

Using Sensational Language in Restaurant Menus Increases Willingness to Pay

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Abstract

Restaurant menus do more than list ingredients—they communicate value, shape expectations, and influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Across five pre-registered experiments, we demonstrate that using sensational language—emotionally charged, dramatized, and vividly descriptive wording—systematically increases consumers' WTP and restaurant choice. Studies 1A–1B show that sensational language elevates WTP for both hedonic (spaghetti) and utilitarian (salad) dishes. Study 2 identifies hedonic perception as the key psychological mechanism. Study 3 rules out alternative explanations, confirming hedonic framing as the dominant pathway. Study 4 extends these findings to a realistic restaurant choice context, showing that diners prefer establishments with sensationally worded menus. Together, these results introduce sensational language as a novel linguistic strategy in marketing communication, highlighting how subtle wording choices can transform utilitarian products into hedonic experiences. For practitioners, adopting sensational language in menus offers a low-cost, high-impact tool to boost perceived value, purchase intent, and overall dining appeal.

Track: Advertising & Marketing Communications