

# Drunken noodles or Pad Kee Mao? Language matters on ethnic menus

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The menus used in the study. On the left, the authentic Thai language menu and, on the right, the English translation. Credit: Ohio State University

Ethnic restaurants like to brag about how "authentic" they are.

But when it comes to the language on their menus, a new study suggests authenticity may not be a hit with some customers.

Researchers found that people who were averse to uncertainty and ambiguity reacted more negatively to a [restaurant menu](#) that labeled foods with their authentic-language name (such as Pad Kee Mao) rather than the English-language name (Drunken Noodles).

"Many marketing experts suggest ethnic restaurants use native language on their menus to increase authenticity," said Stephanie Liu, co-author of the study and assistant professor of hospitality management at The Ohio State University.

"But managers shouldn't assume that their diners always want authenticity in the menus. A lot depends on the customers' personalities and the environmental conditions at the restaurant, such as noise levels."

Liu conducted the study with Sungwoo Choi and Anna Mattila of Pennsylvania State University. It is published online in the journal *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*.

Liu said restaurant menus are too important for owners and managers to make assumptions about what works best.

"Every restaurant has a menu and everyone reads the menu. It is a form of marketing," she said. "Menus will affect how much people like your restaurant, so you have to get it right."

In this study, Liu and her colleagues examined how people's desire for a definite answer on a given question - what psychologists call "need for cognitive closure" - affected their response to language on a restaurant menu.

People who have a high need for cognitive closure like order, structure and predictability, feel discomfort with ambiguity and like to make decisions quickly and decisively.

While this need for cognitive closure can be a personality trait, nearly everyone can feel higher needs for this type of closure in certain situations, Liu said.

For example, studies have shown that time pressure or a noisy environment can momentarily make nearly everyone feel a higher need for cognitive closure. Moreover, many people develop a higher need for such closure as they age.

This study involved 171 American adults who participated in the research online. They first completed a survey that included 15 questions measuring their need for cognitive closure. (For example, "I would quickly become impatient and irritated if I would not find a solution to a problem immediately.")

They then took part in what they were told was a separate restaurant study. They were asked to imagine they were going to a Thai restaurant with a friend. They were presented with one of two menus.

In one menu, all the dishes had authentic Thai labels (such as Khao Pad Kra Pow or Khao Pad Sapparod). In the other menu, all the labels for the dishes were translated into English (such as Basil Fried Rice or Pineapple Fried Rice). But both menus had descriptions of each dish in English and looked otherwise identical.

After reading the menus, participants were asked to rate their attitudes toward the menu and the restaurant. They were also asked to rate how bothered they felt when making a decision on their menu choice.

Results showed that people who scored higher on the need for cognitive closure had more negative reactions not only to the authentic language menu, but also to the restaurant itself.

"How you react to the menu influences in part how you react to the [restaurant](#)," Liu said.

The study found that these diners' negative attitudes toward the authentic language menu were driven by an intensified feeling of being bothered when they dealt with difficult food names.

"Restaurants depend on their diners having a good experience. You don't ever want them to feel bothered or aggravated," she said.

The issue of [menu](#) language is particularly important for [ethnic restaurants](#) that have a loud dining area or who cater to a business lunch crowd that is in a hurry.

"The need for cognitive closure is not just a [personality trait](#)," Liu said.

"We can all feel a greater need for a quick, easy decision when we are in a loud environment or are in a rush. Restaurants need to keep that in mind."

Liu noted that studies suggest the need for cognitive closure increases with age - so restaurants catering to an older crowd should consider whether authentic language labels are really a good idea.

**More information:** Sungwoo Choi et al. Consumer Response to Authentic-Language Versus English-Language Menu Labeling in Ethnic Dining, *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/1938965517730314](#)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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