Digital Clienteling for Omnichannel Retailing:

The role of Japan's Distinctive Staff Styling in the Apparel Industry

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1.Introduction

The proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the widespread use of mobile devices have transformed consumer purchasing behavior. Consumers now engage across online and offline touchpoints (Sopadjieva et al., 2017), compelling retailers to adopt omnichannel strategies that integrate physical and digital

channels for seamless experiences (Rigby, 2011; Bell et al., 2014)[1].

Omnichannel retailing evolves along a continuum from multichannel setups to fully integrated ecosystems (Cao and Li, 2015; Picot-Coupey et al., 2016; Neslin, 2022). This requires not only front-end integration but also back-end restructuring and resolution of conflicts over resource allocation and performance evaluation (Zhang et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2014; Verhoef et al., 2015; Mirsch et al., 2016; Saghiri et al., 2017; Liu and Song, 2024).

While research has explored firm behavior and consumer responses (Asmare and Zewdie, 2022; Yang and Hu, 2024), the strategic role of human resources is often overlooked (Ye et al., 2018). In practice, store staff typically focus on customer service, display, or checkout, rarely engaging in digital clienteling. Designing incentives and support is thus essential to motivate them to provide seamless online experiences.

This issue is critical in apparel, where uncertainty over fit, color, or comfort raises perceived risk (Kohsaka et al., 2019). For such products, staff-led, media-rich communication can build trust and familiarity, encouraging purchases. In Japan, retailers have shifted from model-driven promotion to staff styling via social media and e-commerce platforms, a trend accelerated during COVID-19 pandemic. This reflects not only consumer demand for relatable styling but also retailers' intent to link digital clienteling contributions to compensation, raising wage levels (Onozato, 2023).

This study examines, through a single case in the Japanese apparel sector, how store staff are enabled to engage in digital clienteling, responding to calls for more qualitative research (Asmare and Zewdie, 2022). The paper proceeds with literature review, methodology, case findings, and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Human Resource Considerations in Omnichannel Retailing

The development of human resources is essential for realizing omnichannel retailing, as store staff must adopt new roles and skills to support seamless customer experiences (Lewis et al., 2014). Ye et al. (2018) identify several barriers: insufficient training and skill upgrading, limited flexibility and motivation, and conflicts between channels exacerbated by inconsistent key performance indicator (KPI) systems. Without coherent HR strategies, staff may struggle to contribute to integration.

Human capital (HC) has been shown to promote omnichannel integration and firm performance. Song et al. (2020) demonstrate that employee capital exerts stronger effects on supply chain integration (SCI) than managerial capital. Song et al. (2021) further reveal a complementary relationship between HC and digitalization: HC fosters

digitalization, which in turn enhances SCI, with frontline employees playing more significant role.

Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of retraining and motivating store staff for cross-channel integration. Yet, how such retraining should be designed, how motivation can be sustained, and what roles staff should play as customer touchpoint representatives remain underexplored.

2.2   Digital Clienteling Considerations in Omnichannel Retailing

Clienteling is traditionally defined as one-to-one, sales-staff–driven marketing aimed at building loyalty through personalized interactions (Jain et al., 2018). Digital clienteling extends this by equipping frontline employees with digital tools to maintain long-term customer relationships through personalized communication and product recommendations (Jain et al., 2021).

In today's hyper-connected environment, digital touchpoints via social media and e-commerce are crucial as entry points for engagement and data collection that enable further personalization. Previous studies show that online information strongly influences consumer behavior: virtual showrooms and real-time availability updates shape strategic use of channels (Gao and Su, 2017); SNSs positively affect channel behaviors (Yan et al., 2019); social media informs omnichannel journeys (Lynch and Barnes, 2020); and credible electronic word-of-mouth drives purchase intention (Ngo et al., 2024).Live commerce has further transformed engagement. Real-time interactions through streaming influence both online adoption (Sun et al., 2019; Park and Lin, 2020) and offline purchases, with in-store live streaming shown to influence offline purchase intentions (Zhang et al., 2023).

However, most studies focus on online retailers, influencers, or consumer-generated content, not on store staff. Given their product knowledge, brand understanding, and direct customer contact, store staff are uniquely positioned for digital clienteling. Yet research rarely addresses how retailers can enable and support employees in this role, or how their efforts can be harnessed to promote omnichannel retailing.

3. Research Questions, Methodology, and Data Collection

Building on the review of prior studies and the identification of existing research gaps presented in Section 2, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1:What forms of digital clienteling are currently being practiced by store staff in Japanese apparel firms to facilitate omnichannel retailing?

RQ2:What effects do these digital clienteling practices have on consumer behavior and business outcomes?

RQ3:How can human resource management (HRM) practices support and sustain the effective implementation of digital clienteling by store staff?

To address the research questions, this study employs a single-case approach focusing on PAL Co., Ltd., a leading Japanese apparel firm that has integrated digital clienteling into its omnichannel strategy. A case study is appropriate because it enables (1) an in-depth examination of complex, context-specific phenomena, providing a holistic understanding of how digital clienteling is implemented in practice and how it interacts with organizational processes such as HRM (Yin, 2009); (2) the identification of specific forms, effects, and enabling factors of digital clienteling, aligning with the strengths of case study methodology, which is particularly valuable for theory building from rich qualitative evidence (Eisenhardt, 1989); and (3) the generation of insights from an industry leader that may serve as a model for other retailers.

The case draws on primary and secondary data. Primary data include two semi-structured interviews with the executive overseeing PAL's digital transformation and digital clienteling initiatives, complemented by direct observations through EC site browsing, Instagram engagement, purchases, and store visits, responding to calls for qualitative retail research (Asmare and Zewdie, 2022). Secondary sources include company reports, press articles, and public lectures. The manuscript was reviewed and refined through iterative dialogue with the interviewee.

4. Case Description: PAL Co., Ltd

4.1 Company Overview and Omnichannel Strategy

Japan's apparel market peaked at 15.3 trillion yen in 1990 but declined to 9.2 trillion yen by 2019 and further during COVID-19, before recovering to 8.4 trillion yen in 2023. While a return to pre-pandemic levels is projected by 2025, long-term forecasts predict contraction due to demographic decline (METI, 2023;Yano Research Institute, 2024).

Despite this, PAL has achieved record sales and profits, rising from 130.5 billion yen in 2019 to 192.5 billion yen in 2024, with operating profit more than doubling to 18.6 billion yen (PAL, 2020; PAL, 2025). Founded in Osaka in 1973, listed in 2001, and now operating 949 stores, PAL manages over 50 brands, many initiated by employees, reflecting a culture of proactiveness.

Although initially lagging in e-commerce, PAL strengthened its PALCLOSET platform from 2016, laying the foundation for an omnichannel strategy. By 2023, while the industry's EC penetration rate stood at 22.9% (METI, 2024), PAL achieved 41.6% with sales of 53.2 billion yen, driven largely by staff-led digital clienteling. Its integrated approach positions stores as venues for discovery and consultation, while EC and social media maintain customer contact and provide convenient purchasing options. This strategy has significantly enhanced loyalty: customers who shop across both channels spend about twice as much as store-only shoppers and nearly four times as much as online-only shoppers.

4.2 Implementation of Digital Clienteling

4.2.1 Background to the Implementation of Digital Clienteling by Store Staff

A core element of PAL's omnichannel strategy is digital clienteling conducted by store staff via social media platforms such as Instagram, WEAR, TikTok, and YouTube. By sharing styling advice and product information, staff attract customers to both stores and the EC channel, while cross-channel data are used to improve content and experiences. Currently, about 2,000 staff post online, with 300 exceeding 10,000 followers and a total following of 23 million—the largest in Japan's apparel

PAL introduced this model for three reasons: to leverage staff expertise in styling and customer service online, to address the industry challenge of low staff wages by linking follower growth to incentives, and to enhance customer shopping experiences with more relatable and personalized content. This creates mutual benefits for customers, staff, and the company.

4.2.2 Implementation of Digital Clienteling

PAL introduced digital clienteling by store staff in 2016. Regardless of employment type, employees could apply for permission to use social media and, once approved, post brand styling photos on their personal accounts. At the time, using individual accounts for brand communication was uncommon, but PAL emphasized this practice on the premise that individual content would provide variety, relatability, and stronger consumer reactions such as likes and comments.

Because Instagram then lacked purchase-linked functions, staff could only display the EC site URL in their profiles. To reduce this friction, PAL introduced a third-party service in 2018 that enabled smooth, bidirectional flows between staff social media and the EC site. Customers could browse staff profiles, styling photos, blogs, and comments on the EC site, and conversely follow staff on social media (Figure 1). They could also search by height and body type, fostering familiarity and attachment.

This integration allowed staff to act as influencers, generating loyal fans who purchased online and sometimes visited stores to meet them. Today, sales via staff social media posts account for about 70% of PAL's EC revenue, underscoring the effectiveness of staff-driven content.

4.2.3 Supporting Mechanisms of Digital Clienteling

4.2.3.1 Staff Training and Skill Development

PAL adopts the stance that digital clienteling is open to all staff who wish to participate, but never imposed. This reflects its culture of autonomy, bottom-up management, and respect for individuality, based on the belief that when employees with diverse body types and characteristics share styling, they can better address customers' varied concerns and insecurities and provide practical hints that help them feel more confident.

To lower entry barriers, PAL provides a starter manual on profiles, styling photos, and posting frequency, while avoiding over-regulation to preserve individuality. Intensive support during the first three months helps staff achieve early successes in gaining followers, promoting products, or attracting store visits. For those who request it, targeted lectures are offered, and internal success stories are promptly
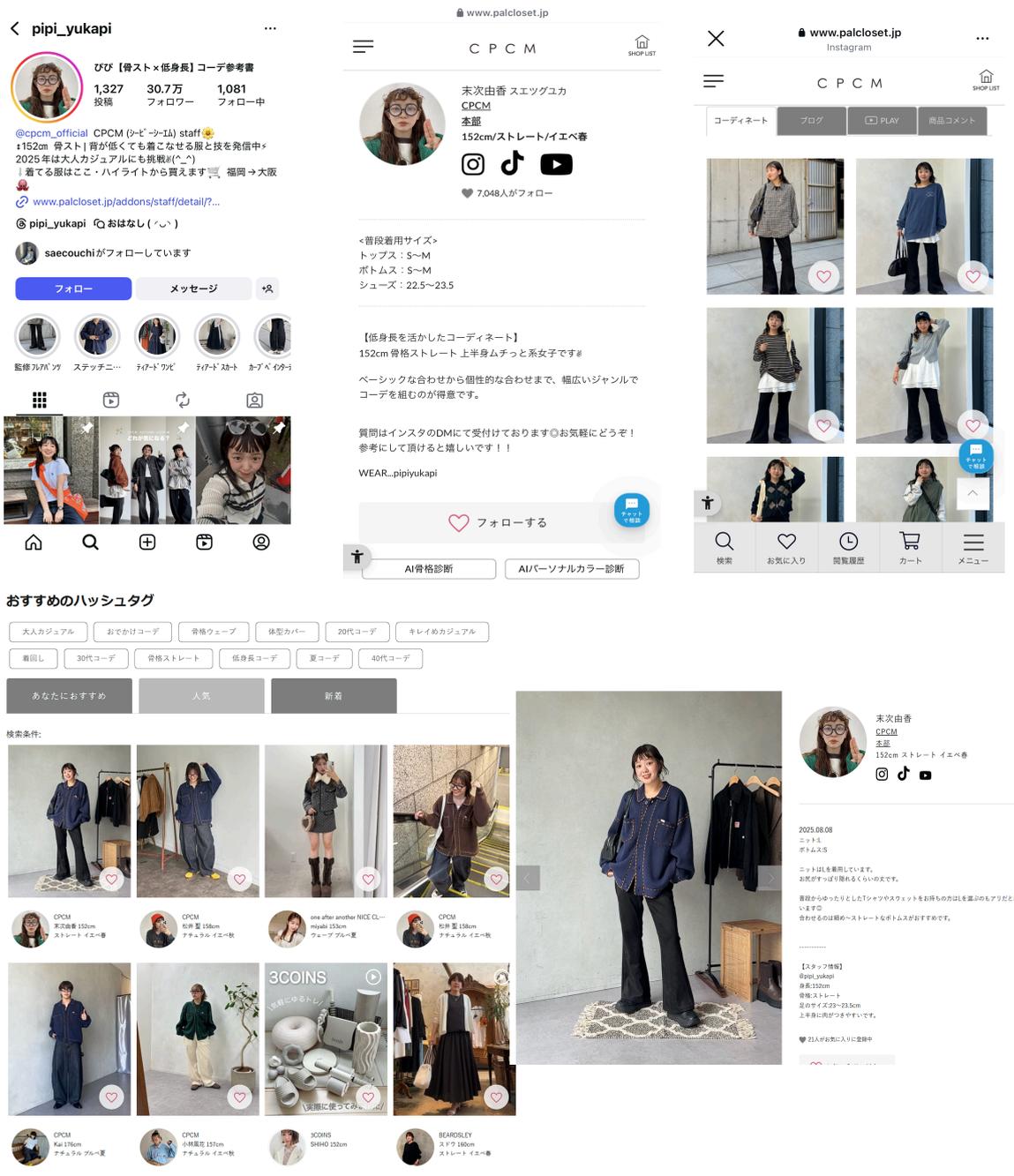
Figure 1. Example of digital clienteling: linking PALCLOSET with social media

shared with concrete examples and data explaining effective posting practices.

4.2.3.2 Performance Evaluation and Incentives

One major concern before implementing digital clienteling was that rising EC sales might reduce store visits, creating resistance to omnichannel strategies (Kondo, 2015).

To overcome this, it was essential to evaluate and recognize staff contributions.

Since 2016, PAL has commended staff with large follower counts, later introducing an influencer allowance for those exceeding 10,000 followers (5,000 for some brands). Today, approximately 70% of EC sales are generated via staff social media posts, and these contributions are reflected in bonuses, sometimes doubling or tripling annual income for top performers.

Digital clienteling is treated as a core duty, with dedicated time allocated in daily work schedules for content creation and posting. Furthermore, Successful staff may also be chosen to lead EC or SNS initiatives or take on headquarters roles such as training coordinators, creating new career paths.

By institutionalizing digital clienteling as a company-wide initiative and establishing a robust evaluation and reward system, PAL enhances staff motivation and enables more employees to sustain their engagement in digital clienteling over the long term.

4.2.3.3 Data Utilization and Analytics

To enable higher-quality posts, PAL makes KPIs from digital clienteling activities across its 50 brands visible within the organization. This transparency allows staff to compare performance, assess their positioning, and identify areas for improvement. Indicators include, for example, posting frequency, timing, and content, each broken down into measurable sub-categories.

The department in charge also analyzes platform algorithms, defining and refining platform-specific metrics to guide staff. Beyond digital clienteling, PAL integrates EC, SNS, and in-store data into a unified infrastructure, translating insights into concrete actions. This system supports a data-driven PDCA cycle that enhances content quality and customer engagement across channels.

4.2.3.4 Care and Encouragement

To sustain motivation for digital clienteling, managers engage with staff content by viewing posts, "liking" them, and offering specific praise. Outstanding examples are shared company-wide, reinforcing recognition and best practices.

In the early stages, the executive leading DT and omnichannel strategy visited stores across nationwide, explaining why digital clienteling was introduced and what it meant for staff, stores, the company, and customers. This consistent communication helped staff see its strategic value and embrace it with ownership.

By combining active recognition with transparent communication from leadership, PAL fosters a supportive environment in which store staff feel valued, understand the bigger picture, and are motivated to sustain and enhance their digital clienteling activities over the long term.

5. Discussion

Building on the case description of PAL's digital clienteling practices, this section discusses the research questions in light of the empirical findings.

RQ1: What forms of digital clienteling are currently being practiced by store staff in Japanese apparel firms to facilitate omnichannel retailing?

A distinctive form of digital clienteling in Japanese apparel retailing is the transformation of store staff into influencers through social media posting. Unlike traditional corporate advertising, these posts reflect the individuality of staff members and foster personalized, trust-based connections with customers. Moreover, the seamless bidirectional flow between SNS and EC strengthens staff as bridges across channels, drives store visits from online followers, and enables in-store expertise—such as styling advice—to be replicated digitally.

The PAL case demonstrates how store staff become key enablers of omnichannel retailing by connecting digital touchpoints with EC and in-store experiences. It also underscores the value of cultivating internal influencers rather than relying solely on external ones. Staff-driven content draws on first-hand product knowledge and brand identity, enhancing credibility and customer trust. In contrast, external influencer marketing carries risks such as weakening brand uniqueness and attitudes (De Veirman et al., 2017), negative associations from influencer scandals (Campbell and Farrell, 2020), or reduced message credibility (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Leveraging employees as influencers thus offers a sustainable, brand-aligned form of digital clienteling that improves customer experience across channels (Jain et al., 2021).

RQ2: What effects do these digital clienteling practices have on consumer behavior and business outcomes?

At PAL, digital clienteling significantly influences both consumer behavior and business performance. Through social media, customers develop empathy and attachment toward store staff, motivating purchases via EC links and visits to physical stores. This creates a synergistic loop between EC and offline channels rather than cannibalization. In this model, who customers buy from often matters as much as or even more than what they buy, echoing research showing that relational bonds with salespeople strongly affect outcomes (Palmatier et al., 2006).

Staff-generated posts now account for nearly 70% of EC sales while also increasing store traffic, consistent with findings that online channels can guide customers to offline spaces when perceived benefits are high (Kleinlercher et al., 2018). By combining online convenience with offline experiential benefits, PAL fosters a fan-based loyalty model in which consumers form lasting ties with staff—though this raises risks if staff leave. To mitigate this, PAL provides support mechanisms that enhance employee satisfaction and reduce turnover.

These outcomes align with research showing that effective omnichannel integration boosts engagement and cross-channel retention (Payne et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2024), and highlight digital clienteling as not only a sales tool but also a driver of integrated customer experiences, blending human touch with digital interfaces to strengthen satisfaction and loyalty (Jo and Bang, 2024).

RQ3:How can human resource management (HRM) practices support and sustain the effective implementation of digital clienteling by store staff?

The PAL case shows that sustainable digital clienteling depends on HRM practices in four areas: training, incentives,data feedback, and care

First, staff training and development are essential. PAL provides starter manuals, intensive follow-up during the first three months, and shares internal success stories. This reflects research stressing the importance of continuous training and reskilling to equip employees with skills for the future world of work (Parry and Battista, 2019). By equipping employees with both technical and relational skills, firms can enable frontline staff to deliver personalized experiences across channels.

Second, performance evaluation and incentives play a central role. PAL introduced follower-based awards, influencer allowances, and EC-sales-linked bonuses. Such practices align with research showing that well-designed extrinsic rewards can enhance intrinsic motivation, creativity, and performance (Gerhart and Fang, 2015). Furthermore, by offering new career opportunities in headquarters or training roles, PAL also reinforces employee retention and the strategic significance of digital clienteling.

Third, data-driven feedback supports continuous improvement. PAL discloses KPIs across brands, allowing staff to compare results and refine practices. This resonates with research highlighting that HR analytics, when integrated into broader business systems, can generate actionable insights and align individual behaviors with organizational objectives (Rasmussen and Ulrich, 2015).

Finally, care and encouragement from leadship are vital. PAL's DT leader actively visited stores, explained the strategic rationale for digital clienteling, and acknowledged staff contributions. This practice echoes HRM literature that highlights the importance of supportive leadership and recognition in sustaining employee engagement (Albrecht et al., 2015).

Taken together, PAL's experience demonstrates that HRM practices—when aligned across training, incentives, data feedback, and care—can transform digital clienteling into a sustainable capability embedded within the organization. This resonates with the broader HRM perspective that the strategic alignment of people management is key to achieving long-term digital transformation and omnichannel success (Gadzali et al., 2023).

6.Conclusion

6.1Theoretical and Managerial Implications

  This study advances research on omnichannel retailing in two key ways. First, while prior studies highlight the need to retrain and motivate store staff for cross-channel integration (Lewis et al., 2014; Ye et al., 2018; Song et al., 2020, 2021), they do not explain how this can be achieved. This study shows that a system of training, incentives, data feedback, and care enables and sustains digital clienteling, thereby deepening our understanding of employee capital as a driver of omnichannel integration.

  Second, existing work has focused on consumer- or influencer-generated content (Yan et al., 2019; Lynch and Barnes, 2020; Ngo et al., 2024), overlooking store staff as strategic actors. This study shows the importance of cultivating employees as internal influencers, shifting attention from external influencers and customer word-of-mouth. Store staff appear not only as facilitators of personalization (Jain et al., 2018, 2021) but also as credible enablers of omnichannel integration, pointing to new possibilities for digital clienteling.

  For managers, the findings suggest that lowering entry barriers through training, providing digital performance incentives, ensuring transparent data feedback, and showing visible leadership support are crucial to institutionalizing digital clienteling. Together, these practices allow staff to engage with a sense of ownership rather than imposition. Importantly, the PAL case illustrates that its omnichannel strategy has been less top-management–driven and more staff-driven, with frontline employees as active agents of transformation and essential to embedding omnichannel strategies.

 6.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

  This study is based on a single-case analysis of PAL, which limits the generalizability of its conclusions. The forms of digital clienteling and the effectiveness of HRM practices may vary depending on factors such as organizational culture, brand positioning, or product type. For example, firms valuing individual initiative may adopt decentralized approaches, while more hierarchical firms may pursue centralized models. Similarly, luxury, fast fashion, and other sectors may require distinct HRM practices to sustain digital clienteling.Future research should therefore examine comparative cases across apparel firms and other industries to test transferability and refine understanding of how contextual factors shape the relationship between digital clienteling, HRM, and omnichannel success.

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