Communication Characteristics of a Global Brand's Store Staff as a Key CRM Tool, and Local Customers' Satisfaction and Intention to Repurchase: A Case Study of UNIQLO Thailand

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Abstract

*T*he fast fashion business in ASEAN is growing rapidly because young consumersin the region now have higher purchasing power and are very keen on fashion. The business is also thriving particularly in Thailand (Kasikorn Research Center, 2013). In the past decade, UNIQLO, a Japanese leading fast fashion retailer run by Fast Retailing Co., Ltd., has become one of the most popular international apparel brands in this country. This article, originally part of a paper entitled 'Store Staff – Customer Communication for CRM: A Case Study of UNIQLO Thailand,' will examine: 1) CRM strategy, exploiting store staff as the main players; and 2) the communication characteristics of the store staff that lead to customer satisfaction and repurchase intent. A Multi-method research strategy was employed. Quantitative data were gathered by distributing two hundred questionnaires to UNIQLO customers from five branches across Bangkok. Qualitative data were collected via in-depth interviews with the brand's first store manager (in Thailand) and with twenty questionnaire respondents.

The results show:

1) According to its CRM strategy, UNIQLO Thailand expected their staff to be brand representatives and the main players in building customer relationships. In doing so, UNIQLO's nine DNAs: Cleanliness, Tidiness, Politeness, Energetic, Punctuality, Briskness, Hospitality, Teamwork and Correctness were imparted to the store staff through several channels, like company training programs and daily morning meetings.

2) According to the respondents, the most satisfying communication characteristic was 'the store staff used polite language and tonality', which reflected the 'Politeness' DNA; while the least satisfying was 'the store staff were able to give advice in choosing clothes that fit you.' In addition, among communication characteristics that affected repurchase intention, the respondents rated 'the store staff gave a warm welcome and service with smile,' which reflected 'Hospitality' and 'the store staff communicated with polite manners,' which reflected 'Politeness,' as the highest; while 'the store staff had good product knowledge and able to provide right information', reflecting 'Correctness,' was rated the lowest. At a significance level of 0.05, scores of satisfaction and repurchase intention rated by customers who were different in sex, age group, range of income, and from different branches, were statistically different.

3) The respondents could not clearly distinguish the store staff's communication characteristics meant to reflect 'Energetic' and 'Briskness' (Haki Haki in Japanese) because, in Thai culture, the actions that reflected both terms were quite similar; while in Japanese culture, they are clearly different.

Keywords: Fashion, Retail, CRM, Customer experience

Background

During the past five years, the fast fashion business in ASEAN has been growing rapidly because young consumers in the region have increased purchasing power and are very keen on fashion. These factors, coupled with strong growth in the Thai retail business, to the point that Thailand has become one of ASEAN's major trade, tourism, and shopping centers; Thailand's fast fashion retail segment has also attracted many international brands, like Zara, H&M, Forever 21, and UNIQLO to expand there. (Kasikorn Research Center, 2013).

In this highly competitive market, effective customer relationship management (CRM) is one key marketing strategy employed by many brands. It helps to differentiate each brand by building good relationships between the customer and the retailer; eventually leading to customer loyalty (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler, 2002 cited in Bojie and Alwie, 2010). In building good relationships with customers, a retailer's commitment to offer an assured quality of goods (and services) should result in the repeated satisfaction of customers (Kenedy, B, 2013). The relationship is enhanced when: the assured quality is superior to competitors;' when the company follows high standards of corporate culture and ethics; uses effective communication and avoids malevolent intentions (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, cited in Kenedy B, 2013). According to Yim, Anderson, & Swaminathan (2004), healthy interpersonal relationships between brands and their customers allows them to be seen as "trusted consultants and partners, working together with customers toward long-term mutually beneficial relationships." More precisely, salespeople (or store staff) were involved in customer relationship management for their companies. In the Thai business context, previous studies show that interpersonal skills, especially face-to-face communication between service providers and customers in a service encounter, were crucial to effective CRM (Pondphan Shoeychitr, 2013: 59; Natphimon Lertcharoenpohn, 2012).

In the past two decades, UNIQLO, a Japanese leading fast fashion retailer run by Fast Retailing Co., Ltd., had become one of the most popular international apparel brands. As of 2014, there were 632 stores outside Japan, accounting for over 30% of total UNIQLO sales. It could be said that global markets, especially in Asia, were the

brand's key drivers of growth. In Thailand, UNIQLO's first store (Central World Branch) opened in September 2011. Only four years later (August 2015), the number of stores across the country increased to 30. In Bangkok alone, 19 stores have been opened (http://fastretailing. com). Thailand is the second largest ASEAN market for UNIQLO, after Singapore (The Nation Online Newspaper, March 11, 2013).

According to its international business strategy, 'Stores Managed by Locals, for Locals', UNIQLO marks their staff as stars and empowers local stores and staff to effectively connect and build relationships with their local customers (http://fastretailing.com). Mr. Takahiro Nishimura, Chief Operating Officer of UNIQLO (Thailand), said that apart from managing the physical environment well, (e.g. interior space planning and decoration, window display, and product arrangement to attract customers) UNIQLO (Thailand) also emphasizes store staff training in order to make them brand representatives and main players in CRM; so that at every touch point (e.g. store front, sale area, fitting room and cashier), they could effectively interact with customers, build satisfaction and trust, and make them become repeat customers (Positioningmag, 2012, Online). However, in effectively running stores worldwide, the management needs to understand that the CRM implementation issues encompass cultural rather than technical factors. According to Ali and Alshawi (2004), multinational organizations face the challenge of how they, as people in one cultural context, build a quality relationship with different customers in different cultural contexts. Therefore, this study was purposed to investigate the policy and strategy of UNIQLO (Thailand) in train-ing its store staff to be main players in CRM; and the communication characteristics of store staff that lead to customer satisfaction and repurchase intent.

This paper is structured in the following fashion. Firstly, we review CRM and interpersonal communication to provide an understanding of the nature and effect of staff-customer communication on CRM. Secondly, to understand how a parent company imparts its corporate culture (DNAs) to their local branches, we review the relationship between corporate culture and service culture, exploring 3 related elements of the service-culture triad: 1) management 2) standards and 3) training. Thirdly, to provide an understanding of Thai-Japanese cultural differences, and cross-cultural business management, Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture are reviewed. Finally, the research questions that guide this study are presented and the study is discussed.

Literature Review

CRM and Interpersonal Communication

Ali and Alshawi (2004) defined CRM as "a business strategy that seamlessly integrates every aspect of business that touches customer. Kotler and Armstrong (2004, p. 16) defined CRM as "the overall process of building and maintaining profitable customer relation-ships by delivering superior customer value and satisfac-tion." The underlying premise of CRM is that customer relationships can be managed to create long-term customer loyalty and higher profits.

In terms of the relationship between CRM and interpersonal communication, Kotler and Armstrong (2004) mentioned that, from previous studies (e.g Reynolds & Arnold, 2000, Periatt, LeMay, & Chakrabarty, 2004 cited in Kotler and Armstrong, 2004), CRM strategies typically were initiated by top management but salespeople who interacted most frequently with the company buying centers were the ultimate customer relationship managers. In other words, only salespeople, who served as the primary conduit between buyer and seller, could effectively and efficiently implement CRM at the customer level. Their performance largely determined the success of a company's CRM strategy and programs. According to Bojie and Alwie (2010), relationship quality influenced the loyalty in credence services and experience services. Two sets of factors, firm factors (commitment, trust and satisfaction) and interpersonal factors (closeness, communication, communication

quality and special care), were examined. Even though a firm factor like 'commitment' had the strongest influence on the relationship quality, the service provider should also focus on interpersonal factors, like 'communication quality,' between service provider and customer because it was a crucial approach to express commitment and build satisfaction and trust.

Beaujean, Davidson & Madge (2006) said "What is regularly missing in our experience is the spark between customer and frontline staff member. That spark and the emotionally driven behavior that creates it explain how great customer service companies earn trust and loyalty during 'the moment of truth': those few interactions, for instance, a lost credit card, a damaged piece of clothing." Effective frontline staff were those who could handle the situation by putting the customer's emotions at the moment ahead of the company's or their own agenda. Pondphan Shoeychitr (2013: 55-57) said that, every touch point in a service could create some impressions and experiences or the moment of truth in the customers' mind. Therefore, it was important for the brand's management to train their frontline staff to cope with any situation at the contact point wisely, sincerely, and according to the company's standards. In first impression management, Pondphan suggested four key points of concern: 1) physical appearance: staff must dress properly, neatly, and cleanly; 2) spirit of hospitality: staff must always express the following actions with no partiality: a) warm greetings and welcomes, b) respect by politely and properly 'wai' (the Thai way to show respect and honor to people); and especially c) willingness and enthusiasm to provide service; 3) external personality: gestures, postures, and manners when providing service, (inviting, giving explanations ,or suggestions, to customers); and 4) internal personality: understanding of individual difference, empathy, and emotional intelligence to handle challenging situations.

Related Research in CRM and Interpersonal Communication: Natphimon Lertcharoenpohn (2012) found that in the staff-customer interactions at an AIS (a leading service mobile phone network provider) service center, the communication characteristics of frontline staff with which the customers were satisfied the most were: 1) having proper tone of voice 2) dressing properly and 3) expressing warm greetings and words of thanks; while the least satisfying characteristics were: 1) ability to use English according to the language rules (e.g. speaking, pronunciation) 2) ability to give information clearly and accurately and 3) ability to give information thoroughly. Moreover, at significance level of 0.05, customer satisfaction towards staff communication characteristics were positively related to their perception of service quality.

Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner (1998 cited in Bojie and Alwie, 2010) showed that customers get involved in a relationship because of three benefits: (a) confidence benefits, (b) social benefits, and (c) special treatment benefits. Confidence benefits are the most important, followed by social, and special treatment benefits. However, Patterson and Smith (2001 cited in Bojie and Alwie, 2010) mentioned that:
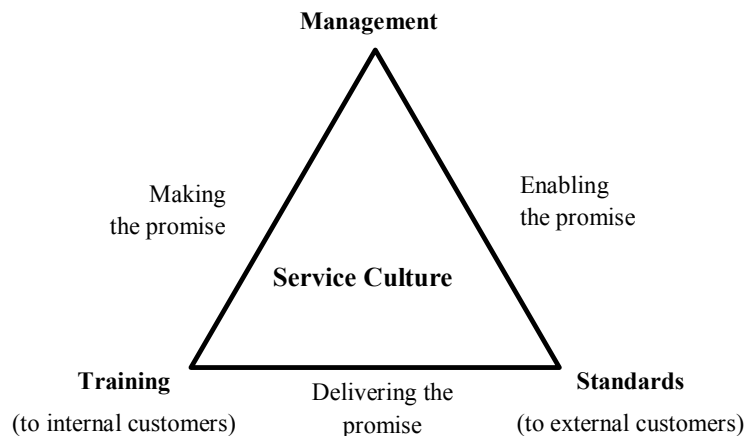
"…when comparing these benefits between Eastern (Thais) and Western (US) cultures, the results indicated that, Eastern cultures place high value on special treatment benefits while their US counterpart's value confidence benefits more. It proved that Eastern cultures place a high value in building a long term relationship by knowing that loyalty will be compensated in the form of special favors."

Service Culture

Edvardsson & Enquist (2002) defined 'service culture' as cultural expressions of a corporate members' shared values and shared meaning reflected in both internal (management-employee & employee-employee relationships) and external (between corporate representatives and customers or suppliers) interactions. Gronroos (1990a, cited in Edvardsson & Enquist, 2002) mentioned that, "a service company can become service oriented by creating a service culture, but it is not an easy mission."

In order to create a service culture in a company, there are three related factors, known as 'Service Culture Triangle', adapted from the principles of the service marketing triad, shown below (Pisit Pipatphokakul, online):

Management

Making
the promise

Enabling
the promise

Service Culture

Training
(to internal customers)

Delivering the
promise

Standards
(to external customers)

1) Management: First and foremost, the management must value all customers. According to this concept, the management must also value their staff and treat them well because they are partners of success who help deliver satisfying products and services to customers. In other words, the brand's CRM strategies or implementation must exemplify a 'customer-centric' approach - both to external and internal customers (employees). 2) Standards: in this regard, standards are systematic and thorough work instruction - including key performance indicators (KPI) in every related process of service, which help enhance effectiveness and consistency of frontline staff when providing service. 3) Training: Currently, training is not only just the act of teaching employees a body of knowledge, skills, or behavior; it also a channel for staff from different branches to exchange experiences and expertise. Moreover, it is a channel for management to cultivate and socialize shared corporate values and behaviors.

Related Research in Service Culture (Internal Marketing): Conduit & Mavondo (2001) studied the relationship between employee (internal customer) orientation and market orientation (or the organization culture that most effectively creates the necessary behaviors for the creation of superior value for buyers and thus superior performance for the business). They had a notion that organizational dynamics and managerial action in areas, such as employee training, effective communication systems, and managing human resources were critical to building an internal customer orientation and, consequently, a market orientation. Their findings suggested that integration between departments, the dissemination of market intelligence (all personnel having access to appropriate information to proactively anticipate and to creatively respond to current customer needs), and management support for a market orientation were important for its development.

Hofstede's Dimension of Culture: Thai and Culture

According to Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture Frame work (2010), the national culture found among Thai and Japanese employees in his study was characterized by: 1) individualism vs collectivism: Thais had low individualism and were socially-oriented, whereby the needs of the in-group supersede individual aspiration; and interpersonal harmony and group orientation are upheld for the sake of cordial relationships. Moreover, they believe in 'kreng jai' – an extreme reluctance to impose on anyone or disturb another's personal equilibrium by refusing requests, accepting assistance, showing disagreement, giving direct criticism, challenging knowledge or authority, or confronting in a conflict situation. While the Japanese showed many of the characteristics of collectivism, as in

Thai society: the Japanese put harmony of group above the expression of individual opinions and people had a strong sense of shame for losing face. However, people had chosen for themselves, which is an Individualist thing to do; 2) masculinity vs femininity: According to Hofstede, Thais had lowest masculinity ranking among Asian countries. Thais expressed characteristics of low masculinity through manners of indirect, relational-oriented, situation-centered, face-saving, and conflict avoiding. In contrast, the Japanese had one of the most masculine societies in the world. However, as their characteristics were mild in collectivism, thus, assertive and competitive individual behaviors would not been seen much in the society; but a severe competition between groups. For instance, at the workplace: a) employees were most motivated when they were fighting to beat competitors; b) their norm was to work hard and long hours; and 3) the drive for excellence and perfection in their material production (monodukuri in Japanese) and in material services (hotels and restaurants) were found in every aspect of life; 3) high power distance: Thais were status and hierarchy-focused, taking seriously addressing people according to status. Social differences in Thai culture also had a lot to do with age differences. For example, younger people were taught to respect their elders, as well as those who are in higher roles, and status. While Japan was a borderline hierarchical society. At one end, the Japanese had hierarchical positions in every social setting and acted accordingly. In corporate settings, for instance, all the decisions must be confirmed by each hierarchical layer and finally by the top management. At the other end, Japan had always been a meritocratic society. The Japanese education system emphasizes that everybody is born equal and anyone can get ahead and become anything, if that person works hard enough; 4) high uncertainty avoidance: in Thai culture, social order and correct behavior were emphasized. They were able to tolerate a higher level of uncertainty. Under the influence of 'face-saving' and maintaining harmony, Thai employees preferred to avoid uncertainty by controlling everything in order to eliminate or avoid the unexpected. While Japan was one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries on Earth. In corporate Japan, a lot of time and effort was put into feasibility studies, having all the risk factors worked out before any project could start. Managers asked for all the detailed facts and figures before taking any decision. This high need for Uncertainty Avoidance was one of the reasons why changes are so difficult to realize in Japan; 5) Low Long-term Orientation: In Thai culture, people were more normative than pragmatic. They exhibited great respect for traditions, a relatively small propensity to save for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results. While Japan was one of the most Long Term Orientation oriented societies. In corporate Japan, the long term orientation perspective guided a consistently high rate of investment in R&D rather than to a quarterly profit.

Bojie and Alwie (2010) mentioned that, according to Hofstede, in Asian countries, described as collectivist in culture, relationships either in business or personal life were not strange to them. It was rooted from their beliefs and therefore most customers were willing to be involved in a relationship due to their culture which emphasizes long-term relationships. However, the concepts of interpersonal relationships in Asia were facing new challenges as Yang and Ho (1988 cited in Bojie and Alwie, 2010) (in a study on university students in Taiwan) found that 'personal choice' socialized by information technology played a more important role in the formation of relationships.

In light of the issues mentioned in the previous three parts, this study poses the following research questions: 1) what is UNIQLO's CRM strategy in Thai society? 2) How does the Japanese management exploit Thai store staff as the main players in CRM? and 3) what are the communication characteristics of the store staff, trained by Japanese management, which lead to Thai customer satisfaction and repurchase intent?

Methodology

Research Population and Sampling

In order to answer RQ1 and 2, we conducted an in-depth interview with the UNIQLO Thailand's first store manager. Also, to gain insights, an interview with an expert in cross-cultural business communication was conducted.

To answer RQ3, the research population consisted of repeat customers of UNIQLO (Thailand), who lived in Bangkok Metropolitan area and regularly shopped at UNIQLO (more than once a month, with spending of more than 1,000 baht/month). Of the nineteen stores across Bangkok, geographical purposive sampling (with respect to economic zone designated by Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, 2014) was employed. Five UNIQLO branches were selected; three were located in business areas and two were in residential areas.

Respondents

As this study was a senior project of an undergraduate student, the sample size was calculated at the 90% confidence level. Two hundred questionnaires were equally distributed to voluntary respondents in the five sampling stores. To acquire further understandings for discussion, qualitative data were gathered by in-depth interviewing with another 20 customers (different sex, age groups, and experience to visit UNIQLO shop in Japan) from the five branches.

Scale Development and Pilot Test of Questionnaires.

Items in the questionnaire were generated to reflect the first part of the literature review: communication characteristics which lead to customer's satisfaction and repurchase intention. After having an interview with UNIQLO Thailand's CEO, we added more items and grouped them according to UNIQLO's nine service DNAs: cleanliness, tidiness, politeness, energetic, punctuality, briskness, hospitality, teamwork and correctness.

As for research tool development and testing, a draft questionnaire was presented to 5 experts in CRM for a content validity test. After that, copies of the edited version were distributed to 30 respondents from the 5 sample stores for a reliability test.

Procedure

At each store, questionnaires were distributed to 40 respondents.

The questionnaires were divided into 3 major sections. The first part sought demographic information: gender, age, highest level of education, occupation, monthly income, RFM - recency, frequency, monetary questions, "and reasons for purchasing products at UNIQLO. The second part sought the level of each customer's satisfaction with store staff communication characteristics. This section contained 25 randomly ordered items. The third part comprised 20 items, which sought the customer's intention to repurchase. Apart from communication characteristics, this part also included items derived from the 7Ps of marketing for further discussion. Across all questionnaire subjects were asked to indicate on 5-point, Likert-type scales (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequency, distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were examined for each item, allowing the researcher to rank the mean scores of the items in each part. Inferential statistics (T-test and One-way ANOVA) were employed to find differences between the means of independent groups.

Results

Demographic and RFM Data

Most of the respondents in this study were female (59%). Three-fourths (75.5%) were in the age group of 18 to 30 years old and almost one-fifth (18.5%) were 30 to 45 years old. In terms of occupation, most of the respondents were employees of private companies (51%), university students (28.5%), and business owners (13.5%); their monthly incomes were 5,000 to 15,000 baht (34.5%), more than 15,000 − 25,000 baht (27.5%), and more than

45,000 baht (15.5%) respectively. Of the 200 respondents, 21.5% had visited a UNIQLO shop in Japan.

As for RFM data, all the respondents went shopping at UNIQLO shops more than once a month. Most of them visited the store 1 to 2 times/month (83%), and they spent 1,000 to 3,000 baht/visit (48.0%) and less than 1,000 baht/visit (43.5%), respectively.

RQ1 and RQ2: What is UNIQLO's CRM strategy in Thai society? How does the Japanese management exploit Thai store staff as the main players in CRM?

According to an interview with the first UNIQLO (Thailand) store manager, the management both in Japan and Thailand share the same business and CRM policy. In the entry phase, they did studies of Thai consumer behavior and found that, for instance, Thais believed in 'kreng-jai' and were attracted by good quality products at reasonable prices (at low price).

In terms of specific CRM strategies for this country, even though UNIQLO (Thailand) had not set any clear direction for the cross-cultural business adaptation

yet, the management expected their staff to be brand representatives in building relationships with local customers. To deliver the best quality products and services to the customers, UNIQLO staff were trained to be main players in building customer satisfaction; for example, to provide service with communication empathy and make it beyond the customers' expectation. The management believed that these actions would definitely create repurchase intent and, eventually, become loyal to the brand. Therefore, UNIQLO's nine DNAs (as listed in Table 1) were seriously imparted to the store staff through several channels (e.g., the company training programs and daily morning meetings). Among the nine DNAs, the spirit of Hospitality – to give warm welcome and provide service with willingness demonstrated through a sincere smile - was strongly emphasized. To make the staff feel and understand this DNA, the management had the staff imagine that how delighted they would be if someone, very important they had been longing for, came to visit their house.

Table 1 UNIQLO's Nine DNAs of Store Staff

DNA	Communication Characteristics (Verbal and Non-verbal)
Cleanliness	To keep every point of store area, including oneself, clean always.
Tidiness	To keep everything in order and pleasant to the eyes, dress properly.
Politeness	To communicate with courteous, respectful and considerate manners.
Energetic	To be enthusiastic, demonstrating by communicating with pleasantly loud and clear voice.
Punctuality	To provide service by the appointed time, never be late.
Briskness	Haki Haki - To express feeling of quickness, smartness and readiness to provide service, demonstrating by standing straight and being ready to move.
Hospitality	To be friendly, express willingness to provide service with sincere smiley face, and have communication empathy
Teamwork	To be able to coordinate and work in collaboration with other staff, both from the same and different store, to supportively respond to the customer's requirement.
Correctness	To give accurate information relating to product and service to the customers in every contact point/process; and do the best to avoid mistakes in communication/actions.

UNIQLO (Thailand)'s general training program for store staff was very systematic and standardized. All staff must remember and recite the six following rules during morning meetings: Have a FRIENDLY SERVICE, Be COURTESY, Keep CLEANLINESS, Work FAST & HUSTLE, Have INVENTORY MANAGEMENT, and CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS FIRST. In addition, 1 or 2-week CRM training programs and 'new starter handbooks' were provided for all new store staff. The staff would be trained in terms of both principles and practices: company profile and milestone, sales talk, how to smile, how to bow in greetings according to Japanese etiquette, and proper behavior and appearance, when providing service at each point of contact (entrance, sales floor, fitting room, and cashier). Moreover, during a probation period, senior store staff from different branches serving as 'mentors', would help coach and give advice during a daily meeting. The meeting content was mainly relevant to service quality and how to satisfy the customers.

RQ 3: What are communication characteristics of the store staff that lead to customers' satisfaction and repurchase intention?

Communication Characteristics and Customer's Satisfaction: From Table 2, the three most satisfying communication characteristics rated by the respondents were: 'Staff used polite language with tone of voice' (Politeness: $\bar{x}$ = 4.34, SD = 0.69), 'Staff communicated with proper tonality while providing service' (Politeness: $\bar{x}$ = 4.31, SD = 0.71) and 'Staff were friendly and had sincere smiley face' (Hospitality: $\bar{x}$ = 4.31, SD = 0.73). On the other end, the two least satisfying were: 'Staff were able to give advice on how to choose clothes that suited you.' (Correctness: $\bar{x}$ = 3.69, SD = 0.78), and 'Staff attentively listened to your problem with supportive facial expression' (Hospitality: $\bar{x}$ = 3.97, SD = 0.78).

Table 2 Mean scores and standard deviation of customer satisfaction towards communication characteristics of UNIQLO store staff.

#	UNIQLO's DNA and its reflected Communication Characteristics	Level of Satisfaction* (n=200)		Rank
1	**CLEANLINESS**	Mean	S.D.	
	1.1 Staff had personal cleanliness (e.g. hair, nails, body odour)	4.15	0.70	12
2	**TIDINESS**			
	2.1 Staff properly packed your purchased product(s) and put it/them in a bag.	4.29	0.66	5
	2.2 Staff dressed properly, suiting their job.	4.27	0.67	6
3	**POLITENESS**			
	3.1 Staff used polite language with tone of voice 'ka/krub'.	4.34	0.69	1*
	3.2 Staff communicated with proper tonality while providing service.	4.31	0.71	2*
	3.3 Staff at admission point (distributing promotion info at the front) were polite and gave you a warm welcome.	4.21	0.76	8
	3.4 Staff used level of language that suited you/other customers while providing service.	4.20	0.67	9
	3.5 Staff at cashier's desk provided service politely but correctly and fast.	4.17	0.70	11

#	UNIQLO's DNA and its reflected Communication Characteristics	Level of Satisfaction* (n=200)		Rank
	3.6 Staff kept proper physical distance when communicating with you	4.07	0.72	18
4	**ENERGETIC**			
	4.1 Staff expressed willingness and enthusiasm while providing service (e.g. helping you to find your desired product that was not available on shelf.)	4.23	0.76	7
	4.2 Staff showed themselves available to you to provide supports or suggestions if needed.	4.06	0.82	19
5	**PUNCTUALITY**			
	5.1 Staff delivered your purchased product(s) / service to you by/within the appointed time (e.g. in case of product delivery from another branch, clothes fixing/alterations).	4.11	0.75	14
6	**BRISKNESS**			
	6.1 Staff quickly responded to your request (e.g. checking if the requested size and color of your desired product was available).	4.14	0.75	13
7	**HOSPITALITY**			
	7.1 Staff were friendly and had sincere smiley face.	4.31	0.73	3*
	7.2 Staff, both in front of the shop and in the shop, warmly sent you greetings when you came in; and said thank you to you when you left the shop.	4.30	0.72	4
	7.3 Staff attentively and willingly listened to your suggestions or complaints.	4.09	0.74	16
	7.4 Staff attentively listened to your problem with supportive facial expression.	3.97	0.78	21*
8	**TEAMWORK**			
	8.1 Staff effectively coordinated with store staff from other branches to get and deliver product (s) and service (s) to you according to your desire.	4.01	0.84	20
9	**CORRECTNESS**			
	9.1 Staff communicated with you with language that easy to understand (clear, concise and precise).	4.19	0.67	10
	9.2 Staff gave answer to your questions clearly, providing enough information to tackle with your doubt.	4.14	0.75	13
	9.3 Staff gave clear and accurate product information to you.	4.08	0.73	17
	9.4 Staff at fitting-room section willingly provided service, and correctly responded according to your request.	4.10	0.78	15
	9.5 Staff were able to give advice on how to choose clothes that suited you.	3.69	0.78	22*

* Level of Satisfaction: 1.00 − 1.80 = strongly dissatisfied; >1.80 − 2.60 = dissatisfied; > 2.60 -3.40 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; > 3.40 − 4.20= satisfied; > 4.20-5.00 = strongly satisfied

Store Staff Communication Characteristics and Customer Repurchase Intention: Table 3 shows that, UNIQLO's product and place (location) most strongly impacted the respondents repurchase intention; while the people factor ranked fourth. When focusing only on the people factor, among communication characteristics that affected their repurchase intention, the respondents rated the two following behaviors as the most influential: 'Staff had spirit of hospitality, giving you warm welcome and a sincere smile' (Hospitality: = 4.20, SD = 0.78), 'Staff politely and gently communicated with you' (Politeness: $\bar{x}$ = 4.20, SD = 0.78); while they rated 'Staff had good product knowledge and were able to provide accurate information' (Correctness: $\bar{x}$ = 4.20, SD = 0.78) as the least.

Table 3 **Mean scores and standard deviation of customer's repurchase intention affected by 7P marketing mix and communication characteristics of UNIQLO store staff.**

#	Factors affected Repurchase Intention	Level of Agreement* (n=200)		Rank
	PART 1: 7P marketing mix	Mean	S.D.	
1	Product	4.24	0.65	1
2	Place (location)	4.21	0.63	2
3	Promotion (sales promotion)	3.99	0.75	3
4	People (store staff)	3.96	0.68	4
5	Price	3.95	0.70	5
6	Process (Product Arrangement)	3.93	0.72	6
7	Physical Evidence (e.g. ambience, decoration, signage)	3.93	0.75	7
	PART 2: Store Staff's communication characteristics			
1	Staff had spirit of hospitality, giving you warm welcome and sincere smiley face.	4.20	0.73	1
2	Staff politely and gently communicated with you.	4.20	0.78	2
3	Staff expressed feeling of enthusiasm and quickness while providing service	4.16	0.81	3
4	Staff effectively coordinated with one another in service delivery.	4.06	0.78	5
5	Staff had good product knowledge and were able to provide accurate information.	4.04	0.77	6
6	Overall: Staff had good personality.	4.03	0.68	7
7	Overall: Staff made your shopping experience at UNIQLO awesome.	4.11	0.77	4

* Level of Agreement: 1.00 – 1.80 = strongly disagree; >1.80 – 2.60 = disagree; > 2.60 -3.40 = neither agree nor disagree ; > 3.40 – 4.20= agree ; > 4.20-5.00 = strongly agree

Testing for differences between means from separate groups of subjects: At significance level of 0.05, mean scores of satisfaction rated by respondents who were different in sex (female > male), age group (18 to 30 years old > 45 to 60 years old), range of income (lower income > higher income) were statistically different; whereas, mean scores of satisfaction rated by customers who had and had never visited UNIQLO's shop in Japan were not statistically different.

REMARKS: According to the response from questionnaires, and in-depth interviews with voluntary respondents, they could not clearly distinguish the store staff's communication characteristics that reflected 'Energetic' and 'Briskness' (Haki Haki) because, in Thai culture, the actions that reflect both were quite similar; while in Japanese culture, they are clearly different.

Discussion

CRM Strategy in Exploiting Store Staff as Main Players

The findings were in accordance with previous studies (e.g. Beaujean, Davidson & Madge, 2006; Bojie and Alwie,2010; Pondphan Sheoychitr, 2013) and clearly showed that in running a cross-cultural business, the management of UNIQLO (Thailand) had been focusing on training their store staff to be main the players in their CRM strategy. In doing so,the nine UNIQLO DNAs, initiated by the parent company in Japan, were imparted via their systematic training programs to ensure that the Thai staff could effectively communicate and build relationships with local customers to create a positive moment of truth at every touch point (i.e. admission, sale area, fitting room and cashier); eventually leading to customer loyalty.

In their training process, however, the results indcated that some specific DNAs in Japanese culture, i.e. Briskness (Haki Haki or a feeling of quickness, smartness, and readiness demonstrated through manners of standing strait, chest-out, and being ready to move), could not be fully imparted. Hence, it could not be clearly seen in the communication characteristics of the staff; whereas,

DNAs of Hospitality and Politeness were obviously expressed. Regarding these results, Nakai (2015, interview) pointed that this was not surprise because the Thai and the Japanese share several cultural characteristics, which reflect the DNAs of Politeness, Hospitality and Teamwork (Hofstede's cultural dimension of Collectivism and Femininity); while Energetic and Briskness were distinguishing characteristics of the Japanese people (Hofstede's cultural dimension of Masculinity). Moreover, he rarely found such Haki Haki attributes among Thai store staff or service providers; in his view, they were quite passive and slow.

Moreover, Nakai also commented that, in general, Japan's staff training process and procedure were seriously systematic and quite different from the cultural characteristics of Thai staff. However, TOYOTA (Thailand), which has been operating in Thailand for 50 years, successfully kept learning about Thai cultural characteristics and has successfully developed their training program to suit the local staff. TOYOTA's service culture was effectively imparted to their staff; thus, the staff could be effective main players in its CRM, greatly profiting the company.

Communication Characteristics That Lead to Customer Satisfaction and Repurchase Intention

The results show that staff communication characteristics of Hospitality and Politeness strongly satisfied Thai customers and strongly influenced their repurchase intentions. Moreover, the test of mean differences indicated that respondents in 18-to-30 age group and had lower income were more satisfied with the staff's communication characteristics than those in the 45-to-60 age group with higher income. The findings corresponded with Hofstede's study (2010) that Thais' prominent cultural characteristics were low masculine (relational-oriented, situation-centered, face-saving and conflict avoiding) and high power distance (hierarchy-focused, taking serious in addressing people according to their status). Those who perceived themselves as senior and

high social status (indicated by higher income) expected to experience better service delivery from the staff; whereas the younger customers, socialized by exposure to information and communication technologies, did not expect such treatment.

Interestingly, at a significance level of 0.05, the satisfaction level of respondents who had and had never visited a UNIQLO shop in Japan were not different. It was possibly because Thai and Japanese people share a common cultural characteristic of collectivism. Moreover, as shown in the results, Thai customers mainly focus on expressions of politeness and hospitality. So they do not mind if Thai staff might respond to their request a bit slower or less actively than those in Japan.

Conclusion

In this study, a gap between Japanese management and Thai staff was found. For the Thai staff to receive UNIQLO's DNAs, good demonstration and examples from the management were consistently needed. Moreover, in accordance with Conduit & Mavondo (2001), to empower local staff to effectively connect with local customers, the management should develop a healthy relationship with them. The more the staff feel a sense of belonging, the more they will be aligned with the company and willing to be trained to become effective brand representatives.

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