

Restaurant Chains in China

Guojun Zeng • Henk J. de Vries
Frank M. Go

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The Dilemma of Standardisation versus Authenticity

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Guojun Zeng
School of Tourism Management
Sun Yat-sen University
Guangzhou, China

Henk J. de Vries
Rotterdam School of Management
Erasmus University
Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Frank M. Go
Rotterdam School of Management
Erasmus University
Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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Guojun Zeng
Henk J. de Vries

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE

Restaurant customers demand not only personal and innovative products and services, but also cost-effective ones. Enterprises have the option to meet the former demand by offering authentic products and services. For achieving cost-effectiveness, they can use standardization. So they may want to use both concepts but these seem to contradict each other: does not standardization affect authenticity? So suppliers face an authenticity-standardization dilemma. Or is it a paradox? This book aims to identify and discuss the authenticity-standardization dilemma for restaurants against the background of translocality.

DESIGN

The case study method is adopted for this study. Empirical data come from China, a country with an increasing number of inner immigrants. Four restaurants have been selected to exhibit four extreme combinations of authenticity and standardization. Another two cases have been chosen to explore the paradoxical combination of high levels of both authenticity and standardization. Semi-structured interviews with both producers and consumers are used.

FINDINGS

Findings show that authenticity and standardization do not exclude each other but the two may be combined in a coordinated way. The resulting expansion strategies of restaurant groups are classified into four extreme categories: Heterogeneity, Standardized Chains, Authentic Alliance, and Standardized Authenticity. The core competence of restaurant groups with the most challenging strategy ‘standardized authenticity’ is to standardize the core set of authentic elements. Our case studies reveal that authenticity is a dynamic concept. The staging of authenticity in a recomposed format to accommodate variety leads to objective authenticity, standardized authenticity, and symbolic authenticity which can be adopted by local restaurants, restaurant groups, and translocal restaurants, respectively. Findings are informative for other service industries as well, such as hotel groups, hospitals, and airlines.

ORIGINALITY

The study constructs an authenticity-standardization framework as a new way to reconcile the tension between the two concepts and to understand the strategic choices in the restaurant industry under translocality. Restaurant groups can innovatively match different categories of consumer groups to develop their expansion strategies. The authenticity-standardization paradox challenges the existing methodologies that are constrained by limiting binaries, such as authentic-fake and back-front for instance.

RESEARCH IMPLICATION/LIMITATIONS

This research advances the understanding of the relationship between authenticity and standardization. However, due to the limitation related to the limited number of cases in this present study, future research should include a greater diversity of restaurant groups in order to increase external validity of findings. A next step could be survey research: more systematic and comprehensive sampling would contribute to higher reliability and validity of the examination. A consumer-based approach that is currently neglected in most research of restaurants should be given more attention. Future researchers can put our analysis further and learn more from the perspective of customers.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The authenticity-standardization framework can be applied to underpin decision-making in the complex context of restaurant group expansion, that is, subsidiaries of restaurant groups, and be related to different growth stages. The conclusions are also helpful for restaurant groups to reconsider their service concept and achieve a sustainable competitive advantage.

KEYWORDS

Authenticity, China, Restaurants, Standardization, Translocality

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