Tokyo, and Nobuta Sayoko, a well-known feminist psychotherapist, provides an example of Nakamura's point about how successful professional women resist being seen as another wannabe. At one point in their conversation, Ueno criticizes the people lining up at the openings of European brand stores in Tokyo:

It's so embarrassing to watch them on TV. I can't help but wonder, "In the middle of this recession, what's with these women?" Japan is the easiest market for those European brands, isn't it? I, for one, don't own any of those brand goods.³⁰

Shyly acknowledging that she, in fact, carries a Louis Vuitton bag, Nobuta explains that she likes such products because they are sturdy. Adopting the same stance as Nakamura Usagi, Ueno calls this an excuse, remarking once again how she "takes pride" in not owning a single European brand and pressing Nobuta to "frankly admit that people love European brands because everyone knows they are expensive."³¹ In response, Nobuta tries hard to convince Ueno (and herself as well) that her admiration of the sturdiness of Louis Vuitton products is genuine, sharing an

episode of how her first Louis Vuitton bag, after having been stolen and found deserted in a river, was returned undamaged half a year later. When Ueno retorts that bags manufactured by Ichizawa Hanpu, a Kyoto firm, are as sturdy as Louis Vuitton's, Nobuta helplessly replies, "Well, but they are not sold in Paris."³² Ueno pounces on this opportunity to remind Nobuta that marketing the image of Paris is the "global sales strategy for European brands" and that this strategy is apparently working well since Paris is the "added value" that has made Nobuta choose Louis Vuitton over Ichizawa Hanpu.³³ In response, Nobuta insists that she was genuinely moved by the sturdiness of her lost and found Louis Vuitton bag, at which point Ueno exclaims, "That's the reason you came up with afterwards [not the reason why you bought it to begin with], and I can't believe a woman like you would do that!"³⁴

Apparently, Ueno, like Nakamura, believes that the educated and sophisticated career woman—like Nobuta—is after all not that different from crowds of other Japanese brand shoppers. For Ueno, these Japanese brand shoppers are easy prey for the strategic sales of European brands, and she takes pride in refusing to become one of these victims. Ueno thus creates, though probably unwittingly, a new category of the deserving consumer and places herself in that category—the consumer who rejects brand shopping because she is sufficiently enlightened to recognize the fallacious rhetoric of intrinsic value. In contrast to Ueno and Nobuta, Nakamura has no problem admitting that she is a brand-shopping junkie, and asks, so what? At the same time, Nakamura admits that "the big three French brands [Chanel, Hermès, and Louis Vuitton], that we dumb Japanese women are crazy about" not only place "outrageous prices" on their products, but also do not hesitate to produce "some incredibly useless goods."³⁵ Just look, she says, at Chanel's 150,000 yen portable umbrella that doesn't even hold up in the rain. Nakamura quickly adds that she bought it anyway because it has a Chanel logo, on it.

Certainly, Nakamura uses this satiric self-representation as a "brand-crazed, dumb Japanese woman" to poke fun at the career woman who naively believes that personal authenticity makes her a borderless, brand-deserving cosmopolitan. Yet Nakamura simultaneously distances herself from the intellectual sophisticate like Ueno who virtuously resists brands. She also laughs at pundits, such as one misogynistic TV commentator who accused Japanese women of indirectly supporting French nuclear experiments through brand consumption and castigating them all in effect as bad girls:

And, when I heard of the commentator's accusation, I, a dumb Japanese woman, felt bad. This didn't stop me buying brand goods, though. I am an unpatriotic Japanese citizen, or should I say, an "unpatriotic" global citizen! The "brand-crazed-dumb-woman" is even less honorable than the "kogyaru-who-doesn't-hesitate-to-sell-her-underwear-or-even-her-body." Well, these two labels are too long for brand names, so instead, [the commentators] are using "Chanel" as the brand name for us dumb women. Our foreheads are branded with the "Chanel" logo. Say, isn't that cool? ... Thanks to us dumb Japanese women, the French government must have earned all the foreign currency it needed to engage in another nuclear experiment.³⁶

Here Nakamura's mockery, obviously targets those who worry over the international image of Japanese women's luxury shopping. Yet Nakamura's cynical joke about being an "unpatriotic global citizen" seems equally aimed at feminist intellectuals who, in an attempt to critique and resist the impacts of global capitalism, sometimes end up being self-righteous. Her sarcasm reminds us that, like it or not, most of us have some wannabe mentality, as it is almost impossible to completely escape from the pervasive forces of late capitalism. To Ueno, who speaks proudly of not owning a single European brand, Nobuta cannot help but say, "Well, I cannot possibly see why we need to be that obstinate about brand shopping."³⁷ Nakamura would certainly be in amused agreement with this remark.

Nakamura, however, has another reason why she is unable to identify with the puritanical intellectuals who refuse brand shopping. For Nakamura, the pleasure it brings may be illusory, but it is better than having none:

Brand women are deceiving themselves. We seek to self-actualize. Then, by owning brand goods, we feel we have improved ourselves. "Oh, at last, I have become a woman who deserves to have a Birkin bag." What a self-deception! But it feels so good, and, before we know it, we are trapped in the hell [of endless cycles of brand shopping]. I know this [because I have lived it].³⁸

As Nakamura sees it, everyone wants to win the capitalist game, and gender complicates this game. The male winner gains pretty women as his reward. His career success and wealth do not contradict his sense of being a man, and bring satisfaction to his (heterosexual) masculine identity. In contrast, for Nakamura, a successful career does not guarantee a woman male suitors unless she is pretty, and, thus, does not satisfy her (heterosexual) feminine identity. The TV drama, "Brand" produces nothing but "a huge belch" from Nakamura, as she is "sick and tired of being overfed that kind of superficial portrayal of the cool career woman."³⁹ For Nakamura, the very idea of such self-actualization is a sham. Unlike such nebulous dreams, brand goods are attainable for a price, requiring money and nothing else. But, as Nakamura acknowledges, facing the fact of such displacement is hard to do.

Conclusion: Married, Still Shopping

Associating Japanese luxury shopping with either independent career women or naive teens and 20-somethings assumes that their status as single women plays a crucial role in their self-indulgence. Surely, once they get married and especially when they have children, these consumers will shed their haute ambitions and concentrate on working, spending and saving for the good of their families. As feminist psychologist Ogura Chikako argues in her 2003 book, *Conditions for Marriage*, however, many of today's women view marriage as a means for continued self-actualization and pleasure, and not as a gateway to a life of constraint. Their unsentimental views of gender roles, work, and marriage in Japan are ones that ring true for Nakamura Usagi and Jend another example of how narratives of self-discovery, the good life, and shopping are intertwined.

In late 1990s, Ogura conducted interviews with single women in their 30s and early 40s, who were living in metropolitan Japan. Interestingly, Ogura found that those interviewees who were graduates of junior colleges or lower-ranked four-year universities had what she called a "new housewife orientation."⁴⁰ These women had grown up observing how hard their fathers worked as corporate warriors while leaving their wives to shoulder all responsibility for child-rearing and housework. These wives and mothers also often worked outside the home in part-time jobs to supplement the family income. Witnessing the difficulties of their mothers' double-burdened life led these daughters to consciously reject this path as no longer viable. At the same time, they knew their lack of educational credentials would prevent them from following the path of the elite career-woman embodied by Kitamura Sami or Kawashima Midori. Moreover, this option did not appeal to them, for it simply meant that they would live like their fathers, too exhausted to enjoy their private lives. Seeking to avoid the hard lives of their mothers and their fathers, these women are specifically looking for a husband who will allow them to lead a materially comfortable life with plenty of free time to pursue self-actualization. If they find such a husband, they say, they will happily marry and become the stay-at-home housewife. They do plan to go back to work once their children have grown up. But this work should be the kind that will satisfy their desire to find their true self. Stylish work such as the job of an interior designer or a floral shop owner is preferred. For these women, it does not matter if such work can make them much money as long as it brings them pleasure. As they see it, the husband bears all the responsibility for a family's financial support.

As Ogura argues, these women are realistic in their view that without exceptional educational credentials in contemporary Japanese society they can only hope to pursue self and individuality after finding a well-off husband. The new housewife orientation represents a cynical attempt on the part of these women, who are strongly conscious of their marginal status, to get the most out of their condition. It is the desire of these women that renders men as merely a means, rather like brand goods, to realize their dreams of pursuing personal authenticity. By holding onto this desire, they are explicitly refusing to become the conventional housewife, who would put the welfare of the family before her own personal fulfillment. Safely married, with children in tow, they may look reassuringly good, but these women are as bad as any of the single, luxury shoppers. In their case, however, the replaceable, expendable, and consumable item is the husband. As they see it, their real dilemma is to find the rich husband. They are acutely aware that they might have to wait longer to obtain him than a Birkin bag. In fact, waiting years in line for a Birkin bag might be the better bet.

Throughout her books, Nakamura screams, "I'm not pretty. I don't have a rich husband." Thus, despite her successful career, Nakamura voices the dilemma faced by these women, who are marked down as average. She confesses that she feels like yelling at a young wife dressed head-to-toe in Hermès leisurely cruising with her kids at a party: "Damn you!! You have the husband who allows you such luxury, while I have to buy all these myself. Oh yeah, I'm not pretty like you, bitch!"⁴¹ She feels like yelling not out of disdain for the woman's superficiality, but because her

presence reminds Nakamura that something is missing in her life. She turns to brand shopping as a way, perhaps the only way, at least to feel that she has what she wants. Shopping temporarily satisfies but also frustrates her because she also knows what she really wants is not the brand goods, or not even the rich husband. What drives Nakamura to what she calls "empty consumption" is the persistent "sense of despair that something fundamental is missing . . . but I don't know what that is." This inability to find the missing something, she believes, is due to the way "society cleverly hides this by telling us we already have it."⁴² It is a social phenomenon she sees as enabled by the mechanism that forces women to choose between career success and the allure of femininity.

Throughout her books, Nakamura also calls herself, *The Naked Empress*. She buys brands because she wants to feel like a queen, even though she knows the masses will see through her pretense. The masses will see that she is as vulnerable as any other woman as she struggles to live the contradictions of gender in a late capitalist society. A graduate of a mediocre four-year university, an ex-OL who is divorced, a surgically altered brand shopper, Nakamura is both too cynical and honest to place herself on the side of the enlightened. She is too cynical to believe, like Midori or Sami, in the liberated girl's dream of finding an authentic self through having it all. Nakamura is also too honest to believe that she is free from the binding fetters of established heterosexual gender identity. Nakamura may be a self-proclaimed bad girl, but she is also a wounded one.

Notes

Thanks to Laura Miller, many Bad Girl authors, and the Japanese History and Culture Study Group at Duke University organized by Simon Partner and Jennifer Weisenfeld for advice on this chapter.

1. Plum Sykes, *Bergdorf Blondes* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 35.
2. Carol Matlack et al., "The Vuitton Money Machine," *Business Week International Editions*, March 22, 2004: 48. Matlack also reports that in 2004 purchases by Japanese accounted for an estimated 55% of Louis Vuitton's \$3.8 billion in annual sales and that its executives hope to tap into "rising affluence in China and India."
3. Clay Chandler and Cindy Kano, "Recession Chic," *Fortune*, September 29, 2003: 52.
4. Korean and Chinese language pages are also available at the websites, as of this writing.
5. "Japan's Luxury Product Sales Increase," *IGN Global Marketing Newsletter*, September 1999. Online at <<http://www.pangaea.net/IGN/news0051.htm>>.
6. Suwendrini Kakuchi, "Despite Hard Times, Shopping Habits Die Hard," *Asia Times Online* January 15, 1999.
7. George Wehrhritz and Kay Itoi, "The Luxury Bubble," *Newsweek*, February 10, 2003: 34.
8. Hermès opened a 12-story, \$137 million store in the Ginza on June 27, 2001. According to *Japan Today*, Japanese are "the company's most loyal customers [accounting] for 25% of global turnover for the brand" while "France brings in 17% in sales." "Hermès Opens Giltzy Shop in Ginza," *Japan Today* June 28, 2001. Online at <http://www.japantoday.com>. Prada's flagship store, which opened in Tokyo's Aoyama district on June 7, 2001, "cost \$85 million, Italy's largest-ever investment in [Japan]," Chandler and Kano, "Recession Chic," 52.

9. Tanaka Yasuo, *Nantōnaku, kurisutaru* (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1981). For more on this novel, see Norma Field, "Somehow: The Postmodern as Atmosphere," in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootyan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 169–188.
10. Yamada Toyoko, *Burando no seiki* (Tokyo: Magajin hausu, 2000), 218.
11. The 1992 film, also titled *Ippai no kakesoba* (A bowl of buckwheat noodles), was directed by Nishikawa Katsumi.
12. Kawahara Toshiaki, *Kōtaisit-ti Masako-sanya* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993), 104.
13. "Otto ni naisho no shakkin de jiko hasan wa kannō?", *Onna no toraburu*, October 1, 2003: 165–184. We thank Kinko Ito for this source.
14. Space does not permit discussion of the equally interesting discourse in English-language publications on Japanese women's shopping. Analysis of Japanese consumption and domestication of "the West" in broader context is found in Joseph Tobin, ed. *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven: Yale University, 1992).
15. Barbara Molony discusses the EEOI in, "Japan's 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the Changing Discourse on Gender," *Signs* (1995): 269–302; Aki Hirota analyzes celebrations of the new career woman post-1970 in "Image-makers and Victims: The Croissant Syndrome and Yellow Cabs," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal English Supplement* 19 (2000): 83–121.
16. "Brand," a serialized television drama, aired in 2000. Hayashi Mariko, *Kosumechikku* (Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 2002), 35–36. The novel was originally serialized in the magazine *Domani* from January 1997 to December 1998.
17. Hayashi Mariko, *Kosumechikku*, 35–36. Kaori Shōji reports that over 100 Agnes B. outlets operated throughout Japan in the early 1990s and were so popular that "one out of every three women under 25 owned at least one Agnes B. item." Kaori Shōji, "It's Always Oh, So French in the Ginza," *International Herald Tribune Online* October 13, 2003.
18. Suzuki Rumi, *Herumesu o amaku mita to itai me ni au*, 3rd edition (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2002).
19. *Ibid.*, 160.
20. Karen Kelsky, *Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 227.
21. Nakamura Usagi, *Shoppingu no jōō* (Tokyo: Bungei Bunko, 2001), 50.
22. Nakamura's given name is Noriko. Usagi, which means rabbit, is her penname.
23. Nakamura Usagi, *Gokudō-kun manyūki* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Bunko, 1991).
24. Nakano Kōji, *Seihin no shisō* (Tokyo: Sōshisha, 1992).
25. Nakamura Usagi, *Datte, hosi ni da moni: Shakkin jōō no binbō nikki* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Bunko, 1997), 22.
26. *Ibid.*, 23–24.
27. Nakamura, *Shoppingu no jōō*, 50.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Nakamura Usagi, *Konna watashi de yokattara* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Bunko, 2000), 38.
30. Ueno Chizuko and Nobuta Sayoko, *Kekkon teikoku: Onna no wakare michi* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2004), 58–59.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 59.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. Nakamura, *Shoppingu no jōō*, 53.
36. *Ibid.*, 53–55.

37. Ueno and Nobuta, *Kekkon teikoku*, 59.
38. Nakamura, *Konna*, 192.
39. *Ibid.*, 227.
40. Ogura Chikako, *Kekkon no jōken* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun-sha, 2004), 30–39.
41. Nakamura Usagi, *Pari no toire de s'il vous plaît* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Bunko, 1999), 178.
42. Nakamura Usagi, *Shoppingu no jōō: Saigo no seisen?* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2004), 243–244.

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Edited by

Laura Miller

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