

Evolving Customers Expectations of Japanese Restaurants in a Post-Covid Era: Indonesia Evidence

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Abstract – The popularity of Asian restaurants worldwide has been gaining momentum due to various attributes such as food trends, health concerns, and unique Asian flavors. Specifically in Indonesia, Japanese cuisine is booming due to, amongst other things, J-pop, tourism ties, and strong business relations. The 'pause' forced by Covid-19 seems to have created more attention to the healthier elements of Japanese cuisine, like naturally prepared Sushi, and subsequently, post-Covid era. The shifting customer expectations when choosing 'which' Japanese restaurant style is preferred should be understood in greater detail. This research investigates the Japanese restaurant industry in Indonesia through small focus group discussions. It utilizes a phenomenological qualitative technique to capture the lived experiences of consumers within the Indonesian market. While several studies exist to explore the evolving demands of consumers, few of them explore the topic from the view of consumers rather than restaurants or corporations. The current study examines the topic from the perspectives of customers who currently and frequently visit Japanese restaurants in Indonesia. The study aims to understand better customers' intent to visit one Japanese restaurant versus another, alluding to what marketing approach the business needs to take to meet customer needs in a post-covid era.

Keywords: *Asian restaurants. Japanese restaurants. Post-Covid. Marketing approach. FGD*

Introduction

The restaurant industry in Asia is booming with the changing cultural diversity and improved financial stability. Tamotia and Bhutada (2020) note that the increased demand for professional food service entities and exotic cuisine is apparent. More so, they accredit the trend to the growing and impressionable middle class, rising income, young population, and westernization (Tamotia & Bhutada, 2020). They argue that after the closing down of businesses during the pandemic and people being forced to the home cook, people are now dining out more and opting for takeaway and deliveries.

Another trend in the Asian market is an increased desire for exotic brands and homegrown meals while dining out. Despite the increased demand, the consumer market is cost-conscious as businesses and families recover from the economic recession and the pandemic. Therefore, Tamotia and Bhutada (2020) and Zhong and Moon (2020) argue that restaurant chains focus on price reduction while improving the overall experience for their clientele. Zhong and Moon (2020) add that improving the perceived price, food quality, and physical environment attracts customers to specific fast-food service joints; they collected customer data through online surveys of Asian customers. The results showed how customer satisfaction, loyalty, and happiness lead to returning clients and improved business prospects.

The changing trends in customer demand in Indonesia result in improved sales and brand image of Japanese restaurants. From a macro level, the customer trends favor Japanese food service companies, with 19.23% of Indonesian consumers prefer Japanese cuisine (Ernawati & Suwandojo, 2019). Al-Mamun (2021) associates the popularity with the diffusion of Japanese cultural norms, the freshness and taste of food, and the overall assumption that the dishes are always healthy. As more people in Asia value and seek exotic and healthy food, the Japanese option is always available.

From a Mezzo and Micro level, Japanese Restaurants use their cultural heritage to attract consumers looking for traditional food in an authentic atmosphere. These restaurants in Medan talk about differentiating their products by using arrangements and ingredients that resemble those in Japan (Situmorang et al., 2021). Nevertheless, some Japanese restaurants also use hybrid methods of combining Japanese cuisine with the demands of the Indonesian people. For instance, traditional Japanese meals have pork which is not well-done or even raw, while Indonesians prefer well-cooked spicy and salty food. As a result, the traditional Japanese food in Medan changed to accommodate the preferences of the local Indonesian people while still utilizing authentic Japanese styles.

With the increasing demand for authentic cultural experiences worldwide, Japanese Restaurants in Jakarta report seeing an increased number of tourists visiting their premises. Septiani and Marizar (2022) conducted deep research through photography and physical observation on one of the famous Japanese Restaurants in Bandung, Shabu Kojo Restaurant. They found that the restaurant differentiates itself from the rest by investing in more than just serving Japanese specialties. The interior design follows a traditional Japanese Style framework with "typical Japanese pattern, ceiling shapes, door designs, the use of chochin lamps, Noren decoration elements... and natural materials" (Septiani & Marizar, 2022). The same trends exist in Jakarta among restaurants with similar cultural practices.

Due to popularity of Japanese Cuisines, the establishment of such restaurants in the Blok M area increased. Businesses took advantage to the changing demographic trends to promote the sale of Japanese culinary and traditional meals in the city (Jonathan et al., 2020). More so, Jakarta's entertainment and hospitality scene changed to incorporate Japanese norms and preferences; clubs and bars included pro-Japanese Karaoke nights and drinks into their service lists (Jonathan et al., 2020). The most prolific change was the introduction of staged authentic Japanese restaurants with the surrounding, atmosphere, customer service, and cuisine mimicking the trends in mainland Japan. In Jakarta, the Japanese culture is evident from the entertainment joints, Japanese schools and the unique benefits offered in Cikarang hospital as cited by Jonathan et al. (2020).

Apart from the usual market trends among customers, the Covid-19 pandemic transformed the hospitality industry in several ways. The food service industry changed during the pandemic to accommodate technology and social media presence. Covid-related restrictions prompted businesses to use online platforms and delivery services to connect with consumers (Yuningsih, 2021). All restaurants in Indonesia changed to accommodate features such as cloud kitchens, food-food chain services, and healthy alternatives. Fortunately, Japanese restaurants predominantly offer healthy meal options and can easily shift to cloud kitchens.

The post-pandemic hospitality industry in Jakarta focused more on personal hygiene, advanced crisis response mechanisms, and the establishment of digital infrastructure. Given that the pandemic spread through physical contact, the hospitality industry reduced in-house infection rates by improving hygiene standards (Sembiring et al., 2021). For instance, restaurants in Indonesia installed hand washing stations within their premises. Asia-Pacific countries, with Indonesia included, incorporated sanitization, masks and temperature checks as contributing factors to customer loyalty (Ray & Ma, 2021). More so, Sembiringi et al. (2021) found that personal hygiene affects customer satisfaction by a factor of 73.1%. Others also provide face masks for customers who wish to add an extra layer of protection.

More so, the development of crisis response mechanism and digital infrastructure also increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. Firstly, after the onset of the pandemic, consumers value preparedness in business with most people associating business success with disaster management protocols (Sembiringi et al., 2021). Perception of preparedness increases consumer confidence in specific brands. Secondly, customers nowadays prefer digital infrastructure and are more likely to contact restaurants with delivery service or mobile food

service facilities (Sembiringi et al., 2021). More so, far-off customers use these digital channels to access Japanese food without traveling physically around Jakarta. It broadens the customer base by including the introverted clientele.

Consumers value authenticity, price, location, social branding, and use of digital infrastructure. Using these assertions, secondary data suggest changing consumer expectations in Asia-Pacific countries, especially Jakarta, Indonesia. The following analysis will explore the changing customer expectations and demands of Japanese Restaurants in Jakarta, Indonesia. Given the changing consumer trends for Japanese restaurants and post-pandemic era, the study will focus on collecting primary data on the consumer expectations, the changes made within the Japanese restaurants, and the impact on consumer relations. More so, it will gather, through observation and field interviews, and the lived experiences of customers in G-Sushi Restaurant Chain in Jakarta. Afterward, the study will provide direct quotes and paraphrased responses from customers and their impact on the value of perceived price, service quality, physical environment, use of technology and innovation, and the attractiveness associated with Japanese culture.

Statement of the problem

Limited knowledge on consumer behavior and preferences creates operational problems for restaurant managers. The management either uses inappropriate marketing techniques and make wrong decisions. Stankevich et al. (2017) supports the study of customer behavior in restaurants noting that it helps organizations plan and execute a relevant promotional and marketing strategy. In Jakarta, Japanese restaurants seem to draw different customer groups into their premises. An exploration of the phenomenon through exploration from the customer's perspective is valuable. It helps restaurants understand what they are doing right and what needs to change. It can help Japanese restaurants compete and survive within the large Indonesian market.

Based on these sentiments, there is a growing need and a research gap on the evolving consumer demands on Japanese restaurants in Indonesia especially from the direct responses of clients. While contributing factors of perceived price, service quality, physical environment, technology and innovation, and Japanese culture are widely discussed, few articles explore the topic from the perspective of consumers. Most of the literature captures the opinions of restaurants or corporations rather than the customer base. The current study will focus on capturing the exact voice of consumers in the Indonesian market. In so doing, it will conceptualize the perceived value systems of customer in the Japanese Restaurant environment in Jakarta.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Several articles assert that Japanese restaurants' customers value taste, service quality, and e-CRM. They focus on customer satisfaction and loyalty because it drives customer choices and expectations. Andriyani and Hidayat (2021) conducted an empirical study in Jakarta, Japan on factors influencing customer demands and preferences. They argue the internet, as used by Gen Z and Millennials, leads to consumerism and a culture of Japanization. The study focused on Sushi Tei Restaurant and found that adding Japanese taste, service quality, and e-CRM (Andriyani & Hidayat, 2021). More so, the era of information era created a positive outlook as depicted by anime films, comics, and Japanese cuisine. Most Japanese restaurants, such as *3 Wise Monkeys*, focus on service quality, price fairness, and food quality to increase their competitive advantage (Setiawati & Bernarto, 2022). The following analysis explores the changing customer demands for Japanese Restaurants in Asia, specifically Jakarta.

The theory of buyer-behavior (main theory of the study)

The theory of buyer behavior fits perfectly into the current study by addressing the preferences of clients in restaurants. According to Howard and Sheth (1969), consumer behavior is often repetitive and interested parties are able to map out purchased cycles for numerous services and products. For items such as food and hygiene products, the cycle is short and the purchase rate is high. The consumer uses the same techniques in selecting the brands to use. Organizations looking into penetrating a market or increasing their sales can use the theory to under the mind of a customer. In the classic understanding of the theory, the client will explore the alternatives, select some brands in the shortlisting process, and apply decision mediators to connect the motives with the alternatives (Howard & Sheth, 1969). After exploring all options, the customer picks one among the different options. The theory applies perfectly with the study because the consumer will consider several factors before picking the restaurant. The following sections explore some factors considered within the value system of consumers such as service delivery, quality of the product, price, behavioral intent, and location and atmosphere.

Service delivery

Customer demands and satisfaction have a close correlation with service quality. Clients' demand and satisfaction rate originates from a sense of feeling and emotional fulfilment or lack thereof. The interaction between expectation, experience, and actual service determine the success of any restaurant (Mim & Ferdous, 2021). Service providers such as the waiters, hostess, and the hospitality of the setting affects delivery and quality of the experience. While these eating joints focus on tangible products, the non-tangible services also matter. Clients may not remember the price or appearance of certain products, but they also recall the emotion associated with a place or how a person made them feel.

Service processes affect the quality of activities within restaurants. If the services are of high quality, new customers become loyal and returning customers, as noted by Jatupornmongkol and Mahamud (2021). The alternative is also genuine, with customers avoiding restaurants with bad experiences. The authors assert that market research and regular improvement on service delivery leads to increased demand. Hoang and Suleri (2021) conducted an empirical study that revealed that restaurants in Vietnam upgraded their delivery services during the quarantine era while maintaining high safety standards within their outlets. Hoang and Suleri (2021) adds that the staff should have appropriate knowledge and experience working with the local clientele. They should act with empathy and strive to satisfy their needs and preferences.

With the onset of technology and the pandemic, more businesses diverted their service delivery to digital systems. Andriyani and Hidayat (2021) acknowledges the benefits of using E-CRM and social media to rich younger clients in Jakarta. Content sharing and use of easily accessible CRM system attracts Gen Z and millennials. More so, the pandemic prompted businesses to non-physical means of interacting with customers. Rusiyani et al. (2022) also conducted an empirical study on consumer satisfaction in Jakarta on the Hanamasa Restaurant; the findings showed that service quality affects customer satisfaction and loyalty in comparison to product quality.

The quality of the product (food)

The restaurants also explore the quality of the physical products offered; the food should satisfy the demands and needs of the customers. Mim and Ferdous (2021) talk about having a luring smell, assortment of menus, and ensuring the taste and nutrient value is high quality. Other classification include checking if the food is fresh and pleasing aesthetically. While numerous factors affect customer preference, loyalty, and behavior, the food quality commands

a large portion of the hypothetical chart. In fact, the most basic attraction of the entire establishment is food. Ryu, Lee, and Kim (2012) and Ko and Su (2015) outlined several metrics in food quality. They talked about safety, hygiene, and the cooking art. They conclude that food quality and customer's purchasing conduct are closely connected.

While multiple factors affect customer demands, the product aspect affects the perception and demands of customers. Jatupornmongkol and Mahamud (2021) notes that the companies should ensure the food is hygienic, fresh, and provide a variety of menus. More so, these organizations focus on customizing Japanese meals and environments by providing an authentic style and satisfying the needs of consumers regularly. Nevertheless, the two authors (Jatupornmongkol and Mahamud (2021)) propose having the food designed to suit future target groups. Hoang and Suleri (2021) posits that taste, smell, sight, and temperature of food add to the overall ambience, leading to positive customer experience.

More so, these restaurants should retain a high level of authenticity by safeguarding and promoting the Japanese taste. The meals should consist of traditional Japanese cuisine such as *Sushi, udon, ramen, and miso* (Andriyani & Hidayat, 2021). More so, the style should improve and reflect the Japanese taste in terms of appearance, taste, and the serving technique. The end product becomes a distinct smell, temperature, and texture which advocates for the traditional brand.

Price

Price affects restaurants in a plethora of ways; it affects customer satisfaction and loyalty. Most people connect price with service excellency and product quality within the hospitality industry (Mim & Ferdous, 2021). The style of the organization in terms of product and service affects the expected price ranges among customers. More so, the choice of eatery among customers uses price as a point of reference in most times. Hospitality firms use pricing as a key aspect of their marketing; they base their choice on how the quality of service and merchandise interacts with the market value. The normal verbatim describes price decency as the key factor in customer satisfaction and loyalty (Mim & Ferdous, 2021). Price cuts across all level of social classes and can determine the choice of purchase, especially if service and product quality are satisfactory.

Jatupornmongkol and Mahamud (2021) note that Bangkok customers prefer having a clearly set price and variety in food. These authors argue that Bangkok customers want a suitable price that considers the quality of raw materials and change in market trends. Unrealistic price ranges discourage customer loyalty and satisfaction. Setiawati and Bernarto (2022) describes price fairness as a key factor in attracting consumers. In fact, Hidayat et al. (2019) conducts a study on the local eateries and determines that perceived price fairness has the largest impact on Indonesian consumers' loyalty.

Behavioral intention

Customers also decide on the choice of the restaurant based on emotional likelihood and apparent probability. Emotional aspects such as the need for fulfillment and the effort placed by the management affect customers' preferences and expectations (Mim & Ferdous, 2021). Namkung and Jang (2010), as cited in Mim and Ferdous (2021), affirm a direct correlation between rationality, emotions, and other social factors. It implies customers' demands for reasonable quality and food price, aside from other behavioral factors, determine the need for specific restaurants. General perspectives on distinctive restaurants, such as convenience and waiting, lead to positive or negative feelings.

Jatupornmongkol and Mahamud (2021) also affirm the value of personality, willingness to serve, and quality of fast service in hospitality. They argue that a good image becomes a merit or a barrier to business expansion. More so, they recommend training employees to improve employee behavior and increase the business image to customers. Interestingly, the Japanese culture in Jakarta is widespread, with popular sectors such as entertainment, manga, and food (Andriyani & Hidayat, 2021). Popular culture in Indonesia incorporates Japanese traditions and norms, such as having J-pop as a popular music segment.

Western food is compared to Indonesian meals, with the younger generation opting for an authentic Western experience. Ernawati and Suwandojo (2019) argue that the Indonesian consumption trends are shifting with more people preferring 'western' food than their native food. Nonetheless, these restaurants should consider using a hybrid interior design, given that the younger generations gained a taste for Western food.

Hospitality firms should also consider the impact of marketing on the changing behavior of customers. While maintaining an authentic and consistent Japanese style is crucial, reacting to competitive marketing by rivals is vital. Dzulkifli, Kusumawati, and Mawardi (2015) explored the marketing strategies employed by Saboten and Sugoitei, two restaurants in Malang, Indonesia. They realized creativity and authenticity in marketing increased the restaurant's market share. Creativity in keeping customers entertained rather than bored made a difference (Dzulkifli et al., 2015). More so, the lowering of prices by Sugoitei increased the number of consumers from the medium social class.

Location and atmosphere

As with other businesses, the general location and atmosphere can affect the customer demands of restaurants. Customers consider the convenience and comfortable area to reach when picking eating places. The management considers several factors as noted by Mim and Ferdous (2021), namely, "rent or home costs, number of potential customers, access streets, parking, restaurant visibility, traffic conditions, neighborhood, growth potential, the proximity of competitors, safety and security" (p.20). All these features imply that location and atmosphere affect customer visits, satisfaction, and the cost of products—the surroundings and the specific location act as part of customer satisfaction and expectation metrics.

Jatupornmongkol and Mahamud (2021) support these assertions by Mim and Ferdous (2021), stating that the environment and atmosphere affect the satisfaction of customers. The environment would include music playing, the dining table, and the seating structure, among other concepts (Jatupornmongkol & Mahamud, 2021). More so, Hoang and Suleri (2021) found that restaurants in Vietnam changed their internal processes to suit the changing customer expectations after COVID-19. These eating joints focus on updating their interior design to increase customer satisfaction. Hoang and Suleri (2021) adds that cleanliness is a critical concern for customers after the pandemic.

The general atmosphere within Japanese restaurants focuses on creating an authentic traditional ambiance. Tunggul Wirajuda, from the Jakarta Post, describes Kikugawa Japanese Restaurant as a wonderful, calming, and reliable eating joints. The restaurant in Jakarta offers the same Japanese dishes such as Sushi, Sashimi, and tempura for over five decades (Wirajuda, 2022). More so, the management retained the timeless traditional inn focusing on the "sound of a shamisen, antique porcelain dolls and decorative fans" (Wirajuda, 2022). Like, most Japanese restaurants, the authentic cultural norms remain because the ownership passes from one generation to the next. Currently, Kikugawa Restaurant is run by the founder's grandson, Tommy, who avoids introducing modern twists to Japanese meals. For instance, Tommy avoids putting *mentaï* mayonnaise on most modern Japanese meals.

While most Japanese restaurants in Jakarta serve the local Japanese population, many clientele are native Indonesians. The restaurants managed to maintain their competitive advantage as an exotic Japanese brand in a seemingly Indonesian environment (Wirajuda, 2022). Apart from physical locations, traditional restaurants popularize their meals using social media platforms. Wirajuda (2022) notes that the restaurant featured on TikTok and Instagram numerous times in the recent past. Bernarto, Purwanto, and Masman (2022) supports these assertion noting that brand image and price fairness add to the appeal of the restaurants in Jakarta. It indicates that while the clientele values an authentic Japanese cuisine and atmosphere, they also consider the price fairness and the popularity of a given restaurant.

Study approach

The approach utilized a qualitative technique that synthesized information through photographs of the target community and items. The data collection process involved using focus group discussions (FGD) and multi group discussions (MGD). It explored the factors affecting consumer perceptions and expectations on Japanese Restaurants. The study targeted the world of Sushi as exhibited by Japanese restaurants within Jakarta. More so, it focused on G-Sushi as one of the prominent brands In Indonesia having been in business for almost a decade. It explored the issue of attaining high brand saliency and Word of Mouth (WoM). The qualitative analysis explored how the G-Sushi brand fits into the large food service industry. In so doing, it collected the feedback on consumer perception on their specific sushi category offered by the company and those of others.

Objectives of the study

The study focused on understanding the changes made by G-Sushi to maintain its competitive edge in the Sushi market within Indonesia. In so doing, it explored the following viewpoints:

- The consumer's demands, preferences, and behaviors in the Sushi Category by collecting in-person response from clients at the restaurant.
- The key determinants of low saliency and word-of-mouth outcomes for client groups based on age, socioeconomic status, single/married categories.

The main objective of the study is to fully synthesize the value systems of customers visiting Japanese Restaurants in Jakarta. It involves answering one question, "What does value or perceived value mean to clients within the restaurant environment?"

Research methods

Research Design: The study focused on understanding the lived experiences of customers visiting Japanese restaurants. As a result, it selected a single chain of Japanese restaurants, G-Sushi restaurants, for the case study analysis. The goal was to obtain unbiased and raw responses of consumers with minimum or no interference from the researchers. They chose to hold small interviews with the current clients of the given restaurants using focus groups and qualitative techniques. It also applies the constructivist viewpoint where reality is likely to be subjective rather than objective.

In an effort to explore the available resources and understand customer expectations and preferences for ethnic restaurants in Jakarta, the researcher implemented guidelines for in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Initial development on the research topic began with a comprehensive literature review. The process resulted in methodological insight and issues associated with the scope of research. Moreover, the literature review analyzed and synthesized scholarly sources in understanding the standards and processed necessary to provide an effective data collection and analysis processes.

Furthermore, the process referenced Randolph (2009) and Petkovic et al. (2020) calling for systematic analysis of variables associated with the research questions. The researcher followed the process by first identifying the associated variables; these variables provided a guideline on the type of articles needed. Afterward, the individual selected articles based on the research question, hypothesis development, and scope of research. The processed centered on the target variables and their connection to the study topic. Finally, the researcher conducted a field study by interviewing the customers of a Japanese restaurants, collecting first-hand information, and making comparison with the literature review.

Participation Selection and Data Collection: The methodology consisted of three groups where each group will have four respondents. Researchers recommended a minimum of three to four group meetings for simple research topics (Burrows & Kendall, 1997). The principle of theoretical saturation, where focus group discussion sessions are run until a clear pattern emerges and subsequent groups produce no new information (Krueger, 1994). This study involved both male and female participants who are university students, workers, or from families. The Primary data was recorded and transcribed from respondents who are regular visitors of G-Sushi Restaurant Chain in Jakarta, Indonesia. These respondents visited different Japanese restaurants within the region, took the pictures, offered additional information on the experience, and its overall ranking. More so, the study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis. Then again, it added simple descriptive statistics in terms of percentages to understand the consumer demographics and their behavioral tendencies.

Research Analysis: The analysis used personal interview to explore the conditions faced by consumers during and after the pandemic. It addressed the safety protocols taken by both the restaurant management and the clients. It provided artefact in terms of paraphrased findings and direct transcripts from respondents. Finally, it offered percentages to understand the kind and behavior of consumers who frequent the Japanese food service company. Interviews focused on consumer loyalty, preferences, and emerging trends in the restaurant industry. The researcher used manual coding to explore the respondent feedback since the sample size is less than 20. Participation selection involved picking regular and random regular clients willing to participate in the study. It focused on capturing images of meals and sitting arrangement among other concepts within the restaurant chain.

A preliminary study found that clients employ certain criteria and preferences when picking restaurants, especially Japanese ones. As per the phenomenological approach, the researcher conducted a content analysis process and provide phrases and quotes for data presentation and analysis.

Results and Discussions

The following table illustrates the results matrix as obtained from the study:

Table 1: Results Matrix

Results	Indicators	Data Source and Collection Method	Baseline	Target	Assumptions
<p>Objective: The study utilized a qualitative approach to determine the evolving customer expectations of Japanese Restaurants in a Post-COVID Era.</p> <p>Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The study should help new restaurants understand the current Indonesian Market for ethnic restaurants. It allows existing restaurants understanding the external and internal contributing factors to success. <p>Outputs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The results demonstrated the value of cultural inclusivity and identity in attracting the current customer base. It also showed the value of technology, such as apps and serving trains for predominant ethnic restaurants in Indonesia. The study demonstrates the effect of customer demographics such as economic strength, age, and social status on taste and preferences. Lastly, it demonstrates the value of price, environmental ambience, and quality of food, brand image, and service delivery on success in the food service industry. 	<p>Qualitative factors such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality of good Price of services and food Quality of service offered Location and atmosphere Behavioral intention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The use of focus group discussions (FGD) The use of multi-group discussions (MGD) It involves collecting responses from participant attending the G-Sushi Restaurant. The researchers also collected images and conducted simple polls on specific questions and objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current market conditions and expectations of the average restaurant in Indonesia Data disaggregated using sex, age, and social status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An increase in demand of Japanese restaurants as reflected by the indicators. Understand the appeal of Japanese restaurants in Indonesia Data disaggregated using sex, age, and social status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The assumption is that most people interviewed for the focus groups are drawn by the Japanese norms and practices in G-Sushi chain of restaurants. The consumers have a broad experience of various restaurants in Indonesia and can ascertain the uniqueness of a Japanese restaurant.

The respondents noted that in 2022, the habit of eating out increased among residents in Indonesia. In so doing, the normal customer volume and sales started increasing in all eateries, including Japanese restaurants. According to the feedback, customers adjusted their behavior during the pandemic and are now overcoming the initial fear and social distancing behavior. Given that the number of infections reduced drastically, in 2022, compared to the previous years. More people are enjoying the convenience of physical visits in exotic eating joints. The following proposition developed from this finding:

Proposition R-A: The demands of consumers changed during the pandemic with people having a deeper appreciation for quality time eating out afterward.

The following tables shows that the number of people eating out at restaurants and visiting malls increased tremendously. More so, 80% of the participants said they had frequented the Japanese restaurant recently. The following figure shows the frequency as compared to before 2022:



Figure 1: Increased Market for Restaurants in 2022

As observed below, these restaurants implemented health and safety measures to protect consumers after the pandemic. They take safety seriously by ensuring all clients have masks and use hand washing stations. Some places went further to provide masks for their clients. The following tables consumers wishing to use their services. Others still offer delivery services for at-home clients as noted below:

Table 2. Health and safety protocols

Functional Area	Safety Protocols	Supporting Scholarly Articles
Age-based Requirements	To prevent in-house infection in high-risk areas, G- Sushi chain prompted guests to show proof of vaccination and identity card. Children and vulnerable age-groups were discouraged from dining out and given the option for a discounted take-out option.	Most public eateries and restaurants complied with government regulations on age restrictions as supported by Norris et al. (2021), Byrd et al. (2021), Nicola et al. (2020).
Head Count at any given time	The restaurant reduced the capacity of clients to about 60% of full capacity in areas gazette to have the Corona Outbreak.	Restaurants reduced their head count to reduce infection and promote social distancing (Norris et al., 2021).
Safety Gear Requirements	All guests were required to wear masks if not eating and remain in their designated tables unless otherwise stated or in case of emergencies.	Masks and social distancing in public became mandatory especially in eating areas (Norris et al., 2021; Nicola et al., 2020)
Installation of Plexiglass	The management constructed plexiglass on the counters and between each eating area and table. It reduces inter-group transmission while in the restaurant.	Protective structures in places where close proximity is necessary reduces infection rates indoors (Norris et al., 2021; Nicola et al., 2020).
Use of Cashless Payment Systems	The establishment only accepts Debit, Visa, and MasterCard. Alternatively, they also take mobile app payments.	Most restaurants started using cashless payments before the pandemic but the virus increased its use (Kotkowski & Polasik, 2021; van der Cruijssen & van der Horst, 2019)

Safety protocols in Japanese restaurants

More so, feedback from the field showed that the heightened expectation of cleanliness and food safety would not reduce after the pandemic. Some clients preferred cashless payment during the pandemic and they still do up to now. Nevertheless, whereas most premises reduce unnecessary human contact as a safety precaution, the consumers still value human interaction

and opt for the traditional full-service method from the staff. For instance, most of the consumers (46%) preferred physical menus rather than those displayed in tablets and mobile apps (14 %, 9% respectively). Similarly, 51% preferred having waiters and waitresses than using any self-ordering program. The following transcripts provided an overall understanding of the general response to cleanliness, food safety, and human interaction in the restaurants:

Female, employee: *"Cleanliness is a mandatory. It's not negotiable especially for a public space with people coming and eating food."*

Female, employee: *"When coming to the restaurant, I want to be served. We're tired of work already. If we're greeted with a smile and professional service, it will boost my mood again."*

Therefore, the following proposition developed:

Proposition R-B: Despite social distancing protocols and quarantine measures being popular during the pandemic, consumers now prefer having a more personal touch with waiters and physical menus while visiting restaurants.

In addition, the consumers overwhelming asserted that reasonable prices are among the drivers of client loyalty and satisfaction. Some argued that they reduced the frequency of visits because it is costly to eat out. After the pandemic, more people learned or got used to eating cheaply at home. The respondents noted that the consumers were more frugal after the pandemic. Interestingly enough, consumers are looking for affordable meals at a time when the cost of electricity and other factors of production has increased as observed from the given research artifact (transcript from respondents):

- Male, employee: *"If the brand is already well-known, the ingredients used and the processing should be trustable."*
- Male, Family with Kids: *"Eating at mall's restaurant should not be too often because its Costly...That is why if I want to go to a restaurant, it must be worth the money I spend."*
- Based on the respondent groups, the type of consumer profile determined their attitude towards the meal price and the overall experience. University students, as respondents, were price-conscious and were likely to pick less expensive foods and restaurants within Jakarta. More so, the students spent less time visiting restaurants and preferred dining out on weekends.
- Between 24 and 30 years, workers seemed more demanding of the quality of products and preferred having unique experiences. Most of these consumers responded positively to warm greetings and high-quality service after long working hours. However, the group preferred dining out on weekdays as a result of business meetings and recollection with colleagues.
- Lastly, the family group dines out for leisure and prefers healthy diets and friendly customer experiences. They are available mostly on weekends and provide various meal options, especially those considerate of children's daily needs.

The following proposition developed from the analysis of consumer preferences:

Proposition R-C: The evolving consumer demands for Japanese Restaurants changed based on age, social status, and price of the product/service.

The atmosphere and location also play a role in customer expectations and loyalty. According to the feedback, Japanese restaurants have a unique thematic interior design. A classic atmosphere and ambiance are standard in Japanese restaurants where consumers enjoy slow eating. A calm and soothing ambiance is associated with a quiet and peaceful escape from reality. Other Japanese restaurants opt for casual, fun, and extroverted atmospheres suited for customers. In the case of Indonesia-based restaurants, the management customizes the experiences to suit different groups. For instance, 'all you can eat' (AYCE) for a special group celebration, ramen for a casual friend group, and Sushi to savor the moment slowly.

Proposition R-D: Consumers have a deep appreciation for the calming and welcoming ambience in Japanese restaurants; a positive atmosphere and location will attract more consumers.

Food quality also affects customers' expectations and demands for Japanese restaurants, as observed from the research findings. The report asserts to the gastronomical experience associated with the specific ethnic food and options. More so, the cuisine offers a variety of dishes available for consumers. Moreover, Japanese people believe in tasting the food with eyes before actual consumption. As a result, most of the meal arrangement involves serving multiple dishes in small portions for the clients. Japanese food is uniquely designed to reflect the culture and provide Indonesian consumers with a unique experience. Research findings note that the Japanese foods are desirable for three reasons as noted below:

- The already existing market for rice-based foods.
- The already existing market for extravagant-looking cuisine.
- The newly constructed market for raw-meat cuisines.

The following proposition developed from this finding:

Proposition R-E: A higher quality of food and uniqueness draws more customers in Japanese restaurants. Therefore, consumers prefer receiving an authentic Japanese cuisine in the establishments.

Excellent service delivery is also evident among Japanese restaurants. It draws in consumers who value fine dining experiences such as the older Indonesian clients. The respondents note that while entering the restaurants, they are greeted with "irasshaimse", which means 'welcome' in the Japanese language by the servers. More so, the servers instruct clients to ring a bell when they are ready to make an order after going through the menu. Afterward, the staff bow and say "arigato gozaimashita" which means 'Thank you in English. The elderly in Indonesia value quality service delivery and are more inclined to visit these restaurants. While the younger Indonesian consumer would value self-service business models in eating joints, the warm reception compels them to return and become loyal customers. Therefore, the following proposition was exhibited:

Proposition R-F: Exemplary service delivery will attract and maintain a steady flow of consumers; Japanese restaurants should have unique greeting phrases for clients and be hospital as much as possible.

Among the standard norms in Japanese culture is the art of adoption and automation to improve human life. In an effort to cater to the younger generations, the respondents note that these establishments introduced innovation and technology in food service. The G-Sushi chain uses the "Kaitenzushi" model in serving food. It involves using a "delivery train," which goes

direct to tables. The given train is coupled with touchscreen tabs in these Japanese restaurants. They provide clients with touchscreen tabs to complete the self-service model. While retaining an authentic cultural experience is vital, the management also introduced tech-based systems to attract and retain newer customers. Therefore, the following proposition developed:

Proposition R-G: The application of innovation and technology will attract new customer bases especially those from the younger generations. Therefore, additions such as delivery trains and apps can be used to target specific market niches.

Conclusion and implications

The findings from the research show several concepts associated with the Japanese brand that attract consumers. Firstly, cultural identity creates brand equity that places a universal mark of authenticity among Japanese restaurants, especially those in Indonesia. Brand equity develops from customer connections by creating a sense of meaningfulness, different/unique experiences, and saliency. The management of the G-Sushi chain added some meaningful characteristics by making the consumer believe or think the restaurant meets their needs in terms of authentic experience, good meals, and warm reception, among other concepts.

The uniqueness and saliency connections developed from the trends and dominating characteristics of the premises. The 'different' brand equity extends from having restaurants majorly centered, and not observing Japanese norms and practices such as warm greetings, respect for personal space, and exotic cuisine. Saliency developed from the ability to serve quick and tasty meals to-go, such as Sushi and rice. Consumers value the convenience of enjoying something unique, accessible, and affordable within their locale. Apart from brand equity, the G-Sushi chain focuses on increasing their market power by incorporating the needs of both the young and the old in their business model.

Using the given suggestions and findings from the study results, the G-Sushi Chain should utilize the following guidelines to create a way forward for their brand.

Table 3. Guidelines for restaurants to evolve post-covid.

Short-Term	Long-Term	Support from Scholarly Articles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The company should familiarize their products to consumers by expanding their operations to popular areas. For instance, G-Sushi Chain should open branches in malls and popular streets across Indonesia. More so, they can increase their online presence by having social media pages, channels on YouTube, and accounts on Twitter, Instagram, and food review apps. • The company may also opt for brand-marked merchandise and after-sale material. For instance, the cashier can offer flyers, balloons, and signage for consumers or use attractive promo to draw more business. They can run marketing ads on popular billboards across the country. • The company can also introduce halal certification for all or some of the dishes. According to Misachi (2017) from World Atlas, over 200 million Muslims are in the country. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To make their brand different and meaningful, the company should research the main attraction in their premises and capitalize on it. For instance, they can introduce better greeting traditions to improve the dining experience. • They can also have suggestion boxes on taste, quality, and future dishes for consumers to fill. In the long run, they can actualize some of the suggestions. • G-Sushi may introduce more tech-based solutions to compete in the long run. They can learn from the competition; the rival Japanese restaurants also use revolutionary techniques. For instance, Mega Sushi Chain uses AI Greeting robots in all branches. • The company can also work with WoM (Word of Mouth) by promoting customer recommendations. Word of Mouth promotion will develop after the chain organization improves the general ambiance, has unique chef dishes, and targets a specific audience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Khan and Ghouri (2018) notes that geographical expansion by opening new branches is an excellent customer-defined market orientation tactic. • Bourlier and Gomez (2017) also calls for internet penetration strategies to appeal to the younger generations. • Lockett (2018) conducted a qualitative study exploring the impact of marketing strategies on sales for small businesses; she found that innovation-based tactics increased revenues and appeal. • Agrawal and Trivedi (2020) noted that Word of Mouth is an informal marketing strategy promoted by restaurants; they argue that people trust the reviews given by family members, friends, and loved ones more than formal ads.

The way-forward for G-Sushi

However, the following study also explores the challenges within the given business model in G-Sushi Chain. The organization should explore the following shortcomings in the business as follows:

- G-Sushi should upgrade the 'train system' to deliver food. They can improve the speed of the train or purely rely on human servers in the affected branches. The delay in moving food across the tables is creating challenges with quality service delivery.
- Three of the branches on the G-Sushi Chain are in obscure locations and are less convenient for Indonesian consumers. As a result, they have fewer clientele than the rest of the branches. Relocation is a possible intervention for three branches, perhaps moved to the nearest malls or business centers.
- Some clientele complained that some servers are not as welcoming as others. The management can offer employee training regularly to sharpen their skills and improve their interaction with consumers.
- Finally, the chain should consider improving their social presence on platforms and introducing a delivery service app specific for their branches. Like other food service giants, the chain may consider launching an app to help serve more consumers and boost their market shares, especially for those who are not eating out.

G-Sushi remains a formidable Japanese food service brand in Indonesia. The study explored the attractions associated with Japanese restaurants, specifically the G-Sushi Chain. These brands use their cultural heritage as authentic Japanese businesses to attract consumers. They target Indonesian residents looking for a unique, meaningful, and salient experience in an ethnic restaurant. The Japanese influence pushes for a warm ambiance, and traditional meals are served either raw as Sushi or lightly cooked. These restaurants offer a variety of meals served in small portions. More so, the consistency and warm reception draw the older population within the country. Younger generations also visit these restaurants because of the new innovation and tech systems such as ordering apps.

Policy implications

The restaurants should pay close attention to the customer decision-making process as a business strategy. Factors such as price of food, quick service, the ambience, and quality meals affect the selection of dining areas. In the context of Japanese restaurants, the management should include cultural norms into the service as a mean of retaining authenticity.

The study also shows that customers are vocal and can promote or discredit the establishment. For instance, word-of-mouth recommendation seem popular among consumers. Therefore, the management should ensure the customer experience is memorable and positive. Positive communication within the surroundings can increase the client base tremendously.

Lastly, the study proposes customization of promotion projects to suit the associated business model. In the case of Japanese restaurants, they can mix classical advert techniques with elements of the ethnic artefacts and people. While urbanization and westernization are rampant in Indonesia, a growing number of people are searching for authentic cultural experiences. The trend can boost the customer volume by drawing people looking for cultural encounters.

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