Online Consumer Engagement Toward Cross Cultural Products in Japanese Restaurant Franchise Marugame Udon

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Abstract

Foreign market often comprises unfamiliar challenge due to different culture. The creation of cross-cultural products by foreign company is highly welcomed by the consumers from any local market. Cross-cultural products can give favorable outcomes for the company intent to succeed in foreign market. This paper aim to look at Marugame Udon cross cultural product which localized its Japanese udon noodle with extra spicy flavor common to Indonesian culinary. Marugame Udon utilized online platforms to launch its new spicy menu during the time of movement restriction by Indonesian government due to COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this paper aim to observe online consumer engagement toward Japanese cross-cultural product from Marugame Udon by employing the five consumer engagement sub-processes for the development of consumer engagement meaning in online context. The result provides iterate interaction between the consumers and the company which led to favorable outcomes of loyalty, empowerment, connection and trust.

Keyword: consumer engagement, online consumer engagement, cross cultural product

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, companies around the world are eagerly looking for new and broader foreign markets. The key for a successful presentation of their new products in a foreign market depends on the understanding of the target market's geographic, socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural characteristics [1]. Therefore, as one of the underlying aspects to influence the favorable outcome of penetrating foreign market, culture remains an important element in international marketing research [2]

Since 1970s companies' branding research changed their focus from producers and products towards consumers. In this major change, brands acquired economic meaning and were managed as cultural, ideological, or political objects [3]. The new concept drives today's companies to concentrate on cross-cultural processes. Companies underwent various innovations to create highly attractive products suitable to their foreign markets.

Currently, In Southeast Asia, Indonesian economy is viewed as the largest economy and the fastest emerging market economies globally. The GDP of Indonesia reached all-time high of 1,042.17 billion USD in 2018, this is an indication of the ability of Indonesia to grow quite steadily, and currently the economy is in a growth mode [4]. It brings foreign companies and investors to engage in Indonesian market, especially companies from other Asian countries. Japan is known as a key strategic partner to Indonesia. It has become Indonesia's largest investor since

foreign investment law came into force in 1967, although recent report stated that Japan's investment to Indonesia has decline into the third biggest source [5], but Japan and Indonesia always share strong historical bonds.

Japan government and companies display confidence in how Japanese cultural products, aside of its hi-tech products, such as *manga* (cartoons), *anime* (animation), and traditional Japanese cuisine strengthen Japan's soft power and economy [6]. Japan exported many of their cultural products globally, for example Japanese restaurant. Although initially, Japanese restaurants were run by Japanese people, and targeted only Japanese consumers, but in the 1980 the story of globalization of Japanese food has created new paths. The first is recipe's adaptation to local markets and development of cross-cultural products [7].

Cross-cultural products can be referred as the products come from other countries that have different cultures [8]. Japan companies' attempt in creating cross-cultural products is a form of a condition where product design teams from one culture or context often need to develop products which will be used in another different cultural environment [9]. One of the examples of Japanese traditional food which has been exported around the world and adapted the taste to its local targeted market is Udon noodle. Udon is commonly known as one of the three major Japanese noodle dishes and is a staple of Japanese cuisine and food culture [10].

Marugame Udon is the first Japanese Authentic udon restaurant in Indonesia, opened on 14 February 2013 in Jakarta and has 77 branches across Indonesia. At the time of data collection its online platform followed by 140.000 followers and has 911 posts, provide the relatively extensive number of consumers who engaged within Marugame Udon products or services. Marugame Udon Indonesia has developed several localize menus with spicy flavor, one of them is 'Spicy Beef Karubi' which was launched on 20 July 2020.

Amidst the outbreak of COVID-19 virus and Indonesian government laws that prohibited large crowd to gather at any tourism spots including restaurants, Marugame Udon Indonesia has successfully launched the new spicy menu and received positive feedbacks from its consumers. Marugame Udon Indonesia utilize its online platforms, including Instagram to promote the new spicy product. Online platforms support companies to connect with their consumers with ease. Online engagement is seen as a more strategic way of understanding consumers and companies' relationship [11]. Especially during the pandemic measuring online consumer engagement become more important as people are shifted their interaction from offline to online [12]. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to observe online consumer engagement toward Japanese cross-cultural product from Marugame Udon Indonesia by employing netnographic methodology from [13]. The remainder of this paper is arranged as follows: Section 2 portrays literature review on culture and cross-cultural products. Section 3 defines literature review on online consumer engagement. Section 4 defines the methodology. Section 5 conveys the result and discussions, and Section 6 concludes the paper.

Literature Review on Culture and Cross-Cultural Products

Culture is a multi-faceted dimension. The term culture is used for tribes or ethnic groups in anthropology, for organizations in sociology and management, and for nations in political science, sociology and management, [14]. At its most basic level, culture can be interpreted as shared symbols, norms, and values in a social organization [15]. Hofstede defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" [14]. Culture refers to the way of life, set of norms and beliefs in different societies. Culture is common to members of cultural groups with well outlined boundaries [16]. Nationality also considered as an agent of culture because all the members tend to share similar language, history, and religion [17].

Different culture possesses different cultural products. Franz Boas explained that culture embraces all the manifestations of a community's social habits including the products of human activity as determined by these habits [18]. [19] defines cultural product as nonmaterial goods directed at a public of consumers, for whom they generally serve as an aesthetic or expressive tool. It can be referred to art, music, food and entertainments.

As a result of cultural differences, there has been the need for continuous understanding to adjust the differences. In terms of product choices and consumer preferences, Gillespie et al., explained that cultural aspects of the society influenced the consumers regarding the selection of goods and services [20]. Due to the more connected world, cultural understanding is essential because of the call to interact with many individuals from other countries and other cultures [21]. Cultural understanding is also important for international companies' collaboration with foreign competitors, distributors, suppliers, and government officials. One of the ways is through the establishment of cross-cultural products. Cross-cultural products can be defined as the products which originally come from other countries with different cultures [22]). Although the product was not made in the country of origin, but the product's idea still represents the original culture. Increasing interaction between cultures will lead to cross-stimulation and creative change [23]. Therefore, cross-cultural products can be the means to combine local and foreign ideas, and encourage companies to prevent harmful mistakes in foreign markets.

Literature Review on Online Consumer Engagement

Engagement appeared as an important psychological concept that impacts human behavior and choice across many domains including education, employment, leisure, and marketing [24]. Engagement is also used as a measurement of company's consumer relationship to the extent where consumers created both emotional and rational bonds with a brand. [25] define consumer engagement as "the mechanics of a consumer's value addition to the firm, either through director/and indirect contribution." Consumer engagement can also be seen as consumer retention and consumer loyalty. Researchers have recognized the outcomes of consumer engagement which encompass the idea of loyalty and satisfaction, empowerment, connection and emotional bonds, trust and commitment from the consumers toward the companies [26]. Therefore, it is common to find that companies or organizations put consumer engagement at their basic strategy to win the competitive marketplace.

In line with the increasingly dynamic global market, thriving companies have started to employ the internet to gain consumer engagement. [27]define consumer engagement in specific online context as "the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer mediated entities." Brodie et al., give also definition of what is consumer engagement in an online context. It involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the company, and/or other company's consumers [26]. [28]define consumer engagement in social media as the extent to which the consumers are active in using organization's social media tools. Social media gives access for people to freely interact with others and offers multiple ways for marketers to reach and engage with consumers [29].

The use of internet has shifted consumer engagement more to online context rather than offline context. Considering the growing popularity of online engagement, companies must recognize consumer's need and expectations. Besides, marketing in online context gives compelling possibilities to many companies through lower costs, improved brand awareness and increased sales [30].

Methodology

The focus of this paper is to investigate online costumer engagement toward cross-cultural products presented by Marugame Udon Indonesia. Online consumer engagement can be seen through the consumers comments in Marugame Udon Indonesia's online platform. [26] presented conceptual model for the development of consumer engagement meaning in online context as the outlook to conduct the exploratory research in this paper. Brodie et al's., analysis reveals that the model does not follow an orderly sequential progression of phases over time because consumer engagement is an interplay of relevant sub-processes.
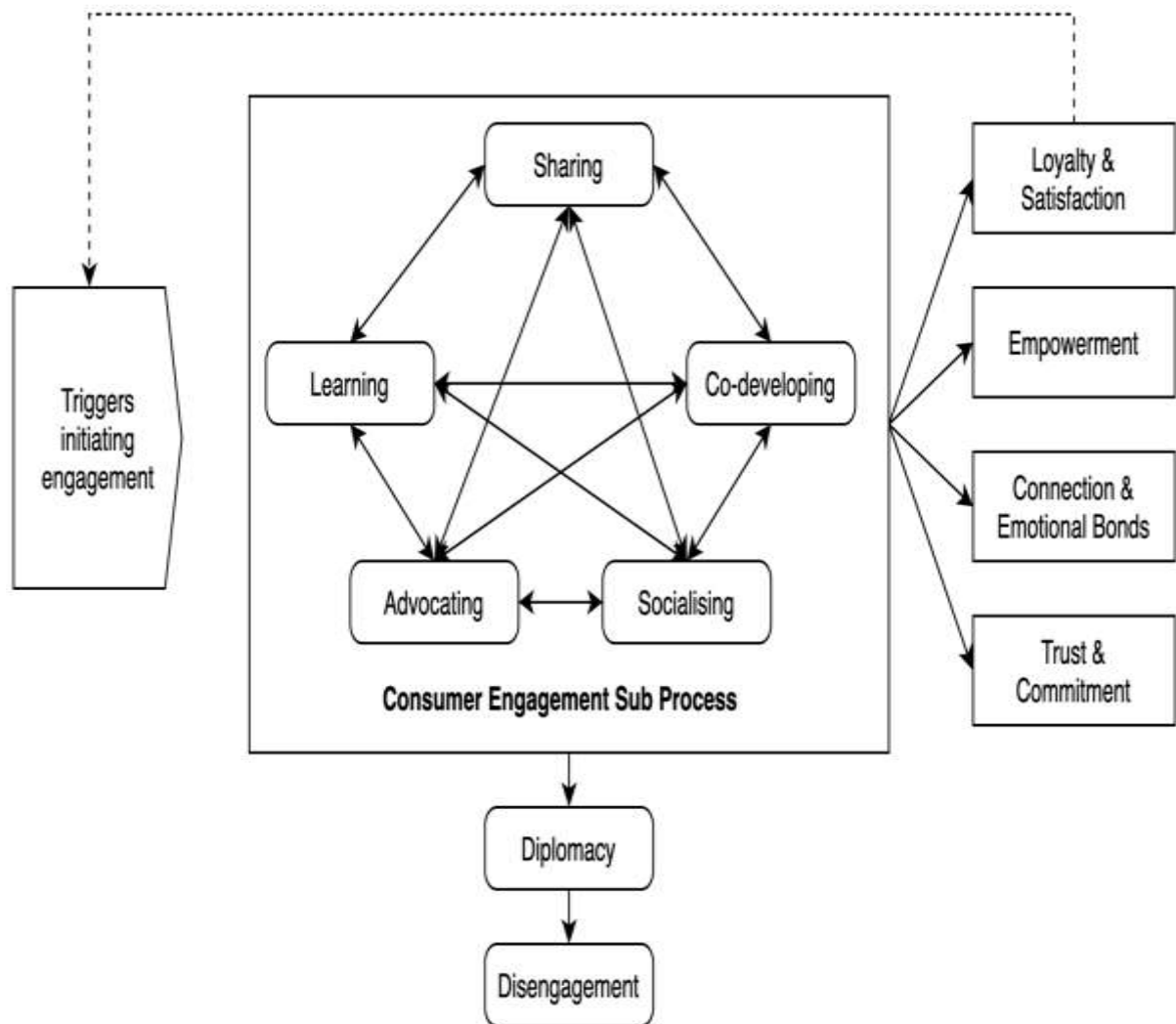
Figure 1. [26]Consumer Engagement Sub Process

The triggers arouse when the consumer must solve a problem or accomplish a particular need and start to create an interactive relationship with the community representing companies or organizations by posting a comment [26]. The triggers connect the five-consumer engagement sub-processes identified in Figure 1.

[26]explained *learning* as vicarious acquisition of cognitive competencies that consumers apply to purchase and consumption decision-making. Consumers learn from other consumers or companies comments and gain knowledge that help them in decision making. *Sharing* is the process of giving active contribution to the co-creation of knowledge in the online community. *Advocating* is consumer engagement expression by giving suggestion of specific products or services. *Socializing* is two-way interactions through which consumers can interact with other consumers. *Co-*

developing is consumer's assistance toward the development of company's new products, services or brand meaning.

The five consumers engagement sub-processes provided a framework for the undertaking of the exploratory research in this paper. The method used for this research is netnography by Kozinets. Netnography is a qualitative research methodology which adapts ethnographic research approach to the study of online community. Originally developed as a response to consumers' increasing internet use, netnography is based on an ethnographic research approach to studying and understanding consumption-related aspects of consumers' lives online [31]. This paper observes the comments given by the consumers toward specific contents within a company's social media platform, namely Instagram. The available online data then analyzed by applying Brodie et al's the five consumer engagement sub-processes. The authors choose Japanese food company, Marugame Seimen (丸亀製麺) also known as Marugame Udon branch in Indonesia, with its online platform https://www.instagram.com/marugameudon/ as the research setting.

Marugame Udon is the first Japanese Authentic udon restaurant in Indonesia, opened on 14 February 2013 in Jakarta. It has 77 branches in Indonesia. At the time of data collection its online platform followed by 140.000 followers and has 914 posts, provide the relatively extensive number of consumers who gave comments toward Marugame Udon products or services. Marugame Udon Indonesia has developed cross-cultural products by localized its Japanese menus with spicy flavor, one of them is 'Spicy Beef Karubi'. Spicy flavor is a typical flavor which largely loved by Indonesian and became one of the key signature characteristics of Indonesian food. Thus, the spicy menus are welcomed by many Indonesian consumers.

Data collection was conducted from the launching of new menu 'Spicy Beef Karubi' in Marugame Udon Instagram account. This paper selected consumers who gave their comments toward the posts uploaded from the outset of 'Spicy Beef Karubi' on 20 July 2020 until 31 May 2021. Consumers' opinions about the new spicy menu and other available spicy menus options are analyzed through Brodie's et al five-consumer engagement sub-processes. The analysis shown several outcomes as described in [26] Figure 1. They are *loyalty and satisfaction*, *empowerment*, *connection and emotional bonds*, and t*rust and commitment*.

Results and Discussion

Further analysis of the data through the employment of the five-consumer engagement sub-process demonstrates that the consumers are highly engaged in the process of *socializing* (41.75%) as can be seen in table 1. The analysis means that the number of consumers who build the two-way interactions, through which consumers can interact with other consumers within Marugame Udon spicy menus posts is the highest. The consumers mostly interact by mentioning their friends' names and inviting them to try the spicy menus. The introduction post of the new 'Spicy Beef Karubi' from Marugame Udon in 20 July 2020 reached a total of 452 comments. The comments are higher compare to Marugame Udon's latest non-spicy menu introduction in 28 September 2020 with only 272 comments.

Table 1

The result of five consumer engagement sub-processes

No	Date	Advocating	Co-developing	Learning	Sharing	Socialising	Total
1	20-Jul-2020	11	0	66	9	121	207
2	3-Aug-2020	2	0	31	10	45	88
3	7-Aug-2020	0	0	15	1	11	27
4	18-Aug-2020	2	0	5	2	5	14
5	22-Aug-2020	1	0	14	3	1	19
6	4-Sep-2020	0	0	13	3	12	28
7	12-Oct-2020	2	0	19	8	9	38
8	15-Oct-2020	0	0	6	1	0	7
9	4-Nov-2020	3	0	12	3	6	24
10	6-Nov-2020	0	0	6	0	1	7
11	11-Dec-2020	0	0	2	0	1	3
12	25-Dec-2020	1	0	15	0	0	16
13	15-Jan-2021	4	0	8	6	7	25
14	22-Feb-2020	12	0	12	24	23	71
15	5-Mar-2020	3	0	2	2	3	10
16	26-Mar-2020	0	0	4	6	8	18
17	21-Apr-2021	0	0	2	5	2	9
	Total	41	0	232	83	255	611
	Percentages	6,7%	0,0%	38,0%	13,6%	41,7%	

The creation of Marugame Udon spicy variants is welcomed by Indonesian consumers who are accustomed to a hot and spicy taste. Indonesian cuisine is known for its wide use of fresh herbs and spices which develops the combination of spicy, hot, strong, sweet, sour, or a mixture of these flavors. The new spicy variant of Udon dish brings Marugame Udon Indonesian consumers to get connected with friends and family to enjoy the meal. Thus, indicate that the *socializing* sub-process occurred in Marugame Udon's spicy menu Instagram post.

Learning is the second most prevalent sub-process which appears in the analysis (38,0%). This process emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge that costumers apply to make purchasing decision. Marugame Udon Instagram account provides not only menu choices but also other important information that the consumers need related to consumer decision making.

The third notable process from the analysis is *sharing* sub-process (13.6%). Marugame Udon's consumers use the platform to share their knowledge and experience after they tried the new spicy menus. The consumers who love the menu encouraged other consumers to try it as well.

The fourth is *advocating* sub-process (6.7%) where the consumers encouraged both Marugame Udon as the company and the other consumers to create or buy specific products and services. The fifth sub-process from the analysis, *co-developing* sub-process, do not gain any engagement from the consumers. There is

no consumer who contribute to company performance by giving assistance toward products or service developments.

The analysis further identifies that the consumer engagement sub-processes which emerged in Marugame Udon's spicy menu Instagram posts resulted in consumer loyalty, empowerment, connection, and trust. Consumer loyalty is seen through the enthusiasm toward the spicy variant udon despite some of the products have been discontinued, for example the comment from @arixxx: "Adain lagi dong menu spicy beef karubi ini. Enak banget ini menu kesukaan saya dan suami."

Empowerment appears in the form of consumers support for the development of new spicy variant of udon dish. Comment from @stexxx: "favorit bangettt spicy beef karubi, bikin lagi dong min yang lebih pedes" is one of the examples of empowerment.

Connection emerges in the outcomes of the analysis as the consumers formed relationship with other consumers by means of Marugame Udon's spicy menus Instagram posts, for example the connection created in this post by @nitxxx: "kuy ini @vigxxx ada yg pedes, cobain besok."

The last, the analysis recognizes *trust* as one of the outcomes of consumer engagement processes. Trust is formed when the consumer has assurance toward the company's integrity and reliability. For example, when a consumer need to ask for specific payment method, the company is available to give assistance. As shown through the comment from @uwuxxx: "Kak, untuk pembayaran lewat e-cash bisa pakai apa aja ya? Lalu ada cashback tidak? Terimakasih." Mainly, the research outline consumer engagement as a mutual relationship between individuals with the company.

Conclusion

This research presented online consumers engagement toward cross-cultural products from Marugame Udon Indonesia on its Instagram account. The employment of netnographic methodology, and the application of Brodies et al.'s (2011) five consumer engagement sub-processes, explained the existence of each sub-processes within Marugame Udon's spicy menus Instagram posts. The five sub-processes constructed the outcomes of online consumers engagement and demonstrated the significance of realizing consumers' aspirations toward specific products or services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online consumer activities become more prevalent, and the utilization of social media for consumer activities will be growing throughout the world. The finding of this study revealed even with the movement restriction due to the pandemic, companies can utilize social media to build online consumer engagement and obtain favorable outcomes especially during the outset of a new product or service. Online engagement through social media supports the company with the establishment of two-way interaction with consumers. Consumers can give their comments on specific products or services to obtain information and/or share their experience with the products. Similarly, the companies can give direct answer toward consumers' questions. Finally, consumer engagement is essential for the companies' because it builds consumer's loyalty and satisfaction, empowerment, connection, emotional bonds, trust and commitment.

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