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To cite this article: Julia Dellori & Matthias Pilz (2026) Do Japanese companies transfer their recruitment and training culture abroad? The case of Germany, *Journal of Education and Work*, 39:1, 21-42, DOI: [10.1080/13639080.2026.2643582](https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2026.2643582)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2026.2643582>



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Published online: 12 Mar 2026.



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Do Japanese companies transfer their recruitment and training culture abroad? The case of Germany

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ABSTRACT

A significant number of Japanese multinational companies operate in Germany and require a skilled work force. Recruitment and training in particular, as part of human resource management, are often heavily influenced by practices from their home country. This raises the question of how assertive Japanese recruitment and training practices are within the German context, where the unique dual training system is of particular importance. This study therefore examines standardisation effects (the consistency of practices within an organisation across national borders) in recruitment and training in Japanese subsidiaries in Germany. The findings, based on 21 expert interviews, indicate a standardisation with regard to Japanese practices. The study reveals a strong influence on both recruitment and training within the companies studied, particularly in domains where German regulations and laws exert minimal influence. However, different types of standardisation effects emerge for distinct practices. The analysis suggests a classification into three types of standardisation, based on the degree of consistency between practices in the host and home countries, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of standardisation effects. These findings contribute to an extension of the theoretical foundations in this field.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 April 2025
Accepted 19 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Recruitment; training culture; standardisation effect; Japanese subsidiaries

Introduction

In today's globalised world, driven by technological advancements, an increasing number of companies extend their operations across national borders. As a result, multinational enterprises (MNEs) emerge, characterised by cooperation between stakeholders from diverse national cultures and contexts, each differing in terms of location, language and economic and social institutions and practices. These transnational activities present both opportunities and challenges, particularly in the transfer of organisational practices. MNEs, whose economic success is largely dependent on human resources (HRs), are therefore faced with the challenge of recruiting and training labour not only in their own country, but also in and for their international subsidiaries (Banks et al. 2018,

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476–477). Against the background of internationally varying recruitment and training practices, which may vary significantly from country to country, MNEs must decide between localising their corporate strategies or pursuing standardisation. Thus, practices can either be adapted to the respective foreign context of the subsidiary in the case of localisation or standardised in line with strategies in the home country (Banks et al. 2018, 476, 481; Pudelko and Harzing 2007a, 535).

Japan, home to the headquarters of some of the world's largest MNEs, is characterised by its unique recruitment and training practices (Dedoussis 1995, 733; Hennings, Pilz, and Bebenroth 2025, 6; Hennings, van der Veen, and Zhu 2025; UNCTAD 2021). Japanese recruitment and training practices have developed against the backdrop of a distinctive post-war employment system characterised by the 'three pillars' of lifelong employment, seniority-based wages and enterprise-based unions (see e.g. Koike and Saso 1988; Kono 1984; Smith and Misumi 1989; Takahashi 1985; Whitehill 1991). This enabled large firms to invest heavily in extensive long-term on-the-job-training, and to recruit predominantly new graduates directly from university or high school (Heeb and Yamauchi 2023; Inui 2003; Womack, Jones, and Roos 1990). Celebrated internationally during the economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s, this model was long seen as a competitive advantage (Aoki 1988; Dore 1973; Womack, Jones, and Roos 1990). However, the economic stagnation of the 1990s challenged the stability of this system, particularly for non-elite graduates from institutions outside the top tier, leading to the necessity of flexible adaptation to current conditions (Brinton 2011; Genda and Rebeck 2000; Inui 2003). Consequently, while maintaining the normative ideals of their traditional model, Japanese companies have successfully adapted to shifting market and institutional conditions by adopting more flexible hiring approaches and diversified training methods in the Japanese market and abroad (Graham 1995; Hennings, Pilz, and Bebenroth 2025; Meyer-Ohle 2009; Milkman 1991; Rebeck 2005).

A significant number of Japanese companies operate in Germany, where the dual training system stands out as an internationally distinctive model (Fuchs et al. 2021, 419–420). Given that recruitment and training are often shaped by the practices of the home country as part of human resource management (HRM), the question arises as to the assertiveness of Japanese recruitment and training practices in the German context (Carr and Pudelko 2006, 77; Fuchs et al. 2021).

This study therefore aims to analyse the extent to which Japanese recruitment and training practices influence Japanese subsidiaries in Germany. Using qualitative analysis of the data collected from interviews with subsidiaries of Japanese MNEs in Germany, this study investigates what practices demonstrate standardisation effects with regard to Japanese recruitment and training practices. Thus, the research question is: To what extent do Japanese recruitment and training practices influence the operations of Japanese subsidiaries in Germany?

The recruitment and training practices discussed in this study primarily pertain to skilled workers with intermediate qualification levels, a group of significant relevance to MNEs (Fuchs et al. 2021, 415). In the Japanese context, this can be compared to the training of skilled workers from the regular workforce below management level (blue collar and white collar employees) who have graduated from high schools and universities. In contrast, in Germany these skills are typically developed through dual apprenticeships and dual study courses (Fuchs et al. 2021, 416; Pilz and Alexander 2011, 272; Ryan 2019, 2).

Following this introduction, the paper will present the state of research on recruitment and training in Japanese subsidiaries, alongside the theoretical approach employed in the study. The methodology, sample, and data analysis will be discussed in detail, followed by an in-depth presentation of the study's findings. Finally, the discussion section will further systematise and operationalise the standardisation effects observed, while the concluding section will summarise the key insights of the research.

Recruitment and training in Japanese subsidiaries

Despite the relevance of the recruitment and training practices of MNEs in the context of growing internationalisation, there has been a significant gap on this topic in the existing research with regard to Japanese companies in Germany (Fuchs et al. 2021, 415–417). In the HRM literature, there is a greater variety of empirical studies on recruitment and training in Japanese overseas subsidiaries, but mainly in countries other than Germany. For example, Maharjan and Sekiguchi (2017) examine HR practices in Japanese MNE subsidiaries in India. Their findings reveal that recruitment and training practices are influenced by cultural and institutional factors to varying degrees. Recruitment tends to be shaped by practices adopted from the parent company, whereas training practices exhibit less direct transfer from Japan (Maharjan and Sekiguchi 2017). Purcell et al. (1999) analyse the transferability of HR practices from Japanese MNEs to subsidiaries in Australia. Similarly, they conclude that HR practices can be selectively transferred, with training practices showing a higher level of consistency with the Japanese home-country practices than recruitment practices (Maharjan and Sekiguchi 2017).

Japanese recruitment and training practices are also addressed in the field of international vocational education and training (VET) research, mainly in the context of analysing transition processes from education to employment (see e.g. Pilz and Alexander 2011). One example of an international comparative study is found in Pilz et al. (2023), who examine recruitment and training in multinational companies. Further, Wrana and Diez (2016) investigate the extent to which Japanese MNEs were able to transfer technical VET systems from their home country Japan to Vietnam. However, there is a lack of cross-border comparisons of national training practices involving Japan and Germany (Fuchs et al. 2021, 414–415). One of the few exceptions is the contribution by Pilz (2016), which, contrary to the perspective in our study, discusses the recruitment and training strategy of German companies in Japan, among other countries.

In summary, the findings suggest that Japanese MNEs do not simply replicate home-country models abroad, but rather combine core Japanese home-country practices and principles with local norms, adapting them strategically to host-country institutional frameworks and practices. Further, while recruitment and training practices in foreign subsidiaries can be shaped by home-country practices, the degree of influence may vary, and certain practices may remain unaffected (Almond 2011, 258–259). There are various theoretical and conceptual frameworks for categorising such studies on the recruitment and training practices of MNEs across national borders. One of these frameworks is the 'standardisation vs. localisation' debate, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section (Maharjan and Sekiguchi 2017, 324).

Theoretical framework

In the context of the globalised economy, MNEs are compelled to navigate the tension between global integration and local responsiveness (Pudelko and Harzing 2007b, 2). The core of this discourse revolves around the question of whether, or to what extent, practices within foreign subsidiaries should be aligned with those of the parent company (standardisation) or adapted to the host country's context (localisation) (Pudelko and Harzing 2007a, 535, 538). Standardisation and localisation serve more as typological frameworks than theoretical concepts, though they are particularly suited to examining this research question due to their international focus and broad conceptualisation of standardisation and localisation effects (Weng 2020, 19). This approach has been applied to research on Japanese MNEs, both in their home country and abroad. For instance, Pudelko and Harzing (2007a) analysed HR practices in American, German, and Japanese MNEs and their respective subsidiaries. In addition to localisation, they further subdivide standardisation into two categories: standardisation based on the practices of the parent company (country-of-origin effect) and standardisation based on global best practices (dominance effect). Based on this approach they examine how HR practices in subsidiaries reflect any of these three effects, with particular attention to the extent of standardisation observed (Pudelko and Harzing 2007a). Building upon these findings, Weng (2020) examines the recruitment and selection practices of Japanese subsidiaries in Vietnam and summarises the simultaneous occurrence of all three effects (country-of-origin, dominance and localisation effect) under the term *hybridisation*.

Methodology

Sampling

The selection of Japan and Germany is based on the fact that Germany is Japan's most significant trading partner in Europe, and Japanese companies have maintained a strong presence in Germany for many years (Federal Foreign Office 2024; Fuchs et al. 2021, 419–420). Furthermore, the contrast between the VET systems (skill formation systems) of Japan and Germany provides an ideal context for a 'most-different' comparative approach (Pilz 2012). In Japan, vocational training typically occurs within companies following completion of a university degree, while in Germany, the well-known dual apprenticeship system integrates both formal education and hands-on company-based training. The dual system is jointly organised by the state and companies, ensuring that participants learn both at vocational school and in the company (Deissinger 2010; Fürstenau, Pilz, and Gonon 2014).

The sample of Japanese MNEs in Germany for this study was selected through a combination of database analysis and expert recommendations. The focus was on greenfield investments, ensuring that the German VET system would be new to the companies when they arrived. A few companies were included that had already taken over existing German subsidiaries (GTAI 2024; Finken and Pilz 2023, 157). A total of 21 companies participated in this study, representing a mix of mainly long-established small ($n = 4$; 0–49 employees), medium-sized ($n = 4$; 50–249 employees), and large ($n = 13$; 250+ employees) enterprises across various industries.

A total of 21 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted between July 2020 and June 2022. The interviewees selected, 20 of whom were German-speaking and one of whom was of Japanese origin, were primarily managers from the background of HR and responsible for recruitment, training or both within their respective companies (Finken and Pilz 2023, 158). The interviews, which lasted approximately 45 minutes each, were conducted in either German or English via video or audio conferencing. With the consent of the interviewees, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and the names of the MNEs were removed to ensure confidentiality and data protection.

Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis was employed to analyse the data collected. This method enables the systematic structuring of interviewee responses through multiple coding phases, based on a combination of deductively and inductively generated categories (Kuckartz 2019, 185). Initially, deductive main categories derived from the characterisation of Japanese recruitment and training practices were applied to the data. In a subsequent phase, these main categories were refined through the inductive creation of subcategories that emerged from the data itself (Kuckartz 2019, 186–187). Qualitative content analysis is particularly suitable for examining complex and dynamic organisational processes, as it allows for a nuanced investigation of the interactions between standardisation and localisation effects (Maharjan and Sekiguchi 2017; Pettigrew 1992). The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used throughout the coding and analysis process. In the following, the quotations have been translated from German to English.

Findings

This section presents a structured analysis of various recruitment and training practices observed in Japanese subsidiaries in Germany. These practices, categorised as recruitment criteria, recruitment processes, recruitment decisions and training practices, exhibit varying degrees of consistency with practices typically found in large Japanese companies.

Recruitment criteria

In both Japan and its subsidiaries in Germany, formal qualifications function as a biographical signal in the recruitment process, indicating an applicant's ability to acquire knowledge (Inui and Hosogane 1995, 166–169; Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4).

However, while Japanese companies tend to favour qualifications from general education institutions over those from vocational institutions (Kariya 1999, 275–277), the subsidiaries place greater emphasis on the fact that a formal qualification, regardless of its type, signals employability. Nevertheless, a preference for university graduates remains, based on the assumption that their academic backgrounds align better with corporate requirements.

[...] [W]e are all about acquiring knowledge quickly. [...] [W]hen someone has a bachelor's degree or comparable qualification, they can acquire knowledge – a lot and in large quantities – more quickly. (U09)

The finding that both university graduates and those with a formally lower vocational qualification occasionally start their careers in the same positions within the subsidiaries is also consistent with practices in Japan. In Japan, both university and high school graduates typically initiate their careers in similar positions, progressing through the company in accordance with a predetermined rotational programme (Debroux 2016, 164, 175; Moriguchi 2014, 61). Similarly to Japan, the potential for training according to company standards is a key criterion for recruitment in German subsidiaries (Hori and Nakajima 2018, 100). Additionally, in the subsidiaries character traits play a pivotal role in assessing an applicant's fit within the company. These traits indicate on the one hand general and company-specific employability and, on the other hand, are seen as relevant when working in groups or within the company community.

If that person has this kind of character or attitude that's fine. I think that is one of the important points for [...] a new member. (U11)

We are looking for [...] a type of person, that is a personality that somehow fits into our company. (U09)

It is evident that there is a strong correlation here with the significance of particular character traits in Japanese recruitment practices, because in Japan character traits also provide information about the general employability of applicants, and working in groups is highly valued (Carr and Pudelko 2006, 84; Hori and Nakajima 2018, 100).

Professional experience is also seen as an indication of general employability within the subsidiaries, since for selected divisions the specific field of experience is often deemed irrelevant. While the particular relevance of professional experience is atypical from a Japanese perspective, it can be stated as consistent with Japanese practices that specialisations are also seen as an irrelevant criterion in recruitment since the company-specific professional training begins only after the initial job assignment. Accordingly, it is typical from a Japanese perspective that a subsidiary explicitly does not require any professional experience and wants to train people from the beginning (Pilz and Alexander 2020, 299; Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4–5).

Sometimes it's better to train people from the beginning who don't know because that person can absorb everything. (U11)

This is consistent with the expectation of Japanese companies to hire 'raw recruits' (Pang and Oliver 1988, 18), who are shaped in a company-specific way so that the learning capacity of new employees can be used exclusively in a company-specific manner (Pilz and Alexander 2020, 299; Pudelko 2006, 285).

Following this, graduates in Japan decide for a company to work in rather than for a specific job when they apply. Accordingly, Japanese companies consider it necessary for the applicant to identify with the company (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4), which can also be observed in relation to the subsidiaries under consideration.

[...] if someone is passionate about the task, then the best thing that can happen to you is to support these people. [...] (U10)

The demand for Japanese language skills, experience in Japanese companies, or even Japanese nationality, reveals a strong influence of Japanese practices, as such requirements are seen as facilitating the transfer of corporate culture from Japan to the German subsidiaries. The tendency for younger applicants to be favoured for remaining with the company over an extended period is indicative of a congruence with Japanese practices. This is particularly striking in relation to the concept of lifelong employment and the profound significance attributed to corporate loyalty in Japan (Debroux 2016; Powell 2017, 78).

If we want to train people [...] we usually prefer younger generations so that they can also work as long as possible with us. (U11)

Recruitment process

The method used by Japanese companies in Germany, of approaching candidates directly during the recruitment process, mirrors practices in large Japanese companies, where high school students are often targeted through school-based job referral systems. In Germany, subsidiaries occasionally also receive direct hiring recommendations from universities, a practice analogous to Japan's referral system. Although this system traditionally involves high schools in Japan, the collaboration between subsidiaries and universities suggests a partial shift in recruitment processes, which is similar to the Japanese recruitment practices (Okano 1995). Furthermore, subsidiaries collaborate with personnel service providers specialising in Japanese companies and rely on Japanese networks in Germany for recruitment, which ensures that recruitment processes are aligned with Japanese practices and highlights the strong influence of the Japanese home-country practices. Furthermore, information exchange between potential applicants and subsidiaries through participation in external job fairs, recruitment events, and information days organised by external parties can be seen as consistent with Japanese recruitment practices (Debroux 2016, 164). Close cooperation with schools and universities is also similar, as companies in Japan work closely with schools and universities, particularly in the context of recruitment. For example, in Japan, so-called old-boy networks are used for recruitment purposes, with former graduates contacting graduates of their former universities (Alexander 2024, 47).

Internships offered in subsidiaries in Germany, although less typical of traditional Japanese recruitment, still serve the purpose of ensuring a good match between the applicant and the company. This is in line with the Japanese emphasis on company identification, which is regarded as the basis for integration into the corporate community, characterised by a familial sense of belonging and the principle of lifelong employment, ensuring long-term affiliation with the company (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4–5; Powell 2017, 78). The combination of personal interviews and assessments to evaluate the compatibility of applicants with the company is also consistent with Japanese practices. Furthermore, a strong focus on the group can be recognised within the procedures for the selection of potential employees by the subsidiaries. It shows the great importance of the fit between individual applicants and the company community, which can therefore also be classified as typically Japanese (Debroux 2016, 164).

Recruitment decisions

Regarding recruitment decisions a strong alignment with Japanese practices is evident for only one of the companies studied, where not only are Japanese recruitment practices adopted, but the entire recruitment process is directly managed by the Japanese parent company. However, the reactions of the Japanese parent companies to recruitment decisions made within the subsidiaries further illustrate an influence of Japanese practices. Specifically, when a Japanese parent company initially found it hard to understand why applicants of such a young age were accepted for formal training, as new graduates in Japan who are recruited for a large company are generally older, but not older than 23 (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4).

On the other hand, the Japanese [...] often cannot understand or comprehend why our trainees are 15, 16, 17, 18. But [...] the differences are simply due to the system. (U19)

Moreover, the Japanese parent companies frequently fail to recognise the necessity of initiatives to enhance their attractiveness as a potential employer, because the reputation of a company in Japan is determined exclusively by its image as a large company, as these are highly respected in Japanese society (Debroux 2016, 163). From the perspective of the Japanese parent company, the employment contract is regarded as an adequate incentive for prospective employees.

Our Japanese superiors don't consider it necessary or haven't quite understood the point of giving employees anything more than an employment contract at our renowned company. Why you have to give even more benefits. Well, that's [...] [something] where we as the HR department have to do [...] more persuasive work and will also continue to do so, that these are important points nowadays in order to [...] get good or even the best employees. Because nowadays they can choose for themselves where they can work. (U15)

Furthermore, the request for a ranking of universities can be characterised as a distinctly Japanese phenomenon. In Japan, the ranking functions as an indicator of the personality traits of the respective graduates. Consequently, the suitability of a graduate for a company is frequently determined by the ranking of their educational institution (Sugimoto 2010, 149).

It is also typical of the Japanese that both communication in the preparation of decisions and the making of the decision itself are, according to the subsidiaries, very time-consuming, but that the decisions made ultimately have a high degree of reliability. This can be attributed to the finality of hiring decisions in Japan against the background of lifelong employment as a principle of Japanese HRM. Hiring decisions therefore have a very long-term impact and thus are carefully prepared and fully considered before they are made (Debroux 2016, 164).

Reasons for offering formal and non-formal training

The decision of the subsidiaries in favour of qualification outside the formal system, thus, non-formal training measures (planned semi-structured learning activities in the company that do not lead to formal recognition (Bjørnåvold 2000, 204–205), is based on short-term coverage of personnel requirements.

As these short-term requirements vary, formalised training (formal learning within an organised and structured context that leads to a formal recognition within the formal education system (Bjørnåvold 2000, 204–205) is seen as unnecessary in this instance. This indicates a consistency between training outside the formal system and Japanese practices.

[...] [T]he demand [...] does [not] match the expenditure for standardisation. If we had to recruit higher numbers, then that would make sense, but [...] [it] does not make sense to create individual training programmes for a few functions. (U03)

As is the case with the subsidiaries, new personnel in large Japanese companies are assigned to new roles where they are expected to make an immediate and productive contribution to the company's business operations and contribute to the company's success as part of the group. Training in Japan is frequently tailored to the specific needs of each trainee, aligning with the unique requirements and operational vacancies of the individual company (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4–5). Consequently, trainees do not acquire a specific range of skills; rather the acquisition of skills is contingent upon the sequence and configuration of the individual assignments they undertake (Carr and Pudelko 2006, 84; Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4–5).

However, a Japanese influence can also be recognised in the formal training offered in the branches, as it is used to fill personnel requirements, albeit with a more long-term orientation. As the operational vacancies to be covered in large Japanese companies occur and are filled both in the short and long term, there is also a conformity with Japanese practices here (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4–5). Additionally, the incentive for training within the formal VET system in the subsidiary is the opportunity to train the company's own 'young talent', which is in line with the company-specific training of personnel in Japan (Pang and Oliver 1988, 18; Pilz and Alexander 2020, 299; Pudelko 2006, 285).

[...] trainees that we consciously recruit because we need them for the future. So, our goal, our philosophy is actually that we grow our own young talent. (U06)

In light of company-specific skills that are valuable to the company in Japan (Pilz and Alexander 2011, 270, 2020; 299; Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4), the positive response of a Japanese parent company to the notion of staff members 'growing internally' as part of a formal training programme can be classified as a typical manifestation of Japanese business culture.

They are happy that we are recruiting staff internally. As far as the Japanese are concerned, they always prefer to have someone they can promote internally and let grow internally rather than bringing someone in from the market. (U02)

The subsidiaries' emphasis on their image, as evidenced by their implementation of locally available measures such as dual apprenticeships, also demonstrates an influence of Japanese practices.

We want to be recognised as a trainer in the region [...]. (U06)

In Japan, the recruitment of the best graduates is contingent upon the prestige and reputation of a company, since the matching between companies and educational institutions is made through a similar image. This highlights the crucial importance of a positive image for Japanese companies when competing with other companies for the best applicants (Gamage 2014, 42; Sugimoto 2010, 149).

The Japanese parent companies' lack of comprehension regarding the significance of learning over making a productive contribution to the company's success during formal training in the German subsidiary can be attributed to the fact that in large Japanese companies, new employees are typically engaged in the day-to-day operations during their training and make their own productive contribution directly through learning by doing (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 5).

And explaining dual apprenticeships is very difficult for us. And also, for the [Japanese], because they then [...] say: Okay, this is a person who can't actually work yet, who I still have to show a lot, [...] [so] I can rather hire someone who can work for three years straight away. (U09)

Accordingly, in line with Japanese practices, it can be documented in the context of offering a dual study course within the subsidiaries that the company will only assume responsibility for the costs of further training activities that are expected to be of future benefit to the company. This is because in Japan, investment in training activities is based exclusively on economic rationality, with a focus on maintaining the company's business and increasing its success (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 5).

Training methods and training staff

The importance of company loyalty and identification with the company in Japan is reflected in the subsidiaries particularly in the focus on providing comprehensive information about the company as part of the onboarding process (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4–5; Powell 2017, 78). Similarly, the communication of corporate guidelines and principles, as well as corporate culture and philosophy, is essential for enabling employees to act in the interests of the company. The material benefits in terms of employer branding also demonstrate a pronounced Japanese influence regarding the promotion of an image and the fostering of a sense of unity within the corporate community. The aspiration for the subsidiaries to be perceived as a unified entity, both internally and externally, can therefore be attributed to the typically Japanese emphasis on the group as a collective, as opposed to the individual as a discrete entity (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4; Powell 2017, 78; Pudielko 2006, 285). Furthermore, the pronounced emphasis on socially integrative measures at the beginning of employment and the implementation of strategies to integrate new trainees into the cohort of those commencing formal training at the subsidiary point to a strong Japanese influence.

In addition to the implementation of social integration procedures with the commencement of employment, functional qualification measures have been observed in the subsidiaries as part of dual apprenticeships, with the objective of preparing for future work assignments. Although in the subsidiaries these measures are frequently conducted off-the-job, in contrast to the Japanese approach where they occur on-the-job, they serve

the same purpose. Furthermore, besides formalised training, the basic knowledge of the relevant job responsibilities is conveyed within the subsidiaries to prepare employees for the future tasks that they will perform, just as in the Japanese case (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4).

The teaching of explicitly Japanese work philosophies and Japanese coaching in the subsidiaries, provided by the Japanese parent company, indicates a transfer of a Japanese work mentality to the subsidiaries in Germany. Similarly, Japanese cultural aspects pertaining to the workplace and interpersonal interactions are imparted through training programmes conducted outside the formal system within the subsidiaries. This facilitates the formation of a sense of belonging and integration within the corporate community through the establishment of networks between German and Japanese employees, thereby enabling newcomers to act and interact in an appropriate manner within the group.

So there is actually a training that focuses specifically on how to communicate with Japanese colleagues and Japanese customers. How is the Japanese approach to service compared to the 'customer desert' that is Germany, because there is a huge difference, also from a cultural perspective. (U02)

This illustrates the significance of a consistent internal and external representation for customers in the subsidiaries, in alignment with the considerable emphasis placed on community in Japanese companies. Thus, trainees in the subsidiaries are also integrated into the Japanese parent company as part of their formal training programme and are also connected to Japanese trainees. This facilitates familiarity with the country itself, the parent company, and the Japanese work environment, while also reflecting the importance of identifying with the company and the group (Carr and Pudenko 2006, 84; Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4).

The mentoring programme, employed in the subsidiaries in Germany for the social integration and professional introduction of trainees during formal training, bears a resemblance to Japanese training practices, where experienced employees serve as trainers within the company and new colleagues are introduced to the company and the work under their guidance and supervision (Keys, Wells, and Denton 1998, 126). Existing employees also serve as trainers in both the formal and informal training contexts within the subsidiaries. For example, it has been shown that employees who have undergone training function as experts in the context of internal training activities that are not part of the formal system. In this manner, the training of new employees not only trains them to work but also prepares them to serve as future 'junior trainers'.

[...] [T]hey also receive further training from us so that they are fit enough to train others. (U05)

A combination of on-the-job and off-the-job training methods is observed in both the formal system and in training outside the formal system in the subsidiaries, which can be categorised as typically Japanese, as the combination of both methods is also evident within the training practices of large Japanese companies (Pilz and Alexander 2020, 299; Pilz and Sakano 2023, 5). In the subsidiaries most of the in-company component of the formal training programme happens on-the-job, with supplementary external training courses. These courses focus on developing self-competence and

social skills, as well as intercultural competence. The objective is to ensure that trainees ‘can achieve their goals for themselves and for the company in the best possible way’ (U01). Measures aimed at developing functional competence, are conducted on and off the job. In some cases, the off-the-job training in the subsidiaries is organised according to company-specific requirements, as is the case in Japan (Pilz and Alexander 2020, 299). In a way similar to the non-formal training programmes established in the subsidiaries, training measures in large Japanese companies are sometimes also stable over time and in terms of content, time and certification (see e.g. Denso Training Centre Cooperation n.d.).

The observation that fewer explanations are required to the Japanese parent company when implementing dual study programmes in the subsidiaries than in the case of dual apprenticeships is due to the fact that a university degree represents the optimal formal qualification for applicants in the context of recruitment in large Japanese companies (Kariya 1999, 275–277).

In addition, given the importance of recruiting highly skilled graduates in Japan, where companies compete intensely for the best applicants (Gamage 2014, 42), the parent company responds positively to the excellent performance of trainees within the subsidiaries. Similarly, employment in a renowned large company is the goal of all graduates in Japan. Consequently, the Japanese parent company responds with a lack of understanding to the behaviour of employees that could potentially jeopardise their employment (Debroux 2016, 163).

[...] [the Japanese] are very performance-orientated, so they have very, very high expectations of themselves and of their work and their work results. And the expectation in our direction is of course the same. This means that if someone performs poorly, and if it's a trainee, they can't understand that or if there are discussions about 'Do I come to work or not?'. (U02)

Furthermore, in Japan, the contribution of the individual to the group is highly valued. This also means that the individual bears a significant level of responsibility towards their colleagues, which should not be overlooked (Carr and Pudenko 2006, 84; Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4–5; Powell 2017, 78).

What is more, in the context of internal training outside the formal system, there is a notable Japanese influence, whereby the specific Japanese training methods from the parent company are adopted in their original form in the German subsidiary.

[...] [W]e have [...] also had this [...] concept at our sites in the factories for several years. We use this [...] to train new employees. [...] [W]e have basically copied this because it is an interesting approach for [...] new recruits at the normal employee level [...] to really bring specialist knowledge to the people. (U019)

Specialised off-the-job training is conducted outside the formal system in the subsidiaries, if necessary, in collaboration with colleagues from the Japanese parent company.

[...] so attempts are made to prepare employees for certain products or to expand their knowledge of products [...] through video conferencing and online training with colleagues in Japan, for example. (U04)

The degree of Japanese influence is similarly prominent in instances where the Japanese managing director from the parent company is engaged in the training process in

Germany. This suggests that the objective is to conduct training in accordance with Japanese standards and to oversee and ensure consistency with them.

Discussion – types of standardisation

The similarities identified indicate the presence of extensive standardisation effects regarding Japanese practices, suggesting the existence of a Japanese influence within the subsidiaries under consideration. This is particularly the case with regard to recruitment and training practices in the subsidiaries, where German regulations and laws exert a relatively minor influence. However, different types of standardisation effects can be identified for the various practices. Therefore, we want to develop a typology that differentiates between three types of standardisation effects (see [Table 1](#)). The distinction is made on the basis of the characterisation of consistency with home-country practices, which will be explained in more detail below.

In the first type of standardisation, which is *direct standardisation*, the practices of the parent company in the home country and the subsidiary in the host country are completely identical. In other words, the recruitment and training practices of large Japanese companies in Japan (home country) can be found in identical form within Japanese subsidiaries in Germany (host country). This form of standardisation entails the implementation of Japanese practices, both in terms of the practices and the objectives pursued. The effects of direct standardisation can be observed within the subsidiaries, both in the context of recruitment and training (see [Table 1](#) '*Direct standardisation effects*').

A second type of standardisation is *indirect standardisation*, whereby the specific practices in the subsidiaries themselves do not align with the practices observed in the home country, but the purpose of the implemented practices is consistent with the training and recruitment strategy of the home country. In the case of the subsidiaries examined, a practice that is not typically Japanese is employed, with the objective of achieving a result regarding recruitment and training that is typically Japanese (see [Table 1](#) '*Indirect standardisation*'). This includes the observation that employability, which is considered a relevant criterion in both Japan and the subsidiaries, is not necessarily determined by a formal qualification in the subsidiaries (Inui and Hosogane 1995, 166–169; Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4). Additionally, in the subsidiaries younger applicants are given preference. Though, contrary to the Japanese system, where graduates should not be older than 23 years (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4), no maximum age is stipulated in the subsidiaries. Furthermore, the concept of recommendation is evident in the recruitment of suitable applicants in the subsidiaries in collaboration with universities. In Japan, however, the concept is used in reference to high school students as part of the school-based job referral system (Okano 1995). Moreover, in Germany, the type of external information events diverges from traditional Japanese practices. This can be seen in the participation in job fairs and 'speed dating' events organised by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. In this manner, the objective of achieving a 'Japanese goal' is pursued with the utilisation of locally accessible resources. Similarly, the importance of a suitable match between the company and the applicant is emphasised. While this match is being explored through internships in the subsidiaries, this practice is not prevalent in Japanese companies (Pilz and Sakano 2023, 4). In the context of formal training, the image of the subsidiary is of great importance, aligning with the significance of companies' image in Japan. The maintenance or development of

Table 1. Typological classification of standardisation effects.

Recruitment	Standardisation through expansion	
	Indirect standardisation	Standardisation through expansion
Direct standardisation Recruitment ● Formal degree as a 'biographical signal' ● Preference for a general university degree ● New employees start in the same position regardless of formal qualification ● Importance of character traits (general and company-specific employability) ● Disregard of the specialisation ● Explicit requirement of no professional experience ● Prioritisation of identification with the company ● Direct approach to potential applicants ● Cooperation between companies and (higher) education institutions for the purpose of exchanging information ● Combination of personal interviews and tests ● Focus on the fit between applicants and the corporate community ● Careful and thoughtful preparation and therefore a high degree of reliability in decisions	Indirect standardisation ● School-leaving qualification not the primary indicator of employability ● No maximum age limit despite favouring younger applicants ● Recruitment through a recommendation concept between universities and companies ● Local measures for comprehensive information exchange ● Pre-company internships to check the fit between applicants and companies ● Building and maintaining a good image through local measures ● Requirement of Japanese language skills, Japanese origin or work experience in Japanese companies ● Cooperation with personnel service providers specialising in Japanese companies ● Shifting recruitment processes to Japanese networks	Standardisation through expansion ● Recruitment carried out by Japanese parent company

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Training for all kinds of training	- Measures to promote company loyalty, identification and a sense of belonging within the corporate community - Socially integrating and functionally qualifying onboarding measures - Experienced employees as trainers	Offering Japan coaching and teaching Japanese work philosophies	
	- Productive contribution from the start of training to cover short-term personnel requirements - Orientation of training activities to internal company requirements (not standardised) - Training of future trainers by experienced employees - Combination of <i>on-the-job</i> and <i>off-the-job measures</i> for functional qualification - Organisation of <i>off-the-job measures</i> according to company-specific requirements - Partial systematisation of training activities 'Dôjô' as a training method	Teaching Japanese work and interaction culture	Participation of Japanese colleagues and management in Japan in training programmes in Germany
formal	- Training to cover long-term personnel requirements - Company-specific training of personnel right from the start - Aligning investments in training activities with economic rationalities - Most of the training takes place <i>on-the-job</i> in combination with <i>off-the-job measures</i> - Networking of trainees	- Promoting a positive image by offering formal training - Networking of German trainees with Japanese parent company	

a good image in the subsidiaries is achieved, for example, by offering formal training activities that are not present in Japan (Sugimoto 2010, 149). In addition, specific Japan-related requirements are demanded during recruitment, and specialist recruitment service providers and Japanese networks are used to ensure that new employees can act and be trained in line with Japanese business culture.

The third type of standardisation is achieved through the expansion of practices from the home country to the subsidiary in the host country (see Table 1 '*Standardisation through expansion*'). Consequently, the practices observed within the subsidiaries in Germany (host country) are consistent with those of the Japanese parent company in Japan (home country), as they are controlled by and executed from the Japanese parent company. This type of standardisation exists in cases where the entire recruitment for the subsidiary is carried out by the Japanese parent company and the management and colleagues from Japan are involved in the training in Germany.

Although a Japanese influence can also be seen in the interplay between the actions of the subsidiaries and the reactions of the Japanese parent companies, it cannot be attributed to standardisation effects, since standardisation exclusively describes the consistency of practices across national borders – in other words, between the practices in subsidiaries and practices in the parent company (Pudelko and Harzing 2007a, 538). But the interactions referred to rather show an orchestration of practices in the subsidiaries by typically Japanese reactions of the parent companies. Thus, although a clear Japanese influence can be seen in the way that the Japanese mindset of the parent company influences the subsidiaries, the concept of standardisation is too narrow to describe the kind of influence observed in the interactions between subsidiaries and parent companies.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that standardisation effects can be identified for different practices, both in the context of recruitment and training, which confirms the influence of Japanese recruitment and training practices on Japanese subsidiaries in Germany. Japanese MNEs rarely transfer their recruitment and training practices in their entirety, but rather engage in selective adaptation. The findings of this study are therefore aligned with the existing research on standardisation effects, which indicate that such effects may be observed to varying degrees and for specific HR practices (Maharjan and Sekiguchi 2017; Purcell et al. 1999). Studies of Japanese subsidiaries abroad have shown that certain HR practices tend to be closely aligned with home-country models, while others are selectively adapted to local conditions (Graham 1995; Maharjan and Sekiguchi 2017; Milkman 1991; Purcell et al. 1999; Wrana and Diez 2016). Our study in the German context is consistent with this, but also has its own characteristics, as adjustments are strongly influenced by the dual training system and associated institutional actors, such as chambers of commerce and vocational schools. The German case presented here confirms the overall observed Japanese hybridisation pattern, but also suggests that institutional characteristics, such as Germany's dual vocational training system, can influence the extent and form of transfer or adaptation. Therefore, the flexibility that Japanese firms have demonstrated in adapting to changing institutional conditions in the domestic

context, as highlighted at the beginning of this contribution, is similarly evident abroad, in the German context (Graham 1995, Hennings, Pilz, and Bebenroth 2025; Milkman 1991).

However, the standardisation effects observed differ regarding the characterisation of the consistency of practices in Japanese subsidiaries in Germany with those of large Japanese companies in Japan. Conversely, the study offers a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of characterisation of standardisation, advancing beyond the boundaries of existing research.

The data presented in this study allows for the definition of three types of standardisation, thus extending the theoretical foundations. Although the literature on the localisation versus standardisation debate refers to varying degrees of effects and these effects are even broken down further, there is no definition or differentiation of these degrees (Pudelko and Harzing 2007a; Weng 2020). For example, Pudelko and Harzing differentiate between two types of standardisation effects: country-of-origin effects and dominance effects. The latter pertain to the adaptation of practices to global standards, which may be envisaged as representing the best practices in a given field (Pudelko and Harzing 2007a, 538). The effects identified for different practices are determined according to tendencies, which can result in an overgeneralisation of the findings at the expense of the specific characterisation of the tendencies (Pudelko and Harzing 2007a, 544; Niemeyer 2007, 127). Building on this criticism and on Pudelko and Harzing's 'golden triangle' (Pudelko and Harzing 2007b), Weng employs the concept of hybridisation to address the simultaneous existence (combination) of localisation and standardisation effects in the field of HRM (Weng 2020). However, even in the context of hybridisation, there is no further differentiation of the effects, indicating that the concept does not go beyond identifying the existence of multiple effects (Weng 2020, 34). This deficit is addressed by the systematisation and differentiation of standardisation effects presented in this article. In a novel manner, we provide a more comprehensive differentiation of standardisation effects, distinguishing according to the characterisation of consistency. While the transfer of this differentiation to localisation and dominance effects offers a starting point for further research, the results also show the limitations of the standardisation concept in describing the influence of home country practices on those of subsidiaries across national borders. Therefore, a broader theorisation would be required to capture more far-reaching influences of the home country within the subsidiaries.

Yet, the findings of this study make a significant contribution to extending the state of research and filling the research gap in relation to the recruitment and training practices of MNEs in two disciplines. In addition to complementing research on HR and HRM in general, this article makes a significant contribution to international VET research by continuing the study of 'training culture[s]' (Pilz et al. 2023, 1) of companies in various countries, which has only been a marginal part of VET research to date. Against the background of increasing globalisation, however, this topic – and consequently the research design employed in this study – is becoming increasingly relevant not only for potential applicants from international and globally active companies, but also for companies themselves and research, as nationally characteristic VET as well as HRM practices are no longer confined only within, but also across national borders.

It should be noted that the study is not without limitations. The characterisation of traditional recruitment and training practices in large Japanese companies is based on

a comprehensive body of literature. Nevertheless, the existing literature has thus far only partially accounted for more recent developments within these companies in Japan (e.g. Powell 2017, 77). From one perspective, this appears to be an appropriate approach, given that the traditional practices can still be regarded as valid in present times. Conversely, this highlights the necessity for an update to the literature on recruitment and training in large Japanese companies, particularly in light of the observed shift towards individualism and away from traditional Japanese collectivism (Shibata 2019).

A comparison with the practices of large Japanese companies makes sense, as the parent companies of the subsidiaries are themselves large Japanese companies. However, the size of the subsidiaries is not given sufficient consideration as a potential influencing factor on the practices of Japanese companies in Germany. Additionally, potential influencing factors such as industry and the amount of time that a subsidiary has already been located in Germany are not taken into account. Furthermore, the impact of factors related to Germany (host country factors), such as the geographical location of the subsidiaries and the regulatory framework, is not explicitly addressed, and these factors can have a significant impact on companies' organisational decisions and practices (Pilz et al. 2023). It should also be noted that potential localisation effects have not been incorporated into the analysis. In addition, the findings presented pertain exclusively to Japanese companies operating in Germany. No comparison is made with Japanese subsidiaries in other countries or with subsidiaries of other countries in Germany. As the selected sample reached data saturation but did not achieve empirical representativeness, the study offers the potential to extend the research framework to other Japanese subsidiaries in Germany and other countries in the future. Moreover, further research is required to gain insight into the rationale behind these practices, as the reasons for their implementation could not be fully elucidated in the present study.

Acknowledgments

The data presented here are embedded in a research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) under the title "Multinational companies and local knowledge base – an evolutionary perspective: Regional variants of initial vocational education and training activities in Germany" (Grant No. FU 424/17-1 and PI 418/7-1). We thank our project partners Prof. Dr. Martina Fuchs (Institute of Economic and Social Geography, University of Cologne), Johannes Westermeyer (Institute of Economic and Social Geography, University of Cologne), and Lena Finken (Chair of Business Education and International VET Research, University of Cologne) for their raw data collection and many valuable insights.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) under Grant No. FU 424/17-1 and PI 418/7-1.

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