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Article

Perceived Cost Performance and Consumer Decision-Making: A Study of Competitive Mechanisms Between Transnational and Local Brands in China's Fast-Food Market, with Reference to McDonald's, Wallace, and Tastien

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Abstract: This paper examines how perceived cost performance shapes consumer decision-making and competitive dynamics in China's fast-food market. Focusing on McDonald's, Wallace, and Tastien, the study analyzes how transnational and local brands compete through combinations of price, product localization, brand trust, store experience, and symbolic positioning. Rather than reducing competition to simple price rivalry, this paper argues that perceived cost performance is a multidimensional judgment. Consumers weigh monetary cost against portion size, taste familiarity, service reliability, convenience, and social meaning. In the contemporary Chinese market, transnational brands like McDonald's rely on standardized quality control, recognizable branding, and stable service expectations. Conversely, local brands such as Wallace and Tastien derive competitive advantage from lower prices, stronger localization, and flexible adaptation to domestic consumption preferences. The analysis demonstrates that consumer choice is structured by the interaction among income sensitivity, occasion-based consumption, trust in food safety, cultural proximity, and online ordering platforms. Consequently, competition between transnational and local brands is best understood as a contest over value interpretation rather than a direct comparison of menu prices. Adopting a theoretical and comparative case-based approach, this study concludes that local brands gain strength by aligning moderate prices with culturally resonant products, whereas transnational brands remain competitive by converting brand assurance into a justified premium. Ultimately, perceived cost performance serves as a central mechanism organizing market segmentation and brand competition.

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1. Introduction

China's fast-food market has emerged as one of the most dynamic and competitive sectors within the broader landscape of consumer retail and food-service development [1]. This market is characterized by rapid urbanization, the integration of digital platforms, evolving preferences among younger demographics, and a heightened sensitivity to the balance between price and perceived value. In this highly competitive environment, brands are not merely vying for consumer attention through pricing strategies or menu diversity. Instead, they are competing on a broader spectrum of consumer evaluations, where the perceived worth of a meal is judged in relation to specific social, cultural, and

practical contexts. This multifaceted competition underscores the importance of understanding how consumers perceive value beyond simple monetary terms.

This paper examines perceived cost performance as a central mechanism that links consumer cognition to brand competition. In everyday market discourse, the concept of cost performance is often used to evaluate whether a product delivers adequate value relative to its price. However, in the fast-food industry, this evaluation extends beyond a straightforward comparison of quantity and cost [2, 3]. Consumers also consider factors such as the familiarity of flavors, the speed and convenience of service, the trustworthiness of the brand, expectations regarding food safety, the overall dining atmosphere, emotional satisfaction, and the symbolic associations tied to specific brands. These additional dimensions make the judgment of cost performance a complex and context-dependent process, reflecting the interplay of tangible and intangible factors.

The Chinese fast-food market provides a particularly insightful context for exploring these dynamics, as it features a mix of well-established transnational brands and highly adaptive local competitors. McDonald's, for instance, exemplifies a mature global chain with standardized operations, widespread brand recognition, and consistent quality benchmarks. In contrast, Wallace represents a prominent local chain known for its affordability and accessibility, catering to price-sensitive consumers. Meanwhile, Tastien has carved out a niche by offering Chinese-style burgers that emphasize localized flavors and a distinct product identity. These three brands illustrate diverse competitive strategies within the same market, highlighting the varied ways in which cost performance can influence consumer preferences and brand positioning [4, 5].

The primary research question addressed in this paper is how perceived cost performance shapes consumer decision-making and, in turn, structures the competitive dynamics between transnational and local fast-food brands in China [6]. The central argument posits that cost performance is not an inherent attribute of a product but rather a subjective interpretation shaped by the interaction of multiple factors, including price, quality expectations, cultural relevance, brand reputation, and the specific context of consumption. Consequently, the same menu price may elicit different evaluations depending on the brand, the demographic profile of the consumer, and the situational context of the purchase. This variability underscores the importance of understanding cost performance as a dynamic and multifaceted construct.

This study employs a theoretical and comparative case-based methodology. To ensure academic rigor and avoid unverifiable claims, the analysis does not rely on original survey data or statistical findings [4]. Instead, it synthesizes insights from existing research on perceived value, price fairness, consumer behavior, brand localization, and competition within the food-service industry. These insights are then applied to a comparative analysis of McDonald's, Wallace, and Tastien within the Chinese market. By adopting this approach, the paper aims to identify key mechanisms underlying consumer perceptions and brand competition without overstating causal relationships. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of the factors that drive consumer choices and brand strategies in a rapidly evolving market.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The second section provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature on perceived value, consumer decision-making processes, and competitive strategies in the fast-food industry. The third section introduces an analytical framework for understanding the concept of perceived cost performance [7]. The fourth section applies this framework to analyze the competitive strategies of McDonald's, Wallace, and Tastien, highlighting their unique approaches to market positioning. The fifth section discusses the broader implications of these findings for market segmentation and brand strategy, offering insights into how brands can better align with consumer expectations. The final section concludes by summarizing the key findings and outlining potential directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Research on consumer decision-making has long emphasized that purchasing behavior depends not only on objective product characteristics but also on subjective evaluations of value [2]. In marketing and consumer behavior studies, perceived value is often understood as a balance between what consumers gain and what they must give up. This framework is particularly relevant to fast-food consumption, where factors such as monetary cost, waiting time, convenience, taste, and service expectations are evaluated simultaneously. These dimensions collectively shape the consumer's perception of value, influencing their purchasing decisions in a competitive market.

Recent studies highlight that competition in the food-service industry increasingly hinges on experience-based and symbolic dimensions of value, alongside functional utility. Consumers assess not only tangible aspects like portion size and menu price but also intangible factors such as store cleanliness, order accuracy, packaging quality, digital ordering convenience, and the emotional comfort associated with a brand. These considerations are particularly significant in fast-food markets, where consumption patterns are often frequent, habitual, and sensitive to specific occasions [8]. The interplay of these factors underscores the complexity of consumer decision-making in this sector.

Price remains a central factor in consumer decision-making, but its influence is shaped by reference points and perceptions of fairness [7]. A low price can attract consumers by signaling affordability and practical value, yet it may also raise concerns if it is associated with inferior quality or potential food safety risks. Conversely, a higher price may be deemed acceptable when it conveys assurances of superior quality, cleaner environments, or stronger emotional satisfaction. This dynamic illustrates that price operates not merely as a numerical figure but as a construct interpreted through the consumer's subjective lens, influenced by their expectations and prior experiences.

Research on branding suggests that familiarity and trust play crucial roles in reducing uncertainty during consumer decision-making. In the context of food-service settings, trust is particularly vital because consumers cannot directly verify aspects such as ingredient quality, preparation methods, or hygiene standards at the point of purchase [9]. Branded fast-food chains leverage this by competing on their ability to manage uncertainty. For instance, a well-known transnational brand may inspire trust through its standardized processes and global reputation, while a local brand may build trust by aligning with regional preferences, fostering familiarity, and visibly adapting to local tastes and cultural nuances.

The concept of localization is also significant in understanding competitive dynamics. Global brands entering domestic markets often adapt their products, promotional strategies, and store formats to align with local preferences. However, local brands typically possess a deeper, more intuitive understanding of everyday taste patterns and price sensitivities within their region. This distinction can influence the competitive balance between global and local players [10]. While transnational brands may excel in delivering standardized service systems and symbolic assurances, local brands often have an advantage in menu customization and offering price points that resonate more closely with the local consumer base.

Digitalization has introduced an additional layer of complexity to fast-food competition. The rise of online ordering, delivery platforms, discount bundles, and app-based memberships has transformed how consumers compare brands. Digital platforms enhance price transparency, but they also emphasize other factors such as customer reviews, promotional coupons, delivery timing, and the visual presentation of food. As a result, consumers now make decisions within a digitally mediated comparison space, which extends beyond the physical store environment. This shift underscores the growing importance of digital strategies in shaping consumer perceptions and influencing brand preferences [6].

Despite these advancements, the concept of perceived cost performance remains insufficiently defined in many discussions of fast-food competition in China. Existing research often treats value, price, and satisfaction as related but separate themes, without fully exploring how consumers integrate these dimensions into comparative brand

judgments [11]. Furthermore, studies on local and transnational competition frequently fail to explain why lower prices alone do not guarantee consumer preference or why premium pricing can sometimes be justified. This paper seeks to address these gaps by framing perceived cost performance as a critical mechanism that connects brand attributes to consumer choice, offering a more comprehensive understanding of competitive dynamics in the fast-food industry (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Core Literature Streams Relevant to Perceived Cost Performance and Fast-Food Competition

Research stream	Core concern	Value for this paper	Limitation
Perceived value	trade-off between benefits and sacrifice	clarifies value evaluation logic	often too general for market comparison
Price fairness	interpretation of acceptable pricing	explains price reaction beyond amount alone	less specific to food-service settings
Brand trust	uncertainty reduction and familiarity	explains premium acceptance	may understate local taste effects
Localization and platform retail	market adaptation and digital comparison	connects brand strategy with Chinese market conditions	often fragmented across topics

3. Analytical Framework

This paper defines perceived cost performance as a multidimensional consumer judgment about whether the total value of a purchase is appropriate relative to the total cost incurred. Value encompasses not only food quantity and taste but also consistency, convenience, trust, service efficiency, social acceptability, and emotional reassurance [12]. Cost, on the other hand, includes factors such as price, waiting time, search effort, delivery fees, uncertainty, and the risk of disappointment. By integrating these elements, the concept of perceived cost performance provides a comprehensive framework for understanding consumer evaluations in the fast-food market.

Under this definition, consumer decision-making in the fast-food market can be analyzed through five interconnected dimensions. The first dimension is price affordability, which examines whether the brand aligns with the consumer's immediate budget and routine spending habits. The second dimension is functional satisfaction, which includes attributes such as portion size, satiety, taste, and product variety. The third dimension is reliability, which encompasses perceived consistency, food safety, order accuracy, and stable service standards. The fourth dimension is cultural and symbolic fit, which evaluates whether the brand resonates with local tastes, social identity, or specific consumption occasions [13]. The fifth dimension is convenience, which includes factors such as store density, waiting time, app usability, and delivery integration. These dimensions collectively shape the consumer's perception of cost performance, offering a nuanced understanding of decision-making processes.

Perceived cost performance emerges from the dynamic interaction among these dimensions rather than from any single factor. For instance, a low-cost brand may be perceived as highly cost-effective if it performs adequately on dimensions such as taste and convenience. Conversely, a higher-priced brand may also be deemed cost-effective if it successfully reduces uncertainty and provides a more reliable or socially appropriate experience. However, a brand risks losing its competitive edge if consumers perceive that its price no longer aligns with the expected value. This interplay underscores the

importance of maintaining a balanced performance across all dimensions to sustain consumer trust and loyalty.

This framework also emphasizes the significance of consumption occasions in shaping consumer preferences. Fast-food purchases are not uniform; they vary based on situational contexts. For example, consumers may prioritize different factors when eating alone, ordering late at night, purchasing meals for children, gathering with friends, or selecting a predictable option during travel. Each occasion alters the relative importance of the dimensions. Price sensitivity may dominate decisions in one context, while hygiene reassurance or symbolic familiarity may take precedence in another. This variability highlights the need for brands to adapt their strategies to cater to diverse consumer needs effectively.

The framework further posits that transnational and local brands possess distinct structural advantages [14]. Transnational brands often benefit from standardized processes, global symbolic capital, and robust reputation systems, which enhance their perceived reliability and trustworthiness. In contrast, local brands typically excel in flexibility, allowing them to adapt pricing, menus, and offerings to align closely with domestic taste preferences. The competitive outcome in the fast-food market depends on how effectively these advantages are leveraged to create favorable cost-performance perceptions among target consumers. By strategically converting their strengths into consumer value, brands can enhance their market positioning and appeal.

Figure 1 is presented below to summarize the multidimensional structure of perceived cost performance. This visual representation provides a clear and concise overview of the interconnected dimensions, aiding in the comprehensive understanding of the analytical framework (As shown in Table 2).

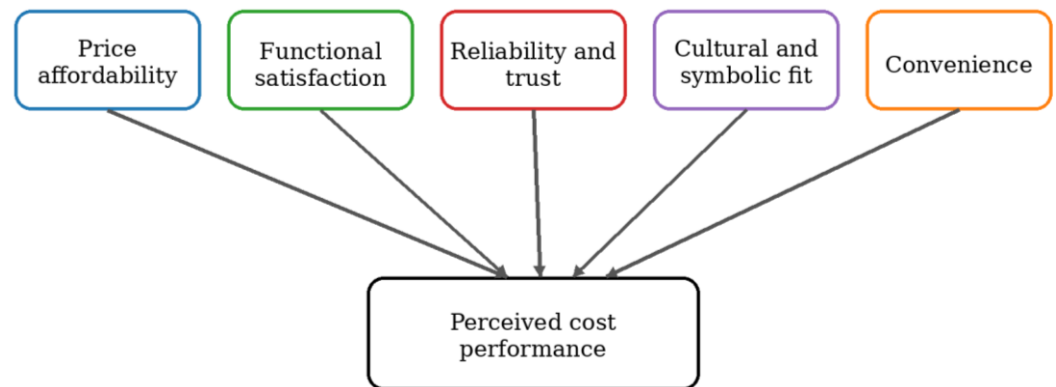


Figure 1. Dimensions of Perceived Cost Performance

Table 2. Analytical Dimensions Used to Interpret Consumer Decision-Making

Dimension	Analytical focus	Expected effect on choice
Price affordability	budget fit and promotion sensitivity	raises attractiveness in routine purchases
Functional satisfaction	taste, portion, satiety, variety	supports repeat purchase when adequate
Reliability	consistency, hygiene, order accuracy	justifies moderate premium
Cultural fit	local taste, identity resonance	increases relevance and differentiation
Convenience	store density, app use, delivery speed	reduces total sacrifice of purchase

4. Analysis: Competitive Mechanisms of McDonald's, Wallace, and Tastien

McDonald's occupies a distinctive position in China's fast-food market because it combines global recognition with long-term local presence. Its menu prices are often higher than those of many domestic chains, yet its competitiveness cannot be understood simply as a premium brand strategy [3]. McDonald's derives value from standardized service, recognizable store environments, comparatively stable product consistency, and strong consumer familiarity. For many consumers, these features reduce uncertainty and justify a higher price point, as they associate the brand with reliability and a predictable dining experience. This combination of factors has allowed McDonald's to maintain a strong foothold in the market despite the presence of lower-cost competitors.

From the perspective of perceived cost performance, McDonald's advantage lies less in low price and more in reliability-adjusted value. Consumers who prioritize store cleanliness, order predictability, child-friendly environments, or stable quality may regard McDonald's as offering acceptable cost performance despite paying more. This is particularly relevant in scenarios where the purchase decision is influenced by convenience, reassurance, or even a subtle form of social signaling rather than strict budget constraints. The brand's ability to consistently meet these expectations reinforces its appeal to a segment of consumers who value these attributes over mere affordability [11].

At the same time, McDonald's faces limits in price-sensitive segments of the market [15]. When consumers define value primarily through satiety, discount intensity, or everyday affordability, a transnational premium becomes harder to sustain. Digital coupon systems and value meals partially address this problem by narrowing the perceived gap between nominal price and received value. These strategies allow McDonald's to remain competitive by selectively lowering perceived sacrifice without abandoning its broader image of quality stability. This balancing act highlights the brand's strategic flexibility in adapting to diverse consumer priorities while maintaining its core identity.

Wallace represents a different competitive logic. Its market strength is closely associated with affordability, dense market penetration, and routine accessibility. For many consumers, Wallace is not chosen because it offers symbolic prestige or highly distinctive ambience. Instead, it is chosen because it is cheap, nearby, familiar, and sufficient to meet basic needs. This combination gives Wallace strong appeal in highly price-sensitive and convenience-driven consumption scenarios, where the primary goal is to satisfy hunger quickly and economically. The brand's widespread presence and straightforward offerings make it a practical choice for everyday dining.

However, Wallace's low-price model also creates interpretive risk. If consumers associate very low prices with weaker ingredient quality, inconsistent service, or lower food safety standards, then cost performance may be capped despite affordability. This reveals an important point: low price creates an opening for preference, but only if consumers believe that the resulting trade-off remains acceptable. Wallace therefore competes through threshold adequacy, ensuring that its offerings meet a minimum standard of quality that consumers find satisfactory [16]. Its success depends on convincing consumers that what they receive is more than enough for what they pay, balancing affordability with perceived reliability.

Tastien illustrates a third mechanism based on localized differentiation. Unlike Wallace, which is often associated with low-price accessibility, Tastien has gained attention through the idea of the Chinese burger and a more explicit localization narrative. This positioning enables the brand to compete not only on affordability but also on cultural familiarity and novelty. For consumers seeking products that feel closer to domestic taste preferences, Tastien can appear more relevant and interesting than both low-end generic offerings and conventional transnational menus. This strategy allows Tastien to carve out a unique niche in the market by appealing to cultural identity and culinary curiosity [17].

The competitive significance of Tastien lies in its ability to combine moderate pricing with symbolic localization [18]. Consumers may perceive strong cost performance not only because the food is reasonably priced, but because the brand appears to offer a more culturally resonant product. This gives the purchase a sense of differentiated value, as it aligns with consumer preferences for localized flavors and experiences. Tastien therefore competes by redefining what counts as value, shifting attention from pure price comparison to the perceived attractiveness of localized product identity. This approach allows the brand to stand out in a crowded market by emphasizing cultural relevance alongside affordability.

These three cases show that competition in China's fast-food market is not organized around a single hierarchy. McDonald's competes through trusted consistency and experience assurance. Wallace competes through affordability and everyday sufficiency. Tastien competes through localized identity combined with accessible pricing. Each brand seeks to shape the criteria through which consumers judge cost performance, tailoring their strategies to align with specific consumer priorities. This diversity in competitive approaches reflects the complexity of consumer decision-making in a dynamic and highly segmented market.

Digital ordering platforms intensify this competition by making comparison easier and faster. Consumers can view prices, bundles, reviews, delivery times, and promotional visuals side by side. This transparency raises pressure on all brands to align visible price with visible value. For McDonald's, platform discounts can preserve competitiveness in price-conscious settings by offering perceived savings without compromising its premium image. For Wallace, online display can reinforce convenience and low-cost access, emphasizing its role as a practical choice for everyday meals. For Tastien, visual presentation and novelty can strengthen differentiation, highlighting its unique appeal to consumers seeking localized flavors.

Consumer decision-making in this context is therefore situational and comparative. A consumer may prefer McDonald's when buying for reliability, Wallace when optimizing routine affordability, and Tastien when seeking localized novelty at a reasonable price. What matters is not an abstract ranking of brands, but which brand most effectively aligns with the consumer's value logic in a given moment. Perceived cost performance is the cognitive mechanism through which this alignment is assessed, reflecting the interplay between individual preferences, situational factors, and the competitive strategies of the brands involved.

Figure 2 visualizes the distinct but comparable competitive logics of the three brands, providing a clear representation of how each brand positions itself within the market to appeal to different consumer priorities (As shown in Table 3).

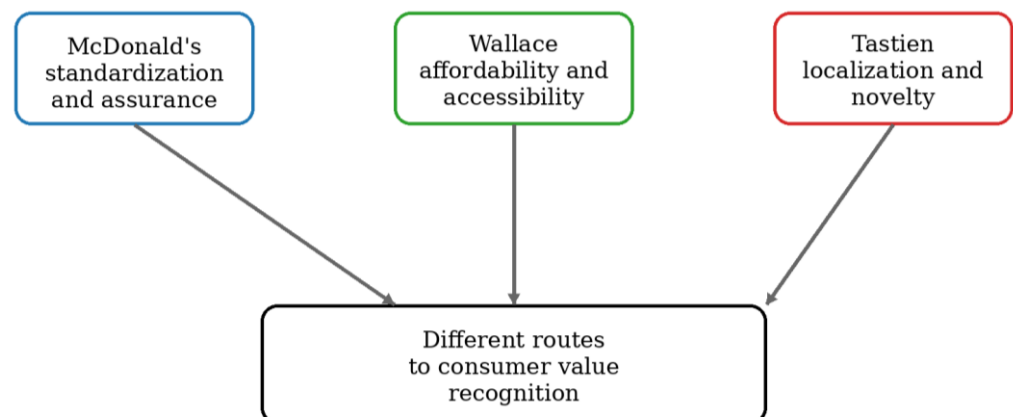


Figure 2. Comparative Competitive Logic of McDonald's, Wallace, and Tastien

Table 3. Comparative Brand Mechanisms in China's Fast-Food Market

Brand	Primary advantage	Key cost-performance logic	Potential weakness
McDonald's	standardization and trust	higher price offset by reliability and stable experience	weaker appeal in strict budget scenarios
Wallace	low price and accessibility	acceptable everyday value through affordability and convenience	cheapness may trigger quality concerns
Tastien	localized product identity	moderate price strengthened by cultural relevance and novelty	needs sustained consistency as scale grows

5. Discussion

The comparison among McDonald's, Wallace, and Tastien highlights that brand competition in China's fast-food market is increasingly shaped by differentiated value narratives. Brands are no longer solely competing by adjusting prices or expanding their outlets; instead, they are engaging in efforts to persuade consumers to interpret the relationship between cost and value in specific ways. This shift indicates that competition is not only operational but also cognitive and symbolic, as brands aim to influence consumer perceptions and decision-making processes.

For transnational brands, the primary challenge lies in maintaining a justifiable premium amidst intense local competition. While standardization, cleanliness, and service stability remain critical assets, these attributes must be effectively communicated to consumers as integral components of overall value. If the premium charged by these brands appears disconnected from the realities of daily consumption, they risk being perceived as overpriced rather than as offering superior quality. Therefore, transnational brands must continuously adapt their strategies to ensure that their value proposition resonates with consumer expectations and aligns with evolving market dynamics.

Local brands face a distinct set of challenges. While low or moderate pricing can facilitate strong market entry and encourage frequent consumption, long-term competitiveness requires more than affordability. It necessitates the establishment of trust, consistency, and product coherence to ensure consumer loyalty and brand stability. Brands that remain confined to a purely low-cost image may struggle to elevate their market position or build a robust reputation. Consequently, local brands must carefully balance accessibility with assurance, ensuring that affordability does not compromise the perceived quality and reliability of their offerings.

The emergence of localized innovation, as exemplified by Tastien, underscores the significance of cultural fit as a potent source of competitive advantage. Localization extends beyond mere adjustments; it can become the core of a brand's identity and a direct contributor to perceived cost performance. When consumers perceive that a product aligns more closely with domestic taste preferences or evokes a stronger sense of familiarity, they may evaluate it as offering greater value, even if it does not have the lowest price in the market [19]. This dynamic highlights the importance of cultural resonance in shaping consumer perceptions and driving brand success.

This discussion carries broader implications for understanding consumption patterns within China's service economy. Consumers are increasingly acting as interpreters of value rather than merely comparing prices. Their evaluations incorporate economic rationality alongside factors such as trust, identity, routine, and occasion. As a result, market segmentation is influenced by how brands position themselves within everyday value cultures. Perceived cost performance, therefore, transcends its narrow

marketing definition and functions as a social mechanism that organizes consumer stratification and brand competition. Figure 3 further illustrates the platform-based consumer decision process described in this analysis.

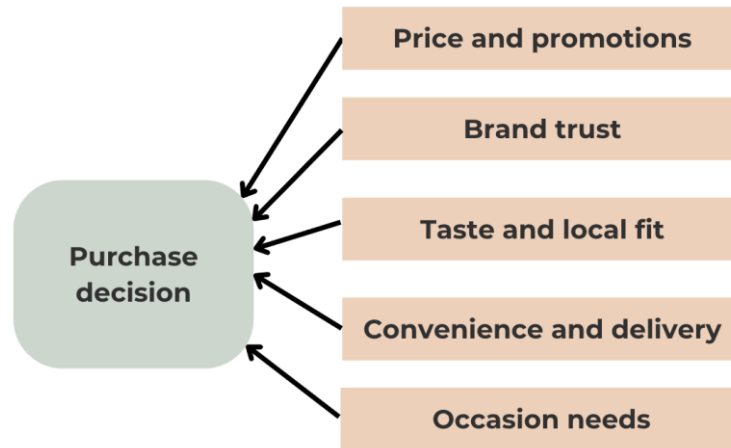


Figure 3. Consumer Decision Process in Platform-Based Fast-Food Comparison

Figure 3 provides a visual summary of the platform-based consumer decision process discussed, offering insights into how consumers evaluate fast-food options in competitive markets. This figure emphasizes the interplay between cost, value, and cultural fit, highlighting the multifaceted nature of consumer decision-making in China's fast-food industry [20].

6. Conclusion

This paper has thoroughly explored how perceived cost performance influences consumer decision-making and competitive dynamics within China's fast-food market, focusing on McDonald's, Wallace, and Tastien as comparative case studies. The analysis has demonstrated that cost performance is a multifaceted construct, encompassing more than just price considerations. It involves a comprehensive evaluation by consumers, factoring in affordability, functionality, reliability, convenience, and cultural alignment. These dimensions collectively shape the perceived value of a brand's offerings, underscoring the complexity of consumer judgments in this sector. By examining these elements, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how brands position themselves to meet diverse consumer expectations in a rapidly evolving market.

The findings underscore that transnational and local brands achieve competitiveness through distinct value propositions tailored to their target audiences. McDonald's sustains its market position by leveraging reliability and brand assurance, which justify its moderate price premium. Wallace, on the other hand, appeals to consumers through affordability and convenience, creating a perception of sufficient everyday value. Tastien differentiates itself by combining localized product identity with accessible pricing and unique appeal, catering to cultural preferences and niche demands. These strategies highlight the importance of contextual consumer interpretations, as brand offerings are evaluated within specific consumption scenarios. This dynamic interplay between brand positioning and consumer perception reveals the strategic diversity required to thrive in China's competitive fast-food landscape.

The broader implications of this study suggest that competition in China's fast-food market increasingly revolves around the ability of brands to define and communicate value effectively. Beyond merely providing products, brands are actively shaping the criteria through which consumers determine worthiness and desirability. This evolving

contest over value definition underscores the strategic importance of aligning brand messaging with consumer cognition. Future research could delve deeper into how these mechanisms vary across different demographic groups, urban versus rural settings, and digital platform environments, providing a more granular understanding of market dynamics. Conceptually, the study concludes that perceived cost performance serves as a pivotal mechanism linking consumer cognition to brand competition, offering valuable insights into the strategic imperatives for success in China's fast-food sector.

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