

Global Media and Culture Ethnography Report

Spencer and Sebika

Topic: Japanese Restaurants Chains vs. Independent Stores

Purpose: Our goal was finding out if the resources and media advertising dominance held by large chain restaurant organizations was pushing independent stores out of business.

Participants: We interviewed the owner-operators of three separate restaurants around Nagoya. Mitarashi Dango near Chikusa Station, Kabuki Ramen in Yagoto, and Weekend Barbecue in Fushimi. We also interviewed around 30 students for their opinions of independent and chain restaurants.

Findings: In talking with each of the different restaurant owners we found that the independent store owners often think of themselves as being in a different market than those of the chains. The restaurant with the closest chain analogue was Kabuki Ramen, as there were multiple other chain ramen establishments down the street. The owner, like the other independent store owners, wanted to attract customers through a respect for his products and a reliable service. During our conversation, he noted that you will see advertisements for chains on every media platform, and for prime marketing locations they hold the power. He did however use SNS applications and Google Maps to do some passive and direct marketing respectively. The other two stores also used Google Maps for passive marketing but almost entirely relied on word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth marketing played a very important role for all three of these companies and the students to which we talked. Interestingly it seems as though despite the amount that larger companies spend on mass media marketing, the thing that people most often rely on when making a purchasing decision is the word of people they know. That said, of the students to which we spoke, a majority said that they like each type of restaurant for different reasons, though they thought independent ones were perhaps more important. Independent restaurants were preferred for their quality and local flavors whilst chains were preferred for consistency, price, and safety.

One thing that we thought was interesting regarding how much students and restaurants value word-of-mouth is that it runs contrary to the increasing importance of media in our day-to-day lives. Even though brands might have massive presence and stronger teams working to influence people, I think that many people understand at a different level that those suggestions can be doctored. Perhaps as the advertising space is increasingly saturated, people will come to rely more on actual human evidence from those around them. Influencers, however popular, can still be paid off for certain talking points, but friends and family aren't so easily swayed. Furthermore, it will be interesting to see in the future if any large brands decide to adopt a similar approach instead of relying on the ever-escalating mass media advertising arms race.