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Emerging issues with traditional branding: what are the present alternatives? An analysis of the 'no brand' strategy

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to give a critical perspective of traditional branding, through the identification of current issues it is facing today. The paper then sheds light on some alternative strategies used by brands. Amongst these, the 'no brand' concept will be discussed. A case study analysis of Muji and Uniqlo, qualified as 'no frills' brands, provides for key characteristics of such brands. Based on this, the paper attempts to define the 'no brand' concept.

Methodology: Relying on available literature and non-scientific contemporary articles, we are able to give a critical perspective on traditional branding. The theoretical literature regarding current issues with branding is limited. The timescale of our analysis is indeed handicapping, as we strive to remain actual. There is no theory regarding the 'no brand' concept either. Thus, our findings are based on the analysis of secondary data of the case study brands, Muji and Uniqlo. Our approach is to select secondary information about the brands and analyse it with theoretical frameworks, namely the business model canvas, the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix as well as the brand core framework.

Findings: This paper identifies three key issues and challenges with traditional branding, as the following: empowered consumers, confused consumer decision journey and brand saturation. Alternative branding activities are identified as a response to these issues. The alternatives include: corporate social responsibility, targeting the conscious consumers, guerrilla marketing, cultural branding, branding through simplicity, unbranding and lastly the 'no brand' approach. The latter alternative stands out as it can be viewed as combining the simplicity and the unbranding concept. Through the Muji and Uniqlo analysis, the 'no brand' brands are defined as simple and logoless brands offering high quality products at affordable price through simplicity of the products and the brand. It is also identified these brands have great brand value alignment, provide relevant information to consumers, focus on the products more than their brand, use rational thinking to appeal to consumers, and have strong business competences.

Limitations: Firstly, our paper is limited in terms of its theoretical perspective, given the lack of literature on the 'no brand' concept. Due to the intangibility and novelty of the concept, our paper merely relies on secondary data from the brands. The analysis is limited to two brands only and the concept of the 'no brand' is found to be rather implicit, which restricts the reliability and validity of our analysis.
For future research it is suggested to conduct an extensive interview based research with the objective of studying the brands internally as well as the consumers' perceptions.

Originality: This paper intends to define the 'no brand' brand, which is a new and undiscovered concept.

Keywords: branding, traditional, marketing, strategy, issues, critique, consumers, 'no brand', brand identity.

Introduction

Following the mass production and standardisation period in the beginning of the 20th century, brands had for purpose to differentiate the goods, which created a need for brand management. The objective was to distinguish the product and company from the others available on the market (Klasson, 2017). During the 1960s, also called the Mad Men era, the main objective was to promote the manufactured products through advertising campaigns. In the late 20th century, our society entered a post-modern period. This phase largely contributed to the evolution of our consumption behaviours (Klasson, 2017) as individuals started using products as an identification tool by using symbols, and thus considering themselves as brands (Klasson, 2017). The years of post-modernism actually depict a society where individualisation is achieved through consumerism (Todd, 2011).

In terms of value, the brand was merely perceived as an addition to the physical product for a long time. It was not until the 1980s, after some brand acquisitions where brands were sold for 2 to 3 times the net value that the concept of branding was put in the limelight. For instance, Nestlé acquired the Rowntree for £2.55 billion in 1989 (eight times the net value of the company) (The New York Times, 1988), which disrupted the vision of brands, and they are now seen as having a strategic and financial value. What contributes to the brand value and how it can grow were the questions then asked. This resulted in managers' perspective shifting towards brand building and the understanding of their strategic impacts (Melin & Urde, 1991). In 2014, strong brands outperformed the market by 73% (Perrey, Freundt and Spillecke, 2015). Even though it is difficult to fully understand what that 73% is made of, it shows brands generate value and benefit the business.

Branding of today

Branding as we know it today is a comprehensive concept, and its role has evolved and has a greater legitimacy and influence on society (Kapferer, 2009). In his book 'The new strategic brand management' Kapferer (2009, p.7) defines brands as 'intangible assets, assets that produce added benefits for the business'. Brands have a key function within the business, which implies companies ought to develop the right branding strategies and capabilities to remain competitive and deliver value for their business.

The brand functions have also evolved. Frans Melin (2002) explains that a brand carries five functions: it is a carrier of information, a catalyst, a guarantee, a risk reducer as well as a mean to construct one's image (Melin, 2002). Thus, brands have not only a rational function but also an emotional and personal purpose. Nowadays, individuals are using brands as symbols and expressions of their identity, based on their needs to develop their personality and image (Klasson, 2017). Some argue that we have entered a post-postmodern phase (Holt, 2002). As previously explained, the post-modern society has been a key transitional phase towards the contemporary consumer-oriented society. The post-postmodern society is, to some extent, reacting to the latter. Holt (2002) challenges the brands' authenticity and states that brands should somehow participate in shaping culture. According to Kapferer (2009), a modern brand management implies that brands must be more than relevant, they should be meaningful (Kapferer, 2009).

Emerging issues with branding

Literature review
In the 1990s, Farquhar (1994, p.1) defined three important pillars to prepare for the future challenges of branding as: 'universal availability, universal awareness, and strong trademark protection'. He describes the future trends in branding as 'consumer

pessimism' and choice simplifier. (Farquhar, 1994, p.2). The paper 'Challenges and Opportunities Facing Brand Management: An Introduction to the Special Issue', by Shocker, Srivastava and Ruekert (1994), also outlines three challenges for brand management: the change in consumers' needs, the intensity in competition and globalisation. As a result, they argue for the cross-functionality of brand management. Moreover, the paper 'Brand management and the challenge of authenticity', by Beverland (2005), highlights a lack of brand authenticity, and recommends to 'appeal to timeless values'. There is limited literature on the topic or, when it does exist, it is often outdated or limited to the brand management function and not the brand identity. More recent literature indicates that experts nonetheless identify and consider future challenges. Kapferer (2009, p.117) informs the reader about the 'alterconsumption' trend. He defines the new brand management as 'adapting to the environment'. The latter is changing partly as follows: 'the consumer becomes a shopper, consumer power is increasing, as well as communities' power and markets are fragmented' (Kapferer, 2009). Alternatively, the book 'Brand theories: perspectives on brands and branding' (Tararovskaya, 2017) presents issues with the term branding and its use within the industry. The misuse of branding revolves around the issue of the empowered consumers of today which has led to the evolution of consumer and brand co-creation (Cassinger, 2017). It also criticizes the terminology used within the branding field. It is defined as being too 'fuzzy' (Duffy, 2017 p. 239) and the hubris that some marketers and brand managers suffer from is also emphasised (Svensson, 2017). Lastly, the fact that brands can serve as means of violence and exclusion is also discussed (Ulver, 2017).

In order to remain relevant and actual, we strived to identify key issues and challenges that traditional branding is facing today based on recent articles and current trends.

1) Empowered consumers

In the book Influential Rules (Shapiro & Varian, 1999), the authors argue that the brand's primary purpose is to facilitate the decision making process for the customers. They argue the brand's role is weakening as an information carrier due to technology (e.g. the Internet) providing an infinite amount of information. On the other hand, Simonson and Rosen (2014a) argue brands are still relevant and do not have a sole purpose to communicate information. The authors do not view branding as flawed, rather the execution of it being flawed (Simonson & Rosen, 2014a). Nowadays, consumers make purchases without knowing the brand or having prior experience. The authors urge brands to acknowledge this change in behaviour and adapt their branding strategies (Simonson & Rosen, 2014a). In their book 'Absolute value' (2014b), Simonson and Rosen address the issues and challenges that marketers face as consumers are becoming smarter and more empowered by technology. The book promotes rational marketing and advises marketers to focus on what the products bring, that is, the absolute value (Simonson & Rosen, 2014a).

2) Confused consumer decision journey

Court et al. (2009) claim that the consumer decision journey, defined as touch points at which brands can influence the purchase decision, has become more circular, rather than linear, where the individual is actively involved. There are 4 key steps in the journey: initial consideration; active evaluation (when the individual conducts research), closure, and post purchase (Court et al., 2009). The active evaluation stage illustrates the concept of consumer empowerment and its role during the purchase decision. To optimise the process for consumers, brands should provide the right amount of information at the right moment in order to avoid being aggressive and invasive (Court et al., 2009).

3) Brand saturation

Consumers are irritated by brands of today, as they are somewhat dictating feelings (The Economist, 2001a). The book 'No logo' by Naomi Klein depicts a growing frustration with branding. The book confirms that a large population is unsatisfied with brands nowadays. (The Economist, 2001a). Consumers are looking for a new consumption behaviour, yet without being anti-capitalists (Kapferer, 2009).

The consensus we find is that there is no issue with the fundamentals of branding, but the problem lies with the way we manage brands today. As consumers are evolving, branding is lagging behind. There is a need for adapting to smarter consumers. (Skibsted and Hansen, 2014). According to Elliott Ettenberg, customer knowledge will define the 'next economy' (Ettenberg, 2003). Consumers will lead and guide corporations, rather than the contrary (The Economist, 2001b). This economic and marketing change calls for some innovation in brand management.

Alternatives to traditional branding

As branding issues arise, companies strive to respond in different ways. We identified some branding strategies they are using to do so. They can be divided into 3 categories: ethics, communications and brand core.

Ethics
The most common solution to increase the relevancy for consumers and society is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Companies are differentiating themselves by adding values and activities to amplify their business (The Economist, 2001b). For instance, H&M launched a conscious cotton collection, produced with organic and recycled cotton only with the objective of making the fashion industry more sustainable (H&M, 2017). CSR has now become a standard practice for corporations as they are more and more scrutinised Harpaz, 2017). Yet, it might be difficult to understand the real motivations behind CSR. Greenwashing is an example of such non transparent practices. It can be defined as exaggerating the firm's environmental and social engagement as well as undermining the firm's bad practices. (The Financial Times, 2017).

The 'conscious consumers' are defined as a new consumer segment (Cohen & Muñoz, 2017). These consumers actively consider ethical characteristics as a parameter of their purchase decision (Cohen & Muñoz, 2017). For instance, Tony Chocolonely is an example of a targeting this type of target group, as the business is based on helping cacao farmers, and ending child labour as well as slavery (Tony Chocolonely, 2017). Advising brands on the practice, Cohen and Munoz (2017) indicate that the business model should be built or be adapted to the ethical value. These companies thus proactively develop a business solution, as opposed to merely react to sustainable trends (Cohen & Muñoz, 2017).

Communications
Guerrilla marketing is an innovative and low cost advertising strategy (Creative Guerrilla Marketing, 2017). Brands adopt this strategy in order to create opportunities to surprise the consumers and engage with them at a more personal level (Creative Guerrilla Marketing, 2017). Yet, it has been largely criticised for irritating the consumers and the ethic of this practice is being questioned (Ay, Aytekin & Nardali, 2010).

Douglas Holt's 'cultural branding' (2016) challenges the practice of creating branded content. He introduces the concept of 'crowdculture'. The term can be defined as a culture shaped by groups of individuals (crowds) through digital platforms. Holt (2016) emphasises the role of social media. His main critique of branded content is that it ignores 'crowdcultures'. His argument supports that cultures reveal opportunities for brands to disrupt. Brands ought to

identify a 'crowdculture' providing an alternative perspective on the culture, and should focus their branding on those consumers (Holt, 2016). For example, Axe released an ad called 'is it ok for guys…'. The ad addresses the social pressure men can experience to 'act as a man' and the impact on their self-esteem, as a result of our society's conventions and gender expectations (Axe, 2017). Holt argues that leveraging new subcultures enables differentiation and creates purposeful brand strategies.

Brand core

One emerging branding trend is simplicity. This concept can be translated into having simple products, simplifying the customer experience, customer decision journey and information. As previously mentioned, Court et al. (2009) recommend a circular customer decision journey. Indeed, consumers search for more simplicity when taking decisions (Spenner & Freeman, 2012). Spenner and Freeman (2012) state that customers want to make informed and confident decisions and that brands should ease this process by removing the stress for the consumers. The global brand strategy firm Siegel+Gale (2017) conducted an extensive study about simplicity and developed a brand simplicity index. The key elements of simplicity exposed in the survey were: the user experience, the store/platform layout, the product/service proposition, the consistency in quality (Siegel+Gale, 2017). The top ranked brands, e.g. Aldi and Lidl, are simplifying the consumer's decision by avoiding the paradox of choice whereas the top bottom global brands depict a lack of clarity (Siegel+Gale, 2017). The agency identifies five factors of simplicity: empowered consumers, better experiences, frictionless experience, time efficiency and utility (Siegel+Gale, 2017).

Many supermarkets now offer package-free products such as nuts, rice, pasta etc. They are removing the unnecessary elements of the product (packaging, brand logo) and focusing on the products' characteristics e.g. organic, whole wheat etc. to encourage a change in consumption behaviour. For instance, the supermarket Original Unverpackt in Berlin is a pioneer of the package free movement (Borromeo, 2014). In a similar approach, supermarkets have developed 'no name' or 'generic' private labels. (Tuttle, 2012). For example, E-mart, a retail chain in South Korea, has its own label called 'no brand' with a tagline saying 'become a smart consumer' (Kwon, n.d.). The Canadian food group Loblaws also sells 'no name' products (Cision Canada, n.d.). These products are labels only as opposed to brands.

Comparably, in 'Unbranding: threat to brands, opportunity for generics and store brands', Meyer and Vambery (2013, p.148) define unbranding as the 'erosion of difference between national and store brands'. The paper focuses on the rise of private labels as serious threat to branded products. The private labels strive to improve their price-to-value relationship by removing the branding elements of their product (Meyer & Vambery, 2013). This concept is defined as a counter movement to branded products (Meyer & Vambery, 2013). Other than private labels, some brands follow another approach: 'de-branding' (Mitch, 2013). Mitch (2013) explains that some brands actively adapt their products and brand strategy to become 'unbranded'. This concept strives to reconcile the brand with the consumers by keeping the brand identity while reducing the visible brand elements (Mitch, 2013). Indeed, brands remove their logos with the objective of minimising brand noise (Mitch, 2013). The noise can be defined by the negative outcome of too much information and communications (Jankowski, 2016). For example, Starbucks has removed its brand name from cups (Handley, 2012), Selfridges launched its quiet shop (Alexander, 2012), and in which famous brands have removed their logos of their flagship products in the initiative to

sensitize consumers about brand noise (Mitch, 2013).

While unbranding changes the physique of the brand by removing logo, yet, it does not inform internal brand elements.
This leads to asking if more comprehensive strategies exist to truly make a brand (not its products) brandless and unbranded. What would be the characteristics of such strategy? Could it be defined?

Case study: Uniqlo and Muji

Why Uniqlo and Muji?
Uniqlo and Muji are both defined as 'no frills' retailers, and reflect a certain brand ethic: placing the product at the heart, instead of the brand (Lee, 2007).
Muji literally means 'no-brand quality goods' (Muji, 2017). Muji is defined as anonymous, against the consumption society and consumer-centric (Glader, 2014). David Aaker (2011) describes Muji as a 'non-brand brand' as it removes superficial attributes as well as focuses on the utility of the products and thereby promotes simplicity and moderation. Indeed, Muji's products are exempt of logos.

Similarly, Uniqlo is defined by simple design, functionality and innovation (Kate Finnigan, 2016). Comparably to Muji, Uniqlo does not use logos on its clothes (Lee, 2007). Uniqlo's UK Marketing Director mentions that the no logo policy is 'a reaction against branded clothes' (Mason, 2001). Uniqlo's founder, Tadashi Yanai, highlights the importance of the soul of the company and the purpose of the brand (Kansara, 2016). Uniqlo and Muji represent a mix between the simple and the unbranded brand concepts previously described.

Introduction of the two brands
Uniqlo offers casual clothes for everyone, everywhere (Uniqlo, 2017a). Uniqlo's clothes are basic and universal, yet it claims it is a mean of self-expression as consumers can then create their own style (Uniqlo, 2017b). Indeed, Uniqlo does not follow fashion trends (Pasquarelli, 2017). It rather focuses on its consumers' purchase trends by analysing customer data (Fast Retailing, 2017a). Moreover, as a fast fashion brand with no outlet stores, inventory control is of great importance for Uniqlo. It controls it by analysing the stores' fluctuating demands (Fast Retailing, 2017a). Uniqlo also has collaborated with many designer brands including JW Anderson, Christopher Lemaire and Ines de la Fressange (Fast Retailing, 2017b; Kopun, 2016). Namely, Uniqlo created a new line called 'Uniqlo U' by hiring Christopher Lemaire as artistic director for its new R&D centre (Barr, 2016). Uniqlo strives to respond to consumers' comprehensive needs by offering an extensive clothes range, from underwear to outerwear (Uniqlo, 2017a). The in store experience is driven by the products themselves. Uniqlo offers detailed description about what type of technology was used and what the advantages of the products are. This is easily accessible in store, in the form of fact sheet next to the product or on the tag. They facilitate the communication of the information by naming flagship products using the key benefits of the product. Some of the well-known names are 'HEATTECH' and 'AIRism' (Uniqlo, 2017a). These product lines are available all year around and updated year on year, which increases consistency and relevancy in product offering. Additionally, using key product names helps consumers orientate themselves on Uniqlo's online website. Along with its no logo policy, this helps to increase the focus on the product itself, thus minimising the brand's visibility.

Muji offers functional and good products (Muji, 2017). Compared to Uniqlo, Muji gives little information about the product in store. Rather, the tags communicate the specifications of the products (e.g. size, composition). Yet, the clear and structured store layouts participate to display the products at their full advantage. Its products

are of stripped and simplistic nature, which also participates to highlight the products themselves (Muji, 2017). By focusing on the products' functionalities, the Muji brand strives to meet the customer needs, instead of wants (Muji, 2017). Lastly, Muji strives to involve its customers and listen to their opinions. They encourage and collect feedback through its online platform Idea Park, as well as leverage this data for product development (Ryohin Keikaku, 2017a).

Methodology

The analysis uses qualitative information based on literature and non-scientific contemporary articles as well as secondary data from the case study of two brands: Muji and Uniqlo. The study is limited to secondary data due to research constraints, namely the lack of literature regarding the 'no brand' concept. This challenges the validity of the paper. The qualitative analysis of the brands is undertaken through applying the literature regarding issues with branding as well as the theoretical models used for studying the two brands. These theories are applied based on the information and communication that the brands provide on their official websites. It is important to note that these sources might not be objective, as they come from the brands themselves. This information however offers a glimpse into how the brands strive to portray themselves, i.e. their brand image. Yet, this gives us a shallow picture of the brands, which affects the reliability of our paper. The aim of this paper is exploratory, to see whether the phenomenon of the "no brand" can be identified through these two brands and what the constituents of it might be. This is an ambitious task, and we can only scratch the surface of the 'no brand' concept.

Analysis

Our analysis relies on three theoretical frameworks: the business model canvas (Osterwalder, 2017) to understand the business strengths, the corporate brand identity matrix (Urde, 2013) to define the brands' identities and identify similar patterns, and the brand core framework (Urde, 2017) to grasp the brand through different perspectives.

The following analysis is based on secondary data from both companies' websites as well as from the parent companies' websites. From these sources, we have gathered information regarding the business strategy (Fast Retailing, 2017a; Ryohin Keikaku, 2017b), the brand values and vision (Ryohin Keikaku, 2017b; Muji, 2017; Ryohin Keikaku, 2017c) as well as the culture (Ryohin Keikaku, 2017b).

The business model

Key Partners	Key Activities	Value Propositions	Customer Relationships	Customer Segments
Both: Strong network Close collaboration Strategic ownership: product brand structure Muji: Key relationships with	Both: Ownership of production chain: Muji: Broader range of activities.	Both: Simple, high quality products at affordable prices to make your life easier.	Both: In store relationship Listen to customers Muji: Focus on customer interaction Uniqlo: Adapts inventory directly customer creation team	Both: Universal customer segment. Targeted to everyone.

communities Value employees as partners.	Uniqlo: Focus on R&D.			
	Key Resources Both: Streamlined production Strong buyer power Uniqlo: R&D focused		Channels Both: Directly managed and indirectly managed stores Uniqlo: Online store is key channel.	
Cost structure Both: Sourcing costs for materials fixed costs: Rent, inventory Muji: CSR costs Uniqlo: R&D costs (fixed cost)			Revenue streams Both: In store and online sales	

Figure 1: Muji and Uniqlo Business Model Canvas (Ryohin Keikaku, 2017b; Uniqlo, 2017a; Fast Retailing, 2017a; Muji, 2017)

Interpretation of the business model: there are both similarities and differences in the companies' business models. Firstly, both brands have strong and long term relationships with their suppliers and collaborators, which allow for production streamlining. Thus, they both have substantial control over their comprehensive production chain. The scale of the companies also contributes to their strong buying power. Both companies benefit from a strategic ownership, i.e. a mother company. Muji emphasises more on relationships through developing their CSR. Whilst Muji focuses on its customer service, Uniqlo strives to develop its Research & Development (R&D) department. As a result, Uniqlo's bestsellers showcase the brand's innovative orientation. They include the 'Ultra light down', a lightweight down jacket which is thinner and more practical, and 'AIRism' and 'HEATTECH', which are innerwear for summer and winter (Uniqlo, 2017).
While Uniqlo offers fashion and Muji offers a broader range of products including clothes, furniture, food, both value propositions are characterised by simple, high-quality products at affordable prices to make their customers' lives easier.

There is also an emphasis on the consumer. Muji focuses on interaction with customers by using Idea Park, a platform to get customer feedbacks, offering in-store services, and its Monozukuri community, which means craftsmanship in Japanese. Uniqlo's Customer Creation Team aims to gather and analyse customers' feedback, behaviour and purchase history from its own internal customer data, in order to better adapt to customer needs.

Both brands have a universal customer segment strategy. They target everyone.
Although there are minor differences between both companies, we distinguish that streamlined process, strong resources, emphasis on customer relationships and offering high quality products at an affordable prices are the major similarities. One observation we ought to make is that Muji does not have much information available about its supply chain, whereas Uniqlo describes and communicates it extensively. These business capabilities are indeed strong and allow the companies to

deliver their unique value proposition, yet they are not inimitable.

The brand identity
Our brand identity analysis uses the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) (Urde, 2013) in order to fully and thoroughly understand the brand as an organisation. We excluded the brand identity prism from our theoretical framework as the picture of receiver is indicative of the types of customers and emotions given to customers, yet it does not allow for a thorough understanding of the brand's internal identity.

Value Proposition Simple high quality clothes at affordable price	**Relationships** Strong and close relationships	**Position** Timeless casual wear
Expression Simple and descriptive	**Promise and core values** Make life easier through simplicity, functionality and quality	**Personality** Innovative enabler of simplicity
Mission & vision 'Lifewear, made better'	**Culture** Collaborative, interactive and customer-oriented	**Competences** Material technology, R&D and supply chain management

Figure 2: Uniqlo's CBIM (Ryohin Keikaku, 2017b; Uniqlo, 2017a)

Value Proposition Simple, low-cost, good quality products	**Relationships** Trustworthy and caring	**Position** Real, consistent and selfless
Expression Simple and transparent	**Promise and core values** Make life good through simplicity, consciousness and sustainability	**Personality** Consciously modest and rational
Mission & vision 'Simple and pleasant life'	**Culture** Inclusive and responsible	**Competences** Material sourcing and production optimisation

'The quest for the good product'		

Figure 3: Muji's CBIM (Fast Retailing, 2017a; Muji, 2017)

Interpretations of the matrixes (figure 2 and 3): keywords can be identified across both matrixes: simple, easy, life and quality. While these words define their value proposition, they also define the brand. The value proposition is deeply rooted in the brand. One main difference between both brands is that Muji's mission and vision are more comprehensive and broad. Uniqlo uses the same concept i.e. making simple better, yet it applies it to the fashion industry, thus narrowing down its brand scope. Additionally, Muji does not explicitly define its category: the matrix does not inform on its business activity due to the high level of intangibility of its brand elements. Comparably, we understand Uniqlo is a fashion retailer. Interestingly, the diagonal competences / promise and core values / value proposition are almost identical in both brands' matrixes. Muji and Uniqlo are able to deliver good quality at affordable price due to the combination of their competences and their promise and core values: a simpler life. This results in a fair price for the perceived high quality in consumers' minds. The internal values are simply expressed by the external values, which is an evidence of strong value alignment across the organisation. In Muji's and Uniqlo's case, the common core value is simplicity. Due to the fact that the brand purpose and core values are simple and self-explanatory, analysing the brand can be compared to looking through a window. Ultimately, there is no real distinction between what they are doing and what they are. This implies extensive internal branding efforts. In fact, Muji claims it is 'communicating our concept and vision thoroughly internally' (Glader, 2017).

The brand core framework (Urde, 2016)
The brand core framework helps to understand, interpret and communicate the brand promise and core values from different perspectives. The latter perspectives are logos (reason), ethos (trust) and pathos (emotions) (Urde, 2016). Following the rhetoric rule, all three appeals are present in Muji and Uniqlo's brands (Urde, 2016), and even largely overlap. Applying the secondary data to this framework, we developed the below framework, combined for both brands:

Logos:
Quality at low price

Simplicity & Rationality

Pathos:
The right decision
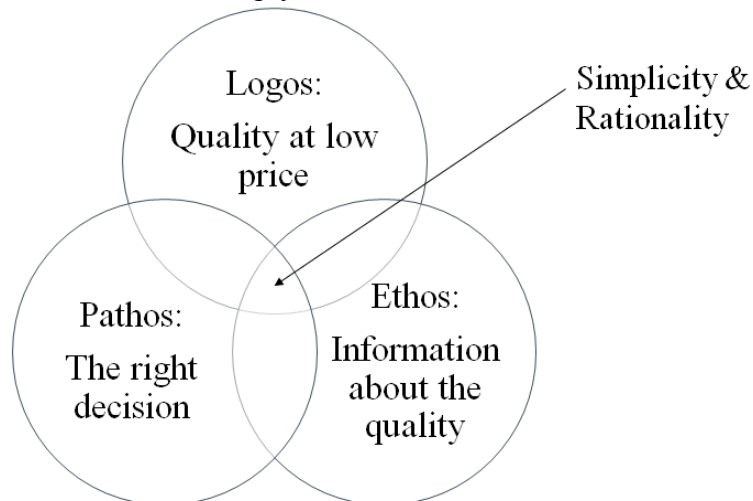
Ethos:
Information about the quality

Figure 4: Muji's and Uniqlo's Brand Core Framework (Ryohin Keikaku, 2017b; Uniqlo, 2017a; Fast Retailing, 2017a; Muji, 2017)

The logos is the reason why consumers should buy the product (Urde, 2016). For Muji and Uniqlo, the value proposition is clearly understood through a logos perspective, as it is based on rationality and logic: we offer high quality products at affordable price. This implies a good price to quality ratio.

The ethos is the way brands communicate trust to consumers (Urde, 2016). Again, Muji and Uniqlo rely on their simplicity and value proposition, i.e. their logos feature. Indeed, Uniqlo communicates its logos through information: consumers are guided through concise and clear information about the products and their materials, e.g. fact sheets. Importantly, information is displayed only at relevant moments. Distinctly, Muji relies on its products' functionality to gain consumers' trust. Muji strives to remove any unnecessary information to let consumers have greater control on their decision. Moreover, Muji solely focuses on the need of the consumers, therefore excluding the 'want' feature of its brand. Additionally, both brands' products do not have visible brand logos, adding authenticity and trust.

Finally, the pathos appeal relates to the emotions brands use to convince consumers and convert intent into purchase (Urde, 2016). Both brands use emotions such as rationality, moderation and logic. Muji and Uniqlo both embed these emotions across their brand experience, as well as their brand identity. These emotions are especially expressed at the outcome of the decision making journey. They want their consumers to feel they made the right decision, to be moderately content and ultimately, have a simpler life.

Given the main focus of both brands is the logos, the latter perspective transcends through the ethos and pathos and dominates the consumer experience. The end result is simplicity, i.e. the brand core of both brands

have a simple value proposition (logos), simple information (ethos) and a simplify decision making. This frameworks helps us to define Muji and Uniqlo as simple brands.

Key findings about the 'No brand' brand
Based on our analysis, we are able to provide key characteristics which define Muji and Uniqlo as 'no brand' brands:

1) Strong competences & resources
2) Good quality products at affordable prices
3) Functionality & practicality (focus on products)
4) Strong brand identity
5) Rationality, moderation, humility emotions
6) Comprehensive & intangible value statement
7) High perceived quality & simplicity (through information)

We have grouped these characteristics into different brand element categories, as illustrated in figure 5 below.
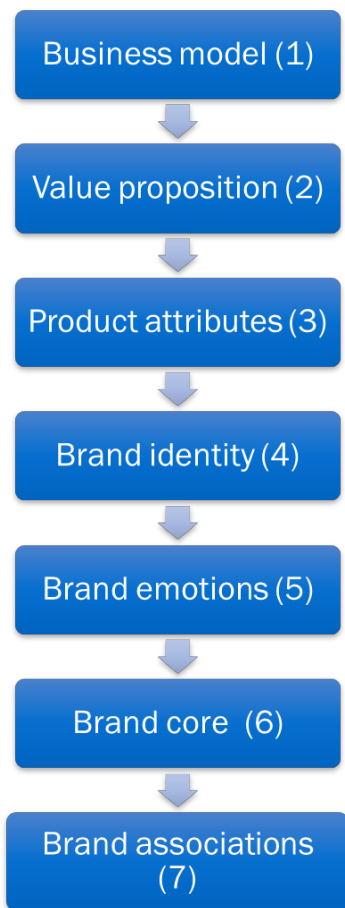
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│  Value proposition (2)   │
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│  Product attributes (3)  │
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│    Brand identity (4)    │
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│   Brand emotions (5)     │
└─────────────────────────┘
            ↓
┌─────────────────────────┐
│     Brand core  (6)      │
└─────────────────────────┘
            ↓
┌─────────────────────────┐
│   Brand associations     │
│          (7)             │
└─────────────────────────┘
```

Figure 5: Brand elements alignment

Through our analysis and the definition of the 'no brand' characteristics, we identify a strong value alignment across all the brand elements (as seen in figure X). Not only do Muji and Uniqlo have strong brand identities, they are largely expressed throughout these different elements. The predominant value in each characteristic is simplicity.

Therefore, we perceive the 'no brand' concept as focusing on aligning all brand elements with the brand vision and core, which is simplicity in Muji and Uniqlo's case.

Interestingly, Muji and Uniqlo never mention the notion of 'no brand' while defining themselves, which makes it an implicit and intangible concept.

There are indications that both Muji and Uniqlo answer some of the concerns raised regarding the empowered consumers, consumer decision journey confusion as

well as the brand saturation. The empowered consumers actively search for information regarding the products and brands. Muji as well as Uniqlo are both brands that offer relevant information regarding their products, in order to depict a simple and easy to understand value proposition. If we consider the issue of the confusion in the decision making journey, we can find indications that the brands try to facilitate the interaction with consumers at key touchpoints, as they offer relevant information when needed. The initial step in the journey is hard to identify without taking into consideration the consumers' opinions. We can however view the consumer oriented approaches that both brands adopt (e.g. Idea Park for Muji and customer creation team for Uniqlo) as good indicators of the final part in the journey, namely the post purchase and outcome. Muji and Uniqlo are brands of a simplistic nature, and strive to keep their communication about the products' characteristics and specifications at the right time within the decision journey, rather than focusing on the desirability of the products. Therefore, they are limiting their brand noise and avoiding to push information onto their consumers.

The limits of our analysis and access to information do not allow us to demonstrate whether the 'no brand' strategy is a viable strategy and answers the issues with traditional branding. We can only relate the information found on Muji and Uniqlo with the issues identified.

Conclusion

This paper gives an overview of how branding has evolved throughout the years. The paper aims to define branding today and gives a critical perspective on the subject.

The literature review provides a foundation for identifying flaws with branding. Yet, contemporary articles also contribute to the

topic. The combined literature and recent articles explain that traditional branding is becoming outdated and does not correspond to the consumers of today. However, the theoretical review emphasises that the execution and implementation of branding, rather than branding itself, are at the root of this problem. Namely, three main issues and challenges of traditional branding were identified. Firstly, consumers are evolving and are more and more empowered. They have more control over their choices and themselves, thanks to technology. This means consumers need not to be convinced by brands and marketing, but rather they want their needs to be understood. Secondly, as brands lag to acknowledge the smarter consumer, the consumer decision journey resulting from their branding strategies therefore becomes inadequate and inappropriate for consumers. Conversely, brands are stagnating in a convincing approach whereby they communicate as much information about their company, brand and product to achieve sales. This information overload confuses the consumer in its decision journey. This phenomenon is emphasised with a constant increase in choice. Lastly, there is a certain brand saturation due to the increasing presence of brands in our society.

Taking these issues into consideration, this paper identifies some alternative branding tools used by companies in order to keep up with the consumer's evolution, which are divided into three categories in increasing order of relevancy: ethics, communications and brand core. The first two categories include strategies such as CSR, targeting conscious consumers, guerrilla marketing and cultural branding. More importantly, the latter category i.e. brand core, sheds light on the concept of simplicity, which mainly consists of focusing on the product and simplifying the customer experience, as well as the unbranding strategy, which aims to remove brand elements. Yet, we have found these strategies do not demonstrate a long term branding strategy nor a high

degree of involvement i.e. degree of change in the internal brand culture. This has led to discussing the possibility of such branding strategy, when the 'no brand' notion is introduced, distinctly from the 'unbrand' brand.

In order to define what the 'no brand' strategy means, this paper has analysed two brands, defined as 'no frills' and logoless: Uniqlo and Muji. The analysis has been conducted using secondary data from both brands' websites as well as their parent companies' websites. This data was then applied to various theoretical frameworks in order to compare both brands as well as distinguish key characteristics of the 'no brand' brand. Firstly, the business model outlines the main competences of the two companies: a streamlined production as well as key relationships, namely with their parent company. Secondly, the CBIM indicates a strikingly strong value alignment across all brand elements. Interestingly, both brands have the same value proposition i.e. high quality at affordable prices, the same core values i.e. simplicity, rationality as well as a similar vision i.e. make life simpler. Lastly, the brand core framework helps us to understand the latter brand identity through various perspectives: logos, ethos and pathos. In Uniqlo's and Muji's case, the logos transcends across the ethos and pathos. The rationality and reason (logos) why the products are of high quality and at affordable price explain why consumers should trust them as brands (ethos), as well as explain the consumer's emotions when experiencing the brand i.e. moderation, humility (pathos).

Based on this analysis, we have reached the conclusion that 'no brand' brands are simple and logoless brands which offer, or give the perception of, an appealing value proposition i.e. high quality at affordable price and promote a vision of simplicity. The main distinction is the strong value alignment across all brand elements.

Discussion

Reviewing the business model of the brands, we can indeed identify similarities. It is however debatable whether the business model largely contributes to building a 'no brand' brand. We can conclude that the business model canvas provides thorough information about the company, yet it does not explain the brand purpose and vision. It was nevertheless included in the research as it helps to explain the feasibility and achievement of the value proposition, which is a major component of the 'no brand' brand.

Regarding the CBIM, we find that the diagonal for the brand promise, core values and value proposition is almost identical for both brands. The framework also provides us with a conclusion that both brands are strongly aligned when it comes to their values. It is however debatable whether the CBIM is a framework suitable for application on the brands given that we only have access to their official information, which makes it hard to analyse the internal aspects of the organisation.

If we consider the core framework we can identify the logos of both brands as being prominent across the framework. Indeed it overlaps and is present across the ethos and pathos. Yet, this is not unique to 'no brand' brands as the theory states there can be overlaps between the three brand appeals. The framework reinforces the brand core outlined in the CBIM, namely simplicity and rationality. This is indicative of the brands' strong brand identity as well as value alignment. Nonetheless, the framework could be more relevant by using consumers' interviews in order to assess how they perceive the brand, and analyse the strength of the brand identity externally.

Lastly, while this paper adds a minor contribution to the understanding of the 'no brand' concept, the analysis does not address the viability of the strategy as a direct response to the outlined issues and challenges of traditional branding. The paper briefly touches upon this topic as the information gathered does allow for a certain understanding of the 'no brand' brand's potential to counter these issues. Yet, confirming such hypothesis is out of the paper's analytical scope.

Managerial implications

This research offers managers a glimpse into the 'no brand' phenomenon where the findings can guide managers in the building of a 'no brand' and gain an initial understanding of the branding strategy. The constituents of a 'no brand' brand, the emerging issues and alternatives of branding strategies certainly can be of value for managers who want to build or exploit some of the 'no brand' strategy branding tools. Yet, even though the 'no brand' concept has been defined through Muji and Uniqlo, the concept seems static and highly depends on the nature of the business and the industry. This strategy is not easily transferable and requires a great level of commitment and involvement at the brand identity level. Uniqlo and Muji are two brands that were created based on the 'no brand' concept (consciously or unconsciously), and therefore we are unable to state that it is applicable to existing brands, as a substantial brand identity re-positioning would be required.

Limits and further research

Although this paper provides a set of characteristics of the 'no brand' concept, there are many limitations to this paper.

First, due to the lack of relevant and contemporary literature, the paper does not benefit from various theories as guidance. Secondly, as the paper mostly relies on secondary data from the official websites of Uniqlo and Muji, which can be qualified as

biased, the reliability of the main sources can be questioned. Additionally, our case study in this paper is based merely on two retail brands: Uniqlo and Muji, which does not allow for a conceptualisation of the 'no brand' strategy. Lastly, the limited contribution of our paper on the viability of the 'no brand' brand strategy can also be highlighted.

In terms of future researches, new literature on the matter would be beneficial. An extensive internal analysis of 'no brand' brands, through qualitative research such as interviews with the company and consumers, is advisable. In order to demonstrate the viability of a 'no brand' brand as branding strategy, a wider research should be conducted with the aim of identifying whether a 'no brand' brand is a feasible and transferable concept or it merely exists due to strong similarities in brand identity and core values between some brands. Another approach to analyse the two brands could be to define their brand and market orientation. This approach would require to undertake a brand image study. Finally, we analysed that one of the core elements that makes 'no brand' brands attractive is their rationality. Yet, as explained by Grönholm (2017), according to behavioural economics, rationality is not the main driver of consumer behaviour and does not drive purchases. In this sense, whether 'no brand' brand strategy is powerful enough to attract consumers can be argued.

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