HUNGER, APPETITE, SEARCH AND MENU ITEM CHOICE: APPLICATION OF THE EKB MODEL IN THE KENYAN COMMERCIAL EATERIES

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Abstract

Purpose – Understanding how foodservice consumers decide what to order from a menu is critical, as this decision-making process is assumed to be guided by psychological factors and influenced by both internal and external motivations and stimuli. Therefore, this study sought to examine the applicability of the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) customer decision-making process stages to menu item selection among foodservice customers in commercial eateries.
Methodology/Design/Approach – The study employed a descriptive survey research design. Cochran's formula was used to determine the sample size, yielding a sample of 385 respondents. The study was conducted in Kakamega County, located in western Kenya. Purposive sampling was used to select the commercial eateries, while simple random sampling was employed to select the respondents.
Findings – The study results indicate that the overall regression model significantly predicts the outcome variable ($p < 0.05$). Among the predictors, EKB customers' basis for evaluating the menu and alternatives made the greatest contribution to the relationship between the independent and dependent variables ($\beta = 0.36$, Sig. = 0.000, $t = 6.919$).
Originality of the research – Although the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model has been extensively applied in retail and product-based contexts, there is a gap in research regarding its application within the hospitality industry. Therefore, this study is among the few original investigations focusing on the application of the EKB customer decision-making process to menu item choice among foodservice customers in the hospitality sector.
Keywords commercial eateries, hospitality industry, outlet, dining

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INTRODUCTION

The economic importance of the hospitality industry cannot be underestimated, both in Kenya and globally, as it contributes significantly to employment creation, provides a market for local produce, and generates revenue at both local and national levels (Cousins & Weeks, 2020). As a result, the industry has experienced remarkable growth, leading to the emergence of numerous food outlets, including chain-operated and independent restaurants, fast-food establishments, and cafés. Furthermore, many restaurants have embraced innovation in menu development by incorporating ethnic, contemporary, and fusion cuisines. Consequently, this has increased diversity not only in the range of available food outlets but also in the menu items from which customers can choose (Cousins et al., 2014). While such diversity may be viewed as a strength, it also presents challenges for foodservice customers when selecting menu items, as considerable effort is required to evaluate the numerous options available and make a final decision regarding both the menu item and the food outlet to patronize.

Therefore, the purchase decision-making process of both general consumers and hospitality foodservice patrons involves selecting from a range of available outlets and choosing a specific menu item from those offered (Bartels & Johnson, 2015). Although this is an important undertaking, foodservice customers rarely make arbitrary decisions regarding where to dine and what to eat. Studies have shown that such decisions follow a psychological and cognitive process influenced by both internal and external motivations and stimuli (Crivelli et al., 2024). However, the factors underlying these critical decisions concerning restaurant and food choices have received limited attention from researchers, both within the industry and in academia. Nevertheless, understanding how commercial foodservice customers decide where to dine is essential for enhancing desirable attributes of both food outlets and menu offerings, thereby promoting business sustainability.

Today, the hospitality industry is experiencing unprecedented growth and development, with an increasing number of foodservice outlets emerging worldwide. This rapid expansion is evident among both local and international brands (Khan, 2025). Consequently, competition within the industry has intensified significantly among and between brands. To respond effectively to this competitive environment, hospitality practitioners must understand the process through which customers of commercial eateries make their final purchase decisions regarding both the choice of outlet and the selection of menu items (Crivelli et al., 2024). However, despite the rapid growth and expansion of the global restaurant industry, many establishments continue to experience challenges associated with low customer retention. These challenges are often linked to unpredictable customer loyalty, low levels of outlet selection and menu item preference, and a diminished inclination toward both specific menu offerings and restaurant establishments (Wen et al., 2022).

This pattern may be attributed to restaurateurs' overreliance on intuition and perception rather than on structured customer behavior frameworks that systematically explain restaurant customers' preferences and purchasing decisions. Furthermore, there is a limited number of practical and empirically validated models that adequately explain the decision-making processes of commercial eatery customers when selecting restaurants and menu items from the wide range of options offered by competing establishments worldwide (Hong, 2015). This study is timely, as it provides empirical evidence upon which foodservice operations can strategically base their practices to attract and retain customers (Longart, 2010). Therefore, the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model was applied to examine how commercial foodservice customers make their final restaurant selection and menu item purchase decisions at both local and global levels.

1. EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Generally, consumer buying behavior in commercial foodservice establishments begins when an individual recognizes a need to purchase food, often stimulated by hunger or thirst, and continues through the stages of information search, evaluation, purchase, consumption, and post-purchase assessment (Mihajlovic et al., 2025). Therefore, the process of restaurant and menu item selection among hospitality customers is not as straightforward as it may appear; rather, it can be viewed as a series of psychological and cognitive processes that can be explained by the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model. The process begins with a prospective customer's desire to patronize a food outlet, a decision influenced by physiological needs and appetite (Chua et al., 2020). However, the manner in which customers ultimately select a particular restaurant and specific menu item remains insufficiently understood. Consequently, this study applied the EKB model to examine and explain the processes through which customers of commercial eateries make menu item choices from the multitude of options available (Blackwell et al., 2006).

According to the EKB model, Blackwell et al. (2006) proposed several stages in the consumer purchase decision-making process, namely problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. For the purposes of this study, these stages were adapted to the context of commercial foodservice experiences in the hospitality industry. Nevertheless, the contemporary consumer decision-making process involves a series of complex activities that give rise to several theoretical and practical limitations (Chua et al., 2020). Although the EKB model has been widely applied in studies of consumer purchase decision-making, it has been criticized for its limited consideration of customer motivation as a determinant of purchasing behavior. Consequently, its application in hospitality foodservice customer decision-making research has remained relatively limited (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012).

Nevertheless, numerous studies have examined restaurant customers' purchase decision-making processes within the hospitality context. These studies have produced several important findings. First, service quality significantly influences customer attraction, satisfaction, and retention. Second, social influences play a major role in both restaurant selection and menu item choice. Third, the perceived value derived from hospitality products and services drives repeat patronage and, consequently, customer loyalty (Ali et al., 2021; Slack et al., 2021; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). This information is crucial for hospitality operations managers, as it provides a foundation for the formulation and implementation of effective marketing strategies. However, few studies have comprehensively applied the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model within the hospitality industry, particularly in the Kenyan context and at the global level. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the applicability of the EKB model to hospitality customers' restaurant and menu item selection decisions.

Nevertheless, the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model is often considered more appropriate for explaining the purchasing processes of goods than those of services (Banerjee & Zhao, 2023). This perspective suggests that applying the model to examine the purchase decision-making processes of customers in commercial foodservice establishments may be inappropriate. However, despite the inherent differences between goods and services, there are notable similarities in the psychological and cognitive processes that consumers undergo when making purchase decisions, regardless of whether the offering is a product or a service (Rickwood & White, 2009; Pham & Higgins, 2005). Furthermore, as with the purchase decision-making process for goods, decision-making in service contexts is rarely linear, owing to the multiplicity of factors and activities involved (Confente et al., 2018). The EKB model conceptualizes consumer decision-making as a multi-stage cognitive process influenced by environmental cues, individual differences, and psychological factors. These determinants have also been found to play a significant role in hospitality customers' purchasing decisions, thereby supporting the applicability of the model within the foodservice context (Blackwell et al., 2006). Consequently, this study applied the EKB model to investigate the purchase decision-making processes of customers in commercial foodservice establishments.

1.1 Theoretical Review

For the purposes of this study, the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model of consumer purchase decision-making was selected and applied. The model was originally developed by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell in 1973. Generally, the original model comprises five stages through which consumers are presumed to progress when making purchase decisions for both goods and services (Blackwell et al., 2006). Subsequent developments of the model have introduced additional stages, expanding the framework from the original five to seven stages. However, the two additional stages were considered beyond the scope of the present study. Consequently, the original five-stage EKB model was adopted to provide the basis for the study's independent variable. The five stages of the model were therefore utilized in this investigation.

The consumer purchase decision-making process begins with problem recognition, which may be triggered by factors such as hunger, social occasions, or convenience, and is subsequently followed by information search (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2003; Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990). During the information search stage, hospitality consumers obtain relevant information from sources such as friends and family members, social media platforms, advertisements, and prior experiences. This is followed by the evaluation of alternatives stage, in which consumers compare restaurant and menu options based on factors such as price, quality, hygiene, ambience, and cultural appeal. This evaluation facilitates the purchase decision stage, during which consumers make their final choice regarding the restaurant and menu item to purchase. Thereafter, consumers enter the post-purchase evaluation stage, which involves assessing their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, expressing complaints where necessary, engaging in word-of-mouth communication, and developing intentions for future patronage and loyalty (Blackwell et al., 2006). This stage represents the culmination of the consumer decision-making process within the scope of the present study.

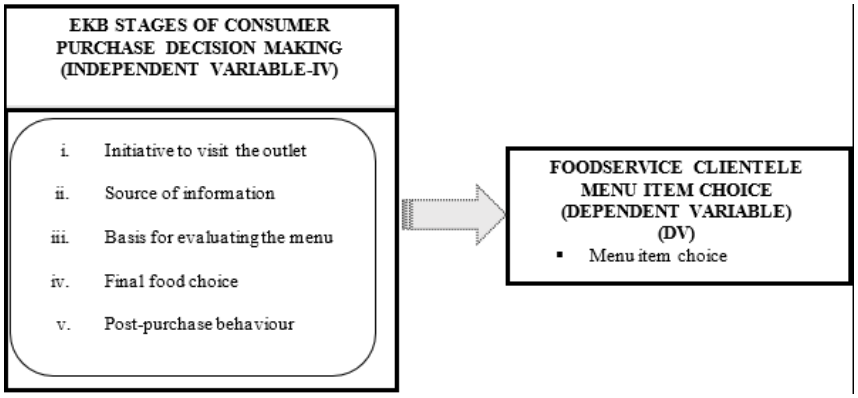
The EKB model therefore provides a useful roadmap for understanding hospitality consumers' decision-making behavior. Hospitality marketers and managers can apply the model to guide product and service development, communication strategies, and marketing initiatives (Olshavsky & Granbois, 1979). Furthermore, the model can be used to explain the psychological processes that hospitality customers undergo, beginning with the emergence of a need or desire to dine, through the identification of a suitable restaurant, the selection of a menu item, and the eventual evaluation of the overall dining experience (Rickwood & White, 2009). Although later versions of the EKB model include the additional stages of consumption and divestment, these stages were excluded from the present study. Consumption refers to the actual use of the purchased product or service, while divestment concerns post-consumption evaluation and the disposal or discontinuation of the product or service. Since these stages fell outside the focus of this investigation, they were not included in the analytical framework. Accordingly, the EKB model was deemed appropriate and was adopted as the principal theoretical framework underpinning this study.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

This study applied the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model to investigate the process through which hospitality customers select restaurant outlets and ultimately choose menu items. The EKB model is a well-established framework in consumer behavior and marketing and can be applied to explain hospitality foodservice consumer behavior as a logical and sequential decision-making process (Blackwell et al., 2006). Originally introduced in 1968, the model illustrates how individuals recognize needs, process information, evaluate alternatives, make purchase decisions, and assess their experiences after purchase. Accordingly, the conceptual framework of this study was anchored on the core stages of the EKB consumer decision-making process within the context of commercial foodservice establishments. The process begins with need recognition, which may be triggered by factors such as hunger. This stage is followed by information search, during which consumers seek information regarding available food outlets and menu offerings. Consumers then evaluate the available alternatives before making a final purchase decision concerning a specific restaurant and menu item. The process concludes with the post-purchase evaluation stage, which involves assessing the dining experience and determining the level of satisfaction derived from the purchase.

The five core stages of the EKB consumer decision-making process constituted the independent variable of this study, while foodservice customers' menu item choice served as the dependent variable. The independent variable comprised five constructs corresponding to the five stages of the EKB model, whereas the dependent variable consisted of a single construct representing menu item choice. These variables were integrated to develop the study's conceptual framework, illustrating the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Based on this relationship, the purchase decision-making process among customers of commercial foodservice establishments is guided by the five stages of the EKB model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: **Conceptual Framework**



Source: Adopted from Blackwell et al., 2006

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design using a quantitative research approach to gather data on the purchase decision-making processes of restaurant customers within commercial eateries in Kakamega County, Kenya. Descriptive cross-sectional survey designs are concerned with describing phenomena as they exist and examining relationships among variables based on respondents' perceptions and experiences (Whaley et al., 2014). Accordingly, this design was considered appropriate because it facilitated the investigation of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Furthermore, descriptive cross-sectional survey designs are widely utilized in the social sciences and psychology to provide a comprehensive understanding of research phenomena, making them suitable for the present study (Gall et al., 2007). Therefore, the design was selected because of its effectiveness in generating accurate and reliable information regarding restaurant customers' purchase decision-making processes within commercial eateries in Kakamega County (Kothari, 2004).

The study was conducted in Kakamega County, located in the former Western Province of Kenya. The county borders Vihiga County to the south, Siaya and Busia Counties to the west, Bungoma and Trans Nzoia Counties to the north, and Nandi and Uasin Gishu Counties to the east. Kakamega Town serves as the county headquarters and largest urban center. The county covers approximately 3,033.8 km² and has an estimated population of 1,867,579 people (Helen, 2015). Kakamega County was selected because of its diverse, multi-ethnic, and cosmopolitan population. In addition, hospitality research in Kenya has largely concentrated on major cities and urban centers, with comparatively limited attention given to Kakamega County (Government of Kenya, 2017). Commercial eateries located within Kakamega Town constituted the study population from which respondents were selected.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was designed to capture the five stages of the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model as the independent variables and foodservice customers' menu item choice as the dependent variable. The instrument was administered to respondents in selected commercial eateries within Kakamega County. Cochran's formula was used to determine the sample size, resulting in a sample of 385 respondents. The use of this formula minimized sampling bias and enhanced the representativeness and generalizability of the findings (Gall et al., 2007). In addition, systematic random sampling was employed to select 30 commercial eateries from a total population of 53 establishments, thereby ensuring adequate representation of the study population. To ensure the reliability of the research instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess internal consistency. Content validity was established through expert review of the questionnaire items. Thereafter, simple random sampling was applied to select the 385 respondents from the 30 sampled eateries.

The structured questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section collected demographic information from respondents. The second section measured the stages of the EKB consumer decision-making model, while the third section focused on foodservice customers' menu item choice. The EKB model was adapted to the context of the study and operationalized into five constructs, which were further translated into twenty-five predictor variables. Guided by the study's conceptual framework, six hypotheses were formulated and empirically tested to examine the relationships between the constructs of the EKB consumer decision-making model and foodservice customers' menu item choice in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya.

The first construct, customer initiative to visit commercial eateries, generated the first hypothesis:

> **H01:** There is no statistically significant relationship between customers' initiative to visit and the foodservice clientele menu item choice in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya.

To test this hypothesis, customer initiative to visit the eatery was operationalized into four predictor variables, namely hunger and/or thirst, sense of belonging or social class associated with the eatery, social norms influencing patronage of the eatery, and the specialty foods prepared within the establishment.

The second construct, customers' sources of information, generated the second hypothesis:

> **H02:** There is no statistically significant relationship between customers' sources of information and foodservice clientele menu item choice in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya.

Customers' sources of information were operationalized through seven predictor variables, including social networks, media-sharing platforms, discussion forums, bookmarking and content-curation platforms, consumer review networks, and manual search sources.

The third construct, customers' evaluation of menu alternatives, generated the third hypothesis:

> **H03:** There is no statistically significant relationship between customers' evaluation of menu alternatives and foodservice clientele menu item choice in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya.

The evaluation of menu alternatives was examined using five predictor variables, namely food and/or drink appearance, aroma, taste, texture, and temperature.

The fourth construct, customers' basis for the final choice of food and/or drink from the menu, generated the fourth hypothesis:

> **H04:** There is no statistically significant relationship between customers' basis for the final choice of food and/or drink and foodservice clientele menu item choice in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya.

This construct was operationalized using five predictor variables, including service level and speed, price charged, promotional activities, physical state of the restaurant environment, and human-related factors.

The fifth construct, customers' post-purchase behaviour, generated the fifth hypothesis:

> **H05:** There is no statistically significant relationship between customers' post-purchase behaviour and foodservice clientele menu item choice in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya.

Customers' post-purchase behaviour was investigated using four predictor variables, namely verbal compliments, tipping behaviour, shared consumption experiences, and revisit intentions.

Finally, in order to establish the overall relationship between the principal variables of the study, the sixth and final hypothesis was formulated as follows:

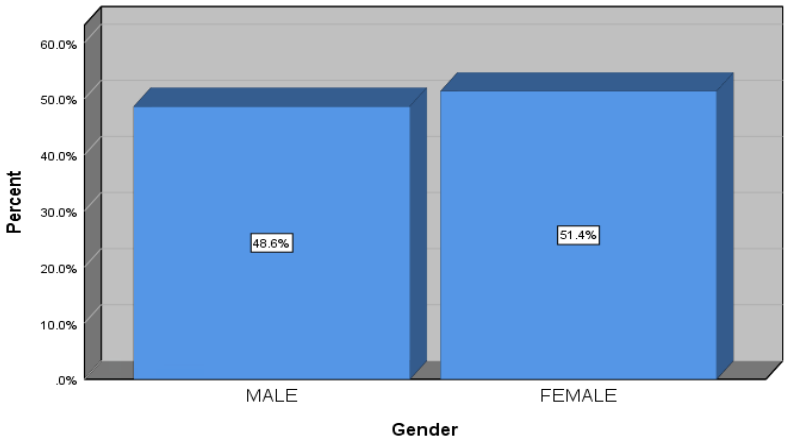
> **H06:** There is no statistically significant relationship between the EKB consumer purchase decision-making process and foodservice clientele menu item choice in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya.

The study applied a self-administered questionnaire for data collection. A five-point Likert scale was utilized for the closed-ended questions in accordance with the study model. The structured questionnaires were thereafter administered to the sampled respondents within the selected commercial eateries in Kakamega County. Subsequently, the collected data were entered into spreadsheets, cleaned, coded, and analyzed using SPSS Version 26.

3. RESULTS

This study investigated hospitality foodservice clientele's menu item choice through the application of the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) consumer purchase decision-making model in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya. To achieve this objective, 385 questionnaires were self-administered to the sampled respondents. In addressing the demographic characteristics of the respondents, the study examined the distribution of gender and educational attainment among the participants. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize these demographic variables. The results are presented in Figure 2 and Table 1 below.

Figure 2: **Respondents' Gender**



Source: Research Data

The study results indicated that the majority of the respondents (51.4%) were female, while 48.6% were male.

Table 1: **Respondents Education Level**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Primary Education	54	16.2	16.2	16.2
	Secondary Education (High School)	135	40.5	40.5	56.8
	Tertiary Education	144	43.2	43.2	100.0
	Total	**333**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Source: Research Data

Further, the study results revealed that the majority of the respondents (43.2%) had attained tertiary-level education, while 40.5% had attained secondary (high school) education and 16.2% had attained primary-level education. These findings indicate that most respondents had achieved relatively higher levels of education, compared to the minority (16.2%) who had attained only primary-level education. To investigate respondents' purchase decision-making processes in commercial eateries in accordance with the applied Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model, descriptive statistics were computed. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Disagree, and 5 = Strongly Disagree. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: **Frequency Statistics of Commercial Eateries Customers' Purchase Decision-Making Process and Menu Item Choice**

Variable	***1(%)***	***2(%)***	***3(%)***	***4(%)***	***5(%)***
Customers' initiative to visit the eatery	**19.6**	**40.5**	**23.6**	**12.2**	**4.1**
Hunger and/ or thirst	27	43.2	10.8	8.1	10.8
Sense of belonging/ class of the eatery	13.5	37.8	40.5	8.1	0.0
Norm to patronize the eatery	24.3	29.7	24.3	18.9	2.7
Food specialty prepared in the eatery	13.5	51.4	18.9	13.5	2.7
Customer source of information about the eatery	**24.7**	**33.9**	**25.1**	**13.1**	**3.2**
Social networks (e.g., Facebook, twitter etc.).	21.6	29.7	35.1	8.1	5.4
Media sharing networks (e.g., Instagram etc.).	16.2	24.3	35.1	16.2	8.1
Discussion forums (e.g., WhatsApp, telegram etc.).	18.9	37.8	21.6	18.9	2.7
Bookmarking and content curation sites (e.g., Pinterest, Reddit, Diigo, Delicious etc.).	21.6	45.9	16.2	13.5	2.7
Consumer review networks (e.g., TripAdvisor etc.).	24.3	35.1	27.0	13.5	0.0
Colleagues, friends and family members.	27.0	27.0	27.0	16.2	2.7
Manual search around town	43.2	37.8	13.5	5.4	0.0
Customer basis of evaluating the menu and/ or alternatives	**30.8**	**27.0**	**30.8**	**10.3**	**0.1**
Food/ drink appearance (Colour).	35.1	24.3	24.3	16.2	0.0
Food/ drink aroma (Smell).	40.5	21.6	24.4	13.5	0.0
Food/ drink taste (Sweetness, Sourness, and Pepper-hotness).	29.7	21.6	40.5	5.4	2.7
Food/ drink texture (elasticity, hardness, consistency).	32.4	18.9	35.1	10.8	2.7
Food/ drink temperature on service (Hot, room temperature, cold).	16.2	48.6	29.7	5.4	0.0
Customer basis of final choice of food/ drink from the menu	**18.4**	**29.2**	**34.6**	**15.1**	**2.7**
Service level/ speed.	16.2	18.9	40.5	24.3	0.0
Price charged.	5.4	32.4	43.2	18.9	0.0
Promotions (food photos, garnishing/ decoration, descriptive terms etc.).	13.5	24.3	43.2	16.2	2.7
State of the restaurant (hygiene, cleanliness, beauty).	27.0	35.1	21.6	8.1	8.1
Human factor (waiters, other guests).	29.7	35.1	24.3	8.1	2.7
Customer post purchase behaviour	**21.6**	**37.8**	**25.0**	**14.2**	**1.4**
Complimented verbally.	35.1	32.4	10.8	21.6	0.0
Tipped.	24.3	43.2	8.1	21.6	2.7
Shared the experience on social media.	8.1	45.9	40.5	2.7	2.7
Plan to visit again.	18.9	29.7	40.5	10.8	0.0

Source: Research Data

In relation to the five study constructs, the results indicate that, cumulatively, the majority of respondents agreed that the various stages of the EKB consumer purchase decision-making process influenced their final food choices. Specifically, 40.5% of the respondents agreed that their initiative to visit the eatery formed the basis for their final food choice decision. Similarly, 33.9% agreed that their source of information influenced their menu item choice, while 30.8% strongly agreed that evaluating the menu and/or available alternatives influenced their decision. Further, 29.2% agreed that their final choice of food and/or drink from the menu was guided by specific purchase decision factors, while 37.8% agreed that post-purchase behaviour influenced their subsequent food choice decisions.

To test the study hypotheses and examine the relationship between the EKB stages of the consumer purchase decision-making process and menu item choice among hospitality foodservice clientele in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results of the analysis are presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5 below.

Table 3: **Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.494[a]	.244	.232	.538

a. Predictors: (Constant), Post Purchase Behaviour, Problem recognition, Final Choice of menu item, Evaluation of alternatives, Information Search

Source: Research Data

The model summary results yielded an R-value of 0.494, an R^2 value of 0.244, and an adjusted R^2 value of 0.232. These findings indicate a moderate positive relationship between the EKB consumer purchase decision-making process and foodservice clientele menu item choice. Further, the R^2 value of 0.244 implies that approximately 24.4% of the variation in menu item choice among foodservice clientele can be explained by the independent variables included in the model, while the remaining 75.6% may be attributed to other factors not captured in the study. Moreover, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine the overall significance of the regression model. The results of the analysis are presented in the ANOVA table below.

Table 4: **ANOVA**

Model		Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	f	Sig.
1	Regression	30.475	5	6.095	21.079	.000[b]
	Residual	94.552	327	.289		
	Total	125.027	332			

a. Dependent Variable: MENU ITEM CHOICE
b. Predictors: (Constant), Post-Purchase Behaviour, Problem Recognition, Final choice of menu item, Evaluation of Alternatives, Information search)

Source: Research Data

The ANOVA results yielded an F-value of 21.079 and a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$).

Table 5: **Coefficients**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.088	.256		.346	.730
Customers' initiative to visit the outlet	.129	.049	.133	2.653	.008
Customers' source of information	.183	.058	.166	3.143	.002
Customers' basis of evaluating the menu	.378	.055	.364	6.919	.000
Customers' final food choice	.131	.049	.138	2.673	.008
Customers' Post-purchase behaviour	-.006	.055	-.006	-.110	.913

a. Dependent Variable: MENU ITEM CHOICE

Source: Research Data

The study findings yielded unstandardized beta (B) coefficients, significance (Sig.) values, and t-values for customers' initiative to visit the outlet, as presented in Table 5 above.

4. DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics generated by the study regarding commercial eateries respondents' purchase decision-making processes revealed that 60.1% of the respondents agreed that their food choices were influenced by their initiative to visit the eatery, while 59.4% indicated that post-purchase behaviour influenced their food choices. Further, 58.6% agreed that their source of information influenced their menu item choice, 57.8% indicated that their basis for evaluating the menu and/or alternatives influenced their food choices, and 47.6% agreed that their final choice of food and/or drink from the menu influenced their purchase decisions.

Although food choice is generally conceptualized within the framework of the EKB model, the variables investigated in this study demonstrated varying levels of influence on the ultimate food choice in commercial eateries. Specifically, the twenty-five predictor variables examined produced varying outcomes across the five stages of the consumer decision-making process. Under the construct of customer initiative to visit the eatery, hunger and/or thirst emerged as the most influential predictor, with 70.2% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing that it significantly influenced their food choice. Within the customer information search construct, manual search of the outlet recorded the highest response rate, with 81.0% of respondents indicating agreement. Regarding the customer basis for evaluating the menu and/or alternatives, food and/or drink temperature at the point of service emerged as the most influential factor, with 64.8% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing that it influenced their menu item choice. Similarly, under the construct of customer basis for the final choice of food and/or drink from the menu, human-related factors, such as waiters and other guests, recorded the highest level of agreement at 64.8%. Finally, within the customer post-purchase behaviour construct, both verbal compliments and tipping behaviour emerged as the most influential predictors, with 67.5% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing that these behaviours characterized their post-purchase responses. Based on these findings, it can be inferred that customers' manual search for information about commercial eateries exerted the greatest influence on the ultimate food choice, whereas service level and/or speed exerted comparatively less influence on customers' menu item selection decisions.

The model summary results revealed a moderate positive linear relationship ($R = 0.494$) between the EKB consumer purchase decision-making process and foodservice clientele menu item choice. Further, the results yielded an R^2 value of 0.244, indicating that 24.4% of the variation in foodservice clientele menu item choice could be explained by the EKB consumer purchase decision-making process, while the remaining 75.6% may be attributed to factors outside the scope of this study. The ANOVA results yielded an F-value of 21.079 and a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that the overall regression model was statistically significant and suitable for predicting foodservice clientele menu item choice. Since the significance value was less than the 0.05 threshold, the study rejected the sixth null hypothesis (H06) and concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between the EKB consumer purchase decision-making process and foodservice clientele menu item choice in commercial eateries within Kakamega County, Kenya.

Therefore, customers' basis for evaluating the menu and/or alternatives emerged as the strongest predictor of menu item choice because it had the highest beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.378$) and the strongest level of statistical significance. The positive beta coefficients associated with the significant predictor variables indicate that improvements in these factors are likely to result in corresponding increases in favourable menu item choices. In contrast, post-purchase behaviour exhibited virtually no predictive effect due to its negligible negative beta coefficient and non-significant p-value. These findings suggest that foodservice clientele menu item choice is primarily influenced by factors operating during the need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase decision stages rather than by post-purchase experiences. For practitioners, this implies that efforts should focus on improving menu evaluation attributes, particularly food and/or drink appearance, aroma, taste, texture, and temperature. This, in turn, will strengthen marketing communication strategies and enhance understanding of customer preferences, thereby improving the ability of commercial eateries to predict and influence menu item choices.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine the applicability of the Engel–Kollat–Blackwell (EKB) model in understanding foodservice customers' purchase decision-making processes within commercial eateries. The adopted model comprised five constructs, which collectively generated twenty-five predictor variables. To determine the magnitude of the effect of these variables on foodservice clientele menu item choice, the study employed multiple regression analysis.

The findings revealed that several customer-related factors significantly influenced foodservice clientele menu item choice in commercial eateries. Specifically, customers' initiative to visit the outlet, customers' sources of information, customers' basis for evaluating the menu and/or alternatives, and customers' basis for the final choice of food and/or drink from the menu were found to have positive and statistically significant effects on the dependent variable. Among these factors, customers' basis for evaluating the menu and/or alternatives emerged as the strongest predictor, suggesting that the criteria customers use in assessing menu options play a critical role in shaping menu item choice within commercial eateries.

These findings imply that commercial eateries should prioritize enhancing menu evaluation attributes such as food and/or drink appearance, aroma, taste, texture, and temperature in order to improve menu attractiveness and positively influence customers' menu item choices. Conversely, customers' post-purchase behaviour was found to have a negative but statistically insignificant

effect on foodservice clientele menu item choice in the selected commercial eateries. This suggests that post-purchase experiences may have limited influence on customers' immediate menu item selection decisions compared to factors operating during the need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase decision stages of the EKB model.

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