

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF OMOTENASHI AND CULTURAL FAMILIARITY ON PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY IN JAPANESE ETHNIC RESTAURANTS IN VIETNAM

KHÁM PHÁ TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA OMOTENASHI VÀ SỰ QUEN THUỘC VĂN HÓA ĐỀN TÍNH ĐÍCH THẬT CẢM NHẬN TẠI CÁC NHÀ HÀNG NHẬT Ở VIỆT NAM

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Abstract - This study investigates the impact of Omotenashi and cultural familiarity on perceived authenticity at Japanese ethnic restaurants in Vietnam. Employing 2x2 between-subjects experimental design, the study manipulated Omotenashi-style service and assessed cultural familiarity among participants, second-year students at The University of Danang - University of Economics. The results indicate that, experiencing Omotenashi significantly increases the perceived authenticity of Japanese restaurants, irrespective of participants' prior familiarity with Japanese culture. Furthermore, an understanding of Japanese culture enhances perceived authenticity. However, the interaction between Omotenashi and cultural familiarity was not significant. These findings suggest that both Omotenashi and cultural familiarity independently contribute to perceived authenticity, offering valuable insights for restaurant managers and policymakers aiming to promote Japanese culinary culture abroad.

Key words - Perceived authenticity; cultural familiarity; Japanese ethnic restaurants; Omotenashi

1. Introduction

Japanese ethnic food has been thriving in recent years in Vietnam. Its ethnic restaurants in Vietnam reached nearly 2,500 in 2020, which is more than triple the 770 restaurants recorded in 2015 [1]. Japanese nationals own about half of the Japanese restaurants in Vietnam, while the other half are either operated by Vietnamese or in partnership with Japanese through franchise models [1], [2].

In ethnic restaurants, authenticity is highly valued by customers and can influence their purchase intentions, revisit intentions, willingness to pay more, and patronage behavior [3] - [7]. Authenticity has also caught much attention from the Japanese government in Japanese foods abroad [8], [9]. Since 2015, initiatives like the "Action Plan 10 for propagating the charm of Japanese cuisine" have been implemented to educate chefs on authentic Japanese culinary practices and promote the use of Japan-produced ingredients [8], [10]. Additionally, since 2016, the "Japanese Cuisine Skills Certification Guidelines" aim to standardize traditional cooking practices among overseas Japanese restaurants [9].

Numerous research papers have discussed factors affecting customers' perceptions of authenticity in ethnic restaurants. These factors, often embedded within the

Tóm tắt - Nghiên cứu này xem xét tác động của Omotenashi và sự quen thuộc văn hóa đền tính đích thực cảm nhận tại các nhà hàng Nhật ở Việt Nam. Bằng thiết kế thực nghiệm giữa các nhóm 2x2, nghiên cứu kiểm soát phong cách phục vụ Omotenashi và đánh giá mức độ quen thuộc văn hóa của người tham gia, là sinh viên năm hai tại Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Đại học Đà Nẵng. Kết quả cho thấy, trải nghiệm Omotenashi làm tăng đáng kể tính đích thực cảm nhận về nhà hàng Nhật, bất kể có quen thuộc với văn hóa Nhật của người tham gia hay không. Hơn nữa, sự hiểu biết về văn hóa Nhật cũng làm tăng tính đích thực cảm nhận. Tuy nhiên, tương tác giữa Omotenashi và sự quen thuộc văn hóa không có ý nghĩa thống kê. Những phát hiện này cho thấy, Omotenashi và sự quen thuộc văn hóa đều đóng góp độc lập vào tính đích thực cảm nhận, mang lại những hiểu biết quan trọng cho các nhà quản lý nhà hàng và nhà hoạch định chính sách nhằm thúc đẩy ẩm thực Nhật Bản ở nước ngoài.

Từ khóa - Tính đúng chất cảm nhận; sự quen thuộc văn hóa; nhà hàng Nhật; lòng hiếu khách kiểu Nhật

restaurants, include tangible and physical cues such as ingredients, ambiance, and service elements [5] - [7], [11]. For Japanese ethnic restaurants in Vietnam, many Vietnamese diners seek not only culinary delights but also a cultural and lifestyle experience, which is often reflected in the restaurant's architecture and decor [1]. Ethnic dining experiences help people enjoy unique meals different from their daily routine and gain a better understanding of a particular country's food culture and gastronomic identity [12]. Therefore, Japanese ethnic restaurants have the opportunity to enhance their authenticity and attract more customers by investing in tangible elements that showcase Japanese culture and lifestyle.

Additionally, there is also a fact that many Japanese companies in Vietnam such as Toyota, Aeon Mall, and Pizza 4P apply Omotenashi (Japanese way of hospitality) [13] - [15] and often promote their service quality through the concept of Omotenashi [16], [17]. This Japanese hospitality has impressed Vietnamese customers with experiences not typically encountered within Vietnam's service culture [18]. This is because Omotenashi is deeply rooted in traditional Japanese culture, influenced by Japan's culture, nature, history, and lifestyle [19]. Even though there have been many qualitative papers studying the practice of Omotenashi in overseas Japanese

restaurants [20] - [22], there is little work studying the potential impact of Omotenashi on the authenticity of Japanese ethnic restaurants. Moreover, the service aspect of Omotenashi that we choose to focus on in this study contributes to the study of intangible cues as factors affecting authenticity.

To establish the research model, we examined the relationship between Omotenashi, the level of familiarity with Japanese culture, and the perceived authenticity of Japanese ethnic restaurants in Vietnam. Japanese culture was officially introduced to Vietnam over 50 years ago via cultural diplomacy activities [3]. In recent years, Japanese culture has also been introduced widely to Vietnamese society via social media. Via such ways, the understanding of Japanese culture could impact the relationship between Omotenashi and perceived authenticity.

Thus, this study aims to (1) examine the impact of Omotenashi on the perceived authenticity of Japanese ethnic restaurants in Vietnam and (2) investigate whether familiarity with Japanese culture affects the relationship between Omotenashi and perceived authenticity.

2. Literature review and methodology

2.1. Literature review

2.1.1. Japanese ethnic restaurants

Similar to what Ebster and Guist [23] defined, ethnic restaurants are dining establishments themed around a specific culture's cuisine and environment, aiming to represent and evoke the atmosphere of that culture. They are usually owned by individuals having the same cultural backgrounds. These ethnic restaurants typically primarily target residents of the host country rather than people from the culture that the restaurant aims to represent. Moreover, the term is applied not only to small-sized ethnic restaurants but also to restaurant chains. In this study, Japanese ethnic restaurants are those established in Vietnam, serving Japanese dishes such as Sushi, Ramen, Udon, Gyudon, etc. Many big Japanese restaurant chains such as Tokyo Deli, Yakimono, Sushi Rei, Gyu Shige, and Ootoya also appear in big cities in Vietnam [2]. In Vietnam, fifty percent of Japanese restaurants are owned by Japanese nationals, whereas the remaining half are either operated by Vietnamese proprietors or through franchise partnerships with Japanese entities [1], [2]. JETRO's survey revealed that although Japanese restaurants in Vietnam initially targeted Japanese expatriates, 90 percent of their clientele are now Vietnamese [1].

2.1.2. Perceived authenticity

Authenticity conveys trustworthiness, representing qualities like genuineness, innocence, truthfulness, and being unaltered [24]. It can also signify uniqueness, heritage, reliability, and consistency [25]. Although definitions of authenticity vary, three main approaches have emerged: objectivist, constructivist, and existentialist [25]. Objectivists view authenticity as originality judged by experts or natives [26]. Constructivists see it as subjective and context-dependent, while existential authenticity focuses on shaping identities for a genuine sense of self [25].

Grayson and Martinec [27] advanced research on perceived authenticity, exploring how customers discern it. Objectivists rely on "indexical cues", factual pieces of evidence that confirm originality, while constructivists use "iconic cues", sensory experiences compared to preexisting knowledge. Iconic cues assist customers in recognizing whether an item resembles the original.

As discussed above, since ethnic restaurants usually aim at residents of the host country rather than those of the home culture [23], customers of the host culture should perceive authenticity based on their previous knowledge or experiences. In other words, customers of the host country tend to perceive authenticity subjectively [5], [26]. Accordingly, they tend to look for "iconic cues" instead of "indexical cues" to judge authenticity [27].

2.1.3. Omotenashi - the Japanese way of hospitality

Omotenashi is a unique form of Japanese hospitality deeply rooted in the culture [21]. Originating from Japan's tea ceremony tradition, it involves three elements: "shitsurai" (environment preparation), "furumai" (host's commitment), and "shikake" (interactive moments) [28]. Similarly, Akatsuka [22] emphasizes that Omotenashi should go beyond superficial service to include proper arrangement of the environment and facilities. Goantara [29] studied Omotenashi from "servicescape" and "experienescape" perspectives, highlighting its physical and service aspects. For more specific practices of Omotenashi, Akatsuka [22] proposed four levels: basic level (preventing dissatisfaction), higher level (creating satisfaction), high level (exceeding satisfaction, creating an impression), and super high level (surpassing even that impression).

Numerous studies have discussed factors affecting customers' perceptions of authenticity in ethnic restaurants, often focusing on tangible aspects like ingredients and ambiance [5] - [7], [11]. Similar to these studies, the preparation of the physical settings for Japanese ethnic restaurants under Omotenashi could potentially affect perceived authenticity.

Meanwhile, the service aspect of Omotenashi could also have a positive impact on perceived authenticity. Under the constructivist approach, Omotenashi service offering in the Vietnamese context can also provide iconic authenticity that Vietnamese customers may perceive when they have some sense of how this kind of service from Japanese culture tends to look like [27]. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Vietnamese customers who are served with Omotenashi in Japanese restaurants in Vietnam will have higher perceived authenticity than those not served with Omotenashi.

2.1.4. Cultural familiarity

Cultural familiarity arises from cumulative exposure to a nation's popular culture via media [4], [30]. While Ebster and Guist [23] define high cultural familiarity as having visited the culture's home country, this study focuses on cultural exposure within the host country. Moreover, Japanese culture has been formally introduced to Vietnam

for over 50 years through cultural diplomacy [3] and more recently through social media. Posts and reels about Japanese tourist spots, festivals, and cuisine have contributed to this spread. Therefore, many Vietnamese have formed knowledge or experiences about Japanese culture. These exposures help Vietnamese customers understand Japanese ethnic restaurants, allowing them to perceive iconic authenticity by comparing their experiences with prior cultural knowledge [27].

Hypothesis 2. Vietnamese customers having high Japanese cultural familiarity will be more likely to perceive authenticity than those who are less familiar with Japanese culture.

This study also examines how familiarity with Japanese culture influences perceived authenticity among individuals who experience Omotenashi service and those who do not. For individuals familiar with Japanese culture, exposure to Omotenashi is expected to have a stronger impact on perceived authenticity. Familiarity with a nation’s culture can be enhanced through increased exposure, leading to a deeper understanding and accumulation of knowledge and experiences [30]. Consequently, while being served with Omotenashi, Vietnamese customers familiar with Japanese culture are more likely to recognize and appreciate this unique form of hospitality, perceiving it as authentically iconic [27]. In fact, countries like Hong Kong, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia are now known as popular places for implementing Omotenashi [29]. Omotenashi is now a crucial strategy for Japanese retailers, contributing to the creation of a distinctive “Japanese” brand image through unique customer services [20]. In contrast, for those not served with Omotenashi service, their perceived authenticity ratings may be significantly lower. The lack of Omotenashi prevents them from comparing their experiences with their prior knowledge, as the cues of iconic authenticity are not present [27].

On the other hand, for those unfamiliar with Japanese culture, perceived authenticity is expected to remain relatively stable, regardless of being served with Omotenashi or not. Since these individuals lack prior knowledge of Omotenashi as a distinct Japanese cultural concept, the cues of indexical authenticity are not present [27]. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. The effect of Omotenashi on perceived authenticity will be moderated by cultural familiarity, such that it enhances perceived authenticity for culturally familiar individuals but has no significant impact on those unfamiliar with Japanese culture.

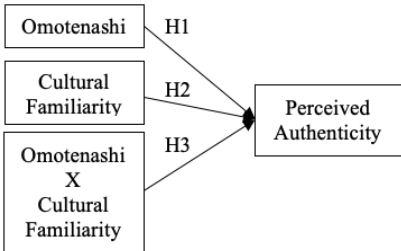


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1. Design and manipulation

A 2x2 between-subjects design was used with the service aspect of Omotenashi and cultural familiarity as independent variables. For manipulation, we referenced Akatsuka’s [22] four levels of Omotenashi and our own experiences at Pizza 4P’s, a Japanese-owned restaurant in Vietnam that explicitly advertises its use of Omotenashi service [31], to create two scenarios: one with Omotenashi service and one with standard service. These scenarios were depicted in two videos, using the same series of pictures of a Japanese restaurant in Vietnam. Both videos included voice-over narration, subtitles, and descriptive visuals to enhance viewer immersion. The Omotenashi service video was designed to highlight elements of Omotenashi such as warm customer greetings, personalized assistance, attention to detail, and proactive service adjustments that offer an impressive dining experience. In contrast, the standard service video represents a more neutral dining experience, where service interactions remain minimal and functional. Customers are not greeted upon arrival, assistance is not proactively offered, and meals are served without structured presentation or additional explanations.

2.2.2. Experiment procedures

We recruited second-year students from six classes of the International Business module at The University of Da Nang - University of Economics. Most students are in accounting. Students were chosen as the research sample for their homogeneity, reducing the impact of uncontrolled variables in the experiment. This ensures that responses primarily reflect the effects of Omotenashi and cultural familiarity, rather than factors like age or income. Additionally, students are a key customer segment for Japanese restaurants in Vietnam, making their behavior relevant to study. The study was conducted in designated classrooms from March 12th to 18th, 2024. Upon arrival, each student was instructed to a table, put on earphones, and use their smartphone to scan a QR code to access a link on Qualtrics. Each was randomly assigned to one of two scenario videos before heading to the survey.

2.2.3. Survey and measures

After watching the video, participants rated eight items on a 6-point Likert scale to measure the level of Omotenashi practice perceived in Japanese restaurants in the video, based on Akatsuka [22] (e.g., “I feel welcomed even before entering the restaurant”). The measure had high reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.977).

Participants then assessed their familiarity with Japanese culture using two items adapted from Liu et al. [4] (e.g., “I am familiar with Japanese culture” and “I am familiar with Japanese food”), also on a 6-point Likert scale (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.806). For further analysis, they were categorized into two groups by using a mean split: less familiar (mean score below 3.49) and more familiar (mean score above 3.49).

Next, they rated perceived authenticity of the Japanese restaurant using five items adapted from Kim et al. [32]

(e.g., “I consider this to be an authentic Japanese restaurant.”), with high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.955$). Participants also provided socio-demographic information, including gender, monthly income, field of study, and whether they had ever dined at a Japanese restaurant in Vietnam.

Table 1. Measurement items

Construct	Measurement items	Reference
Perceived Omotenashi	I felt welcomed even before stepping into the restaurant.	Akatsuka [22]
	I feel that the staff are always willing to listen and understand my needs.	
	I feel there is flexibility and a willingness to adjust the service to suit my requirements.	
	I perceive the attention to every small detail in the service from the staff.	
	I feel the sophistication in the way the staff serves.	
	I sense the effort of the staff in making me feel as comfortable as at home.	
	I feel the restaurant shows concern for my safety through the measures applied.	
Cultural familiarity	I feel the restaurant shows concern for my dining experience.	Liu et al. [4]
	I am familiar with Japanese culture.	
Perceived authenticity	I am familiar with Japanese cuisine.	Kim et al. [22]
	I consider this a truly authentic Japanese restaurant.	
	This restaurant makes me feel connected to Japanese culture.	
	I can experience and/or learn about Japanese culture at this restaurant.	
	This restaurant makes me feel like I am in Japan.	
	I feel that I am being served authentic Japanese food.	

2.2.4. Research ethics

In conducting this research and administering the surveys, we prioritized maintaining ethical standards and respecting the participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were given clear explanations about the study's objectives, methods, and purposes. Personal information was kept confidential and was not disclosed to any unrelated third parties without explicit consent from the participants. The research proposal had been approved by the Faculty of International Business committee before implementation.

3. Results

3.1. Participants profile

A total of 243 students participated, with 232 valid responses analyzed. The sample included 86.2% females ($n = 200$) and 13.8% males ($n = 32$), with 65.1% majoring in accounting ($n = 151$). Most respondents reported a monthly income below 2 million VND (72.8%). Additionally, 58.2% had never dined at a Japanese

restaurant in Vietnam, while 41.8% had. The mean rating for familiarity with Japanese culture was 3.49 ($SD = 1.16$), indicating a certain level of awareness among participants.

3.2. Manipulation check

The random assignment of two groups achieved the expected effectiveness. Supporting the manipulation, participants watching the video of service with Omotenashi reported significantly higher levels of perceived Omotenashi ($Mean_{Omotenashi} = 5.42$) as compared to those in the group watching the video depicting standard service ($Mean_{Non_Omotenashi} = 2.12$, $t = -34.920$, $p < 0.001$).

3.3. Omotenashi and cultural familiarity

We conducted a two-way ANOVA to test the hypotheses, with Omotenashi (OM) (served vs. not served) and cultural familiarity (CF) (familiar vs. non-familiar) as independent variables.

Significant main effects were found for OM and CF. Supporting Hypothesis 1, those served with OM rated perceived authenticity higher ($Mean_{Omotenashi} = 4.9009$ vs. $Mean_{Non_Omotenashi} = 2.8118$, $F = 220.729$, $p < 0.001$). CF also significantly increased perceived authenticity ($Mean_{Familiar} = 4.2271$ vs. $Mean_{Non-Familiar} = 3.2239$, $F = 11.599$, $p < 0.001$) supporting Hypothesis 2. However, the interaction between OM and CF was not significant ($F = 0.089$, $p = 0.765$), resulting in the rejection of Hypothesis 3. This suggests that OM positively impacts perceived authenticity regardless of CF.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of perceived authenticity based on OM and CF

OM	CF	Mean	SD	N
Not served	Non-Familiar	2.619	0.919	63
	Familiar	3.028	1.217	56
	Total	2.812	1.085	119
Served	Non-Familiar	4.538	0.906	29
	Familiar	5.026	0.702	84
	Total	4.901	0.785	113
Total	Non-Familiar	3.224	1.277	92
	Familiar	4.227	1.358	140
	Total	3.829	1.412	232

Table 3. Two-way ANOVA results: effects of OM and CF on perceived authenticity

Source	Type III SSE	df	MSE	F	Sig.
OM	191.46	1	191.5	220.7	0.000
CF	10.06	1	10.1	11.6	0.001
OM x CF	0.08	1	0.1	0.1	0.765

4. Conclusions

As Vietnam increasingly embraces global influences, Japanese restaurants have flourished, becoming a significant part of the country’s culinary landscape [1], [2]. Authenticity is crucial in ethnic restaurants, impacting customers’ purchasing intentions and loyalty [4] - [7]. This study examined the role of Omotenashi in enhancing the

perceived authenticity of Japanese ethnic restaurants in Vietnam, highlighting the importance of the service aspect of Omotenashi and cultural familiarity.

The findings indicate that Omotenashi significantly boosts perceived authenticity, regardless of customers' familiarity with Japanese culture. First, cultural familiarity was measured using self-reported items, which may not accurately reflect participants' understanding of Japanese culture. In addition, the items assessed the general familiarity with Japanese culture but did not identify whether participants recognized Omotenashi as a distinct aspect of Japanese hospitality. As a result, this construct may not have been strong enough to create a moderation effect in the relationship between perceived Omotenashi and perceived authenticity.

Second, even participants who self-reported low cultural familiarity may still have recognized Omotenashi-like service behaviors due to their widespread representation in Vietnamese media. For example, the act of Japanese football fans picking up trash at stadiums after football matches has been widely covered in the media, reinforcing Japan's cultural image of politeness, consideration, and communal responsibility [33]. The Japanese are also well-known for orderly queuing and strict adherence to public rules [34]. These images may have led participants, regardless of their self-reported cultural familiarity, to associate their perceived Omotenashi service with typical Japanese behaviors they have encountered through media exposure. Consequently, both groups may have rated perceived authenticity similarly, reducing the likelihood of a statistically significant interaction effect between Omotenashi and cultural familiarity.

Additionally, the study highlighted the significant impact of cultural familiarity, revealing that a better understanding of Japanese culture significantly enhances Vietnamese customers' perceived authenticity of Japanese ethnic restaurants in Vietnam. It's important to note that this understanding of Japanese culture does not extend as far as the definition used by Ebster and Guist [23], who categorized individuals with high cultural familiarity as those who have visited the culture's home country. In our study, the majority of the participants had not visited Japanese restaurants in Japan before. Therefore, in this context, general cultural familiarity helps them appreciate iconic authenticity rather than indexical authenticity [27], especially if they took iconic cues from the pictures in the videos.

The study's contributions include integrating Omotenashi into authenticity research, emphasizing service elements alongside tangible aspects [5] - [7], [11]. As another academic contribution, this study also shows that Omotenashi can elevate perceived authenticity even without cultural familiarity, offering a new perspective on cultural exposure and authenticity [4], [5], [30].

In terms of implications for the Japanese government's policy, the findings reaffirm the role of Omotenashi in enhancing authenticity for Japanese restaurants abroad. Omotenashi could become a powerful tool that Japan can use in introducing Japanese culture [10].

Restaurant managers can enhance perceived authenticity by incorporating Omotenashi into service protocols and training staff to provide Omotenashi to customers. In Vietnam, Pizza 4P's exemplifies Omotenashi, especially in its service [31]. Based on our experiment manipulation, Omotenashi expressions such as personalized interactions, proactive assistance, and attention to detail effectively enhance perceived authenticity. These include gestures like welcoming customers warmly, anticipating their needs, carefully presenting dishes, respectful bows, and structured service sequences. Furthermore, in our research, only when we manipulated the experience of Omotenashi, did they become aware of it. Thus, it is essential not only to offer Omotenashi but also to actively promote it so that Vietnamese customers are aware of its presence in the restaurant. Moreover, since the study reveals that customers with higher Japanese cultural familiarity rate authenticity higher, Japanese restaurants should educate customers about Japanese culture, especially Omotenashi, through cultural events or promotional channels.

This study has some limitations. We used two self-reported items to measure cultural familiarity, which may introduce bias. Future research should develop more objective measures and refine scales to better capture familiarity with Omotenashi and its cultural roots. Additionally, our manipulation focused on the service aspect of Omotenashi. Future studies should also examine the physical elements of restaurants for a more comprehensive perspective.

Moreover, this study primarily examined the effect of Omotenashi on perceived authenticity, without exploring its broader implications on business outcomes. Future studies should investigate whether an increase in perceived authenticity leads to higher customer satisfaction, loyalty, or positive word-of-mouth, thereby providing insights into the tangible benefits of Omotenashi for businesses.

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