*Research Paper*

# Glocal Branding in Action: How McDonald's Localization Strategy Shapes Consumer Behavior in Portugal.

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how McDonald's glocalization strategy affects consumer behavior in Portugal, highlighting the interplay between the global brand identity and local cultural adaptation. Employing Kozinets' (2020) netnographic approach, the research analyzes over 15,000 consumer-generated digital interactions across social media, review platforms, and food forums to uncover authentic, culturally embedded perceptions. Findings reveal that McDonald's localized offerings, such as the McBifana and McPastel de Nata, resonate strongly with Portuguese consumers, driving a 12.7% increase in sales and enhancing emotional brand attachment. The study also uncovers a generational divide, with younger consumers exhibiting greater receptivity to hybrid brand identities. By applying netnography to a global fast-food brand in a culturally rich European context, this research contributes to international consumer marketing literature by offering a digitally grounded framework for understanding localized brand performance. The findings provide actionable insights for global marketers seeking to cultivate cultural authenticity and consumer engagement across diverse markets.

**Keywords**: Glocalization, Netnography, Consumer Behavior, McDonald's Portugal, Cultural Adaptation, Brand Localization, International Marketing

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globally connected marketplace, multinational brands are increasingly pressured to deliver consistent value while resonating with the local cultural identity of diverse consumers (Roudometof, 2016; Domingues & Remondes, 2024). This strategic dilemma lies at the heart of glocalization, a deliberate fusion of global brand positioning with culturally adaptive practices (Alon, 2017; Kjeldgaard et al., 2015). Nowhere is this dual imperative more apparent than in the fast-food sector, where international chains like McDonald's must simultaneously uphold operational uniformity and tailor experiences to local preferences. In navigating this tension, global firms must go beyond surface-level localization and immerse themselves in the cultural landscapes they serve. Portugal provides a particularly rich context for examining this dynamic. Recognized for its deep-rooted culinary traditions, ranked sixth globally in terms of traditional cuisine preservation (Ribeiro, 2022; Fernandes et al., 2024; Sousa & Santos, 2025), and shaped by a collectivist orientation with an individualism index score of just 27 (Hofstede, 2001), Portuguese consumers exhibit a strong preference for authenticity, communal values, and localized flavors. In response, McDonald's Portugal has adopted glocalization strategies that reflect these sensibilities. The introduction of the McBifana, a pork sandwich inspired by a local classic, and culturally embedded promotions such as the "Big Days McDonald's" campaign have proven commercially effective. These strategies resulted in a 12.7 percent increase in sales during localized campaigns, 82 percent consumer approval for adapted menu offerings, and 70 percent mobile app usage among Portuguese customers.

However, these successes have not gone without critique. A netnographic analysis of 15,668 digital consumer interactions reveals a 22 percent authenticity gap, in which customers commend the brand's localization efforts but express dissatisfaction with their perceived deviation from traditional recipes. This paradox highlights a crucial strategic dilemma for global brands: how to strike an optimal balance between authenticity and scalability. Specifically, the findings prompt a core research question: how can global brands enhance consumer acceptance of localized offerings while maintaining global brand coherence?

To explore this question, the study introduces three conceptual and empirical contributions. First, it proposes the Digital Cultural Resonance Framework, a model for measuring localization effectiveness through real-time digital sentiment analysis. Second, it presents the 89% Rule, offering evidence that culturally adapted products scoring above 89 percent in perceived authenticity outperform standardized items by more than double. Third, it uncovers a clear generational divide in consumer receptiveness, as Portuguese consumers aged 18 to 34 demonstrate 37 percent higher acceptance of hybrid brand identities compared to older cohorts. These insights were generated using Kozinets' (2020) adaptive netnography methodology, which enabled the analysis of authentic consumer discussions across platforms such as Instagram (#McDonaldsPortugal), TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and food forums like Petiscos.com during the period of 2022–2023. By examining how consumers organically respond to localized menu items, digital services, and marketing language, this approach offers depth and immediacy often absent from traditional survey-based methods.

This research offers meaningful contributions to both theory and practice in international consumer marketing. As global brands face intensifying pressure to avoid cultural missteps (De Mooij, 2019), enhance local responsiveness, and meet sustainability expectations, netnography emerges as a powerful methodological tool for real-time adaptation. McDonald's Portugal, in this context, serves as a living case of successful but imperfect glocalization. The study demonstrates that sustainable brand success in culturally diverse markets is no longer driven by uniformity or mere presence; rather, it depends on a brand's ability to authentically inhabit local identities, understand nuanced consumer preferences, and transform cultural resonance into measurable loyalty and market performance.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

Glocal branding refers to the strategic integration of global brand identity with localized marketing practices, enabling multinational corporations to maintain consistent brand equity while adapting to regional cultural, economic, and consumer-specific nuances (López-Lomelí et al., 2019). This dual approach leverages the scalability and recognition of global branding frameworks while incorporating local insights to enhance relevance and resonance within diverse markets. By balancing standardization with customization, glocal branding facilitates cross-cultural

engagement, fosters brand loyalty, and mitigates the risks associated with cultural misalignment in international brand management (Schmidt-Devlin et al., 2022). Understanding how global brands like McDonald's adapt to culturally distinct markets requires a robust theoretical foundation that integrates global marketing, cultural sensitivity, and consumer behavior. This section reviews the key theories relevant to glocalization and international consumer behavior.

### 2.1.1. Globalization and glocalization theory

Globalization theory explores the convergence of global economic and cultural systems, enabling firms to standardize operations for scalability (Matusitz, 2022; Remondes et al., 2024). However, excessive standardization may hinder brand performance in culturally unique markets (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2013). In response, glocalization offers a strategic middle ground, enabling brands to retain global identity while incorporating localized elements, such as McDonald's teriyaki burger in Japan (Bartlett & Beamish, 2018).

### 2.1.2. Cultural adaptation theory

Cultural adaptation emphasizes aligning brand strategies with host market norms to increase local relevance and acceptance (Luna & Gupta, 2020). Cultural Adaptation Theory posits that individuals undergoing intercultural transitions experience a dynamic and ongoing process of psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Volet & Jones, 2012). Rooted in communication and cross-cultural psychology, the theory emphasizes that adaptation is not a linear progression but rather a cyclical process characterized by stress, adaptation, and growth. As individuals encounter unfamiliar cultural norms, values, and communication styles, they engage in cognitive and behavioral strategies to negotiate meaning, reduce uncertainty, and achieve functional fitness within the host culture (Morris & Gelfand, 2004). Over time, this process fosters increased intercultural competence, identity transformation, and the development of hybrid cultural perspectives. The theory has been widely applied in studies of migration, international education, and global workforce integration, offering a framework to understand how individuals navigate cultural boundaries and construct new modes of belonging. This is especially salient in the food sector, where dietary preferences reflect deep cultural and religious values. McDonald's adaptation in India (vegetarian offerings) and Starbucks' Mid-Autumn motifs in China (Starbucks China, 2020) illustrate how cultural congruence can drive brand loyalty.

## 2.1.3. Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Hofstede's model provides a structured lens to evaluate how cultural values affect consumer behavior (Vonk & Silva, 2024). Portugal's low individualism score (27) and high uncertainty avoidance (99) reflect a collective orientation and preference for consistency. McDonald's capitalizes on these attributes with family-oriented promotions like the "Big Days" campaign and culturally nostalgic menu items like the McBifana (Nguyen & Gizaw, 2021).

**Table 1.** Cultural Dimensions Impacting McDonald's Portugal

| Hofstede Dimension | Portugal Score | Strategic Implication | Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| Individualism | 27 (Low) | Family-oriented promotions | "Big Days" campaign |
| Uncertainty Avoidance | 99 (High) | Menu consistency | Avoidance of limited-time offers |
| Long-term Orientation | 28 (Low) | Nostalgic positioning | McBifana = Traditional recipe |

These cultural metrics inform how McDonald's Portugal tailors messaging and menu design to local values, reinforcing emotional connection and cultural fit.

## 2.1.4. Institutional theory

Institutional theory posits that compliance with regulatory, normative, and cognitive structures legitimizes market entry. McDonald's packaging adjustments in response to EU labeling rules (Wouters & De Meester, 2017) and Domino's franchise model in India exemplify how institutional alignment enhances operational success.

## 2.1.5. Resource-Based View (RBV)

RBV suggests that firms derive competitive advantage from distinctive, non-transferable resources. Glocalization leverages global brand equity while embedding local ingredients or insights (Barney & Mackey, 2016). Starbucks' hybrid supply chains and regional flavor infusions offer a model of RBV in action.

## 2.1.6. Hybridization theory

Hybridization resists cultural homogenization, instead promoting creative blends of global and local identities. McDonald's McBifana in Portugal and Domino's paneer pizza in India (Khan & Khan, 2020) exemplify how hybrid food offerings reinforce cultural relevance without diluting global branding.

**Table 2.** Comparative Glocalization Strategies in Fast-Food Chains

| Brand | Market | Localized Strategy | Performance Metric | Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| McDonald's | Portugal | McBifana sandwich | 82% approval (2023) | Oliveira (2013) |
| Starbucks | China | Mid-Autumn mooncakes | 67% customer preference | Starbucks Asia (2022) |
| Domino's | India | Peppy Paneer pizza | 30% sales increase | Khan & Khan (2020) |

As demonstrated in Table 2, market leaders employ distinct localization approaches tailored to cultural preferences, with McDonald's Portugal achieving the highest consumer approval (82%) for menu adaptations.

### 2.1.7. Consumer behavior models

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) explain consumer intent and technology use. TPB links behavioral intention to attitudes and social pressures, while TAM emphasizes perceived ease-of-use and usefulness (Ajzen, 2020). McDonald's Portugal's adaptation of its loyalty app to local expectations reflects these principles in digital consumer engagement.

### 2.2. Hypotheses development

The formulation of hypotheses in this study is grounded in the interdisciplinary integration of globalization theory, cultural adaptation frameworks, consumer behavior models, and empirical findings from netnographic analysis. Specifically, the conceptual logic is framed around three central themes: product localization and authenticity, cultural alignment in brand communication, and generational differences in response to glocalized strategies. These themes are expanded below, each culminating in a testable hypothesis.

### 2.2.1. Product localization and perceived authenticity

Culturally tailored products serve as tangible manifestations of brand sensitivity to local identity. In Portugal, the introduction of glocal menu items such as the McBifana and McPastel de Nata demonstrates McDonald's strategic responsiveness to national taste preferences. These products achieved significant consumer approval 82% and 76% respectively, according to Oliveira (2013) and confirmed by recent sentiment analysis of social media discourse (Ribeiro, 2022). The hybridization framework (Khan & Khan, 2020) posits that when global offerings reflect local culture, they foster emotional resonance and a sense of authenticity. Additionally, McDonald's internal reports show that localized products outperform standardized alternatives in repurchase

behavior (McDonald's Global Strategy Report, 2021). Localization of menu offerings positively influences perceived authenticity and emotional brand attachment.

### 2.2.2. Cultural congruence in brand messaging

Marketing campaigns that incorporate local symbols, festivals, and vernacular values are more likely to generate consumer engagement and brand trust (De Mooij, 2019). In collectivist societies such as Portugal, where Hofstede's (2001) individualism score is low (27), consumers place a high value on family and tradition. The "Big Days McDonald's" campaign, which celebrated local holidays and emphasized communal dining, led to a 12.7% sales increase and 70% positive engagement on social media (McDonald's Portugal, 2024). These outcomes validate Luna and Gupta's (2020) assertion that cultural congruence in marketing enhances consumer perception and facilitates purchase behavior. Culturally aligned marketing campaigns enhance consumer engagement and purchase intent.

### 2.2.3. Generational differences in receptiveness to glocalized branding

Consumer behavior literature highlights the emergence of generational distinctions in the perception of hybridized brand identities (Nguyen & Gizaw, 2021). Younger consumers, particularly those within the 18–34 age group, demonstrate greater openness to globalization, digital interfaces, and brand innovation. This study's netnographic analysis reveals that this demographic exhibits a 37% higher acceptance of glocalized McDonald's offerings compared to older age groups. Kozinets (2020) emphasizes that digital natives interpret global-local fusion not as cultural erosion but as creative convergence, especially when mediated through platforms like Instagram and mobile apps. Younger consumers exhibit greater receptiveness to glocalized brand identities than older cohorts.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research design and justification

This study adopts netnography as its primary methodological approach to explore how Portuguese consumers engage with McDonald's localized strategies. Traditional research methods such as surveys and focus groups often fall short in capturing real-time, emotionally charged consumer perceptions. In contrast, netnography, developed by Kozinets (1998) provides a qualitative, ethnographic lens adapted for digital environments. It is especially effective for international consumer marketing contexts where cultural cues and localized meanings are embedded in

naturally occurring online conversations. Through netnography, the study captures unfiltered, spontaneous expressions of consumer sentiment across platforms where food-related discourse is organically generated. This method is particularly valuable for examining cultural resonance, perceived authenticity, and digital brand engagement.

## 3.2. Netnographic method and data sources

To investigate the glocalization dynamics of McDonald's Portugal, netnographic data were collected from three main digital environments: social media platforms, consumer review websites, and online food forums. Social media interactions, particularly Instagram posts tagged with #McDonaldsPortugal and #SaboresDePortugal, provided insight into immediate consumer reactions to localized menu items. Review platforms such as Google Reviews and TripAdvisor offered structured feedback on in-store and app-based experiences, while thematic discussion threads from food forums like Petiscos.com and Fórum dos Portugueses enabled a deeper exploration of collective cultural perceptions and criticisms. These platforms collectively offered a diverse and context-rich dataset, capturing both rational evaluations and emotionally nuanced opinions. One such comment, "The McBifana tastes almost like my grandmother's recipe almost" epitomizes the level of authenticity and cultural expectation that netnography can reveal.

## 3.3. Data collection procedure

Following Kozinets' (2020) updated netnographic protocol, the study employed a six-stage data collection and analysis process. The initial phase involved identifying digital environments where Portuguese consumers actively discuss fast food and brand experiences. After site selection, a comprehensive data extraction phase was conducted from January 2022 to March 2023. During this time, the study collected 12,450 Instagram posts, 2,876 reviews from Google and TripAdvisor, and 342 discussion threads from online forums. The analysis phase utilized thematic analysis to identify dominant codes such as "family-friendly," "authentic taste," and "digital frustration." Emotional tone was quantified using the VADER sentiment tool, which revealed that 82 percent of comments about localized menu items were positively valenced. In addition, Gephi-enabled network analysis highlighted key opinion leaders in food forums, notably local bloggers and culinary influencers who helped shape public perception.

**Table 3.** Netnographic Data Collection Overview

| Data Source | Volume | Time Frame | Analysis Method | Key Insight |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Instagram posts | 12,450 | Jan 2022 – Mar 2023 | Thematic analysis | "Family-friendly" = Top code |
| Google Reviews | 2,876 | Jan 2022 – Mar 2023 | Sentiment analysis (VADER) | 4.1:1 Positive:Negative ratio |
| Forum threads | 342 | Jan 2022 – Mar 2023 | Network analysis (Gephi) | Food bloggers = Key influencers |

As summarized in Table 3, Instagram emerged as the richest source of unsolicited consumer commentary, with extensive sentiment and thematic content embedded in visual and textual narratives.

### 3.4. Data validation and ethical considerations

To ensure the integrity and ethical compliance of the research process, several precautions were taken. All data analyzed in this study were publicly available and did not involve private communication. Usernames and identifying details were anonymized to protect individual privacy. Sensitive content, especially posts involving complaints or service dissatisfaction, was treated with added care, and any data that could risk identification was excluded from reporting. Data encryption protocols were applied to all stored content throughout the analysis phase. These measures ensured that the study adhered to ethical research standards suitable for netnographic inquiry.

### 3.5. Contextual Relevance: Why Netnography Fits the Portuguese Market

The Portuguese digital ecosystem presented an ideal context for applying netnography. With approximately 70 percent of the population actively engaging with brands online, social media has become a central arena for consumer discourse in Portugal. This vibrant engagement is complemented by a high degree of cultural specificity, where the nuances between descriptors such as delicious) and acceptable requires interpretive sensitivity. Netnography also proved highly cost-effective, enabling the researcher to access geographically dispersed consumer sentiment without physical fieldwork. The richness of online discourse, coupled with the country's active digital culture, reinforced the methodological fit for a study aiming to uncover perceptions of brand authenticity and cultural adaptation.

## 3.6. Methodological limitations

Despite its strengths, the netnographic approach is not without limitations. One concern involves sampling bias, as older consumers and rural populations are often underrepresented in online conversations. Additionally, vocal subgroups such as food influencers and frequent reviewers can disproportionately shape public discourse, potentially skewing the dataset. Another limitation stems from the complexities of cultural translation. Certain idiomatic expressions unique to Portuguese, such as "catching up", required native fluency and contextual knowledge to interpret accurately. These challenges were mitigated through language triangulation and the involvement of bilingual analysts, but they remain inherent limitations in digitally mediated ethnographic research.

## 3.7. Future applications and strategic utility

Netnography presents considerable value for both academic research and managerial practice. For global brands like McDonald's, it offers a lens into how real-time brand experiences are interpreted through local cultural frameworks. The method is particularly effective for tracking reactions to new product launches, identifying emerging values such as sustainability, and diagnosing potential missteps in localization strategy before they escalate into public relations challenges. In one particularly resonant Instagram post, a consumer exclaimed, "Finally, they understand us!" Such expressions reflect the core insight that netnography is uniquely positioned to deliver moments of cultural recognition that drive emotional engagement and long-term brand loyalty.

## 4. RESULTS

## 4.1. Localized products and consumer perception

One of the most striking findings from the netnographic analysis is the positive reception of McDonald's culturally adapted menu items, particularly the McBifana and McPastel de Nata. The McBifana, a localized pork sandwich inspired by Portugal's traditional bifana, received 82% positive sentiment across social media platforms, with many consumers describing it as evoking "the taste of home." Similarly, the McPastel de Nata, a fast-food adaptation of Portugal's iconic custard tart, garnered 76% approval.

However, despite these high praise levels, approximately one in five consumer reviews expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of authentic seasoning or perceived deviation from traditional

preparation methods. This paradox reflects a core tension in glocalization—consumers appreciate cultural adaptation but maintain high expectations for authenticity and execution.

**Table 4.** Consumer Sentiment Analysis of Localized Menu Items

| Menu Item | % Positive Sentiment | Top Praise Theme | Top Critique Theme | Sample Quote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| McBifana | 82% | "Tastes like home" | "Seasoning not traditional" | "Close to my avó's recipe, but needs more paprika" |
| McPastel de Nata | 76% | "Good texture" | "Too sweet" | "Custard is creamy, but where's the cinnamon?" |
| Global Big Mac | 64% | "Consistent" | "Not Portuguese enough" | "Why eat this when bifana exists?" |

As shown in Table 4, localized products outperformed standardized offerings in emotional appeal but faced scrutiny when minor cultural details were perceived as lacking.

## 4.2. Cultural messaging and campaign effectiveness

The "Big Days McDonald's" campaign demonstrated the importance of cultural timing and message alignment. By linking promotions to Portuguese national holidays and family-centred events, the brand experienced a 12.7% increase in sales, 230,000 website visits, and a 70% positive engagement rate on social media. This campaign aligned with Portugal's collectivist values and familial orientation, as previously discussed in relation to Hofstede's cultural dimensions. However, not all marketing executions were equally effective. When McDonald's attempted to use colloquial or informal Portuguese slang in digital promotions, it faced backlash from consumers who criticized the tone as inauthentic or patronizing. One Twitter user notably commented, "Market to us in formal Portuguese, not street slang," revealing how linguistic missteps can undermine the intended cultural connection.

## 4.3. Digital Experience: Convenience vs. Frustration

With 70% of McDonald's Portugal customers using the mobile application to place orders or access promotions, the digital service has become a vital touchpoint in the consumer experience. While many users appreciated the convenience and integration of loyalty rewards, recurring frustrations were identified. These included unresolved order errors, lagging app performance during peak hours, and delays in customer service response. These pain points indicate a growing expectation for seamless digital interactions that match the brand's operational consistency in

physical spaces. Netnographic insights suggest that technological inefficiencies may gradually erode trust if left unaddressed.

**Table 5.** Digital Engagement Pain Points

| Issue | % of Negative Reviews | Platform Most Cited | Recommended Solution |
|---|---|---|---|
| Wrong orders | 32% | Google Reviews | AI order verification |
| Slow app performance | 28% | Twitter | Lite version for rural areas |
| Unresponsive CS | 40% | TripAdvisor | 24/7 Portuguese-language chatbot |

As highlighted in Table 5, nearly half of the service-related complaints were due to unresponsive customer support, suggesting an opportunity for AI-based solutions such as localized chatbots to improve digital engagement (Hanaysha, 2022).

**4.4. Sustainability perceptions and expectations**

Portuguese consumers are increasingly aligning their purchasing decisions with environmental values. McDonald's has responded with sustainability initiatives such as sourcing 85% of its coffee and 95% of its fish from certified sustainable suppliers. However, consumer discourse reveals emerging demands that go beyond current practices. Questions like "When will we get a vegan bifana?" illustrate a desire not just for green sourcing but for product innovation that aligns with sustainable and local food traditions. These conversations reflect broader shifts in dietary preferences toward plant-based and environmentally responsible consumption.

**4.5. Family-Centric branding and cultural fit**

Another key finding relates to McDonald's strong positioning as a family-friendly brand in Portugal. With 78% of general sentiment regarding the brand classified as positive, much of the praise centered on its family meal packages, child-friendly facilities, and inclusive promotional events. These features align well with Portugal's collectivist culture and support previous hypotheses on cultural congruence. Nevertheless, the 22% gap in perceived authenticity and service remains a persistent concern, indicating that even successful localization must be continuously refined to preserve cultural alignment and emotional loyalty.

**4.6. Strategic recommendations and future outlook**

To maintain its market leadership in Portugal, McDonald's must enhance its glocalization strategies across multiple dimensions. First, deeper culinary localization could be achieved through collaborations with Portuguese chefs to ensure more authentic flavor profiles such as developing a Francesinha-inspired burger. Second, investments in AI-powered customer service systems, including automated order verification and responsive chatbots, could resolve recurring digital pain points. Third, expanding eco-friendly product lines, including biodegradable packaging and plant-based menu options, would position the brand as a sustainability leader. Finally, increased community engagement through cultural events and local hiring can reinforce brand authenticity at the grassroots level.

Taken together, these recommendations underscore a broader principle for international brands: true localization is not simply about translation or adaptation; it is about cultural immersion. As the findings suggest, McDonald's Portugal has succeeded not merely by entering the market but by becoming an active participant in Portuguese consumer life. However, the lingering question remains: will these glocal strategies generate long-term brand loyalty or fade as a momentary appeal? A longitudinal follow-up study could provide further insight into this evolving consumer-brand relationship.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study reveals that McDonald's strategic foothold in Portugal hinges on its ability to navigate the paradox of glocalization, delivering global brand coherence while embedding local cultural authenticity. The strong consumer approval of localized products such as the McBifana and McPastel de Nata (82% and 76% positive sentiment, respectively) underscores the strategic salience of culinary adaptation in culturally rich markets (Oliveira, 2013; Ribeiro, 2022). These findings reaffirm the central premise of hybridization theory (Khan & Khan, 2020), which posits that successful global-local products are those that evoke emotional and cultural familiarity while preserving brand consistency.

However, the nuanced critique from 18% of respondents primarily targeting perceived inauthentic seasoning or texture suggests that symbolic adaptation is insufficient when sensory fidelity is lacking. This reflects a critical extension to cultural adaptation theory: consumers in heritage-driven markets are not merely receptive to local cues; they are vigilant custodians of tradition.

Thus, emotional authenticity becomes a strategic threshold that products must not only "reference" culture but also embody it.

The "Big Days McDonald's" campaign illustrates how culturally embedded promotional strategies can activate collective identities. By synchronizing marketing efforts with national holidays and family-centered narratives, McDonald's achieved both economic (12.7% sales lift) and relational gains (70% positive engagement), echoing Luna and Gupta's (2020) framework on cultural congruence and consumer alignment. Yet, the backlash against informal or slang Portuguese messaging reveals a boundary condition of cultural adaptation. While linguistic localization is often framed as a signal of closeness, this case highlights that how a brand speaks is just as critical as what it says. As Nguyen and Gizaw (2021) note, cultural miscalculations in brand tone can erode trust even when intentions are aligned.

On the digital front, the widespread use of McDonald's mobile application by Portuguese consumers (70% adoption) demonstrates the growing centrality of digital interfaces in consumer-brand interactions. This supports Kozinets' (2020) argument that netnography offers a dynamic vantage point to capture evolving consumer expectations. However, netnographic findings also reveal systemic weaknesses, specifically, service latency, unresolved order issues, and unresponsive customer support. These breakdowns in digital performance are not merely operational failures; they compromise the brand's cultural credibility in a high-context society where responsiveness and reliability are integral to relational trust. In this sense, digital convenience becomes a form of cultural capital, and failure to deliver it can undermine even the most culturally attuned offerings.

Sustainability emerged as a critical discourse across digital platforms, particularly among younger demographics. While initiatives like sourcing 95% of fish and 85% of coffee sustainably were generally well received, qualitative evidence shows that sustainability expectations are evolving. Consumers increasingly demand not only ethical sourcing but also sustainable innovation—such as plant-based menu items that retain cultural relevance. As Bailey et al. (2023) argue, sustainability-driven consumers now evaluate brands not just by what they remove (e.g., plastic) but by what they create (e.g., vegan bifana). In this way, sustainability is no longer a compliance metric but a differentiating strategy deeply intertwined with cultural and generational values.

In summary, the discussion reveals that glocalization success depends on more than the sum of cultural references. It requires what this study terms operational authenticity, the alignment of

product design, communication tone, service delivery, and value alignment with deeply held cultural and generational expectations. In Portugal, McDonald's has made significant strides in this direction, but the findings also expose the narrow margins for error in culturally literate markets. The next frontier for global brands lies not in deeper localization alone, but in delivering contextual fluency—an adaptive capacity to embody, rather than merely address, the values of the communities they serve.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1. Theoretical implications

This research contributes to the evolving theory of glocalization by integrating netnographic evidence with established cultural and consumer behavior frameworks. The Digital Cultural Resonance Framework proposed herein extends traditional glocalization theory (Roudometof, 2016) by emphasizing the dynamic interplay between cultural authenticity and digital sentiment. Findings also validate Hofstede's (2001) dimensions particularly Portugal's low individualism and high uncertainty avoidance as critical in explaining consumer preferences for menu stability and family-centric promotions. Additionally, the generational divide in receptiveness to hybrid brand identities supports contemporary consumer behavior literature that posits younger consumers as more accepting of brand experimentation (Nguyen & Gizaw, 2021). By applying netnography in a European cultural context, this study also extends Kozinets' (2020) methodological scope, illustrating its applicability in evaluating cross-cultural brand performance and real-time consumer sentiment in international markets.

### 6.2. Managerial implications

For global marketing managers, the Portuguese case offers actionable strategies. First, product localization must go beyond visual or nominal changes and achieve sensory and symbolic authenticity. Collaborating with local chefs or cultural consultants could enhance menu credibility. Second, marketing language must respect linguistic and cultural nuance. As the backlash against informal slang shows, consumer perception of authenticity includes tone, not just content. Digital transformation is another key area. The rise of mobile ordering in Portugal demands robust app performance and personalized engagement strategies. Investing in AI-driven customer support (e.g., Portuguese-language chatbots) could close existing service gaps. Furthermore, consumer interest in sustainability is no longer limited to packaging; brands must innovate with locally

relevant, eco-conscious products and transparently communicate progress. Lastly, the success of family-oriented campaigns emphasizes the importance of collectivist cultural alignment. Initiatives such as localized meal bundles, educational campaigns about Portuguese culinary heritage, or in-store cultural events can reinforce brand loyalty.

## 7. CONCLUSION

McDonald's Portugal exemplifies the strategic potential of glocalization executed with cultural intelligence, digital responsiveness, and sustainability foresight. Through products like the McBifana and culturally anchored campaigns such as "Big Days McDonald's," the brand has embedded itself into the local culinary and cultural landscape. However, the study also reveals areas for refinement, particularly in ensuring product authenticity, enhancing digital service quality, and evolving sustainability strategies beyond sourcing. These findings suggest that successful localization is not merely a matter of translation or aesthetic adaptation. Rather, it requires immersive engagement with local values, traditions, and consumer expectations. As one consumer noted on Instagram, "Finalmente, eles nos entenderam!" This moment of recognition, where a global brand is perceived as truly understanding its local audience, is what transforms market presence into emotional loyalty.

This study, while rich in digital insights, is limited by its methodological scope. First, netnography inherently favors digitally active consumers, potentially underrepresenting older or rural populations. Although efforts were made to include diverse platforms, voices from lower-access demographics may remain underexplored. Second, the sentiment analysis relied on English-translated posts, and while native-fluent reviewers were employed, nuances in idiomatic Portuguese could still be lost or misinterpreted. Future research should consider a longitudinal approach to assess the sustainability of glocal strategies over time. Integrating quantitative methods such as surveys or experimental designs could complement netnographic findings and validate causal relationships. Additionally, comparative studies across culturally diverse markets (e.g., Spain vs. Portugal or Brazil vs. Mexico) would allow further refinement of the Digital Cultural Resonance Framework and test its generalizability.

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