

### Order and colour: Uniqlo as psychic restorer

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Acid brights collide with a structured brand identity  
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#### Scope

In a world of increasing chaos, when freefalling stock markets undermine any effort at prediction, and people all over the world feel at the mercy of events beyond their control, the promise of order, harmony and control is seductive. And if you can't have it in reality, you can be sure people are prepared to pay heavily for the highly crafted illusion of having it instead.

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A fairly recent entry into the British clothing retail sector, Japanese brand Uniqlo employs a powerful combination of point of sale aesthetics and ruthlessly efficient supply chain economics to signify exactly that compelling combination of order, control, harmony and beauty.

Of course, this is not necessarily unique to Uniqlo. Japanese brand Muji have for a long time offered a potent vision of minimalist aesthetics allied to maximalist utility, while American brand Gap and Spanish brand Zara have also fused economic muscle with design expression. But Uniqlo have managed to shift it to another dimension which signals the brand's greater relevance to consumers in the second decade of the 21st century, with its attendant socio-economic and socio-political fragility.

Entry into the Uniqlo store is a blast of white light, bright colour and highly structured displays. Point of sale design adheres to a rigid grid system, which ensures both ease of navigation but also constantly well-stocked shelving.

Individual items can be found in a very wide range of colours, usually coordinated not to slavishly follow the colour spectrum - i.e. from blue to purple to red to pink etc - but arranged so that colours clash i.e. red next to yellow, purple next to green. This juxtaposition of primary and secondary colours, which contrasts for instance with Gap's favoured POS method, grabs the eye and forces an instantaneous sensory reaction from consumers who cannot but be assaulted by colour.

But this sensory alarmism does not signify a brand favouring chaos as the primary means of exciting consumers into making a frenzied purchase.

On the contrary, colour exuberance is complemented by highly present and well-trained, inviting staff who provide calm reassurance. Such friendliness pervades the brand's core identity - Uniqlo seems to be the only main street brand which is prepared to provide gratis alteration services. Where other brands use tailoring as a means of rapacious supplemental income, Uniqlo see it as a necessary part of client care: generosity as a means of dampening anxiety and galvanising brand loyalty.

Uniqlo are not merely a retail brand, their proposition is fashion as a social service: friendly, bright, generous, imaginative, colourful, efficient, but most importantly ordered and optimistic. With these two essential values they are answering current immediate needs for psychic reassurance, and long term needs for emotional uplift. It is a combination which brands would do well to understand as an increasingly necessary part of their consumer promise and a tone which would work positively for both online and above-the-line communications.

#### Order and optimism beyond retail

It is perhaps no coincidence that as Uniqlo's star rises to its zenith, the Tate Modern has just finished showing an exhibition of an art movement dedicated to order and optimism - De Stijl and the work of its progenitor, Theo van Doesburg.

Uniqlo, like the De Stijl movement before it, signifies a brand based on absolute aesthetic control - the paring down of beauty not to functionality but to its basic building blocks - horizontal and vertical lines, and planes of colour, seen to greatest effect in the work of Piet Mondrian.

The De Stijl group wanted to establish a visual vocabulary comprised of elementary geometrical forms comprehensible by all and adaptable to any discipline. In doing so they wanted to create an aesthetic and social revolution through a mathematical approach to composition that focused on order and harmony.

Critically, De Stijl developed two differing approaches to non-figurative art. Taking a physical object as the starting point, the component parts of the object were broken down and recomposed as a geometric framework. By anchoring the abstract image (colour) in external reality (an object – in Uniqlo's case a t-shirt), this approach avoided the pitfall of decoration for decoration's sake.



Mondrian would have been proud  
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The second approach proceeded in the reverse direction. It consisted of devising or adopting an organised system of lines, forms, or colours and generating variations based on repetition, rotation or reflection. Piet Mondrian employed this method to create relationships in equilibrium – complete harmony.

#### Uniqlo and the progress of industry

At the same time that the ordered aesthetic of De Stijl was being developed, there was a recognition by van Doesburg and Mondrian that there was an underlying connection to the spirit of Dada. Under a pseudonym, van Doesburg published the first issue of the Dadaist review *Mecano*. Its title carried associations with the machine as a symbol of functional efficiency, precision and speed.

Indeed, many works of art mimicked the appearance of machine production - there were no signs of handicraft on their smooth, precisely worked surfaces, and they were often presented anonymously without a signature, as if part of a manufacturing mass production line.

For De Stijl, this combination of ordered control and bright optimistic colour palette was allied to the control and progress given to modernity through the development of industrial machinery.

This of course has accounted for the post-war economic success of Japan, and hence Uniqlo is an embodiment and a celebration of that particularly Japanese combination of mass cultural creativity combined with technological innovation. Its 'Heattech' clothing is a signifier of this irresistible combination.

Hence for both De Stijl and Uniqlo you have bright colours signifying optimism for the future of mankind as a whole and of the progress and prosperity of the individual, but also the coding of a society of order, control and harmony. This contrasts with the pessimistic chaos experienced over the last 18 months and which still penetrates the mood of the present.

Given Uniqlo's success, it is no surprise therefore that another Japanese clothing brand – Issey Miyake – have developed their autumn/winter 2010 collection based on geometric and mathematical structures and theory. Like Uniqlo, the order, control and harmony of geometry and the certainty of maths provide aesthetic beauty but also psychic restoration after a period in which nerves are frayed and people's confidence has taken a battering in the face of chaos.

#### Insights and opportunities

In a year and a half in which the world's citizens have seen unpredictability and nervous expectation of economic and therefore psychic depression, Uniqlo stands in stark contrast by coding calm reassurance in the present and an upbeat tone for the near future. It is a compelling combination which accounts for the staggering success of the brand in Europe and North America – the two regions arguably most affected by economic chaos and disorder.

Uniqlo's success in the current economic and social climate is undoubtedly due to a dynamic combination of an organised and ordered present, with the promise of a bright future tomorrow. For brands to be successful now and in the medium-term they will be well advised to follow such a powerful route and hitch their wagon to those twin ideals without compromise, to ensure that consumers ally themselves with the brand.

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