

Review of Menu Design and Presentation in Influencing Customer Purchase Decisions

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Abstract: *Menu design and presentation represent important elements of restaurant marketing because menus do more than communicate available food and beverage choices; they also influence how customers perceive value, quality, attractiveness, and affordability. The arrangement of menu items, typography, colours, images, descriptions, pricing formats, portion information, and highlighting techniques can affect customers' attention and purchase intentions. Research in consumer behaviour suggests that customers rarely evaluate every menu item equally. Instead, they use visual cues and simplified decision-making processes to select items that appear attractive, valuable, familiar, or distinctive.*

Effective menu engineering therefore combines principles of visual communication, psychology, behavioural economics, and hospitality marketing. Strategic placement of high-profit items, descriptive language, appropriate photographs, price presentation, and category organization can guide attention and potentially increase the selection of targeted products (Wansink et al., 2001; Dayan & Bar-Hillel, 2011). Menu presentation may also shape expectations before consumption, meaning that the design of a menu can influence perceived taste, quality, sophistication, and overall dining experience.

Keywords: Menu Design, Menu Presentation, Food Photography, Pricing, Consumer Behaviour, Menu Engineering, Digital Menus

I. INTRODUCTION

The restaurant industry operates in a highly competitive environment in which customer decisions are influenced by numerous tangible and intangible factors. Food quality, service, ambience, reputation, location, price, staff behaviour, and menu presentation all contribute to the customer's overall evaluation of a restaurant. Among these factors, the menu has a particularly important role because it is often the primary communication medium through which customers understand the restaurant's offerings and make their purchase decisions. A menu provides information about dishes, ingredients, prices, portions, and categories, but its design can simultaneously influence attention, expectations, perceived value, and choice behaviour.

Consequently, modern menu design has increasingly moved beyond simply listing available dishes toward strategically presenting information to facilitate desirable purchasing behaviour. Consumer choice research demonstrates that the manner in which alternatives are presented can affect decisions even when the underlying alternatives remain unchanged (Thaler, 2015). In restaurants, this principle is particularly relevant because customers typically make decisions within a limited period and under conditions of uncertainty concerning taste, portion size, and quality.

CONCEPT OF MENU DESIGN AND PRESENTATION

Menu design refers to the systematic organization and visual presentation of food and beverage offerings. It includes the physical or digital structure of the menu, item arrangement, typography, colour scheme, images, descriptions, pricing, headings, spacing, and graphical elements. Menu presentation refers more broadly to how these elements are

communicated to customers during the ordering process. A well-designed menu should enable customers to identify available choices easily while simultaneously communicating the restaurant's positioning and value proposition. From a marketing perspective, the menu can function as a salesperson because it directs attention toward selected products without requiring direct verbal persuasion from employees. Menu engineering traditionally focuses on the relationship between item popularity and profitability, but contemporary approaches increasingly incorporate behavioural and psychological considerations. Research indicates that consumers' choices can be affected by how options are positioned, framed, and described rather than by objective characteristics alone (Kimes, 2008).

THEORETICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MENU DESIGN AND PURCHASE DECISIONS

The influence of menu design can be understood through consumer decision-making and behavioural economics. Customers often experience choice overload when presented with numerous alternatives. To simplify the decision, they use visual prominence, familiarity, price, descriptions, recommendations, and other cues. The concept of cognitive fluency suggests that information that is easier to process may be perceived more positively. Therefore, clear menu organization and readable typography can reduce decision difficulty. Conversely, excessive information, confusing layouts, or poor contrast may increase cognitive effort and negatively influence the experience. The menu can also function as a form of "choice architecture," where the restaurant structures available alternatives in ways that make particular options more noticeable or attractive. Dayan and Bar-Hillel (2011) demonstrated that food choices can be influenced by positional effects, indicating that the placement of items may have consequences for selection.

VISUAL LAYOUT AND ITEM POSITIONING

Visual layout is one of the fundamental components of menu design. Customers generally scan rather than read menus comprehensively, meaning that the location of an item can influence the probability that it will receive attention. Restaurants may therefore place strategically important items in visually prominent areas, such as the beginning of a category, highlighted boxes, or dedicated sections. However, the exact effectiveness of specific "sweet spots" can vary according to menu format, culture, device, and customer characteristics. Menu layout should consequently prioritize natural reading patterns, clear grouping, and appropriate visual hierarchy rather than relying on simplistic assumptions about one universally superior location. Strategic positioning becomes particularly valuable when combined with descriptive names, photographs, and pricing cues.

TYPOGRAPHY AND READABILITY

Typography contributes to both the functional and psychological dimensions of menu presentation. Font type, size, weight, spacing, and alignment determine how easily customers can process information. A menu that uses excessively decorative fonts may communicate elegance but reduce readability, whereas simple typography may support faster information processing. Font choices can also communicate restaurant positioning. For example, sophisticated typography may support premium positioning, while informal typography may be more suitable for casual dining. Nevertheless, visual style should not compromise readability. Clear headings, consistent formatting, adequate spacing, and appropriate font sizes can reduce cognitive burden and help customers compare alternatives more efficiently.

COLOUR AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE

Colour is another important design element because it contributes to emotional responses, attention, and brand identity. Different colour combinations can communicate different restaurant concepts. Warm colours may create associations with energy and appetite, while darker or neutral combinations may be used to communicate sophistication. Colour can also distinguish categories or highlight particular menu items. However, colour effects are contextual rather than universal. Cultural meanings, restaurant atmosphere, lighting conditions, and brand identity can influence customer interpretation. Therefore, colour should be selected to support readability and brand positioning rather than simply assuming that a particular colour will automatically increase food purchases.

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL APPEAL

Food photographs provide customers with a visual representation of what they may receive. High-quality images can reduce uncertainty and stimulate expectations regarding taste, portion size, freshness, and presentation. Visual presentation is particularly important in digital menus, where photographs can occupy significant screen space. Research into food imagery indicates that visual cues can influence expectations and evaluations of food products. However, photographs can also create unrealistic expectations if the actual product differs substantially from the displayed image. Consequently, restaurants should ensure that menu photography accurately represents the food served. Strategic use of photographs may be more effective than placing images beside every item because excessive visual material can make a menu cluttered and reduce hierarchy.

DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE AND MENU ITEM NAMES

The wording used to describe food can influence customer perceptions. Descriptive menu labels provide information about ingredients, preparation methods, origin, texture, flavour, or sensory qualities. A simple item name may communicate less information than a carefully constructed description that explains how the dish is prepared and what sensory characteristics customers can expect. Wansink et al. (2001) found that descriptive menu labels can influence consumer perceptions and sales, demonstrating the potential importance of linguistic framing. Descriptions may also increase perceived value because customers receive more information about what makes a dish distinctive. However, descriptions should remain accurate and understandable; exaggerated or misleading language can undermine trust.

MENU PRICING AND PRICE PRESENTATION

Price is one of the most influential factors in purchase decisions, but the way prices are presented can affect customers' perceptions of cost and value. Traditional menus often emphasize currency symbols and precise prices, whereas contemporary menu design may use simplified numerical presentation. Restaurants sometimes avoid visually emphasizing prices to reduce the perception that customers are making a monetary sacrifice. Kimes and Wirtz (2003) examined price presentation and demonstrated that the framing of prices can influence customer perceptions and spending behaviour. Price presentation should therefore be considered alongside portion size, descriptions, product quality, and restaurant positioning. A premium restaurant may use a design that reinforces exclusivity and quality, whereas a value-oriented restaurant may emphasize affordability and transparent pricing.

MENU CATEGORIZATION AND CHOICE SIMPLIFICATION

Categorization helps customers navigate menus by organizing items into meaningful groups such as appetizers, main courses, desserts, beverages, vegetarian dishes, or chef recommendations. Effective categorization can reduce search costs and improve decision efficiency. However, excessive categories can fragment the menu and create confusion. The ideal structure depends on the restaurant concept and the number of offerings. Menu categories should correspond to customer expectations and make it easy to compare similar products. Special dietary categories can also improve accessibility by helping customers identify vegetarian, vegan, allergen-related, or other relevant choices.

HIGHLIGHTING HIGH-PROFIT AND SIGNATURE ITEMS

Menu engineering frequently seeks to promote items that have favourable combinations of popularity and profitability. Restaurants may highlight signature dishes using boxes, icons, photographs, contrasting typography, or labels such as "chef's recommendation." Such techniques can increase visibility and encourage customers to consider particular products. However, the use of too many highlights reduces their effectiveness because nothing appears genuinely distinctive. Strategic highlighting should therefore be selective and connected with actual product quality and restaurant objectives.

DIGITAL AND QR-CODE MENU PRESENTATION

The increasing use of smartphones and QR-code menus has transformed menu presentation. Digital menus provide greater flexibility because restaurants can modify prices, descriptions, photographs, availability, and promotional information without reprinting physical menus. They can also support interactive features, multilingual descriptions, nutritional information, and recommendations. However, digital menus may create usability challenges when pages load slowly, navigation is complicated, or customers are required to repeatedly scroll through large amounts of information. The effectiveness of digital menus therefore depends on mobile-friendly design, logical categorization, fast navigation, accessible typography, and high-quality imagery. The digital environment also provides opportunities for restaurants to personalize recommendations and collect behavioural information, although privacy and transparency should be considered.

INFLUENCE OF MENU DESIGN ON PERCEIVED VALUE

Perceived value represents the customer's assessment of the benefits received relative to the costs incurred. Menu design can contribute to this perception by communicating quality, uniqueness, portion information, preparation methods, and ingredients. A sophisticated menu may reinforce premium positioning, while a simple and transparent menu may strengthen perceptions of honesty and affordability. The relationship between menu appearance and perceived value demonstrates that customers evaluate the complete consumption experience rather than food characteristics alone. Accordingly, menu design should be consistent with restaurant ambience, service style, food quality, and target market.

INFLUENCE ON IMPULSE AND EXPLORATORY PURCHASES

Menus can also encourage customers to move beyond their initial intentions. Customers who enter a restaurant with a general intention to eat may encounter visually prominent dishes, recommendations, combinations, desserts, or beverages that were not part of their original plan. Descriptive information and attractive presentation can encourage exploratory purchasing. This is particularly relevant for high-margin complementary products such as beverages, appetizers, and desserts. However, promotional techniques should remain customer-oriented because excessive persuasion may negatively influence trust.

MENU DESIGN AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Customer satisfaction is influenced not only by what customers purchase but also by how easily and confidently they make their decisions. A clear menu can reduce uncertainty and facilitate a smoother ordering experience. Customers may perceive the restaurant as more professional when the menu is organized, readable, accurate, and aesthetically consistent. In contrast, poorly designed menus can create frustration, particularly when prices are unclear, items are difficult to locate, or descriptions do not correspond to the actual food. Thus, menu presentation can indirectly contribute to satisfaction by improving the overall ordering experience.

Menu Element	Design	Psychological/Marketing Mechanism	Possible Influence on Customer	Expected Purchase Effect
Visual layout		Attention and visual hierarchy	Improves item visibility	Higher consideration
Item positioning		Positional effects	Increases exposure to selected dishes	Greater selection probability
Typography		Cognitive fluency and brand communication	Improves readability and perceived style	Easier decision-making
Colour		Emotional and attentional cues	Shapes mood and brand perception	Potentially stronger appeal
Food images		Visual stimulation and expectation formation	Reduces uncertainty	Increased product interest

Descriptive labels	Framing and information enhancement	Increases perceived attractiveness	Higher purchase intention
Price presentation	Price framing and perceived sacrifice	Shapes value perception	Potentially higher spending
Categorization	Reduced search complexity	Simplifies choice	Faster decisions
Highlighting	Selective attention	Draws attention to target products	Greater product consideration
Digital menu design	Convenience and interactivity	Improves accessibility and flexibility	Enhanced engagement
Recommendations	Social/managerial cue	Signals preferred choices	Increased trial
Portion information	Value assessment	Helps customers evaluate price	Greater confidence
Author/Study	Major Focus	Key Finding Relevant to Menu Design	
Wansink et al. (2001)	Descriptive menu labels	Descriptive naming can affect perceptions and sales	
Kimes (2008)	Restaurant revenue management	Menu and pricing decisions can support revenue optimization	
Kimes & Wirtz (2003)	Price presentation	Price framing can influence customer perceptions and spending	
Dayan & Bar-Hillel (2011)	Food-choice architecture	Position and presentation can influence food selection	
Thaler (2015)	Choice architecture	The structure of choices can influence decisions without eliminating alternatives	
Spence et al. (2016)	Multisensory food experience	Visual and sensory cues influence food expectations and experience	
Menu engineering literature	Profitability and popularity	Strategic item analysis can guide menu placement and promotion	

Although considerable research has examined consumer choice, food marketing, menu engineering, and price presentation, several gaps remain. First, many earlier studies focus on individual variables such as price, item placement, or descriptive labels rather than examining menu design as an integrated system. Second, the rapid transition from printed menus to digital and QR-code menus creates new questions concerning scrolling behaviour, screen size, photographs, interactive recommendations, and personalization. Third, cultural differences may influence how customers interpret colours, food descriptions, pricing conventions, and visual symbols, making findings from one market difficult to generalize to another. Fourth, there is a need for more empirical research comparing physical and digital menus using actual purchasing data rather than relying solely on stated intentions. Future research should therefore integrate behavioural, technological, cultural, and financial perspectives when evaluating menu effectiveness.

II. CONCLUSION

The review demonstrates that menu design and presentation can play a meaningful role in influencing customer purchase decisions. Layout, item positioning, typography, colour, photographs, descriptions, pricing, categorization, highlighting, and digital functionality can shape attention, perceived value, expectations, and choice behaviour. The menu therefore represents more than a list of food items; it is a strategic communication and marketing instrument that connects the restaurant's products with customer perceptions. Nevertheless, menu design should be viewed as one component of a broader restaurant experience.

Attractive presentation may encourage a purchase, but repeat patronage ultimately depends on whether the actual food, service, value, and experience meet or exceed customer expectations. The most effective menus are consequently those

that combine aesthetic quality, usability, accurate information, strategic product positioning, and consistency with the restaurant's brand. Future restaurant research should investigate these factors through experimental studies, customer surveys, sales-data analysis, eye-tracking, and comparisons between traditional and digital menus.

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