

COMPATIBILITY OF MENUS TO CHILDREN'S NEEDS IN SELECTED HOTELS IN NAIROBI, KENYA

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Abstract

This paper examined the compatibility of hotel menus to children's needs. The study used a survey research design. Simple random sampling was used to select the respondents from the target population. The target population comprised of hotel employees, parents and children. Data was collected using questionnaires and non-participant observations were occasionally employed to supplement the information that was captured by the questionnaire. Data was cleaned, analyzed quantitatively and presented using frequency tables and graphs. The findings revealed that many Kenyan hotels do not have identified children's menus thus children are left to eat from adult menus which totally vary in presentation, nutrition, portion sizes and also in delivery. The population of children is therefore left without many choices as they seem to be a forgotten lot. It is therefore recommended that hotels provide foods compatible to children in terms of texture, presentation, nutrient content and color so as to encourage them to eat as well as enjoy their meals. In addition hotels should offer special feeding facilities for the children to enable them get pleasure from their feeding experience and also employ trained employees in their food production to cater for children.

Key words: Children, Compatibility, Hotel, Menu, Nairobi, Kenya

1. Introduction

Hotels globally have grown over the past years and are now able to provide services to a wide variety of guests including business travelers, holiday goers, co-operate clients, honey mooners, the disabled and even children (Jakle and Sculle, 1999). Clients in the hotel industry are now catered for through customized and specialized services. Hotels have made concerted efforts to cater for food for their different market niches or segments with regard to age.

Children are a vital part of the hotel industry in Kenya because they constitute a whole market segment on their own, hence the need for hotels to improve services to this group as a means of increasing their market share and revenue. In addition children have a lot of influence on parent's decisions on where to go and eat. If properly catered for the children's market share is quite big as it involves not only children, but also their parents and guardians. Thirdly, children provide employment to the hotel industry due to their special and unique needs, hence aiding the industry to play a role in boosting and improving the economy of a country. From the forgoing, it is clear that children could make a major contribution in building and improving the hotel industry as consumers of the services they provide. However, children are a group that has been neglected or disregarded. Menus in most Kenyan hotels may not be compatible to the needs of children aged 2 to 12 years because they have special requirements with regard to portion size, texture, temperature, flavour and nutritional quality of foods, and feeding equipment. Hotels therefore can improve their market share and revenue by creating specialized services that address children's needs with regard to food such as presentation, portion size, service, feeding facilities and nutritional adequacy. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the factors considered when formulating menu that meet children's needs?

2. What sensory aspects are considered during production of children's menu?
3. Are equipment's used during service suitable for children's needs?

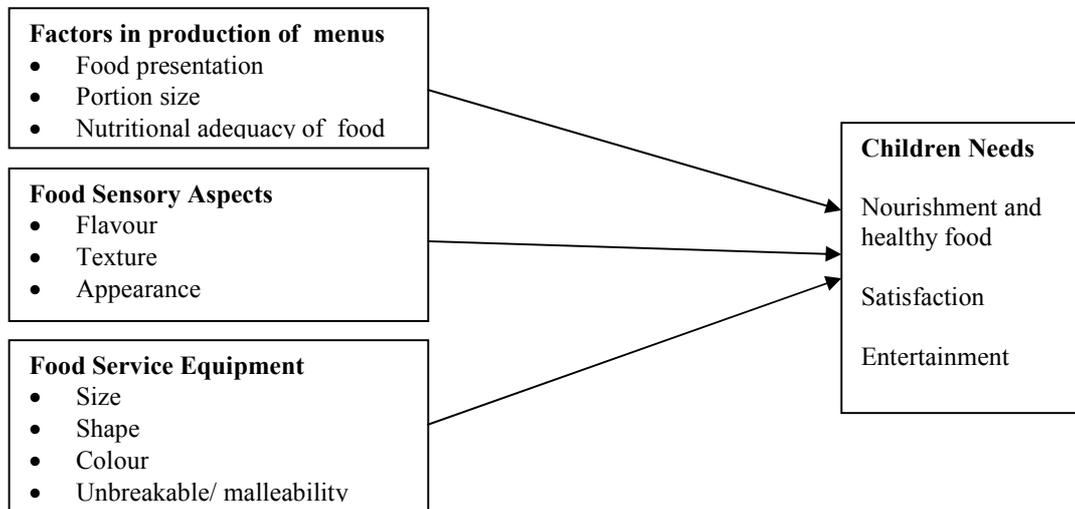


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2. Literature Review

2.0. History of Children's Menus

Since time immemorial, children's cuisine has been an important consideration in the hotel industry. In 2004, historians and scholars discovered a children's menu on the back of one of the four original charters of the constitution of the United States of America (USA) (Carlin 2004). The constitution and children's menu, originally drawn up at the constitution convention centre in Philadelphia in 1787 is housed at the national archives building.

The menu, shown in Appendix 1 provides dining options for children under 7 years and is seen as a recognition of the need for fun-to-eat, affordable dining options for the youngest members of the nation by the government while honoring the rights of individuals and unity of a nation. The menu features two columns of fancifully named items, such as Yankee Doodle Macaroni, Johnnycakes, and Eagle fingers. It also included; Bloody Great Blood Pudding, Cheese betwixt Two Slices of Bread and Mother Goose. The use of such terms may have been an amusing means to encourage children to eat their food. Additionally, the menu also had a 'Pleasant Diversions' section that included a man with a wooden leg evidently coloured in blue by a child and the earliest known example of a word find containing the names of revolutionary war-era battleships. This suggests that the intention of the original framers of this menu probably intended that serving food to children be a way to distract them while the elders created a system of representative national government (Lipscomb-Blaine 2004).

Since then, other hotel establishments have designed menus targeting child food consumers. For example, McDonald's Happy Meal has become the best-selling children's menu item in history since its debut in 1979 (Wikipedia 2009). Originally referred to as the 'Circus Wagon Happy Meal,' the menu featured a hamburger or cheeseburger, French fries, cookies, a soft drink and puzzles and games. As a result of its high success, many other hotel establishments also began to offer similar meals to children. Eventually, the happy meal menu initiative partnered with major film and toy companies such as Ty, Mattel and Lego to offer toys ranging from Hot wheels racecars to Barbie's, while Disney and Dream Works released toys representing characters in movies like Toy Story and Shrek. These ventures pivoted the McDonalds Happy Meal menu into a multi-billion dollar business.

Currently, the happy meal menu has international standing having been adopted beyond the USA into other regions around the world that include Australia, Canada, Mexico, Japan, United Kingdom, Portugal, Brazil, Ukraine and Germany and some African countries such as South Africa, Libya, French Guiana, Egypt and Algeria (Wikipedia 2009). Different names are used in some countries for instance, Joyeux Festin (French), Kajita Feliz (Spanish),

Xenni Min (Ukrainian), Okosama Lunch (Japan) and Juniortute (Germany). The meal commonly consists of French fries, a soft drink or milk, chocolate milk, orange juice or apple juice, a cheese or ham burger or chicken nuggets. A toy is typically included with the food and both are contained in a small box or paper bag. Based on this concept, The Mighty Kids Meal has been designed for pre-teens who are older than those who can eat a happy meal, but still not hungry enough to eat from the full menu. The only difference is that the Mighty Kids Meal provides more food than the Happy Meal. This concept was originally developed by Burger King in 1998 in the form of its Big Kids Meal (Wikipedia 2010). In Kenya, there is limited documented evidence of children's menus. This indicates that most hotel establishments do not have special provisions for children's cuisine. Therefore hotel industry in Kenya still needs to improve a lot on provision of food service to children.

2.1 Formulation of Children's Menus

Children are a special group of clientele for the hotel industry because of their age, limited skills and abilities, literacy and nutritional requirements depending on their level of development. Therefore, there are several factors that should be considered when formulating their menus

2.1.1 Presentation

Presentation of food to children is important because their interest is very easily diverted (Halliday 2010). Children will enjoy foods that have visual appeal with bright colours, unusual shapes, and in small sizes that they can pick with their fingers (Robinson 1973). A study by Halliday (2010) on children's willingness to eat fruit in Belgium and Netherlands demonstrated that they are prepared to eat twice as much when it is visually striking. The food industry has long striven to make food for children as appealing as possible. For instance one entrepreneur in the United Kingdom creates sandwiches in the forms of unique images such as animals, and fun objects to encourage children to eat a varied diet.

2.1.2 Portion size

Children should be served with portion sizes of foods that match their age. There are guidelines for setting serving portions for children. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, a good guideline is that a toddler portion size should equal about a quarter of an adult portion size. For example, toddler portion sizes would include $\frac{1}{4}$ slice of bread, 1 tablespoon cooked vegetables, $\frac{1}{2}$ piece fresh fruit etc. Portion sizes for preschoolers or younger school age children, which include kids from the age of about four to eight years old, should be about a third of an adult portion size as the amount of food consumed increases with age. Portion sizes for older children and teens are similar to those of adults. This simple formula could be a good guide to the determination of portion sizes in the food industry (Hawkes, 2002, Nielsen, S.J. & Popkin, 2003).

2.1.3 Nutritional adequacy

To develop to their optimal potential, it is vital that children are provided with nutritionally sound diets. Nutritional considerations vary depending on the age and stage of development of the child. Human milk provides optimum nutrition for growth and development and children could breast feed for the first two years of life or they are fed on formula milk. Toddlers aged 1-3 years of age begin to exert its independence by moving around freely and choosing foods to eat. The most important factor is to meet energy needs with a wide variety of foods. During this period a child becomes able to drink through a straw and eat with a spoon, and frequently they become "fussy" eaters. The provision of a variety of foods will allow the child to choose from a range of foods with differing tastes, textures, and colors to help satisfy their appetite.

After 4 years of age, a child's energy needs per kilogram of bodyweight are decreasing but the actual amount of energy (calories) required increases as the child gets older. From 5 years to adolescence, there is a period of slow but steady growth. Dietary intakes of some children may be less than recommended for iron, calcium, vitamins A and D and vitamin C, although in most cases deficiencies are unlikely, as long as the energy and protein intakes are adequate and a variety of foods, including fruit and vegetables, are eaten. Regular meals and healthy snacks that include carbohydrate-rich foods, fruits and vegetables, dairy products, lean meats, fish, poultry, eggs, legumes and nuts should contribute to proper growth and development without supplying excessive energy to the diet. Children need to drink plenty of fluids, especially if it is hot or they are physically active. Variety is important in children's

diets and other sources of fluid such as milk and milk drinks, fruit juices and soft drinks can also be chosen to provide needed fluids.

2.1.4. Texture and Flavours

According to (Skinner et al 2002) Preschool children prefer mildly flavoured foods to strong or spicy flavours. Most foods are best served lukewarm but many children love ice cream which is very cold. The ability of the child to chew should determine the texture of the food. Young children get fatigued because of chewing hence the tendency to dislike vegetables. The toddler may be given chopped vegetables and ground meat, while the 3-5 year old may manage diced vegetables and minced or bite-size pieces of tender meat (Skinner et al 2002). Children enjoy chewing some foods such as crackers and strips or wedges of vegetables. Foods that are slippery such as custards and sticky such as mashed potatoes may not be appealing to some children although they are easy for them to eat.

2.1.5. Feeding equipment

Equipment can be helpful in enabling a child to use the best eating patterns possible depending on their age and stage of development. Morris (2010) summarized the issues with regard to use of feeding equipment for children. Infants require feeding bottles with nipples which should fit the size and shape of the baby's mouth; have the right flow rate and adequate stiffness. Bottles should hold the appropriate amount of fluid, be easy to hold, unbreakable and easy to clean. Toddlers use cups which should be easy to use without tipping too much. It should be easy to hold with one or two handles and regulate the flow of liquid, shatter or break free, and bright colours would help attract attention. Cups with lids can help prevent spillage. Straws should be short or long depending on the sucking skills of the child and should not shatter or break when the child chews. Bowls and spoons should allow for easy removal of food. The spoon should not break when bitten and the bowl should fit the child's mouth. The length of the handle of the spoon should be appropriate for the feeders' hand. Adapted spoons with bent handles can be very useful. Other equipment that aid feeding children may include lock in and raised feeding chairs.

3. Materials and Methods

The study was undertaken in Nairobi, Kenya. Survey design was used and the target population of 1,200 comprised of hotel employees dealing with the food service, children and parents who are customers of three selected hotels in Nairobi. A sample size of 120 was used. Stratified sampling was used to stratify the children in strata of toddlers and kids. Simple random sampling was used to select the actual participants from the three categories of children, parents and hotel employees. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 General Information

From the findings majority of the parents were female (66.7%), children were represented by an equal percentage of both males and females (50% each), while majority of employees were male (66.6%). With regard to age, majority of the parents were aged between 18-30 years (66.7%), majority of the children were aged between 7-12 years (64.3%) and majority of the employees were aged between 18-29 years (83.3%). These findings show that the parents and employees were still in their youthful stage of life and that the children were old enough to participate in choice of foods, feed themselves, and act responsibly in the hotels. From the findings majority of employees worked as waiters (50%), managers were (33.3%) while supervisors were (16.67%). It is evident that there were a higher number of waiters in the three hotels, most probably because it is the busiest department in the hotel. Majority of the parents were employed (87%) whereas only (13%) were unemployed which is evident that most of the parents had a source of income which affords them the luxury to take their children out for meals.

According to classes attended by the children, majority were in upper primary (42.9%), which shows that the respondents were old enough to give information on their food consumption. Majority (64%) of the children did not know what children menu was while only 36% had an idea. These findings imply that most of the children did not know what children's menu was hence could not ask for it in the hotels. As to whether parents asked for children's menu when they dine out with their children, majority (62.5%) do not ask while only 38.5% ask. Employees accounting for 33% indicated that they had children's menu while a majority (67%) did not. As shown on Table 1, parents stated the type of foods that they would like their children to be fed on. The findings show that majority (70.8%) preferred to have their children feed on vegetables and fruits while 54.2% preferred wholesome meals like Ugali, Chapati, Rice, and Pilau. Majority (78.6%) of the children stated that they liked to eat light meals, sometimes

only snacks for example Chips, Sausages, Eggs, and Kebabs. From these results it is evident that parents like their children being fed on nutritious meals as well as vegetables and fruits.

Table 1: Food preferences

Food parents prefer for the children	Yes	No	Non response
Snacks (Crips, Biscuits, Cakes, Ice Cream)	20.8%	75.0%	4.2
Drinks (Soda, Fruit Juice, Milk Shakes)	33.3%	62.5%	4.2
Wholesome meals (Ugali, Chapati, Rice, Pilau)	54.2%	41.7%	4.2
Light meals (Chips, Sausage, Egg, Kebabs)	33.3%	62.5%	4.2
Vegetables and Fruits	70.8%	25.0%	4.2
Food preferred by children	Yes	No	Non response
Snacks (Crips, Biscuits, Cakes, Sweets, Ice Cream)	50.0%	50.0%	0
Drinks (Soda, Fruit Juice, Milk Shakes)	35.7%	64.3%	0
Wholesome meals (Ugali, Chapati, Rice, Pilau)	14.3%	85.7%	0
Light meals (Chips, Sausages, Eggs, Kebabs)	78.6%	21.4%	4.2
Vegetables and Fruits	14.3%	85.7%	4.2

Source: Data analysis

4.2 Formulating Children's Menu

4.2.1 Portion Sizes/Servings

83% of the employees indicated that they categorized their portion sizes when serving children while only 17% did not categorize. With regard to categorization of the portion sizes, majority of the employees stated that they used small sizes (50.0%), medium size (25.0%) while 25% gave no response. The findings implied that hotel employees try to ensure that children are served smaller portions compared to adults. It is also evident that hotel employees are keen on the categorization of portion size when serving children.

4.2.2 Trained Employees for Children's Food Production

Majority (84.4%) of the hotels did not have employees specifically trained to produce and serve children's menus'. Only 16.6% stated that they had trained employees for child menu production and service. It is clear that there are hardly any employees trained on child menu production and service in hotels which may compromise the children nutrition and meal enjoyment.

4.2.2. Types of Food Children Prefer to Choose in Menus

The study established the type of food that children like to choose in hotel menus. From the findings majority (85.7%) of the respondents prefer chips, followed by 50% who prefer pizza. The choices by children shows little interest in nutritional composition, as they prefer protein and starchy foods compromising their nutrition.

Table 2: Type of food children like to eat

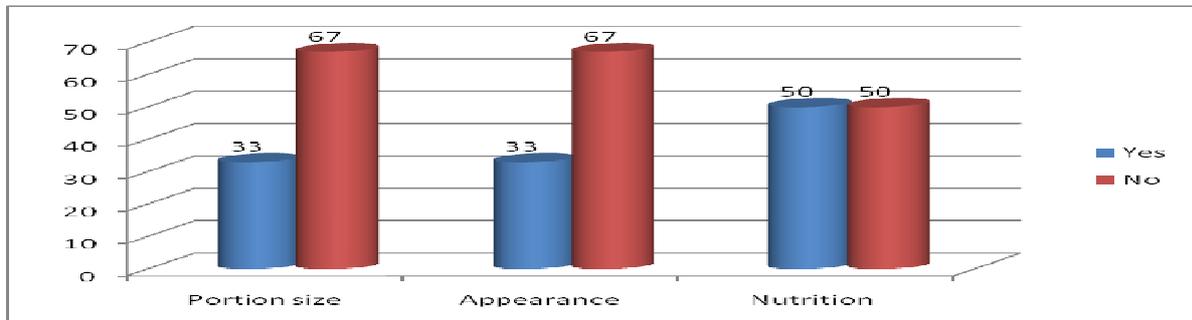
	Type of food	Yes %	No %		Type of food	Yes %	No %
1.	Chips	85.7	14.3	7.	Milk shake	28.6	71.4
2.	Pizza	50.0	50.0	8.	Chicken wings	28.6	71.4
3.	Sausages	42.9	57.1	9.	Kebabs	28.6	71.4
4.	Soda	42.9	57.1	10.	Cakes	28.6	71.4
5.	Ice cream	42.9	57.1	11.	Fish fingers	14.3	85.7
6.	Burgers	35.7	64.3	12.	Fruit salads	14.3	85.7

Source: Data Analysis

4.3 Suitable Menus for Children

91.7% of parents expected menus suitable for children in hotels. On hotels having menus for children, 50% of the hotel employees agreed. The findings imply that there is only a 50% chance that they may find the type of menus suitable for children offered in the hotels. The hotel employees indicated that most important factors taken into

consideration in production and service of children’s menu as nutrition (50%), portion size (33%) and appearance (33%). Therefore portion size and appearance were the least important as shown on figure 1.



Source: Data analysis

Figure 1: Suitable menus for children

4.4. Children’s Service Equipments

As to whether parents were provided with special feeding equipment for children during service, 58.3% stated that they were not given any special equipment compatible with the age of the children and therefore had to make their own innovations. Majority (75%) of the employees indicated that they did not provide special feeding equipment for children while only (25%) stated they did. However observations showed that many parents required special feeding facilities for children such as suitable cutlery and crockery in terms of size, colour and those that are easy for children to handle. Another observation made was that most of the furniture was high for children to use. The crockery used by children were made of glass or material bound to break and injure the children. There was also inadequacy of feeding equipment which led to a lot of wastage and there were very high chances that the children would be injured from broken equipment. All the hotel employees agreed that it was a tall order catering for children especially the toddlers hence there was need to improve this service

4.4.1 Prices for Children’s Food

Parents and employees stated whether children’s food was priced differently. The findings showed that a majority 83.3% of parents did not get special prices for children’s food while 16.7% stated otherwise. Surprisingly, 83.3% employees concurred with parents that children’s food are not priced differently while only 16.7% differed. Despite employees’ knowledge of serving children medium to small portions, price is not adjusted proportionately. To parents, this meant that if a child does not consume the entire portion the parent still has to pay and in many instances the portions given to children was no different from adults. Therefore, for a child with a high appetite, the portions over time may lead to overweight or worse still obesity thus parents loose either way economically and nutritionally as they feel cheated on without complaining.

4.4.2. Rating of the Service Levels

Parents rated the service levels offered to children in the hotels using a ten point scale. Majority of them 79.1% gave a rating of below 5 which indicates that the services for children in the hotels are way below average and hence the need to improve.

Table 4: Service Levels

Rating	Ten point scale									
	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	Eight	Nine	Ten
%age	8.2	4.2	20.8	29.2	16.7	16.7	0	0	0	4.2

Source: Data analysis

5. Conclusion

Most hotels do not have children’s menus and as a consequence do not adequately cater for children’s feeding requirements in terms of service, nutritional quality, feeding equipment and design of foods. Kenya’ hotel industry needs to consider children’s menu as a product on its own and be priced differently. Service of children in hotels is

poorly done as it is below average does not adequately cater for children's feeding requirements in terms of service, nutritional quality, feeding equipment and design of foods. This indicates that hotels have not catered well for this market segment yet it has a big population which needs nutrients more than adults to stimulate their growth. The study recommends that services offered by hotels to children clients need to be improved, should create children's menu and take considerations such as manageable texture, presentation, nutrient content and appearance so as to encourage children to eat as well as enjoy their meals. Hotels should offer special feeding facilities for children so as to enable them benefit from their feeding experience. Hotels should also try to have on board trained employees specialized in children's menus in production and service in order to satisfy children's needs.

Though from the findings employees are very keen on ensuring that children receive nutritious foods when they dine out, other aspects that contribute to satisfaction and enjoyment of the meal are not taken into consideration. An assessment of the existing menus for children in the hotel industry and the factors that should be taken into consideration when formulating menus for children showed that a lot of attention is paid to presentation with regard to color and shape to capture children's attention (Halliday 2010). Also children are given incentives such as toys and menus may include games and puzzles that they love. Current menus show dishes associated with personalities or figures the children like from T.V programmes that they watch. It is however evident that an aspect that is most often ignored is the nutritional adequacy and the potential of food to promote good health. Currently, there is pressure to address the growing tide of obesity, as well as measures to curb marketing of unhealthy foods to children. In their attempt to expand their market share food establishments encourage over eating by providing bigger portion sizes to consumers. Both parents and the food industry should identify methods to encourage children to eat more healthily.

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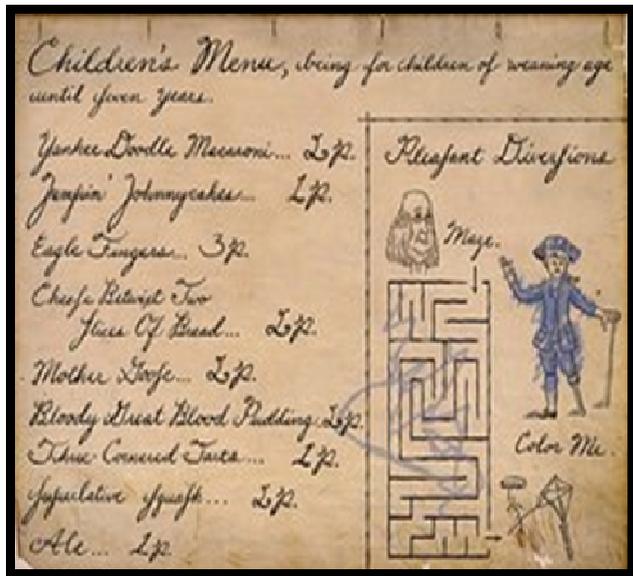
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Appendix 1:



An example of the first Menu for children, for less than 7 years discovered behind the 1787 constitution of the USA (Carlin, 2004).

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