

## A Study on the Relationship between Customers and Shop Managers according to Line of Brands

### 브랜드 군에 따른 고객과 슝 매니저간의 관계 특성 연구

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#### Abstract

본 연구는 의류점포의 고객과 슝 매니저 사이의 관계를 보다 포괄적인 관점에서 심층적으로 이해함으로써 대 고객 관계마케팅에서의 우위를 점하기 위한 전략도출에 기여하고자 하는 목적에서 이루어졌다. 이를 위해 백화점에 입점해 있는 디자이너 브랜드와 캐릭터 브랜드 의류점포 각 4 곳의 고객 9명과 슝 매니저 8명에 대한 문화기술적 면접과 이들 점포에 대한 참여관찰을 통한 질적 연구가 2000년 5월부터 8월말까지 행해졌다.

연구 결과에 대한 내용분석에 따르면 브랜드군 간에는 관련변인이나 관계형성 과정 등 장기적 관계형성 메커니즘에 차이가 있는 것으로 밝혀졌다. 또 관계에 대한 관점에 따라 추구이점이 다름으로써 관계에 대한 관여 수준, 관계의 질, 관계지속기간, 신뢰에 대한 관점에 차이가 발생하는 것으로 나타났는데 관계에의 관점과 추구이점의 차이는 가격의 차이에서 연유하는 것으로 보인다. 따라서 제품수준에 따라서 상이한 접근방법이 요구된다. 한편 패션상품의 특성으로 하여 의류의 경우에는 고정고객 유지 뿐 아니라 신규고객 창출이 중요하기 때문에 기존의 관계 마케팅과는 다른 접근방법이 요구된다.

**Key words:** relationship marketing, long-term relationship, line of brands, shop manager, customer; 관계 마케팅, 장기적 관계, 브랜드 군, 슝 매니저, 고객

## I. Introduction

In the early 1990s, with the conversion of thought that the superior competitive position is acquired not by products but by customers, customers were regarded as principal assets<sup>1)</sup> and developing long-term relationships with customers was regarded as the most efficient strategy<sup>2)</sup>. Thus, Relationship marketing, defining 'new paradigm shift'<sup>3, 4)</sup>, became the core subject in almost all marketing

areas<sup>5)</sup>. Though a relationship includes all relational exchanges between exchange partners<sup>3)</sup>, relationship with end users is categorized as Customer Relationship Marketing. The purpose of CRM is making circumstances to maintain customers for longer duration than discrete transactions to create lifetime customer value on the basis of mutual benefit. With CRM, customer satisfaction and loyalty are established by customized products and services. Therefore CRM emphasizes intimacy with customers. And it has

been revealed that customer satisfaction depends on the interpersonal interaction between customers and salespersons in all the details of buying situations<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, in the field of clothing and textiles, because the dominant focus has been on *information gathering to satisfy consumer needs*, subjects which are related to relationship marketing are limited to Quick Response<sup>7)</sup> or marketing system<sup>8)</sup>. It seems that this situation is generated from insufficient interest in relationship marketing, high uncertainties of the environment of fashion products that is affected by fashion and diversification of lifestyle, and irregularity of buying patterns. Accordingly, the dominant focus has been on information gathering to satisfy consumer needs. However shop managers are important due to their forefront position in retailing settings. They are called 'relationship manager' due to their function of controlling the quality of service<sup>1, 6)</sup>. Therefore understanding the customer-shop manager relationship is critical in retail settings. Thus a study on shop managers, especially on interpersonal relationships between customers and shop managers, is necessary.

And although non-store retailing, especially e-commerce has lately attracted considerable attention, it seems that selling clothing through e-commerce has a limit for the time being except for a few lines of goods because clothing is difficult to standardize and purchase without trying on by oneself. However, as e-commerce grows, solutions will soon emerge to solve these kinds of matters, and hence it is imperative to understand interpersonal relationships between customers and salespersons, which is the biggest difference between store and non-store retailing, to deal with not only intratype but also intertype competition in retailing system.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to deeply understand the relationship between customers and shop managers of apparel shops through a qualitative study. That is, customers and shop managers of designer brands and character brands were selected as the subject of study to thoroughly understand the property, related variables, and process of relationship between customers and salespersons of apparel shops. This study may be helpful to devise marketing strategies and educational materials for salespersons.

## II. Study method

To accomplish the purpose of this paper, a qualitative study was performed through ethnographic interview and participant observation on 4 shop managers and 5 customers of 4 designer brand shops and 4 shop managers and 4 customers of 4 character brand shops at department stores from May to August 2000.

A qualitative study method is an attempt to understand phenomena from inside through field research<sup>10)</sup>, that is, researchers enter into a specific subculture in person. Thus a qualitative study makes it possible to broaden point of views regarding diverse aspects of phenomena; accordingly it can be usefully applied to exploratory research<sup>11)</sup>. Further, a qualitative study is helpful to interpret phenomena with consideration of context by researcher's subjective and synthetic judgment. Since interpersonal relationship is dependent on situation and formed by mutual interaction, a qualitative study is more suitable than a quantitative study.

For purposive sampling of the subjects of this study, first, shop managers of 4 designer brands and 4 character brands were selected with regard to the sales volumes and recommendation of

department stores. Then customers introduced by shop managers were selected, but results of interviews indicated that they were too intimate with the shop managers. Thus some other customers, who used the shop and accepted the interview request, were also included to reflect various customers' opinions.

The age groups of interviewees' are diverse, and all shop managers, who have engaged in the sales part for more than 10 years, are expert salespersons. Almost all customers are above the university graduate level, and in the case of designer brands, their income level is higher than average.

Interviews were done through a face-to-face personal interview method and Patton's interview guide approach. Thus the contents and the order of questions were different according to the characteristics of respondents and interview context. And according to the degree of respondents' enculturation, there were differences in vocabulary and the depth of interview. The contents of the interview with shop managers were mainly related to attitude and viewpoint toward sales, the method of customer treatment, relationship with customers, patrons, etc. And the contents of the interview with customers were mainly related to shopping orientations, attitude toward shop managers' treatment method, relationship with shop managers, patron, etc.

Restaurants and coffee shops were mainly used for the interviews. But some customers who didn't want to go to other places used the shop. The contents of interview were recorded with the interviewee's consent for accuracy.

Customer interviews were done just one time, and shop manager interviews were carried out twice. That's because the contact with shop managers was easier and shop managers were not only more enculturated in the situations but also

participated in the interviews more positively. Hours of interviews with customers were from 40 minutes to 2 hours and were from 2 to 4 hours with shop managers.

During participant observation, the researcher observed interaction situations between customers and salespersons without joining in the sales. Observation was done at the shop managed by shop managers participating in the interview. However it was difficult to comprehend relationships or process of relationship building between interviewees, because of observation period and situation. Therefore observation was treated as validation of contents and meanings of shop managers' responses.

Content analysis was performed to understand the result of the study and get conclusions.

### **III. Relationship according to line of brands**

#### **1. Differences in perception of relationship**

According to content analysis, it is revealed that points of view about relationship between customers and shop managers are different according to line of brands with brand, namely designer brands and character brands. That is, in designer brands, the relationship between customers and shop manager is regarded as an interpersonal relationship, and transactional aspects are just accompanied by interpersonal aspects. On the contrary, in character brands, they also acknowledge the relationship between customers and shop managers as an interpersonal relationship, but great emphasis is put on transactional aspects rather than interpersonal aspects. Such differences in perception of relationship are only due to line of brands, there are no differences between customers and shop managers.

These different viewpoints differentiated the role of the salesroom; namely, the role of the salesroom of designer brands is a kind of social life space as well as a shopping place. However at character brands, the role of the salesroom is limited as a shopping place.

It seems that the price of clothing is related to the cause of different viewpoints about relationship. In the case of designer brands, thanks to high prices, customers expect fairly good service and courtesy, and hence they perceive shop managers as crucial elements. On the contrary, at character brands, owing to moderate prices, customers' expectation level of service is relatively low, and shopping itself is regarded as a kind of pleasure. Thus shop managers or relationship with shop managers aren't so important especially because customers think of the existence and kindness of the shop managers as natural.

Accordingly the role of other sales staff is differentiated. At designer brands, they serve as assistants to shop managers because customers much prefer shop manager's reception. But at character brands, they contribute to sales volume and have their own patron. However in this case, polite and cordial manner is also necessary.

To customers, the most important thing is comfort in shop manager or shop. But the meaning of comfort is somewhat different according to line

of brands. In the case of character brands, comfort means appropriate recommendation of dress which is fitting to one's taste and appearance, not imposing burden of purchase, and knowing who she is. To add to these, in designer brands, comfort means courtesy and recognition.

In Table 1, I summarize the basic findings from differences in perception of relationship according to line of brand.

## 2. Related variables

Variables related to relationships are also different according to line of brands.

### 1) Appearance and character

In designer brands, the shop manager's character is key element because of much more interactions and intimate connections between customers and shop managers. Thus shop managers who are amiable, sincere, cordial, and comfortable are preferred. And a neat, trim, and comfortable figure is preferred to a beautiful, slender, and splendid one. It seems such appearance can give trust more easily. There is no difference as related to preferred character between designer brands and character brands because sales accompany interpersonal relationships even though relationships in character brands aren't so intimate. However in character brands, more

Table 1. Differences in perception of relationship

	designer brands	character brands
viewpoints about relationship	interpersonal relationship > transactional relationship	interpersonal relationship < transactional relationship
Role of salesroom	shopping place & social space	shopping place
expected service level	high	relatively low
role of other sales staff	assistant of shop manager	contribute to sales volume
the meaning of comfort	courtesy and recognition proper coordination advice not imposing burden of purchase	proper coordination advice not imposing burden of purchase knowing who she is

emphasis is placed on figure. The shop manager, who has a self-image corresponding with the brand image and a pertinent figure and sense to appeal to customers of the brand, is preferred.

It must be true that such differences also originated from difference of viewpoint about relationship. At designer brands, because clothing of the brand is already familiar to most customers and interpersonal relationship is valued, there is no need for shop managers to inform the characteristics of the brand as models. Rather, an elegant appearance coincided with the status as manager is important. On the contrary, shop managers of character brands, as models or living manikins, should inform the characteristics of the brand to induce customers into the shop. Hence an attractive figure corresponding to the brand image is important.

#### 2) Coordination ability

Although coordination ability is most valuable among indispensable abilities for shop managers, in the case of designer brands, thanks to intimate interpersonal relationship, the manager's character is more emphasized. In contrast, customers of character brands think coordination ability of shop managers is more important than character. Yet there are some differences in the point of view regarding coordination ability, that is, shop managers think coordination ability is related to satisfaction and trust, whereas customers think it is only related to satisfaction.

#### 3) Similarity

Similarity between customers and shop managers facilitates favor and trust toward the other side, due to feeling of closeness, especially similarity in taste about garment or culture is most important. Customers and managers of designer

brands recognize the importance of similarities owing to mutual disclosure and frequent interaction. However, in character brands, similarity wouldn't affect relationship because there is no private conversation or intimate personal connection. Yet when choosing a specific shop for shopping, customers sway in accordance with the atmosphere of the salesroom controlled by shop managers, and hence it's difficult to ignore the effects of similarity. Namely, if the customer and shop manager's tastes are similar, it's easier to induce customers into the shop and satisfy them with coordination advice.

#### 4) Characteristics of communication and mutual disclosure

In the case of designer brands, shop managers should start conversation and self-disclosure to interest customers in the relationship at the early stage of relationship building. But customers take the leadership of communication after mutual disclosure takes place, as the relationship gets intimate. In such situations, it's important for managers to carefully listen to the customer's story without valuation and leakage of secret. And the shop manager's listening manners, understanding, recognition and sympathy, are also important during communication.

When one side discloses herself unilaterally, trust can be damaged, so mutual disclosure should be maintained. However, because of the strong one-sided aspect of communication, namely, customers mainly speak and managers mainly listen, managers regard communication as a process of interpersonal relationship building and a kind of service. At the early stage of the relationship, the contents of conversation are chiefly related to clothing, but as mutual disclosure takes place, the contents of conversation related to

privacy increase.

On the contrary, at character brands, shop managers consistently take leadership in communication situations. Most of conversation contents pertain to explanation about clothing, except for conversation to grasp the customer's disposition and taste and to ask after customer's usual life. In this case, shop managers mainly speak and listen carefully at the same time to grasp the customer's disposition and taste for proper reception. However, even if the customer and shop manager think the relationship is intimate, both sides want to remain in a transactional relationship. And their hesitation to private conversation rarely leads to mutual disclosure. Therefore, in communication situations, shop manager's communication technique is important without regard to the lines of brands. Summary of the characteristics of communication is shown in Table 2.

##### 5) Relationship investments

Shop managers invest in relationships more positively because the shop managers' role is offering service and relationship maintaining itself is a part of customer management. As the relationship develops, the amount of relationship investment is increased.

Especially, at designer brands, due to higher

expectation level and more interaction, shop managers invest in relationships more heavily. At first, they begin with knowing who she is and phoning to ask after. Yet, as times go by, the level of investment gets higher through presents and by meeting outside the shop to share culture such as dinning, shopping, sightseeing, participating performing arts, etc.

However, at character brands, there is no meeting outside and phoning to ask after even though shop masters mail DM (direct mail) and phone to inform the news about new arrivals, bargain sales, events, etc. Shop managers prefer indirect investments to direct investments. Namely they prefer to make effort to comprehend fashion trends and to experience culture enjoyed by customers for pertinent coordination advice.

Customers invest in relationships only when they have commitments to shop managers to some degree. General methods of investments are giving profit through purchase and introducing other persons. However purchasing is more usual because introducing other customers is related to the problem of taste. As relationship investments, purchasing means that purchasing clothing takes place only at the shop when customers need to buy something rather than purchasing for shop managers unnecessarily. In addition to above, at designer brands, there are some customers who

**Table 2. Differences in characteristic of communication**

		designer brands	character brands
early stage of relationship	leadership of communication	shop manager	shop manager
	Main roles of customer/ shop manager	listener/speaker	listener/speaker · listener
	main conversation contents	related to clothing	related to clothing
Mutual disclosure		take place	not take place
after establishing intimate relationship	communication leadership	customer	shop manager
	main roles of customer/shop manager	speaker/listener	listener/speaker · listener
	main conversation contents	related to privacy	related to clothing

bring snacks or presents. And if the relationship is fairly intimate there are some who invite to treat shop managers even at home. Thus, the degree of relationship investment of customers is higher at designer brands.

#### 6) Relationship-proneness

According to relationship-proneness of customers or shop managers, the quality of relationship is differentiated. Because customers hold decisive power of the relationship, the customer's relationship-proneness is more important.

The customers of designer brands think relationship is natural regarding to pertinent coordination advice reflecting taste, cordial treatment and courtesy. Hence, low relationship-prone customers are only reluctant to disclose themselves in communication situations and dislike excessive positive treatment rather than refuse the relationship itself. And it seems that low relationship-prone customers didn't relate relationship with trust because of such disposition. With characteristic of designer brands, emphasis

on interpersonal relation, it's hard to ignore shop manager's relationship-proneness.

On the contrary, it seems that both customers and shop managers of character brands have relatively lower relationship-proneness. They didn't want intimate connection except for relationship under the necessity.

All related variables of relationship mentioned above are summarized and presented in Table 3.

### 3. Process of relationship building

Relationship between customer and shop manager is developed only when satisfaction with clothing is promised and when the relationship gives any kinds of benefits to both parties concerned. Although this is a common feature, relationship building process is somewhat different according to line of brands.

In the case of designer brands, if customers are satisfied with the clothing they buy and with the service they receive, then trust toward shop managers is built on. Trust can lead to greater satisfaction and mutual disclosure. Then intensified

**Table 3. Differences in related variables of relationship building**

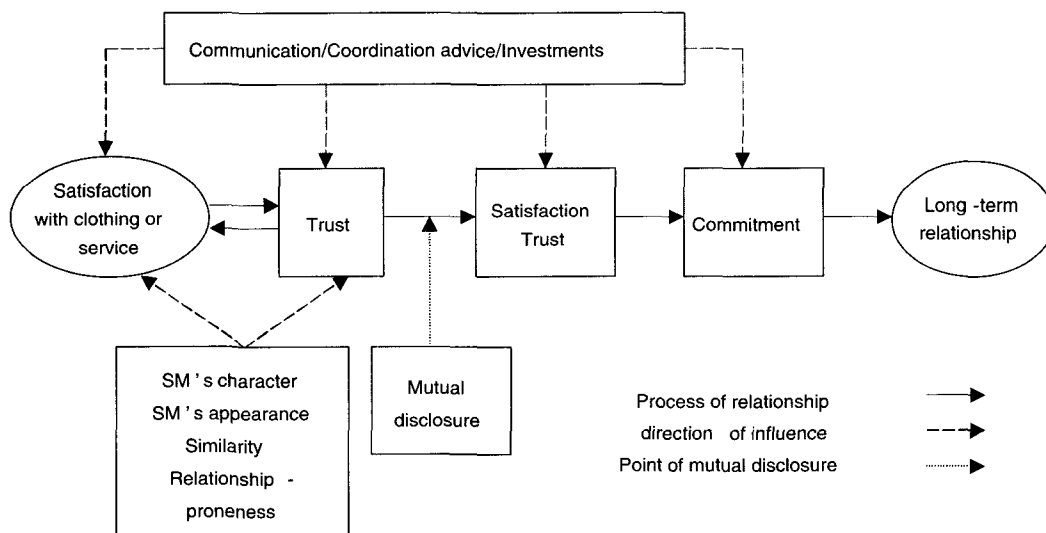
	designer brands	character brands
Preferred appearance for shop manager's	neat, trim and comfortable	pertinent to express brand image
Preferred character for shop manager's	amiable, sincere, cordial and comfortable	cordial and sincere
Indispensable elements for shop manager	character > ability in coordination advice	character < ability in coordination advice
Similarity	related to satisfaction and trust	related to entrance at shop and satisfaction
Characteristics of communication	with process of relationship, leadership and contents of conversation varied and mutual disclosure took place	no variations in leadership and contents of conversation and no mutual disclosure with process of relationship
Relationship investments	shop manager invests more positively in relationship than customer	mainly shop manager invests in relationship, but the degree of investments is lower than designer brands
Relationship-proneness	relatively high	relatively low

satisfaction and trust lead to commitment to shop managers and commitment to long-term relationships. Although variables related to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships are diverse, shop manager's character, appearance, ability in coordination advice, similarity, characteristics of communication and relationship investments have effects. Among these variables, the shop manager's character, ability in coordination advice, communication technique and relationship investments influence all relationship stages. The shop manager's appearance is related only in the early stage, and similarity is related in the early stage of a relationship and mutual disclosure.

To establish relationships, satisfaction is important, however, as relationships develop, trust is emphasized. As a matter of fact, it is true that satisfaction and trust are deeply connected to each other. However, it seems that satisfaction precedes trust because in the early stages of a relationship, satisfaction is emphasized more, and as the

relationship develops, more emphasis is put on trust. Customer trust of the shop manager has two components, benevolent trust and expert trust. Benevolent trust is feeling secure about relying on the shop manager, and expert trust is the belief that the shop manager has necessary competence to be relied upon. Even though both trust are important, at designer brands, owing to intimate and frequent interaction, benevolent trust rooted in the shop manager's benevolence to protect not only her own interests but also the customer's is crucial. Low relationship-prone customers are apt to exclude trust in relationship, and hence they hesitate to disclose themselves and to have commitment to shop managers. I presented the relationship building process of designer brands in Figure 1.

However, in the case of character brands, customers satisfied with the buying outcomes and the service intensify the number of visit. As contacts repeat, accumulated satisfaction and



Picture 1. Relationship building process of designer brands



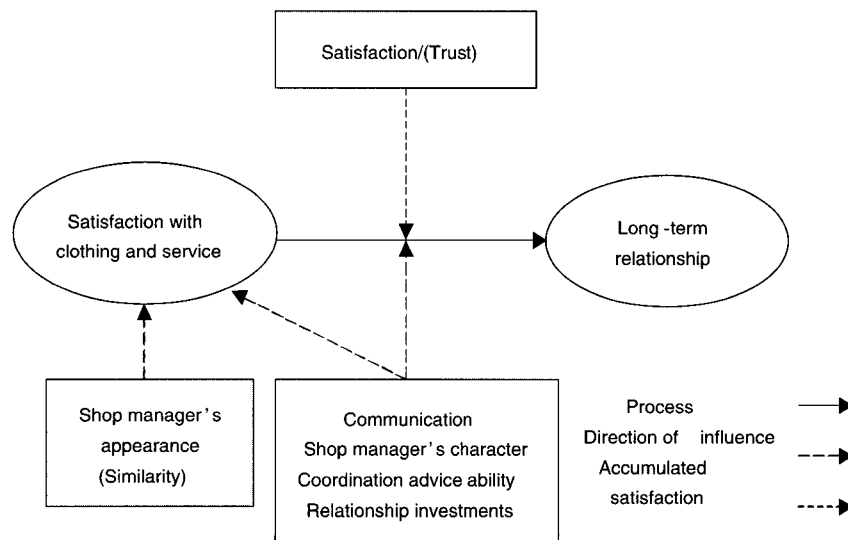
trust lead to long-term relationships. In this case, expert trust is more important than benevolent trust. Variables related to building relationships included the shop manager's character, ability in coordination advice, appearance, characteristics of communication, and relationship investments. Although interviewees didn't refer to similarity and relationship-proneness, it can be supposed that the customer's frequency of visit and satisfaction with the shop manager's coordination advice are facilitated with similarity of taste between the shop manager and the customer. And shop managers said they decide the treatment manner according to the customer's reaction. I think it implies that relationship-proneness also has some effects on relationships. The attention-getting point is different according to points of view between shop managers and customers. Shop managers relate relationship with satisfaction and trust, but customers who participated in the interview relate relationship only with satisfaction. They thought trust was an inappropriate concept in relationships

with shop managers. It may be interviewed customer attribute or relationship attribute of character brands. Hereafter, study related to this issue is necessary. The relationship building process of character brands is presented in Picture 2.

#### 4. Relationship severance

Relationship severance can take place in any stages of relationship building for various reasons such as depreciation of relationship quality, discovery of better alternatives, shop manager's brand switching, repugnance of the clothing, and change of customer's lifestyle or taste.

In the case of designer brands, especially, depreciation of relationship quality caused by damage of satisfaction or trust is a serious problem. As the relationship develops, customers understand shop managers much more thanks to commitment. However, at the same time, the customer's expectation level about satisfaction gets higher, which makes it possible to depreciate



Picture 2. Relationship building process of character brands

relationship quality with a mere trifle if related to regrettable feeling. The breach of promise is the most important factor to damage of trust, thus keeping promises, rather than making them, is the essence of the quality of relationships. Inevitably mistakes take place, and most of all, acknowledging one's mistake is essential to maintain relationships. If mistakes took place repeatedly or trust was not restored, the relationship will be over.

At character brands, owing to customer's tendency to pursue of fashion, change of fashion trend or repugnance to dress style of the brand are critical causes for relationship severance.

### 5. The quality of relationship

Different viewpoints to relationship also generate the difference in the relationship quality of designer brands and character brands. At designer brands, commercial friendship can be introduced by commitment on the basis of satisfaction and trust. At character brands, though the basis of relationship is personal interaction, the focus is on the transaction-orientated view rather than the interpersonal-oriented view, and hence an intimate relationship or commercial friendship isn't

generated. By the term "commercial friendship", a specific aspect, that is, one side provides service and the other side receives service, is emphasized even though friendship is involved in relationship.

Regarding the quality of relationship, at designer brands, as the relationship becomes closer and friendlier, the duration of the relationship is longer and commitment to the shop manager intensifies.

Existing customers in any brands lead the sales. Purchasing amount increases rapidly when interests in clothing of the brand or commitments to shop managers get higher as customers newly get into existing customer. However, long duration of relationships cause decrease in sales despite high commitments to shop managers owing to decrease of interests in clothing of the brand.

We can see the summary of differences in relationship building and the quality of relationship in Table 4.

## IV. Conclusion

It is revealed that there are considerable differences from viewpoints to mechanism of relationship between customers and shop managers

Table 4. Differences in relationship building and the quality of relationship

	designer brands	character brands
related variables of relationship building	shop manager's character and appearance, ability in coordination advice, characteristic of communication, relationship investment, similarity, relationship-proneness	shop manager's character and appearance, ability in coordination advice, characteristic of communication, relationship investment(similarity, relationship-proneness)
intervening variables	satisfaction, trust, commitment (benevolent trust is more important than expert trust)	satisfaction, (trust) (expert trust is more important than benevolent trust)
commercial friendship	possible	impossible
duration of relationship	relatively long	relatively short

in accordance with brand line. On the basis of the findings of this study, the conclusion is as follows:

First, according to the result of this study, the long-term relationship is formed through non-linear forms of variables, which is contrary to existing studies which postulated that the development of relationship is formed by linear relationship of antecedent variables, intervening variables and outcome variables. It seems that the cause of such postulation in previous studies is neglect of developing status and viewpoints and benefits sought in relationships. In other words, the development phase of relationships is different according to the development degree of the relationship and viewpoints and benefits sought of relationship. Thus, to deeply understand relationships, it is required to understand what the benefits sought are and how much the relationship develops.

Second, benefits sought in the relationship are different with viewpoints of the relationship. At character brands, owing to emphasis on transactional aspects, customers seek benefits from pertinent coordination advice and the shop manager's recognition of the customer's taste in dress, body size, name, etc. But shop managers pursue profits from the relationship. Whereas at designer brands, in addition to such basic benefits, customers and shop managers also seek social benefits such as acquiring various information connected with new culture and the basic human need to feel important and understood through conversations, which is a fundamental desire in personal relationships.

Third, it seems that the price of clothing causes the differences in viewpoints and benefits sought. *As the price gets higher, the customer's expectation level of service gets higher and benefits sought gets more interpersonal-oriented.* Like this, because the

attribute of the brand makes definite differences in relationships between customers and shop managers, customer treatment manner should be differentiated according to the line of brand.

Fourth, benefits sought cause differences in relationship involvement level, quality and duration of relationship, and viewpoint about trust. In the case of designer brands, thanks to social benefits sought, both parties (customers and shop managers) are more involved in relationships and their relationship can be developed into commercial friendship with mutual commitment on the basis of satisfaction and trust. Thus, there are more relative variables and complex developing status. In consequence, effect of medium, clothing, is less and duration is relatively longer. In contrast, at character brands, because only individual benefits are sought, the relationship involvement level is low and related variables and developing phases are simple. In consequence, it is impossible to maintain relationships without medium, clothing. And the duration of relationship is relatively short because of customer's property of pursuit of fashion. As a result, at designer brands, benevolent trust is more important and at character brands, expert trust is more important.

Fifth, in the case of clothing, different approach method is required compared to existing relationship marketing. In other words, because clothing is apt to be influenced by fashion trends, repugnance toward clothing, and change of customer's lifestyle or taste, it is hard to apply the concept of existing relationship marketing, which is emphasized retention of existing customers rather than the attraction of new customers. In the case of clothing, acquiring new customers to create an opportunity for maintaining and enhancing relationships is as important as maintaining existing customers.

Finally, although in the same category as business, different approach method is necessary according to the level of goods because the viewpoints and the benefits sought in relationships are differentiated according to the level of goods.

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