

Recontextualization of sushi: A cross-cultural analysis of consumer experiences in Japan and the United States

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Abstract

Purpose: With Japanese food becoming a world cultural heritage and the number of inbound tourists to Japan for food experiences increasing, the Japanese government considers Japanese food as a tourism resource and promotes the attraction of tourists from overseas and the export of Japanese agricultural, forestry, and fishery products. Understanding how Japanese cuisine, particularly sushi, is received internationally and how the concepts and eating behaviors surrounding sushi change in the process of cultural transfer overseas is crucial for cultural comprehension and for developing marketing strategies for Japanese cuisine in foreign markets. The purpose of this study was to analyze how customers' experiences of Japanese food, especially sushi, differ from those in Japan, and what differences exist in the perceptions of sushi restaurants between Japanese and non-Japanese customers as sushi change their aspect, relocate, and take root overseas.

Design/methodology/approach: This study conducted a text analysis of online reviews for sushi restaurants in Japan and the United States. Reviews were collected from the top 20 sushi restaurants on Tabelog in Japan and the top 30 sushi restaurants on TripAdvisor in the United States. The collected reviews were classified based on whether the reviewer was Japanese or non-Japanese. The data were then subjected to tokenization and morphological analysis before conducting the text analysis.

Findings: This study finds about the differences in user experiences in Japan and the U.S. as well as in Japanese and non-Japanese customers for sushi. The results of the study indicate that the aspect of sushi has changed differently between Japan and the U.S., and that this has led to differences between Japanese and non-Japanese in the way they perceive sushi that has developed overseas. Sushi was decontextualized and recontextualized to fit the local context when food culture was transferred from Japan to overseas. This study also indicated that Japanese customers have different expectations when visiting sushi restaurants in the United States compared to their experiences at sushi restaurants in Japan. This suggests that even among Japanese individuals, their sushi dining experiences in the U.S. are influenced by differing expectations from those they have in Japan.

Research limitations/implications: Although this study focuses on sushi restaurants in Japan and the United States, analyzing cases from other countries could provide further insights. Nevertheless, the results of this study offer important implications for understanding the adaptation and transformation of food culture in other cultural contexts, which is essential for the marketing strategies and international expansion of the sushi and Japanese food industry.

Practical implications: The findings have practical implications for the global sushi industry and the broader Japanese food sector. By understanding the different expectations and experiences of Japanese and non-Japanese customers, businesses can tailor their marketing strategies and improve customer satisfaction in international markets.

Originality/value: This study's originality lies in its comparative cross-cultural framework, innovative methodological approach, and specific focus on sushi. Its value is underscored by its theoretical contributions, practical implications for the food industry, and broader impact on cultural studies. The use of extensive review data further strengthens the study's contributions to the academic and practical understanding of cultural adaptation and consumer behavior.

Keywords: Cultural Recontextualization, Cross-Cultural Consumer Behavior, Feature Word Analysis

Introduction

The globalization of Japanese cuisine has seen sushi become a culinary phenomenon beyond its native context. Since its recognition as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013, Japanese food, and sushi in particular, has experienced a surge in international popularity. This trend is not merely about the spread of a cuisine but involves significant cultural adaptation and transformation. Understanding how sushi is perceived and experienced differently in Japan compared to the United States offers valuable insights into the processes of cultural recontextualization.

This study investigates the discrepancies in sushi dining experiences among Japanese and non-Japanese customers in both Japan and the United States. By comparing these experiences, we aim to explore how sushi, a traditional Japanese dish, is decontextualized and recontextualized in different cultural settings. Previous research has largely focused on the globalization of sushi in singular contexts, often neglecting the nuanced differences in consumer experiences across cultures. This research fills that gap by providing a comparative analysis that highlights the transformation of sushi consumption practices in diverse environments.

The data for this study were collected from two prominent review platforms: Tabelog, the largest restaurant review site in Japan, and TripAdvisor, a globally recognized review site for hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions. By analysing customer reviews from these platforms, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the different expectations and experiences of Japanese and non-Japanese diners. The feature word analysis method is employed to extract and compare key characteristics from the review texts, allowing us to identify significant trends and variations in sushi consumption.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader field of cultural studies by elucidating the mechanisms through which a specific cultural element—sushi—adapts and evolves as it crosses cultural boundaries. The findings have practical implications for the sushi industry and the wider Japanese food sector, providing guidance for marketing strategies and international expansion efforts. Through this comparative analysis, we aim to deepen the understanding of how traditional foods are integrated into new cultural contexts, thereby enriching the discourse on cultural globalization and culinary adaptation.

Literature Review

The international dissemination of sushi is believed to have commenced around 1960, when a restaurant critic wrote an article about Japanese food for *The New York Times* in 1960; in 1966, Noritoshi Kanai opened the sushi bar "Kawashima" in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, with sushi chefs from Japan. This led to a surge in popularity of Japanese food as a healthy option among Hollywood stars in the 1970s, and sushi was introduced to the United States. In the 1980s, the release of the TV movie "Shogun" brought Japanese culture into the spotlight. During the 1990s, sushi restaurants opened in various countries, including the United States, London, Hong Kong, Beijing, and France, driven by demand in the United States.

Since the 1990s, many countries have developed unique sushi dishes to suit their local tastes, and various types of "rolls" and "gunkan" (warships) have been created in different regions. When food culture is transferred to a different country, customers experience the food culture as a different culture, with regional characteristics that depend on not only cultural differences between countries, but also the characteristics of the local community in the destination country (Imura, 2021). Kawabata (2016) states that food cultures may face crises in four respects when they cross borders: 1) the food culture they offer, 2) the investors, 3) the ingredients they offer, and 4) the labor force. In order to overcome these crises, the food culture will strive to acquire investors and labor by devising the ingredients and the way in which they are offered. As a result, the food culture may change the way it offers food in a way that fits the local context. Wang (2023) posits that the transfer of food culture is a mediating variable, contingent upon the combination of labor and capital. Wang notes that the different food provisioning processes in Japan and China are affected by divergent food provisioning processes. It is worth noting that the majority of sushi chefs abroad are not of Japanese origin but are, in fact, Asian immigrants. Based on his investigations in China, Wang found that the skills of artisans working within the sushi industry encompass a range of abilities, including the fact that simple labors, such as those responsible for b preparation in the final cooking process, are not sushi chefs and possess only limited experience through on-the-job training. Furthermore, Japanese sushi chefs possess a unique set of skills that go beyond mere cooking techniques, such as those related to food connoisseurship, cooking skills, customer service, and restaurant management. Technological advancements have also been a significant factor in rapidly promoting the internationalization of sushi. These advancements introduce innovative solutions that enhance efficiency and quality. Technology has profoundly impacted the global sushi supply chain. The implementation of AI-based plate detection systems in conveyor belt sushi restaurants has saved time for both customers and staff, thereby improving customer service (Raja et al., 2022). Additionally, advancements in digital and transportation technologies have enhanced inventory visibility, communication with partners, and transportation efficiency across global supply chains (Ratchariya & Limpiyakorn, 2022).

Automated sushi-making machines have streamlined the sushi preparation process, improving efficiency and accuracy while maintaining aesthetic appeal. These machines utilize advanced mechanisms to seamlessly roll and package sushi, reducing manual labor and increasing production capacity. Equipment like sushi-making machines with curtain parts simplifies the sushi production process, ensures uniformity in sushi specifications and food distribution, and ultimately enhances the consumer dining experience.

Technology has significantly contributed to the globalization of sushi by enhancing various aspects of its production, distribution, and consumption. Conveyor belt sushi chains have streamlined billing processes, improving the customer experience (Patchariya, 2022). Furthermore, innovative technologies such as cold plasma and electrolyzed water have facilitated the emergence of new sushi production facilities in various countries. These technologies address microbiological risks associated with sushi consumption while adapting sushi to diverse culinary traditions (Wang, 2013).

Cultural adaptation has played a crucial role in the globalization of sushi, influencing its popularity and evolution in various regions. At Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market, the reconfiguration of relationships among labor, commodities, and cultural influence in international seafood trade has highlighted the regional characteristics of sushi in a globalized urban environment (Ratchariya, 2022). This demonstrates how the global flow of capital and culture affects local markets and food cultures in urban settings (Theodor, 2001).

The internationalization of sushi has had significant economic implications for the global food industry. The ability to adapt sushi to local tastes has enabled Japanese food companies to expand their markets and increase exports. For example, the Japanese government has actively promoted sushi and other Japanese foods as part of its cultural diplomacy and export strategies, recognizing the economic potential of global food markets (MAFF, 2015).

The integration of sushi into American dietary habits, where it is now commonly found in supermarkets, illustrates the impact of non-Western cultures on local food cultures in the United States (Lorenzana, 2023). Furthermore, Filipino "sushi chefs" in Indian cities act as cultural intermediaries, adapting Japanese cuisine to local preferences and contributing to the social dynamics of cultural production. This cultural mediation influences food consumption and production patterns in these urban areas (Wen, 2013). Such cultural adaptation reflects the continuous evolution and localization of sushi, emphasizing its adaptability and appeal in diverse culinary environments (Theodor, 2001).

The literature on the internationalization of sushi highlights the dynamic processes of cultural adaptation and recontextualization. Recontextualization refers to the process by which organizational assets acquire new meanings when introduced into the different cultural and socio-political backgrounds of target stakeholders (Brannen, 2004). This process is crucial for successfully transferring products or services to other cultures, even if the target culture shares many characteristics with the originating culture. Simply understanding the assumptions of the target culture is insufficient; effective recontextualization requires explicitly referencing the linguistic and communicative environment of the target recipients.

The evolution of traditional Japanese cuisine, such as sushi, from a local delicacy to an internationally beloved dish exemplifies the complexities of cultural globalization. By understanding these processes, we can gain valuable insights into the broader phenomena of cultural exchange and adaptation. These insights offer practical implications for companies involved in the global food industry. This study aims to enrich the discourse on cultural globalization and culinary adaptation by deeply understanding how sushi integrates into new cultural contexts.

Methods

This study aims to elucidate the reconstruction of the context of sushi consumption as it is transferred overseas by examining discrepancies in sushi experiences between Japan and the United States. The analysis compares sushi experiences in three scenarios: Japanese customers in Japan, Japanese customers in the United States, and non-Japanese customers in the United States. The objective is not only to compare sushi restaurants in Japan and the U.S. but also to identify the differences in sushi experiences of Japanese customers in their home country versus abroad, and between Japanese and non-Japanese customers in the U.S. By understanding these differences, we aim to analyse how sushi has been transformed and recontextualized in overseas settings.

Data were extracted in October 2019 from two major review platforms: Tabelog, Japan's largest restaurant review site, and TripAdvisor, a comprehensive review site for hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions. For the Japanese data, Tabelog was chosen due to its dominance as a restaurant review platform. In the U.S., although other review sites such as Yelp, Google, and OpenTable exist, TripAdvisor was selected for this analysis because it provides information on both Japanese and non-Japanese reviewers, which is crucial for our comparative study.

From Tabelog, the top 20 sushi restaurants (with a total of 3,337 reviews from Japanese customers) were selected. From TripAdvisor, the top 30 sushi restaurants in the U.S. were chosen, comprising 596 reviews from Japanese customers and 4,411 reviews from non-

Japanese customers. This selection allows for a comprehensive comparison of sushi experiences across different cultural contexts and customer demographics.

Analysis Procedure

Next, the analysis procedure is explained. This study employs a method called "feature word analysis" to examine the review data collected through the aforementioned process, thereby extracting the characteristics of each dataset. As part of the data preprocessing, it is necessary to extract words from the documents using a technique known as "morphological analysis" for the Japanese text data. Unlike English sentences, Japanese sentences lack clear delimitations between words, necessitating this process.

Morphological analysis involves dividing text into units called morphemes, which are roughly equivalent to words. These units are then analyzed based on their part-of-speech information. In this way, words can be extracted from a Japanese sentence by morphological analysis of the document.

Juman and ChaSen are common morphological analysis programs, but the results of analysis vary greatly between Juman and ChaSen due to their different morphological part-of-speech systems. In this study, we perform morphological analysis using ChaSen, which is capable of more detailed part-of-speech classification, given the large amount of part-of-speech information used.

In this study, we conducted feature word analysis on the extracted review data. Feature word analysis is widely used across various fields and for multiple purposes. In the field of technology, it is employed to extract feature words from patent documents to identify trends and key technologies. In scientific literature, principal component analysis is applied to identify sets of words that indicate scientific advancements. The extracted words are presumed to be useful for information retrieval and understanding scientific progress. In the context of genome sequences, word-based genomic signatures are utilized to identify functional DNA elements, particularly in the analysis of promoter sequences related to DNA repair pathways. This method has demonstrated effectiveness in identifying putative functional DNA elements. In the field of semantic analysis, feature word extraction is used to rank words with multiple meanings based on their usability, thereby clarifying the meanings of words within text data. Therefore, feature word analysis aligns well with the objectives of this study. The feature word analysis procedure involves the following steps:

1. The target corpus is analysed using corpus analysis software, with the reference corpus serving as a baseline for comparison. We used Text Mining Studio 7.1.2.
2. Keyness is expressed as a number, with log-likelihood ratios commonly used in this process (Dunning, 1993). This statistical method is useful for analysing rare and common phenomena in the occurrence of a given phenomenon.
3. Words that appear frequently in the target corpus are analysed using the log-likelihood ratio method.

Thus, we use feature word analysis for macro-observation of the vocabulary of an entire text.

Findings

The results of the key word analysis revealed the following: The Tabelog is a collection of word-of-mouth reviews of reputable sushi restaurants among the Japanese population. These sushi restaurants are characterized by the fact that customers make reservations days, sometimes months, in advance and are seated at a counter-type table. First, after the waiter offers you a hand towel, he or she asks you what you would like to drink (alcohol, tea, etc.). Generally, the seat in front of the restaurant's best chef, called the "taisho (boss)," is considered the best seat in the restaurant. The size of the restaurant depends on the number of sushi chefs,

but the maximum number of people that can be served by one chef is about five to six. After the drinks are served and the customers have settled down, the sushi chef asks the customers what they would like to eat. In most cases, customers order sashimi first, or the restaurant will offer a la carte dishes, and after tasting these, the customer is asked what he or she would like to order. This is the flow of service at a high-end sushi restaurant in Japan.

Some restaurants offer pre-prepared course meals, but customers who order a course meal often sit at a table rather than at the counter. The restaurant also generally directs course meal customers to table seating. This is a service culture unique to sushi restaurants, unlike the case of course meals in Japanese restaurants.

In contrast, the majority of U.S. sushi restaurants obtained from TripAdvisor are large establishments with more than one hundred seats or large chain restaurants. The average customer purchase prices are also significantly lower than those obtained from the Japanese sushi restaurant rankings. Despite the rising popularity of raw fish due to the health food trend and the popularity of Japanese cuisine, the menu offered at sushi restaurants in the U.S. is diverse and includes a variety of dishes beyond sushi.

The following three analyses will examine how these differences in business practices and cultural background impact the sushi experience for customers.

Figure 1 illustrates the results of the Tabelog analysis for Japan. The top terms include Boss, Snacks, Sake, Tuna, and Counter, with Snacks referring to a la carte dishes served when seated and served with sake. The top four terms are more prominent in Japan than in other languages and are considered the most important elements of the image of a sushi restaurant for the Japanese, consisting of Boss, Snacks, Sake, and Tuna. The high frequency of Tuna suggests that it is the menu item that determines the reputation of sushi restaurants, and that the selection of Sake is more important than beer. In the middle, many words related to the taste of sushi appear, including Umami, Sourness, Aroma, and Salt, indicating that the respondents are sensitive to the evaluation of taste. In the second session, words related to service, such as "customer," "on your own choice (omakase)," and "smile," are used to evaluate the service spirit, which is known as the "omotenashi spirit," or "spirit of hospitality," typical of the Japanese.

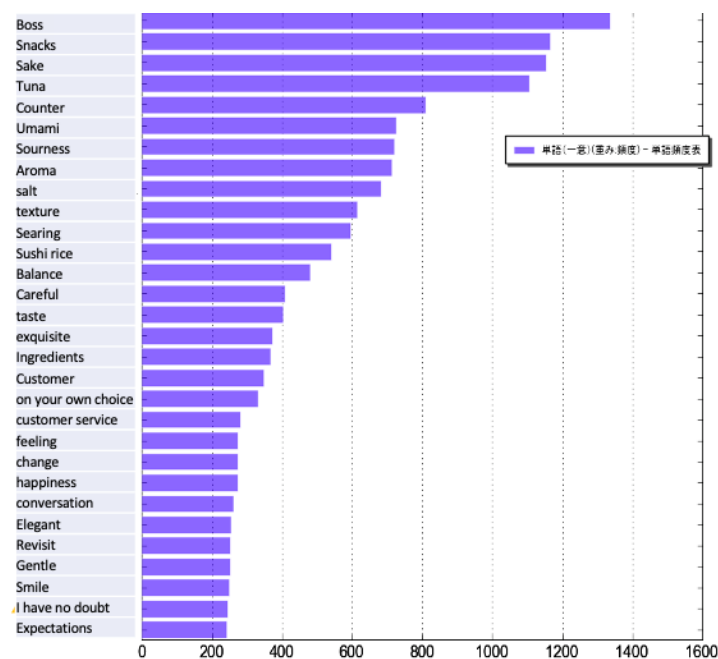


Figure1. Tabelog Analysis (Sushi restaurants in Japan)

Figure 2 displays the comments of Japanese visitors to the United States regarding sushi restaurants. The evaluation provided by Japanese visitors showcases the price of sushi as the most common factor, with descriptions such as "expensive" and "Washoku" indicating that the sushi experience in the United States is perceived as expensive compared to Japan.

Additionally, the figure showcases comments regarding specific menu items, with tuna topping the list in the Tabelog, indicating that Japanese visitors are interested in American specific menu items, including rolls, clam chowder, and lobster bisque.

In terms of restaurant reputation and atmosphere, the figure shows that the number of staff, rice, and the variety of rolls are important factors in determining the similarity to the sushi restaurant experience in Japan. Furthermore, the results indicate that the quality of service and operations by floor staff have a significant impact on the level of satisfaction, as the restaurants tend to be large-scale and provide fewer opportunities for direct interaction with artisans.

Comparing the results of the Tabelog analysis to the evaluations provided by Japanese visitors, the figure shows that Japanese visitors are more interested in menu items that are not available in Japanese sushi restaurants, with comments regarding taste being less common.

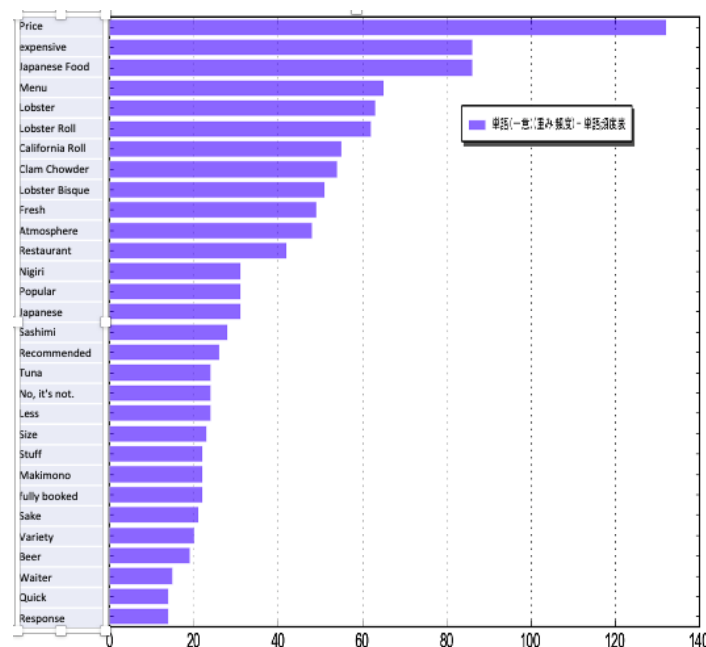


Figure 2. TripAdvisor analysis (Sushi in the US, by Japanese customers)

Figure 3 displays the comments submitted by foreigners on TripAdvisor. The majority of the comments pertain to the location of the restaurant, such as the hotel, restaurant, and bar. Following these are comments about the chef and staff, as well as the atmosphere, friendliness, and other aspects of the restaurant. Terms related to cross-cultural experiences with Japanese food culture, such as Japanese, sashimi, experience, etc., and specific menu items, such as bread rolls, lobster, spicy, etc., appear in the middle of the list. The only comment related to taste was "spicy," in contrast to the numerous taste-related terms that appeared in the Tabelog. Additionally, drinks such as cocktails, wine, etc. appear. This suggests that while Japanese people typically drink sake or beer with sushi, foreigners are more likely to consume wine or other beverages at sushi restaurants in the United States. It is also worth noting that in Figure 2, Japanese people frequently commented that sushi restaurants in the United States are "expensive," while foreigners frequently remarked that they are "cheap."

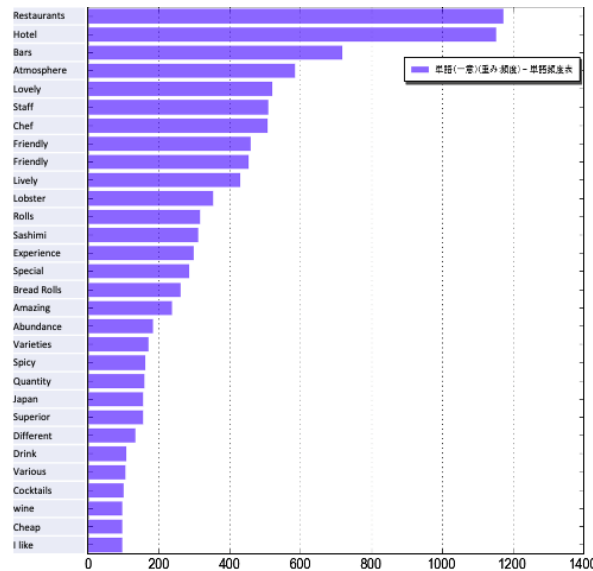


Figure 3. TripAdvisor analysis (Sushi in the US, by US customers)

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis revealed that Japanese people value the unique atmosphere and space of sushi restaurants when it comes to the experience of eating sushi, and they also recognize sushi as a delicate dish that is enjoyed for its taste and aroma. They also seek the Japanese spirit of hospitality in the service and attitude of customers. On the other hand, foreigners are more interested in the appearance and impact of sushi, and appreciate a "Japanese" cross-cultural experience. They prefer "spicy" flavours with impact, rather than subtle flavors. In addition, sushi restaurants in the U.S. offer many menu items other than sushi, and are perceived as seafood restaurants in addition to being conceptualized as "Japanese restaurants."

While there is a belief that traditional Japanese food culture should be directly transmitted in order to transfer and penetrate Japanese food culture overseas, the reality is that cultural transfer is decontextualized through encounters with the local culture, and recontextualized in a way that adapts to the local food culture, social system, etc., by incorporating some of the local culture. In the case of sushi, the Japanese craftsman's culture is also transferred to the local culture. The skills of Japanese craftsmen have been replaced by machines, making it possible for unskilled workers to produce sushi on a conveyor belt. This facilitated the transfer and penetration of sushi culture overseas. It has made it possible for not only Japanese craftsmen but also Asian immigrants and other chefs who have no direct knowledge of Japanese culture to serve sushi overseas. This is the first factor

Theoretical Implications

The study makes significant theoretical contributions by enhancing the understanding of cultural recontextualization. It provides a detailed examination of the processes through which sushi is decontextualized from its original setting and adapted to fit local contexts abroad.

Practical and Social Implications

The implications of this study include cultural and economic impacts. This insight into how the globalization of sushi affects cultural exchange and economic dynamics in both exporting and importing countries. It also provides recommendations for policymakers in terms of regulating and promoting culinary arts as a form of cultural exchange.

This research identifies areas for further research, such as the environmental impact of global sushi consumption or the sociological aspects of culinary globalization.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study focuses on sushi restaurants in Japan and the United States, analysing cases from other countries could provide further insights. Nevertheless, the results of this study offer important implications for understanding the adaptation and transformation of food culture in other cultural contexts, which is essential for the marketing strategies and international expansion of the sushi and Japanese food industry.

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