

# Japanese Scopophilia: A Comparison of Japanese and American Restaurant Menus

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There are considerable differences between Japanese and Anglophone restaurant menus with the former usually having pictures of all the items available, whereas the latter being more often solely text based or with graphics for general illustrative purposes only. This research quantified the difference using a Google image search for “restaurant menus” in English and Japanese, finding that the proportion of text based menus to be 80% in English and 8% in Japanese, and the proportion that showed images of all the food on the menu 86% in Japanese and 0% in English (Fischer test  $p < .0001$ ). A rare (1) *menu with images* from a Guam restaurant was used, and recreated with (2) one photograph of the restaurant interior, and (3) text but no photos. Differences in Japanese evaluations of the restaurant having been shown each one of these three menus were significant, especially among Japanese females, in the predicted direction: the more images a menu contained the more the menu was preferred ( $1 > 2 > 3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

As one of the few scholars (Takano, 2008) to argue that the Japanese are *not* characterized by their collectivism points out, the contrarian road is an uphill one since almost every phenomenon, negative or positive, prevalent in Japan is interpreted as being a result of collectivism. If the Japanese work so hard that they die from over work (*karoshi*) then this is rarely argued to be due to internal factors such as greater emphasis on self-reliance (Saha, 1992) but more often seen as result of cultural control and collectivism (Giorgi et al., 2008; Hu et al., 2014; Nobles, 2013; Smith, 2008). When it is noted that the Japanese excel at recycling this is sometimes attributed to a greater degree of sensitivity to material wasted (*mottainai*), but more often to the force of collectivism upon attitudes

towards the environment (Ando et al., 2010; Barrett, 2005).

In a similar way, drawing upon Doi's theory of dependence (*amae*: Doi, 1971) Ikeda (2020) argued that the Japanese preference for *omotenashi*, wherein hospitality providers make hospitality choices for their guests, is due to a greater degree of conformance on the part of the Japanese. Doi however argued that rather than being purely passive, dependence (*amae*) is a non-verbal communication requesting that others feel affection and take action according to visually readable cues using the power of *visually* perceptive consideration (*sasshi*).

The current authors likewise argue that the prevalence of images of food in Japanese menus, is not due to some collectivist inability for the Japanese to make up their minds for themselves, therefore requiring "mind control" (Ikeda, 2020) by "contextual" (Hall, 1976) information, but rather due to a Japanese preference for visual, rather than verbal methods of communication.

The first author has argued that this preference for visual communication is rooted in the greater Japanese ego-involvement in face, place, and other self-representational images. This greater degree of ego-involvement is evidenced in Japanese auto photography which is found to be more positive and posed than that of North Americans. (Leuers = Takemoto & Sonoda, 1998; Leuers = Takemoto & Sonoda, 1999). Similarly when Americans and Japanese are required to make collages expressing their future, Japanese self-expressive collage is more positive than that of Americans (Leuers = Takemoto & Sonoda, 2000). Further, in comparisons of children's pictorial self-representations, Japanese self-portraits are more positive than those of Americans (La Voy et al., 2001), and in students the positivity of auto-portraiture correlates (unlike self-esteem) with perceived social support (Takemoto, 2017).

As argued by the first author, self-esteem is predictive of positive social and health outcomes in Americans, as positive self-image, and positive auto-portraiture is predictive of positive social and health outcomes among Japanese. Japanese positive self-image can also be measured indirectly using verbal scales, such as that of comportment (Nojiri, 2016). Comportment, for example is considered to be culturally important and correlates with social adjustment more than Rosenberg's self-esteem (Nojiri, *ibid*).

The importance of non-verbal visual communication in Japan finds expression in many areas. While many Japanese (e.g. Oguri, 2002), sensitive as they are to gestures especially perhaps those which they do not understand, feel that it is Westerners who use more nonverbal gestures, previous research (Kita, 2009) has found that Japanese verbal communication is accompanied by an abundance of bows and wordless gestures, such as nodding, at a rate four times greater than that of Britons during conversation. In the area of self-presentation, likewise, the Japanese are commonly argued to be highly motivated to procure fads and fashions, and to express themselves in things (Richie & Garner, 2004). A majority of Japanese women feel that cosmetics are an essential social skill and good manner and spend more on cosmetics per person than any other nation in the world (Stewart, 2016). The Japanese are also argued to use mascots or "*Yuru Kyara*" (Okida & Takemoto, 2017) far more than e.g. residents of Guam for the purpose of self, and other, representation. Emoticons, and not just smiles, are found to be highly abundant in email communications in Japan (Kato et. al, 2009). Since the Japanese preference for self-expression via images is appreciated from the vantage point of a simulated other, this simulated view point is capable of focusing upon internal, invisible images such as "*madonna*" car interiors, and underwear (Matsudani, 2015), and

Japanese demonstrate a greater ability to imagine the insides of things (Ball & Torrance, 1978). Japan excel in visual arts such as animation, calligraphy, print making and architecture (Buntrock, 2014). The Japanese ability to produce anime cartons and manga is well known. Japanese read the images in manga whereas Anglophones are more likely to read the words of comics (Wilson, 2002).

Japanese appreciation of food is no exception; visual information about and visual appeal of food is of paramount importance. In addition to illustrated menus, Japanese restaurants provide model food often in display windows bordering on the street so that customers can be enticed by and choose food even before they enter the restaurant. Upon entering the restaurant, the customer is far more likely to be provided with a view of the place where food preparation is carried out, ensuring the highest standards of hygiene and stimulating appetite still further. Finally Japanese food itself is so high in visual attractiveness and Japanese so attenuated to the visual appeal of food that a Japanese Food psychologists claims "Further, the Japanese are said to eat with their "eyes".... I am privately of the opinion that the Japanese can sate their desire for food if not their appetite by eating with their eyes alone." (Imada, 2005, p.58, author's translation). Evidence for this ability to sate desire for food with the eyes can be found in the existence of model food used by Japanese dieters at least in part to sate their own appetite without having to eat anything. The rice ball in Figure 1 is made of plastic. Japanese dieters are encouraged to put it on their desk at work so as to give themselves and others the impression that they are going to be eating carbohydrates, when in fact they will only partake visually.

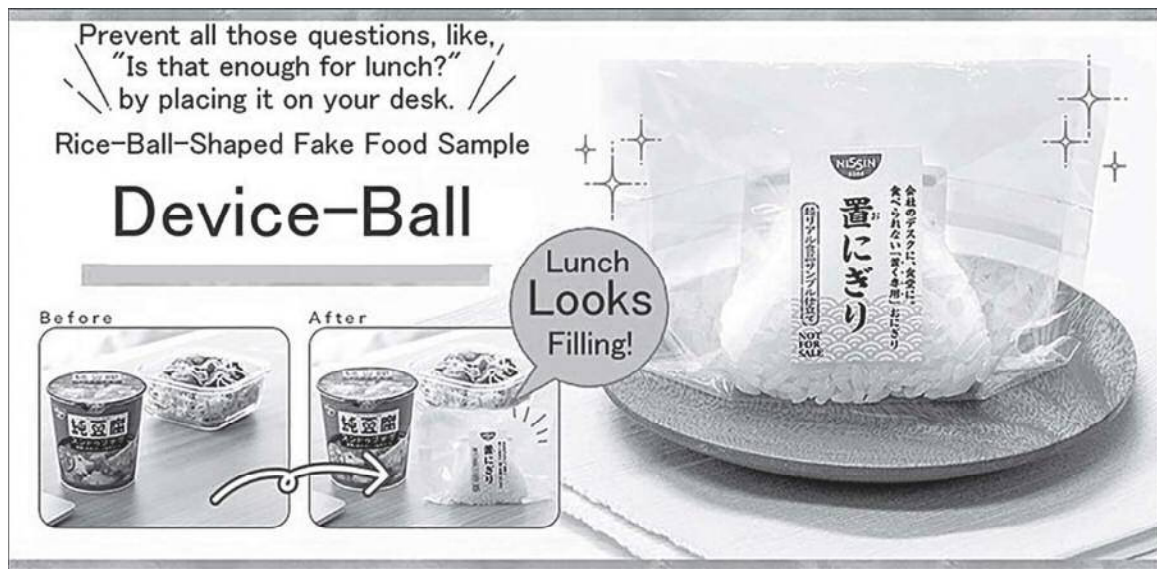


Figure 1: “Device Ball” (author’s translation) fake food for dieters (Nissin, 2019)

### Experiment 1

Returning to the focus of the current study, experiment 1, attempted first of all to verify the cultural preference for images in Japanese as opposed to Anglophone food menus. To achieve this two Google image searches were performed. One search was for the Japanese for "menu" (メニュー) and the other for Google image search was for the English word "menu." The first 50 images thus found were analyzed into four categories according to whether they contained no images, illustrations, some photos of food servings, or photograph of all the food items on the menu. The search results are displayed for Japanese and Anglophone menus in Figure 2 and Figure 3 respectively, and the results of the analysis are shown in Figure 4.





Figure 2: Google Image Search for "menu"



Figure 3: Google image search for the Japanese for menu, “メニュー”

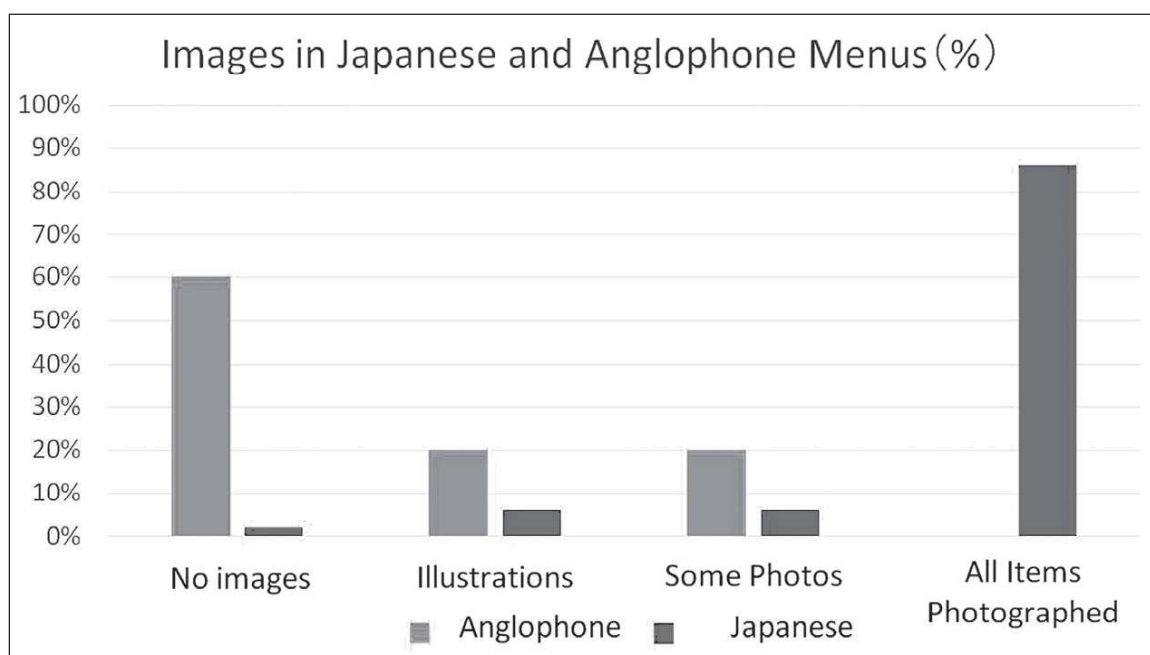


Figure 4: Images in Anglophone and Japanese menus

As is apparent from visual inspection of the Google search results and is shown by the analysis, there is a very great cultural difference in the tendency to use images in menus. The majority of menus in Japan show photographs of all items on the menu, whereas none of the Anglophone menus displayed this characteristic. Conversely the majority of Anglophone menus (60%) contain only verbal descriptions of the items on the menu, and no images of the food at all, whereas only 2% of Japanese menus - one menu out of all the items sampled - showed a similar lack of non-verbal communication. While a large proportion of Anglophone menus that contained illustrations or some photos of food items, even these were in a minority (40%). As the result of a Fisher's test, all cultural differences were found to be highly significant ( $p < .0001$ ).

## Experiment 2

The second experiment was carried out to investigate whether the preponderance of images in Japanese menus is merely some sort of trivial

coincidence, motivated by unimportant traditional modes of expression, or a lack of verbal acuity, or whether it is motivated by a genuine and important preference for visual communication among Japanese. To test the motivational importance of and preferences for images in food menus, three menus were used. The first was a rare example of a menu provided by an American establishment, in Guam, that contained images of all the food items on the menu together with Japanese descriptions to attract Japanese tourists. The second was a modification of this menu containing the verbal descriptions and one image showing the interior of the restaurant. This was used to test whether any Japanese preference for images is a preference for images per se or for image based communication of food choices. The third menu was created by using only the same verbal descriptions of the food items and their pricing, without any images whatsoever. The three menus are displayed in Figure 5, Figure 6 and Figure 7. 46 (27 female, 19 male) Japanese university student subjects - of an age (average 20.1 years) corresponding to the largest age cohort of visitors to Guam -- were asked to rate each of the three menus according to three positive and one negative criteria: attractiveness, quality, deliciousness, and whether the restaurant was best avoided. All three menus were rated according to all criteria by all subjects, with the menus presented in a random order. The individual results of the menu ratings are shown in Figure 8.





Figure 5: The Original Restaurant Menu (Hooters, 2017)



Figure 6: The original menu (Hooters, 2017) modified to show only an image of the restaurant interior



Figure 7: The original menu modified to display only the verbal food descriptions.

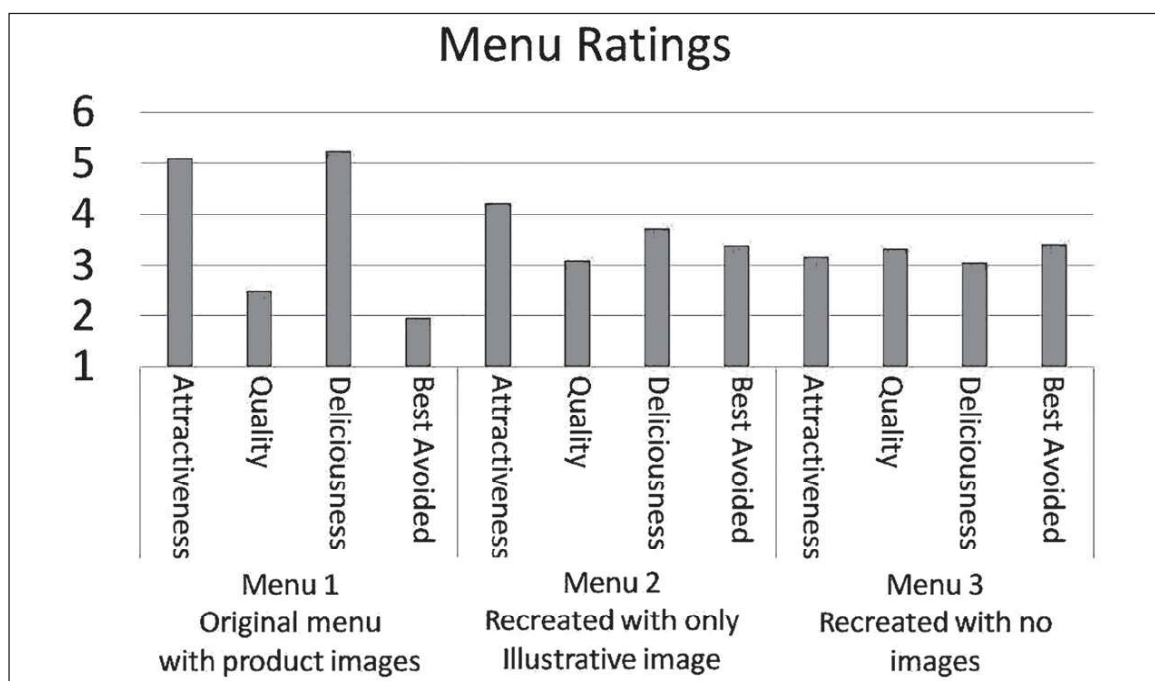


Figure 8: Ratings of each of the 3 menus

The four ratings of each type of menu (1 with images, 2 with a photo of the restaurant interior, 3 with no images at all) were then aggregated, reversing the negative item, to give an overall rating of the attractiveness of each restaurant menu as shown in Figure 9.

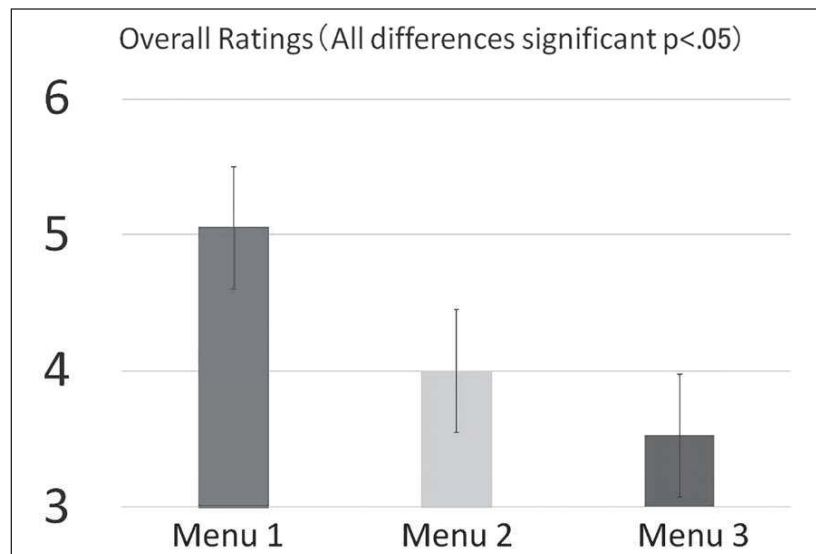


Figure 9: Aggregate of ratings of each menu

As a result of a t-test it was found that the differences in the overall attractiveness of each menu was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) with the original menu with images of each of the food items displayed being significantly more attractive than the original menu with only a photo of the interior of the restaurant, which was significantly more attractive than the menu with no images at all.

As the result of an analysis according to gender, it was found that the negative impact of menus without images was especially strong upon Japanese women, who often make food purchase decisions (Fujita et al., 2017).

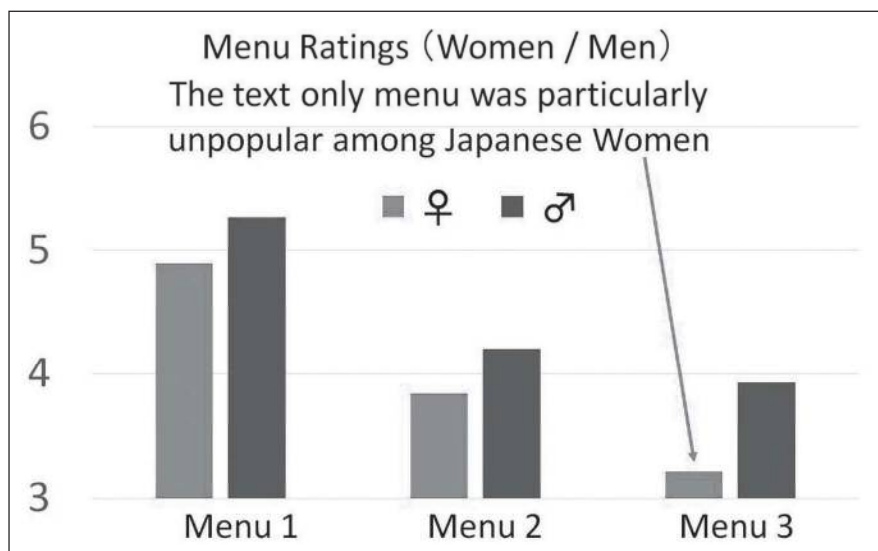


Figure 10: Aggregate ratings of Menus by Japanese women and menu

## Conclusion

Japanese restaurant menus generally display product images. Menus in English, including those catering to Japanese tourists on Guam, often do not display images. The preponderance of images in Japanese menus is not an unimportant custom or coincidence, but for Japanese, especially Japanese women, product images are important in forming a positive impression of the restaurant. This research concludes therefore that restaurants catering to Japanese tourists would be advised to include full product images in their menus.

From a theoretic perspective, it is often be argued that Japanese decision making is collectivist and Japanese communication is often regarded as being “contextual” (Hall, 1976). Similarly, even the lay interpretation for the model rice-ball shown in Figure 1 is collectivist, as shown in the captions. From the awareness of a wide range of vision-centred phenomenon, however, and an analysis of menus - this research contends that Japanese decision making is just as autonomous and Japanese communication is just as focal (as opposed to “contextual”),

though both are carried out in a different mode, *visually not verbally*.

Finally, one outcome of the active, autonomous Japanese *visual* appreciation of food, food preparation, restaurants, and their environment in general, is perhaps nowhere more powerfully demonstrated than in the high levels of hygiene achieved by the Japanese, which in the current coronavirus pandemic, has become the focus of international appraisal (Boyd, 2020). Japanese success in curbing the spread of the virus, however continues to be attributed to “obedience” (Reynolds, 2020; but see Takemoto & Cai, in preparation).

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