

I'm Lovin' It: Globalization Uncovered Through McDonald's

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ABSTRACT

Globalization refers to the process by which ideas, cultures, and people are exchanged between countries. Scholars argue about whether globalization occurs through a standardized, localized, or mixed approach called glocalization. To investigate, McDonald's is a case study, using food as a comparison tool to explore these theories.

McDonald's first international location was Japan, despite the stark contrast between American values of indulgence and Japanese values of craftsmanship. The differences between each region set the stage for McDonald's globalization, intriguing many scholars. Studies explore the philosophical qualities of globalization or the business strategies of McDonald's but overlook how these changes occur.

This study uses video advertisements with multimodal content analysis to address the current gap. The semiotic elements of advertising display cultural relationships of local-foreign interactions. This paper asks the question, "How does McDonald's advertising in the United States and Japan reveal the process by which globalization affects culture?"

The identified themes of standardization, hybridity, and quality suggest that McDonald's glocalization techniques are not a compromise between standardization and localization. Glocalization produces new cultures by unpredictably combining components. Therefore, globalization is found to take select pieces of different scholars' theories. These findings underscore the value of commercial media and food as primary sources for understanding how globalization constructs cultural meaning.

INTRODUCTION

"I'm Loving It" is an iconic slogan of global fast-food culture (Boone 2021). While McDonald's is associated with American ideals and capitalist consumption, its Golden Arches have managed to spread internationally, with over 30,000 McDonald's locations worldwide in 119 countries (Khan and Khan 2011). McDonald's ability to satisfy and appeal to such diverse palates and interests intrigues many

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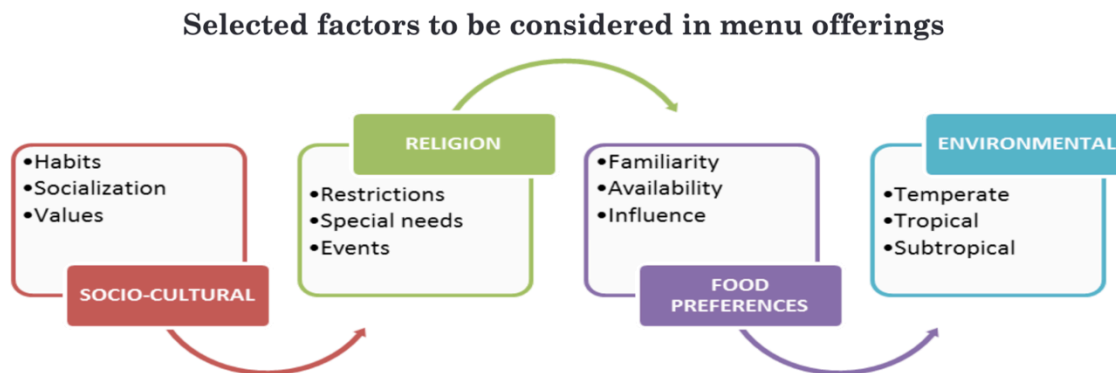
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scholars, causing speculation that the driver of this success has been McDonald's ability to utilize globalization (Sakib 2023).

Globalization, a theory with a wide spectrum of definitions, explains that ideas, cultures, and politics are negotiated and shaped by each nation they touch as they transition around the globe (Prakash 2011). Tracing McDonald's rise in international food systems provides evidence for this theory; however, it is debated whether McDonald's remains inherently American or has changed (Appadurai 2022). Certain theorists suggest that McDonald's branding adapts to local values (*Figure 1*), with domestic flavors and unique strategies contextualized to regions, an approach termed glocalization (Crawford et al. 2015; Bullard 2025). Regardless, a prime example of globalization can be found in Japan, a country with highly specialized Eastern foodways. Remarkably, despite the seemingly contradictory interaction between fast food and Japanese culinary traditions, Japan was the first country in which McDonald's gained its international foothold (Traphagan and Keith Brown 2002).

Figure 1

Cultural Determinants When Considering Food



Note: This figure displays what contextual factors guide how brands are tailored to each locality. Each category determines which values are modified during globalization, depending on its relative importance to the culture. Reprinted from “‘I’m Lovin’ It’—Around the World: A Case Study of McDonald’s ‘Glocalization,’” by Khan and Khan, 2013, *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Cases*, 2 (2), 64–73, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529710199>

Visual advertising bolsters claims about globalization by documenting and unveiling the complex interactions between individuals and countries. Advertising is proven to be a significant mediator and influence on culture as it serves as a portrayal of national identity and helps to create cultural narratives (Jones 1970). Given advertising's deep ties with culture and identity, it serves as a lens to understand globalization on the microscopic level. Thus, advertising can reveal the specific factors and rationales behind McDonald's growth.

Anthropologists often focus on theoretical aspects of food and business strategies as food moves from country to country, without exploring the process by which transformation occurs. The current research takes a philosophical or result-based approach to this cultural phenomenon, focusing on the outcome rather than the process of change, and leaving a gap in the exploration of the intricacies of globalization (Mujtaba and Patel 2007; Varzi 2018). Surprisingly, even less research investigates fast food, which carries cultural relevance, especially for the United States (Norenzayan 2024). These specificities hold key insights for anthropologists as the interplay between food and cultures through globalization provides larger implications about human interaction, forecasting the future global sphere via what values are shared, lost, built upon, and transformed in the culinary exchange of McDonald's (Bourdieu 1979). Moreover, this paper holds implications for multinational corporations, policymakers, and communities that seek to succeed in navigating globalization by sharing culture instead of homogenizing it.

This raises the question: How does McDonald's advertising in the United States and Japan reveal the process by which globalization affects culture? Investigating this question, this paper explores globalization's influences through a multimodal content analysis of McDonald's advertisements, comparing artifacts from each country. The goal is to examine narrative choices and evaluate which mode of globalization is best supported, fulfilling the current research gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food Cultures

Food carries symbolic and social significance through its combination of physical and abstract elements. The individual ingredients, as well as the way in which communities cultivate and consume food, provide direct insight into how culture is formed (Parrish et al. 2025; Bourdieu 1979). While taste indicates unique regional preferences, food also displays societal structure through who eats and what is eaten; gender roles, with masculine and feminine roles assigned to certain aspects of food production; and social organization, with rituals and ways of consumption displaying local behavior (Walsh 2020; Parrish et al. 2025). Overall, food provides a cultural heritage as it is adapted to its environment, making the diets representative of the people (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). The process of globalization moves food around the world, thereby giving anthropologists a chance to observe whether food morphs and whether cultures share or reject one another. These transformations, or refusals, signify how the world and its people interact, aiding in understanding globalization (Maberly and Reid 2014; Levitt 1983).

United States Fast Food Culture

America is a melting pot of cultures, most evident when looking at the plethora of cuisines and immigrant cultures present (Boch et al. 2021). This multitude of food plays into the American values of choice and freedom, but when aggregating these offerings, there is a lack of a coherent American culinary identity (Herrmann 2013). This issue creates an atmosphere in the United States that emphasizes personal choice,

variety, and indulgence regarding food (Boch et al. 2021). McDonald's harnessed these pillars of American identity to scale itself to global fame. Through their Speedee Service System, McDonald's introduced a new way of eating with assembly-line food production that cut down wait times with disposable plates and plastic silverware that enabled customers to eat where it was most comfortable (Myers 2023). Their introduction of meal deals, vast menu combinations, and uniform restaurant layouts, incorporated into all franchises, created a foodway that is a perfect reflection of American cravings for customization, diversity, and convenience (Myers 2023).

Japanese Gastronomy

Setting the stage for McDonald's was a rich Japanese sphere characterized by tradition and localized rituals. In Japan, *washoku* is the encompassing term that explains Japanese cuisine. *Washoku* centers upon the seasonality of ingredients — like bamboo shoots, edamame, and cherry blossoms — and aesthetic presentations that display craftsmanship (Bestor and Bestor 2011). Within the presentation of food, chefs carefully balance flavors and thoughtfully tie in elements that honor nature while treating food as art (Ishikawa et al. 2017). Even ekiben, the Japanese fast food of boxed meals sold at train stations, is emblematic of this. Scholars note that ekiben does not simply provide convenience for travelers but displays the Japanese work ethic and pride through its meticulous organization, layout, and bite-sized meals that capture fresh seasonal tastes (Ashkenazi and Jacob 2000). The literature overall presents a striking contrast between indulgent American fast-food flavors and artistic Japanese gastronomy (Ishige 2014; Ishikawa et al. 2017). Together, the food cultures of the United States and Japan set the stage for how McDonald's would integrate.

Theories of Influence

Theodore Levitt revolutionized markets and corporate strategies by theorizing the concept of globalization. Explaining that global advancements like transportation or travel were making individuals from different regions increasingly homogenous, Levitt instructed corporations to apply standardized strategies that avoided over-customization (Levitt 1983). However, Levitt's concepts have since been built upon and adopted into anthropological contexts, orienting globalization scholars towards culture, focusing on the idea that cultural globalization is not a unidirectional process in which the West dominates local traditions (Abdelal and Tedlow 2003).

Notably, Appadurai moved this theory away from economics and was the first to apply it to culture, arguing that globalization occurs through the cultural flow of people, technology, capital, media, and ideologies in a way that exchanges these aspects, challenging the notion that globalization homogenizes landscapes (Appadurai 2022). He emphasized that hybrid cultures occur from the overlap and uneven flow of cultures, with outcomes being unpredictable rather than uniform. Now, globalization centers on the free flow of identities and the reshaping of narratives within a localized context (Prakash 2011). The extent to which the negotiation occurs is heavily contentious within the field of anthropology, and is where scholars begin to diverge.

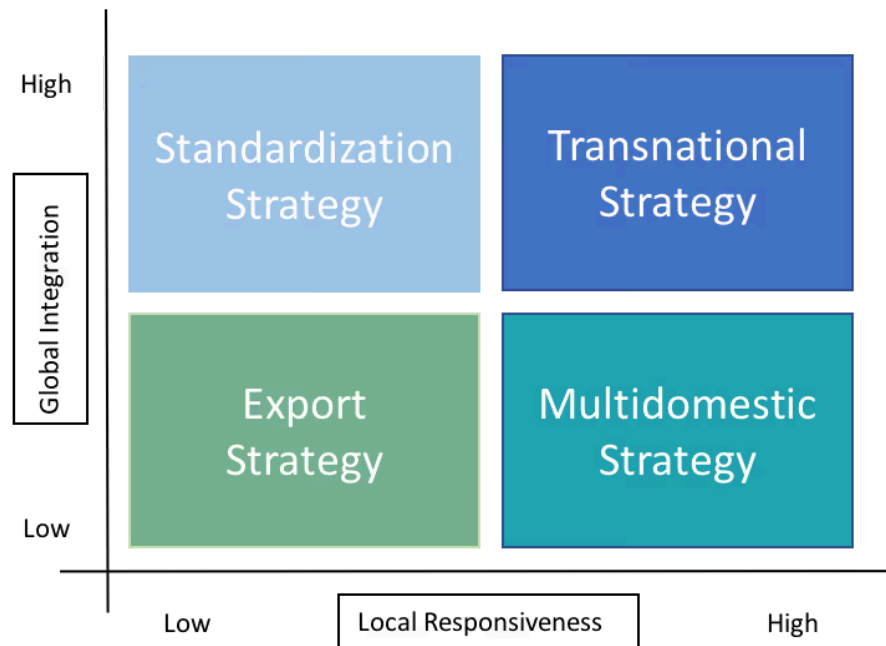
One branch of globalization postulates that global corporations fully entrench themselves within the local environment, catering to domestic interests while shedding the brand's original identity (Schuerkens 2003). Termed as localization, the process produces specific cultures with brands that are entirely the local atmosphere; the opposite of what Levitt suggested. Another side of the globalization spectrum hypothesizes that globalization falls somewhere in between localization and Levitt's standardization definition (*Figure 2*). Prakash and other scholars tie both ends to argue that globalization and interconnectedness are mediated through a system of glocalization, a stance more in accordance with Appadurai (Prakash 2011). They come to define local and native atmospheres not as distinct from foreign influence, but as a blend; glocalization implies an adaptation, not a replacement or imposition (Crawford et al. 2015; Bullard 2025). Most scholars in the field forward the concept of glocalization and move beyond the stricter confines of globalization as a monolithic concept (Khan and Khan 2011; Traphagan and Keith Brown 2002; Prakash 2011).

McDonald's In Japan

McDonald's introduction to Japan functions as a case study to observe globalization. The opposing cultures allow for notable observations, and these same strategies that were perfected in Japan became the model for McDonald's expansion into other countries, as well as other businesses that model McDonald's (Abdelal and Tedlow 2003). Again, here with McDonald's and globalization, scholars take different positions on which theory the Golden Arches confirm. Ritzer, a leading author in the field, positioned McDonald's success with stricter definitions of globalization that fall in line with Levitt, coining the term McDonaldization to describe it (Ritzer 2021). McDonaldization, he argued, is built around four principles: efficiency, cutting production time; calculability, producing quantity and big portions with low cost over quality; predictability, keeping locations uniform with the quality and service consistent; and control, regulating employees and production with technology and standardized designs (Ritzer 2021). This means of homogenous standardization, he and others discussed, built fast food culture and is the selling point, leading to McDonald's remaining Western in other countries (Ram 2025; Ritzer 2021). Aligning with glocalization definitions, Watson used Ritzer's theory but argued that McDonald's combined standardized Western strategies with Asian values to produce cultural hybridity (*Figure 2*). Going deeper than just flavors, McDonald's had to be a social space and a place to eat for Asia (Watson 2006). McDonald's had to have symbolic significance through ties to Western modernity and to Japanese systems, allowing it to fit into everyday life.

Figure 2

Corporate Strategies



Note: Scholars place McDonald's either in the standardization strategy category or the transnational strategy category. Ritzer leans towards standardization while Watson situates McDonald's in the transnational strategy. Adapted from "Global Business Strategies for Responding to Cultural Differences," by Lumen Learning, n.d., <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-principlesofmanagement/chapter/responding-to-cultural-differences/>

Culture and Advertising

Advertising is a primary site where cultural negotiation takes place, showing how globalization works in practice. Advertising bridges the gap between theory and practical implementations by displaying which choices are made (Jones 1970). The literature finds that advertisements embed culturally specific symbols and collective values about national identity to act as a storytelling mechanism (Sanesh et al. 2024; LaPlante 2005). Video advertisements are not merely a sales tactic. They actively narrate culturally meaningful stories to resonate with local audiences and construct cultural narratives (Jones 1970). Visual advertising is therefore a valuable tool and microcosm of how these changes occur, illustrating the push and pull that takes place under globalization.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship provides strong theoretical grounding on globalization, McDonald's, and advertising as a cultural mirror, there is limited research that compares how and which regional choices were made. Leading studies in anthropology, such as Watson's, which used ethnography to observe product-based, or Levitt's, which used high theory, are too results-focused or utilize too broad a scope, respectively. While these studies laid the foundation for the field, these strategies overlook the process by which food and culture are negotiated, missing out on the relevant insights that come from brand choices and local interaction. Without a clear understanding of the process, globalization remains a chaotic theoretical argument, causing culture and its people to be misunderstood (Bourdieu 1979). Broader advertising research often examines food and culture as distinct categories, losing the additional value that comes from observing representations of food (Watson 2006; Levitt 1983; Jones 1970). Research explains the importance of food, McDonald's, and advertising in comprehending culture, yet no research combines all of these elements to decipher the complexities of globalization. This study addresses that gap by conducting a comparative content analysis of McDonald's advertisements in Japan and the United States, focusing specifically on how the narrative elements of food in the advertising construct the culture of McDonald's in each region. By analyzing ads from the same global brand across two cultural contexts, this research demonstrates how globalization operates at the level of the individual, offering a focused and nuanced understanding of globalization as a cultural negotiation.

METHODOLOGY

Multimodal Content Analysis

This study utilizes a qualitative multimodal content analysis to examine McDonald's video advertisements and how they construct cultural meaning in the United States and Japan. Multimodal analysis is typically used to investigate how meaning is produced through the interaction of semiotic modes — visual imagery, text, sound, layout, and movement (Jewitt 2009; Kress 2009). Unlike traditional content analysis, which focuses on verbal content and elements, multimodal analysis brings in the meaning from visual and auditory elements in addition to linguistic content, tying together all essential elements that form culture (Kress 2009). This study employs a social semiotics framework because semiotic elements are tools that producers, like McDonald's, select strategically to communicate values and cultural representations (van Leeuwen 2004; Kress and van Leeuwen 2020; Jewitt 2009). Other modes of qualitative analysis are unable to note such a variety of necessary cultural cues, and quantitative approaches cannot represent the non-numerical aspects of culture, making multimodal content analysis the right choice for this study.

Data Set

The data set consists of eight selected McDonald's video advertisements, four from Japan and four from the United States, from the Internet Archive (*Table 1*). This sample size allowed for detailed analysis and cross-cultural comparisons. Four advertisements from each region balance representation and ensure semiotic patterns (Ni et al. 2022). Most multimodal studies that utilize social semiotics range from one to six advertisements per country, with the average around four (Ni et al. 2022; Pricilia and Suyudi 2023; Dhayef and Fadhil 2024). Specifically, the date selection for the advertisements included ads only from the opening of McDonald's in Japan and the initial ten years preceding (1971-1981) because this is when McDonald's experienced initial struggles and then widespread success (Mujtaba and Patel 2007). The strategic choices are most evident during this time period, complementing semiotic tools to produce substantial themes. Corresponding dates were chosen for the United States advertising to maintain uniformity with the Japanese timeline and to prevent influence from different time periods when investigating similarities and differences.

Table 1
Selected Ads

US Ad Name:	Visual Representation (From the Ad)	Japan Ad Name:	Visual Representation (From the Ad)
1974 McDonald's "7up McBubbles" United States commercial		1972 Omelette Sandwich - Japan	
1971 McDonald's "Big Mac Introduction" United States commercial		1972 Welcome Egg McMuffin - Japan	
1981 McDonald's "Filet O' Fish - Fish story" Commercial		1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce - Japan	
1975 McDonald's "60 second service guaranteed - Pit Stop" United States commercial		1974 McDonald's Quarter Pounder - Japan	

Note: All eight analyzed ads were randomly selected from a pool of fifty ads. The fifty ads were split into two regions, the US and Japan, containing twenty-five ads each. All ads in each data set were assigned a random number from one through twenty-five. A random number generator from Google picked 4 unique numbers. The corresponding ads were then included in the study. The same selection process was repeated with both regional data sets. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Data Analysis

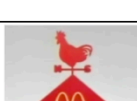
Coding Framework Design

The coding instrument I used to analyze the McDonald's advertisements relies on frameworks from social semiotics and visual grammar to reduce personal bias and interpretation. To ensure analytical rigor, I also utilized a traditional qualitative data analysis platform called ATLAS.ti. As the primary researcher, I generated the codebook, while ATLAS.ti was strictly employed as a baseline to audit and verify human coding reliability.

My scenes from each ad were defined by continuous frames (shots without camera cuts). Each advertisement and scene underwent a five-part coding that aligned with three metafunctions of visual communication developed by Kress and van Leeuwen — representational, interactive, and compositional (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020). My framework included contextual, compositional, representational, interpersonal, and audio-lingual meaning. While context is not a part of Kress and van Leeuwen's elements, I included it to give a general sense of what the advertisement was about. The additional audio layer, also not a part of their elements, was included because sound contributes significantly to emotional tone and narrative structure (Jewitt 2009).

First, each advertisement was coded for contextual variables that summarize each scene. Those summaries were tagged with general themes that guided the subsequent coding steps (*Table 2*). Images from the advertisement were included alongside the summaries to provide evidence for the description. Social semiotics emphasizes that meaning is shaped by the production context and the intended audience, making this information vital for interpreting cultural differences and other complex semiotic elements (Hall 1997).

Table 2
Contextual Coding

Segment #	Time Stamp	Summary	Screenshot ex.	Initial themes
S1	0:00-0:05	A rooster raises a McDonald's barn to reveal a sandwich. The camera zooms in to show the Teriyaki chicken sandwich.		Freshness, Children's appeal
S2	0:05-0:07	The camera shows a close-up of teriyaki sauce, and then a strip of chicken is dipped into it.		Glocalization
S3	0:08-0:11	It cuts back to the rooster on top of a ban. The rooster lifts the barn again to reveal another chicken sandwich. This one has yum yum sauce.		Glocalization
S4	0:11-0:13	The camera zooms in on a chicken patty, and the yum yum sauce is layered on.		Glocalization
S5	0:13-0:14	Two sandwiches are displayed on the screen. The teriyaki and yum yum/Japanese white sauce sandwiches. A third corn shows a chicken strip being dipped in another, more orange version of yum yum sauce. Frame shows the variety of choices and local sauces that McDonald's offers		Variety, Choice
S6	0:14-0:15	The rooster and barn come crashing down and display the McDonald's logo as well as text beneath it, which has the date that these items will be added.		Branding

Note: This table contains a simplified version of the contextual summary portion of my framework using the 1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce commercial. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Next, I examined the compositional aspect of each ad to explain how the visual and textual elements were organized. Visual grammar research indicates that compositional choices guide interpretation by signaling what information is most important through the placement of objects and how elements should be understood in relation to one another (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020; Hall 1997). Variables that were documented included layout, on-screen text, typography, framing, color, size, graphics/branding, and salience (*Table 3*).

Table 3
Compositional Coding

COMPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS

Element	Screenshot ex.	Description	Meanings
Layout / Information value		Multiple products appear, but each is framed in the center of its respective box.	Centering the products makes them focal points of cultural interest.
On-screen Text		The text is minimal and below the product, describing it simply.	Reserving text for simple descriptions and prices implies that the new sauce is the primary driver of consumption.
Font / Typography		The font is blocky and usually red or brown.	Use of blocky red and brown fonts shows stability and corporate strength.
Framing / Boundaries		All products are framed against a sterile white backdrop with no background context.	The sterile white backdrop decontextualizes the food, focusing the viewer's attention entirely on the ingredients.
Color		Colors are vibrant. The food always has contrasting greens from lettuce with the white or red sauces. The background is white.	Vibrant greens and white/red sauces = freshness and sensory. Visual contrast triggers appetite. Sense of premium quality.
Size / Scale		The sandwiches, chicken strips, or sauces are always the largest image in the frame. Text is smaller and in the periphery.	Making food the largest object in the frame focuses around the meal.
Graphics / Branding		The McDonald's logo appears at the beginning, end, and when new products appear.	The rooster/barn weather = metaphor for farm freshness. Makes industrial brand feel like traditional agriculture.
Salience		The ad uses lots of motion and color contrast to engage the viewer. The barn incorporates both.	Frantic motion of the rooster captures the viewer's attention. Frame's brand as dynamic.

Note: Table 3 contains a simplified version of the composition portion of my framework using the 1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce commercial. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

The third step I used for categorization involved representational documentation, in which I noted settings, characters, actions, food presentation, objects (culturally tailored symbols), and vectors, and what they mean (Table 4). This dimension captures how advertising constructs social reality and associates products with particular lifestyles and cultural identities (Jewitt 2009; van Leeuwen 2004). Coding these factors distinguished between narrative representation and conceptual representations to

highlight symbolic values, with prior advertising research suggesting that representations of everyday life, familial interactions, and lifestyle play a central role in transferring cultural meaning to products (Jones 1970; Kress 2009).

Table 4
Representational Coding

REPRESENTATIONAL ANALYSIS			
Element	Screenshot ex.	Description	Meanings
Setting		There is a lack of setting in the ad. Only a white background from time to time.	Lack of a specific setting suggests McDonald's can exist anywhere in Japan, reinforcing global identity.
Actions / Events		There are two. The chicken getting dipped in sauces and the rooster lifting up the barn.	Act of dipping chicken emphasizes sensory of new tastes. The rooster lifting the barn acts as a reveal tool to make the sandwich feel innovative.
Food depiction		The food is shown with close ups of high quality sauces and meats.	Extreme close-ups of sauces and meats show craftsmanship. Fast food doesn't = low-quality processed food.
Vectors		The only vector is the rooster and its motion. It helps to uncover the products with its act and also captures the audience's attention.	The rooster's motion toward the product directs the viewer's eye, creating novelty and intrigue.

Note: Table 4 contains a simplified version of the representational portion of my framework using the 1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce commercial. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Continuing the coding process, I examined the interpersonal aspect of each advertisement to discover how the advertising interacted with the viewer through gaze, camera angle, interpersonal distance, modality, and emotional tone (Table 5). These features shape the perceived relationship between viewer and subject and influence audience interaction (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020). Close distance and direct gaze can create intimacy, while low camera angles suggest power. The interpersonal level of the advertisement reveals the interplay between the audience and the ad and what narratives are constructed (van Leeuwen 2004).

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Interpersonal Coding

INTERPERSONAL ANALYSIS

Element	Screenshot ex.	Description	Meanings
Angle of interaction		All shots are from slightly above. Some of the shots, like that of the up close full product, are closer to eye level.	The eye-level, intimate distance creates longing desire → positions viewer as a taster. Builds personal relationship between the consumer and new flavors and the experience
Interpersonal distance		Shots are close and intimate with the food	Close intimate shots help build a relationship with the audience. They feel like they are there eating the chicken.
Modality / Realism		All of the food is shown in a realistic way and uses high modality. Only the rooster is cartoonish.	Real food paired with a cartoonish rooster creates a bridge between quality food and fun branding. Appeals to children's audience as well as adults

Note: Table 5 contains a simplified version of the interpersonal section of my framework using the 1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce commercial. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Finally, I explored the audio and language audio layers (Table 6). Music (which includes genre, tempo, and mood) and narration (which includes voiceover, dialogue, or ambient sound) can be semiotic resources that help tie a piece and its separate layers together (Worthen 2010). The audio-lingual aspects of the advertising reinforce the narratives and cultural atmospheres through their subtle cues.

Table 6

Audio-Lingual Coding

AUDIO / LANGUAGE LAYER

Element	Description	Meanings
Music	The music is fast-paced and upbeat and sounds banjo-like. It generates a joyful and energetic mood.	The choice of a banjo gives hints of America and its upbeat tempo constructs excitement. It frames the localized Teriyaki flavors as an energetic and modern American innovation.
Voiceover / dialogue	The narrator states the names of products and slightly describes them.	The narrator's clear, descriptive naming of the products acts as a cultural translator.
Ambient sound / SFX	The rooster gives off quick and frantic clucks.	The frantic clucking serves as an auditory metaphor for freshness - grounds fast-food process in a traditional agricultural setting - indigenizes brand.

Note: Table 6 contains a simplified version of the audio-lingual framework layer using the 1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce commercial. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Thematic Coding and Globalization Analysis

The emerging individual codes for each semiotic element created an idea of what each McDonald's ad signified. To make a coherent narrative, I took each of the codes from each of the elements in the five coding sections (contextual, compositional, representational, interpersonal, and audio-lingual) and developed a more straightforward overarching idea for each section (*Table 7*). Following such coding, I used the section-based codes to develop broader thematic patterns related to globalization for each advertisement (*Table 8*). Overall, the analysis combined deductive and inductive approaches, filling in the nuance that ethnographic or anthropological studies skip over (Kress 2009; Appadurai 2022; Levitt 1983; Bourdieu 1979). These broader themes help contribute to the discussion of globalization and connect back to the research goal of finding the relationship between the host and exporter countries by taking an approach that reveals the process by which narratives are achieved, identifying recurring patterns, unexpected themes, and cross-cultural differences.

Table 7
Section-Based Themes

1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce Commercial - Japan

Coding Section Synthesis:	Themes:
Contextual	This narrative focuses on flavor hybridization, utilizing localized sauces for market entry and cultural bridge-building. The segments use a reveal with the rooster lifting the barn to present McDonald's as a gift. Overall, this relates to the gifting culture in Japan and consumer choice, using localized strategies that fit within Japanese society.
Compositional	The compositional theme of freshness uses a rooster mascot and barn imagery to visually ground the industrial production as farm-fresh. Centered products and minimal descriptive text ensure the sensory contrast of the sauces and are the primary focus for the viewer. Motion and vibrant color trigger appetite and signal quality.
Representational	The agricultural theme uses traditional farm symbols to indigenize McDonald's for local consumers. The lack of a specific setting creates a sense of universality around McDonald's and fosters a clean, standardized atmosphere. Extreme close-ups of dipping provide proof of culinary craft.
Interpersonal	A slight bird's-eye view angle gives the viewer a sense of personal ownership over the meal, while close interpersonal distance creates visceral desire. High realism in food photography, combined with a cartoonish mascot, makes McDonald's feel authentic and fun. The offer strategy makes the brand feel inviting to encourage experimentation.
Audio-lingual	Upbeat, banjo-led music constructs pairs of American folk energy with Japanese flavor narrations. The narrator acts as a cultural translator. Frantic clucking sound effects provide an auditory metaphor for natural farming.

Note: Table 7 contains a simplified version of the categorical theme matrices I created for each commercial, using the 1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce commercial as an example. These ideas from each section guided the overall globalization themes for the commercial and the results section. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Table 8

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Full Ad Globalization Themes

**1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce Commercial - Japan
THEMES SUMMARY**

Theme label	Meanings
Standardization	McDonald's remains the authority of the advertisement, implied by the branding placement in the ad. This suggests that while the flavors may change to suit local tastes, the experience and reliability and quality of the brand are guaranteed. The consistency of the logo through many shots proves that McDonald's retains some of its hallmark qualities.
Hybridization / fusion	This is the ad's core theme. By using distinct Japanese flavors (Teriyaki and Yum Yum sauce) with Western products (the chicken sandwich), McDonald's creates a hybrid between both cultures that keeps each portion identifiable, yet culturally mixed. It implies that globalization is a process of fusion rather than replacement, making foreign brands feel accessible to local palates. This ad also uses sonic fusions by combining American banjo music and Japanese narration.
Premium / quality / craft	The rooster and barn function as a metaphor for farm freshness. Using the sonics of a farm reveal the food through an agricultural symbol. McDonald's distances itself from the negative industrial connotations of fast food and is framed as local, meticulous production.

***Note:** Table 8 contains a simplified version of the globalization themes for the 1973 McDonald's Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce ad. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.*

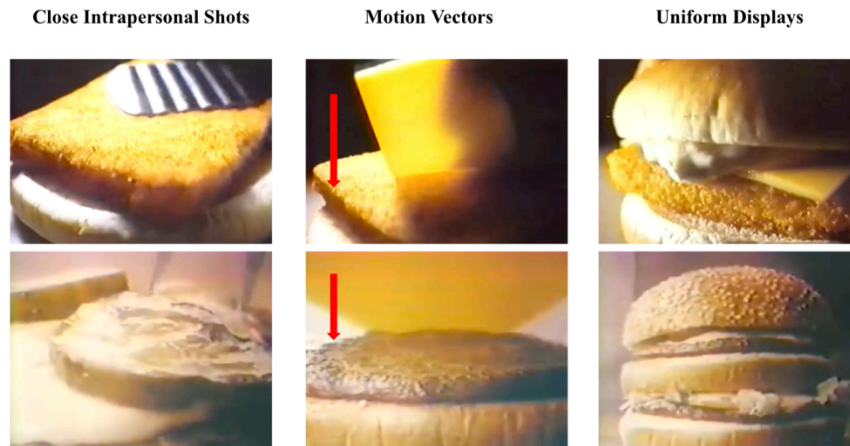
RESULTS

Theme #1: Standardization and Consistency

The theme of standardization appears in all eight commercials in some aspect, heavily emphasized in the United States markets and less so in Japan. It gives the impression that McDonald's has reliable guarantees with not only its products, but also the dining atmosphere — hallmarks of McDonaldization (Ritzer 2021; Myers 2023). For the United States, in the Big Mac and Filet O' Fish commercials, the close intrapersonal shots give viewers an intimate experience of making the sandwiches. The downward vectors from falling ingredients (like cheese) draw viewers' attention to the building and layering process of each product, alluding to the concept of uniformity (*Figure 3*). These frames establish consistent product depictions and a closeness with the audience. Observers gain a sense of understanding of how McDonald's maintains reproducible industrial production, almost as if they can construct the meal.

Figure 3 *Framing Techniques*

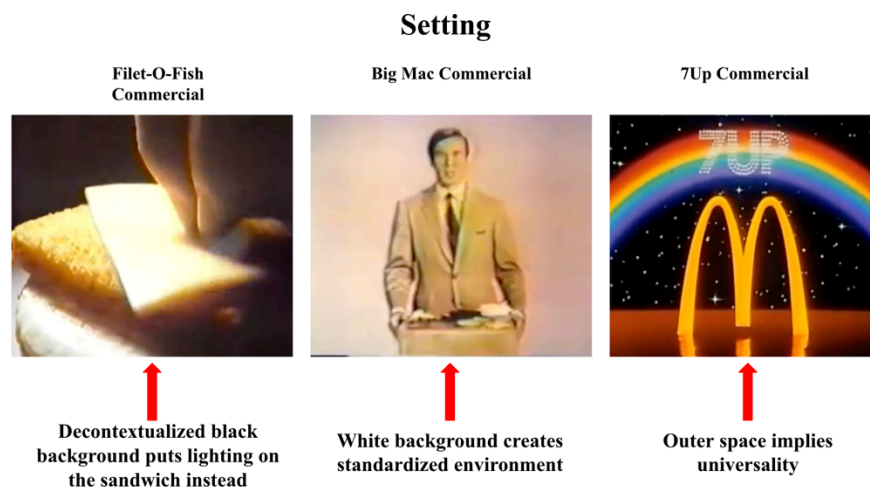
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Note: Close intrapersonal shots entice the audience while the vectors from ingredients falling into place guide consumers through the production process. The finished form then becomes a consistent burger that even the audience knows how to make. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

McDonald's pairs these semiotic visual hooks and motion-based cues with a lack of clear setting (especially in the 7Up space-themed commercial) to reinforce standardization as the focal point of their strategy in America. Non-descript setting and meticulous production suggest that McDonald's provides the same essential qualities and experience anywhere it exists (*Figure 4*). This interpretation agrees with Levitt's analysis that homogeneity is McDonald's most effective narrative tool (Levitt 1983; Ram 2025).

Figure 4
McDonald's Settings' Importance



Note: Each respective strategy utilizes a technique that makes McDonald's appear ubiquitous. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Furthermore, the Speedee Service's efficient assembly-line production is on full display through the Pit Stop commercial. The commercial includes a rapid linguistic emphasis on a "60-second guarantee" from an F1 driver with the frantic production in the kitchen behind him. The quickness associated with the character archetype, the linguistic pacing, and the efficient production of the setting display McDonald's as a pit crew with the capabilities to keep up with the speed of modern life (*Figure 5*). These operational ideals touch upon almost every quality of Ritzer's McDonaldization theory, picturing efficiency, calculability, and predictability (Ritzer 2021). These uses of standardization align with American food systems, as described by Myers, and seem to follow Levitt and Ritzer's ideas; however, the commercials add a point of clarification (Levitt 1983; Abdelal and Tedlow 2003; Myers 2023). Standardization, while uniform, is not culturally neutral or a homogenizing force, disproving the negative connotations from the literature. In the advertisements, standardization operates alongside local contextual elements. Homogeneous strategies perform cultural integration as they embed American values of choice and freedom that Ram identified. Catering to America's unique traditions reveals cultural insights through homogeneity. This ultimately makes standardization more of a cultural tool instead of a business strategy, unlike what Levitt or Ritzer postulated.

Figure 5
Pit Stop and Speed Motifs



Speed based semiotic cues like green colors, rapid speech, clocks, and racing themes create an environment of efficiency as the selling point, a key component of standardization.

Note: *Speed-based semiotic cues like green colors, rapid speech, clocks, and racing themes create an environment of efficiency as the selling point, a key component of standardization. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.*

For Japan, semiotic tools such as setting and branding intermingle features of standardization with Japanese contexts. In the Egg McMuffin and Quarter Pounder commercial, a typical McDonald's setting is the standardizing element that gets transposed to Japan. Typical representative elements like red and yellow umbrellas or booth arrangements contain Japanese families or a Japanese businessman,

respectively, displaying natural everyday Japanese life connected to the rigid franchising elements of McDonald's (Figure 6). These cues acknowledge a mixing of local and Western environments, positioning a narrative that aligns with glocalization theories, not McDonaldisation theories (Appadurai 2022; Watson 2006). The prevailing aspect of McDonald's branding in Japanese commercials, like the McDonald's logo and color scheme (red, yellow, and white) or the standard McDonald's cardboard boxes used in the Quarter Pounder commercial, once again fit within Japanese contexts (Figure 6). Western symbolism, like the Golden Arches, becomes highly present in Japanese settings, disagreeing with localization literature, as the brand does not shed its original identity. Even standardizing elements can get recontextualized within their new host country.

Figure 6
Localizing National Branding



Note: The settings characteristics blend values while packaging is placed within daily life. The color scale of each ad uses red, yellow, and white to imply McDonald's without even seeing the logo. Brand placement situates the Golden Arches in the corner for all ads, creating a sense of secondary importance compared to Japanese products and lifestyles. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

An exception to the prevalence of standardization in Japanese commercials is the Omelette Sandwich advertisement, which uses an upscale, fine dining atmosphere with distinct Japanese menu items to show a highly tailored environment. The only standardizing indication of McDonald's is exemplified through the Golden Arches logo; however, its size and corner placement suggest that McDonald's is secondary to local emphasis (Figure 6). This contradicts ideas that globalization refuses local settings and implies that standard appearances may coincide with local symbolic elements, i.e., the salaryman and the Japanese folding walls' presence.

Together, these narrative elements link back to Ritzer's ideas of predictable production and service, providing nuance to an interpretation of standardization where only the necessary identifiable elements (like logos, layout, or production format) are kept (Ritzer 2021). Specifically for Japan, the presence of

local contextual elements pushes the analysis to describe more of what Watson observed — high standardization complemented by new Japanese aspects (Watson 2006). Overall, Levitt and similar scholars noted that corporations like McDonald's employ Western norms and standardized features as a selling point for American and Japanese audiences to comfort consumers who desire consistency (Levitt 1983; Abdelal and Tedlow 2003). These uses of standardization, however, are slightly different from these interpretations, as standardization functions with local contextual elements to give such comfort. Being able to recognize McDonald's through its production style and branding highlights uniformity, but the domestic complements of setting and rituals, for both countries, use some hybridity. Standardization and McDonaldization are not just constant frameworks. The practice of these theories involves some local tailoring.

Theme #2: Glocalized Hybridity

Across all four of the Japanese advertisements, the themes of localization and/or fusion stand beside the American themes like standardization. Through globalization, McDonald's becomes a cultural hybrid in Japan, acting as a gateway to Western concepts of sophistication, whilst simultaneously indigenizing itself to fit Japanese identity. The Omelette Sandwich advertisement utilizes high-class cues through a setting of porcelain plates, tall glasses, and white tablecloths, and a salient contrast of the white tablecloth with the breakfast sandwiches' colors to frame the meal as an elevated cultural import. These factors mark the breakfast sandwich not as a quick American convenience but as Japanese craftsmanship (*Figure 7*). This conceptualization positions McDonald's as upscale and is further localized by the setting choice of Japanese folding walls, a traditional marker of Japanese interiors, placing McDonald's alongside the audience in their home (*Figure 7*). Here, McDonald's strategy points towards glocalization, dipping into localization, by integrating with Japanese home life and transforming fast food into culinary art (Appadurai 2022; Bestor and Bestor 2011). This contrasts with the American advertising narratives in which all four commercials detach from locally identifiable elements, affirming standardization in America but localized changes for Japan (*Figure 4*).

Figure 7
Fine Dinning

Upscale elements



Note: A simple egg sandwich becomes a display of artisanship in Japan. Fast food is culturally elevated and reinforces washoku and feels Japanese through the traditional setting. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Building on glocalization ideas, the 1972 Egg McMuffin advertisement leverages the salaryman archetype, a character that displays the post-war ideal of dedication, progress, and loyalty to the country. This character guides the commercial, with his daily walk to work happily interrupted by an Egg McMuffin, symbolizing McDonald's as a new part of Japan's morning routine and treating the corporation as a peer that shares the same values as the salaryman (Figure 8). This integration is achieved through the contextual setting and emotional expressions that make McDonald's appear to kick-start the salaryman's day. While an Egg McMuffin at face value seems Western, like Watson noted, the combination with Japanese contextual markers and Western elements breaks down the feelings of foreignness for McDonald's (Watson 2006).

Figure 8
Local Routine

Salaryman



Note: The Egg McMuffin becomes a part of Japanese breakfasts and routines through the salaryman, who is representative of the modern, hardworking population. These same values get associated with

McDonald's, and the cityscape connects McDonald's to the post-war rebuilding, enshrining McDonald's into Japan's future. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Another distinct technique McDonald's uses is local flavors. In Japan's chicken sandwich advertisement, the combination of teriyaki and yum yum sauce (a Japanese white sauce) replaces ketchup or ranch on a chicken sandwich. The zoomed-in shots focus on the sauces as the selling point rather than American chicken flavors. The tie-in of sonics between American banjo music and Japanese narration trains listeners to think of McDonald's as both Japanese and Western (*Figure 9*). While the advertisement centers around menu options with the chicken and personal choice (American fast-food themes), these combinations of Japanese flavors and presentation styles go against Levitt's standardization frameworks (Levitt 1983; Abdelal and Tedlow 2003). As Levitt discussed, businesses globalize successfully by not catering to local interests and customizing products. These narratives give direct reference to fusion approaches that glocalization scholars describe, positioning globalization firmly in this middle-ground framework, evidence of cultural flows (Appadurai 2022).

Figure 9
Fusion Foods

Local Sauces

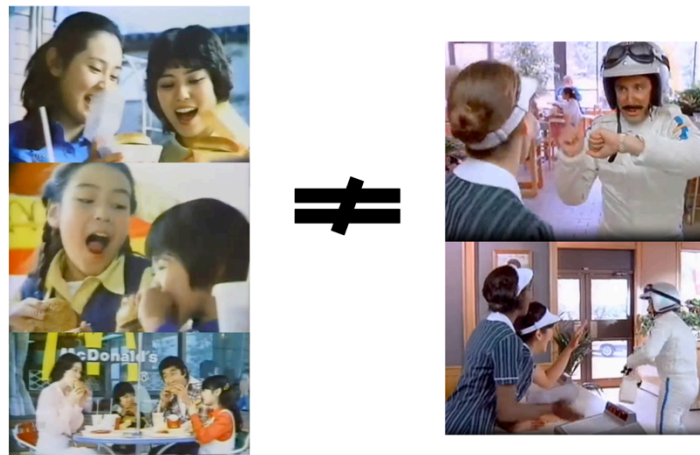


Note: *While the consistent depiction of each sandwich ties into standardization, the zoom-in shots of the sauce take American creations and put a local spin on them - an effective method of glocalization. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.*

A further point of distinction that reveals hybridity lies within McDonald's choice of character and setting interaction. For Japan, the Quarter Pounder commercial is located at a typical standardized McDonald's restaurant and uses the identifiable McDonald's cardboard to-go boxes to present the burger. The distinction that keeps this advertisement from implying standardization is how McDonald's functions as a site of socialization and community in Japan. The characters, ranging from families with children to a couple on a date, interact with the restaurant and are pictured smiling and coming together in solidarity, explained through upbeat emotional pacing and exaggerated expressions (*Figure 10*). This underscores the Japanese rituals of sharing meals, as Ishige found that eating and washing dishes together fosters reciprocity and community, elevating McDonald's to a site of communal gathering and Japanese ritual, a stark contrast to the Pit Stop driver who uses his to-go bag for personal convenience (Ishige 2014). While certain semiotic elements of the Japanese advertisements may demonstrate standardization or localization, the combination of all narrative elements reveals globalization to work similarly to what Watson and other

glocalization scholars claim — oscillating between standardization for the West and cultural hybridity in the East (Watson 2006; Appadurai 2022; Prakash 2011). The Golden Arches logo and standardized packaging provide some reference to Ritzer's thesis. However, the salaryman, Japanese folding walls, and communal gathering subordinate the standardizing elements, making a distinction that Ritzer's framework cannot explain. Overall, the synthesis of these semiotic elements moves glocalization from simply a hybrid to a multicultural experience that unites disparate regions. Scholars note that glocalization is a middle ground between cultures, but McDonald's advertising suggests that glocalization imports foreign influences in a way that maintains their essence but allows local individuals to feel connected. The chicken sandwich still remains a chicken sandwich, but it utilizes teriyaki sauce to become more Japanese. This environment creates cultural exchange as individuals are able to experience diverse cultures in a familiar way that enables openness and experimentation. Glocalization is a mechanism to share heritages and produce new forms of their experience.

Figure 10
Contextual Differences



Note: The same elements create starkly different meanings for Japan and the United States. While McDonald's offers a location for communal gathering in Japan, these same settings in the United States contribute to consumer culture and isolated convenience. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Theme #3: Quality vs. Indulgence

While the cultural framing of McDonald's differs in each region, an overlap emerges regarding the emphasis on quality, appearing in three of the Japanese commercials and four American commercials. The way in which quality is depicted shows the clash between Japanese *washoku* and America's indulgent fast-food culture, providing insight into how conceptions of food relay the cultural changes that occur during globalization (Bourdieu 1979). Across both markets, the ads rely on extreme close-ups, sensory-heavy action shots of the ingredients, and varying elements to build consumer trust and desire; however, the interpretation of these semiotic meanings differentiates each sphere.

In the U.S., Filet-O-Fish and the Big Mac advertisements, the camera zooms in on the flakiness of the fish and sizzling patties, showing the ingredients in depth to promote McDonald's as high-quality. However, the creamy texture of sauces and deep-frying oil masks the natural qualities of the ingredients, stimulating desire. These narrative techniques zoom in on ingredients but highlight the sauces and fatty flavors (*Figure 11*), prioritizing rich flavors over natural freshness (Hall 1997). Through the extreme closeness, which provides viewers with the ability to seemingly smell and taste the McDonald's products, and eye-level angles of interaction (*Figure 11*), which engage the audience, McDonald's plays into its customers' desires and appeases indulgent American interests (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020; Boch et al. 2021). Additionally, the Big Mac commercial utilizes scale, framing the burger to fit the whole screen, and narration that states, "McDonald's is bigger than ever." These choices appeal to the idea that McDonald's satisfies any appetite. In this sense, quality is highlighted through intrapersonal distance and angles of interaction to draw viewers in, but is then supplemented by notions of choice, rich flavors, and control, core pillars of the American food identity (Boch et al. 2021). Globalization of McDonald's in America follows in line with standardization and fast-food cultural values, affirming the notions of brand uniformity from Levitt and Ritzer (Levitt 1983; Ritzer 2021).

Figure 11
American Food Culture

Indulgent Qualities



Note: The detailed shots of ingredients initially display product quality but quickly transition to the pictured eye-catching shots. These frames correspond with rich flavors. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

For Japan, quality centers directly upon craftsmanship and freshness, aspects of *washoku* (Bestor and Bestor 2011). The Omelette Sandwich and Quarter Pounder advertisements feature action shots of sizzling bacon, beef patties, or water-drenched lettuce, accompanying such visuals with evocative sound effects (dripping water or sizzling meat). These elements provide proof of the natural and fresh qualities of fast food in Japan (*Figure 12*). Furthermore, the Quarter Pounder commercial uses on-screen text that states, "100% real beef" to establish ethos, while the Teriyaki and Yum Yum Sauce commercial utilizes an animated chicken, clucking sound effects, and salient green and red contrasts to allude to the

farm-freshness of its chicken sandwiches. These direct and subtle cues position fast food as intricate, detailed, and high-end (*Figure 12*). Food remains up to Japanese standards of quality and displays aesthetic craftsmanship that Japanese products are made with (Ishikawa et al. 2017; Ishige 2014). These elements represent the unpredictable outcomes that Appadurai emphasizes, as when the same strategies are employed between cultures, different meanings are assumed (Appadurai 2022). McDonald's does not behave uniformly and instead fits into existing cultures. The theme of quality suggests globalization as fluid and adaptable, implying that globalization connects cultural spheres instead of homogenizing them. Using the same semiotic tools to result in different cultural outcomes conveys that standardization affects strategies, not meanings.

Figure 12

Washoku and Craftsmanship

Natural Freshness



Note: Japan uses high realism and action shots to capture the quality of its products. Each piece of imagery alludes to high standards either through colorful depictions, quantitative evidence, or metaphors. Each strategy achieves the same goal in a new way. Created by Gavin Reddy, 2026.

Synthesis

This multimodal study into McDonald's advertising in the United States and Japan asks the question: "How does McDonald's advertising in the United States and Japan reveal globalization's effects on culture?" The three themes — standardization and consistency, glocalized hybridity, and quality vs. indulgence — work together, even with their tension, to demonstrate that McDonald's does not use a one-size-fits-all approach; rather, it strategically adapts its practices to fit seamlessly within the cultural logic of each market. While standardization conflicts with the other themes' findings, the semiotic analysis reveals that standardization contains local cultural aspects alongside uniformity, a nuance that implies that all possible forms of globalization are culturally rich. Globalization recontextualizes foreign

Americanness into a familiar Japanese experience to create products that are simultaneously American in appearance and Japanese at the core — the essence of glocalization and a finding that furthers Watson's theories (Watson 2006). To-go boxes and uniform layout can mean comfort for Americans or a communal ritual simply by placing the setting in Japan. Sandwiches obtain new sauces and audiences. Ingredients can display artistic craftsmanship and indulgent qualities, even without using different elements of analysis. The rich insight that food and advertising provide allows audiences to understand how choices are made and how globalization succeeds. These findings affirm Bourdieu's claims that food represents people and Jones's framing that advertising narrates culture (Bourdieu 1979; Jones 1970). In conclusion, McDonald's advertising portrays globalization as a sliding scale for cultural interaction. Some values are maintained, while others are remolded, giving rise to categorically distinct yet interconnected identities in each region.

Limitations and Future Research

These findings describe McDonald's advertising, specifically from 1971 to 1981. The limited scope restricts these findings from encompassing all globalization interactions, and strategies may have evolved, revealing new meanings in a highly digital age. Additionally, this study focuses exclusively on the implicit messages within advertisements, uncovering the intended meaning that was constructed. While it explores the gap by looking into the processes of globalization, the implementation of what the advertisements show might be different from the semiotic interpretation. This would result in a discrepancy between which models are confirmed. Future research could continue the ethnographic approach that previous anthropologists applied to globalization, which can be focused on watching the decisions in real time (Watson 2006). This would move past corporate strategies and engage the ongoing everyday changes directly. Furthermore, survey or experiment-based research can build off of studies like this to move past theory and uncover how consumers directly interpret globalization and its effects (Højlund 2015). While the theory has value, interacting with those who experience globalization is important. Overall, this study provides evidence for how McDonald's advertising uncovers assumptions about globalization. I strictly adhered to Kress and van Leeuwen's established semiotic framework to prevent researcher bias and ensure theory-driven analysis rather than opinionated interpretations. Moreover, the themes should not be disregarded in relation to other countries and businesses, as McDonald's in Japan served as a blueprint for other companies' global expansion, giving this case study broader significance (Watson 2006).

CONCLUSION

Globalization operates as an intricate process of mutual negotiation between cultures that can be unveiled through McDonald's advertising. This study answers the research question "How does McDonald's advertising in the United States and Japan reveal globalization's effects on culture?" by displaying that interactions between cultural values produce a glocalized hybrid. Going beyond Watson's theory, this study illustrates that glocalization is not a binary compromise between standardization and localization.

Glocalization constructs new shared identities, not just combinations of what exists between two cultures. Even standardization contains contextual elements of hybridity. Overall, globalization theory appears less rigid than the founding scholars suggest, aligning better with culture's dynamic nature.

This study's semiotic analysis shows that while themes of indulgence and industrial efficiency pertain to McDonald's in the United States, when exported to Japan, McDonald's acquires a new identity that includes Japanese ideals of quality and community alongside elements of the Western world. This is evidenced through choices like teriyaki sauce replacing ketchup, the salaryman archetype anchoring McDonald's in Japanese daily life, and the recontextualization of standardized packaging within communal Japanese settings.

While theorists like Watson and Levitt highlight result-based considerations, this study addresses the gaps that overlook how exchanges play out and lead to cultural outcomes. The limitations of this analysis confine the findings to McDonald's advertising, not all branches of globalization theory. Additionally, this study focused on corporate displays and intended messaging and cannot confirm how Japanese and American consumers interpreted these narratives — citizens could have resisted glocalized messaging — a gap that future research should address. Even with such limitations, this study does imply that adaptation is a mechanism through which globalization occurs, and advertisements are a mechanism through which those evolutions are seen, underscoring the need for anthropologists to focus less on theory and more on rich primary sources like food and commercial media (Jones 1970). Taking the methods of this study, other researchers can explore different countries and fast-food chains, which provide equally important findings. Ultimately, as global interactions become more frequent, looking to foodways can provide a window into society's cultural future, affirming the contemporary relevance of food and globalization.

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