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Japanese Cuisine in Malaysia: Culture and Identity

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Abstract

Despite the vast research in global Japanese food, little is known about the perspective of Southeast Asian countries, more specifically from the intercultural communication lens, the popular take on Japanese food abroad. Thus, this exploratory study is aimed at examining Japanese food businesses in Malaysia in terms of their online websites and the experiences of their patrons. In the context of this study, these Malaysian and Japanese patrons who have been in the two countries were selected as respondents for the study. The study employed three main methods, which were as follows: Search Engine Optimization (SEO), document analysis and the structured interview. Fifty three (53) websites were analyzed using SEO and document analysis methods while 13 respondents were interviewed. The findings showed that online visibility contributed to the popularity of the restaurants to a certain extent. Furthermore, the taglines used by the restaurants upheld and promoted Japanese culture and there were five main elements that characterized Japanese food identity in Malaysia. These findings underscored the importance of the Japanese cultural identity as providing a strong value base that has helped Japanese restaurants to promote Japanese food worldwide.

Keywords: *Japan, food, identity, Malaysia, culture, uncertainty-avoidance*

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses an exploratory study about the penetration of Japanese food culture into the Malaysian market. Data for the study included information posted on the official websites of Japanese restaurants, relevant Facebook sites and from interviews conducted with Japanese and Malaysian nationals who frequented both countries. Why is this of any interest? It is because food is a symbol of culture and identity. Moreover, the Japanese government has since 2005, a strong interest in introducing Japanese culture through food via its official national policy. The country had introduced the Intellectual Property Strategic Programme to promote the Japanese brand (Sakamoto & Allen, 2011). In line with this effort was the establishment of a non-governmental authority to promote Japanese Restaurants Abroad (JRO). Another remarkable effort by the Japanese government was the Cool Japan initiative that promoted Japanese culture overseas (Iwabuchi, 2015). Malaysia, which is one of the international markets for Japanese corporate investment, has naturally become an appropriate and interesting place to study the phenomenon of Japanese food culture. At the time of this study, there were about 147 Japanese restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia.

Japan was the top investor in Malaysia from among other foreign direct investment stakeholders, with a cumulative investment of USD 636 million between 2009 and August 2013 (Malaysian Investment Development Authority, 2015). Malaysia and Japan shared a close relationship in certain socio-economic areas, more specifically in the automotive, technology and education sectors. In addition, major cities in Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor Bahru and Kuching had in recent years witnessed a growing community of Japanese expatriates. It was reported in a United Nations (2013) report on migration that there were 16,156 Japanese residing in Malaysia. Therefore, in addition to the strong policy and aggressive marketing of Japanese culture globally, the above factors had also contributed to the rising number of Japanese restaurants, and in turn, emergence of a Japanese food culture.

Current research on the global Japanese food phenomenon tends to focus on Western audiences (Kushner, 2013, Sakamoto & Allen, 2011). The literature on Japanese food in the Southeast Asian context is limited. There has been more interest shown in studying Japanese food abroad in developed countries such as the United States (Edwards, 2012). Interesting works on modern Japanese food by Cwiertka, (2006), Rath (2010), and Kushner (2013) have focused on the pervasive influences of Japanese food locally and abroad.

There is, however, a lack of studies on Japanese food abroad from the intercultural communication perspective in Southeast Asian countries. Thus, the focus of this paper is to explore food culture phenomenon through Japanese business organizations in Malaysia. Data is obtained from the online websites of these businesses and the experiences of Malaysian and Japanese respondents who have been to both these countries. The uncertainty avoidance framework proposed by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) underpins the analytical framework of the study.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Cultural Identity

Food in this context is constructed to represent its Japanese origin but with the touch of commercial branding. Japanese food in Japanese-based restaurants in Malaysia largely reflects

its Japanese cultural identity in promoting and selling the food to customers. In order to explain this issue, one has to first look at the origin of the Japanese national identity in context. The Japanese identity is about *nihonjinron* (Japaneseness) which endorses the collectivist culture above individual needs. It is linked to the idea of belongingness, i.e., the notion of *ba* 'frame' as depicted by Lebra (1976) and as introduced by Nakane (1970). It is about long term relations and the passing on of the tradition to the young. It is monolithic whereby tradition supersedes individual diversity. Japanese culture values authenticity that is referred to as being 'original'.

A study of Japanese food culture, revealed that sushi, an authentic Japanese food, was commercialized to meet the demands of global customers (Sakamoto & Allen, 2011). The researchers of that study pointed out that when sushi was first introduced to global consumers, the Japanese in general, felt rather possessive of their sushi tradition. However, when they later realized that global consumers demanded their own flavours of sushi, they accepted the fact that sushi being a global but authentic Japanese food meant that they had to accept changes in their traditional sushi preparation. Moreover, the Sakamoto and Allen study (2011) clearly showed that the Japanese had begun to appreciate the idea that sushi penetration into the international market had the advantage of soft power influencing the globalized food markets. Edward (2012) explored Americanized sushi identity in New York City, the Midwest and Japan. She concluded that sushi identity overseas had been affected by the tastes and preferences of the host countries. Furthermore, this trend would likely continue as long as there is demand for sushi from foreigners. Another study on food culture in Japan uses the term '*kodawari*' which refers to the personal obsession and detailed efforts in preparing food by Japanese chefs (Fukutomi, 2014). The *Kodawari* spirit has influenced the way in which the Japanese chefs prepare ramen by adding their unique individual signature to this dish. In other words, each ramen chef has their own signature ramen dish, one which is different from the other. In preparing the ramen dish, each chef adheres to the principles of authentic ramen ingredients in the Japanese style, but with a twist because of each individual's unique secret recipe for the dish. Another interesting study was the research by Kim and Ellis (2015) on the Japanese udon noodle as a tourist attraction. They explained how udon noodles, which is a staple in Kagawa, Japan, has been positioned as a tourist attraction for food lovers. As a result, tourists are provided with the opportunity to 'digest' the Japanese culture whenever they are enjoying their favourite udon noodles. Zhang (2015) noted that Japanese food organizations had strategically used the concepts of health as an essential part of their national practice of culture and beauty, in food presentations to attract customers.

Cwiertka (2006) in her book, '*Modern Japanese Cuisine*' outlined the historical factors that have modernized the Japanese food cuisines of today. The Japanese cuisine was influenced by Western cuisines because of the Japanese ambition to be modernized and technologically competitive. Japan was eager to be like its Western counterparts, especially after the historic moment when China was defeated by the British in the first Opium War (1839-42). In addition, countries such as China and Korea had also influenced Japanese cuisine due to factors of war and immigration. Religious influences such as Buddhism and Shintoism also impacted the evolution of Japanese cuisines through the principles of consumption of pure food, rather than flesh-related food such as meat, beef and chicken. Thus, political, economic and social factors at the domestic and international levels have impacted the Japanese cuisine today, as understood in Cwiertka's work. The Japanese cuisine strictly follows the tradition of making every dish truly authentic Japanese, and it is not overstating the case: for example, a Japanese restaurant in

Malaysia, due to its geographical proximity to Japan, would have Japanese ingredients flown in from a celebrated market in Japan almost daily. Indeed for other overseas markets such as those in New York, California and London, it is rather impossible to fly in or ship fresh ingredients from Japan due to the high costs involved hence, the chefs have to optimize local ingredients in preparing Japanese dishes (Cwiertka, 2006). Rath (2010), who wrote a book titled *Food and Fantasy: In Early Modern Japan*, supports Cwiertka's (2006) claim that Japanese cuisine has been impacted by factors such as Western cuisines. Rath further added that today, even though Japanese food has evolved, their food identity still closely symbolized the national culture. Kushner's (2013) work on ramen evolution has attempted to link Chinese influence on Japanese cuisines, and how the Japanese have turned ramen that originated from China into a Japanese cultural food.

Food culture in this context has to co-exist with the food business organizations. Thus, in this study, the Japanese food business organizations were seen as using the national identity to promote their products, i.e., Japanese dishes. As stated by Yoshino (1999) and supported by Goldstein-Gidoni (2005) in his study on Jewish brokers who were learning Japanese culture, the *nihonjinron* principle was used by the Japanese to spread their culture to others who were interested to learn about it.

The abovementioned studies have discussed Japanese cuisines locally and internationally. However, the focus was on the significance of Japanese restaurants abroad in general, and the influence of the West on Japanese cuisines. This study aims to explore Japanese food business organizations in Malaysia in terms of their online websites, and the Japanese food experiences among selected Malaysian and Japanese respondents who have been to the two countries.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory

The Hofstede theoretical framework with its cultural dimension provides a holistic cultural understanding of values. The framework can be understood in terms of five cultural dimensions, namely power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long term orientation and indulgence (Hofstede, 2010). The uncertainty avoidance framework by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) underpins the analytical framework of the present study.

Uncertainty-Avoidance Framework

In an interesting observation on national paradigm, Hofstede (1996, 2001) described powerful countries and their organizational identities as follows:- United States (the market), France (the power), Germany (order), Poland and Russia (efficiency), the Netherlands (consensus), Scandinavia (equality), Britain (systems), China (the family) and Japan (Japan). Exclusively, Japan is described as only Japan without being associated with any characteristic that defines a powerful country in terms of a national paradigm. This indication from a well-known scholar in culture emphasizes the strong identity of national culture onto the organizational culture and identity of Japanese companies.

Uncertainty-avoidance is one of the dimensions of Hofstede's intercultural work. This dimension, i.e., uncertainty-avoidance, could be interpreted as a range of ambiguity that could be tolerated by the community of the culture. The terms used in intercultural communication

are weak uncertainty avoidance and strong uncertainty avoidance. Weak uncertainty avoidance means that there is less expression of the culture. On the other hand, strong uncertainty avoidance refers to expressive cultures. Based on Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov's (2010) work, Japan was rated by Hofstede as 92, which indicated strong uncertainty avoidance culture. Malaysia, on the other hand, was rated as 36, which indicated a weak uncertainty avoidance country. The highest rated, 112 were Greece and Portugal with the strongest uncertainty avoidance while the lowest/weakest uncertainty avoidance rated 8 was Singapore..

Cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance dimension score high in neuroticism and lower in agreeableness. What is important is to reduce ambiguity. In order to do that, the community will plan rigorously and ensure that all the rules and regulations are written clearly to avoid any conflict and misinterpretation. Systematic and orderliness are the important values of strong avoidance community. In terms of food preparation, strong uncertainty avoiding cultures appreciate purity in food. Healthy food is valued. People cherish hygiene in daily life and attend to it religiously.

Organizational Identity

Organizational identity has been a dynamic issue with various studies linking identities to the goals, outputs and the nature of the organizations and their relevant stakeholders. Organizational identity (OI) has been conceptualized in many ways. This is due to the fact that OI is dynamic by nature, and different OI could be defined based on its contributing elements that make an organization what it is today (Giorgi, Lockwood & Glynn, 2015). It is a self-reflection of an institution that defines its own identity states. He and Brown (2013) had provided the trajectory of OI and outlined the development of OI through four theoretical lenses, namely functionalist, social constructionist, psychodynamic and postmodern. Each perspective defines OI based on its framework. Functionalist perspective ties to measuring OI based on its relevant constructs i.e., objective and tangible features. While it has contributed to the area, this perspective ignores the process of the OI, cognitive perspective of OI and the discourse of power in relations to OI. Social construction perspective is also known as interpretative perspective. It defines OI as collectively defined by its members and relevant stakeholders. While it offers flexibility in terms of its coverage, it also appears ambiguous when it comes to conceptualization of OI. Psychodynamic perspective refers to unconscious matters regarding the process of constructing OI. It tries to understand the process of OI by reflecting on what is beyond the structured and obvious in the organization. Postmodern perspective refers to analyzing OI in terms of what is beyond mainstream direction of OI, and questions the other side of OI process in an organization. In their study, He and Brown (2013) also suggested several issues that need to be researched, namely employee performance, leadership, corporate social responsibility, employee personality, employee identities and self-concept orientations. Having mentioned that, this paper attempts to position OI as an entity which is linked to national identity. This is in line with the dynamics of OI as proposed by Hatch and Schultz (1997, 2002), where identity affects cultural process and vice versa. It is also in line with the explanation of Giorgi, Lackwood and Glynn (2015) that culture affects the identity of an organization.

Japanese food business organizations in Japan have been growing. With 147 established Japanese food restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, it is a healthy growing trend of Japanese food penetration into the Malaysian market. In addition to this growth, JRO had organized a Halal Seminar in Kuala Lumpur in 2016 to tap the needs of Halal markets

in Asia and global consumers (JRO, 2015). Coming back to the Japanese food restaurants in Malaysia, each restaurant establishes its own website and relevant Facebook sites to promote the cuisine, location and ambiance of the restaurant. With taglines such as “Eclectic Menu of Authentic Japanese Cuisines as Traditionally Served in Japan” and “Authentic Sanuki Udon” to name a few, these Malaysia-based Japanese restaurants are optimizing Japanese identity to their potential customers.

In sum, based on the above discussion, this study is motivated by the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the visibility nature of the Malaysia-based Japanese restaurants websites in Kuala Lumpur?

RQ2: Do the restaurants’ taglines symbolize the Japanese culture?

RQ3: What are the most important elements of Japanese food to the experienced consumers?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed three main methods, which were Search Engine Optimization (SEO), document analysis and the structured interview. SEO analysis was carried out in order to find out whether the interactivity elements of the websites were important to customers. It is important to note here that SEO is a site analyzer tool that analyzes a website for its visibility (Sonawe et al., 2015). It uses a robot to explore the SEO for useful website criteria. Five main criteria, weighted equally, are used by SEO in analyzing a website: Accessibility, Design, Texts, Multimedia and Networking. The overall criterion is Overview, which is a Cumulative Point Average of the five criteria. The data was captured using SEO only on open access websites. The following steps were undertaken in the process of analysing the websites:

- Start SEO in open access websites
- Each of the 53 websites identified earlier were inserted into the SEO link to determine the five main criteria
- The robot would begin the search based on the criteria provided
- The extent of search completion was based on the robustness of the robot deployed and characteristics of the websites searched
- Once the SEO was completed, the complete results on the website concerned would be indicated by the robot.

There were three main websites that the researcher referred to when searching for Japanese restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. They were Chillout, Soulout and Freakout (2013), Twelve Japanese Restaurants (2015) and Best Japanese Restaurants in Malaysia (2015). Kuala Lumpur was chosen as the location to be studied as it is the capital city where most of the Japanese restaurants are headquartered.

Document analysis was conducted on the 53 websites and their Facebook sites, in order to understand the restaurant demographic identities which included the corporate taglines. Structured interviews were conducted among Japanese and Malaysians who have been to the two countries at least 3 times. The respondents were given the following five structured questions in relation to Japanese food culture in Malaysia: 1) What is the special feature of Japanese food? 2) What is your favourite Japanese food? 3) Is the food easily available in Japanese restaurants in Malaysia? 4) What is your favourite Japanese restaurant in Malaysia? and 5) And why? The

snowballing method was used as it was hard to find respondents who had similar experiences. Thirteen (13) respondents were interviewed for this study. The data were analyzed thematically using the framework by Clarke and Braun (2013). The researcher had undertaken six steps based on this analytical framework, namely 1) immersing in the data in order to familiarize with the themes, 2) building the coding principles and identifying important codes, 3) using the codes to search for themes, 4) revising the themes and reflecting on their selection, 5) finalizing themes (naming and defining) and 6) writing up. It is important to note that these processes are not linear. Thus, each step has to be taken with care so that the analysis will contribute new insight for future research.

RESULTS

Demographics

Out of 147 available restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, 53 restaurants have official websites. Thus, it represents 36 percent of the population. These 53 restaurants have official websites and Facebook sites or related Facebook sites created by the customers. In terms of categories, the majority of the restaurants are franchise-based (n=27, 50.9%). This is followed by independent restaurants that are individually owned (32%), and there are 9 hotels that have mostly award winning Japanese restaurants as claimed in their respective websites (refer to Table 1).

In addition, in terms of specialization of the restaurants, a majority (n=36, 67.9%), offers a full range of Japanese cuisine. This style is popular based on the data acquired. Then, this is followed by sushi-based restaurants (n=5, 9.4%). Ramen-based restaurants secured third place with four restaurants (7.5%). Dessert and fusion-based restaurants have equal numbers of restaurants operating (n=3, 5.6%). Finally, steamboat and udon-based specialization restaurants recorded one each (refer to Table 1).

Table 1
Demographics of the Restaurants

Categories of Restaurants	N=53	(%)
Franchise	27	50.9
Stand alone	17	32
Hotel	9	16.9
Specialization of Restaurants		
Japanese cuisine (all range)	36	67.9
Sushi	5	9.4
Ramen	4	7.5
Dessert	3	5.6
Mixed Western and Japanese cuisine	3	5.6
Steamboat	1	1.8
Udon	1	1.8

For interview data, the distribution of gender is as follows: 5 males and 8 females from which 7 are Japanese and 6 are Malaysians. They were given pseudonyms for anonymity and confidentiality purposes. Out of the 7 Japanese, 2 are male professors, 1 is a female teacher, 1 male and 3 females are students. For Malaysians, 2 are male professionals, 2 are female professionals and 2 are female lecturers (refer to Table 2).

Table 2
Respondents' Demographics

Identification	Gender	Nationality	Occupation/Status	Country of Residence
Professor A	Male	Japanese	Professor	Japan
Professor B	Male	Japanese	Professor	Japan
Teacher A	Female	Japanese	Teacher	Malaysia
Student A	Male	Japanese	Student	Japan
Student B	Female	Japanese	Student	Japan
Student C	Female	Japanese	Student	Japan
Student D	Female	Japanese	Student	Japan
Professional A	Male	Malaysian	Professional	Malaysia
Professional B	Male	Malaysian	Professional	Malaysia
Professional C	Female	Malaysian	Professional	Japan
Professional D	Female	Malaysian	Professional	Malaysia
Lecturer A	Female	Malaysian	Professional	Malaysia
Lecturer B	Female	Malaysian	Professional	Malaysia

RQ1 What is the visibility nature of the Malaysia-based Japanese restaurants websites in Kuala Lumpur?

This research question is answered using SEO analysis. Kodawari Menya Udon & Tempura was the most user-friendly website with Overview: 72.3, Accessibility: 62.2, Design: 71.6, Text: 62.7, Multimedia: 97.1 and Networking: 77.1. Comparatively, the website that scored the lowest in SEO analysis was Sushi King with Overview: 48.0, Accessibility: 42.6, Design: 62.0, Text: 48.1, Multimedia: 34.7 and Networking: 42.6. Majority of the websites scored 50.0 and above for the overview except for two websites, which are Sushi King and Sushi Tei. This finding indicates that the interactivity nature of the Malaysian based Japanese restaurants websites is good except for the two websites that need further improvement. Please refer to Table 3.

Table 3
Website Analysis of SEO

Website	Overview	Accessibility	Design	Texts	Multimedia	Networking
Angus House Japanese Charcoal Steak	55.3	46.8	62.0	55.3	70	45.1
Bankara Ramen Malaysia	52.1		76.5	57.2	17.1	45.1
Beard's Papa	56.4		68.5	42.7	34.7	59.8
Coco tei Tokyo Japanese Fine Dining	58.68		63.9	66.4	41.8	53.3
Fukuya	54.8	52.7	68.6	50.0	34.7	54.9
Hanaya	66.5	84.0	75.4	71.0	43.5	44.3
Ichiban Ramen	67.5	72.3	85.8	44.6	55.9	62.3
Iketeru Restaurant	50.8	60.1	68.0	46.4	24.1	36.1
Ippudo	69.5	84.5	71.6	56.1	57.1	68.9
Ishin	51.0	42.6	62.0	45.7	48.8	50.8
Jogoya	56.4	56.3	69.4	39.7	42.4	61.5
Kampachi	62.4	82.5	62.0	60.4	48.8	50.0
Kingyo	66.9	60.8	85.8	65.5	70.0	45.1
Kirishima Japanese Restaurant	64.6	64.1	82.5	57.1	77.7	36.1
Kodawari Menya Udon & Tempura	72.3	62.2	71.6	62.7	97.1	77.1
Kofuku Japanese Cuisine	65.4	72.0	77.9	61.0	38.2	61.5
Komugi	58.3	64.9	66.7	68.2	49.4	35.3
Komura Japanese Restaurant	57.5	56.7	66.7	64.9	60.6	36.1
Kura Japanese Restaurant	65.7	75.9	66.7	60.5	70.0	53.8
Kurata Japanese Fine Dining	56.4	53.2	72.7	64.4	31.8	45.9
Kuriya Japanese Res- taurant	63.6	64.9	74.5	42.1	96.5	45.1
Machi Japanese Kitchen	59.5	69.4	66.7	51.1	48.8	51.6

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Maiu Japanese Restaurant	55.8	67.4	62.0	45.7	54.1	42.6
Manmaru	63.3	46.6	80.9	60.3	75.3	51.6
Marutama Ramen	68.2	71.8	76.5	47.9	70.0	68.0
Mizu Japanese Fine Dining Cuisine	61.3	80.4	66.7	43.0	96.5	25.4
Nobu	58.0	64.9	62.0	50.0	45.9	59.0
Ozeki Tokyo Cuisine	58.0	64.9	62.0	50.0	45.9	59.0
Rakuzen	55.8	60.8	62.0	57.0	48.9	44.3
Rocku Yakiniku	66.4	80.0	80.9	58.6	55.9	42.6
Sakai's Curry and Bar	62.1	80.4	66.7	47.7	96.5	25.4
Sasagawa Japanese Restaurant	60.5	60.8	75.7	51.4	48.8	53.3
Shabu Garden	51.2	52.7	48.1	48.1	68.2	45.1
Shogun & Saisaki Japanese Buffet Restaurant	59.3	71.4	66.7	45.1	62.9	43.4
Suki Ya	55.2	60.3	62.0	43.5	52.4	50.8
Sushi Hinata	64.2	64.9	67.6	70.7	62.9	53.3
Sushi King	48.0	42.6	62.0	48.1	34.7	42.6
Sushi Oribe	49.6	50.9	52.7	48.8	48.8	45.1
Sushi Tei	58.3	64.9	66.7	68.2	49.4	35.3
Sushi Zanmai	57.7	60.8	62.0	55.5	71.5	41.0
Tako Tao	54.6	54.5	62.0	64.8	31.2	50.8
Tatsu Japanese Restaurant	56.7	70.1	63.9	60.0	31.2	44.3
Tokyo Don	62.3	52.7	73.2	66.4	63.0	53.3
Tonkatsu by Wa Kitchen	60.0	56.8	73.2	58.4	48.8	53.3

Tonkatsu Mamaison	66.2	88.01	63.9	38.6	74.7	61.5
Torii Japanese Yakitori and Whisky Bar	62.0	50.7	78.1	34.9	70.0	69.7
Tsubohachi	64.8	80.4	76.0	47.7	96.6	25.4
Umai-ya Japanese Restaurant	51.7	60.8	62.0	31.5	50.0	44.3
Watami	64.6	76.4	62.0	44.2	77.7	63.1
Xenri D' Garden Terrace	54.1	60.8	62.0	49.4	45.3	44.3
Yuu Jo Japanese Restaurant	58.4	59.5	62.0	47.41	70.0	53.3
Yuzu	52.3	52.7	62.0	47.8	34.7	53.3
Zipangu	56.2	76.3	71.3	56.6	17.1	36.1

RQ2 Do the restaurants' tagline symbolize the Japanese culture?

In order to answer this research question, the researcher selected top ten websites that had shown the most likes in their official Facebook sites (please refer to Table 4). The data indicated that all the taglines of the restaurants symbolized Japanese culture. Each restaurant promotes the authenticity, creativity and innovativeness of Japanese cuisine. The taglines were associated with Japanese culture albeit some restaurants introduced fusion Japanese cuisine such as Maiu Japanese Restaurant (Fusion Japanese Food). Sushi King had the highest likes (528, 677) and Kurata Japanese Fine Dining recorded the lowest among the top ten (9, 573).

Table 4

Top Ten Japanese Restaurants Based on Facebook and Their Taglines

Name	Facebook likes	Tagline
Sushi King	528, 677	'Kaiten Sushi' or Revolving Sushi
Watami	79, 997	Japanese Casual Restaurant
Kirishima Japanese Restaurant	28, 946	Traditional Japanese Restaurant
Ippudo	16, 873	To continuously innovate to remain true
Sushi Zanmai	16, 107	Boulder's Top Sushi Restaurant
Kuriya Japanese Restaurant	16, 016	Exquisitely Japanese Fine Dining
Ishin	14, 580	Using only the finest quality ingredients air-flown directly from Tsukiji Market, Tokyo, Japan.
Kodawari Menya Udon & Tempura	12, 074	Authentic Sanuki Udon
Maiu Japanese Restaurant	11, 864	Fusion Japanese Food
Kurata Japanese Fine Dining	9, 573	Eclectic Menu of Authentic Japanese Cuisines as Traditionally Served in Japan

RQ3 What are the most important elements of Japanese food to the experienced consumers? There are five main themes that emerged during the interview analysis. They are freshness, healthy, elements of four seasons, beautiful preparation and easily available. The respondents pointed out that freshness is important to Japanese cuisine. For example, Japanese *Kaiseki* food (authentic Japanese) as well as *Sushi* and *Sukiyaki* need to be prepared from the freshest ingredients in order to make them taste and feel like authentic Japanese cuisine. This was mentioned by Professor A. His statement is supported by Professional C who is a Malaysian and works in Japan that:

Food such as Sashimi that is raw sliced fish or meat required freshness or otherwise, it's just hunks of fish.

As further elaborated by Professional D:

Imagine the potato..when you wash it, the skins peel off just by the touch of your hand...so fresh and that is why Japanese food is fresh.

Another important element is healthiness. The respondents unanimously agreed that Japanese food represents healthiness. Professor B emphasized that Japanese food has the excellent

balance of nutrition. This is further supported by Teacher A where she mentioned that Japanese cuisine needs to be well-balanced and thus it leads to really healthy diets. And as summarized by Lecturer B:

The taste is mild, not too oily, it is not too sweet and not too salty.

Japanese food has the character of the four seasons. The seasons refer to winter, autumn, summer and spring. The food is prepared based on the seasons as Japan experiences the seasons. As stated by Professor B:

Japanese dishes reflect the seasons of spring, summer, fall, and winter. Japanese dishes correspond to each season by appreciating the freshness of foods

His view was further supported by Teacher A, who said:

As you know, Japan has four seasons, so we could enjoy four tastes with Japanese food.

In terms of food preparation, the respondents argued that Japanese food must feed the eyes. This statement came from Professor B where he mentioned:

It is said that Japanese eat with “eyes,” so table setting is part of art, which places importance on beauty and harmony of colors and tastes of food, bowls, chopsticks, plates, etc.

And his statement was supported by Teacher A:

Also, the beauty of nature and changing of seasons is emphasized in the presentation or represented in decoratively cut foodstuff. Decorating table and rooms with objects matched to the seasons are also closely associated with Japanese food.

Lecturer B also agreed with the abovementioned statements, where she stated:

Food needs to be prepared in the form and design that is appetizing. And it also needs to be delicious.

Availability of Japanese food is important to the respondents. They agreed that the food availability within their living or working areas offers accessibility to the customers. As stated by Teacher A:

Yes, it is available with comparative ease by a locality in Malaysia.

Her statement was supported by all Malaysian respondents (Professionals A, B, C, D and Lecturers A and B) who affirmed that it is easy to get Japanese food in Malaysia.

DISCUSSION

Studies indicated that foreign food would normally adapt to the international appetites when entering host countries (Cheng, 2011; Thompson, 2011; Karaosmanoglu, 2011). In the

case of Japanese food, sushi for example is a global phenomenon and thus, sushi has been innovated to meet the customers' demands (Sakamoto & Allen, 2011). However, what makes Japanese food interesting in this study is the essence of preparing and eating food that must be essentially *nihonjinron* (Japaneseness). With the existence of JRO, the Japanese are serious about monitoring their food trans-cultural stations worldwide and this includes Malaysia. The names of all 53 Japanese restaurants that are based in Malaysia, reflected Japan's culture and identity (refer to Table 3). Considering Japan is a country with strong avoidance uncertainty, the effort taken by the JRO with the help of the Japanese government is congruent with the need to create a guide for Japanese business organizations.

Given that the internet penetration of Malaysia is 67% (Internet World Stats, 2015), Japanese restaurants are using internet to penetrate into the Malaysian market, especially in a big city like Kuala Lumpur. From the SEO analysis (refer to Table 3), it was clear that majority of the restaurants' websites have high visibility to the existing and potential customers. This phenomenon is not uncommon for a strong uncertainty avoidance country where information needs to be clear so that there is no misinterpretation and conflict in understanding the message provided.

The most popular restaurant among the Facebook sites, Sushi King, scored the lowest in terms of website visibility (refer to Table 3). Interestingly, Sushi King that was opened in 1995 has about 90 outlets throughout the whole nation (Sushi King, 2011). It is also indicated that Malaysia as a country with weak uncertainty avoidance tolerates ambiguity and manages to experiment with Japanese food regardless of the low visibility of the website. Moreover, with the high availability of Sushi King restaurants in Malaysia, the tendency to experience Japanese sushi is high in Malaysia compared to other types of Japanese restaurants.

Referring to Table 4, the themes of each Japanese restaurant represented Japanese identity. Even though some of the restaurants such as Maiu Japanese restaurant offer fusion food their national identity prevailed. These organizations optimize on national identity as their marketing strategy as it is the strongest selling point to the customers. The theme "Using only the finest quality ingredients air-flown directly from Tsukiji Market, Tokyo, Japan" used by Ishin restaurant, expressed the desire to stay true to the national identity regardless of the hardship and high cost of operation. The way the Japanese organizations, especially the food business organizations, use their national identity, supports Hatch and Schultz's ideas that identity and culture affect each other. This also confirms the argument by Giorgi, Lockwood and Glynn (2015) that culture affects identity of an organization. The researcher believes that the Japanese food business is special due to its input, process and output that need to celebrate Japanese culture as observed by Hofstede (1996, 2001). Using culture as the central point to market their products, these organizations need to adhere to and demonstrate that there is Japanese culture presented in their products, i.e., the food. It is especially important since the food business is among the most competitive businesses globally. This phenomenon of using taglines to claim that the food is pure and authentic to the Japanese culture supports strong uncertainty avoidance culture dimension. The Japanese restaurants feel that it is important for them to produce culturally laden identities in their taglines to assure that their food is prepared and served according to the Japanese culture.

Freshness, healthiness, elements of four seasons, beautiful preparation and easy availability are identities that characterize Japanese food in Malaysia. These factors contribute to the way in

which customers in Malaysia perceive Japanese cuisine. While freshness, healthiness, elements of four seasons and beautiful preparation signify cultural values of Japanese cuisine in its truest sense (Cwiertka, 2006; Rath 2010), being easily available stands as a convenience factor that adds to the sale volume of the organizations. Given that Japanese restaurants are challenged by Western fast food conglomerates such as McDonald, KFC and Pizza Hut among other international food business operators such as Korean, Middle Eastern and European, their existence indicates that national identity sells for these kinds of organizations.

CONCLUSION

Japanese restaurants in Malaysia emphasize on national identity to win the hearts of existing and potential customers. This study offers how national identity is optimized by the food business organizations in order to stay competitive in the markets given the strong cultural uncertainty avoidance character of the country, i.e., Japan. While other international food organizations have to adapt closely to customers' appetites, Japanese food businesses in Malaysia challenge this trend by staying true to their tradition despite the innovations that they make to the cuisine. In other words, keeping true to tradition is what makes Japanese cuisine appealing to the customers. Learning from this research experience, the researcher suggests that optimization of Japanese identity on Japanese cuisine is vital for the survival of food business organizations that are Japanese-oriented.

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