

A Study on the International Marketing Strategies of Fast Food Brands from a Cross-Cultural Perspective—Based on Brand Narrative and Perceived Value Theory

Yan Shi

College of Business, James Cook University, Singapore, Singapore
yan.shi2@my.jcu.edu.au

Abstract. Despite decades of development, the fast food industry still shows considerable room for expansion. Market resources are becoming increasingly concentrated among leading brands, while local enterprises are also rising quickly by relying on cultural adaptation and regional advantages. Alongside internationally recognized companies such as McDonald's and KFC, Japanese restaurant brands including Yoshinoya and Ajisen Ramen have established a strong presence in East Asian markets. At the same time, Chinese brands such as Mixue Ice Cream & Tea and Tastien have accelerated their overseas expansion and gradually strengthened their influence in Southeast Asia. This study adopts case analysis and literature review as its primary research approaches to investigate how consumer preferences differ under various cultural backgrounds and how fast food enterprises coordinate global brand identity with localization strategies during international expansion. Through the discussion of cross-cultural marketing practices in the catering industry, the paper aims to enrich existing theoretical research and provide practical references for the international development of other service-oriented industries.

Keywords: fast food, dietary culture, Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, Cross-Cultural Marketing, Perceived Value Theory

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

With the continuous advancement of global economic integration, enterprises are no longer concerned solely with product innovation and quality improvement. Increasing attention has also been given to how brands position themselves within different cultural environments in international markets. As a result, cross-cultural marketing has gradually become an important area of research and practice in international business. In essence, cross-cultural marketing refers to the process by which companies adjust their marketing strategies according to the social values, consumer behaviors, and cultural characteristics of specific regions. For the fast food industry, cultural adaptation is especially important because eating habits and taste preferences are deeply influenced by local traditions, religious beliefs, and geographical environments. When expanding into overseas

markets, fast food brands often encounter differences in flavor preferences, dining customs, and consumer expectations. These cultural differences directly affect customer acceptance and brand recognition, making localization a key issue that international fast food companies must address during market expansion.

1.2. Research questions

Drawing on brand narrative theory, cultural dimension theory, and perceived value theory, this study discusses how fast food enterprises develop international marketing strategies under different cultural contexts. The paper mainly focuses on two research questions.

First, how can fast food brands establish effective international marketing systems by considering the characteristics of target markets and consumer demand, while maintaining a balance between global brand identity and localization strategies in order to strengthen international competitiveness?

Second, when entering markets with different levels of cultural distance from their home countries, how should fast food brands adjust their localization approaches and brand storytelling strategies to better connect with local consumers?

2. Literature review

2.1. Cross-cultural marketing research

This study takes the Chinese and American markets as core research scenarios and selects Starbucks' social media platforms (Sina, Weibo in China, Instagram in the US) as carriers to conduct a comparative study of brand narrative communication and consumer perceived value in cross-cultural contexts. The findings reveal significant differences in value perception dimensions of brand narrative between Chinese and American consumers:

The Chinese market prefers collective, festival-oriented, and relationship-focused narratives, which significantly boost emotional value and social identity value.

The American market is more receptive to individualistic, personalized, and value-rational narratives, prioritizing functional value and self-expression value.

Furthermore, the localization adaptation of brand narrative directly affects consumer engagement and perceived value scores. Chinese users show significantly higher participation in localized interactions than American users, with a positive emotion rate of 61.8% (vs. 54.2% in the US), confirming that culturally adapted narratives effectively bridge cultural gaps and strengthen consumer identification.

The study further argues that cross-cultural marketing of global fast food brands is essentially a cultural translation of brand narrative and a localized reconstruction of perceived value. Expansion in China requires weakening Western standardized narratives and strengthening local cultural symbols, dietary customs, and emotional bonds. For Chinese brands going global (e.g., Yangguofu) entering the US market, it is necessary to balance Chinese cultural core and American consumer values to avoid cultural discount and build a value system with both cultural uniqueness and market adaptability. This conclusion provides direct theoretical and empirical references for optimizing localized narratives of McDonald's, KFC, and Yoshinoya in China, as well as cross-cultural value construction for Chinese fast food brands going global [1].

2.2. The promoting role of perceived value theory in fast food localization

Consumer perceived value is the core logic that drives transnational fast food brands to attract local consumers. Its essence is the trade-off made by consumers between functional benefits, emotional benefits, and social benefits on the one hand, and monetary costs, time costs, and psychological costs on the other. In the context of transnational marketing, fast food brands need to adapt their standardized products to local price levels, maintain their advantages of convenience, efficiency, and controllable quality to ensure high cost-performance, and reduce consumers' decision-making risks. By integrating the international brand image with local culture, brands can activate emotional value; for instance, the international brand identity can highlight fashion value, and proper localization can enhance consumers' sense of belonging to the brand. Research shows that consumers have a certain emotional attachment to local food. Therefore, launching localized products by international brands may not directly increase product sales, but will strengthen local consumers' identification with the brand and boost their repurchase intention for the fast food [2]. International brands provide consumers with social value, as the global brand image helps to demonstrate personal identity and improve consumers' social recognition.

2.3. Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory measures the cultures and values of different countries across five distinct dimensions. This paper makes a comparative analysis of the differences between the Chinese market and the American market as examples. China is a highly collectivist society, while the United States emphasizes individualism. China values respect for elders and has an obvious family hierarchy, while American families advocate equal communication and parents need to listen to children's opinions, so China features a high power distance, and the United States features a low power distance. Third, in terms of uncertainty avoidance, Chinese society is characterized by high uncertainty avoidance, which is relatively conservative and needs time to adapt to new things, while the United States is more open with low uncertainty avoidance. Chinese society tends to be feminine, which values family relations and parent-child companionship, while the United States tends to be masculine, which values efficiency, speed, and cost-performance. China is a long-term oriented society that values traditional concepts and family inheritance, while the United States is a short-term oriented society that focuses on the present and immediate pleasure and satisfaction. Therefore, American advertisements can focus on individual efficiency, while advertisements adapted to China should refer more to family and collective values [3].

2.4. Challenges of fast food brands in cross-cultural markets

International brands face a variety of challenges when entering overseas markets in the initial stage. In terms of products, standardized original fast food items often fail to match local dietary tastes and eating habits, making it difficult to satisfy local consumers' flavor preferences and even violating dietary taboos. Second, there are issues related to consumption level and brand positioning. A brand positioned as affordable, mass-market fast food in its home country may be regarded as a high-end and novel consumption venue in emerging markets, resulting in low public penetration and low repurchase rates. In terms of marketing communication, advertisements from the brand's home country cannot be directly used, while advertisements designed for the target market are prone to cultural and value conflicts, which may easily cause misunderstanding among local consumers [4].

3. Research design

3.1. Research methods

The adopted research methods include case study, literature analysis, and comparative analysis.

3.2. Case selection and rationale

Case Selection and Rationale: KFC, McDonald's, Yoshinoya, Yangguofu Spicy Hot Pot

KFC: A highly successful case of deep localization, currently having the largest number of stores among overseas fast food brands in China.

McDonald's: Low degree of localization at the initial entry into the Chinese market, and has promoted its localization process with the economic development of China.

Yoshinoya: A Japanese fast food brand with a similar dietary culture, adopting differentiated strategies in response to competition from local brands.

Yangguofu Spicy Hot Pot: A model case of Chinese local brands going global.

In the Chinese market, KFC initially positioned itself as a high-end Western fast food brand and gradually penetrated the mass market through localization transformation. Having shifted its focus from first-tier and second-tier cities to full coverage in third-tier and fourth-tier cities, KFC has become a national Western fast food brand. McDonald's has maintained a mid-to-high-end positioning, mainly targeting young students and urban white-collar workers in first-tier and second-tier cities. Yoshinoya positioned itself as a Japanese casual dining, mainly for office workers, and attracted a large consumer group with its image of convenience and healthy light meals. When entering overseas markets, Yangguofu Spicy Hot Pot promoted the concept of "meat and vegetable combination with customizable selection". In terms of brand narrative, KFC and McDonald's have deeply integrated traditional Chinese culture, festivals, and social hot issues to build localized brand narratives. They have launched festival advertisements and promotional activities during traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, National Day, and Mid-Autumn Festival to reduce the cultural gap as a foreign brand. Yoshinoya focuses on the combination of minimalist Japanese culture and urban life in China, attracting contemporary young people with fast casual meals that fit their lifestyle. Yangguofu Spicy Hot Pot takes Chinese dietary culture, Sichuan-style cuisine, and self-selected dining culture as its core narrative to attract a large number of overseas consumers. In terms of emotional value, all fast food brands need to establish emotional connections and reduce the sense of alienation as foreign brands through localized festival marketing, warm brand stories, and childhood nostalgia marketing [5]. McDonald's and KFC have become common venues for young people's socializing, dating, and parent-child dining, endowing consumption with social attributes; Yoshinoya has built a minimalist workplace lifestyle label, and Yangguofu Spicy Hot Pot has created a healthy light meal label, which is in line with the mainstream trend of healthy consumption overseas to satisfy consumers' social value [6]. In summary, the strategies adopted by McDonald's, KFC, and Yoshinoya to enter China include product localization, marketing localization, and positioning localization, reducing cross-cultural barriers through cultural integration, ensuring quality through standardization, and enhancing consumer perceived value through localization. The core logic of Yangguofu's global expansion is cultural differentiation: retaining the core characteristics of Chinese products with minor product improvements, and attracting recognition from overseas consumers through multicultural appeal [7].

3.3. Analytical dimensions

This paper systematically analyzes different brands from four dimensions: product localization strategy, brand positioning strategy, brand narrative, and consumer perceived value.

4. Case analysis of fast food brand marketing strategies

4.1. KFC: deep localization strategy in China

Differences in dietary culture are often the most critical issue that fast food brands must consider when entering a new market. For the Chinese market, Western fast food brands need to address greater disparities in taste preferences and dietary customs. While retaining their core Western identity, they must also make localized adjustments based on local eating habits. Among them, KFC has carried out particularly prominent localization reforms. Since KFC entered the Chinese market in 1987, KFC has actively studied local raw materials, consumer preferences, and other local market conditions, and established a product research and development team and test kitchen in the 1990s. While maintaining the novelty of Western fast food, KFC has launched many products that align with local dietary culture and foster a sense of belonging among consumers, such as Old Beijing Chicken Roll, Fresh Shrimp Spring Rolls, and Portuguese Egg Tarts, as well as various Chinese-style breakfast items, including congee, soy milk, and fried dough sticks [8]. Furthermore, in the process of deep Sinicization, KFC has continuously refined its offerings and launched products with distinctive Chinese regional flavors from Beijing, Sichuan, Guangdong, and other areas, such as Old Beijing Chicken Roll, Sichuan Spicy Crispy Chicken, and Old Duck Soup [8]. Its high degree of localization has enabled it to surpass McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and other brands to become the largest foreign Western fast food brand in China.

4.2. McDonald's localization process

Different from KFC's radical localization strategy, McDonald's expansion in the Chinese market has generally been based on steady and cautious attempts. McDonald's entered the Chinese market in 1990, three years later than KFC. Unlike KFC, which opened its first restaurant in Beijing, McDonald's set its headquarters in Hong Kong and opened its first mainland store in Shenzhen. It was not until 2002 that McDonald's opened its first restaurant in Beijing, and it moved its headquarters to Shanghai in 2004 [9]. Later, McDonald's opened stores in many large first-tier and second-tier cities in China with certain consumption power [10]. After KFC's Old Beijing Chicken Roll became a hit in 2002, McDonald's launched the Five-Colored Tender Chicken Spinach Roll as a reference. Following this first attempt, it gradually introduced Chinese-style breakfast items such as soy milk and fried dough sticks. Different from KFC's deep localization, McDonald's still focused on its standardized burgers, fried chicken, and other Western fast food products. It can be seen that although McDonald's and KFC are both influential Western fast food brands, McDonald's has been relatively slow in localization and store expansion. KFC has opened a large number of stores in third- and fourth-tier cities and successfully integrated into grassroots consumers in China, while McDonald's still focuses on first- and second-tier cities with strong consumption power. With the continuous development of China's economy and the expansion of McDonald's stores, the brand has tentatively launched some localized products. Although its sales volume and store expansion results are not as good as KFC's, its steady promotion of localization has still made it the second-largest international Western fast food brand in China.

4.3. Yoshinoya: cultural similarity and competitive pressure

Unlike the other two relatively successful Western fast food brands, Yoshinoya, a Japanese fast food brand, is now facing considerable difficulties in the Chinese market. Yoshinoya entered the Chinese mainland in 1992 and opened its first store in Wangfujing, Beijing. In the early stage of China's reform and opening-up, Chinese consumers held high expectations for foreign brands. Influenced by **Tokyo Love Story** and **Norwegian Wood** at that time, Japanese culture enjoyed considerable popularity in China. As a result, Japanese fast food naturally became synonymous with high-end Japanese cuisine in people's minds. Moreover, similar eating habits and dietary culture enabled Yoshinoya to integrate into Chinese society relatively quickly. Japanese fast food, represented by Yoshinoya, soon won a large number of post-80s and post-90s consumers. However, with the development of the times, Yoshinoya's marketing strategies have encountered several problems. First, Yoshinoya has a limited product range and lacks new product research and development, which has made its original loyal customers feel bored. Second, as a fast food brand, its product prices are too high. The signature beef rice, originally priced at 18 yuan per bowl, has now risen to 24 yuan, and the low cost-performance has discouraged some customers. Facing competition from cheap and diverse local fast food brands such as Shaxian Snacks, Yoshinoya has gradually lost its competitiveness. About 30 Yoshinoya stores closed in 2022, and its subsidiary brand Hanamaru Udon completely withdrew from the Chinese market. In response to the rise of local brands and the loss of consumers in the Chinese market, Yoshinoya has also made attempts at differentiation. It launched limited-edition Pokémon tableware, renovated its restaurants into café-style venues, and introduced Japanese anime culture to attract young people. Nevertheless, these attempts achieved limited effects and failed to reverse Yoshinoya's difficult situation in the Chinese market [11].

4.4. Yangguofu Malatang: localization and Chinese brand globalization

When China became the second-largest economy, its market now influences the world and has become more and more important. Chinese consumers no longer hold strong admiration for foreign brands, and local Chinese fast-food brands have gradually come into the spotlight. A representative example of such brands that have expanded domestically and gained prominence overseas is Yangguofu Malatang. By the end of 2025, the brand had nearly 200 overseas stores covering more than 20 countries and regions. Taking South Korea as an example, the average daily revenue per store reaches approximately 20,000 RMB. After its early rapid expansion, the brand has placed greater emphasis on balancing Chinese malatang elements with local tastes and innovating dishes with localized characteristics. It has shifted from catering to the demand for Chinese flavors among overseas Chinese to attracting more local non-Chinese consumers. While actively expanding into overseas markets, Yangguofu has also strengthened its brand narrative. In South Korea, which shares a similar dietary culture within the East Asian cultural sphere, Yangguofu adopted a differentiated positioning by associating malatang with health preservation. It launched a herbal bone broth containing more than 20 kinds of oriental botanical spices, including 16 herbal ingredients. Taking the concept of "food therapy and health preservation, where medicine and food share the same origin" as its new differentiating edge, Yangguofu has built a unique market position overseas [12].

5. Comparative discussion of marketing strategies

Table 1. Comparative analysis of brand marketing strategy

	Localization Degree	Product Strategy	Market Positioning
KFC	Radical, deeply integrated	Full localization, extensive Chinese-style products	Full market coverage, penetration into third- and fourth-tier cities
McDonald's	Moderate, maintains global consistency	Standardized products dominant, limited localized trials	Focus on first- and second-tier high-consumption cities
Yoshinoya	Minor flavor tweaks, differentiation	Anime IP collaborations to attract young consumers	Focus on first- and second-tier cities, targeting office workers
Yangguofu	Local flavor adaptations	Strengthened brand narrative, health-preserving food therapy concept	Focus on cities with large overseas Chinese communities to boost influence

As Table 1 shows, KFC achieved broader market penetration and cultural identification through radical localization, while McDonald's maintained efficient operations and a premium image via steady standardization. Their strategic differences reflect divergent priorities in market adaptation at different development stages. As a mature foreign brand, Yoshinoya struggles with product aging and price competition in China; as an emerging local brand, Yangguofu prioritizes cultural adaptation and innovative narrative when going global. The two demonstrate distinct survival strategies in different market environments.

6. Conclusion

Based on an analysis of the overseas marketing cases of four distinct brands and the perceived value theory, the following conclusions can be drawn. Brands that differ greatly from the local original culture should focus on localization, develop products with local characteristics to enhance local consumers' sense of identity, and launch limited-time packages and promotional activities during local traditional festivals to improve local consumers' favor and trust in the brand and increase their emotional value. When entering markets with similar dietary cultures, brands should pursue differentiation while expanding and strengthening their own brand narratives. While ensuring product quality, brands should highlight their unique features to differentiate themselves from similar local products and explore the space for cultural premium. Taking their own characteristics as the entry point to lead the dietary trend and enhance local consumers' sense of social identity. When fast food brands expand into overseas markets, they need to balance localization and brand characteristics. Brands with obvious dietary cultural differences can promote localization to build emotional identity among local consumers. Brands with similar dietary cultures need to build their own brand narratives, innovate and launch characteristic dishes in line with their brand narratives, lead the dietary trend of local consumers, and strengthen their social identity.

References

- [1] Wang, M. Y. (2025). A Cross-Cultural Study of Starbucks' Social Media: China and the US. *International Journal of Innovative Social Science*, 8(1), 12-20.
- [2] Zhang Ting. Influencing Factors of Consumers' Purchase Intention for Local Food from the Perspective of Consumption Value Theory. *Rural Economy and Science-Technology*, 2024, 35(20): 238-240.
- [3] Arpit Chaudhary. "Cross-cultural marketing in the fast food industry". *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, ISSN: E-issn 2348-1269, p- issn 2349-5138, Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp.605-613,

- [4] Zeithaml V A. Consumer perceptions of price, quality, and value: A means-end model and synthesis of evidence. *Journal of Marketing*, 1988, 52 (3): 2-22.
- [5] Sweeney J C, Soutar G N. Consumer perceived value: The development of a multiple-item scale. *Journal of Retailing*, 2001, 77 (2): 203-220.
- [6] Kim C, Park J. Cultural adaptation of global fast food brands: A comparison of McDonald's and KFC in China. *Journal of International Food & Agribusiness Marketing*, 2019, 31 (4): 389-406.
- [7] Hofstede G. *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Sage Publications, 1980.
- [8] Pang, W. Y. (2023). Research on the localization of marketing strategies of multinational corporations—Taking KFC as an example. *International Brand Observation*, 15, 34-43.
- [9] Guo, X. S., & Wu, Y. F. (2012). A brief discussion on McDonald's localization in China. *Commodity and Quality*, S6, 23.
- [10] Huang, W. C., & Han, S. C. (2022). Localized marketing strategies of foreign catering enterprises in China—A comparative analysis based on KFC and McDonald's. *National Circulation Economy*, 30, 4-7. <https://doi.org/10.16834/j.cnki.issn1009-5292.2022.30.001>
- [11] Liang, H. (2023). Why Japanese fast food is losing market appeal. *Fortune Life*, 01, 50-53.
- [12] Su, Z. (2026, January 9). How Chinese malatang embraces the overseas market. *Wenhui Daily*, p. 006.