Menu design psychology

Lesson 4.2.2 | Consumer psychology

Core ideas

Menu design can guide attention by changing item position, section order, spacing, boxes, images and visual emphasis.

Item names and descriptions can create expectations about taste, quality, origin or value before the customer orders.

Price presentation can affect how noticeable cost feels, especially when currency symbols, columns or comparison points are used.

Choice overload may occur when too many options make decisions slower, less satisfying or more stressful.

Anchoring and decoy options can shape price judgements by making other items seem cheaper, better value or more attractive.

Menu effects depend on restaurant type, customer goals, hunger, budget, culture, dietary needs and trust in the business.

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Key terms

Menu design: The organisation and presentation of choices on a menu.

Menu engineering: Designing a menu to influence attention, choice and profitability.

Visual emphasis: Using size, boxes, spacing, images or colour to make an item stand out.

Descriptive labelling: Using appealing wording to shape expectations about an item.

Choice overload: Difficulty or dissatisfaction caused by having too many options.

Anchoring: Using one value or option as a reference point for judging others.

Decoy option: An option included partly to make another choice look more attractive.

Price salience: How noticeable or attention-grabbing a price is.

Further detail and evidence

Menu design affects readability, attention and expectations. Pavesic (2005) discusses eye magnets such as boxes, contrast and distinctive type, alongside poor spacing, tiny print, overemphasised prices and layouts that do not fit the restaurant. This is a design discussion, not one new controlled eye-tracking experiment.

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Continued

Eye-tracking records fixations and gaze paths to study visual attention. Looking at an item does not prove liking or ordering it. Layout and folds can alter scanning; avoid treating one universal gaze pattern as established for every menu.

Position: Dayan and Bar-Hillel (2011) reordered menu lists in laboratory and restaurant settings. Items at the beginning/end could be selected more often than middle items, illustrating primacy/recency effects in choice.

Names: Lockyer (2006) used focus groups and a survey to examine reactions to alternative wording for menu items. Descriptive terms can change appeal, but substantial individual differences remained. A name can create an expectation without changing the recipe.

Applying the ideas

To test a menu change, keep dishes and prices fixed, vary the defined feature and record actual orders. Eye-tracking can test whether highlighting captures attention; post-choice ratings can test expectations. Separate increased attention from a change in sales.

Evaluation and connections

Restaurant orders offer ecological validity but availability, companions and time may confound choices. Surveys permit explanations yet depend on self-report. Randomising menu versions and balancing times improves a field comparison. Compare demographic, cultural and dietary needs rather than assuming one wording suits all diners.