Online branding strategies of Saudi Arabian bakeries: a qualitative approach

Raghdah Aljuwaiser, Panayiota J. Alevizou

Online branding strategies of Saudi Arabian bakeries: a qualitative approach

Raghdah Aljuwaiser*

Taif University,
College of Business Administration,
Al Hawiyah, Taif, 26571, Saudi Arabia
Email: rajuwaiser@tu.edu.sa
*Corresponding author

Panayiota J. Alevizou

University of Sheffield,
Management School,
Conduit Road, Sheffield, S10 1FL, UK
Email: P.J.Alevizou@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper reports on qualitative research that sheds light on online retail branding in the bakery sector. This paper highlights owner-managers' (OMs) perceptions of branding, as well as their online branding approaches. We adopted an interpretivist enquiry, and as such, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven OMs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Saudi Arabia, as the OM is considered pivotal in developing and operationalising the online branding strategy. Our findings highlight a threefold OM perspective of branding, which implies an abstract rather than strategic view of branding. Our findings also indicate a fragmented and inconsistent use of online branding strategies amongst bakery OMs, which may be clouding their brand identity and creating additional resource requirements. The paper contributes to the knowledge on SMEs' online branding through a qualitative approach and from an owner-manager perspective.

Keywords: SME; communication; online branding; social media; influencers; owner-manager, Saudi Arabian.

Biographical notes: Raghdah Aljuwaiser received her BSc in Management of Housing and Institutions from King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia, where she graduated with first class honours. She then worked in the non-profit sector in both administrative and marketing positions, during which she became aware of her interest in marketing, and this has paved the way for her to study a Master's degree in Marketing Management Practice from the University of Sheffield. She currently works as a Lecturer in Marketing at Taif University in Saudi Arabia in the Business Administration Department, teaching various subjects such as principle of marketing, strategic marketing, consumer behaviour and international marketing.

Panayiota J. Alevizou is a Lecturer in Marketing at the Sheffield University Management School, where she teaches Marketing. Her research focuses on sustainability labelling, eco-labelling and sustainability marketing. Panayiota has presented her work in various national and international conferences and has published in journals, such as, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research* and *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. She is co-chair of the Sustainability Special Interest Group (SIG) of the academy of marketing.

1   Introduction

The role of SMEs in enhancing a country's economy, generating employment income, and reinforcing industry innovation is well established in the literature (Hill, 2001; Gilmore et al., 2007; Tripathi, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, small enterprises are identified as having 6–49 employees with revenue ranging from three to 40 million SR, and medium enterprises comprise 50 to 249 employees with revenue of more than 40 million and up to 200 million SR (Monsha'at, 2020). Although SMEs' contributions to the Saudi non-oil GDP is low and accounts for 21% (Khan and Alsharif, 2019), it has been stated that there are nearly 950,000 SMEs, making them a vital pillar for the country's economy (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). Furthermore, Saudi SMEs play a crucial role in the growth of the private sector economically and socially, as studies have stated that SMEs enhance the employment rate between 20% and 22% and contribute up to 14% in revenue (General Authority for Statistics, 2019; Khan and Alsharif, 2019; Rafiki, 2019; Tripathi, 2019; Monsha'at, 2020). However, previous research has highlighted that Saudi SMEs face challenges in terms of resources, management and marketing knowledge, making them vulnerable to competition (Ahmad, 2012; Tripathi, 2019).

Changing consumer tastes, a general interest in nutrients and healthy lifestyles, regulatory pressures and the importance of data analytics and social media have been identified as the main trends affecting the packaged-food industry (Collins, 2019). Baked goods are one of the most prominent offerings of the industry, and in particular, bread and pastries are consumed daily in Saudi Arabia (Euromonitor International, 2019). However, as consumer lifestyles change, healthy diets become a global priority, with set goals from the World Health Organization (2020) targeting unhealthy diets and promoting healthy lifestyles. As such, the Saudi Arabian bakery sector is facing seismic global shifts as consumer organisations advocate for healthier ingredients and less sugar and salt and global producers are advancing their production and ingredient technology for healthier food with a lower ecological footprint (Stuckey, 2020). Consumers are increasingly tracking their fitness and diets through wearable devices and applications (Dussimon, 2020), triggering opportunities for more interactive communication with their preferred food producers. Specifically, the use of innovative technologies in SME operations is vital for achieving competitiveness, especially in marketing communications, where the effect of technological innovations is particularly invasive (Konstantopoulou et al., 2019). In addition, ease and convenience are driving the sector towards e-commerce, which has been seeing a boost in value in the sales of baked goods in Saudi Arabia (Euromonitor International, 2019). More research is needed on the areas of digital media, business competitiveness, micro and SME (MSMEs) activities, brand

strategies and small business growth in the context of emerging economies (Ahmad, 2012; Fong and Burton, 2008; Tajuddin et al., 2017).

Branding has been found to help SMEs grow, develop and sustain their success, as it contributes to their competitive advantage (Mitchell et al., 2013). Although the SME branding literature has explored this issue in the food sector – such as restaurants, coffee shops and grocery stores (Hirvonen and Laukkanen, 2014; Wong and Merrilees, 2005) – online branding for bakery shops has not been investigated. In addition, existing studies have focused on brand management (Mitchell et al., 2012, 2013), leaving online branding relatively unexplored (Rowley, 2009). This may be due to online branding bringing established branding principles under the microscope (Rowley, 2009). This research addresses these gaps by exploring online branding strategies of Saudi Arabian bakeries from the OMs points of view. The research objectives are as follows:

1   What are the OMs' perceptions of brand and branding in the bakery sector?

2   How do SMEs formulate, operationalise and evaluate their online branding strategies?

To achieve the aim and objectives, we will review relevant studies in the literature relating to online SME branding and the role of OMs in branding strategy and communication. Second, we will highlight literature gaps and research questions, and finally, we will discuss our findings. The contribution of this paper is rooted in its focus on the role of OMs and their assigned meanings to the term brand, as well as the peculiarities of the bakery sector. We conclude with the theoretical and practical implications of our study and highlight areas for future research and the limitations of our study.

2   Literature review

2.1   Owner-manager, branding and online brand strategy

OM characteristics, such as their experience with brand communication tools such as social media, have an impact on SMEs' online brand strategies, as they are likelier to use social media platforms if they are adept with such platforms (Abubaker et al., 2019). Numerous studies have explored the role of OMs in online branding strategies, investigating their participation and responsibility. A study on micro-organisations in the fashion industry in the UK demonstrated that OMs are solely in charge of the communication aspect of their enterprises (Henninger et al., 2017), which has also been confirmed by other studies focusing on Indonesian retail SMEs in the same industry, where OMs operated their brands' Instagram accounts (Suciati, 2018). However, this may result in personifying the brand and embodying an OM's identity, values and culture within the online branding strategies. Indeed, the literature states that a retail brand identity is linked to the OM's personality (Centeno et al., 2013), personal set of values and entrepreneurial vision (Spence and Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2010), identity (Mitchell et al., 2015) and brand communication activities (Berthon et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2015). In addition, a study conducted on Australian SME OMs who have Middle Eastern roots demonstrated the role of OMs in online branding practices. It examined how OMs' cultural backgrounds and country heritages were embodied in SME branding and how

their backgrounds aided the construction of SME brands in terms of logos, names, products and online communication practices (Buschgens et al., 2020).

A brand is a complex concept to comprehend; thus, SME OMs experience difficulties in constructing a definition for 'brand', although they might refer to it as a 'long-term purpose' (Inskip, 2014) or align it with an advertisement, logo or name (Wong and Merrilees, 2005). In their study, Wong and Merrilees (2005) highlighted the narrow perception of branding shared by OMs in SMEs, whereas Mitchell et al. (2012) found that OMs viewed branding in an abstract and symbolic (identity, heritage image, etc.) manner and as helping the company grow and remain competitive.

To explore online branding strategies, we started by investigating OMs' perceptions and understandings of branding in the bakery sector. Our first research question is as follows:

RQ1   What is the perception and interpretation of the term 'branding'?

2.2   *Online retail branding strategies*

Online branding has been defined as the way "online channels support brands which in essence are the sum of a product, service and organisation as perceived by a user, customer or stakeholder" [Rowley, (2009), p.349]. Studies have highlighted the various elements of branding, such as the logo and brand marks, which can be communicated in the start only to proceed with value creation backed by positive customer experience (Rowley, 2009). Chaffey (2019) highlighted that online branding is connected to the capabilities of online channels to support brands. However, simply focusing on online brand communication is not sufficient (Kapferer, 2004). In addition, relying on the components of offline branding creates restrictions, as there are a number of differences – such as customer experience, visual communication, customer interaction and other sensory elements – that make online branding particularly challenging.

A number of studies have highlighted the importance of corporate identity and integrated marketing communications as means of creating strong brands (Alevizou et al., 2019; Henninger et al., 2017). These past studies have highlighted the importance of consistency and clarity in terms of the encoded messages transmitted via both online and offline platforms.

The use of online channels and their importance in branding strategy have been extensively discussed in the literature for the past twenty years. Opoku et al. (2007), for instance, noted that SMEs (e.g., restaurants) use websites as part of their online branding strategies, which helps them communicate their brand personality and brand positioning. This is echoed in the work of Spence and Hamzaoui-Essoussi (2010), who noted that SMEs use websites to enhance their brand and added that this fits well with their lower-cost strategy. Similarly, Goswami (2015) investigated how online branding amongst fashion retailers in India is implemented and concluded that online branding contains several effective strategies and tools, such as websites (for store information purposes), emails (for product promotion), loyalty schemes (including personalised pages), recommendations for customers, prizes, coupons and online discounts. The author agreed with previous studies and highlighted the use of visual elements in online branding, such as logos, videos from fashion shows, fashion blogs and so on (Goswami, 2015). Overall, SMEs use a number of communication tools to engage with stakeholders, their employees and their customer base. For instance, a number of SMEs utilise their

websites – sometimes multilingual – to communicate with their customer bases more effectively (Gilmore et al., 2007; Opoku et al., 2007), whereas others find websites costly in comparison to other online platforms of communication and as such move towards social media (Hassan et al., 2015).

There is wide agreement in terms of the effectiveness of social media as a communication tool. In the case of SMEs, the online environment presents some communication opportunities for branding, especially on popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Youtube, Instagram and WhatsApp (Abubaker et al., 2019; Alevizou et al., 2019; Henninger et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2019; Michaelidou et al., 2011). Selecting a platform is a key consideration for SMEs, as a number of SMEs in the B2B sector use LinkedIn, whereas Facebook is regarded as appropriate for SMEs who serve customers in the B2C industry (Eggers et al., 2017). However, regardless of their sector, SMEs employ social media to attract customers, build relationships with stakeholders, enhance brand awareness and collect feedback from customers (Michaelidou et al., 2011), and this has been found to create and reinforce customer loyalty (Sharma et al., 2019).

While social media benefit SMEs, certain obstacles affect its use as a branding tool amongst SMEs in different sectors, such as scepticism over the measurement of social media and its methods, lack of knowledge about social media platforms, limited technical skills, financial and time constraints, inexperience with social media networks and low technological development, specifically in less-developed countries (Abubaker et al., 2019; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Odoom and Mensah, 2019).

During the past few years, innovative approaches to marketing communications and, in particular, to social media have contributed to the use of social media influencers as a way of improving branding and sales (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019) . One key challenge facing brands is the identification of the most suitable influencers. Studies have shown that working with influencers based on follower numbers is not the most effective marketing strategy but instead reduces perceived brand uniqueness (De Veirman et al., 2017). The findings regarding the benefits of using influencers to enhance brand image are inconclusive. Most importantly, collaborating with influencers in the Saudi Arabian bakery industry remains, to our knowledge, unexplored.

A key goal of any retail business (either online and offline) is to create a memorable customer experience (Biswas, 2019). This may be achieved through consumer senses (Spence et al., 2014). For instance, studies have shown that consumers may be influenced by product colour (e.g., Bagchi and Cheema, 2013), whereas other studies have focused on packaging visual-gustatory effects, highlighting that the location of the food image on the package façade can increase flavour perception but decrease quantity consumed (Togawa et al., 2019). Branding has been instrumental in encapsulating the sensory environment, but this has mostly been explored in a physical store setting, with very few studies reporting on the experiential and sensory online retail environment.

On the other hand, anthropomorphic appeals can overcome the element of space and have been defined as the attribution of human-like characteristics to brands, which allows consumers to perceive brands as having human characteristics (Epley et al., 2007; Velasco et al., 2021). Anthropomorphism is a popular approach in marketing and branding, with studies suggesting it to be frequently associated with food and packaging (De Bondt et al., 2018; Triantos et al., 2016) and with products marketed to children (Inagaki and Hatano, 1987; Vandana and Kumar, 2018), frequently highlighting positive consumer associations and purchase effects. Another strand of related research focused

on brand personification (Cohen 2014; Delbaere et al., 2011), as 'to personify' also means 'to embody or symbolise', and, as such, brand personification refers to the brand itself being personified as a character [Cohen, (2014) p.3]. Delbaere et al. (2011) highlighted that the reason that personification can be understood by consumers is anthropomorphism. Cohen (2014) identified five overlapping categories of brand personification as a character who

1   personifies the brand

2   is a spokes character for the brand

3   is as an ambassador for the brand

4   serves as a mascot for the brand

5   has some other relationship to the brand (p.3).

Even though these categories have been explored in a physical retail setting, there is little research on how managers perceive these and how they create their online brand identities, which is explored in this paper. As such, our second key research question is as follows:

RQ2   How do the established views of online branding affect OMs' online branding strategies?

3   Methodology

An interpretivist enquiry is best suited for branding research, especially in the field of SMEs (Gabbott and Jevons, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2012; Wong and Merrilees, 2005). This study adopted an inductive qualitative approach aiming to explore in-depth interpretations and understandings of social work. It focused on first hand experiences, stories and circumstances to develop novel ideas and theories (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Our participants are OMs of bakeries in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The sample was selected purposely from the internet – in particular, websites and social media platforms. In addition, we consulted the Jeddah chamber of commerce and industry (JCCI) social media pages and database and, in particular, their definition and classification of SMEs. After contacting the bakeries we located online and in the JCCI's list, we received seven positive responses. We contacted only bakeries that fit our criteria in terms of size, years of operation and location. We recruited OMs of bakeries operating in Jeddah for a minimum of one year. Details from our sample can be found in Table 1.

The study received ethical approval from the authors' institution. An information sheet was sent to the participants ahead of the interview. Participants who agreed to take part in the study were sent a consent form to sign and return to us. We have not used any real names, making sure our participants are not identifiable. Participants received the interview protocol in advance and were informed that they could opt out from answering any questions that made them uncomfortable. Our audio recordings, as well as the consent forms, were locked in a password-protected drive.

Table 1 Bakery shops –participant information

Bakery shop	Number of stores	Gender	Educational background	Size of the enterprise	Years of service	Product type
Bakery (1)	3	Male	Engineering	Medium	2 years	Churros (traditional Spanish sweets with a twist)
Bakery (2)	2	Male	Business administration	Small	1 years	Ice cream, smoothies, cupcakes and cookies
Bakery (3)	1	Male	Finance	Small	1 and a half years	Waffles, pancakes, crepes and funnel cakes
Bakery (4)	1	Female	Mathematics	Small	10 years as a home business, and three years with a new brand name and a physical retail shop	Sweet and savoury
Bakery (5)	2	Male	Mechanical engineering	Small	Six years as an ice cream business, then seven months with a new brand name, concept and variety of products	Sweet and savoury
Bakery (6)	1	Female	Mathematics	Small	10 years as a home business, and six months with a new brand name, and a physical retail shop	Cupcakes, cookies, cakes and crepes
Bakery (7)	1	Male	Management	Medium	Five years	Cakes, cookies and cupcakes

To achieve the aim of this study, we conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which are known to generate rich data and are suited for organisational research (Cassell, 2015). The interview questions were open-ended based on the objectives of the study and were centred on the OMs' interpretations of a 'brand' and their understanding of brand strategy (see Table 2). We audio recorded the interviews, which lasted up to one hour and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in the local language, and both the interview protocol and transcripts were back-translated for accuracy.

Table 2   Sample interview questions and themes

Themes	Sample questions
Social media platforms	What is a brand? What is your understanding of the branding process?
	Can you describe your brand?
	Please discuss your brand communication on your social media platforms.
	Please explain each approach.
Influencer marketing and social media content	Can you explain how you handle social media?
	Can you discuss the content of your brand communication?
	Can you discuss your approach to social media influencers?

NVivo was used to manage and organise the data from the seven interviews. Our data analysis process followed the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As such, we familiarised ourselves with the data by listening to the audio recordings, transcribing the interviews verbatim, reading the transcripts and keeping initial notes and ideas. We then proceeded in generating the initial codes across the dataset and searching for themes (and subthemes); this led us to review the key emerging themes and create a thematic representation of our data. Following an ongoing analysis, we refined and defined each theme, and we concluded the process by producing the report.

4   Findings and discussion

This section presents our findings related to bakeries' online branding approaches. In particular, we focus on how Saudi Arabian small- and medium-sized bakeries formulate their online branding strategies and how they operationalise them to achieve their branding objectives. We start by outlining key issues, such as social media trends affecting the sector and the particularities of bakeries in Saudi Arabia.

4.1   A family affair, influencers and social media activity

All our participants were active on social media, mostly on Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and WhatsApp. They actively posted, but the content and the approach varied. The perceived effect of social media on sales was acknowledged by all the participants:

> "Of course, and I've experienced the years where there were no social media and I was working, and the years where there were social media, and I have seen the difference. I mean, the development is indescribable; the difference is huge". (B4)

In addition, they perceived social media as a means of advertising their products on their own accounts or on others' (with a fee), which echoes previous studies (Wong and Merrilees, 2005). Overall, Instagram seemed the most popular for posts related to products or shops or for reposts and tags from customers. Apart from Instagram, OMs seemed to prefer Snapchat, especially for posting short videos of the customers' posts. WhatsApp seemed to be perceived as the most suitable channel for sales and sales promotions. In addition, apart from direct messaging on Instagram, OMs used WhatsApp for customer communication, as they perceived it as more suitable than emails. The main challenge discussed by OMs was the time-consuming element of social media. Overall, they discussed hashtagging, likes, posts and photographs. Even though their approaches to social media seemed sporadic and fragmented, their perceptions of the type of photograph/visual and the type of content that fit with their brand were clear. All the OMs explained their approaches to posting photographs, ranging from taking their own pictures of their products to posting photos of their customers to hiring professionals and requesting photos that 'fit' with the brand.

The online interactions with customers were reactive, with little planning and mostly dealing with orders, posting photos and handling complaints. The OMs of B2 and B3 mentioned that complaints were dealt with in a private manner via direct messages or over the phone.

Finally, the OMs had limited experience in evaluating the effectiveness of social media apart from likes and the effect of positive reports and reviews, which highlights some problems with their online branding approach:

> "Honestly, the effect of other accounts – their effect is really powerful but for a specific time. I mean, for example, when there is a post about the store on YJ , of course after a week you'll see that the store would be more crowded. For example, okay, they heard the review, they saw the review, but after a week the effect is over, so that's why – I mean, they're really powerful, but for specific times only". (B3)

We agree with past research (Abubaker et al., 2019; Odoom and Mensah, 2019) highlighting OMs' scepticism and lack of knowledge on the measurement of social media and extend that to include the criteria currently used in the sector, which are solely based on the number of followers indicating a short-term 'sales gratification' rather than a long-term brand strategy.

In addition, almost all OMs had family members helping with social media accounts. For instance, the OM of B3 received help from their sister:

> "My sister studied graphic design, so she helps me in these stuff. She actually designed the logo, all the fonts, and the logo, and these things, and the menu, and she's responsible for the social media, the marketing".

The OM of B4 mentioned the following:

> "I mean I consider her [my sister] part of the famous people on Instagram. She has so many followers, and any advice that comes from her – I mean she makes the [. . .] and any advice that comes from her famous friends, I advertise on their accounts. I mean, you know, through connections".

Finally, the OM of B6 summarised the involvement of family members on social media:

> "Like Instagram, my niece is responsible of it. This [employee], he is responsible of WhatsApp – sometimes my nephew, sometimes my son, takes responsibility of it, so I am telling you things are a little bit mixed up".

When asked why they worked with family members, the OMs brought up the issues of trust and unpleasant experiences with working with local agencies. The OM of B5 recalled:

> "We actually hired a company, but it wasn't good. They've even posted pictures which do not represent our style, not even, so they have messed up things for us, but by Allah's willing we will recover from this. We've stopped working with them – it [was] basically 'post pictures, and do other things for certain amount of money', and we gave them our accounts, and we have certain guidelines for the brand and certain way of taking pictures and stuff like that, but they didn't [. . .] I mean didn't follow the guidelines, so we're trying to fix things a little bit".

This is not a novel finding, as most small businesses involve family members, especially when resources are limited. However, we found that in some cases, more than one family member was involved in handling social media accounts, which may affect consistency in brand communication.

One key finding affecting branding strategy is that social media influencers –who are referred to as مؤثرين ('muthirin') in Arabic – in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf cooperation council (GCC) area in general are becoming a sought-out strategy for many shops and bakeries, in particular. They are known for having a substantive follower base of 100 thousand followers or more. They are perceived as an 'advertising tool' for shops, as their effect is 'instant', especially in terms of an increase in sales and profit. However, as opposed to other industry sectors such as the fashion, sports and beauty industries, bakeries work with influencers who are not related particularly to the baked-food sector or even the food industry but instead are celebrities, actors, makeup artists, food critics, TV hosts, singers or models or simply gained their fame by using social media platforms to share their lifestyles. The main justification for this approach is the 'instant' results in foot traffic.

Even though working with celebrities is not novel, the process of selecting them is a characteristic of the sector, as was confirmed by almost all OMs. The first step was mainly Instagram research to identify influencers – or 'famous people', as they were referred to during the interviews. Next was inviting them to the shop (if they reached an agreement over the fee), familiarising them with the shop, allowing them to take their own photos and finally offering them products while filming the process. The hope was that their social media followers would be impressed by the experience and would visit the shop. The OMs of the bakery shops 'collaborated' with a talent show winner who later became a TV host, a group of comedians, an actor, a social media food critic and an actress on a children's channel. All the OMs were clear about the cost of such collaborations: "Most of them of course ask for huge amount of money in order to come to the bakery" (B3). The OM of B2 mentioned the following:

> "I mean I chose (Y Restaurants), an account called (Y Restaurants), because it's specialised in restaurants and stuff like that, and they have many followers – that's it. Of course I choose them based on their popularity, and how many followers they have".

Apart from two bakeries, the OMs mainly looked at the number of followers instead of the brand fit, which may result in issues with brand identity, as stated in the literature (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Overall, social media seemed to be managed within the family, with a few OMs reporting a negative experience when working with external organisations. This chase

after 'famous people' created issues for the sector, as there were indications of considerable spending with little consideration of brand fit. This may be due to the immediate notice of sales increase and shop foot traffic, which is considered short-lived.

This may also be attributed to the distorted understanding of branding, as will be seen in the following sections discussing the OMs' understandings and interpretations of the term.

4.2 The owner-manager: branding conceptualisation and associations

Our participants were asked to reflect on what a 'brand' is and how important branding is for their business. As such, the OMs defined a brand from a *tangible and intangible perspective, an anthropomorphic perspective, and a strategic perspective.*

4.2.1 The tangible and intangible perspective: branding as an extension of the core product

A few of the OMs viewed the brand as an extension of the product distinctiveness, its quality, the services and the employees:

> "Brand – it's the idea of having something unique. I started with something unique, and in my opinion, my product quality, which I take into consideration, is high, and this is what differentiates me from others. Even if others copied my ideas, I would still have my quality [. . .]. To me this is very important, and in Allah's willing, nothing changes or be missed – I mean the cleanliness and the quality of the shop – and all of these things I would keep it in my mind, on the same level and develop it constantly, even the employees, everything, the cleanliness of the shop". (B2)

Even though this was the view of one OM, who also mentioned that "[The brand] is a holistic thing, because a lot of people come to us and ask 'Is this an international brand?' and stuff like that. I tell them in Allah's willing in the future it will be everywhere" (B2), this implies that the OM is overly focused on the products and services rather than a holistic brand strategy and image. A similar perception was shared with the OM of B3, who viewed branding as the brand name, the logo and the store design:

> "I am trying to make a brand for myself, in terms of the theme of the store, of the store, and in Allah's willing, I am planning to expand more. So this concept I am making a brand for myself – even when I expand, I will take the same name, the same logo, the same store design". (B3)

We echo previous studies highlighting that OMs view their brands as extensions of themselves (Henninger et al., 2017), and we also stress that this view may narrow the online branding strategies to a one-way communication focused on core offerings rather than more symbolic ones. A functional interpretation of branding has also been reported in past studies (Mitchell et al., 2012, 2015), where OMs focused on the store atmosphere, their products and/or services and customer experience.

OMs sharing this brand perspective perceive social media as a core branding approach due to the low cost and sense of control, as the OM of B2 mentioned: "To be honest, social media is the most used. Social media – I mean are there any others, other than social media?" Even though they were quite excited with their posting routines – usually focusing on photographs of their products – both OMs did not have a clear online branding strategy:

> "I post pictures almost every day. Every day, every two days, three days, I need to post, but not at this time. I mean, my primary focus is currently on ice cream, but sometimes I post a picture of a smoothie; other time I post picture of a cupcake. Of course I need to post about any new product, in order to market it. I advertise it". (B2)

In addition, they had no knowledge of how to conduct market research, as the OM of B2 shared:

> "Without planning [to conduct research], I mean, if I saw the store a little bit empty, and one customer approached me, or I felt that the place isn't crowded and the atmosphere is relaxing, and customers are enjoying their ice cream, I would ask them, "How do you evaluate the ice cream on a scale from 1 to 10?" I mean, so yeah, yeah".

The basic use of social media was also confirmed by the OM of B3, where the posts were identical across all platforms.

4.2.2   The anthropomorphic perspective: Branding as an extension of the OM

A few of the OMs, when responding to our question 'What is a brand?', adopted an anthropomorphic perspective, making relative associations to a living entity and to having an identity, a look and an image to the public:

> "So I consider the identity as a primary thing that would live with you, that would help you to establish and develop. Without an identity, everything would be messed up, and you would be adding many unnecessary products". (B7)

In this case, the 'brand' is seen as a guide that *lives* with the OM and *helps* them with their business. The OM also equates the brand with an identity and a guide in terms of branding. Even though at the start of the discussion, the OM focused on the brand as a *living* entity, towards the end of the discussion, the brand became a frame for product assortment. This implies that some OMs viewed the brand as a *compass* for their businesses or product strategies. Similarly, the OMs of B4, B6 and B7 viewed the brand as having an identical *personality* and the same *characteristics* as their owners: "Yeah, even at my house, I have the same style, the same colour" (B6). The OM of B7 said, "So a specific part of who I am has had an impact on B7." B4 saw the brand as immortal – it would outlive her and carry on their heritage: "I mean if I died and I couldn't achieve this aim [business expansion], may Allah let me live longer – others would come [guided by the brand] and continue the journey".

All the OMs made associations with their own personalities; however, a few saw their brands as having distinct personalities external to their own. What we need to stress here is that OMs did not have clear ideas of what their brand personalities were but abstract and blurry visions of what the brand personality *should* be. Aaker (1997) explored brand personality through a five-factor scale: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Our interviewees described it as a more 'happy-like' personality, fitting well with the colour scheme of their store (and the other way around). Most of them used words such as 'unique', 'distinctive', 'different' and 'identity'. The OM of B4 mentioned the following:

> "I do not want it to be based on my personality; I want to create a different personality for it, so when I talk in B4's account on Instagram, I talk as if B4 has its own personality, not me. I mean, I want to create a personality for it, a business that speaks this specific language". (B4)

> "To our knowledge, this perspective is novel, as past studies have highlighted branding as an extension of an OM's personality, values, vision and identity" (Centeno et al., 2013; Spence and Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2015).

As mentioned in the literature review, brand personification and anthropomorphism is not a new concept but a rather popular one in the fields of marketing and branding. Cohen (2014), in examining the five categories of brand personification, discussed the role of a *spokes-character* for the brand, which implies an approach taken by a few of the OMs who saw their brands as having their own "specific language" (B4). This affects their online branding strategies and communication, as the OMs go beyond posting photos of the products to trying to find a *voice* and a *language* for their brands. Yet this is still in its infancy, as most of the OMs *envisioned* – rather than specified – what their brands' voices or personifications looked like. One of the main struggles was centred on a daily activity related to the language used for social media content:

> "Most of the times, I want to use hashtags in English, but in the future, I will concentrate on doing that, because the more you [. . .] add hashtags in English, the more you can spread your message, as long as you have the goal to be international". (B4)

Overall, we agree with previous studies (Mitchell et al., 2012, 2015), especially in relation to brand personality and symbolic brand communication, and we further stress the limited use of these channels for branding purposes. The OM of B4, for instance, was expecting customers to make suggestions instead of actively engaging with them on social media. Even though on a theoretical level, they acknowledged the power of branding and the importance of brand personality, contrary to studies reporting the opposite (Horan et al., 2011), on a practical level, they remained reactive towards social media and content creation.

4.2.3 The strategic perspective: brand concepts, strategy and marketing stereotypes

At this point, we need to highlight that four out of the seven shops were inspired by an idea they had come across when travelling (or living) abroad – they had decided to turn these ideas into bakery shops in their hometowns. These OMs discussed international expansion plans and benchmarked against well-established brands instead of local competition. In other words, existing well-established brands worked as branding *stereotypes* for a few OMs, influencing their ideas of branding and their strategic approaches. "To be a brand is to have an 'identity', to make any product identified, we aim for [B1] to be a brand that is identified such as McDonald's, for example, is identified" (B1). The same OM dismissed a direct competitor for not having a brand or what he considered a good-quality and well-presented product: "No! big difference! First, he produces pastry in a very primitive way. He doesn't have a brand, and no identity. […] He is not a competition by any meaning" (B1). The OM of B1 was slowly expanding in different areas of the city and was clear about who his target market was and was also comfortable discussing his online branding strategies.

On a similar note, one OM seemed to realise the role of competition and the changing consumer preferences and stressed his approach to innovation:

> "Actually, you see, in this field, you need to think and come up with ideas constantly, through the year. I mean, this field is renewable. Every day there is something new in the market: new products, new ideas, nice new things. And you're dealing with, with a customer – I mean, the end customer requires that we renew and change, I mean. I mean, it's easy for someone to see a new idea in another place, and he'll change his mind and leave you, so there is a need to renew and change, keep up with the market, and knowing competitors is good. I mean, we do business visits to shops which are similar to ours, and we see what do they have, what are they offering, see their performance, and their prices in order to be involved in the competition, because it's easy to lose your place in the competition". (B5)

The notion of looking at the competition is not new in the literature, as it has been the basis for models on competitive advantage, for instance (see Porter, 1999). Contrary to the rest of the bakeries, the OMs from B1 and B5 acknowledged the fast-changing consumer tastes, the market trends and the power of competition (both direct and indirect). This seemed to affect their online branding strategies, as they benchmarked against established brands and consequently drove their online strategies beyond the taste of their products.

5   Conclusion and contribution

Baked goods are one of the most prominent offerings of the packaged-foods industry, and in particular, bread and pastries are consumed daily in Saudi Arabia (Euromonitor International, 2019). Our findings have shed some light on online branding strategies of small – and medium-sized bakery shops in Saudi Arabia. The emphasis in the literature has been on the physical retail setting and large organisations. Most studies on retail branding have focused on the fashion and food industries, leaving the packaged-food sector unexplored.

The theoretical contribution of this paper starts with the interpretation and understating of what a brand is (RQ1) and how it affects online branding strategy (RQ2) from an OM's perspective. We echoed previous studies (Inskip, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Wong and Merrilees, 2005), highlighting the subjectivity of a brand and branding as well as the lack of proper articulation from the OMs regarding what a brand is, linking our study with research stressing the abstract view of branding. However, we have extended previous studies by adding the potential effect of family members handling online branding. Future studies can focus on the nature of that involvement and the role of OMs in guiding their family members' work. Our second theoretical contribution is the OMs' reflections on what branding is and how important branding is for their businesses. We classified the definitions given by OMs in a threefold perceptive: 'brand' as a tangible and intangible perspective, an anthropomorphic perspective and a strategic perspective. In addition, we highlighted 'brand' as external to the OM entity guiding the future direction of the brand. Even though the symbolic, strategic and functional elements in SME OMs' views of branding are common in the literature (Inskip, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012, 2015), we found some associations between branding strategies and brand perceptions, which may lead small- and medium-sized bakeries towards unsustainable practices (e.g., overpaying influencers, focusing solely on number of followers, ignoring brand fit, disregarding direct competition, not forming a clear brand direction). We call for further research on these online branding approaches and their effects on a brand. The

managerial implications of our study are twofold. First, the OMs can plan an online branding strategy that fits their brand identity. In addition, the selection of influencers can be based on brand fit and personality, as well as, product assortment instead of the number of followers. Second, branding perceptions can be less abstract when they follow a well-planned short-and long-term brand strategy. At this point, we need to acknowledge our study limitations, which are the small sample size of our study.

References

Aaker, J.L. (1997) 'Dimensions of brand personality', *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp.347–354.

Abubaker, A., Ahmad, S. and Ahmad, N. (2019) 'SME social media use: a study of predictive factors in the United Arab Emirates', *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*, Vol. 38, No. 5, pp.53–68.

Ahmad, S.Z. (2012) 'Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: problems and constraints', World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp.217–232.

Alevizou, P., Henninger, C. and Spinks, C. (2019) 'Communicating sustainability practices and values: a case study approach of a micro-organisation in the UK', *International Journal of Business and Globalisation*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp.37–52.

Bagchi, R. and Cheema, A. (2013) 'The effect of red background color on Willingness-to-pay: the moderating role of selling mechanism', *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5, pp.947–60.

Berthon, P., Ewing, M.T. and Napoli, J. (2008) 'Brand Management in Small to Medium-Sized Enterprises' , *Journal of Small Business Management*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp.27–45.

Biswas, D. (2019) 'Sensory aspects of retailing: theoretical and practical implications', *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 95, No. 4, pp.111–115.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp.77–101.

Buschgens, M., Figueiredo, B. and Rahman, K. (2020) 'How brand owners construct imagined worlds with brand visual aesthetics', *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp.266–283.

Cassell, C. (2015) *Conducting Research Interviews for Business and Management Students*, SAGE Publications.

Centeno, E., Hart, S. and Dinnie, K. (2013) 'The five phases of SME brand-building', *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 20, No. 6, pp.445–457.

Chaffey, D. (2019) *Digital Marketing*, Pearson UK, https://www.citc.gov.sa/en/reportsandstudies/ Reports/Documents/CITC_ECOMMERCE_2017_ENGLISH.PDF (accessed 27 November 2020).

Cohen, R.J. (2014) 'Brand personification: introduction and overview', *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp.1–30.

Collins, M. (2019) '4 trends impacting packaged food', *Progressive Grocer,* 6 September [online] https://progressivegrocer.com/4-trends-impacting-packaged-foods (accessed 27 November 2020).

De Bondt, C., Van Kerckhove, A. and Geuens, M. (2018) 'Look at that body! How anthropomorphic package shapes systematically appeal to consumers', *International Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 37, No. 5, pp.698–717.

De Veirman, M., , Veroline, C. and Liselot, H. (2017) 'Marketing through Instagram influencers: the impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude', *International Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 36, No. 5, pp.798–28.

Delbaere, M., McQuarrie, EF. and Phillips, B.J. (2011) 'Personification in advertising: Using a visual metaphor to trigger anthropomorphism', *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp.121–130.

Dussimon, K. (2020) 'Key trends in global packaged food markets: functional nutrients', *Euromonitor International,* 25 March [online] https://blog.euromonitor.com/key-trends-in-global-packaged-food-markets- functional-nutrients/ (accessed 27 November 2020)

Eggers, F., Hatak, I., Kraus, S. and Niemand, T. (2017) 'Technologies that Support marketing and market development in SMEs–evidence from social networks', *Journal of Small Business Management*, Vol. 55, No. 2, pp.270–302.

Epley, N., Waytz, A. and Cacioppo, J.T. (2007) 'On seeing human: a three-factor theory of anthropomorphism', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 114, No. 4, pp.864–886, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.114.4.864.

Euromonitor International (2019) 'Baked goods in Saudi Arabia', November [online] https://www.euromonitor.com/baked-goods-in-saudi-arabia/report (accessed 26 November 2020).

Fong, J. and Burton, S. (2008) 'A cross-cultural comparison of electronic word-of-mouth and country-of-origin effects', *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp.233–242.

Gabbott, M. and Jevons, C. (2009) 'Brand community in search of theory: an endless spiral of ambiguity', *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp.119–122.

General Authority for Statistics (2019) Small and medium-sized establishments contribution in the private sector [online] https://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/Small%20and%20Medium-Sized%20Establishments%20Contribution%20in%20the%20Private%20Sector%20Q3%2C%202019%20EN.pdf (accessed 26 November 2020)

Gilmore, A., Gallagher, D. and Henry, S. (2007) 'E-marketing and SMEs: operational lessons for the future', *European Business Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp.234–247.

Goswami, S. (2015) 'A study on the online branding strategies of Indian fashion retail stores', *IUP Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp.45–59.

Hassan, S., Nadzim, S.Z.A. and Shiratuddin, N. (2015) 'Strategic use of social media for small business based on the AIDA model', *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 172, No. 2015, pp.262–269.

Henninger, E., Alevizou, P. and Oats, C. (2017) 'IMC, social media, and UK fashion micro-organisations', *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp.668–691.

Hill, J. (2001) 'A multidimensional study of the key determinants of effective SME marketing activity: part 1', *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 7, No. 5, pp.171–204.

Hirvonen, S. and Laukkanen, T. (2014) 'Brand orientation in small firms: an empirical test of the impact on brand performance', *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp.41–58.

Horan, G., O'Dwyer, M. and Tiernan, S. (2011) 'Exploring management perspectives of branding in service SMEs', *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp.114–121.

Inagaki, K. and Hatano, G. (1987) 'Young children's spontaneous personification as analogy', *Child Development*, Vol. 58, No. 4, pp.1013–1020.

Inskip, I. (2014) 'Corporate branding for small to medium-sized businesses: a missed opportunity or an indulgence?', *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 11, No. 5, pp.358–365.

Kapferer, J.N. (2004) *The New Strategic Brand Management: Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long Term,* Kogan Page, London.

Khan, A. and Alsharif, A. (2019) SMEs and Vision 2030 smaller units for a larger economy Jadwa Investment, Riyadh [online] https://www.jeg.org.sa/sites/default/files/library/files/SMEs%20and%20Vision%202030.pdf (accessed 26 November 2020).

Konstantopoulou, A., Rizomyliotis, I., Konstantoulaki, K. and Badahdah, R. (2019), 'Improving SMEs' competitiveness with the use of Instagram influencer advertising and eWOM', *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp.308–321.

Kraus, S., Gast, J., Schleich, M., Jones, P. and Ritter, M. (2019) 'Content is king: how SMEs create content for social media marketing under limited resources', *Journal of Macromarketing*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp.415–430.

Lou, C. and Yuan, S. (2019) 'Influencer marketing: how message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media', *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp.58–73.

Michaelidou, N., Siamagka, N. and Christodoulides, G. (2011) 'Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: an exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands', *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 40, No. 7, pp.1153–1159.

Mitchell, R., Hutchinson, K. and Bishop, S. (2012) 'Interpretation of the retail brand: an SME perspective', *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp.157–175.

Mitchell, R., Hutchinson, K. and Quinn, B. (2013) 'Brand management in small and medium-sized (SME) retailers: A future research agenda', *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 29, Nos. 11–12, pp.1367–1393.

Mitchell, R., Hutchinson, K., Quinn, B. and Gilmore, A. (2015) 'A framework for SME retail branding', *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 31, No. 17–18, pp.1818–1850.

Monsha'at. (2020) Sizes of business [online] https://www.monshaat.gov.sa/en/SMEs-definition (accessed 26 November 2020)

Odoom, R. and Mensah, P. (2019) 'Brand orientation and brand performance in SMEs: the moderating effects of social media and innovation capabilities', *Management Research Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1, pp.155–171.

Opoku, R.A., Abratt, R., Bendixen, M. and Pitt, L. (2007) 'Communicating brand personality: are the web sites doing the talking for food SMEs?', *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp.362–374.

Porter, M.E. (1999) 'Michael Porter on competition', *Antitrust Bulletin*, Vol. 44, No. 4, p.841.

Rafiki, A. (2019) 'Determinants of SME growth: an empirical study in Saudi Arabia', *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp.205–225.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, M.C. and Ormston, R. (2014) *Qualitative Research Practice*, 2nd ed., SAGE Publications, California.

Rowley, J. (2009) 'Online branding strategies of UK fashion retailers', *Internet Research*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp.348–369.

Sharma, S., Singh, G. and Aiyub, A. (2019) 'Use of social networking sites by SMEs to engage with their customers: a developing country perspective', *Journal of Internet Commerce*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp.62–81.

Spence, C., Nancy, M., Puccinelli, D.G. and Roggeveen, A.L. (2014) 'Store atmospherics: a multisensory perspective', *Psychology andMarketing*, Vol. 31, No. 7, pp.472–488.

Spence, M. and Hamzaoui-Essoussi, L. (2010) 'SME brand building and management: an exploratory study', *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 44, Nos. 7–8, pp.1037–1054.

Stuckey, B. (2020) 'Consumer packaged goods trends driving food and beverage innovation', *Forbes*, 15 January [online] https://www.forbes.com/sites/barbstuckey/2020/01/15/2020-consumer-packaged-goods-trends-driving-food--beverage-innovation/?sh=5b04b2d03533 (accessed 27 November 2020).

Suciati, P. (2018) 'Instagram marketing techniques for online store: a descriptive study', in *2nd International Conference on Vocational Higher Education* (ICVHE) 2017, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, pp.811–825, https://doi.org//10.18502/kss.v3i11.2808.

Tajuddin, R.M., Hashim, S.F. and Zainol, A.S. (2017) 'The role of brand identity in creating resilient small enterprises (SMEs) in fashion industry', *International Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp.140–146.

Togawa, T., Park, J., Ishii, H. and Deng, X. (2019) 'A packaging visual-gustatory correspondence effect: using visual packaging design to influence flavor perception and healthy eating decisions', *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 95, No. 4, pp.204–218.

Triantos, A., Plakoyiannaki, E., Outra, E. and Petridis, N. (2016) 'Anthropomorphic packaging: is there life on Mars?', *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 50, Nos. 1–2, pp.260–275.

Tripathi, A. (2019) 'SMEs in Saudi Arabia: an innovative tool for country's economic growth', *Science International*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp.261–267, https://ssrn.com/abstract=3458372 (accessed 26 November 2020).

Vandana and Kumar, V. (2018) 'Mom I want it: impact of anthropomorphism on pester power among children', *International Journal of Business Innovation and Research*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp.168–185.

Velasco, F., Yang, Z. and Janakiraman, N. (2021) 'A meta-analytic investigation of consumer response to anthropomorphic appeals: the roles of product type and uncertainty avoidance', *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 131, No. 2021, pp.735–746.

Wong, H. and Merrilees, B. (2005) 'A brand orientation typology for SMEs: a case research approach', *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp.155–162.

World Health Organization (2020) 'Healthy diet', 29 April [online] https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet (accessed 27 November 2020).