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The Persuasiveness of Menu Item Descriptions: The Influence of Language on Consumer Menu Choice in Kenyan Casual Dining Restaurants

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Abstract:
This study investigated the influence of descriptive language on consumers' menu item choices in casual dining restaurants. The study was anchored on the stimulus-organization-response theory. The study focused on customers who patronize casual dining restaurants in Kenya and adopted a cross-sectional survey design. A cluster sampling method followed by simple random sampling methods was used to select respondents from the target population. Four hundred and fifteen participants (n = 415) were drawn using simple random sampling from five Kenyan universities. The data collection tool included a questionnaire with a response rate of 69.1%. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study results demonstrated that consumer item choice is influenced by various factors. The results showed that there was a weak association (r = 0.36, p < 0.05) between descriptive language and consumers' menu item choices. The F-value (F (1) = 48.308, p < 0.05) implies that the way menu items were described had a significant effect on which item a consumer chooses. R-square = 0.32, meaning the model is not a perfect predictor of the menu item choice. The study recommends that restaurant owners should focus on creating unique menu descriptions and using new technologies in restaurant menu development.

Keywords: *Psychological techniques, descriptive language, consumer choice*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Problem

The restaurant market environment is competitive. Dynamic consumers are demanding more quality and variety (Parnia, Hosseni & Fen). Restaurants need to provide innovative and unique menu items to stand out from the competition and attract customers. Varying customer preferences have emerged over time, compelling restaurants to be innovative (Franklin & Johnson, 2019). This need has prompted studies on menu descriptive language and its influence on consumer item choice in restaurants. Studies suggest that the menu acts primarily as a sales tool in food and beverage establishments (Cichy & Wise, 2018). According to literature, menus are seen as significant communication tools and can deliver openings for restaurants to influence the item ordering behavior of consumers. A study by Peters & Remud (2020) concluded that what consumers decide to eat is heavily influenced by menu item descriptions.

As Sitwell (2018) points out, with language being just as crucial as food in encouraging consumers to spend more, picking the ideal descriptions for the items on the menu is imperative. Several studies provide evidence that descriptive menu language influences customers' decision-making process (Kyalo, Ochieng & Onyango, 2020; Baiomay & Jones, 2017; Wanyonyi, Waweru & Njoroge, 2021). As Hillen (2021) suggests, psychology may be used to extract the most benefits from consumers by influencing their minds. This type of subtle coercion can result in individuals ordering food they would not normally choose on their own, which again increases profits for the restaurant. According to Hendrawan & Anggraeni (2020), salient features of the menu, such as descriptive language, come into play during the meal experience. Moreover, it is implied that descriptive language influences menu item choice by providing context and details that assist customers in making decisions (Reynolds, 2018).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The invasion of western cuisine has influenced menu offers in casual dining restaurants in Africa, especially in South Africa, Morocco, and East Africa (Oktay & Sadkolu, 2017), making it difficult for consumers to navigate through the menu. This situation impels restaurants to find ways to enhance the menu to make it easier for consumers to make their preferred choices. Wanyanyi *et al.* (2021) posit that using descriptive language as a form of psychological technique can influence menu choice and ultimately increase revenue. In addition, Ozdemir & Caliskan (2015) assert that by providing vivid descriptions of menu items, customers can easily visualize the dish and make a more informed decision. In essence, literature suggests that techniques such as using descriptive language in menus can entice consumers to buy. (Hillen, 2021).

A review of existing literature identified key elements of menu item descriptions that have the most influence on customer perceptions. These include:

- The use of persuasive language,
- Brand-named menu items,
- Names that are nostalgic, and
- Those that have sensory appeal (Magnini & Kim, 2020; Wang, Zhang & Xu, 2018; Baiomay, Jones & Goode, 2017)

These aspects of descriptive language have not been statistically tested exhaustively. A challenge is determining the extent to which descriptive language saliently influences the consumer's item choice. For the continued growth of customer decision-making knowledge, it is imperative to understand how descriptive language influences customers' item choices. Many studies from the literature reviewed have examined the actors and factors influencing consumers' satisfaction, disregarding the salient aspects of the menu (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Wansink, Painter, & Ittersum, 2016). This study aims to fill this gap

1.3. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to examine the influence of descriptive language on consumers' menu item choices within casual dining restaurants in Kenya.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The results contribute to the body of knowledge, particularly valuable insight into how restaurants can influence their customers' decision-making process.

Additionally, the results can be used to inform menu language and marketing strategies. By understanding the dimensions of menu language descriptions, hospitality industry practitioners will be able to create better menus.

This study contributes to the theoretical body of knowledge in the marketing literature by extending the current understanding of menu choice in the context of the hospitality industry.

The findings from this study provide hospitality practitioners with insight into customer menu choice and how to make influential menus better.

2. Methodology

2.1. Area of Study

Kenya is divided into forty-six counties, with several casual dining restaurants distributed within these areas. The majority of casual dining restaurants are found in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Meru, and Nakuru. The study targeted consumers who dine in restaurants licensed by Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA), a corporate body established under section 4 of the Tourism Act of Kenya.

2.2. Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey method to measure the influence of menu descriptive language on menu item choice. It is a helpful and appropriate technique because it allows the researcher to properly and swiftly evaluate a sizable population in a short period of time. Compared to other approaches like longitudinal studies, which require several data points to be gathered over a lengthy period of time, cross-sectional studies are also comparatively cheap to conduct. The data were gathered from a single moment in time, making it less likely to be influenced by environmental changes.

2.3. Sampling Design

The study adopted a cluster sampling technique whereby the clusters were defined by geographical area (counties), and then universities in those counties were randomly selected. The participants were drawn using simple random sampling from five universities. The sample consisted of 415 participants.

2.4. Data Collection

The researcher used a questionnaire to collect data from the respondents after ascertaining the reliability and validity of the research instrument. A questionnaire is an appropriate instrument due to its ability to collect huge amounts of data within a reasonable span of time Leavy (2017). The questionnaires were administered by the researcher and two research assistants in the five randomly selected counties in Kenya. A filter question was included in the questionnaire to eliminate respondents who did not fit the criteria for the survey. Six menu items were described in a descriptive language

in the research instrument. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with five statements about menu descriptive language on a 5-point Likert scale using a scale of 1–5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), and 3 = Undecided (UD). 4 = I agree (A), 5 = I strongly agree (SA). We included demographic items that asked participants to indicate their gender, income, and age. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.

2.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used to generate percentages for all items. Four diagnostic tests were done to ensure that the assumptions of linear regression were met. They were the normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity tests. A linear regression analysis was done using Analysis of Variance, or ANOVA. Pearson's correlation was conducted to test the relationships between descriptive language and participants' menu item choices at the 0.05 level of significance.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Gender

The analysis showed that out of the 415 respondents interviewed, 59% were female, and 41% were male. Therefore, gender representation is almost balanced in this study, which implies that the results reflect a more accurate representation of the overall population. According to the study findings, 75% of respondents were 25 years of age or younger, followed by those aged 26-30 years (12.8%), 31-35 years (5.6%), and those over 35 years (11.6%). Therefore, gender representation is almost balanced in this study, which implies that the results reflect a more accurate representation of the overall population.

3.2. Age

Literature suggests that age has a bearing on consumers' food preferences. A study by Chatterjee and Mukherjee (2017) found that older people tend to select more familiar items, while younger people are more likely to experiment with new dishes. The study results showed that 75% of the respondents were 25 years of age or younger, followed by those of age 26–30 years (12.8%), 31–35 years of age (5.6%), and those above 35 years of age (11.6%). Literature suggests that age has a bearing on consumers' food preferences. Han, Zhang, and Li (2019) found that older people tend to select larger portions than younger people. A study by Chatterjee and Mukherjee (2017) found that older people tend to select more familiar items, while younger people are more likely to experiment with new dishes. According to a study by the National Restaurant Association (2019), 85% of 18- to 34-year-olds are more likely to order a menu item if they are familiar with it. The implication is that restaurants should be innovative in crafting menu descriptions that target younger people.

3.3. Diagnostic Tests

Multicollinearity results showed a variance inflation factor (VIF) value of 1.194, an indication that the multicollinearity is not significant. The results of the normality test were used to determine whether or not the data were normally distributed. Kurtosis values between -3 and 3 are considered good (Olsen, Devore & Peck, 2015). The results showed that the skewness values were between -0.5 and +1, and the kurtosis values were between -3 and 3, indicating that the data were normally distributed as required by the regression assumptions. The test on the model showed that descriptive language has a p-value of 0.349; therefore, no heteroscedasticity problem existed because the significance (p) value was greater than 0.05. The reliability test of the research instrument was done using Cronbach's Alpha value judgement. Cronbach alpha values of 0.7 or higher indicate acceptable internal consistency (Taber, 2018; Cho & Kim, 2015). The Cronbach Alpha analysis showed values for each variable greater than 0.7.

3.4. Descriptive Statistics Results

3.4.1. Menu Descriptions Help Consumers Identify Dishes Easily

The results indicate that 74.6% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that menu descriptions help them identify dishes more easily, compared to 13% who disagreed, as shown in figure 1. This result shows that a majority of respondents feel that menu descriptions help them identify dishes more easily. According to Roberto, Agnew, Larsen, & Brownell (2014), it is easier to remember certain menu items depending on the way the name has been crafted. Several studies (Baiomy,2014; Reale & Flint, 2016; Kim, Tang, & Gupta,2018; Roseman, Joung, Choi, & Kim, 2017) point out that most consumers want detailed descriptions on restaurant menus because they help them easily identify dishes and consequently make informed decisions before ordering. As demonstrated by this study, the use of attention-grabbing descriptors contributes to a heightened likelihood of menu item selection.

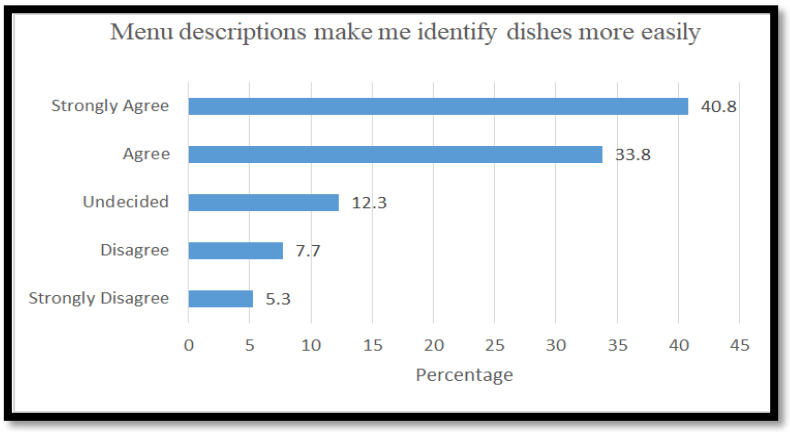

Figure 1: Menu Descriptions Make Me Identify Dishes More Easily

3.4.2. Nostalgic Menu Descriptions

Fifty-six percent (56%) of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that nostalgic menu descriptions influence their choice of the menu item, compared to 19.4% who disagreed and strongly disagreed, as depicted in figure 2. This indicates that, while a minority of respondents held an unfavorable view, the majority of respondents believed that nostalgic menu descriptions influenced their decision to order a certain menu item. As Guéguen & Jacob (2014) concluded, sentimental labels such as 'Grandma's homemade baked potatoes' trigger happy memories of tradition and family. Furthermore, Gutjar, Wijk, and K. Valesca (2014) concluded in their study on 'the role of emotions on food choice and liking' that emotional responses to food are relevant drivers of choice behavior. For example, a restaurant might include a picture of an old-fashioned milkshake on its menu, evoking childhood memories for many customers. This type of visual cue can be used to encourage customers to choose the item, as they will be drawn to it due to the emotional connection it creates (Gutjar *et al.,* 2014).

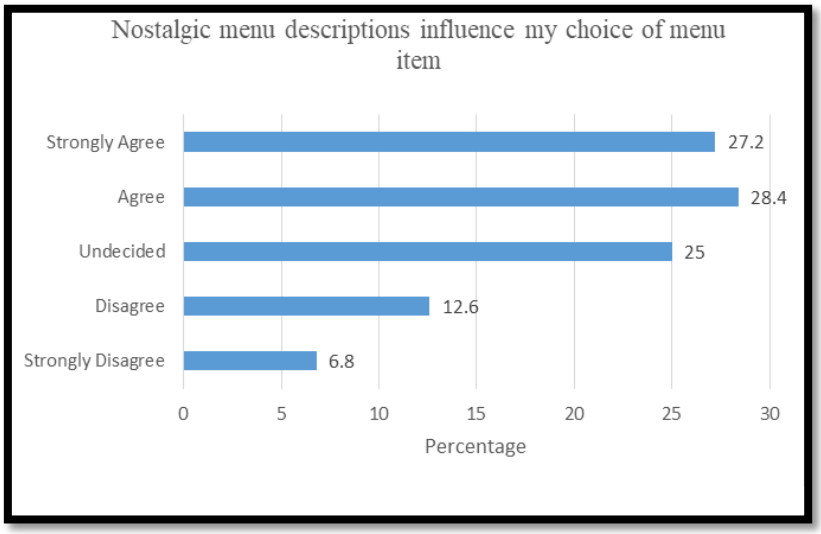

Figure 2: Nostalgic Menu Descriptions Influence My Choice of Menu Items

3.4.3. Influences of Nutrition Information on Consumer Item Choice

The respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with the statement that nutrition information on the menu description impacts their food choice, and 41.9% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement, compared to 38.5% who disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement as shown in figure 3. This suggests that the majority of respondents prefer to know the nutritional content of the food they are ordering. The study result is consistent with Fakih, George, Assaker, and Hallak's (2016) findings that showed nutrition information on menu descriptions is believed to inform consumers and may help them make better choices. On the other hand, the Roseman, Joung, Choi, and Kim (2017) study concluded that consumers accept nutritional labels on the menu to conveniently obtain nutrition information.

Conversely, 38.5% of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement that nutrition information on the menu description impacts their food choice. This indicates that nutrition information may not strongly influence menu item choices for a significant proportion of the population. It is possible that several factors influence the food choices of individuals, and nutrition information is just one of them. Nutritional information may act as a favorable stimulus, as suggested by the S-O-R model. According to the model, when an individual is exposed to a particular stimulus, they will respond in a certain way. In this case, the stimulus is the nutritional content of food, and the response is a potential change in menu item choices. Despite the results of this study indicating a weak relationship between nutrition

and menu item choice, studies by Roseman et al. (2017) and Yoon & George (2012) indicated a stronger correlation. Perhaps for certain consumers, nutritional value may be secondary to other considerations.

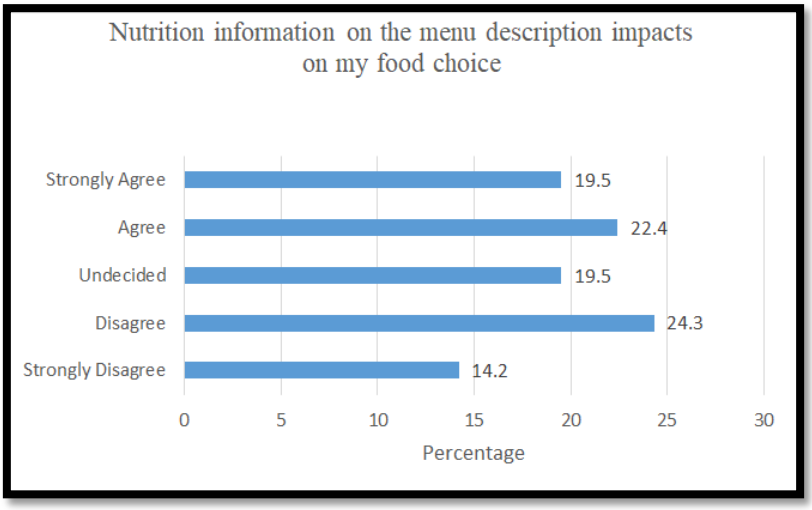

Figure 3: Nutrition Information on the Menu Description Impacts on Food Choice

3.4.4. Brand-Name Menu Items and Menu Choice

Familiarity is a primary factor influencing consumers' decisions while choosing their menu items (Chen & Antonelli, 2020). The study results show that 41.9% of the respondents agreed with the statement that they prefer brand-name menu items, as shown in figure 4. The reason could be that brand-named menu items are well-known, and consumers have a certain level of familiarity with them, making it easier for consumers to choose them. On the other hand, 35.9% of the respondents disagreed with the statement, preferring to try something different. This could be due to a desire to explore new flavors and ingredients or simply because they do not identify with the brand in question. The results of this survey suggest that customers are more likely to base their decisions on other factors, such as quality and consumer preferences, than on the brand name. This contradicts findings by Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence (2014), which showed that providing a name for the dish before the consumer evaluates its taste is known to have a bigger impact than when the name is provided after tasting. Some consumers may be opposed to the idea of menu items being described in terms of taste since they may prefer to judge a dish based on its look or other characteristics.

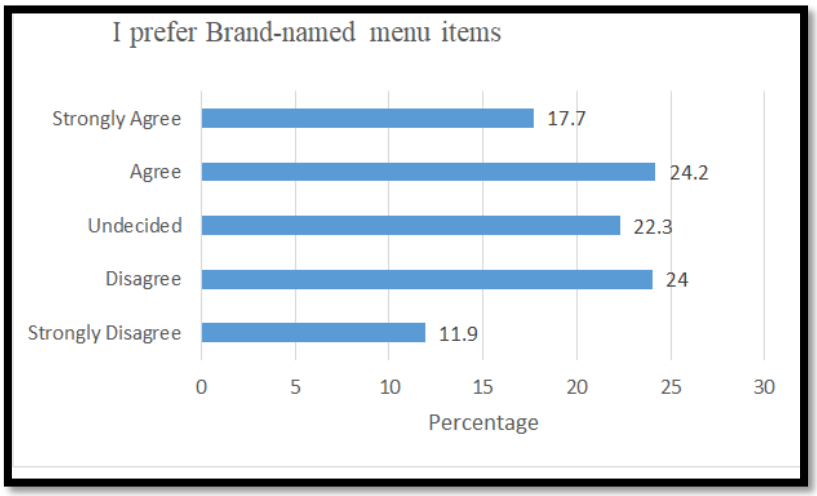

Figure 4: I Prefer Brand-Named Menu Items

3.4.5. Sensory Appeal

The survey results revealed that 66.8% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that menu descriptions that portray 'taste' are more interesting to them than those that do not, as shown in figure 5. The results of the study demonstrate that menu descriptions that emphasize the taste of a dish can be effective in increasing consumer interest. Additionally, this could be because many consumers prefer to have a general idea of what the food tastes like before deciding to order it. Moreover, a survey conducted by the National Restaurant Association in 2019 indicated that 78% of adults are more likely to order a menu item if they have a general idea of what it tastes like. The findings of the National Restaurant Association (2019) are very similar to the findings of this study.

It is also worth noting that 13.8% of the respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statement that menu descriptions that portray 'taste' are more interesting to them. This could be attributed to the fact that some people may prefer to try something new without any preconceived notion of what it may taste like. As Bareham (2013) points out,

menu descriptions could focus on taste-related words such as "delicious," "mouthwatering," and "savory," among others, as these elicit more interest in the consumer. As Kim (2016) avers, sensory labels are used to describe the taste of a meal.

There are certain words that need to be used in the menu for the consumers to show more interest and be attracted to particular 'dishes' on the menu. For example, a menu might describe a dish as 'juicy, grilled steak served with a side of creamy potatoes' rather than simply listing it as 'steak and potatoes.' However, a study by Ohlhausen and Langen (2020) concluded that the combination of descriptive name labels and the decoy effect is not recommended for fostering sustainable food choices. In contrast, results from other studies have revealed a fairly good association between menu item selection and the descriptive language used.

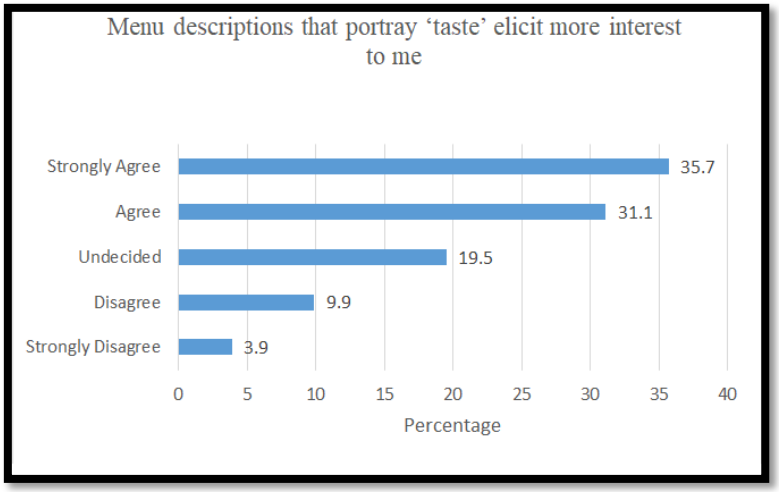

Figure 5: Menu Descriptions That Portray 'Taste' Elicit More Interest to Me

3.4.6. Descriptions Do Not Distract Consumers While Selecting What to Order

The respondents were asked to rate the extent they agreed with the statement that descriptions on the menu do not distract them while selecting what to order. The results showed that 26% of the respondents strongly agreed and 30.8% agreed with the statement, compared to 27.9% who disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement, as shown in figure 6. These findings imply that the majority of the respondents did not feel that descriptions on the menu distracted them from ordering. This is not in agreement with studies by Baiomay & Jones (2017) and Wansink, Painter, & Ittersum (2016) that revealed concisely described menu items have a positive influence on what the consumer decides to order from the menu and improve the way consumers felt about a menu item.

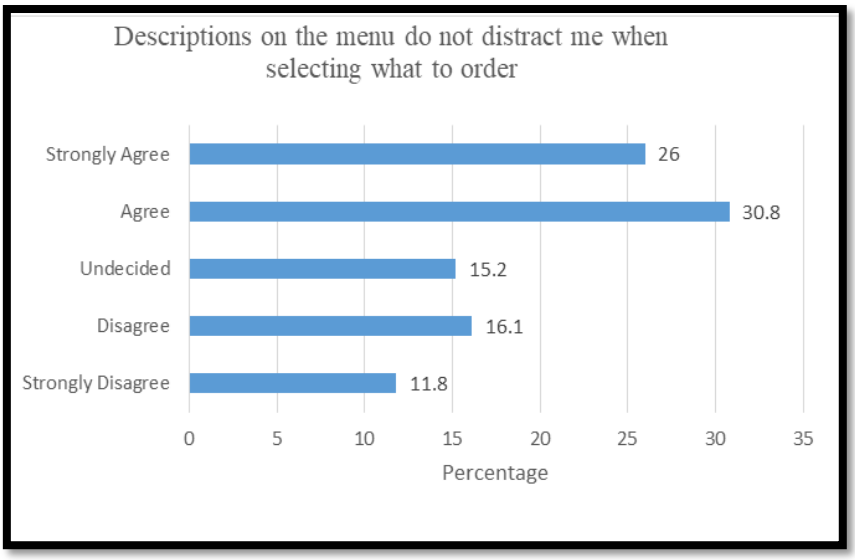

Figure 6: Descriptions on the Menu Do Not Distract Me While Selecting What to Order

3.5. Inferential Statistics Results

The study results showed that there was a moderately positive and significant relationship between consumers' menu item choices and descriptive language ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.05$) from Pearson correlation analysis. This indicates that descriptive language has an effect on consumers' menu item choices (Rocek, 2019). We can hypothesize that when a menu item is accompanied by descriptive language, there is a modest increase in the likelihood that a consumer will choose it. The results from the model summary table showed that the coefficient of determination, R-square = 0.132, as shown in table 1. In this case, the model explains about 13.2% of the variance in the response variable. This indicates that the model

is not a perfect predictor of the response variable. However, it does provide some insight into the relationship between descriptive language and the consumer's menu item choice.

In contrast, results from other studies have revealed a fairly good association between menu item selection and the descriptive language used. For instance, a study by Yip & Siu (2020) provided empirical support for the contention that there is a connection between descriptive menu language and item selection. A study by the National Restaurant Association (2018) found a strong correlation between the selection of menu items and the descriptive terminology. The study concluded that descriptive menu language can increase sales of certain menu items by as much as 27%, and when menu items were described with sensory details, such as 'succulent,' consumers were more likely to order those items, increasing the overall check size of a restaurant by as much as 9%.

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.364[a]	.132	.130	.70419
a. Predictors: (Constant), Descriptive language				

Table 1: Model Summary

The ANOVA table results in this study showed that the linear regression model of $Y = \beta_0 + \beta X$ is significantly linear at ($F=48.646$, $p < 0.05$) as shown in table 2. In this model, Y is the consumer's menu item choice, X is the descriptive language, β_0 is a constant, and β is the coefficient of X in the model. This result implies that the linear regression model was a good fit for the data and that the differences between the means of the groups were statistically significant (Olsen, Devore & Peck, 2015). Additionally, the results showed a significant relationship between descriptive language and consumer menu item choice. This is supported by the findings of Baiomy & Jones (2017) and Wansink *et al*., 2016), which concluded that concisely described menu items positively influence what the consumer decides to order from the menu.

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	24.123	1	24.123	48.646	$p < 0.05$ [b]
	Residual	158.185	319	.496		
	Total	182.307	320			

Table 2: ANOVA Table for Linear Regression Analysis between Consumers' Menu Item Choice and Descriptive Language

This regression model, $Y=1.791+0.435X$, was established, as shown in table 3. The model indicated that for every one-unit improvement in descriptive language, the consumer's menu item choice improved by 43.5 percent. The result concurs with the Wansink *et al.* (2016) study that concluded descriptive labels improved the way customers felt about food, the restaurant, and dining.

Coefficients						
Model		**Unstandardized Coefficients**		**Standardized Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.791	.219		8.191	$p < 0.05$
	Descriptive language	.435	.062	.364	6.975	$p < 0.05$
a. Dependent Variable: Consumer's Menu Item Choice						

Table 3: Coefficients for Linear Regression Analysis between Consumer's Menu Item Choice and Descriptive Language

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

The study provided some insight into the relationship between descriptive language and consumers' menu item choices.

The study has shown that descriptive language has a moderate and significant influence on menu item choices. The results of this study also demonstrated that consumer item choice is influenced by various factors, which are consistent with the findings of earlier studies (Baiomay & Jones, 2017; Apaolaza, Hartmann, Echebarria, & Barrutia, 2017; Reale & Flint, 2016).

Taste is a subjective experience, and different consumers may have different reactions to descriptions that emphasize the taste of a dish.

From the study findings, it is clear that descriptive menu language helps potential consumers make more informed decisions and provides insight into what they can expect while ordering a menu item.

This study demonstrated that menu item descriptions can predict which menu item a customer will order at a casual restaurant.

Further analysis of the results revealed that nostalgic descriptions considerably influenced consumer choice over other elements of descriptive menu language.

4.2. Recommendations

- Restaurant owners should focus on creating unique dishes descriptions that are not associated with any particular brand to attract customers who prioritize quality over brand name.
- They should use technology in developing menus with diverse menu descriptors.
- Menu descriptions should be designed to manipulate consumers into making certain choices. This could be seen as unethical or manipulative.
- The government should come up with policies that regulate and protect consumers from being unduly influenced.
- An in-depth study should be conducted to investigate the impacts of the increasing complexity of menu descriptions on consumer preferences.

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