

**Revisiting the global expansion strategy of fast-food brand: Modelling of satisfaction antecedents in marketing management**

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**Abstract**

This study explores consumers' perceptions of the fast-food business strategies of McDonald's in a foreign market. Under the setting of Japan as a foreign market, a qualitative method is applied in the study, with 24 interviews with Japanese people based on the following key themes: local menu variations, local management and other employment opportunities, environmental friendliness, and corporate citizenship.

It is found that Japanese consumers evaluate most the global brand value as an American icon in the Japanese market, rather than appreciating the effort in adapting to the local market. While it has typically been discussed that localisation is one of the key elements for business success, the outcome of this study suggests that research focusing on the antecedents realising customer satisfaction and loyal behaviour needs to have more attention, and that reconceptualising

knowledge is important, especially since contradictory evidence appears as the global market expands.

**Keywords:** fast food, McDonald's, Japan, localisation, western brand, accessibility, environmental friendliness, corporate citizenship, re-conceptualisation

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## **1 Introduction**

### *1.1 Background of this study*

Fast-food business is one of the expanding sectors of industry, and McDonald's must be one of the most prosperous corporations in the world, whose icon can be found on every corner of the big towns on the planet (Sawant et al., 2020). Japan is one of the countries that McDonald's has established itself in. The leaders of McDonald's are confident that accessibility and a well-planned distribution network in Japan are their most valuable resources for the brand's value in terms of competing with other national and international fast-food restaurants in the local market of Japan (Mujtaba and Patel, 2007).

Regardless of the culture or the location in the country, as Grant (2010) discussed, operational customer brand loyalty was established as a result of effective business strategies,

including human resource management (Mujtaba and Patel, 2007). Operations must consider domestic human resource management execution, since in a country like Japan, there is a set of business practices and laws that the McDonald's organisation has to consider. McDonald's has emphasised local management, and this has helped the organisation to gain acceptance into the country by the Japanese people (Mujtaba and Patel, 2007).

### *1.2 Problem statement*

The organisation considered the cultural, social, political, technological and economic situations of the country (Sawant et al., 2020). The key to McDonald's' success stems from the corporate intonation of 'think global, act local', which applies to the Japanese market since the locals are the ones that make up a significant percentage of customers who consume its products (Mujtaba and Patel, 2007). This mantra has enabled the corporation to achieve its much-needed financial success in Japan in the places that it has opened fast-food restaurants.

Though the company has been expanding the business in the Japanese market since it opened its first McDonald's outlet in 1971, it underwent some problems in 2014 that dented the company's operations in the country (Chan, 2014). All these issues were about a lack of traceability and transparency of the food materials, causing damage to the trust of the brand and a decline in business (Ling and Wahab, 2020). Contrary to expectations and other markets' experiences, Japanese McDonald's recovered relatively quickly from the scar of these scandals, and the brand seems to have retained its value. It has also been successful in maintaining loyal customers in Japan thanks to its swift restructuring of the management system to rectify the issues (Erh Ku et al., 2018). However, the key factors of how and why McDonald's was able to recover trust in Japan have not been explored.

### *1.3 Rationale and significance of the research*

This study will enable the organisation to gain in-depth knowledge about how it can leverage its customer and brand loyalty, which will see it successfully increase the number of outlets it has in Japan. So far, researchers have discussed which attributes of McDonald's attract customers from an international marketing perspective (e.g. Prasad and Aryasri, 2011; Mathur, 2017), the brand impact and brand strategies in a new market (e.g. Botschen and Wegerer, 2017; Gupta et al., 2020), and the effectiveness of franchising as a market entry strategy in a general context (e.g. Ghantous and Das, 2018; Rosado-Serrano, 2019). As noted, even though a good accumulation of research has contributed to this field of study, a holistic approach with detailed perceptions from consumers exploring which factors have been the basis for international business success in new markets has been lacking; this could provide good opportunities for global fast-food restaurants to build effective business strategies when they seek new markets and new customers.

This research, therefore, aims to explore which factors have supported McDonald's' business expansion in Japan and to develop a conceptual map for further investigation of how to build robust relationships with customers in a global market. This study will be significant for the company because it will give McDonald's a platform and a plan that it could also use in other global markets. The outcome of this study will also provide clear guidelines for how to strategize and enable global expansion through customer and brand loyalty. This study aims to investigate McDonald's' strategy in a foreign market, Japan, from the perspective of consumers' perceptions, and to develop a map of trajectories that result in consumer support and loyalty.

## **2 Literature review**

### *2.1 McDonald's' overall strategy of global expansion*

#### *2.1.1 Brand impact in the global market*

Aitalieva and Panasyuk (2016) pointed out that before it ventured into the global market, McDonald's first built a reputation for itself in the USA, where its brand image grew substantially. The brand image of the company created loyalty among its customers. The customers in the overseas markets, therefore, abandoned their local fast-food restaurants in favour of McDonald's outlets. More people have been reported to be more aware of Western brands and want to be associated with them (Srivastava, 2017). This explains why there is always excitement when a McDonald's store opens up in Asia, as people always want to embrace Western mannerisms, cultures and ways of life.

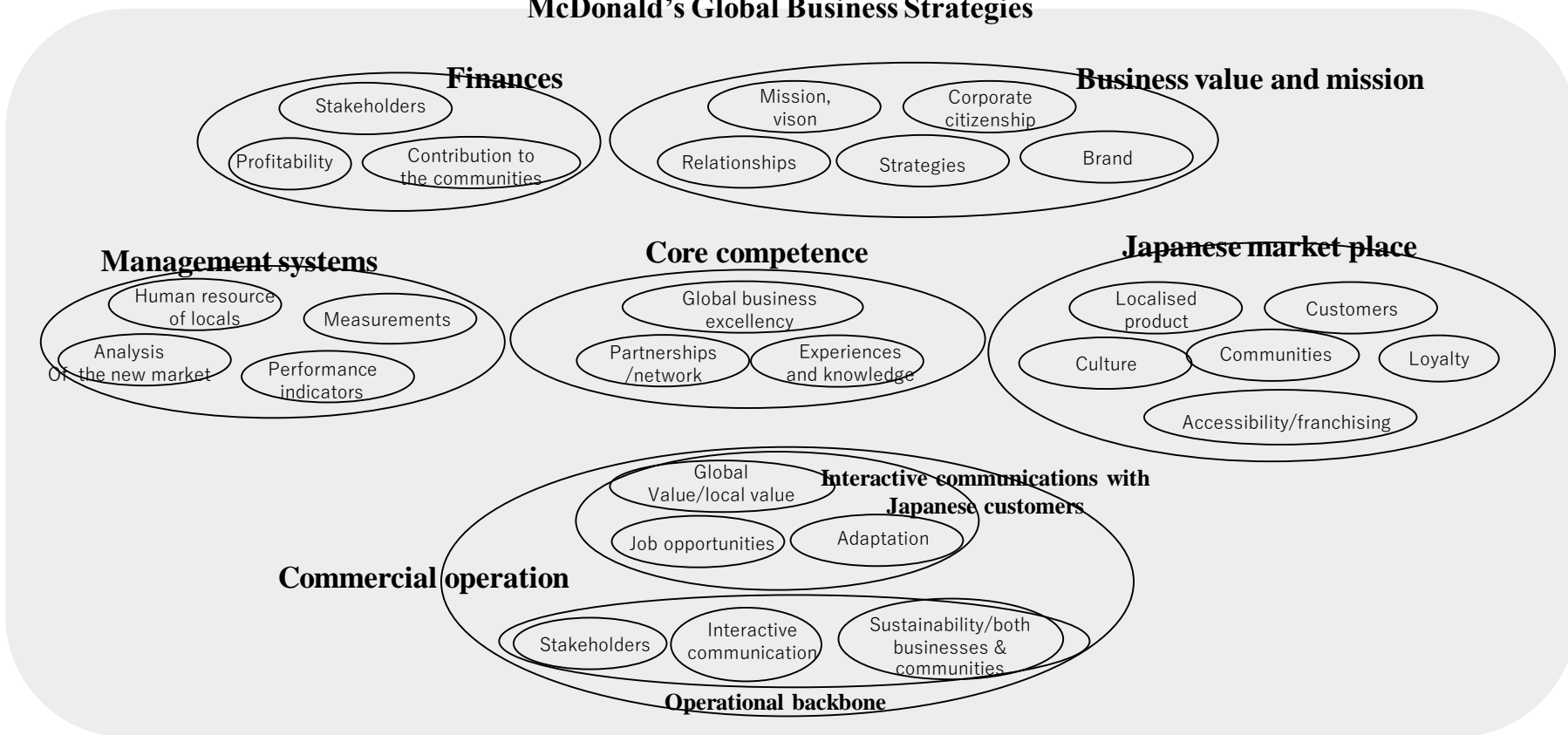
Branding has been reported to play a vital role in the success of organisations, providing high profit margins if managed well (Harun et al., 2010). The long-term objective of McDonald's has been to build a global brand, since this strategy is essential for creating a viable competitive advantage, as discussed by Harun et al. (2010). McDonald's is a Western company; it is relatively easy for it to break into the Japanese market since Western companies have the capability and feasibility of forming a trusted brand name among local Japanese consumers (Harun et al., 2010).

#### *2.1.2 Adaptation to the local market*

McDonald's' strategy of global expansion involves several strategies that have been proven to be effective by a number of researchers with experience working with organisations that would like to infiltrate the local market of a foreign country. McDonald's is an international organisation, and for it to be able to achieve higher success levels, a collaborative business has been established in the Japanese market. Management teams of local Japanese experts work as franchisees and have

implemented local menu variations, created employment opportunities and carried out environmentally friendly activities with corporate citizenship, all of which have been key factors sustaining McDonald's' business in Japan. Figure 1 presents an image of McDonald's' global business strategy as a collaborative bundle of the key elements required to sustain the business in Japan.

## McDonald's Global Business Strategies



**Figure 1** An image of McDonald's' global business strategy in Japan (inspired by Laasch, 2018, and arranged by the authors)

As demonstrated in Figure 1, McDonald's has been penetrating the Japanese market, enhancing active collaborations with stakeholders' resources and strategies; this can be termed a holistic business organisation. When McDonald's was starting the operation, it positioned its core competence and business values at the centre of the business; these have been the driving force behind and the backbone of the company's global expansion.

## *2.2 Key themes of McDonald's' strategies in Japan*

### *2.2.1 Accessibility to the restaurants*

McDonald's has long been recounted to be strategic in the way that it enters foreign markets. The company's international market entry strategy aims to maintain the key features that have led to the development and growth of its brand image with its distribution network, leading to high levels of customer loyalty (Crawford, 2015; Dittfurth et al., 2019). Franchising is meant to provide technical expertise, specialised sales and service strategies, support, and even initial funding, as articulated by Maruyama and Yamashita (2010), and McDonald's is often noted to have adapted this strategy to its Japanese market entry and global expansion strategy.

The franchising measures that were deemed essential by McDonald's in its bid to establish a loyal customer and brand base in Japan included key performance indicators (KPIs) that would show how the organisation was growing in Japan (Lee et al., 2015). The net promoter score was seen as an excellent measurement that could be utilised to quantify the number of referrals that were directed to McDonald's, whereby the same location growth KPI could be used to show if the franchise would be a healthy one (Gillis and Castrogiovanni, 2012; Lee et al., 2015). As Rauch et al. (2020) suggested, the service sector has been under constant pressure to optimise both internal management and the services extending to the customer; enabling a sustainable business network to reach customers via efficient and productive operational processes is critical. Bearing in mind



the suggestions presented by Ludvigsson-Wallette and Lawrence (2020), a franchising method should be useful for McDonald's to achieve this goal.

### *2.2.2 Localisation: Local menu variations*

Lu and Chi (2018) discussed how a unique and localised menu is one of the key factors that makes the brand successful. Good examples of a localised menu are the Teriyaki McBurger and the Bai Shrimp Filet-O, which were responding to Japanese food culture. These strategies are examples of adaptation to the food culture of the local market (Panwar and Patra, 2017).

According to Ritzer and Miles (2019), the consumption of food from McDonald's increased rapidly since its inception because Japan was a country with households that were changing from having three generations to having only two generations. This means that the role usually played by the homemakers, of foremost home cooks, was changing in a rapid manner; this also increased the habit of eating out or getting takeaway meals, meaning that people's inclinations towards food were also changing. McDonald's considered all these cultural and societal factors, as the local market was its target to beat (Chan, 2014).

### *2.2.3 Local management and employment opportunities*

The approach of 'thinking global and acting local' has been successful in Japan, and it was responsible for making McDonald's a great hit in the local market (Royle and Urano, 2012). McDonald's used local management to obtain high responsiveness from the local Japanese market, and it worked in its favour. The key to Japanese market success for McDonald's was the utilisation of local management staff. With so many chains of restaurants in Japan, McDonald's decided that even though there were significant cost savings to be had by standardising its services, if it wanted to have the capability of adapting to the Japanese environment, it needed to secure the trust of the local market by employing a large proportion of Japanese locals (Li and Berger, 2018).

McDonald's would have been naïve to take no notice of the numerous aspects of the local Japanese market and the factors that would have affected how its products performed in that market (Royle and Urano, 2012). Even though McDonald's' idea was to promote its global image, Kuriyama (2017) discussed that it was obliged to consider and focus on the needs of the local Japanese communities that it was interested in selling its services and products to.

The corporation was hugely dedicated to staffing locally and promoting its business from within the country (Royle and Urano, 2012). The globalisation strategy that was put into effect by McDonald's of emphasising local management and other employment opportunities was a clear illustration of how it valued Japanese input, and this was a way in which it 'acted local'. The organisation realised that its brand image was growing progressively, and more local customers loved its products as well as its service delivery due to the act of installing people who knew the local customer base very well.

#### *2.2.4 Environmental friendliness*

As reported by McDonald's Holdings (2019), in 2018, the company became the first global organisation to address the issue of global climate change when it set a science-based objective aiming to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. McDonald's decided to work with relational actors of its supply chain network and to implement innovative actions, such as renewable energy use and other eco-friendly behaviour, to increase its environmentally positive impact (McDonald's Holdings, 2019).

The organisation invested in energy-efficient kitchen equipment, restaurant recycling and sustainable packaging, which encouraged and inspired a culture of sustainable agricultural practices (Kasim and Ismail, 2012). In co-operation with its numerous producers, suppliers and

franchisees, McDonald's gave precedence to action on its carbon footprint, focusing on practices such as packaging and waste, restaurant energy usage, and sourcing (Kasim and Ismail, 2012).

The implementation of a customer-focused supply chain strategy has been called a key factor for achieving a better business performance, realising better sales, better profitability and a better market share, which is the ultimate goal for businesses (Madhani, 2020). Concurrently, McDonald's integrated the initial guidance of its Accountability Framework into its supply chain management to develop environmentally friendly and ethical business behaviour as good practices (McDonald's Holdings, 2019).

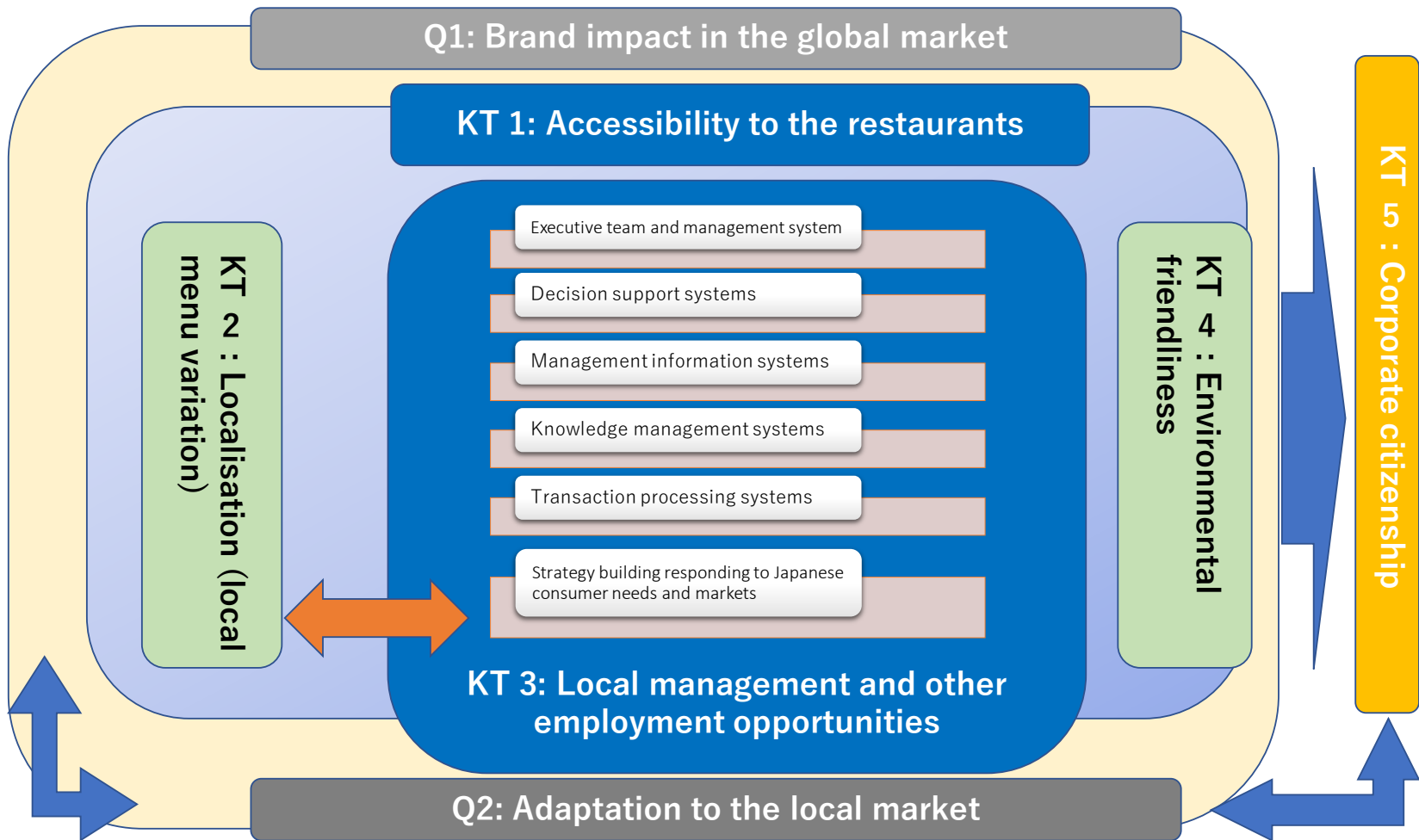
#### *2.2.5 Corporate citizenship*

The company provided numerous financial donations to local societies, and this encouraged Japanese customers to consume from McDonald's outlets since the strategy was a way for the company to promote its name to locals (Takano, 2013). In a recent turn of events, in 2017, McDonald's launched 'McHappy Day', as explained by McDonald's Holdings (2017); McDonald's contributed 50 yen for each Happy Meal sold, and a Twitter campaign using the hashtag '#messages' was carried out to raise funds (McDonald's Holdings, 2019). The charity money that was contributed was used to improve children's wellbeing.

The sponsorship deals that McDonald's was involved with in Japan were very influential in capturing a vast customer base. National sports are known to be enticing to many people, including numerous Japanese locals, who were the target market of McDonald's, as described by Smart (2018). The big picture that McDonald's came to realise was that by utilising its resources to sponsor sporting activities in the country, it had a huge opportunity to market its products; this is a commercialisation strategy that many commercial outlets could benefit from.

### *2.3 Key takeaways from the literature review*

Based on the discussion in this section, Figure 2 shows the key takeaways that function as research questions for this study.



**Figure 2** An analytical model with key takeaways

In the next sections, primary data is used to answer these research questions based on a questionnaire that was designed for the interviewees.

### **3 Research methodology**

#### *3.1 Research method and data collection*

A qualitative method was applied to this study since the research focuses on descriptive data that can provide confirmation and suggestion of how to make the objective of the study possible, as detailed by Tetnowski (2015). Interviews were conducted with 24 participants and were based on a semi-structured interview questionnaire. This method allowed the authors to reveal hidden thoughts, emotions and behaviours from the interviewees. This method also enabled the researchers to achieve the research aims and objectives, which were reflected in the semi-structured interview questionnaire, which itself contained key takeaways from the research and encouraged the interviewees to express their opinions and feelings to deliver rich primary data to be analysed (Schultze and Avital, 2011). As the aim of the study is to investigate and evaluate the McDonald's strategy and global expansion through customer and brand loyalty in Japan, the best-placed research method was a qualitative method that allowed the exploration of consumers' perceptions and behaviours based on the obtained data.

The interviewees were presented with a semi-structured questionnaire, and the interviewers had the freedom to change the flexibility levels and the lack of structure, as described by Edwards and Holland (2013). The research method was characterised by an interactional dialogue exchange between the contributors and the interviewers, and a topic-centred and thematic approach with fluid organisation was utilised. A perception concerning data and information was

contextual and situated, and it required the authors to guarantee that the related circumstances were brought into focus to produce the situated knowledge (Edwards and Holland, 2013). Understandings and meanings were generated in the interactions, and it commendably signified the co-production that involved the construction or reconstruction of the knowledge (Edwards and Holland, 2013). A sense of trust and rapport was first created with the participants, which brought about comfort about the researching into Japanese consumers' behaviour and perspectives (Gubrium et al., 2012).

### *3.2 Participants*

As the research aims to reveal and grasp participants' perceptions of McDonald's' business strategies in Japan, it was critical to create a relevant participant group made up of McDonald's customers. To select suitable participants, the authors employed convenience and snowball sampling techniques (Edmonds, 2019). This was applied to the initial candidates, and they were then asked to introduce their acquaintances if they were available and happy to contribute, based on snowball sampling. To cover the populational range by using both sexes and a variety of age bands, an equal number of men and women were recruited, and participants came from a balanced number of age ranges, as is shown as a Table 1.

ID	Sex	Age
1	Male	36
2	Male	38
3	Male	41
4	Male	49
5	Male	33
6	Male	39
7	Male	35
8	Male	40
9	Male	41
10	Male	32
11	Male	20
12	Male	23

13	Female	26
14	Female	24
15	Female	25
16	Female	30
17	Female	42
18	Female	36
19	Female	21
20	Female	24
21	Female	26
22	Female	25
23	Female	24
24	Female	25

**Table 1** A list of the participants

### *3.3 Data analysis*

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded. The coding process enabled the authors to identify any patterns and themes in the interviewees' statements (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). Text-mining software, NVivo 12, was used to develop codes and examine the patterns and relationships in the words, enabling the authors to analyse the interviewees' profound perceptions and hidden thoughts and ideas. A list of generated codes was categorised, and the identified key themes and links between the codes were critically analysed within the context of the literature. From this process, the findings, with their key themes and elements, were summarised as a conceptual framework, with actionable recommendations for business practitioners and researchers.

## **4 Findings and analysis**

### *4.1 Overall expansion strategy*

The establishment of business in Japan by McDonald's drew attitudinal preferences over time due to some blunders in the marketing field as well as in several strategies that it did not consider at



first. Based on the key takeaways from the literature review, this section will discuss and evaluate the data revealing interviewees' perceptions of the key strategies that McDonald's will have to put into place for it to acquire and maintain a customer base in Japan.

***Key Takeaways 1: Accessibility to the restaurants***

According to most of the participants, franchising was a well-thought-out way to boost McDonald's' brand name. The majority of the participants appreciated the sales network of the restaurants:

***P1: It is good to find a restaurant wherever we go.***

***P5: McDonald's' logo and sign are a global language; even in rural areas, Mac [Japanese consumers called McDonald's 'Mac' or 'Macdo'] is everywhere.***

***P18: It is so easy for us to find Mac wherever we go.***

The organisation should consider the sentiments that were obtained from the participants who responded to the interview questions. Franchising was found to be influential in boosting the customer and brand loyalty of McDonald's in Japan. As suggested by Salar and Salar (2014), franchising in Japan would help to improve the speed of growth of the McDonald's customer base, since it was found to be the most influential way of ensuring that the organisation captured a market leadership position before competitors could encroach on its space.

***Key Takeaways 2: Localisation: Local menu variations***

As past researchers have identified, the local menu items that the Japanese McDonald's chain of restaurants serves its local market, such as the Teriyaki McBurger, the Bai Shrimp Filet-O and the Tsukimi Burger (a 'moon viewing' burger, a typical cultural behaviour in the autumn), are good evidence of how McDonald's adapts to the Japanese culture and market.

***P7: I like that McDonald's' menu is arranged as a local menu, as I can sense our food's cultural tradition!***

***P19: The Japanese menu is my favourite, especially the Tsukimi Burger. I always look forward to the seasonal menu with Japanese flavours, but to be honest, Mac is Mac, and its original menu is good enough!***

***P22: I cannot understand why the Bai Shrimp Filet-O is unique to the Japanese menu; the global product line includes already a variety of worldwide Mac tastes.***

Srivastava (2017) discussed the impact of national and international fast-food brands on consumers' behaviour from a comparative perspective, suggesting that Asian consumers usually perceive brands from the West as a luxury. This discussion implies that McDonald's should strive to take advantage of this in its bid to advance its image and serve its clients' demands. In this manner, local menu variation was considered to be influential in evoking a positive attitude towards the McDonald's brand in Japan. However, the interview outcome indicates that McDonald's' global brand, with its original product line, has already developed a robust brand value that realises customer satisfaction in the Japanese market.

### ***Key Takeaways 3: Local management and employment opportunities***

All the interviewees acknowledged that McDonald's in Japan employs local Japanese citizens, meaning that for those with the desire and the motivation, there is the possibility to be promoted to a higher position within the organisation.

***P12: One of my friends was promoted to a full-time role from a part-time role at a restaurant. She was provided with a variety of support by the top management team so that she could learn and become qualified to take the route to a management role.***

*P13: The public relations communications of banners, TV ads and other Social Network Service posts about recruiting staff show that not only young people but also middle-aged homemakers are given opportunities to work flexibly.*

*P20: McDonald's is one of the most popular working places for university and high-school students, especially girls – maybe because the working atmosphere is excellent and clean.*

The strategy of utilising Japanese locals, including for top management posts, can steer local consumer support towards the affirmative, which could increase regular traffic into McDonald's' outlets in Japan. The roles, including in the sectors of advertising and public relations, are mostly filled by Japanese nationals, and this seems to work in McDonald's' favour when doing businesses in Japan. Furthermore, several positions in the food outlets affiliated to McDonald's are filled with Japanese locals, and this helps to boost the company's image and satisfaction in the eyes of local Japanese consumers. As explained by Khan et al. (2012), since customer satisfaction gives rise to customer and brand loyalty, the hiring of locals boosts the satisfaction of the local consumers who, in turn, reward the McDonald's organisation with customer and brand loyalty.

On this point, interestingly, female interviewees stated their favourable comments more actively than male participants. This suggests that McDonald's has provided fair employment opportunities for both male and female jobseekers in a place where there still remains a disparity of job opportunities between the sexes.

#### ***Key Takeaways 4: Environmental friendliness***

After explaining the nature of the ecological friendliness question to the interviewees, all of them had a favourable opinion of how McDonald's conducts itself in ensuring environmental friendliness in Japan.

***P4: It is quite well known that McDonald's has been switching paper containers and packaging to eco-friendly materials.***

***P15: A large amount of waste oil can be changed into other products, such as waste oil being used for 3D printing resin. This is a good sign of an environmentally friendly invention.***

***P21: I think McDonald's has been doing an excellent job of communicating with consumers regarding its environmental activities.***

Communicating sustainability practices should be differentiated among different cultures and business characteristics (Font et al., 2017). As Oe and Yamaoka (2020) indicated, the values of Confucianism and collectivism embedded in Japanese business paradigm restrain the behaviour of communication. Interestingly, this tendency is not observed from the interviewees' statements, and the participants appreciate McDonald's' active communication of its ethical strategies. This could mainly be because McDonald's' global business ethos encourages the practice of communicating with customers.

#### ***Key Takeaways 5: Corporate citizenship***

The participants were generally happy to be involved in McDonald's' Corporate Social Responsibility activities to give back to the local communities. The participants were particularly pleased with the donations that are directed to the local schools and health institutions, saying that it helps less-privileged children who have limited access to essential services.

***P3: I like the idea of the Ronald McDonald House. I have donated to this several times and will continue to do so in the future, too.***

Most of the interviewees knew that the charity event was advocating for the improvement of children's wellbeing.

*P16: It is good to see that McDonald's Japan has contributed to helping Japanese children by supporting sports events.*

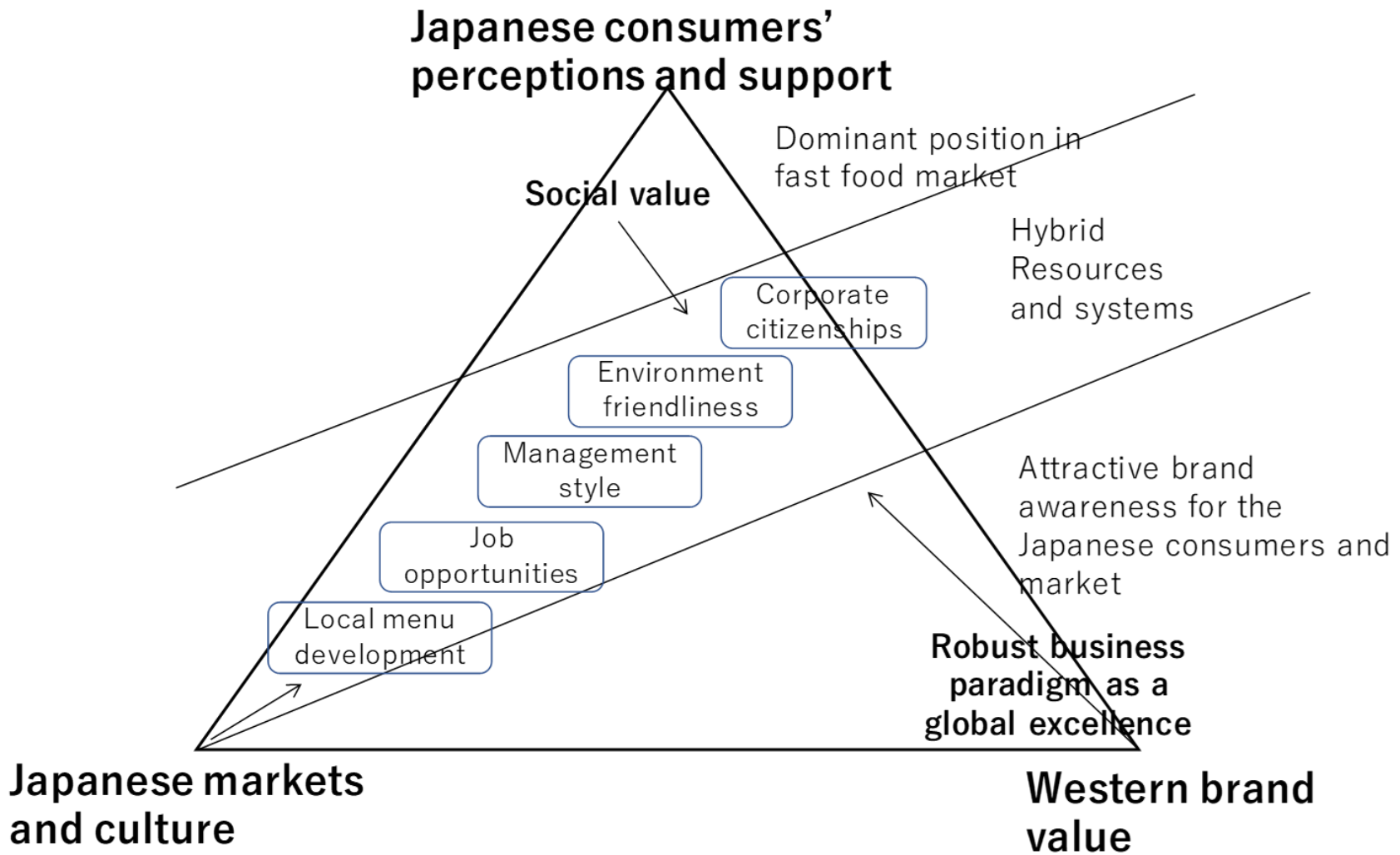
*P19: I enjoyed joining McDonald's' Pokémon Go events, but I was wondering it would have been better if we could have toured in the town, not just in the restaurant!*

The respondents recognised the way that McDonald's is active in sponsoring local sporting events, which pushed their attitudinal preferences to be positive. As Woo (2019) discussed, McDonald's Japan also launched an art project to regenerate communities after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. This is evidence of the company's business philosophy that states that it aims to contribute to customers and communities as a societal member (Lung-Amam and Dawkins, 2019). McDonald's also conducted community-based gamification by Pokémon Go, which was also a kick-off event to show the impact of augmented reality and the internet of things in our daily life activities (Calvo, 2019).

#### *4.2 Conceptual framework developed from this study*

Based on the findings of the research, the strategies that the McDonald's organisation could put in place are those that would be influential in ensuring that there is a positive impact directed towards consumer and brand loyalty in Japan. According to Sawant et al. (2020), franchising is a very crucial strategy that enables customers easy access to restaurants and enhances smooth adaptation to the Japanese market; it brings locals together through robust Western brand value and ethical activities that contribute to Japanese communities.

The revealed perceptions and evaluations from Japanese consumers are summarised as a map of trajectories resulting in Japanese consumers' support and loyalty (Figure 3).



**Figure 3 A map of the trajectories resulting in consumers' support for McDonald's in Japan**

## **5 Conclusion**

### *5.1 Original contributions: Theoretical and practical*

The expansion strategy of McDonald's in Japan will continue to be successful if it takes into methodical consideration the views that have been shared by the research participants. This strategy is projected to make business people, families and people from all walks of life in Japan flock to the McDonald's restaurant outlets in the country. Macieira et al. (2020) focused their discussion on consumer satisfaction and loyalty in the year of 2020, suggesting that 'the topics are currently not receiving adequate attention by service management researchers' (Macieira et al., 2020; 348; as the field grows, management scholars need to continue to aggregate academic discussions into a contemporary context and attempt to reconceptualise the knowledge in the field of study.

As a champion of the fast-food sector, McDonald's has been studied intensely so far, but the concept of local vs global brand power has not been fully explored. It has conventionally been discussed that the business's efforts to adapt to local markets' needs is one of the key elements for its success. The outcome of this study suggests that research focusing on the antecedents realising customer satisfaction and loyal behaviour needs to receive more attention, and that reconceptualising knowledge is important, especially since contradictory evidence appears as the global market expands. Moreover, as Tawse and Tabesh (2020) discussed, while implementing strategies in businesses, the developed framework suggests that investigating the organisation's dynamic managerial capabilities and managerial actions is critical to support business sustainability.

## *5.2 Limitations and further research opportunities*

This study remains at a pilot level because of its qualitative approach, and a quantitative approach should be undertaken to validate the findings of the study. The outcome of this research consists of an outline of data analysis from a limited number of Japanese consumers. To develop some more robust implications that could act as the basis for effective strategy building for McDonald's, a quantitative approach with a survey should be carried out to validate the impact of the framework proposed in this study. One original finding suggests that the positive effects of ethical behaviours with social values, environmental attitudes and corporate citizenship should be further investigated, with detailed dimensions and scales, so that relevant strategies can be launched. An evaluation scheme is also required to sustain the businesses in an international market.

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