

# The 'Standardised Wage' Anchor: Evaluating Cognitive Resistance to Localised Pay Adjustments in McDonald's Global Quick-Service Restaurant (QSR) Franchises

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## Abstract

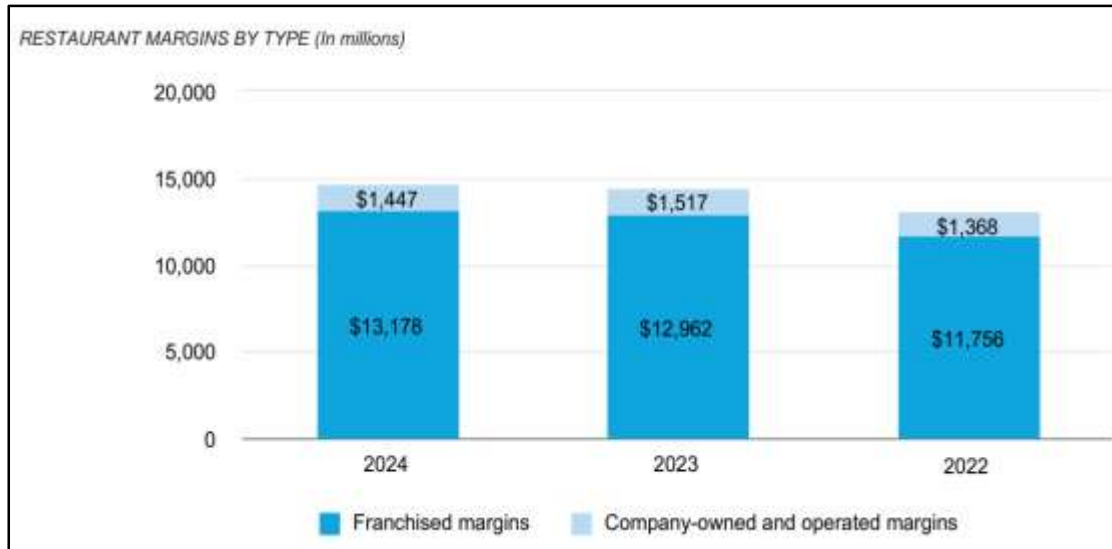
The introduction chapter presents the research context, which is concerned with the subject of standardised wage anchoring among the McDonalds global QSR franchisees. It describes the research background, aims and objectives, questions, problem statement and rationale of the tension between the global brand consistency, cognitive resistance, as well as the local labour market pressure. The Literature Review examines the literature that is available on the topics of wage standardisation, cognitive resistance, labour shortages, and strategic wage flexibility in McDonalds global QSR franchises. It incorporates both behavioural and organisational views and uses both Diffusion of Innovation and Institutional Theory to create a solid theoretical base and pinpoint gaps in the existing studies.

The research will be based on the interpretivist, deductive, explanatory, and secondary methodology of qualitative research in order to examine how the standardised wage anchors in QSR franchises around the world yield cognitive resistance to localised pay changes. Peer-reviewed sources on the topic of behavioural economics, HRM, and franchising, corporate reports, and labour statistics were used to source data, which were analysed using thematic analysis to find trends of anchoring, managerial cognition, labour performance, and strategic trade-offs. The results indicate that brand wage anchors bring about reference dependence and status quo effect to the managers, limiting wage flexibility, heightening turnover vulnerability and dwindling hiring performance in an inflationary or high-competition labour market. The conclusion brings out a time-based conflict of structure between brand standardisation and market responsiveness. The weaknesses are the usage of secondary data and the absence of interviews with managers, whereas further studies may utilise behavioural experiments and cross-country wage elasticity research. Suggestions are to use inflation-indexed wage bands, cognitive bias training and flexible franchise wage governance.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research Background

Multinational food and beverage corporations like McDonald's, founded in 1940, exist in a wide range of labour markets (McDonald's, 2025a). whilst ensuring that brand standards are highly homogenised, including the same minimum wage standards at the entry-level. In 2025, the average wage of the crews in McDonald's locations will be roughly \$15 to \$20 an hour, and the average entry-level job will amount to between \$11 to \$17 per hour, based on the location (CNBC, 2021). This standard pay often lags regional wage pressures and inflation, adding to local managers' hesitation to change pay in the face of labour shortages.



**Figure 1.1: Restaurant Margin of McDonald's**  
 (Source: McDonald's, 2024)

The figure above shows McDonald's restaurant margin. Franchised margins covers 90% of the restaurant margin of McDonald's, with sales exceeding \$130 billion (McDonald's, 2024). Regarding behaviour, such anchored wages can influence the choices of managers and the expectations of job seekers, which is why special attention should be paid to the effects of wage anchoring.

## 1.2 Research Aim

The Study aims to investigate the impact of standardised wage anchoring across McDonald's global and local QSR franchises on cognitive development in adolescence, local pay adjustments, and the implications for managerial decision-making and local labour market performance.

## 1.3 Research objectives

- To investigate the idea of brand-standard entry-level wages in the McDonalds world-wide QSR franchise system.
- To determine the impact of cognitive resistance on the willingness of managers to reduce wages in the McDonalds Global Quick-Service Restaurant (QSR) Franchises.
- To identify challenges hindering standardised wage practices in attracting, retaining, and addressing local labour shortages in McDonald's Global Quick-Service Restaurant (QSR) Franchises.
- To make strategic approaches can be used to facilitate flexible wage adaptation in Global QSR franchises while maintaining a standardised brand identity.

## 1.4 Research question

1. How does the idea of brand-standard entry-level wages work in the McDonalds world-wide QSR franchise system?
2. What is the impact of cognitive resistance on the willingness of managers to reduce wages in the McDonalds Global Quick-Service Restaurant (QSR) Franchises?
3. What are the challenges hindering standardised wage practices in terms of attracting, retaining and addressing local labour shortages in McDonald's Global Quick-Service Restaurant (QSR) Franchises?
4. Which strategic approaches can be used to facilitate flexible wage adaptation in Global QSR franchises while maintaining a standardised brand identity?

## 1.5 Problem Statement and Rationale of the Research

The adoption of standardised entry-level wage standards, such as average hourly wages. Approximately \$15.50 in the U.S. in 2025 by McDonald's tends to ignore material cost pressures in the regional context as well as emerging trends in the labour market (McDonald's, 2025b). In the meantime, certain U.S. states, such as California, have adopted a minimum wage of \$20/hour in fast food, which has produced a significant gap between a brand's wage floor and customer traffic (CNBC, 2025). These fixed wage references create recruitment issues, higher turnover, and poor fit with competitive market forces that further strain operations.

## 1.6 Significance of the Research

The study is significant because McDonald's has more than 2 million employees worldwide (McDonald's, 2025a), although wage-setting for entry-level positions is more standardised than regional inflation and labour costs. The study fills a significant gap in the strategic HRM literature by examining wage anchoring through a behavioural economics lens. The results have practical implications for global QSR franchises and policymakers as they provide the necessary information regarding the wage-setting framework to balance brand uniformity with market responsiveness in the local market, sustainability of operations, and long-term labour retention and employment outcomes.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The chapter provides a review of the literature that exists on standardised wage practices in global QSR franchising, especially that of McDonald's. It analyses the wage standardisation, mental resistance, labour market issues, and theoretical frameworks applicable towards developing the analytical basis of the study.

### 2.2 Brand-standard entry-level wages in the McDonalds world-wide QSR franchise system

McDonalds has been heavily depended on global standardisation in ensuring brand consistency, although disagreements exist regarding its labour implications. (McDonald's, 2025b) considers wage standardisation as efficient and predictable for the global 40,000-plus McDonald's outlets, but Lee, Oh & Kim (2025) believe it limits local HR control. As can be empirically proven, U.S. McDonald's staffing rates are approximately \$15 to \$20 an hour for entry-level and high-cost markets, and pay \$11 to \$17 per hour, especially after the post-pandemic inflation (CNBC, 2021). Although standardisation has helped in having global control, critics have pointed out that standardisation has minimal integration with different local labour markets.

### 2.3 Impact of Cognitive Resistance and Willingness to Pay Wages in McDonalds Global Quick-Service Restaurants (QSR) Franchise

Decisions for setting wages in multinational corporations are affected not only by the economic situation but also by the behavioural and organisational factors. According to behavioural scholars, there are different views on how to explain wage rigidity in global franchises. The anchoring perspective offered by Richey et al. (2022) implies that managers are heavily dependent on established wage standards and are not ready to adjust to market changes. Conversely, Almatrodi et al. (2023) state that only organisational controls and performance targets make resistance resistant, not cognition itself. This cognitive resistance remains prevalent in McDonald's franchises even after evidence indicated U.S. QSR job vacancy rates were over 10.9% in 2022, indicating labour shortages (McDonald's, 2025c). Fast-food chains such as McDonald's, KFC, and Haldiram's at Indian railway stations are expected to add high-end food brands, in line with the overall revamp of over 1,200 stations in India (NDTV, 2025). Thus, which reflects the brand awareness of McDonald's all over the world.

### 2.4 Challenges Faced by McDonald's QSR Franchise in Standardised wage practices in terms of attracting, retaining and addressing local labour shortages

McDonald's QSR franchise system has standardised wage practices that pose a great challenge in attracting, retaining and staffing the workforce in various labour markets. According to QSR Web (2025), Labour market research indicates that 70% of QSR operators in the United States of America have problems with filling vacancies, and 45% have reported a lack of sufficient staff to meet peak demand, indicating the existence of deep labour shortages in the industry. Moore et al. (2024) state that low wages in McDonald's restaurants make entry-level positions in these establishments less attractive than others with higher salaries and perks. Conversely, organisational focus more on structural factors, including rigid franchise policies and training expenses. Thus, as a major setback to attraction and retention, it generates continuous staffing turbulence.

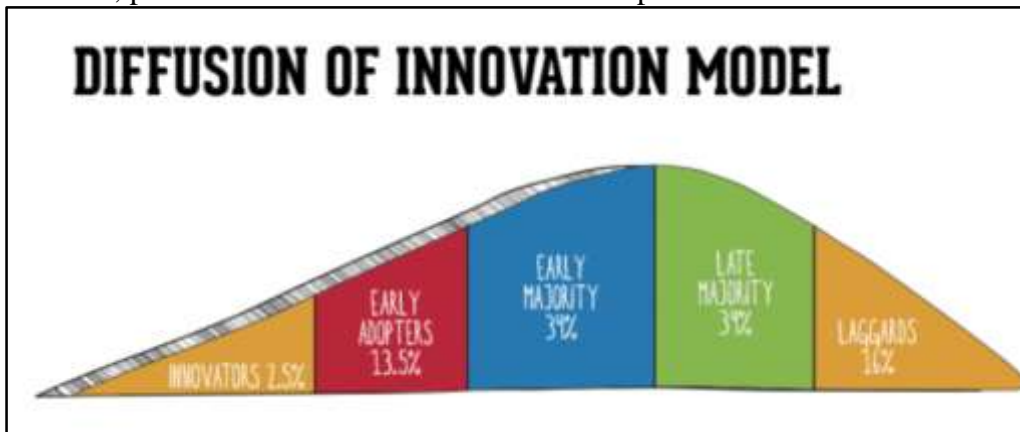
## 2.5 Strategic approaches to retain Brand Standardisation by flexible wage adaptation in McDonalds Global QSR Franchise

The McDonald's brand has a well-maintained standardisation and a flexible responsiveness to change by balancing a global system and local sensitivity. According to Thi, Thanh and Giao (2025), Standardisation will allow offering a standardised service, training and brand values across franchises in the global market to protect the customer experience. According to McDonald et al. (2023), flexible wage adjustment will allow franchises to ensure the pay systems match the local labour legislation, cost of living, and market competitiveness. However, despite the fact that Figuerola-Ferretti et al. (2025) explained that standardisation raises efficiency and brand equity, too much rigidity may demoralise the local workers. Malinen et al. (2025) report, however, that wage flexibility has a positive effect on retention and morale, but it is not a consistent factor. The strategic nature of the two together enables the McDonalds to uphold the international brand and at the same time, compete locally.

## 2.6 Theoretical Framework

### *Diffusion of Innovation Theory*

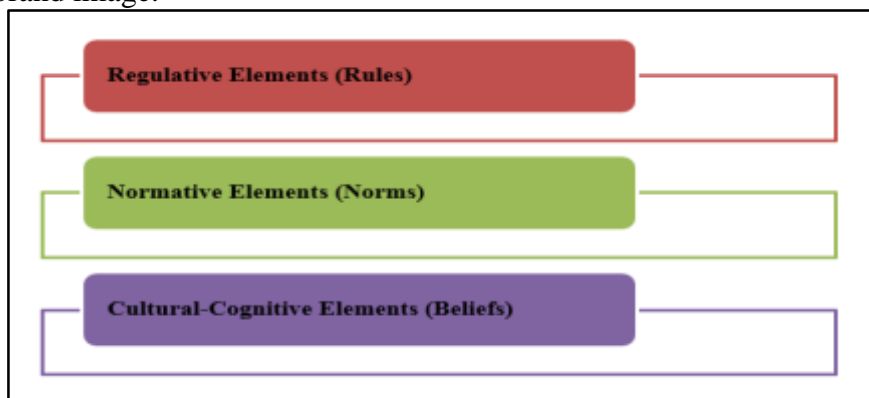
Diffusion of Innovation Theory describes how new ideas, practices, or policies can be shared in an organisation over time by using the communication channels and social systems (Hanlon, 2020). Localised wage restructuring in the global McDonald's franchises of the QSR can be considered as a pilot market innovation. This may be executed by pilot wage models in one area, exchanging performance experience across franchised areas, and early adopter markets could be used to show that it is compatible with brand standards, perceived risk reduction and faster acceptance.



**Figure 2.1: Diffusion of Innovation Theory**  
 (Source: Hanlon, 2020)

### *Institutional Theory*

The Institutional Theory explains how an organisation's behaviour is influenced by industry norms, rules, and legitimacy pressures (Risi et al., 2022). In the case of McDonald's, standardised wage arrangements are institutional anchors to aid in brand uniformity and operational authority. Its implementation is by keeping maintained global wage frameworks and formalising regulated local wages deviation by corporate rules, audit and compliance systems, and such frameworks should be viewed as approved but not disruptive to brand image.



**Figure 2.2: Core Elements of Institutional Theory**  
 (Source: Author)

## 2.7 Literature gap

The existing literature on global QSR franchising is mostly concerned with wage standardisation, cost efficiency and labour shortages. Nonetheless, very little research has been conducted on the cognitive and behavioural resistance of franchise managers to localised wage adjustments (Moore et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is little research that integrates the Diffusion of Innovation Theory with the Institutional Theory to understand the persistence of standardised wage norms even as local labour market circumstances evolve.

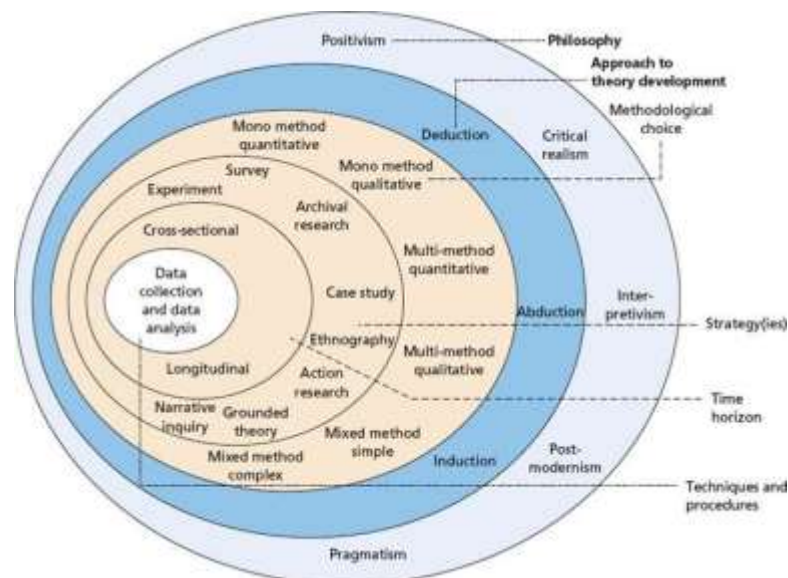
## 2.8 Summary

This chapter examined wage standardisation, cognitive resistance, labour issues, and strategic flexibility within McDonalds global QSR franchises, which formed a theoretical basis of the study on localised resistance to wage adjustment.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Philosophy

The interpretivism philosophy has been taken to support the study since it allows an interpretive approach to enquiring about managerial cognition and explaining subjective behavioural norms, which are anchoring. Interpretivist studies discuss social reality as made up of meaning and context, which is fundamental in the research to explore how franchise managers interpret and contend against wage changes, as opposed to quantifying wages (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). In contrast to positivism, which emphasises objective measurement, interpretivism appreciates the subjective conceptualisation of wage decision-making under the influence of cognitive biases, norms and corporate governance (Shanks & Bekmamedova, 2020). This philosophy plays a major role in the critical analysis of managerial meaning-making in making wage decisions within corporate constraints and comprehending the cognitive lock-in phenomenon.



**Figure 3.1: Saunders Research Onion**  
 (Source: Mbedzi et al., 2021)

### 3.2 Research Approach

This study used a deductive design as it aims to test a set of theories that have already been proposed to the audience, including the Anchoring Effect and cognitive lock-in, against evidence patterns in the secondary sources, as opposed to deriving a new theory out of it. In deductive reasoning, theory (linking biases to a fixed point) dictates observation (brand-standard wages limit local adaptation) (Yasseri & Reher, 2022). This is consistent with behavioural economics and HRM studies where theoretical constructs are used to explain managerial resistance and wage rigidity (Kwong et al., 2021). Deductive reasoning serves the purpose of the research directly since it is a form of associating cognitive resistance with wage decisions.

### 3.3 Research Design

An explanatory research design is the best since it explores the causal relationships between brand-standard wage anchors and managerial resistance in mixed labour markets. Explanatory design is more than description because it seeks to learn the impact that corporate wage policies have on the local decision-making and labour outcomes, particularly in the face of inflationary conditions (Vega-Gutierrez

et al., 2021). In contrast to the exploratory design that merely establishes patterns, the explanatory research will question the reasons behind cognitive resistance and its impact on the results (Sulik et al., 2025). It thus gives more details on the behavioural and strategic HRM dynamics in QSR franchises.

### 3.4 Data Collection

The proposed research is based on the secondary data, which is peer-reviewed journals on the topics of behavioural economics, labour market, HRM, and franchising. It also resorts to industry reports on QSR labour trends (turnover, wage benchmarks), corporate reports (McDonalds Annual Reports, FDDs) and economic statistics of such organisations as OECD, BLS and is supported by the credible business media coverage. The reason why secondary sources are also appropriate is that the QSR labour markets are geographically dispersed and are recorded on various plausible data sets (Ostermann et al., 2022). Thus, it allows efficient, cost-effective, and ethical analysis on time.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

The thematic analysis will be employed to analyse the data, and it involves identification, analysis and interpretation of meaning patterns (themes) in qualitative data. Using the data of familiarisation with wage, labour market, and cognitive resistance, the major concepts will be coded and organised into themes based on the anchoring bias, managerial cognition, labour outcomes, and strategic trade-offs (Babu, Seadon and Moore, 2023). The thematic analysis is suitable to describe such subjective phenomena as cognitive lock-in in various sources of secondary data and to compare the results between studies and settings.

### 3.6 Inclusion & Exclusion

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Scope	QSR wage practices, behavioural economics, HRM, franchising	Non-QSR sectors, non-labour topics
Timeframe	2020–2025 data	Pre-2020 (non-theoretical)
Sources	Peer-reviewed, industry reports, corporate filings, OECD/BLS	Blogs, opinion pieces, unverifiable media
Language	English	Non-English

**Table 3.1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

(Source: Author)

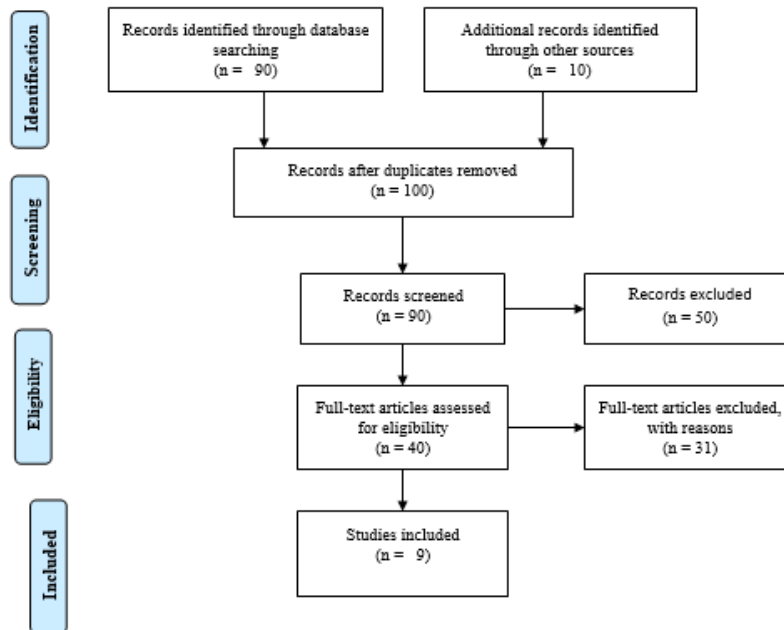
### 3.7 Boolean operators

Operator	Purpose	Example Search String
AND	Narrows results by combining terms	“QSR AND wage anchoring AND labour shortages”
OR	Expands results by including alternatives	“anchoring OR cognitive lock-in”
NOT	Excludes irrelevant topics	“franchising NOT hotels”

**Table 3.2: Boolean Operators**

(Source: Author)

### 3.8 PRISMA



**Figure 3.2: PRISMA Analysis**  
 (Source: Author)

### 3.9 Ethics

No risks to human participants are involved since this secondary research will not imply interviews or any personal information, which means that the issues of consent and confidentiality will be excluded. The use of peer-reviewed sources and industry-verified documents, including the McDonald's Annual Reports and BLS labour statistics support the reliability (Perody & Sudhakara, 2024). Ethical integrity also demands proper citation, no information distortion and equal coverage to eliminate defamatory statements regarding the corporate wage practices. In general, the profile of ethical risks is not large and can be easily handled compared to the purpose of the research.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Findings

#### Theme 1: Wage Anchoring & Reference Dependence

Author	Methodology	Findings
(Koch, 2021)	Secondary	Koch (2021) discovers that the reference-dependent preferences can explain wage rigidity, in which employees compare wages to internal reference levels. Experimental results indicate that employees are inert to downward adjustments even where they are economically justified, which is in favour of behavioural accounts of rigidity as opposed to classical views of labour markets.
(Bao & Saunders, 2021)	Primary	Bao and Saunders (2021) establish that there is high reference dependence in UK housing prices, with buyers and sellers anchoring to the previous price levels. This anchoring of behaviour warps the market reaction to fresh data and creates slower price changes, and reinforces cognitive biases of reference-based economic choices.

**Table 4.1: Theme 1 Table**

(Source: Author)

#### Theme 2: Managerial Cognitive Resistance to Wage Adjustment

Author	Methodology	Findings
(Chen <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	Secondary	Chen <i>et al.</i> (2023) discovered that the effectiveness of pay-for-performance is based on equity cognitive judgments of employees. Their meta-analysis reveals that there are significant positive impacts of perceived distributive and procedural justice on job performance, which proves that there is a psychological meaning behind pay schemes that determine the behavioural outcome beyond financial enticements.
(Adna & Sukoco, 2020)	Secondary	Adna and Sukoco (2020) demonstrate that managerial cognitive abilities have a positive impact on the capacity to change and organisational performance. They also discover that social capital mediates this relationship in such a way that stronger social network firms are in a position to take better advantage of managerial cognition to pursue change initiatives and enhance strategic performance.

**Table 4.2: Theme 2 Table**

(Source: Author)

#### Theme 3: Labour Market Outcomes (Turnover, Hiring, Retention)

Author	Methodology	Findings
(Bolt <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	Secondary	According to Bolt <i>et al.</i> (2022), the study of labour turnover has progressed throughout the last hundred years since research has ceased to be structural and started being holistic by integrating psychological, organisational, and contextual aspects. There is a

		connection between high turnover and low job satisfaction, low career advancement and low organisational support, pointing to multi-faceted causes of labour fluidity.
(Gelencsér et al., 2023)	Primary	Gelencsér et al. (2023) demonstrate that the workplace wellbeing measures, such as autonomy, favourable leadership, and work-life balance, play a role in the retention of personnel. Their holistic thinking proves that well-being leads to better organisational commitment that leads to less turnover and better labour stability in competitive labour markets in the long-term.

**Table 4.3: Theme 3 Table**

(Source: Author)

**Theme 4: Standardisation vs Local Wage Flexibility in Franchising**

Author	Methodology	Findings
(Ouyang & Batt, 2025)	Secondary	The study by Ouyang and Batt (2025) reveals that the quality of jobs among low-wage service workers in fast-food franchising differs greatly between firms. With higher wage policies, training and benefits, franchises achieve positive employment results, and low standards come with high turnover and low satisfaction amongst workers.
(Huang et al., 2023)	Secondary	Huang et al. (2023) prove that sustainable competitive advantage in Taiwanese multi-unit franchising is a product of the strong brand equity, the consistency of its functioning, and the capacity to adapt the company to the local environment. The strategic combination of franchisee support and cultural sensitivity contributes to the improvement of the long-term performance, resilience, and competitiveness in the market.

**Table 4.4: Theme 4 Table**

(Source: Author)

**4.2 Analysis**

***Theme 1 - Brand Wage Anchors and Reference Dependence***

The results are quite consistent with the existing literature on the subject of brand-standard entry-level wages, as the global base wages set by McDonald's offer a concise point of reference for managers and their workers alike. As demonstrated by the experimental evidence (Koch, 2021), reference dependence causes wage stickiness, despite the fact that economic incentives would warrant any adjustment, which relates to the post-pandemic rigidity presented in the literature (CNBC, 2021). The findings extend beyond efficiency of wage standardisation of its operation though the literature devotes much attention on the same, but show that such anchors do produce a state of cognitive status quo where workers are paid in a standard wage and yet are not satisfied enough, which was not extensively researched in the earlier literature.

***Theme 2 - Cognitive Resistance and Status-Quo Bias Among Managers***

In line with the literature, managers are being resistant owing to organisational norms and perceptions of fairness. The meta-analysis (Chen et al., 2023) supports the hypothesis of the literature, according to which standardisation restricts the discretion of local HR (Lee, Oh and Kim, 2025). Nevertheless, the findings provide a greater amount of information on the psychological mechanisms, such as status-quo bias and loss aversion, which convert the wage anchors into cognitive lock-ins. Unlike the literature that explains the organisational limitations and rigid franchise controls, the findings portray the direct contribution of

managerial cognition in mediating the wage adjustment in the expression of the behavioural processes of prior staffing problems.

### **Theme 3 - Labour Market Frictions and Employment Outcomes**

The outcomes of the labour market are consistent with the literature, as standardised wages serve as the sources of recruitment difficulties and turnover (Moore et al., 2024). It is demonstrated in the discussion that such frictions are increased by rigid wage anchors, particularly during inflationary periods, which is in line with the literature indicating that local labour shortages exist (QSR Web, 2025). In addition to the literature, the results highlight the importance of well-being, autonomy, and leadership to reduce turnover (Gelencsér et al., 2023). It provides examples of what organisational levers may be for local adaptation.

### **Theme 4 - Strategic Trade-offs Between Standardisation and Local Adaptation**

As it is in the literature, the results indicate that successful franchises are those that integrate wage standardisation and local responsiveness. According to the literature, the benefits of operational efficiency and brand equity (Figuerola-Ferretti et al., 2025) are visible, and the analysis shows the behavioural cost of breaking the corporate norms, which substantiate the necessity of balanced governance models.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendation**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

This paper concludes that global QSR operations have wage anchoring that constrains local managerial wage adjustment to inflation and labour shortages. These behavioural restraints undermine retention and hiring performances, and reflect a long-standing trade-off between standardisation of the brand and responsiveness to markets that influence labour competitiveness in franchise settings.

### **5.2 Study Limitations**

The research is based solely on secondary qualitative evidence without interviews or surveys of franchise managers, which does not provide any insight into the reality of decision-making. The regional wage comparison data is still fragmented, and corporate wage-setting schemes are not widely reported to the market, which leaves data gaps, limiting the scope of cross-country research on anchoring and wage adjustment behaviour.

### **5.3 Future Scope**

The study might be expanded in future by conducting primary interviews with franchisees and managers in the stores to obtain cognitive reasoning in wage decisions. The cross-country wage elasticity research would enable more accurate quantitative estimation of the adaptation gaps, the behavioural experiments and longitudinal turnover-wage tracking would help determine how the anchoring influences the labour outcome in the context of inflation cycles, labour shortages and evolving regulatory conditions.

### **5.4 Recommendation**

Global QSR franchisors might adopt local wage rates tied to cost-of-living, use train manager training to eliminate anchoring biases, and re-write franchise agreements to become flexible. Still, as an example, Starbucks changes wages depending on the region and keeps the brand uniform, which will enable the local stores to react to the labour markets without affecting the brand uniformity across all stores globally (TSI, 2024). This will promote global retention and efficiency.

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