

How does cultural strategy drive the global expansion of edu-business? The case of a Japanese company in private supplementary education

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to understand the mechanisms driving individuals to utilise and engage in edu-business and contribute to the industry's development, even when they face criticism. To that end, this paper, focussing on corporate stories, explores the cultural strategies education companies employ to expand their businesses overseas.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper examines the case study of Kumon Institute of Education, a key player in the Japanese edu-business sector. The analysis is based on interviews conducted between 2019 and 2021 with four public relations officers who possess extensive knowledge of the company's history. Additionally, it draws on government and company documents, as well as newspaper articles. The analysis focusses on the narrative isomorphism between the company and the government from the provider's perspective.

Findings – Kumon's corporate stories and narratives have been shaped by the history, culture and policies of Japan, its country of origin, rather than adopting a bottom-up approach or embracing neoliberal values. As the company expanded its international reach, its Japanese identity became a cornerstone of its narrative, heightening the appeal of its stories through the use of expert discourse and historic cultural resources. Recently, a synergy has developed between the public and private sectors in the realm of education export, reinforcing the distinctly Japanese nature of the company, which is particularly appealing to both users and employees.

Originality/value – This paper focusses on the edu-business itself, analysing cultural strategies that go beyond the functional aspects of management or services to understand how edu-businesses have attracted people.

Keywords Edu-business, Japanese company, Private supplementary education, Education export, Story

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The prevalence of edu-businesses providing educational services and products has expanded significantly worldwide, with annual reports and other documents published by international organisations highlighting the impact of these businesses (e.g. [Global Partnership for Education, 2018, 2019](#); [UNESCO, 2021, 2023](#)). Simultaneously, there has been a growing chorus of criticism from educational organisations, such as the Global Campaign for

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Education and Education International. These organisations express concern that edu-business companies are promoting values that prioritise economic rationality at the expense of educational equality and equity. Despite this criticism, commercial agendas increasingly influence educational policies, settings, and the lives of education recipients. This situation has prompted researchers to explore how edu-businesses have transformed policies and school life (Grubb & Lazerson, 2006; Ball & Youdell, 2008). Some studies have gone beyond the prevailing discourse, which portrays these commercial entities solely as contributors to substandard education, aiming to provide a more nuanced perspective of edu-businesses (Ideland & Serder, 2023). These studies aim to deepen our understanding of these transformations by delving into the edu-business sector, exploring how individual edu-business companies attract and orient individuals to their offerings and services.

Arguably, one of the reasons why edu-businesses continue to expand, in spite of the criticism that they face, is their effective use of cultural strategies that enhance the appeal of their companies or services, and imbue the use of the brand with meaning. Consumer decisions are shaped not only by product features and price but also by the allure of the lifestyle or ideal evoked by the consumption of those products (Lash & Urry, 1994; Ritzer, 2004). Consequently, as part of their cultural strategy, multinational companies often employ “stories” about themselves and their services in their brand-building (Aaker, 2018). Whether true or not, such stories are characterised by their ability to evoke emotions (Gabriel, 2008), attract interest, sustain attention, and remain memorable (Aaker, 2018). Unlike industries that trade in tangible goods, the educational sector relies heavily on storytelling techniques, given the time required for learners (or their families) to experience these services and realise their benefits. Some of these stories are designed to serve immediate communication goals, while others, referred to as signature stories, encapsulate the organisation’s vision, cultivate customer relationships, and guide the organisation’s trajectory, making them particularly influential (Aaker, 2018).

Operating under the assumption that companies use stories to promote and reinforce their brand and image, this paper explores the cultural strategies employed by educational businesses to facilitate their international expansion. It adopts a twofold process to explore the mechanisms that drive individuals to engage with edu-businesses. Firstly, it examines how one company has developed signature stories to communicate the appeal of its services within its areas of operation; secondly, it aims to investigate why these stories have garnered attention. In essence, the analysis will scrutinise how educational companies have harnessed their cultural strengths to attract and motivate people as part of their business strategy. Through a case study of a specific company, the paper argues that analysing the historical construction of narratives presented by edu-businesses is crucial to understanding and critically examining the growth of the industry and the mechanisms that attract people to it.

The following two sections present narratives about edu-businesses that have been highlighted in previous studies. They begin with an overview of the global context of edu-businesses, followed with a specific focus on Japan, which was an early exporter of education services. These sections also serve as a theoretical background for the analysis and discussion sections. Section 4 presents the methods of the current study; Section 5 demonstrates the results of our analysis of interviews and documents, and Section 6 follows with a discussion of corporate cultural strategies.

2. The stories of edu-businesses

This section outlines the different views and attitudes towards edu-business in the fields of management studies and the sociology of education, with a focus on the particular discourses the two fields have shaped. Proponents of edu-business have relied primarily on management studies for their theoretical foundations. Theoretical frameworks such as the base of the

pyramid (Pralhad & Hart, 1999) and shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011) have laid the groundwork for research on corporate engagement in educational development, including low-fee private schools (Tooley & Dixon, 2005). These frameworks assume that social and market values can be reconciled and that the market can effectively achieve socially desirable outcomes (Porter & Kramer, 2011), including democratic participation and equal educational opportunities (Tooley, 2016). Tooley and Dixon (2006) argued that privatisation is not always a top-down approach (e.g. a government-led “denationalisation” of specific industries). Instead, they highlighted the role of de facto or bottom-up privatisation, which encourages participation and strengthens individuals’ involvement in the process. In other words, they supported the idea that edu-business can offer educational opportunities from the “bottom up”.

In contrast, scholars adopting a sociological perspective have criticised the private sector’s role in education, contending that edu-business has perpetuated a narrative that emphasises utilitarian perspectives. Ball (2012) pointed to a policy network in which companies and entrepreneurs intervene in educational policymaking, prioritising economisation and blurring the international development discourse of human rights, equity, and social justice (Santori, Ball, & Junemann, 2015). More specifically, edu-businesses have generated and disseminated “little stories” on such topics as individual entrepreneurial spirit, as well as “grand narratives” of innovation and scalability, particularly in relation to technology (Santori *et al.*, 2015; Ball, Junemann, & Santori, 2017). However, under the guise of claims of philanthropy and stakeholder considerations, these companies can undermine the sovereignty of the state over its own education system, particularly in small and fragile countries (Santori *et al.*, 2015; Abbott, 2017). They promote market competition through testing, data collection, and digital technologies, thus arguably reinforcing the influence of neoliberal discourses (Hogan, Sellar, & Lingard, 2015).

Research in this area in both management and the sociology of education has often focussed on generalised discourses, presenting a certain fixed view of edu-businesses. Organisational identity itself, however, is generally regarded as flexible and distinctive, if somewhat paradoxical (Martin, 1992; Christensen, 1995; Yamada, 2017). The current study, therefore, seeks to reflect the evolving identities of the organisations that comprise edu-businesses and promote an understanding of the real nature of edu-business itself. In addition, since individuals’ consumption choices in this market are motivated by lifestyle or aspiration rather than specific features or price (Lash & Urry, 1994; Ritzer, 2004), understanding the factors that drive edu-business necessitates looking beyond its functional issues to identify how companies strategically present and promote their services and products to appeal to potential customers.

This study thus aims to historically analyse how certain company stories have emerged and evolved, and how they have been connected to the cultures of their countries of origin. It does this through a focus on one specific company. This paper concerns itself with stories because, in addition to capturing customers’ attention, they are used to internalise a company’s norms, values, goals, and ideals among its own employees (Kristofferson, 2014; Aaker, 2018). Hence, I believe they are useful in understanding an organisation’s cultural strategy. In addition, when businesses expand into other countries, they sometimes enhance their corporate identity and the appeal of their products or services by highlighting their country of origin in their stories (Kristofferson, 2014). For example, Finnish education export strategies have contributed to the process of “Finnish national branding” by constructing an image of the country as an educational hyper-brand (Dervin, 2015; Dervin & Simpson, 2019). This relates to the concept of “soft power”. Soft power, as defined by Nye (2004), describes a country’s ability to attract and influence others through its ideology or culture, rather than by resorting to military or economic coercion. Even in a world of globalisation, some companies actively leverage their nationality to harness the soft power associated with their home country (Kristofferson, 2014).

In addition, this study analyses corporate stories from the perspective of “institutional isomorphism” – and more specifically, “mimetic isomorphism” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This concept describes how organisations adopt discourse and strategies that align with their surrounding environment, often mimicking those of successful organisations to minimise uncertainty. From this perspective, educational companies may be influenced by entities with long-standing involvement in educational development, such as national aid agencies. Moreover, recent trends indicate a direct interaction between the public and private sectors. Research on public diplomacy – that is, a country’s efforts to communicate directly with foreign populations – has suggested that cooperation between governments and non-state actors, including multinational corporations, can enhance recipient trust and generate soft power (Melissen, 2005; Melissen & Wang, 2019). Consequently, governments have higher expectations of companies, and these expectations, in turn, identify business opportunities in line with policy trends. In the case of edu-businesses, individual enterprises may leverage the image of their country of origin, while simultaneously enhancing that country’s image by aligning their business strategies with policy trends. In addressing these issues, this paper focusses on edu-business in Japan, which not only developed earlier than in other countries, but also became an early exporter of education services.

3. The context of Japanese edu-businesses and their exports

3.1 Overall trends

Historically, edu-business [1] in Japan developed through private supplementary education, also known as “shadow education” (Bray, 1999). In particular, the edu-business market for supplementary education, such as tutoring centres (called *juku* in Japanese), emerged in the late 1950s and expanded in the 1960s (Kuroishi & Takahashi, 2009). Although *juku* was framed as a movement unique to Japan or East Asia (Rohlen, 1980; Mori, 2007), by the 1990s, private supplementary education was recognised as a worldwide phenomenon (Bray, 1999). The Japanese government had been critical of tutoring centres, but given their increased presence, a 1999 report by the Lifelong Learning Council of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) indicated a change of its stance to recognise their role (Hayasaka, 2017; Zhang, 2023). Since then, the discourse in Japan has widened to explore the possibility of various collaborations between schools and tutoring institutes (Hayasaka, 2017). Studies investigating the overseas expansion of Japanese educational companies have predominantly focussed on the factors influencing their managerial success (Nonaka, Toyama, Hirata, Bigelow, Hirose, & Kohlbacher, 2008; Itami, Takahashi, Nishino, Fujiwara, & Kishimoto, 2017), with limited research on cultural dimensions (Ukai, 1994). Meanwhile, this type of supplementary education in Japan has been criticised for overworking students and emphasising rote memorisation (Komiya, 2000; Kuroishi & Takahashi, 2009). Outside the country, this trend was sometimes referred to as “cram schools”. As a result, many companies needed a “story” to fend off criticism, project their appeal to the outside world, and inspire their workers.

Interestingly, the discussion about Japanese government aid in educational development has often revolved around the pros and cons of exporting Japanese-style education overseas, particularly from a cultural perspective. In Asian countries once colonised or occupied by Japan, the government enforced Japanese-language education and a Japanese-style education system before and during World War II (Kuroda & Yokozeki, 2005). This led to the Japanese government adopting an approach of not interfering in the politics and culture of other nations after World War II. The Japanese government notably exhibited reluctance to directly intervene in the basic education of other countries until 1990, when the international goal of Education for All (EFA) was established (Kuroda & Yokozeki, 2005; Saito, 2008). Even following the promotion of aid for basic education after 1990, the focus remained primarily on

areas with a perceived lower impact on politics and culture, such as science and mathematics, as well as school construction (Kuroda & Kayashima, 2019). This historical context is a significant factor in the government's adherence to the "request-based principle" that guides official development assistance (ODA). However, if these contexts are compelling edu-businesses to be isomorphic in their international expansion, that raises the question of how they have affected corporate cultural strategies pursuing international expansion.

3.2 The Kumon Institute of Education

This paper focusses on an individual education company, the Kumon Institute of Education, globally one of the largest educational companies (Nonaka *et al.*, 2008). This Japanese company began exporting supplementary education in 1974, making it one of the first companies to expand internationally in the field of edu-business. It has since been extensively studied for its international expansion and management practices (e.g. Nonaka *et al.*, 2008; Itami *et al.*, 2017; Tsai, 2018). Kumon was also featured in the *White Paper on International Economy and Trade*, a paper published annually since 1949 by the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) and submitted to the Japanese Cabinet, as a successful example of edu-business within the export service industry (METI, 2007, pp. 197–198). Kumon has placed particular emphasis on storytelling in its international expansion, actively communicating its story through writings and advertising such as the *Understanding the Kumon Method, Potential* magazine, *Learning for Life* (Kinoshita, 2008), and others. These stories have played a crucial role in explaining their services, especially in regions where private supplementary education is not common (Asakura, 2020). Kumon is, therefore, a suitable case study for a historical analysis of edu-business.

Kumon was founded in 1958 by Toru Kumon (1914–1995), a high school mathematics teacher, with the aim of providing original teaching materials and methods to learners at its franchise learning centres. These centres offer after-school mathematics and reading programmes for pupils, mainly from preschool to grade 12. In the years that followed, Kumon experienced considerable growth, expanding its operations to six countries and regions in 1980, 18 in 1990, 39 in 2000, and 46 in 2010 (Kumon Institute of Education, 2008; METI, 2010, pp. 245–246). As of December 2023, the company had 3.52 million mathematics and reading learners across 62 countries and territories. The distribution of learners by region is as follows: 2.31 million in Asia outside Japan, 1.44 million in Japan, 310,000 in North America, 140,000 in South America, 90,000 in Europe, and 20,000 in Africa, for a total of 4.63 million learners as of June 2012 (Globis, 2012). Notably, a considerable number of learners are located in Asian countries and North America.

4. Methodology

This paper constitutes one component of a broader research project on the international expansion of edu-business conducted continuously from 2008 to 2023. The current study data primarily relies on interviews conducted between 2019 and 2021 with four individuals who were potentially involved in shaping the company's history and stories. The company's public relations department, located at its headquarters, is responsible for shaping its overall cultural strategy, including the publication of its commemorative books. These four interviewees were selected for their experience and long tenure in the department, as well as their insight into past trends. The goal of these interviews was not to ascertain the truthfulness of the corporate story but rather to understand how the corporate story and narrative were formed, as well as to investigate the contexts that have shaped them (Kristoffersson, 2014). It is also assumed that geographical conditions – encompassing physical, political, economic, cultural, and pedagogical aspects (Bray, 2023) – may influence

strategies across different regions. However, such considerations fall outside the scope of the current study, which aims to identify and discuss the general trends in the case study company’s stories.

All interviewee data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Prior to the interviews, the purpose of the research and the content of the questions were explained to the interviewees, and their consent was obtained. Following the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and make any necessary changes. The interviews took place either at the company’s offices or at a university in Tokyo, Japan. [Table 1](#) presents the positions and backgrounds of the key interviewees.

Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours and followed a semi-structured interview sheet listing the questions, which covered the company’s vision, overseas expansion strategies, brand strategies, and government relations. Conversations around the given topics were encouraged. Multiple interviews were conducted with each participant to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the historical changes in stories and narratives. Following the interviews, transcripts were prepared and then divided into small sections. Headings were added, and each section was coded with a reference to prior research related to the company. The primary codes encompassed categories such as international expansion, the relationship with the country of origin (Japan), competitors, company philosophy, and learning methods. These codes aided in revealing the factors that triggered the transformation of the company’s stories and narratives.

In addition, various sources, including company documents such as pamphlets, websites, anniversary issues, and magazines (*Bun*, 1985–2010, and *Bun NEXT*, 2011–2023), as well as press releases, were utilised to understand the crafting of narratives revealed in the interviews and the influences that shaped them at the time. Additionally, to capture the context within which the corporate narrative were constructed, Japanese government policy documents and newspapers (*Nikkei*, *Yomiuri*, and *Asahi Shinbun* [2]), international newspapers (Nexis Uni was used to search for English-language newspaper articles), and magazine articles were also consulted. Despite concerns regarding their accuracy, newspaper articles prove valuable in understanding a company’s cultural strategy, and they are often used to analyse historical trends and discourse within consumer culture research (e.g. [Matsui, 2013](#)).

5. Results

This section describes the results of the interviews and the document analysis, breaking down the time frames involved and illustrating how the company has shaped its own stories, with a particular emphasis on how it has defended itself against criticism of its international expansion.

Interviewee	No. of interviews	Position in the company and background
Hanna	3	Former employee (decades of work experience, including in the company’s public relations office)
Miya	3	Employee (experience at another start-up and in the company’s public relations office)
Joe	2	Employee (decades of work experience, including in the company’s public relations office and as a local branch manager)
Ken	2	Employee (decades of work experience, including in the company’s public relations office)

Table 1.
Position and background of the key interviewees

Source(s): Table by the author

5.1 Expansion of educational services in the United States (from the 1980s–1990s)

The international expansion of Japan's edu-businesses began with services catering to Japanese citizens residing overseas. However, during the late 1980s, Kumon also rapidly expanded its services to local markets (interview with Hanna). During this period, Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) experienced rapid growth, especially in the United States. As a result, many Japanese employees were posted to foreign branches for periods of one to three years. This increase in overseas assignments heightened the demand for Japanese tutoring institutes outside of Japan. These centres catered to parents who sought to facilitate the seamless reintegration of their children into Japanese schools and prepare them for university entrance examinations.

In this context, the shift in the company's focus from Japanese to local markets was driven by the introduction of Kumon's learning programmes in public elementary schools in the United States, leading to a notable success story that became known as the "miracle of Sumiton" (interview with Hanna). The company describes this story on its website:

In 1988, an elementary school vice principal in Sumiton, Alabama, USA became very interested in Kumon after seeing a TV report about the Kumon Method. She asked Kumon to provide the Kumon Method to the students in her school. Subsequent to this request, Kumon was introduced to Sumiton Elementary School as a regular subject. The results of Kumon study were impressive. (Kumon Institute of Education, n.d.)

The public school in the story is located in Sumiton, a coal-mining town, where about 60% of the students historically received subsidised school lunches and performed poorly on national standardised tests (Murr, 1989). In the United States, school meals are provided at no cost or a subsidised price to students from low-income families. These local features made the story even more attractive, and various mass media outlets picked it up (interview with Hanna). *Newsweek*, for example, introduced the company as "Samurai Maths" and highlighted the Japanese method (Murr, 1989). *TIME International* also reported that Sumiton students' grades improved, and their confidence and self-control increased, suggesting that through Kumon Mathamatemex, they could acquire the mathematical skills of Japanese "computer-brained superhumans" (Reingold, 1990).

In the 1980s, in the background to the publication of these newspaper and magazine articles, the United States experienced a profound sense of crisis about its economic and educational standing relative to Japan. First, Japan's economy was growing, while the United States' economy remained stagnant. Second, the U.S. National Commission of Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which called for urgent educational reforms. This report advocated for addressing domestic challenges and encouraged comparative analyses with the educational systems of other countries, notably Japan and the United Kingdom (Kitano, 2011).

The abovementioned *TIME* article reported the adoption of a teaching method from Japan that diverged from the traditional methods in the United States, which tended to rely on verbal explanation (Azuma, 1994; Tsujimoto, 1999). It details the following story about this method, in which each student progresses through a series of graduated worksheets:

Each morning at 8:15, students at the Walcott School . . . hunch over their desks and busily scribble on their worksheets. *There is absolute silence*. Keith Meiwes, a fourth grader who was once intimidated by math, is now doing seventh- and eighth-grade classwork. Melissa Meyer and Amy Perrin also credit Kumon with their new success in math. "This program has helped to give them self-confidence, a better self-image and motivation," says principal Bill McLaughlin. (Reingold, 1990, emphasis mine)

This media coverage also enhanced Kumon's visibility in other countries, as Reingold's *TIME* article generated over 300 enquiries from 61 countries (interview with Hanna; Kumon

Institute of Education, 2007). Some of these enquiries were about setting up Kumon classrooms in their countries or introducing the learning methods in their schools (interview with Hanna). Ilene B. Black, the principal of Sumiton School, mentioned that the article led to visits from various areas of the United States and other countries (Black, 1996). In essence, the corporate story was formed through newspaper articles and other mass media discourse. This story suggests that the Japanese learning method at Kumon, initially thought to have been developed in conjunction with the examination system in Japan, could also be effective in the American context.

5.2 Strategies in Asia (from the 1990s to the present)

During the 1990s, Kumon gained global recognition from the spread of its classes in the United States, and gradually expanded its operations with a particular focus on Asian countries. However, this expansion was accompanied by two major criticisms (interview with Hanna). The first criticism stemmed from opposition to the international expansion of Japanese companies, due to anti-Japanese sentiment (interview with Hanna). Upon entering South Korea, which Japan had annexed and colonised from 1910 to 1945, the company faced criticism from Koreans: “Is Japan even getting into Korean language education?” (Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 1992a), reflecting concerns about education as a means of nation-building and preserving local values. In response, Kumon adjusted its business strategies in South Korea by entering a licensing agreement with a local publisher in June 1991 and subsequently removing its brand name from its Korean-language teaching materials (Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 1992a).

In response to the criticism arising from anti-Japanese sentiment, the company used narratives emphasising its careful consideration of the local culture and education system in its expansion into overseas markets. Joe, who had experience as a branch manager at an overseas subsidiary in an Asian country, described the importance of being aware that “we come in from the outside and work according to local practices and situations”. These considerations appeared repeatedly in company documents and interview articles throughout the 1990s. A prominent illustration of this approach is a phrase frequently repeated in interviews: “the business was expanded in response to local requests”. This suggests that the company sought to present its expansion abroad as a response to offers and a means to address educational issues in the region. In essence, it can be argued that the company adopted a discourse aligned with the “request-based principle” of the Japanese government’s aid policy.

The second criticism was related to Kumon’s learning methods (interview with Hanna). Both academics and the government expressed concerns regarding its early education practices and integration into the regular public-school curriculum [3] (interview with Hanna; Ukai, 1994; Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 1992b). In response to these criticisms, Kumon developed several narratives to legitimise its international expansion. For example, it incorporated expert-supported narratives, such as highlighting the “learning method’s roots in the self-study used in the *Terakoya*” (interview with Hanna). *Terakoya* (or *Tenarai-jyuku*) were educational institutions in Japan during the *Edo* period (the 17th–19th centuries) where commoners’ children learnt reading, writing and arithmetic. Tsujimoto (1999), a specialist in the history of education at Kyoto University, explained that the Kumon learning method overlaps with the learning principles of *Terakoya* in early modern Japan. It employs the concept of “embodiment of learning”, a process through which each student internalises knowledge as needed via repetition, unlike the simultaneous teaching method used in modern schools, which separates the roles of teachers and students (Tsujimoto, 1999, pp. 193–210). Subsequently, the company began to promote its own narratives about the origins of the Kumon educational method, drawing on the characteristics of early modern Japanese

learning referred to in Tsujimoto's research (interviews with Hanna and Ken). This learning method was described as enabling learners to "become independent people" by learning on their own. In their interviews, Joe and Ken explained that learners could learn steadily and independently and carve out their own future, mentioning some alumni as examples.

Utilising Japanese cultural assets, in addition to the expert narratives, has further enhanced the credibility of Kumon's narratives, both externally and internally. Kumon reinforces the connection between its unique learning methods and the traditional *Terakoya* system in commemorative books published to mark its anniversary and in magazines distributed to instructors (interview with Hanna). In these documents, the company often uses *ukiyo-e* prints, a Japanese art genre, as visual aids to illustrate this connection. Since 1986, the company has been collecting *ukiyo-e* with a special focus on works from the *Edo* period that highlight children, including the learning in *Terakoya* (interviews with Hanna and Ken). The collection has grown to about 3,200 works and as of 2022 has been open to the public at the Kumon Children's Ukiyo-e Museum. In addition, the company has organised exhibitions, including *Children Represented in Ukiyo-e* in Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany (1998–1999); *Kyoto-Tokyo, from Samurai to Manga* in Monaco (2010), and others in places including Taiwan (2019). These exhibitions have provided opportunities to explain the relationship between traditional Japanese learning methods and the company's learning approach, generating interest in Kumon's learning methods, and expanding its business opportunities (interview with Hanna).

5.3 Securing advantages in an increasingly competitive environment (from the 2010s to the present)

During the 2010s, the edu-business sector experienced a surge in international competition as numerous educational companies aimed to bolster their expansion endeavours, a trend rooted in market shifts and technological advances. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis diverted the market's attention from developed countries and towards emerging economies that, despite regional differences, offered significant potential for economic growth (Kose & Prasad, 2010). Concurrently, companies or individuals from diverse industries, armed with technology-driven innovations, ventured into the education sector, including entities such as the Khan Academy in the United States, Byju in India, and Ruanguru in Indonesia, further intensifying competition. This trend was particularly prevalent in Asian markets traditionally served by Kumon, with increased involvement from companies offering products and services related to "edtech", which integrates information technologies into education (interviews with Miya, Joe, and Ken).

During this period, Kumon sought to expand its market presence by exploring strategic partnerships with public sectors, particularly the Japanese government (interview with Joe). Although its interactions with the government had historically been infrequent (interview with Hanna), more intensive cooperation occurred after 2010 (interviews with Joe and Ken). The company crafted its international expansion narrative by positioning itself as an alternative to conventional government assistance through collaboration with various governmental bodies focussed on international objectives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, in a film highlighting Kumon's activities in Bangladesh – produced by the Japanese Prime Minister's Office as part of its public diplomacy efforts – the company conveyed its intention to "provide sustainable educational support to poor children" through an "All-Japan" initiative, which required the cooperation of diverse Japanese actors [4] (Kumon Now, 2017, 2019). In 2018, this film was released as a commercial on CNN. It was also made available on the Prime Minister's Office's international public relations website, Japan.gov, and its YouTube channel (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2018). This enhanced emphasis on collaboration with the Japanese government and

other organisations through government-facilitated initiatives marked a distinct departure from the situation in 2008, when I started interviews with the company.

In conjunction with the government, these company narratives were significantly shaped by the policy directions of the Japanese government as it sought to establish a more substantial presence in the international market. During the 2010s, as a part of its public diplomacy efforts, the government promoted a series of “Cool Japan” initiatives [5] designed to globally promote unique products and services embodying the nation’s lifestyle and culture. Aligned with the growing global trend of emphasising national interests in international cooperation (e.g. Mawdsley, 2017), the government, which had previously refrained from promoting Japan due to its historical background, developed a framework for private-sector engagement in educational cooperation and encouraged companies to highlight their distinctly Japanese nature. In 2010, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), a governmental organisation responsible for delivering ODA, introduced a proposal-based partnership programme with the Japanese private sector to promote the expansion of Japanese services and products in developing countries [6]. In 2016, MEXT launched the Overseas Development of Japanese Education initiative, EDU-Port Nippon, which focussed on the international dissemination of Japanese-style education (Kyoto University, 2021). In the case of Kumon [7], the company participated in symposiums sponsored by MEXT, increasingly advocating for Japanese-style education as if on behalf of the Japanese government. Follow-up interviews revealed that the company established a new department in 2022 to explore new business opportunities in collaboration with both domestic and foreign governments, as well as other organisations.

6. Concluding discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the corporate cultural strategies underlying the international expansion of edu-businesses, even amidst criticism. An analysis of interviews and documents indicates that the case study company did not adopt a “bottom-up” approach in the development of its primary narratives, at least not as a corporate cultural strategy. Initially, the corporate story might have been shaped by a sense of crisis regarding education in the United States, particularly in response to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission of Excellence in National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). However, the company’s own narratives gradually became dependent on those of its country of origin. These narratives focussed on the image of the provider country and government policies rather than on neoliberal values (Ball, 2012; Santori *et al.*, 2015; Hogan *et al.*, 2015) and international standardisation (Seki, 2009; Ball *et al.*, 2017). Kumon’s expansion has mirrored that of the Japanese government, employing discourses and strategies aligned with the educational aid policies of its own country, such as responding to local offers and prioritising maths-based learning centres. Moreover, its corporate stories have reinforced the relationship with its country of origin (Japan) by leveraging expert historical analysis as well as cultural resources such as *ukiyo-e*. As Kumon expanded internationally, it further bolstered the image of its home country in its cultural strategies. It is notable that, through a process of mimetic isomorphism with government policies that do not overtly promote the government’s presence, “Japanese-ness” is not explicitly presented in the company’s narratives. Rather, it is woven into the corporate narrative a more organic manner, as in the idea of cultivating “independent individuals” (which is rooted in the Japanese learning culture). This contrasts to the findings of previous studies focussing on Nordic entities (Kristofferson, 2014; Dervin & Simpson, 2019).

In other words, beyond purely functional appeals based solely on academic performance, edu-businesses construct narratives that effectively link their image to the economies, histories, and cultures of their home countries. These corporate stories deliberately shape

people's attitudes, influencing not only their consumption patterns but also their habits (Kristoffersson, 2014; Aaker, 2018). In the realm of educational services, this could influence the trajectory of an individual's vision for their life course by impacting their study habits and aspirations for the future. Furthermore, aligning with the international trend of enhancing public diplomacy through international cooperation (OECD, 2016), the Japanese government, which previously refrained from direct appeals, is believed to be striving to bolster private sector engagement [8] (MOFA, 2023). By doing so, it indirectly enhances its own presence through these companies, safeguarding its national interests. Essentially, a collaborative effort is underway between the public and private sectors to establish a structure that highlights the appeal of educational services for edu-business customers and employees, with an emphasis on their Japanese nature. In other words, whether explicitly or not, competition might arise from how edu-businesses showcase the cultural attractiveness of their countries. Given this development, there is an urgent need to construct a framework for analysing cultural influences on recipients from a perspective that differs from the current debates in management and educational research (e.g. Tooley, 2016; Ball *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, it should be noted that the narratives employed by edu-businesses are sometimes contradictory. The analysis in this paper suggests that, while utilising the Japanese government's discourse of tailoring aid to fit the unique circumstances of particular countries rather than imposing a "development model" like Western countries (Sato, 2016), edu-businesses have interpreted this discourse to suit their own purposes. Consequently, they have devised strategies to propagate their own educational ideologies to recipients. Although UNESCO uses the phrase "education for all" in the context of reducing inequalities through universal access to education, some companies equate this concept with expanding access to their products and broadening their market reach (Bray & Zhang, 2022, p. 37). There appears to be a coordinated effort between edu-businesses and the Japanese government to refine their cultural strategies, aiming to resonate with individuals by reinterpreting and reshaping particular narratives. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of edu-businesses, we must acknowledge the potential "decoupling" (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997) of narratives and reality, and explore how this decoupling may arise and progress. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that the government's policy of promoting national interests, coupled with the cultural strategies adopted by individual companies, holds the potential to exacerbate this divide.

Notes

1. The Japanese edu-businesses market was worth JPY 2,849 billion in 2022, with tutoring institutes (*juku*), etc. accounting for the largest share. According to a private research company, recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic has progressed well (Yano Research Institute, 2023).
2. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* and the *Asahi Shimbun* are general newspapers with the highest and second-highest circulation in Japan, respectively. In addition, the *Nikkei Shimbun* is the most popular newspaper covering the economy in Japan.
3. In the USA, the introduction of the Kumon method in new public schools was discontinued in 1993, after which development shifted to traditional out-of-school classroom businesses.
4. Kumon engaged with JICA in a preparatory study for a project to improve the quality of education in collaboration with the NGO BRAC (BOP Business Cooperation Promotion; Bangladesh, March 2014–March 2017). Kumon's business activities in Bangladesh began in 2015 through collaboration with the JICA and the Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO), a government-affiliated organisation that works to promote two-way trade and investment between Japan and the rest of the world. The company hosted researchers from the University of Tokyo and other institutions to develop measures of learning effectiveness and publish them in a JICA working paper (Sawada, Mahmud, Seki, Le, & Kawarazaki, 2017).

5. The term “Cool Japan” was coined in 2002 by American journalist McGray (2002), in an article titled “Japan’s Gross National Cool”, published in *Foreign Policy* magazine. McGray (2002) observed that although Japan’s gross national product was shrinking, the country had created a powerful “gross national cool” engine that was a kind of “soft power” (Matsui, 2014). As part of this policy, the Japanese government established the Creative Industries Promotional Office within METI in 2010 and the Cool Japan Fund Inc. by law three years later (Act No. 51 of 2013) to assist companies and organisations in developing Japanese-style services abroad.
6. The Office for Private Sector Partnerships (now the Private Sector Partnership and Finance Department) was established in 2008. Through these programmes, JICA has supported the overseas expansion of companies in various sectors to use their advanced technologies, products and ideas to solve problems in developing countries. This has helped companies expand overseas and revitalise the Japanese economy. Between 2013 and 2022, JICA implemented 50 projects in the education sector.
7. As part of Edu-port project, Kumon also engaged with MEXT on a project in South Africa (begun in 2022) to improve non-cognitive skills among industrial workers through habitual mathematics learning, and measure its effectiveness.
8. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs revised the *Development Cooperation Charter* in June 2023, which outlines the basic principles for Japan’s international cooperation.

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