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Synergizing Omnichannel Order Management and CRM for Competitive Advantage: A Case Study of UNIQLO's Digital Transformation

Andartya Setyawan Darna[1*], Muharman Lubis[1]

[1]Telkom University, Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding Email: andartyasetyawan@student.telkomuniversity.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Intense competition in the retail industry requires companies to adopt an omnichannel strategy to create superior customer experience. This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of how UNIQLO, as a global retail leader, integrates Omnichannel Order Management (OOM) into its Customer Relationship Management (CRM) ecosystem. Adopting the omnichannel management framework, this study uses a qualitative case study approach based on secondary data to examine the strategies, technological enablers, and impacts of UNIQLO's "Ariake Project." The findings show that UNIQLO successfully builds a strong operational foundation through technological drivers, specifically RFID for unified inventory visibility and warehouse automation, alongside organizational drivers such as the "Takumi" culture. This integration enables flexible order fulfillment services such as Buy Online Pick-up In-Store (BOPIS), which has achieved an adoption rate of over 40%. Furthermore, the synergy with CRM has encouraged the growth of e-commerce contribution to a steady level of 15% post-pandemic. The study concludes that the key to UNIQLO's success lies in the synergistic integration of operational efficiency (OOM) and customer data intelligence (CRM), which provides actionable insights to balance technology with customer empathy in retail transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global retail industry is currently experiencing an era of profound digital disruption, marked by intensifying competition and a fundamental shift in consumer behavior driven by rising expectations and the availability of new integration technologies [1]. As customers increasingly demand seamless shopping experiences across multiple touchpoints, retailers are forced to shift from traditional multichannel models, where physical and online stores operate separately, to a holistic omnichannel approach. A firm's ability to compete in this digital age is largely determined by the successful adoption of strategies that blur the lines between physical and digital commerce [2]. In this context, the primary objective is to create a unified ecosystem where customer interactions and transactions are seamless, regardless of the channel used [3].

Theoretically, omnichannel retailing has great potential. However, in practice it involves various difficulties. A usual problem in the retail sector is the existence of operational silos, where physical stores, e-commerce platforms, and mobile applications are managed as separate entities [4]. This difference often leads to inconsistencies in pricing, inaccurate inventory visibility, and disjointed customer data, which not only frustrates customers but also result in operational inefficiencies. To solve these problems, academics suggest that retailers must integrate two critical pillars: the operational backbone, represented by Omnichannel Order Management (OOM), and customer data intelligence, represented by Customer Relationship Management (CRM). However, empirical study that explains how global retailers successfully engineer this integration to achieve a competitive advantage are still limited, especially in the post-pandemic context.

To fill this gap, this study adopts the omnichannel management perspective in considering the operational and customer experience strategical fit [3]. This study selects UNIQLO (Fast Retailing Co., Ltd.) as a case example. UNIQLO was chosen because its status as a global leader in retail innovation, known for its agile supply chain and digital transformation initiatives [5]. Its "Ariake Project" that aims to transform the apparel giant into a "digital consumer retail company" is a perfect example for how legacy retailers can utilize technology to unify their value chain [6]. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore in detail the transformation strategy of UNIQLO. Specifically, the research aims to address these three questions: 1) How does UNIQLO plan the operational integration of OOM within its CRM system?; (2) What are the key technological and organizational drivers' facilitation of this integration?; and (3) What is the impact of this integration on operating performance and customer experience?

By answering these questions, this paper provides empirical evidence toward how omnichannel integration is realized in practice, holding potential for retail practitioners to learn from, and adding to the emerging literature on digital retail transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Evolution from Multichannel to Omnichannel Retailing

The evolution of the digital retail sector is marked by a strategic change from a multichannel to an omnichannel approach. Unlike the multichannel approach, which often operates each sales channel as a separate unit or silo, the success strategy actually depends on a company's ability to create synergy between these channels [4]. In response to this limitation, the omnichannel approach emerged by placing the customer at the center of the strategy [7]. This shift in focus to the customer as the core of omnichannel is also emphasized in the literature, which identifies 'customer experience' as the main intellectual foundation in this field of research [8]. The goal is to create a unified, consistent, and seamless shopping experience that blurs the lines between channels [9], through the synergetic management of various channels and customer touchpoints [3].

2.2 The Concept and Importance of Omnichannel Order Management (OOM)

As the operational backbone of the omnichannel strategy, Omnichannel Order Management (OOM) is an integrated approach to managing the entire order lifecycle across all sales channels [10], [11]. This deep channel integration is the key to transitioning towards true omnichannel management [12]. Its key function is to create real-time inventory visibility across the entire network, allowing companies to prevent stockouts and effectively execute services such as Buy Online, Pick-up In-Store (BOPIS) [13]. Additionally, these systems improves order fulfillment efficiency by automating workflows and determining the most optimal fulfillment location [14]. The transition from multichannel logistics to integrated omnichannel logistics is both a challenge and the key to efficiency [15]. Ultimately, all these operational advantages aim to improve the overall customer experience, which is the core of the omnichannel philosophy [3].

2.3 Main Challenges in OOM Implementation

While OOM offers several strategic advantages, its implementation provides complex challenges, both from technological and organizational standpoints. From a technological perspective, the hardest challenge is the integration of heterogeneous systems from multiple channels, such as Point-of-Sale (POS) in physical stores, e-commerce platforms, and marketplaces [16]. Organizationally, common challenges include cross-channel conflicts and silo mentality, for example physical store team and online business team has their own KPI targets and incentives, hindering synergistic collaboration [3].

2.4 The Role of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in the Omnichannel Ecosystem

If OOM is the operational engine of an omnichannel strategy, then Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is the "brain" that provides customer data-driven intelligence. To create a real seamless experience, a company must be able to manage its customers entirely, where all data and interactions from multiple touchpoints are integrated into a single, complete view [17]. This unified view of the customer is what becomes crucial in omnichannel [3]. By consolidating purchase histories and behaviors from various channels, a CRM system enables a company to perform deep personalization [16]. The success of this personalization heavily depends on customer technology acceptance and use, where perceived ease of use and benefits are the main drivers of their purchase intention [18]. The effective management of touchpoints along the entire customer journey is what ultimately proves to strengthen consumer purchase intention [19].

2.5 Theoretical Framework: The Synergistic Omnichannel Model

To analyze the complexity of strategy used by UNIQLO, the omnichannel management framework is used [3]. This framework posits that true omnichannel retailing requires the dismantling of silos between channels to create a seamless customer experience. Compared with multichannel retailing, which concentrates on optimizing the individual channels' performance independently (channel management), omnichannel retailing emphasizes synergistic management of the various accessible channels and customer touch points to let customers interact through all possible means to enhance the overall customer experience (customer experience management).

In this framework, two essential pillars are identified for a successful integration; operational and customer integration. In the context of this study, operational integration is represented by Omnichannel Order Management (OOM), ensuring the ability to have fully visibility of inventory in real-time and fulfil efficiently across all channels. On the other hand, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) stands as an instrument of customer integration, collecting data from different sources to offer a unified view of the customer journey.

Therefore, this study hypothesizes that there is no competitive advantage with either OOM or CRM in terms of a stand-alone application, but through their interdependence. We approached the subject with a theoretical assumption that OOM is conducive to customers' "physical capability" to meet their desire (i.e., to pick up goods at the store), and CRM is conducive to generating customers desires into accessing further aims (i.e., personalized recommendations) through processing learning,

exploration, and choice. The alignment of these two systems represents the operationalization of the vision of a seamless omnichannel ecosystem [3].

2.6 Synthesis and Research Gap

From the review above, the literature has found a fundamental shift towards omnichannel retailing, a strategy that demands operational integration through Omnichannel Order Management (OOM) and data intelligence through Customer Relationship Management (CRM) to create superior customer experience. The existing literature is robust in conceptualization framework and discussing the general challenges of its implementation. However, more detailed empirical case studies are still needed on how leading global retail companies apply these principles in practice, especially in facing post-pandemic market dynamics and leveraging specific technologies. Therefore, this research goal is to fill that gap by specifically analyzing the case study of Uniqlo, a company known for its digital innovation. This paper will review how Uniqlo integrates OOM into its CRM ecosystem to achieve a competitive advantage.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach. This approach was chosen as the purpose of the study was to achieve a deep, rich and holistic understanding of a complex phenomenon i.e., how an organization strategically and operationally implements omnichannel order management in the context of CRM. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth examination of the "how" and "why" behind UNIQLO's strategy, something that cannot be entirely captured through quantitative data alone.

3.2 Research Type: Case Study

The type of research employed is a single case study. The case study allows an investigation to retain the complexity of a contemporary phenomenon, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clear [20]. The global retail company UNIQLO was selected as the unit of analysis in this study. UNIQLO was selected as a case study based on its status as an industry leader widely recognized for successfully implementing an innovative omnichannel strategy. In addition, the company's strategy is well-documented through various publicly accessible white papers, making it a good case study that can give valuable insights to other companies and the academic community.

3.3 Type and Source of Data

This study relies entirely on secondary data, which is data that has been collected by other parties and is publicly available. The use of secondary data is considered efficient and sufficient to answer the research questions. The data sources used in this study are as follows:

1. Official company reports, such as annual reports, financial results, and strategic reports like "The Ariake Project" created by Fast Retailing Co., Ltd.
2. Academic publications like peer-reviewed journal articles and books with omnichannel, OOM, and CRM topic.
3. Quantitative data, sales data obtained from the company's annual reports.
4. Digital platform analysis, study on functionalities and features that are available on UNIQLO's official website and mobile application.

3.4 Data Collection Technique

The data collection techniques used are document study and literature review. Data are collected systematically by searching academic databases (such as Google Scholar) and official company website (specifically the Fast-Retailing Investor Relations portal). Relevant documents are then downloaded, archived, and selected based on their suitability to the research focus.

3.5 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis in this study uses a qualitative content analysis technique. The analysis process was conducted in several stages. First, all collected data from various sources were organized and thoroughly read. Second, coding or identifying significant themes related to the research questions such as "inventory integration," "CRM-based personalization," "logistics efficiency," and "customer experience" were conducted. Third, we synthesized and integrated these themes into a cohesive narrative that will be recapitulated in the Findings of Research and Discussion chapters as findings from the case study are linked back to the existing theoretical framework.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter shows the findings from the UNIQLO case study, organized to address research questions regarding the strategic integration of operations and CRM, the key technological and organizational enablers, and the resulting impact on performance.

4.1 Strategic Context: Integration through "The Ariake Project"

UNIQLO's omnichannel implementation is not a standalone initiative but acts as the core of a larger business transformation. According to the company's official reports, UNIQLO envisions evolving from a conventional apparel retailer into a "digital consumer retail company" [6]. This vision is realized through a large-scale strategic project called "The Ariake Project," whose goal is to integrate the entire value chain from production to sales in a customer-centric manner powered by digital technology [6]. Within this framework, UNIQLO fundamentally changed its operations by unifying its physical store and e-commerce inventories [6]. This unification creates the necessary infrastructure for OOM and CRM to interact, enabling a seamless flow of information where customer demand data directly influences production planning and inventory distribution [6], a strategy identified as a key factor in market leadership [21].

4.2 Technological and Organizational Enablers

To help this integration, UNIQLO uses specific technological and organizational drivers:

1. Technological Drivers: RFID and Automation. The key technology supporting this strategy is the implementation of RAIN RFID tags on every product label. This technology allows for accurate, real-time inventory tracking, which is a crucial prerequisite for enabling omnichannel services [13]. Furthermore, to handle the complexity of omnichannel fulfillment, UNIQLO transformed its logistics capabilities. The company partnered with Daifuku to automate its Tokyo warehouse into a 24-hour operation with significant staff reduction, increasing work execution speed by 32 times [21]. This automation ensures that the OOM system can fulfill orders rapidly, whether for home delivery or store pickup.
2. Organizational Drivers: The "Takumi" Culture. Besides technology, organizational aspects are equally important. UNIQLO never loses focus on quality through its “Takumi” system, teams of veteran textile experts with decades of experience who work directly with partner factories to ensure high standards [21]. This culture of precision extends to their store operations, where they train staff to handle both physical service and digital fulfillment tasks, to make sure the human aspect aligns with the digital strategy.

4.3 Impact on Operational Performance and Customer Experience

The integration of OOM and CRM has produced a number of quantitative and qualitative impacts. Quantitative Impact: E-commerce Growth and Adoption The transformation is reflected in the growth of e-commerce sales contribution. As shown in Figure 1, the contribution peaked at 19.00% during the pandemic (2020) and stabilized at 15.00% in 2024, a level permanently higher than the pre-implementation phase [22].

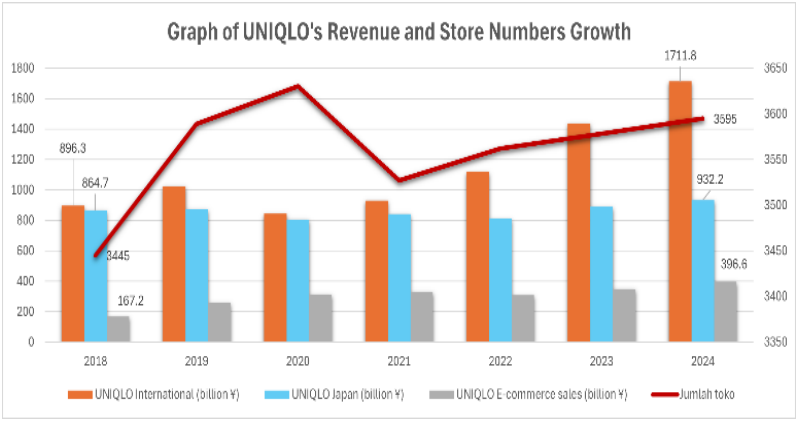

Figure 1. Graph of UNIQLO's Revenue and Store Numbers Growth (Data sourced from [22]

Operationally, the success can be seen by the high utilization of the Buy Online Pick-up In-Store (BOPIS) service. According to official reports, in-store pickup contributes for more than 40% of all online purchases [6]. This indicator confirms the efficiency of the OOM system in utilizing physical stores as logistics hubs. The major quantitative success metrics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Key Metrics of UNIQLO's Omnichannel Success

Key Performance Indicator	Achievement
Growth of E-commerce Contribution	Peaked at 19.00% in 2020 and stabilized at a 15.00% level post-pandemic, significantly higher than the initial level of 9.49% in 2018.
Adoption Rate of In-store Pickup Service	Over 40% of all online orders are fulfilled via the in-store pickup service (BOPIS).

Qualitative Impact: The Duality of Experience. From the customer's point of view, integration is two-sided. While CRM-based personalization and OOM-driven efficiency do introduce some "gains" (control and speed), they also introduce "pains" related to the reduced human touch. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The Duality of Customer Experience in UNIQLO's Omnichannel Ecosystem

Aspect of the Customer Journey	Gain Points (Advantages & Positive Feelings)	Pain Points (Difficulties & Negative Feelings)
Information Search & Planning	Customers feel smart and in control by being able to check accurate stock levels and exclusive app promotions before visiting a store.	High reliance on technology; if the app has crashes or data is out of sync, the entire shopping plan can fail.
In-Store Experience	Feeling at ease using the store as a showroom to try on products for size and material, then purchasing them online later.	Feeling frustrated and ignored when it is difficult to find staff for assistance. An empty-looking store can create doubt for new customers.
Transaction & Fulfillment Process	Feeling awed and efficient with the rapid self-checkout process via RFID. The convenience of picking up a BOPIS order without a long queue.	Feeling anxious or intimidated by new cashier technology. Hearing complaints from others who find it complicated.
Overall Feeling & Brand Perception	Feeling satisfied for having saved time and money. Perceiving UNIQLO as a modern, innovative, and practical brand.	The shopping experience can feel cold and impersonal, reducing the warm emotional connection with the brand.

5. DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the implications of the findings from the UNIQLO case study, connecting them to the theoretical concepts of omnichannel management and the established framework [3]. We first present the structure of the discussion, then we analyze operational strategies that have been used and their impact on corporate performance.

5.1 Logistics Efficiency and the Transformation of the Physical Store's Role

The high adoption rate of the in-store pickup service, exceeding 40%, serves as strong evidence of logistics efficiency [6]. As noted in the literature, the management of integrated distribution channels, where physical stores take on a logistical role, is a key metric in assessing the maturity of a company's omnichannel strategy [23].

By shifting a large portion of the fulfillment responsibility to its physical stores, UNIQLO has effectively transformed the role of its brick-and-mortar network. Stores are no longer just points of sale but have become important logistical assets, functioning as mini-fulfillment centers and showrooms. This transformation is further supported by the company's investment in warehouse automation and the "Takumi" culture, which ensures that speed does not compromise product quality [21]. Ultimately, this reflects the achievement of integration at both the physical and virtual levels, which is the core of a mature omnichannel framework [24].

5.2 Analysis of the Growth Narrative: The Three Phases of Omnichannel Impact

The growth data of UNIQLO's e-commerce contribution tells a story of strategic success that can be divided into three distinct phases:

1. Strategy Validation Phase (2018-2019): The jump from 9.49% to 13.60% serves as clear market validation that UNIQLO's initial investment in its omnichannel infrastructure was effective and well-received by consumers. This growth aligns with findings that the level of cross-channel integration has an appreciably positive effect on a retailer's sales growth [25].
2. Crisis-Driven Acceleration Phase (2020-2021): The 19% increase was not a coincidence but instead was the outcome of a solid omnichannel base with an extraordinary external catalyst: the COVID-19 pandemic. UNIQLO was prepared to not just survive but thrive in the face of a greatly changed consumer landscape that massively shifted online. This resilience aligns with observations that UNIQLO was among the few global retailers to successfully navigate and grow during the pandemic due to its agile business model [21]. This demonstrates how an omnichannel strategy functions as "strategic insurance" that builds business resilience.

3. Stabilization in the "New Normal" (2022-2024): The normalization to the 15-16% level indicates market maturity. This is not a falloff but evidence that e-commerce has found a new, permanently higher level of demand relative to the pre-pandemic period. This success confirms findings that online-offline channel integration positively improves performance at the overall corporate level [26].

5.3 Managerial Implications: Balancing Technology with Customer Empathy

This case study highlights that the success of digital transformation is not measured solely by efficiency and sales metrics. The emergence of customer pain points (e.g., lack of human interaction, tech intimidation) shows a trade-off that must be consciously managed. This requires managers to understand the entire customer journey holistically, not on a per-channel basis, to identify the important moments that most affect satisfaction [27]. The implication for managers is the necessity of balancing technological implementation with empathy. This could mean enhancing the role of staff to be problem-solvers or style advisors, giving specific guidance for customers that are unfamiliar with new technologies, and creating an in-store experience that remains warm and engaging even though most of the transactions are taking place digitally.

5.4 Limitations of the Research

This research has limitations as it relies entirely on publicly available secondary data. The lack of access to internal company data or interviews with management limits the depth of analysis regarding internal decision-making processes and operational challenges. Therefore, future research is recommended to: (1) use qualitative methods with in-depth interviews to explore managerial perspectives; (2) conduct quantitative studies to specifically measure the impact of omnichannel on loyalty and customer lifetime value; or (3) conduct comparative studies with other retailers to find different strategic patterns.

6. CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the entire research, provides specific answers to the three research questions, and presents the implications as well as suggestions for future research.

6.1 Research Summary

This study was initiated by the challenges in the modern retail industry that requires integrated and seamless customer experience. Using UNIQLO as a case study, this study aimed to analyze how a global retail company integrates Omnichannel Order Management (OOM) into its Customer Relationship Management (CRM) ecosystem to achieve competitive advantage.

6.2 Answering the Research Question

Based on the analysis conducted, the three research questions proposed in this study are answered as follows:

1. Strategy of Integration: UNIQLO successfully integrates OOM within its CRM ecosystem by making unified data its core foundation through the "Ariake Project." OOM functions as the operational engine that ensures efficiency and accuracy in cross-channel order fulfillment [6]. Meanwhile, CRM also acts as the "brain" that gathers and analyzes data from each customer interaction across all channels [6]. This integration makes it possible for UNIQLO to easily process orders efficiently without sacrificing a personalized and relevant experience.
2. Technological and Organizational Drivers: Certain enablers define the success of this integration. From a technological perspective, the use of RFID tags enables real-time inventory visibility that required for OOM [13], while warehouse automation increases fulfillment speed. Organizationally, the "Takumi" culture make sure that this digital speed does not compromise product quality, creating a synergy between human expertise and digital efficiency [21].
3. Impact on Performance: The impact of this strategy has been proven significant. Quantitatively, it is marked by the stabilization of e-commerce contribution at a high level (15%) post-pandemic [22] and a high adoption rate of the BOPIS service (>40%) [6]. Qualitatively, it creates a dual-sided customer experience that offers efficiency but requires careful management of the human touch.

6.3 Research Implications

This study yields several important implications:

1. This study provides rich empirical evidence for the omnichannel literature, practically confirming the framework which posits that synergistic integration between operational capabilities (OOM) and customer data-driven capabilities (CRM) is a critical success factor [3].
2. Managerial Implications: The case study demonstrates to practitioners in the retail industry that investment in omnichannel must be comprehensive. Success does not rely solely on the adoption of technology, but also on the willingness to transform business processes, align goals across divisions, and more than that, it depends on technological efficiency and empathy to their clients' experience.

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This research is limited by its reliance completely on publicly available secondary data. The lack of access to the company's internal data or interviews with management limits the depth of analysis regarding the decision-making process and internal implementation challenges. Therefore, future research is recommended to: (1) use qualitative methods with in-depth interviews to explore managerial perspectives; (2) conduct quantitative studies to specifically measure the impact of omnichannel on loyalty and customer lifetime value; or (3) undertake comparative studies with other retail companies to identify different strategic patterns.

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