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Japanese and non-Japanese understandings of service in Japan

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Key words : Japanese service encounters, social cognition, attentiveness, *omotenashi*

Abstract

Utilizing a Content Analytic approach (Krippendorff, 2013), the current study investigates Japanese and non-Japanese understandings of service in Japan. Based on a comparison of non-Japanese online blog comments and Japanese survey responses, it was found that both groups view Japanese service as being of ‘high quality.’ Only the non-Japanese group, however, evaluated Japanese service as being ‘inflexible.’ In contrast, the Japanese group viewed Japanese service as expressing ‘care and attention’ toward the customer. These findings suggest that certain aspects of Japanese and non-Japanese expectations regarding ‘attentiveness’ (Fukushima, 2015, 2020) in service encounters differ. Specifically, Japanese positively evaluate service provided in anticipation of customer requests. In contrast, non-Japanese value service provided in response to customer requests. Adopting a social cognitive account of relational work (Long, 2016), it is argued that a perceived failure to conform to such expectations resulted in non-Japanese evaluations of Japanese service as ‘inflexible.’

1. Introduction

Following Japan’s much publicized bid for Tokyo to host the 2020 Olympics, the concept of Japanese-style hospitality *omotenashi* has come to represent a high quality of service associated with Japan. A number of recent newspaper articles, however, draw into question the effectiveness of Japanese-style hospitality in intercultural service by claiming non-Japanese have a negative im-

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pression of certain aspects of service in Japan and the concept of *omotenashi* in particular (e.g., Brasor, 2015 ; Nakagawa, 2015 ; Rogers, 2010).

Given the predicted increase in foreign visitors to Japan from the current 15 million to an estimated 30 million by 2030 (Nakagawa, 2015), a trend which is likely to resume after the effects of Covid-19, it is important to clarify the expectations that both Japanese and non-Japanese bring to service encounters as well as the situation-specific behaviors associated with those expectations. To this end, the current research has the following goals : (1) to identify non-Japanese understandings of service encounters in Japan (2) to clarify Japanese understandings regarding service in Japan and (3) to consider the culture-specific expectations underlying any differences, particularly in relation to intercultural encounters.

2. Literature Review

Beginning with Ide's (1989) criticism of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, the importance of interlocutor 'first order' (i.e., lay) impressions to an understanding of social interaction (including politeness) has received much attention within the field of pragmatics (e.g., Eelen, 2001 ; Locher, 2004 ; Locher & Watts, 2005 ; Mills, 2011 ; Watts, 1992). Among researchers working within this relatively new discursive 'second wave' of politeness research (for overview see Grainger, 2011 ; Mills, 2011) the distinction between 'first order' and 'second order,' has typically been understood in terms of a distinction between 'lay' versus 'analyst' interpretations.

Central to this discussion of interlocutor 'understandings' is a consideration of the underlying process of social cognition. According to Long (2016), behaviors which correspond with expectations are typically processed in an unconscious fashion, and are thus a less likely target of conscious perception and a positive or negative affective response. On the other hand, behaviors which go against expectations are a more likely target of conscious attention and an often times a negative affective response. In intercultural encounters, because of the increased probability that interlocutor expectations differ, the risk of negative evaluations arising from contrastive salience is also greater. With regards to service encounters, Márquez-Reiter and Stewart (2008), for example, report that expectations can vary even across localities of the same country and different commercial settings in the same country. There is also evidence that expectations held by individuals can vary depending on whether they are involved in an intra- or inter-cultural service encounter (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010).

Omotenashi : Within the Japanese context, the concept most closely related to ‘hospitality’ is the emic construct of *omotenashi*. *Omotenashi* (an honorific *o* + *motenashi*) is a noun form of the verb *motenasu* which can have a variety of meanings (e.g., to entertain, to attend to) (Shinmura, 2013, p. 2791) and is closely linked to the notion of ‘attentiveness’ (Fukushima, 2015, p. 2020). Nagao and Umemuro (2012), Miyashita (2011) and Terasaka and Inaba (2014), for example, claim that *omotenashi* consists of ‘pleasing the other party,’ ‘standing in the other party’s position,’ ‘demonstrating *kikubari*’ (i.e., ‘attentiveness’) and that it is grounded in Japanese traditional culture such as tea ceremony. This altruistic or selfless dimension of interaction is underscored by Fukushima (2015 : 268-269) who argues that heartfelt sincerity or ‘*omoiyari*’ (empathy) is central to the demonstration of ‘attentiveness’ in Japan.

Empirical studies demonstrate how specific behaviors associated with expectations in service encounters (e.g., ‘warmth’ or ‘personalization’) can vary across cultures (e.g., Nagao & Umemuro, 2012 ; Winsted, 1997, 2000). Winsted (1997), for example, reports that ‘personalization’ was a significant factor in the evaluation of service for both Americans and Japanese, however, ‘formality’ was significant only for Japanese. In contrast, ‘congeniality’ was significant for only for Americans. The current study builds on previous theoretical and empirical research by investigating Japanese and non-Japanese understandings of service encounters in Japan.

3. Non-Japanese understandings of service in Japan

3.1 Methods

Materials : The primary data for the analysis of non-Japanese understandings consisted of (1) an online article written by a long-term western non-Japanese resident of Japan (Rogers, 2010) and (2) comments posted online by members of the non-Japanese community in response to the article. Following the classification outlined in Kádár and Haugh (2013), the dataset can be understood as consisting of ‘lay-observer’ understandings of specific past experiences (i.e., ‘evaluative moments’) or in some cases folk-theoretical explanations of service encounters in Japan (other countries) and/or service in their own countries.

Analyses : The current research utilized a Content Analytic approach (Krippendorff, 2013) for which categories and subcategories were developed out of the data in a bottom-up iterative fashion. Given the data consisted of responses to an online article, the first step of the analysis was to identify the main points presented in the article and to organize them into categories and

subcategories which could be used as a starting point in the analysis of the blog comments. The initial categories were created and tested across 10 groups of 3-4 Japanese native speakers and finalized based on an analysis of a 5% sample of the data. These steps can be summarized as follows.

Step 1

1. Identify the main contentions in the article and organize them into categories and subcategories.
2. Test the categories by having multiple groups apply them to an analysis of the article. Based on this, further modify the categories to eliminate any remaining overlap or ambiguities.

Step 2

1. Further refine and modify the categories by having multiple groups apply them to an analysis of 33% of the data.
2. Apply the resulting categories to an analysis of the remaining data.

3.2 Results

General categories

As shown in Table 1, the content analyses of the 120 comments provided by non-Japanese revealed 371 content units which were categorized as corresponding to one of eight general categories¹⁾. Of the total 371 content units that were identified 138 pertained to the general category of 'Description of service' which represented 37% of data. The next most frequently mentioned category was 'Extent of the problem' (23%), followed by 'Causes/results' (13%), 'Meta-comments' (11%), 'Behavioral/affective response of non-Japanese' (8%), 'Solutions' (5%), 'Behavioral/affective response of Japanese' (2%) and 'Unrelated comments' (2%).

The results of a chi-square analysis of the count totals of each general category indicated a significant difference in the distribution ($\chi^2(7, 371)=306.46, p<.000$) and based on this finding, chi-square analyses to compare each general category were conducted²⁾. The results of these analyses

¹⁾ A content unit was the basic unit applied to the analyses of the comments. It represents a single unit of meaning and is not necessarily defined or limited by a specific grammatical (sentence) or lexical (word) unit.

²⁾ Significance levels were adjusted using Rom's Procedure (Wilcox, 1996, pp. 280-281) resulting in a minimal required significance level of .002.

Table 1 : Frequency of General Categories

General Categories	Count	Frequency
1 Description of the service	138	37%
2 Extent of the problem	84	23%
3 Causes/results	50	13%
4 Meta-comments	40	11%
5 Behavioral/affective response of non-Japanese	28	8%
6 Solutions	19	5%
7 Behavioral/affective response of Japanese	6	2%
8 Unrelated comments	6	2%
	371	

$$(\chi^2(7, 371)=306.46, p<.000)$$

revealed the following. First, the three categories with the lowest counts (Solutions, Behavioral/affective response of Japanese and Unrelated comments) were found to be significantly lower than all other categories and no significant differences between them were uncovered. Next, the highest category (Description of service) was found to be higher than all other categories. Finally categories 2 and 3 (Extent of the problem and causes/results) were higher than category 4 and 6, respectively³⁾.

As categories 1, 2, and 3 are directly related to the main contention of the article, it is not surprising that a significantly greater number of comments corresponded to them. They also represent the clearest example of understandings regarding the specific character of service in Japan. This is in contrast to the other categories which are meta-comments (mostly criticism) of other people's comments, descriptions of affective responses and unrelated comments.

The finding that individuals made meta-comments about the comments of others (category 4) with greater frequency than the bottom three categories is somewhat surprising. This may reflect the nature of online communication. For example, the indirect (and/or delayed) nature of posting online may have facilitated the usage of such comments. Whether this is the actual cause and the degree to which such a tendency differs from face-to-face interaction remain issues for future research.

³⁾ These findings can be summarized as follows : 138 > 84 ($\chi^2(1, 218)=13.14, p<.000$), 84 > 40 ($\chi^2(1, 124)=15.61, p<.000$), 50 > 19 ($\chi^2(1, 69)=13.93, p<.000$), 40 > 6 ($\chi^2(1, 46)=25.13, p<.000$), 28 > 6 ($\chi^2(1, 34)=25.13, p<.000$), 19 > 6 (ns).

Subcategories

The percentages shown in Tables 2 to 5 indicate the percentage of blog contributors who made reference to each subcategory in their comments. Statistical analyses of subcategories were limited to general categories which contained one or more subcategories with 12 comments or more (10% of the data sample). This included the following: Description of service, Extent of the problem, Causes/results and Meta-comments.

Description of Service: The category of Description of Service contained 138 comments divided into the following ten subcategories⁴⁾. Examples of comments representing each subcategory are also shown. The order of posting is shown in parenthesis.

1. Japanese service is inflexible and lacking in personalization: It's true, you're not allowed to deviate from the menu or ask anything of the staff that is outside of their memorized phrases. (#3)
2. Japanese service is of high quality or is better than in other countries: I've had more customer service in Japan in a month than in the rest of the world in a lifetime, free extras, custom variations, help and guidance... (#45)
3. Japanese service lacks warmth: The two things that bother me most are the lack of smiles & genuine comments (#56)
4. Japanese service is of low quality: Yes, I totally agree with the writer, customer service really is terrible. (#15)
5. Japanese service is polite: Service here is polite (#49)
6. Japanese service is friendly/warm: The staff are always friendly and plenty of smiles to go around. (#7)
7. Japanese service is lacking in linguistic accommodation: I didn't expect the staff to speak English, but whenever I asked them to stop using keigo [honorifics] and keep their Japanese a bit simpler: [they] refused. (#102)
8. Service is better in other countries: I prefer the service in the UK, the US, Canada... over Japan. At least in these countries I know I will get what I want (#48)
9. Japanese service is flexible: I never have any problem custom ordering. I find most

⁴⁾ All blog comments shown are verbatim with no correction of grammatical or spelling errors.

small restaurants very flexible with that. (#34)

10. Neutral evaluations : Japanese customer service is what it is, and that's what it's gonna be for a long time. (#23)

As shown in Table 2, a chi-square analysis revealed a significant difference in the distribution of the subcategories ($\chi^2(9, 138)=112.00, p<.000$) and to further investigate the nature of these difference chi-square analyses were run on all ten subcategories⁵⁾. The results of these analyses indicated that the number of people who claimed Japanese service was inflexible (45) was significantly higher than those who argued Japanese service is of low quality (12) ($\chi^2(2, 57)=19.11, p<.000$) as well as all subcategories mentioned less⁶⁾. The second most frequent subcategory (service is of high quality), mentioned by 25 respondents, was found to be significantly higher than subcategories mentioned by 7 respondents (service is polite and service is friendly/warm) ($\chi^2(2, 32)=10.13, p<.0015$) or less⁷⁾. Finally, the third subcategory (service lacks warmth), mentioned by 21 respondents, was found to be significantly higher than the lowest subcategory which was mentioned by 3 respondents (neutral evaluations) ($\chi^2(2, 23)=13.50, p<.000$).

These findings indicate that of the ten subcategories the top three were mentioned significantly more than the remaining six. That is, a significantly greater proportion of the non-Japanese sam-

Table 2 : Subcategories (Description of Service)

<i>Description of Service</i>	<i>Bloggers who mentioned</i>	<i>% out of total (120)</i>
1 service is inflexible	45	38%
2 service is of high quality	25	21%
3 service lacks warmth, sincerity	21	18%
4 service is low quality	12	10%
5 service is polite	7	6%
6 service is friendly, warm	7	6%
7 lack of ling. accommodation	6	5%
8 service better in other countries	6	5%
9 service is flexible	6	5%
10 neutral evaluations	3	3%
	138	

($\chi^2(9, 138)=112.00, p<.000$)

⁵⁾ Significance levels were adjusted according to Rom's Procedure as explained above.

⁶⁾ 45 vs. 7 ($\chi^2(1, 52)=27.78, p<.000$), 45 vs. 6 ($\chi^2(1, 51)=29.82, p<.000$), 45 vs. 3 ($\chi^2(1, 48)=36.75, p<.000$).

⁷⁾ 25 vs. 6 ($\chi^2(1, 31)=11.65, p<.001$), 25 vs. 3 ($\chi^2(1, 28)=17.29, p<.000$).

pled perceived Japanese service as ‘inflexible,’ ‘lacking warmth’ and yet at the same time being of ‘consistent’ and/or ‘high quality’ compared to the other characteristics that were identified. Although seemingly contradictory in nature, the findings suggest that non-Japanese evaluations of Japanese service differ along the ‘sociability’ and ‘efficiency’ dimensions. Specifically, efficiency in terms of ‘consistent quality’ was highly recognized whereas the sociability dimension of ‘warmth’ was criticized.

Extent of the Problem : There were 84 comments in the general category of Extent of the Problem which pertained to one of the following six subcategories.

1. Examples of specific establishments with bad service : Once a waiter dumped half a bowl of soup in my lap. I got a quiet sorry, a new bowl of soup which arrived 10 minutes later, and I had to ask for a damn towel to clean my soaked jeans. Place : The Basamichi chain in Saitama. (#65)
2. Examples of specific establishments with good service : Indian, Thailand, and sometimes Chinese restaurants have excellent service. Especially, Thailand restaurants have great service. (#15)
3. Claims that poor service is limited specific types of establishments (e.g., fast-food and chain restaurants) : Stop going to chain restaurants with automated kitchen and bar service, and you will be surprised how many of these problems disappear. (#6)
4. Service can’t be generalized and varies from place to place : Saizeriya is a chain and completely cookie-cutter yet my girlfriend has been able to get them to replace tomatoes on top of one of the pastas with nori [dried seaweed] in multiple locations. I realize in a lot of places they aren’t so flexible, I think it’s just hit or miss. (#60)
5. The problem of poor service in Japan is wide spread : Inefficiency is the real nature of pretty much any process in Japan where something that takes 20 mins in the US or Europe, takes 2 hrs in Japan. Largely due to the intransigent and inflexible procedures and policies that nearly everything here has. (#8)
6. Japanese service is a problem only for long-term foreign residents : Once you get use to the so-called “standardized” service in Japan, the part of you wants something extra. That’s just human nature. (#138)

Table 3 : Subcategories (Extent of problem)

<i>Extent of Problem</i>	<i>Bloggers who mentioned</i>	<i>% out of total (120)</i>
1 bad examples	26	22%
2 good examples	24	20%
3 limited problem	23	19%
4 depends on place	6	5%
5 wide spread	3	3%
6 long term residents only	2	2%
	84	

$$(\chi^2(5, 84)=46.71, p<.000)$$

To test for significant differences in the distribution of these subcategories a chi-square analysis was carried out. As shown in Table 3, the results revealed a significant difference ($\chi^2(5, 84)=46.71, p<.000$) and so, to further investigate this difference, chi-square tests of the subcategories were also run⁸⁾. The results of these comparisons revealed that the number of respondents who mentioned the top three subcategories (bad examples, good examples and claims that poor service is limited to fast-food restaurants) was significantly greater than the number for subcategories with fewer than 6 mentions (depends on place, wide spread, long term residents only)⁹⁾. This suggests that, although non-Japanese view Japanese service as ‘inflexible’ and ‘lacking in warmth,’ opinions regarding the extent of the nature of such problems are mixed. Interestingly, of the three subcategories which demonstrated a significantly higher number of comments, two reject the idea that poor service is widespread in Japan. That is, the results provide evidence that non-Japanese perceptions of service in Japan are slightly more positive in nature than has been suggested by recent critics (e.g., Brasor, 2015 ; Nakagawa, 2015 ; Rogers, 2010).

Causes and Results : There were a total of 50 comments, distributed across six subcategories, which made reference to the potential causes and results of service being poor in Japan.

1. There is a logical (e.g., economic) reason for the nature of Japanese service : These places [McDonalds] operate under small margins so it’s understandable for the folks that work there to pretty much have a manual of do’s and don’ts. (#103)
2. The problem is how/who you ask : when you ask something special to a person which

⁸⁾ Significance levels determined using Rom’s Procedure as explained above.

⁹⁾ 26 vs. 6 ($\chi^2(32, 1)=12.50, p<.000$) ; 24 vs. 6 ($\chi^2(30, 1)=10.80, p<.001$) ; 23 vs. 6 ($\chi^2(29, 1)=9.97, p<.002$).

does have the power to decide by himself, they will go to any lengths to fulfil your wish.

(#72)

3. There is no logical (e.g., economic) reason for the nature of Japanese service : Coke and all fast food restaurants is so cheap, but the prices are so high that they put the machines out so that you can refill them to your hearts content in the States. And if you order to go the difference between a small medium and large is like \$.10? presumably to pay for the larger cups¹⁰⁾.

(#212)

4. Japanese service is the result of cultural values : About the apologizing thing, that's what Japanese expect. When Japanese complain about bad service, they don't want compensation. They want an apology. Big cultural difference. (#41)

5. Japanese service results in loss of customers and profit : Japanese customers often have a very low tolerance for bad service, and don't hesitate to make their needs known. Companies and shops with notoriously bad service don't stay in business long here. (#4)

6. Japanese businesses value profit over customers : I think a relevant point is that Japanese business is just plain stingy, its the way the system is. They don't give anything to anyone as a gesture of service. (#36)

As shown in Table 4, a chi-square analysis revealed a significant difference in the distribution of subcategories ($\chi^2(5, 50)=22.00, p<.001$) and, based on this result, chi-square analyses were carried out to compare each of the subcategories¹¹⁾. The results of these analyses indicated that the

Table 4 : Subcategories (Causes and Results)

<i>Causes and Results of service</i>	<i>Bloggers who mentioned</i>	<i>% out of total (120)</i>
1 there is a logical reason (cause)	19	16%
2 the problem is how you ask (cause)	11	9%
3 there is no logical reason (cause)	8	7%
4 cultural values (cause)	6	5%
5 customers/business lost (results)	3	3%
6 value profit over people (cause)	3	3%
	50	

($\chi^2(5, 50)=22.00, p<.001$)

¹⁰⁾ A point made regarding the Japanese restaurants that fill a glass only halfway to the top if you request a drink without ice.

¹¹⁾ Significance levels were adjusted according to Rom's Procedure.

only significant difference was between the first subcategory which consisted of claims that there is a logical reason for the nature of service in Japan (mentioned by 19 people), and the last two subcategories which contained claims that (1) companies lose business (i.e., customers) as a result of poor service and (2) that the problems result from companies valuing profit over people (3 mentions each) ($\chi^2(1, 22)=11.64, p<.000$).

In other words, as with the results shown in Table 3, the findings indicate a generally positive attitude towards Japanese service on the part of non-Japanese. Specifically, a significantly greater number of respondents provided logical reasons and explanations for the seemingly poor nature of Japanese service compared to those who discussed negative effects (loss of profit) and/or negative causes (e.g., greed) of such service.

Meta-comments : The category of meta-comments consisted of 40 comments spread across the following 3 subcategories.

1. Claims that criticizing Japanese service is culturally insensitive : ...looking at Japanese culture through your own country's perspective is always a foolish. This isn't America. (#66)
2. Speculation about what Japanese think : I think it's very difficult to maintain both a highly efficient and consistency system while allowing for straying from the system. And I think most Japanese people like it just the way it is. (#24)
3. Overtly stated (dis)agreement with previous comments : Gotta agree with you Burakuminde (#87)

As shown in Table 5, a chi-square analysis of the distribution of these subcategories revealed a

Table 5 : Subcategories (Meta-comments)

<i>Meta-comments</i>	<i>Bloggers who mentioned</i>	<i>% out of total (120)</i>
1 criticizing Japan is culturally insensitive	34	28%
2 what Japanese think	3	3%
3 previous comments	3	3%
	40	

($\chi^2(2, 40)=48.05, p<.000$)

significant difference such that the most frequently mentioned subcategory (criticizing Japan is culturally insensitive) was significantly greater than the other two subcategories ($\chi^2(2, 40)=48.05, p<.000$). This finding is consistent with the above analyses in that it suggests non-Japanese, in addition to having a sympathetic view of the reasons behind service in Japan, look down on those who overtly criticize Japanese service or culture.

4. Japanese understandings of service in Japan

The findings of the analysis of online comments indicate that although non-Japanese negatively evaluate Japanese service as being ‘inflexible’ and ‘lacking in warmth,’ these evaluations were moderated by a belief that the problem is limited to specific industries within the service sector (e.g., fast food restaurants). They also appear to believe that there is a logical reason for the nature of Japanese service and, possibly because of this, they are critical of non-Japanese who express negative evaluations of Japanese service and Japanese culture. Based on these findings, a survey was developed to address the following questions.

1. How do Japanese perceive service in Japan? (particularly in relation to the question of ‘flexibility,’ ‘warmth’ and ‘quality’)
2. How do Japanese perceive *omotenashi*? (particularly in relation to intra- versus inter-cultural service encounters and to the showing ‘attention’ versus the more formal dimensions of presentation style)

4.1 Methods

To investigate the above research questions, the following eight items were created for a survey that was carried out on 125 Japanese undergraduates (42 male, 83 female) who participated as part of a course on intercultural communication. Participants consisted of 113 second year, 9 third year and 3 fourth year students with an average age of 19 ($SD=.77$).

The items were of two types : four regarding service in Japan and four regarding the culture specific emic construct of *omotenashi*.

Survey items regarding service in Japan

1. Japanese service is of high quality.
2. Japanese service lacks warmth.

3. Japanese service is inflexible.
4. If I don't like the service, I will complain.

Survey items regarding *omotenashi*

5. *Omotenashi* is essential to good service.
6. *Omotenashi* is essential to intercultural service encounters.
7. *Omotenashi* means showing care and attention.
8. *Omotenashi* means beautiful presentation style.

To respond to each item, participants had to choose one of the following four possible statements.

Response options

1. Strongly agree
2. Somewhat agree
3. Somewhat disagree
4. Strongly disagree

Because research has shown that there is a tendency for Japanese to select a neutral response (e.g., Chen et al., 1995 ; Shiomi & Loo, 1999 ; Stening & Everett, 1984 ; Zax & Takahashi, 1967), following previous research, the current study utilized items which were limited to four possible choices and contained no central or 'neutral' response option.

4.2 Results

ANOVA analyses were run on the combined average score of responses to the items regarding Japanese service (Items 1~4) with item type and participant gender as independent variables (Figure 1). Results indicated a significant main effect of item type ($F(3, 27.12)=39.94, p<.000$) and follow-up post hoc analyses revealed that the mean evaluation of Item 1 ('Japanese service is of high quality') ($M=3.34, SD=.88$) was significantly higher than Item 2 ('Japanese service lacks warmth') ($M=3.06, SD=.85$) ($p<.007$), Item 3 ('Japanese service is inflexible') ($M=2.33, SD=.83$) ($p<.000$) and Item 4 ('If I don't like the service, I will complain') ($M=2.26, SD=.78$) ($p<.000$).

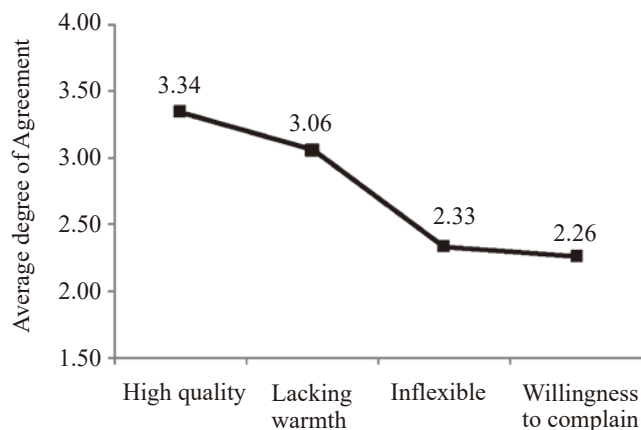


Figure 1. Evaluations of Japanese Service

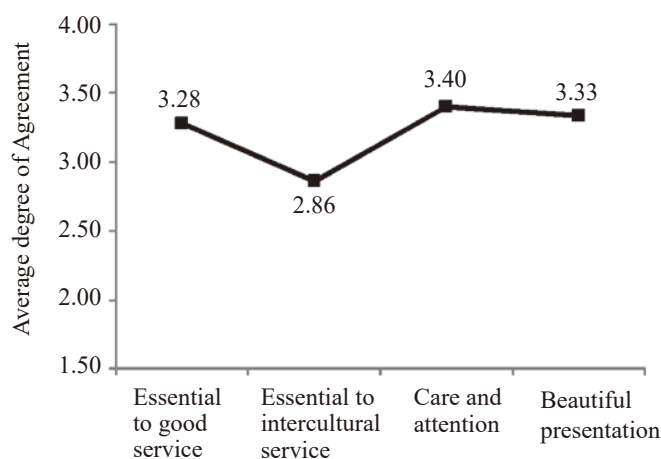


Figure 2. Evaluations of *Omotenashi*

ANOVA analysis of the responses to the four questions regarding participant impressions of *omotenashi* (Items 5~8) revealed a significant main effect of item type ($F(3, 6.09) = 10.58, p < .000$) (Figure 2). Follow-up post hoc analyses further revealed that participant evaluations of Item 6 ('*Omotenashi* is essential to intercultural service encounters') ($M = 2.86, SD = .73$) was significantly lower than the remaining three items: Item 7 ('*Omotenashi* means showing care and attention') ($M = 3.4, SD = .83$) ($p < .000$); Item 8 ('*Omotenashi* means beautiful presentation') ($M = 3.33, SD = .76$) ($p < .000$); and Item 5 ('*Omotenashi* is essential to good service') ($M = 3.28, SD = .75$) ($p < .000$). No significant differences among the other items were revealed.

A significant main effect of participant gender ($F(1, 7.87) = 13.67, p < .000$) was also uncov-

ered such that the evaluations of all items was higher for the female compared to the male respondents. Follow-up *t*-test further revealed this difference to be significant for two of the four items investigated: Item 7 ('*Omotenashi* means showing care and attention') ($M=3.54$, $SD=.70$ vs $M=3.12$, $SD=.99$) ($t=-2.75$, $df=123$, $p<.007$) and Item 8 ('*Omotenashi* means beautiful presentation') ($M=3.45$, $SD=.61$ vs $M=3.12$, $SD=.98$) ($t=-2.31$, $df=123$, $p<.023$).

5. Discussion

Results of the analysis of the online blog comments indicated that although non-Japanese have a negative perception of service in Japan as being 'inflexible' and 'lacking in warmth,' these evaluations were balanced by the belief Japanese service is of 'consistent' and 'high quality' and that 'poor' service in Japan is justified by specific reasons and limited to specific service sectors (e.g., fast food and chain restaurants).

Interestingly, Japanese simultaneously evaluated Japanese service as being both of 'high quality' and 'lacking in warmth.' That is, evaluations of 'quality' appear to not be dependent on evaluations of 'warmth' in perceptions of Japanese service, a result which is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Winsted 1997).

The most significant difference regarding Japanese and non-Japanese perceptions, however, was in regard to evaluations of 'inflexibility.' The 'inflexibility' of Japanese service was the most frequent topic of mention in non-Japanese blog comments (e.g., an inability to get a sandwich without mayonnaise). In contrast, however, Japanese did not view Japanese service as inherently 'inflexible'. In contrast Japanese agreement with the statement 'If I don't like the service, I will complain' was between 'somewhat agree' and 'somewhat disagree' and significantly lower than the two highest items investigated. This suggests that Japanese are not overly concerned with making individual requests (even when dissatisfied with the service they receive). This finding, combined with the lack of evidence that Japanese see Japanese service as 'inflexible' suggests little emphasis is placed on making individual requests and there is little expectation that such requests should be accommodated by service providers.

Drawing on Nagao and Umemuro (2012) and Miyashita (2011), Terasaka and Inaba (2014 : 90) state that *omotenashi* includes the following: one pleases the other party; one stands in the other party's position; one demonstrates *kikubari* ('attentiveness') matching the other party's purpose, situation and needs. 'Standing in the position of another' (*aite no mi ni naru*) is how Lebra (1993 : 72) defines empathy. Attentiveness, demonstrated to fulfill specific duties,

specifically in service encounters, has been termed ‘business-oriented attentiveness’ (Fukushima, 2015, 2020). The current findings indicate that Japanese agree with the depiction of hospitality (i.e., *omotenashi*) as consisting of ‘showing care and attention’, an item for which agreement was the highest of the 4 items investigated.

This ‘preempting’ of the needs of guests as an expression of ideal service stands in stark contrast to the non-Japanese seeming desire for service that responds to explicitly expressed individual requests. Moreover, this difference in expectations regarding service likely underlies the difference in Japanese and non-Japanese evaluations regarding the ‘inflexibility’ of Japanese service uncovered in the current study. Because Japanese view service provided without asking as expressing ‘care’ and ‘attention’ and non-Japanese prefer service provided in response to specific requests, what the non-Japanese perceived as a lack of accommodation (i.e., ‘inflexibility’), may be viewed as thoughtful and caring *omotenashi*-style hospitality by the Japanese.

6. Summary and conclusions

Although the current study offers insight into Japanese and non-Japanese understandings of service encounters in Japan and potential areas of misunderstanding, certain limitations should be considered. Given the limited nature of the data set we cannot conclude that the findings represent general trends with regards to Japanese or non-Japanese understandings of service in Japan. Because blog comments were posted in response to an online article, the scope of the content of those comments was limited primarily to specific claims made by the author of the article. As a result, while the findings provide a reasonably accurate representation of non-Japanese attitudes regarding the specific points raised in the article, we can draw no conclusions regarding the possible range of content units (i.e., understandings) which go beyond the content of the article. Similarly, because the survey of undergraduate students investigated items which were primarily based the findings from the blog analyses the same questions regarding the generalizability of the findings must be raised.

Taken as a whole, then, as noted above, the current research should be viewed as an exploratory study the findings of which, although not necessarily generalizable to all Japanese service contexts, provide certain insight into Japanese and non-Japanese perceptions of service in modern day Japan. In this sense, they hopefully capture some of the concerns and cultural impressions (i.e., understandings) that exist among Japanese and those non-Japanese with experiential knowledge of Japanese culture and thus offer a springboard for future research in this area.

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