

JAPÁN "MA" KONCEPCIÓ ÉS NEGATÍV TÉR A TERMÉK PLAKÁTTERVEIHEZ

Japanese concept of "Ma" and negative space to product poster designs

Készítette: NGUYEN TRONG NGHIA, Graphic Design MA, 2nd

Témavezető: Csordás Zoltán, Tervezőgrafikus

Abstract

This study explores the Japanese concept of "Ma" and its manifestation as negative space in product poster designs. "Ma" is a multifaceted concept that embodies the essence of emptiness, interval, and pause, deeply ingrained in Japanese culture and aesthetics. It is regarded as a crucial element in creating visually appealing and harmonious designs. The strategic use of negative space in product posters can effectively guide the viewer's gaze, build focus, and enhance the overall visual communication experience.

This research analyzes the application of "Ma" and negative space in various poster designs, including both Japanese and international brands. By examining successful examples and considering factors such as layout, typography, color, and cultural sensitivity, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how "Ma" and negative space can be effectively utilized to create impactful and culturally relevant product posters. Additionally, the research delves into the historical and philosophical roots of "Ma" tracing its development and influence on Japanese artistic expression. It also explores the relationship between "Ma" and minimalism, highlighting how "Ma" contributes to the creation of minimalist yet impactful designs. The findings of this study contribute to a richer understanding of "Ma" and negative space in the context of poster design, offering valuable insights for designers seeking to create visually engaging and culturally sensitive product posters.

How long would you stop to read all the information on a product poster on the street? Especially because if it has a lot of text and is too small to read from a few meters away. If the goal of your poster is to get people to launch announcement of a new product, for example, your poster should be strategically designed with the harmonious combination between typography and product image to help you achieve this goal. A general rule for poster communication is that simplicity wins. That simplicity is linked to the Japanese concept of "Ma". It's a sublimation expression of negative space or white space that many people these days seem to tend to overlook or ignore. According to Wawaza Japanese lifestyle center, "Ma is emptiness full of potential".

This Ma concept is often defined as 'negative space'. This means that a space (or time) is intentionally left blank, to allow for relationships and functions between people and things. The Japanese concept of space is influenced by Shinto (*Rujivacharakul*, V., 2021), a spiritual tradition that values space and the relationship between objects and people as well as the objects themselves; This means that all things

are made up not only of themselves, but also of the spaces and relationships they affect. Thus, Ma is the literal gray area that allows different people, things, places and experiences to co-exist with less friction between them (*Eastgate, T., The Oxford Student, Dec, 2018*).

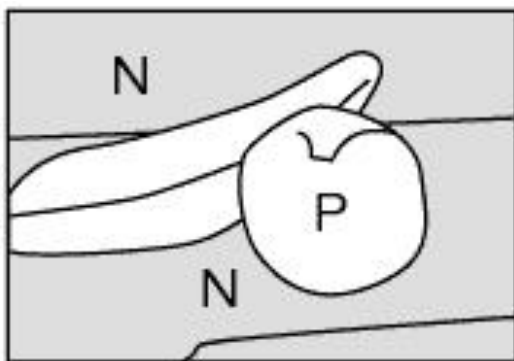
The late 1800s witnessed Japanese design principles, like the idea of "Ma", shape European art through a trend called "Japonisme". "Ma" isn't just blankness, but a vital part of balance and purpose. This shows up in Dieter Rams' work, whose "Less, but better" idea mirrors Japanese simplicity.

Take the Braun ET66 calculator by Rams. It shows "Ma" with its neat, well-balanced design. The simple layout and smart button placement make it easy to use, proving how blank space can boost both looks and usefulness. Rams' use of "Ma" leads to sleek, practical items, highlighting how Japanese design ideas still impact modern creations.

In poster design, in general and product poster in particular, where there is negative space, there is opportunity. Negative space, as you probably know, is an empty space in an image or design. Whenever there is negative space, that's usually a good place to consider placing text. This is because the text will be clear and easy to read, and the eye will be naturally drawn to it (*Tiburca, H., Sept, 2019*).

A good example to be able to better understand the negative space term covered around an object. Usually, it sounds like some kind of cryptic secret that's limited to "insiders."

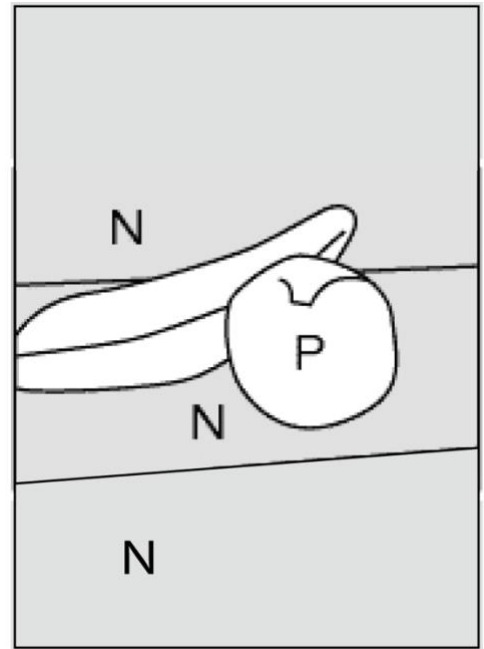
Negative space refers to the background area of a design. It is called the negative to distinguish it from the positive subject that occupies the center of visual interest.



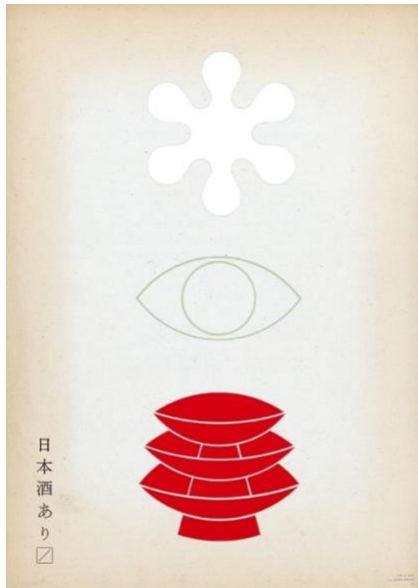
In the diagram on the left, the "positive" mass of an apple is placed on the "negative" surface of the table and the empty space behind. From habit, you will pay more attention to the apple than the table. The apple is the center of visual interest. However, seeing the negative area of the table surface is an integral part of the whole. (Piper Nilsson, *Shape and Form*).

According to the Ma concept, the Japanese think in this case that the apple has its own soul both yin and yang, so the empty space behind needs to be more open in both directions. This extension acts as a "stop station" for our eyes and helps them focus more on the apple in a more comfortable way.

Mads Soegaard emphasizes that the Ma concept is a great tool for balancing design elements and better organizing content. It will improve the visual communication experience for the viewers. Ma concept is the real star of the show, working between words and images. It keeps each page from being busy. It creates a story line that helps the viewer and helps the person who will learn troubleshooting tips. People get frustrated when information hits them. We are humans, we are not machines. Negative space in Ma concept calms us and lets us "breathe" (Soegaard. M, *The power of white space*, 2020).



In Japanese Ma concept also mentions the concept of open and close negative space in poster designs.



Poster 1 This is Sake by Hiroaki Nagai

Firstly, This "This is Sake" poster, designed by Hiroaki Nagai, is an example of open negative space. Active subjects of sakazuki cups, eyes and sake drops are surrounded on all sides by empty space.

Open negative space poses a particular problem - the danger is always present that large open areas will feel "empty". Notice how carefully Nagai has laid out his problems.

Sakazuki cups are vertically centered on the page. Title is aligned to the bottom left, creating a harmonious and easy to

read overall. These illustrations are arranged on a vertical line. There is a continuous movement from

one shape to the next in a very orderly manner.

Two more examples of subject placement in posters

"Every time the soy sauce goes down, it grows" poster designed by Kenji Ekuan and " I want to eat raw".

If the wall water bottle and carrot slices are set a little high or are too small in size, the ingredients will



Poster 2 & 3 Every time the soy sauce goes down, it grows & I want to eat raw by Kenji Ekuan sequentially

disintegrate. When the image is placed in an open space, the designer should be really sensitive to each size and space of the page and from there make the appropriate adjustments. The type is aligned to the posters, balancing the heavy base of the main subject in center. Place the subject in the center position on a large empty space, giving the viewer the feeling that the object is separate and floating but still in sight.

Secondly, close negative space in the posters above by Kenya Hara, the main objects and background are cut close to the edge of the page. This creates closed negative space. Each negative region is a closed shape. The spoons in these 2 posters have definite momentum towards definite. Compare the negative zones above and below the spoon. Empty space is arranged in balance.

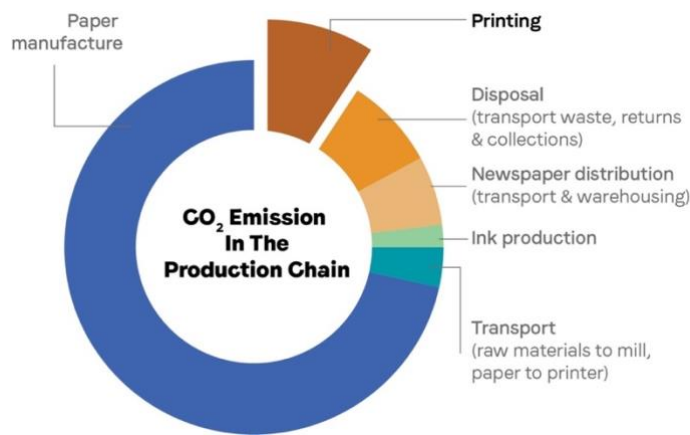
There are three factors to consider when designing negative spaces. First, the design should be easy to read for the viewer. As a designer, you should

consider white space when choosing design typographic specifications that work with the whole, such as fonts, colors, line spacing, layout. Besides, changing the layout of the negative space also affects reading performance and overall user experience. Viewers will feel more comfortable and likely want to take the time to stop and read through the information on the posters. Moreover, design color and branding are also very important to create a harmony for the overall design. Posters with lots of



Poster 4 & 5 Japanese rice wine & Miso soup by Kenya Hara

negative space can reflect the minimalism and elegance of the brand. The last factor is focus, flow and attention. Negative space does a great job of guiding viewers through interactive content. It can help build the necessary focus and direct the viewer's attention to specific parts of the composition.



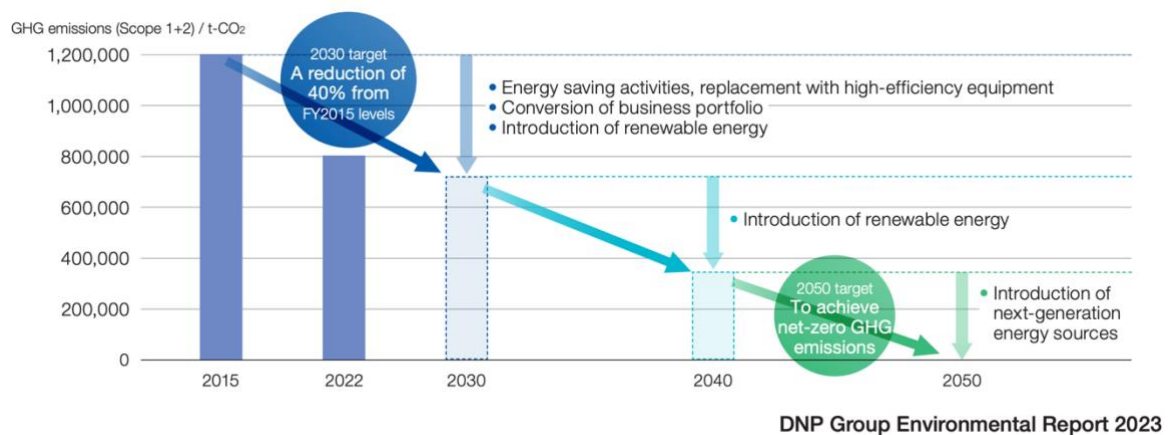
Pie chart 1 : CO₂ Emission in the Production Chain of a Daily Newspaper

The Japanese concept of "Ma" suggests a reciprocal relationship between people and their environment. Just as negative space complements a subject, a harmonious environment fosters human well-being. This philosophy is reflected in Japanese industry's commitment to sustainability and reducing carbon emissions in response to climate change.

According to the Carbon Trust, a company founded by the UK Government, focused on finding solutions to reduce carbon dioxide, a document analyzing the carbon dioxide balance of "The Daily Mirror". Every year 25% of carbon dioxide emissions come from the printing process (*Pie chart 1*). By fiscal 2030, Japan wants to cut its budget by 46% from fiscal 2013. In order to meet Tokyo's promise to reaching net-zero emissions by 2050, the new target will aim to maintain the rate of reductions. The report highlights the severity of the climate situation and calls for swift action. Furthermore, in this statistic, the experts mentioned the recycling of used printing articles and gravure printing technology to minimize the amount of CO₂ released into the environment and the recycling capacity of the company. Printing material becomes an important aspect of the paper line.

In Japan, The DNP Group has committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, aligning with their vision of a decarbonized society. To reach this goal, they have developed a comprehensive roadmap focusing on reducing Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions from their own operations to net zero. This roadmap will likely involve a multi-pronged approach, including energy efficiency improvements, transitioning to renewable energy sources, exploring carbon capture technologies, and promoting sustainable sourcing practices. The DNP Group will also prioritize innovation and research to develop new, more sustainable solutions. By implementing these strategies and continuously adapting their

roadmap, the DNP Group aims to lead the way towards a more sustainable future.



Putting Ma in MiniMALism and beyond. According to Japanese architecture, the presence of MA in a house is essential, it makes the minimalism of a room with tatami mats more elegant and liberal. Make the udon noodle poster in front of the restaurant attractive and outstanding. However, minimalism is limited to form and physical space in some respects, but for MA, there doesn't seem to be any barrier. In essence, MA is what makes minimalism possible. The Wawaza Japanese lifestyle center describes "Ma" as intentional pauses that emphasize meaning, similar to the way silence in music accentuates the notes. These pauses provide essential moments of reflection and clarity within our hectic lives.

In Japanese culture, "Ma" fosters a sense of peace and tranquility, offering respite from the chaos of daily life. This concept, when applied to poster design, lends an air of credibility and sophistication to the product being advertised. "Ma" also emphasizes intentionality and focus, encouraging a mindful approach even to brief encounters, such as viewing an advertisement. This mindful approach ensures that even with limited time, interactions have a clear purpose and meaningful impact.

Kevin Nute argues that the Japanese concept of "Ma" has a broader meaning than the Western idea of negative space. While "Ma" encompasses the space between objects, it's not simply emptiness. It's an active and distinct entity in itself. Nute cautions against equating "Ma" with the modern abstract notion of "space," which emerged when the term was introduced to Japan in the late 19th century.

He also agrees that not only is the original Japanese nature, consciousness, and place not much different from Western cultures in terms of its focus on material objects, but also in the quality of its dependence on material objects. In time, this is really unique. The baselines of all places are perceived subjectively (*Kevin Nute, Ma and the Japanese Understanding of Space Revisited, 2018*).

The impact of negative space in advertising is known to affect the overall visual appeal of a design. As Zdralek said, "Nothing can replace negative space." It's easily seen in roadside ads, from borders and typography to color and backgrounds. The concept of "Ma" encompasses all negative space, colored

or not. It's a valuable tool for experienced designers. When used effectively, "Ma" enhances design by reducing eye strain and delivering impactful messages. While much research focuses on print, "Ma" is also crucial for website design, UX, and UI, where it simplifies complex designs and enhances user experience. Studies show negative space improves readability, allowing for better information absorption. It undeniably benefits brand perception and creates elegant designs. This research confirms that "Ma" and negative space are fundamental elements in Advertising and Graphic Design.

References

- Barry, S., 2014. Negative Space: The Power of 'Nothing' in Design. *Retrieved from* www.sitepoint.com/negative-space/
- Cylinders, H., Sept, 2013. Gravure – the environmentally friendly print process. *Retrieved from* www.hybridcylinders.com/gravure-the-environmentally-friendly-print-process/
- Kisak, Y., 2011. When Less is More: Japanese Concept of "MA", Minimalism and Beyond. *Retrieved from* wawaza.com/blogs/when-less-is-more-japanese-concept-of-ma-minimalism-and-beyond/ (Seen 12.10.21).
- Mads Soegaard, 2020. The power of white space. *Retrieved from* www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/the-power-of-white-space
- Matsumoto, K., 2020. MA- The Japanese Concept of Space and Time. *Retrieved from* <https://medium.com/@kiyoshimatsumoto/ma-the-japanese-concept-of-space-and-time-3330c83ded4c>
- McCallum, T., 2019. Concept of "MA" and the space between. *Retrieved from* tommccallum.com/2019/01/04/ma-thinking-about-the-space-between/ (Seen 05.10.21).
- McGrath, J., 2018. The Japanese words for “space” could change your view of the world. *Retrieved from* qz.com/1181019/the-japanese-words-for-space-could-change-your-view-of-the-world/
- Nilsson, P. Shape and Form. *Retrieved from* documents.sessions.edu/eforms/courseware/coursedocuments/design_and_composition/lesson1.html
- Nute, K., 2018. Ma and the Japanese Understanding of Space Revisited. *Retrieved from* www.researchgate.net/publication/323688004_Ma_and_the_Japanese_Understanding_of_Space_Revisited