ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 89-93, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081115

# Emotional and Factual Language in Restaurant Menus: Insights from Eye-Tracking

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***Abstract:*** *Emotional value has become a focal point in marketing strategies nowadays. Previous studies have demonstrated that incorporating emotional value into products or services can significantly enhance consumers' willingness to purchase and pay. Emotional value also plays an increasingly important role in the restaurant industry. However, existing strategies primarily emphasize environmental design, dish presentation, and service interactions. The emotional value embedded in menu content descriptions remains underexplored. To address this gap, the present study employed eye-tracking technology to explore how emotional versus factual menu descriptions influence consumers' visual attention patterns. The results revealed that when selecting main courses, participants showed a preference for factual descriptions, spending a longer total fixation duration in this section. In contrast, for staple foods and beverages, emotional descriptions attracted attention more quickly and maintained it more effectively, getting shorter time to first fixation, longer total fixation duration, and higher fixation counts. Further analysis explored potential cognitive mechanisms underlying these different attentional strategies. This study extends the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by validating its predictive utility at the millisecond level through eye-tracking data. The findings also offer practical implications for menu design, highlighting the strategic use of emotional value as a marketing tool across different menu categories.*

***Keywords:*** *Eye tracking, Menu, Emotional description, Factual description, Restaurant*

## 1. Introduction

Emotional value has become increasingly important to consumers. Xinhua News Agency[1] reported that "buying happiness" has evolved from a niche subculture into a mainstream consumption motivation. The emotional value has emerged as the third core dimension after functional and price value. Accenture's China Consumer Insights 2023 report[2] also shows that advertisements incorporating emotional cues raise purchase intent by 25% and willingness to pay a premium by 19%. Consequently, emotional value has shifted from a marketing "bonus" to a "core metric" driving consumption. Research interprets this trend as a form of post-materialist values: once basic needs are met, consumption motives shift toward emotional, symbolic, and identity-based expression[3].

Psychological research identifies two mechanisms by which emotional value drives purchasing behavior. First, the theory of emotional attentional bias suggests that positive emotional cues capture visual attention within 100–200 milliseconds and prolong gaze duration, thereby increasing the likelihood of product selection[4]. Second, compensatory consumption theory considers that individuals experiencing stress, loneliness, or self-threat purchase emotionally symbolic goods to repair affective deficits[5]. Neuroimaging studies further demonstrate that reading emotional words such as "warmth" or "healing" activates the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and reward circuits which could trigger pleasure responses comparable to monetary rewards[6]. Sociologically, this aligns with the trend of emotional labor outsourcing. Since consumers live more fast-paced lives in current society, they would rely on the market to fulfill emotional needs[7].

Dining, as a high-frequency consumption scenario integrating sensory and social experiences, naturally serves as a venue for emotional compensation and expression. This makes emotional value marketing a key part for restaurants. A recent report found that 63.4% of Chinese consumers aged between 18–35 spend at least 10% of their monthly income on emotional experiences, among which dining ranks among the top three categories[8]. Currently, restaurant marketing efforts typically emphasize environmental design, lighting, or background music. Menu is one of the most direct interfaces with consumers which attracts visual attention for an average of 2.5 minutes and 6–8 revisits[9]. However, the research of menu is limited. Existing research on menu design focuses on

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creative dish names, typography, and imagery, but lacks empirical investigation into how textual descriptions influence attention and choice. To address this gap, the present study employs eye-tracking technology to compare how emotional versus factual menu descriptions capture consumer attention across main courses, staples, beverages, appetizers, and desserts. The findings aim to bridge the theoretical gap between emotional value and menu text design, while offering practical insights for leveraging emotional cues in restaurant marketing.

## 2. Method

### *2.1 Participants*

In this study, researchers randomly recruited 25 participants in Shanghai, China, comprising 14 women and 11 men. Prior to the experiment, researchers provided each participant with a detailed explanation of the experimental procedures and potential risks. All subjects completed informed consent forms and voluntarily agreed to participate in the experiment.

### *2.2 Stimuli*

The experimental menu was divided into five sections: appetizers, main courses, staples, desserts, and beverages. The appetizer section included salads, cold dishes, and other starters; the main course section includes items such as steak, roast chicken, and lobster; staple dishes comprised pasta, rice, noodles, and similar options; the dessert section offered tiramisu, mousse cakes, and other sweets; and the beverage section included hot cocoa, soda, and other non-alcoholic drinks. Each section contained six items.

Each menu item was presented with its name and a short description. The descriptions were categorized into two types: emotional and factual. For example, the dessert item Raspberry Mousse was described in the emotional description as: “Overflowing with happiness! Light mousse paired with sweet-tart berries—like a summer breeze’s gentle kiss, fresh and dreamy with a touch of romance”. In contrast, its factual description was: “A mousse base of raspberry jam and cream, topped with raspberry garnish. Each serving weighs 50 grams with 40% raspberry content.” The two types of descriptions were controlled for word count to ensure comparability.

To minimize confounding effects, a Latin square design was employed to counterbalance the pairing of dishes and description types. Two sets of experimental materials (Set A and Set B) were created. Each item’s emotional and factual descriptions were assigned alternately to the two sets to control for item-specific bias.

### *2.3 Design and procedure*

This study adopted a within-subject design. Each participant was exposed to all experimental conditions. To minimize order and material-related bias, participants were randomly assigned to view either Set A or Set B of the experimental materials which were counterbalanced using a Latin square design.

Before the experiment, the researcher provided participants with standardized instructions regarding the experimental requirements and procedures. After signing the consent form, participants were guided to take a sit. A display screen presenting the experimental materials was positioned directly in front of each participant, with an eye tracker (Tobii 4C Pro) placed below the screen to record eye gaze data throughout the trial. Both the eye tracker and the display screen were connected to the experimenter’s computer. Prior to data collection, a five-point calibration was conducted for each participant to ensure tracking accuracy. Experimental materials were presented sequentially in the following order: appetizer, main course, staple, dessert, and beverage. Each image was displayed for 15 seconds. The experiment concluded once participants completed all sections. The experiment lasted approximately five minutes. Upon completion, each participant received a dessert as gift.

During the experiment, the emotional description and factual description areas of each image were defined as Areas of Interest (AOIs). Following data collection, three primary eye-tracking indicators—Total Fixation Duration (TFD), Time to First Fixation (TFF), and Fixation Count (FC)—were extracted based on the AOI data and exported for subsequent analysis.

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## 3.Result

### *3.1 T-Test Between SE and SF*

As shown in Table 1, the total fixation duration (TFD) for SE ($M = 1.82, SD = 0.67$) was significantly longer ($p < 0.05$) than that for SF ($M = 1.50, SD = 0.73$). Similarly, the fixation count (FC) for SE ($M = 6.95, SD = 2.46$) was significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) than that for SF ($M = 5.62, SD = 2.79$).

### *3.2 T-Test Between DE and DF*

As shown in Table 1, participants' time to first fixation (TFF) on DE ($M = 3.40, SD = 2.02$) was significantly shorter ($p < 0.05$) than that on DF ($M = 5.43, SD = 3.76$). In addition, the mean value of TFD for DE ($M = 1.88, SD = 0.50$) was longer ($p < 0.05$) than that for DF ($M = 1.58, SD = 0.94$). Although the difference did not reach statistical significance, the p-value approached the conventional threshold ($p = 0.08$).

### *3.3 T-Test Between ME and MF*

As shown in Table 1, TFD for ME ($M = 1.25, SD = 0.61$) was than that for MF ($M = 1.57, SD = 0.82$). Although the difference was not statistically significant, the p-value was marginal (p = 0.06).

*Table 1: TFD, FC and TFF for Emotional and Factual Descriptions*

| | | *Appetizer* | *Main Course* | *Staple* | *Dessert* | *Beverage* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Emotional* | *TFD/ s* | *1.50* | *1.25* | *1.82* | *1.54* | *1.88* |
| | *FC* | *6.35* | *7.05* | *6.95* | *6.35* | *6.76* |
| | *TFF/ s* | *5.78* | *5.31* | *4.74* | *4.08* | *3.70* |
| *Factual* | *TFD/ s* | *1.70* | *1.57* | *1.50* | *1.80* | *1.58* |
| | *FC* | *5.82* | *5.83* | *5.62* | *7.47* | *6.44* |
| | *TFF/ s* | *6.45* | *5.02* | *5.20* | *3.94* | *5.43* |

## 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how different styles of menu textual descriptions influence consumers' browsing behaviors. The independent variable was the type of textual description, categorized as emotional or factual. The dependent variables were participants' eye-tracking measures while viewing the menu. The data analysis revealed distinct attentional patterns across menu categories. In the main course section, participants exhibited significantly longer TFD for factual descriptions than for emotional ones. In contrast, for staple foods and drinks, participants showed higher TFD and FC for emotional descriptions. Moreover, for the drink section, emotional descriptions not only attracted longer TFD but also shorter TFF. These findings suggest that when selecting main courses, participants tend to rely on factual information, whereas emotional descriptions capture attention more rapidly and sustain engagement when choosing staples and beverages.

This divergence can be explained by differences in cognitive involvement associated with different menu items. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)[10], individuals process persuasive information through two distinct pathways: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route is activated under conditions of high involvement, when individuals allocate sufficient cognitive resources to engage in systematic evaluation of message quality, logic, and evidence, forming stable and enduring attitudes. Conversely, the peripheral route dominates under conditions of low involvement, time pressure, or limited cognitive resources. Individuals would tend to rely on heuristic or affective cues—such as emotional words, imagery, or source appeal—for quick judgments. It produces transient attitudes which are more sensitive to contextual influences.

Main courses generally constitute the core of a meal, providing primary nutritional and energy value, and are typically higher in price compared to other menu items. In this scenario, consumers' selection entails greater decision risk, motivating participants to engage in deeper cognitive elaboration and rational comparison. Under these conditions of high involvement, participants were more likely to adopt the central processing route, focusing on factual details to support deliberate decision-making. Hence the main course got longer TFD for factual descriptions. In contrast, staple dishes and drinks are

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usually lower-priced items with less perceived risk. Participants are therefore more inclined to adopt the peripheral route, relying on affective heuristics for rapid and intuitive choices. This processing tendency is reflected in the shorter TFF and longer TFD observed for emotional descriptions. These findings align with previous research showing that price–involvement moderates visual attention and decision-making strategies. Liu [9] similarly demonstrated that higher-priced items elicit more systematic gaze patterns and longer information processing duration. While lower-priced items get quicker, affect-driven attention. This study extends the application of the ELM model by validating its predictive utility through millisecond level eye-tracking evidence. It also provides practical implications for restaurant marketing: factual descriptions may be more effective for high-value or high-involvement dishes, while emotional descriptions may better engage consumers in lower-stakes menu categories such as drinks and desserts.

Experimental results also indicated that when participants viewed appetizer and dessert pages, there were no significant differences in eye-tracking results between emotional and factual descriptions. A potential explanation lies in the intermediate price positioning of appetizers, which places them in a "gray zone" of decision risk. At this mid-level price point, the degree of elaboration likelihood (EL) is moderate which is insufficient to trigger the central route for systematic information processing. However, it's neither not low enough to trigger the peripheral route. As a result, the two processing tendencies counterbalance each other and neutralize observable differences in eye-tracking measures[10]. This interpretation aligns with Dallas's research[11]. It suggests that when product price fall between 40–60% of an individual's budget anchor, the linguistic framing effect diminishes, yielding no significant variation in gaze duration. Desserts, on the other hand, inherently carry strong affective associations such as romance, happiness, and comfort. Because their baseline emotional intensity is already high, additional emotional cues in textual descriptions may lead to redundant activation. The emotional description only produced negligible incremental effects on attention. Piqueras-Fiszman and Spence[12] also found that when food items are intrinsically linked to positive affect, the marginal influence of external emotional framing significantly decreases.

While this experiment identified the influence of emotional versus factual menu descriptions on consumers' visual attention patterns, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, in real dining situations, consumers often browse menus nonlinearly, revisiting sections multiple times. In contrast, the present study employed a sequential browsing procedure, which may have restricted the validity. Future studies could replicate a more natural browsing experience by allowing participants to navigate freely between menu sections. Second, the experimental materials in this study presented only dish names and textual descriptions to isolate the variable of interest. However, real-world menus typically incorporate images, recommendation icons, and promotional labels, which may interact with emotional language to influence attention and choice. Incorporating these multimodal elements in future experiments would enhance external validity and clarify the combined effects of textual and visual stimuli. Finally, future research could employ wearable eye-tracking devices in real restaurant environments to record consumers' gaze behaviors during authentic menu interactions. Such naturalistic designs would yield richer, ecologically valid data and deepen understanding of emotional value processing in real consumption situations.

## 4. Conclusion

This study investigated how emotional and factual descriptions on restaurant menus influence consumers' visual attention patterns. Description type was used as the independent variable and participants' eye-tracking data was used as the dependent variable. The analysis showed that participants relied more on emotional descriptions when viewing staple dishes and drinks. They would prefer factual descriptions when selecting main courses. There was no significant preference difference between the two when browsing appetizers and desserts. The findings extend the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by adapting its classic central–peripheral route framework from conventional advertising to dining scenarios. Moreover, by validating the model's predictive utility at the millisecond level of eye-tracking behavior, this research bridges cognitive processing theory with consumer attention dynamics. Last but not least, the study provides actionable insights for menu design and restaurant marketing. It emphasizes the strategic integration of emotional value across different menu categories. Factual descriptions may enhance engagement with high-involvement items such as main courses, whereas emotional descriptions can effectively attract attention and evoke interest in lower-stake categories like beverages and desserts.

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