Japanese Fashion in Australia:
Will Uniqlo and Australia make a fairy tale couple?*

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Abstract

Uniqlo is *the* Japanese fast fashion giant and the largest Japanese apparel company in terms of net sale. Australia will become Uniqlo's fourteenth country/territory in later 2013. Its first Australian store will open in Emporium Melbourne, a new shopping complex in central Melbourne ('Uniqlo confirms', 2013). Uniqlo is reported to find the Australian market attractive and with high potential ('Uniqlo Go 1' 2012). This makes sense when the characteristics of Japanese fashion and Australia's fashion environments are considered. For example, contemporary Japanese fashion is known as having "bottom up" trend streams and tends to be a product of "the street." Australia could be an ideal place to adopt Japanese fashion as Australian fashion is regarded as informal and casual. Additionally, Australia's modern multicultural society creates an environment where other cultures are accepted.

This paper, however, will argue that the prospects for Uniqlo's success in Australia are not as promising as they appear. It is not just that Uniqlo's value for money items and fast fashion business model may not be the best suited for Australian consumers, but a lack of ethics at Uniqlo, especially after the accident in Bangladesh, is the biggest concern. Unfortunately, Uniqlo's unethical practice goes beyond the sweatshop – many retail staff are reported to be harassed at Uniqlo stores in Japan. Since Australians tend to be more sensitive about ethics, particularly workplace ethics, than the Japanese, it is implausible for many Australians to support Uniqlo if they discover Uniqlo's unethical practices.

Keywords

Australia and Japan, Fast Fashion, Japanese Fashion, Uniqlo, workplace ethics

1. Introduction

The potentiality of growing Uniqlo has become a subject of academic research in Japan (Nagasawa and Suganami 2012).[1] However, analyses to date are inwardly orientated: Not just because their

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reports are written in Japanese but only Japanese reference materials are used. The natural language barrier makes them unable to forecast Uniqlo's potential in a particular country such as Australia, even though accurately forecasting apparel products and/or business has been academically conducted (Yamamura 2011, Frank *et al* 2003, Sztandera *et al* 2003, Donohue 2000, Fisher *et al* 1994). This paper will first review the characteristics of both Australian and Japanese fashions in order to discuss Uniqlo's potential in Australia.

2. Review 1: Australian Fashion

Australia has "a vibrant and growing fashion industry" (Potts 2011: 120) and this might be related to the fact that Australia is one of the most urbanised countries after micro states such as Malta and Singapore in terms of the distribution of population. Fashion is an urban culture that originates in cities. However, Australian fashion is not necessarily a product of urban culture. Instead, according to Craik (2009a) who is one of a very few academics specialising in contemporary Australian fashion,[2] Australia's informal and casual fashion originates in Australia's two iconic styles; Australian bush fashion and swim/surf wear.

Australia's fashion industry actually began with its colonial history, which began its development with its "convict beginnings and settlement of the bush" (Craik 2009a: 413). In nineteenth and twentieth century Australia, European settlers dressed in Europe-originated styles but concepts behind the clothing were more or less detached from people who wore them. In colonial Australia, "it was the meanings of dress that accrued singularity in the Australian context rather than the unique quality of the garments themselves" (Maynard 2001: 2). Today, bush brands (eg Akubra), representing what it is to be Australian, have changed and their relevance to the nation is largely reduced to utilitarian work wear and niche wear for the urban middle class. The Australianness is no longer that of the colonist, but its role as a communicator of a form of Australianness cannot be denied (Craik 2009a).

The other dominant type of Australian fashion is swim/surf wear (eg Roxy and Billabong). "[T]he centrality of swimwear and surfwear in iconic representations of the outdoors and casual Australian way of life, as well as a central motif of generations of Australian fashion" (Craik 2009a: 411) should be considered. This type of fashion has its ties with the informal and casual, a concept that has been expanded to Australia's everyday fashion.[3]

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[1] See also: Kinki University Research Institute, Marketing Service of Neo Technology, 'Uniqlo no genjo to tenbo nitsuite no hokoku desu', viewed 28 August 2013,
http://www.bus.kindai.ac.jp/kawamura/infomanage/infomanage11/uniqlo/uniqlo-group.html.
I have also noted that Uniqlo has been selected as a *sotsugyo ronbun* (graduation thesis) topic by Japanese undergraduate students.
[2] Juliette Peers and Peter McNeil are known to have conducted researches on Australian fashion, although their works are typically focused on art/design history, not always contemporary aspect.
[3] Styles of these Australian fashion styles, mostly those of women, from the 1930 to 1970s are recorded in photos. For further information see Robinson (2005).

Even though there are iconic fashion styles in Australia, bush and swim/surf styles are not "automatically identified as a form of national dress" like the Japanese kimono and/or Hawaiian Aloha (Craik 2009a: 410). Ultimately, Australian fashion is not about bush or swim/surf fashion per se, it is about the aspects of informality and casualness. Additionally it is about the openness to accept other fashion. This is described as "a new level of Australian confidence and pride" (Craik 2009a: 434). Today's Australia is not a mono-cultural British colony, but a multicultural society that offers diversity – after having gone through multiple phases (Soutphommasane 2012).

3. Review 2: Japanese Fashion

Fashion academics including Kawamura (2004 and 2005) and Craik (2009b) emphasise that fashion is predominantly a Western concept. Japanese fashion became internationally recognised after Japanese designers such as Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto moved to Paris for greater opportunities in the late 1970s. Tokyo is rising as a fashion city but it still lacks the strong structure as seen in the West (Kawamura 2004: 98). Unlike the West where fashion is associated with traditional culture, it is detached from tradition in Japan.

Consequently, Japanese fashion is not necessarily the product of formally trained designers. Rather, "anyone with great ideas is in the position to produce [fashion]" (Kawamura 2006: 795). From the 1960s until the first half of the 1970s the street styles were understood as counter-cultural. However, by the end of the twentieth century, there were perceived as trendy and somehow part of the mainstream (Maeda 2006). Apparel fashion companies are not reluctant to employ street ideas to survive in a trend driven/fast moving industry (Kawamura 2006: 796). Japanese fashion trends flow "bottom up" to a greater extent than the "top down" model predominant in the rest of the world (Craik 2009 and Kawamura 2006).

As opposed to the claim Japan is not a traditional fashion country, Slade (2009: 85 and 142) argues that Japan developed its own fashion system within the urban Edo culture. He employs Kuki's concept of *iki* (or an association of simple beauty and minimalist ethical ideology), which is a uniquely Japanese aesthetic concept that has no equivalent word in any other language The essence of *iki* was adopted by ordinary Edo people to express self-identity in fashion such as kimono and hair style (Kuki 1997: 81). This indicates that the bottom up Japanese fashion flow is not unique to the contemporary times, but was seen in the pre modern historical era.

However, there was a time when Japanese fashion flowed top down. In the wake of the Meiji Restoration, when modern Japan adopted Western styles and systems, Japanese leaders made adjustments to suit their society. Fashion was not excluded from this movement. Clothes were the sign/symbol of "do modernity" (Slade 2009: 143) and "Clothing modernity in Japan was at the heart of Japan's particular national trauma of late entry into the modern world" (Slade 2009: 172). The ordinary Japanese people at that time had no or little idea about cultural and aesthetic discourses of Western fashion.

This limited understanding did not just happen in history. Today's Japanese fashion is often described as "stylistic perfection" (Slade 2010: 546) that is "based on the imitation of foreign cultures" (Narumi 2010: 235) and not including their underlying cultural meaning. This could not

happen in the West due to the role of social context in determining fashion. However, in today's Tokyo, multiple niche fashion styles exist side by side (Craik 2009b) and as if different kinds of soup cans are "throwing a spoonful from each into one pot" (Polhemus 1994: 134).

Through fashion, people can and do express their identities (see Craik 1993 and Entwistle 2000), and young Japanese people are celebrating "the superficiality of their posed identities without denying that that is all they are," as different styles of subcultures are "enacted in a self-reflexive masquerade without regard for appearing natural or authentic" (Craik 2009b: 159). By adopting multiple styles of fashion and identities, not just by adopting one style of fashion that is most suitable to them, they "urge to be seen and to be heard" (Kawamura 2011).

Japan has endured a long recession since the 1990s. Young people "find no hope in future Japan" (Kawamura 2010: 212) and this thought is widely supported both in and outside of Japan (Harlan 2012, Murakami 2012: 194).[4] The young Japanese use fashion as revenge against their own society and an opportunity to express their freedom – trying or expressing in various ways by using different styles of fashion.

This could explain why Japan offers "an extremely fast-moving trend cycle" (Azuma 2002: 137). Because the young Japanese feel the need to express themselves in different ways to what they did a month ago, if not a week ago, so many different styles of fashion are invented/made in Japan. Many are adopted by fashion corporations – major Japanese apparel companies commonly introduce new styles on a weekly basis, whereas the cycle is typically seasonal in the rest of the fashion world (Azuma 2002: 137). Japanese apparel corporations often observe "streets" then they "adopt" street styles to produce new items without delay.

4. Uniqlo: The New Japanese Apparel Empire

Japan's largest fast fashion Uniqlo or Fast Retailing[5] is owned by Tadashi Yanai, who is regarded as today's wealthiest Japanese (McCurry 2010). Fast Retailing, previously registered as Ogori Shoji, was originally nothing more than a local tailor in Yamaguchi, established in 1963 by Yanai. The first Uniqlo store, labelled as Unique Clothing Warehouse, opened in 1984 in Hiroshima, but no significant attention was paid to the company until 1998 when its Harajuku store opened (Choi 2011: 5). However since then, the company has expanded rapidly and has become a dominant force of the Japanese apparel market. Today, in every Japanese town you visit, there seems to be a Uniqlo store – which is not selling prestigious/luxurious items but basic casual wear including "room wear" and inner/under wear. As a result, many people in Japan from infants to retirees and everybody in between has at least a few Uniqlo items each, if not more.

Uniqlo's strength is mass production of simple design quality products, rather than following changeable trends – in this way, Uniqlo is non-Japanese. The first wave of its success was ignited by

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[4] See also: 'Daigakusei 4 wari "jisatsu kangaeta": Kangakudai imamura san chosa' 2012, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 15 November, viewed 7 March 2013, http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/kyoiku/news/20121115-OYT8T00372.htm?from=yoltop.

[5] Fast Retailing consists of its subsidiary apparel companies including Uniqlo and g.u. Uniqlo, by far, is the primary subsidiary.

its light and warm fleece jackets, 26 million of which were sold domestically in Japan in the autumn/winter season of 2000 alone (Yanai 2003: 111).

Today in 2013, Uniqlo has over 850 stores in Japan and a further 350 international stores in thirteen countries and territories including the UK, France, the US and Japan's neighbouring countries in Asia. In October 2012, the company announced that its consolidated net sale amount would reach over 1 trillion yen. This is a historical outcome as no other apparel corporation in Japan has ever hit this mark – and this became possible as the result of sale increases in the international market outside of Japan (Tateyama and Okada 2012). Furthermore, Uniqlo's first Australian store will be opened in Melbourne's CBD by the end of 2013 ('Uniqlo confirms' 2013). According to Japanese reports, Uniqlo finds the Australian market attractive and expects strong results from this imminent expansion ('Uniqlo Go 1' 2012). The store will not be customised for the Australia domestic market; instead it will import its own Japanese styles ('Uniqlo Go 1' 2012). However, I am uncertain of this optimistic forecast, as explained earlier this paper. This paper now shifts to reveal why Uniqlo should expect to hit the wall in Australia.

5. The Discussions: Will Uniqlo and Australia make a fairy tale couple?

Aside from the fact that Uniqlo is unknown to most Australian,[6] there are other reasons why the company should proceed with caution. My first concern is that Uniqlo's value for money items might not be attractive to many Australians. Second, the fast fashion's potential in Australia might be limited. Last and most importantly, Uniqlo's poor corporate ethics record may be the biggest barrier to their success in Australia.

5.1 Value for Money – Not Necessarily for Australians

Makioka, Biragnet and Booker (2009: 3) suggest that "Uniqlo has developed products specifically to meet the needs of customers looking for value." The company sells what the Japanese people wanted during the "lost decades" that began with the early 1990s recession. According to the Nomura Research Institute, increasingly Japanese consumers go for the "value for money", 62% in 2006 in comparison to 52% in 2000 (Makioka *et al* 2009: 1).

Japanese media reports in late 2012 indicated that Uniqlo would export its Japanese business model to Australia ('Uniqlo Go 1' 2012). Unfortunately, this Japanese model may not be the most successful option in the international market, especially in the West. For example, Uniqlo once downsized its business scale in the British market a decade ago, and it was still reported by Mainichi Shimbun that the company is struggling in the West (Okada and Tateyama 2012). Outside of Asia,

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[6] The example in my presentation abstract revealed that the "UNI QLO" logo causes optical illusion, making ordinary Australians believed it was a promotion of "UNI QLD", the University of Queensland.

Uniqlo has only expanded its presence to four countries. Out of 350 international (outside of Japan) stores, there are 10 stores in the UK, 7 in the US, 3 in France, and 2 in Russia. The rest are in Asia.[7]

Perhaps, Muji (known as *Mujirushi Ryohin* in Japan) is a current example that illustrates Uniqlo's case. Muji has a broader retail and product line in comparison to Uniqlo, but still offers a wide variety of value for money apparel products. This Japanese company operates 379 stores in Japan. In addition, there are 117 outlet suppliers that are selling Muji items. Internationally, the company has 206 stores outside of Japan, but the majority (108 stores) are located in Chinese speaking countries/territories ('Corporate Information' 2012). Given its positive corporate identity in Japan (which has generated many Muji fans − particularly some young Japanese people decorate their whole apartments with Muji products), the company is not doing as well outside of its home ground and possibly its nearby countries.

It should be noted that Australia is a lucky country which, in recent years, has enjoyed economic growth in contrast to Japan. The Australian minimum wages are twice as high as those in Japan[8] so cheap "value for money" products may not necessarily be attractive to Australian fashion lovers. In particular, after the accident in Bangladesh, Australian consumers are becoming concerned about what they are buying. For example, an ABC report raised ethical concerns in apparel industry including the sweatshop practice and concluded it by asking the audience "Do I really need a $5 t-shirt?" (Cooper 2013). Similarly, News Limited journalist Penberthy (2013: 13) concluded his article by announcing that he has "stocked up [on] clothes from American Apparel" since the Bangladeshi accident because the company has a "strict no sweatshop policy." The ethical issue is important to many Australians and this will be discussed later.

5.2 Limitation of Fast Fashion in Australia

Georgina Safe, the fashion editor for the Sydney Morning Herald, has observed that there is "the lack of choice in the Australian outposts of fast fashion chains compared with what they sell elsewhere [in the world]" (Safe 2012). This might be related to the fact that Australian "seasons are out of sync with the northern hemisphere" (Wallace and Speedy 2011). Traditionally, Australia has been isolated from international (fast) fashion and that has allowed more local designers and apparel companies to flourish, and Australian consumers tend to support the local designs (Kimura 2009). The disadvantage for global fast fashion is tangible.

There is also another point made by Safe (2012) that is not about availability in Australian stores but about an Australian consumer mindset, which differs from that of Europeans − in particular, shopping for clothes is a widely recognised leisure in Europe, but not to the same degree in Australia.

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[7] This was advised by Mr Numata of Uniqlo's HQ over the telephone on 22 May 2013.
[8] For the Australia minimum wages see Fair Work Ombudsman, 2013, *National Minimum Wage*, viewed 20 May 2013, http://www.fairwork.gov.au/pay/national-minimum-wage/Pages/default.aspx.
For the Japan Minimum wages see Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2012, *Chiikibetsu Saitei Chingin no Zenkoku Ichiran*', viewed 20 May 2013,
http://www.mhlw.go.jp/seisakunitsuite/bunya/koyou_roudou/roudoukijun/minimumichiran.

Unfortunately, since Australia has a "smaller population and a relative disinterest in shopping," there cannot be the variety of items in Australian stores as compared to European stores (Safe 2012).

This creates a dilemma. According to Safe's article, the wider selections in fast fashion outlets in European fashion cities even made her shop there (even though she admits that "disposable clothing" makes her ill as a fashion writer) but she would not in Australia (Safe 2012). Even though fashion is not a big leisure activity for many Australians, there are fashion conscious Australians, who might use fast fashion outlets to purchase non-Australian products. Shopping locally is cheaper than going overseas. This suggests there are some potential fast fashion consumers in Australia, who will be key to Uniqlo's success in Australia.

For Australian fashion lovers, edgy Japanese street styles are typically expected from Japanese fashion. However, little or none would be available at Uniqlo stores. Unlike "Japanese Australian" designers such as Akira Isogawa, Yu Konishi and Toshihiro Takaoka, Uniqlo offers simple and basic styles that may be a little uniquely Japan. Furthermore, unlike the European counterparts such as ZARA and H&M (which supply trendy items at reasonable cost to adopt fast fashion cycles), Uniqlo's priority is to supply quality cut or products rather than meeting latest trends (Okada and Tateyama 2012). In such a case, why would Australian fashion lovers go to a Uniqlo store when they could go to an American Apparel store to buy similar looking products? At the American Apparel store, the products meet ethical standards (as they refuse to use the sweatshop and pay more than the minimum wages to their American workers). This ethics issue will be discussed in the following section.

5.3 Ethical Fashion: Will Australians support Uniqlo's corporate ethics?

In 2010, the Japanese journalist Yokota (2010) reported on Uniqlo's sweatshop practice in China. At the factory, tailors usually work from 8 am till 9 or 10 pm. Sometimes they are required to work until 3 am – and the work starts again at 8 am on that day. 1500 RMB per month (approximately A$240) including penalty (overtime) wages is the average wage. Unfortunately, the sweatshop practice has become part of the norm in the fashion industry: "The textile and apparel industries are a showcase of horrors for the labour abuse", indeed as Ross has revealed "workers are physically, sexually, and economically abused" (Ross 1996: 10). Therefore Uniglo's practice is neither new nor unique in the fashion industry and is highly unlikely to change drastically within our capitalist system.

However, what is unique about Uniqlo's ethics is that this practice of abuse is extended to their retail staff members – reported in the Japanese language media such as *Toyo Keizai* and *My News Japan*. For example, according to a former employee, he was forced to work more than 300 hours a month. Due to the extremely long hours of work, he became clinically depressed, unable to get out of bed, and consequently quit his job. According to him, Uniqlo uses their retail staff as if they are disposable. He says "Prior to joining the company, I did not consider that Uniqlo as a 'human resources disposal company' that made us work until we fell ill, dismissing us and employing the next lot" (Koko de Hatarake Shuzai Han, 2012).

Similarly, according to the *Toyo Keizai* report, "service zangyo"[9] or unreported unpaid overtime work is an ordinary work practice – it is typical for workers to work more than 240 hours per month. Within this environment, many employees fall mentally ill. Approximately 3% of the total full time employees are on an ongoing leave of absence due to mental illness, and this figure is six times higher than the national average (Kazama 2013).

Uniqlo needs to realise that it is not illegal to sell good made in overseas sweatshops, but is illegal and unethical to make people work on the Australian shop-floor in sweatshop-like conditions. Australian labour-management regulations are tighter than those of Japan and the potential impact of unethical practice in retail workplace can damage Uniqlo more drastically than it can in Japan. Australians who are legally employed expects to be treated within the legal frameworks that protect them, not just about wages but also about unfair dismissal workplace harassment. It is also difficult to imagine that Australian consumers would support Uniqlo if consumers found out how the retail staff are treated in Japan, because this could threaten the work condition of local Australian sales assistants under the Japanese management. Indeed, Peter Singer argues that Australians are more sensitive to ethics issues; whereas the Japanese tend to take care of well-being of *uchi* or their own community such as members of family, school and/or company (Singer 1993). Once again where American Apparel offers similar looking items, there is a little justification for Australian consumers to choose Uniqlo if they discover Uniqlo's unethical practices.

5.4 The Merits: Too Early to Break the Engagement

Given the above concerns, there are some positive aspects of Uniqlo's entry to Australia. First, since Australian fashion is not as sophisticated as that of Japan (Robb 2012, Murakami 2001: 73), Uniqlo's value for money items might be attractive to some Australians: Items such as its fleece jackets, implementing the state of art technologies, are available at reasonable prices and they do not look cheap. No matter how rich Australia is, there are always those on moderate and low incomes who are potential Uniqlo customers. These people may not even consider their ethical responsibility as consumers (Devinney *et al* 2010).

Second, Uniqlo offers simple design items that are not disliked by international consumers. According to Aoki (former chief of Japan's Cultural Affairs Agency), contemporary Japanese culture has international acceptance for the following two reasons. First, it is a culture for everybody, regardless of age, nationality and heritage background. Second, it carries almost no religious and/or ethnic message (Aoki and Barakan 2009). So long as Uniqlo continues to exist within these concepts, their culturally unbiased products may be acceptable beyond the national boundaries – this includes Australia.

6. Conclusion

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[9] For further information on "service zangyo" see Kopp (2012).

This paper has identified the characteristics of Japanese fashion, and analysed the potentiality of Japanese fashion in Australia. Since Japanese fashion offers "bottom up" trend streams from "street," it appears that Japanese fashion may perfectly fit within the Australian casual and informal fashion environment. This is certainly good news for the Japanese fashion giant Uniqlo, which enters the Australian apparel market by the end of 2013.

However, Uniqlo's success in Australia might be uncertain. The company seems too Japan focused and Australians may not find the fast fashion items attractive – but more importantly, a lack of ethics in Uniqlo's business model may be a potential for the Australian fashion consumers to stay away from Uniqlo. In general, Australians are more ethically concerned in comparison to the Japanese. After the Bangladeshi accident, Uniqlo's unethical approaches to their employees cannot be a positive aspect of selling their image and products in Australia.

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