



The influences of restaurant menu font style, background color, and physical weight on consumers' perceptions



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ABSTRACT

Restaurateurs often attempt to signal the scale [e.g., casual vs. upscale] and service standards of their operations through the use of various cues on their menus. Fancy font, gold menu paper, and heavy physical menu weight are frequently used as attempts to signal an upscale environment and high service standards to potential diners. Therefore, this research conducts a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between subjects experimental design on students at a large Mid-Atlantic University to test these effects. Results indicate that when menu font is italicized potential diners do perceive the restaurant to be more upscale and as having the capability to deliver top-rate service. The same findings also held true for menu weight: heavier menus, as opposed to lighter ones, drive perceptions of scale and anticipated service quality. Regarding background color, however, no significant effects of gold versus white background colors were found.

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1. Introduction

A restaurant's physical menu is an initial signal to a customer about his/her impending restaurant experience. The menu not only communicates what is being sold, but can also lead diners to select particular items (Antun and Gustafson, 2005). Moreover, the menu offers a look at the brand image and personality of the restaurant (Kincaid and Corsun, 2003; Ozdemir and Caliskan, 2014). After all, menus are handed to diners upon their arrival at the table. In fact, research dating back nearly two decades finds that the esthetic features of a restaurant menu do have significant influences on consumers' perceptions of a restaurant's image and perceived quality of the servicescape (McCall and Lynn, 2008; Mills and Thomas, 2008; Morrison, 1996; Verhoeven et al., 2009).

Because menus are a key facet of restaurants' fundamental business strategies (Markovic et al., 2010), restaurateurs use various elements of the physical menu to communicate the restaurant's desired brand positioning. Changes in the physical design of the menu can significantly impact the sales of a restaurant (Kwong, 2005), with some estimates suggesting up to a 10 percent increase for subtle changes (Panitz, 2000). Due to the relatively low cost of

doing so, as evidenced by the many variations that exist at restaurants, the three elements that are commonly used for such signaling are menu font style, menu paper color, and a menu's physical weight.

Are these menu design strategies effective in such signaling? Practice is often wiser than theory so perhaps these tactics do help shape customers' perceptions, but to date little empirical research has explicitly examined this area. Even pedagogical textbooks designed to prepare undergraduate students to become entry-level managers, report that proper physical menu design is important (e.g., Cichy and Wise, 1998), but again, little fine-grained empirical research, drilling down into specific physical features, has been conducted. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to empirically test the influences of menu font style, menu paper color, and a menu's physical weight on consumers' perceptions of scale and service quality. These three attributes were selected for inclusion in this research because they are inexpensive for restaurateurs to manipulate, thus making them commonly varied in the industry as efforts to signal scale and service cues to diners.

To achieve the intended purpose, this article draws upon theories and empirical findings from a variety of disciplines to provide a conceptual anchoring for our predictions. Next, the article details the particulars of the $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between subjects experimental design used to test the hypotheses. The article then concludes with results, conclusions, implications, and suggestions for future research extensions.

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2. Literature review

A menu serves as a marketing tool for a restaurant because it is intended to promote particular perceptions to the consumer (McCall and Lynn, 2008). Most research on restaurant menus has focused on product placement and ways to highlight specific items that have the greatest profit potential for the restaurant (Bowen and Morris, 1995; Guéguen et al., 2012; Mill, 2001). For example, Bowen and Morris (1995) find that well-orchestrated menu design can help sell complimentary menu items; Raab et al. (2010) detail advances in menu engineering processes in which sales volumes and profit margins of menu items are taken into account; and, Fang and Hsu (2014) consider profit margins coupled with the effects of different menu items on operational efficiency. Some of these product placement studies use eye tracking technology to study consumers' scan paths when reading menus. For instance, Yang (2012) used eye tracking devices to find that consumers' actual scanpaths do not match industry's current understanding of menu design. Nevertheless, while the design and physical elements of a menu have a direct influence on perceived scale and anticipated levels of service, they are largely overlooked in the current body of menu research (McCall and Lynn, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2005; Verhoeven et al., 2009; Wansink and Love, 2014).

There is, however, theoretical anchoring outside of the hospitality literature that supports the contention that a menu's physical attributes can send significant signals to consumers. For example, the notion of grounded cognition (Barsalou, 2008) posits that visual and haptic (sense of touch) cues affect individuals' perceptions. Correspondingly, a growing body of research suggests that the cues communicated through physical packaging can facilitate customers' brand evaluations (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992; Keller, 1993), and the visual and haptic cues can lead to customers' inferences about the target quality placed in a given packaging (Jostmann et al., 2009; Towal et al., 2013). Anecdotal evidence has shown that food and beverage operations have used different design elements on menus to help differentiate customers' perceptions of scale and service quality (Dostal, 2013). However, despite the potentially powerful roles of the visual and haptic cues, the effects of menu-related variables (i.e., menu font style, menu paper background color, and menu's physical weight) on restaurant customers' perceptions of scale and service quality has received very little empirical attention.

2.1. Font

Nearly a century ago, Poffenberger and Franken (1923) asked subjects to assess the appropriateness of 29 font styles for each of five commodities (automobiles, building materials, coffee, jewelry, perfume) and five abstract qualities (cheapness, dignity, economy, luxury, strength). The results of this study found that simple and easy-to-read fonts were associated with characteristics such as 'cheapness' and 'economy' whereas italicized, scripted, or ornate fonts were in turn associated with qualities of 'luxury' and 'dignity'. This seminal study provided initial evidence that font style does matter in that consumers can perceive the level of appropriateness of various styles in a given context.

Studies contained in the marketing literature have extended this stream of research to suggest that visual characteristics such as typefaces (ex. underlining, bold, italics) convey specific meaning to the reader (Childers and Jass, 2002). The use of a particular font for a specific brand or product can have a positive effect if the font association is used properly and a negative effect if the font is not suitable in helping to convey an intended image (Doyle and Bottomley, 2004). In a restaurant context, however, we have seen no academic studies that examine the effect of menu font style on perceived scale or anticipated service quality by customers. A number of font

style studies have been conducted outside of the restaurant industry. For instance, Diemand-Yauman et al. (2011) find that italicized texts used in learning materials yield significant improvements in students' educational outcomes in that the italicized font leads to better memory performances. Such findings are anchored with motivation based theories that suggest that more elaborate designs increase arousal and are better liked if they are appropriate for the item being described (Berlyne, 1971; Hirschman, 1980).

Thus, to extend this body of font-style research to a restaurant menu context, the current study posits that a restaurant menu written in italicized font will signal to the consumer that the restaurant is more upscale than the same menu written in non-italicized font. Such predictions extend the growing body of font-style research into a restaurant context. In sum, italicized fonts signal more 'luxury' and less 'economy' than simpler font styles (Poffenberger and Franken, 1923). As stated in the previous section, grounded cognition theory supports this logic regarding the effect of font style. In particular, a facet of grounded cognition theory, perceptual symbol systems (PSS), contends that a single multimodal system in the human brain can accommodate diverse types of information processing across various cognitive processes including high-level perception, implicit memory, working memory, long-term memory, and conceptual knowledge (Barsalou, 2008). PSS goes further to posit that the brain typically contextualizes the categories that it represents in the background situations (e.g., objects, agents, actions, events, and psychological states) (Barsalou, 2003; Yeh and Barsalou, 2006). Thus, the notion that a font style can trigger various inferences is rooted in the PSS dimension of grounded cognition theory.

As an extension of the grounded cognition theory, further theory-based support for such logic can be found in the concept of *visual equity* which can be described as the value derived from the visual cues that represent a brand (Lightfoot and Gerstman, 1998). While some marketing studies focus on a product's package as a trigger of visual equity (e.g., Underwood, 2003), Doyle and Bottomley (2004) demonstrate that font appropriateness in a brand's images can also have a significant influence on the formation of visual equity. In a restaurant context, Bowen and Morris (1995) contend that menus provide tangible evidence of a restaurant's intended image. The level of service offered is a key component of a restaurant's branding and image because research finds that service levels can generate brand equity in firms (Berry, 2000); therefore, the notion of visual equity and the theory of grounded cognition anchor the notion that font can influence both scale and service perceptions. Hence, based upon this logic, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1a. Diners will perceive restaurants with an italicized menu font as being more upscale than restaurants with a non-italicized menu font.

H1b. Diners will perceive restaurants with an italicized menu font as being capable of delivering higher levels of service quality than restaurants with a non-italicized menu font.

2.2. Background color

Color communicates symbolic and associative messages and serves as a significant cue for transferring meaning, contrast, and novelty to the product and brand (Schmitt and Pan, 1994; Garber et al., 2000). The use of color on items such as packaging, labeling, and logos aids in shaping consumers' perceptions of the brand and product (Grossman and Wisenblit, 1999; Aslam, 2006).

Like with font-style, there is also very limited research on the influence of restaurant menu background color on customers' perceived service quality, which is surprising because research has suggested that consumers judge a product on the basis of menu

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