

# The Impact of Experiential Dining on Customers' Willingness to Pay

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**Abstract**—The hospitality industry has experienced major changes because experiential dining has become an essential element for restaurants to use in their battle against other restaurants. The study investigates how narrative-driven dining experiences affect customer WTP because menu storytelling functions as a psychological and commercial instrument in dining establishments. The molecular gastronomy movement from the late 1990s established menu storytelling, which researchers later developed through gastrophysics research. The elements lead consumers to stop evaluating prices through practical assessment and instead approach their purchasing decision as an indulgent experience, which allows them to pay more. The study uses existing academic literature and real-world case studies, which include Fork n' Films and The Sunset Cinema Club, and primary survey data based on different age groups to show how immersive dining experiences lead to increased WTP. The survey results showed that 60.9% of respondents would pay more when they learned about a dish's origin, while 52.2% would pay extra for food that matched the restaurant's theme. The research paper shows that narrative integrity must remain intact because any story elements that do not match the dining experience will undermine consumer trust while damaging brand equity. The research demonstrates that storytelling functions as a central element for value creation in today's food and beverage industry instead of acting merely as an extra marketing tool.

**Index Terms**—Experience, Dining, Menu, Storytelling, Culinary, Gastronomy.

## I. ORIGIN

The origins of menu storytelling are deeply rooted in the ways of serving food in the 19th century, from serving all the dishes at once, termed as 'service à la française,' to dishes being divided into courses and presenting each course turn by turn; this was termed as 'service à la russe.' This allowed the servers to present

the narrative of the food served. The modern version of this has continuously evolved, and it is widely credited to the "Molecular Gastronomy Movement" that happened during the late 1990s and early 2000s, which was led by Ferran Adrià at "elBulli," which is in Spain, and "The Fat Duck," which is located in England. The chefs fully transformed the menu from just the list of ingredients to a whole sensory journey that made people feel connected to the food emotionally and made them evoke a memory through the food. This concept was later formalized by researchers such as Brian Wansink & Charles Spence for "gastrophysics" (Spence, 2017).

## What is a 'Customer'?

Before moving forward with the research, the need to understand the term 'customer' is important. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), a customer is broadly defined as an individual who participates in a transaction by exchanging financial resources for goods or services while simultaneously forming cognitive and emotional evaluations of that experience. But in the restaurant business, the customer is more than just an economic actor. A complex interplay of sensory, social, and psychological stimuli encountered during the dining experience shapes the satisfaction of restaurant patrons, who actively co-create value (Kandampully, Zhang, & Jaakkola, 2018). The customer assumes a very different profile when it comes to experiential dining. These are people who deliberately look for immersive, narrative-rich settings where eating becomes a form of entertainment, self-expression, and cultural engagement rather than just a means of subsistence (Tung & Au, 2018). Customers who frequent experiential dining establishments are often classified as hedonistic consumers, those who are driven not only by functional outcomes but also by

pleasure, emotional stimulation, and the desire for distinctive, narrative-driven encounters (Hosany & Prayag, 2019). Additionally, research shows that these customers have a greater preference for eateries that provide authenticity, thematic coherence, and meaningful food narratives because these factors directly increase their perception of the value of the dining experience and, as a result, their willingness to pay a premium price (Manthiou et al., 2020; Foroudi et al., 2021). This presents the customer base for experiential dining as a highly engaged, value-conscious group whose purchasing decisions are closely linked to the calibre.

#### Why is experiential dining needed?

Due to several intricate factors, such as cloud kitchen cafés, delivery platforms, and easy availability due to customers' hectic and fast-paced work lives, there is more competition- than ever in the restaurant and service industries in 2026. Consumers look for convenient dining options, but when they go out to eat, they look for something special. Restaurants are adapting to the digital world via Instagram pages for their marketing. Restaurants are thinking beyond the box these days to attract customers. As a result, restaurants now offer experience-based services instead of product-based ones. Currently, dining at a restaurant is just as much about the experience as it is about the cuisine. While choosing the restaurant, good food is important, but so are the restaurant's atmosphere and design. Clients are now pursuing exclusivity, rarity, specialness, and one-of-a-kind treatment in the service business. This circumstance gave rise to the idea of the "experience economy." Restaurant owners have started offering experiential meals, themed events, and chef-driven storylines. This is an economical phase when businesses create value by organizing unique, intimate events for clients, going beyond simply selling goods or services. "A customer values an experience more than a service or a product" (B. James Pine II & James H. Gilmore, emeritus, 2023). Restaurant owners have realized that customers are willing to pay extra for services or even basic foods when the word "exclusive" is added. Chefs are now designing and creating "exclusive" menus, and customers are waiting in line for them. Dining while watching movies or sports, dressing up as a character or someone from a different era, or dining in a location that has been meticulously restored to

resemble a movie set, for instance, a ballroom from a historic period drama like *Bridgerton*, are all examples of experiential dining, which is the new normal. A themed event is the cohesive concept that will guide the design, tone, and overall atmosphere of an event (Booking Events, 16 July 2025). A few examples of themed events are gala events, under-the-sea prom, and Halloween parties in the United States, UK & Australia, Diwali parties in India, etc. Halloween parties are celebrated while people dress up in various costumes of characters from movies and series, and the food is centered around pumpkins and fall cuisine, for example, pumpkin pie, spiced pumpkin cakes and drinks, vanilla and caramel butter apples, etc., whereas in Diwali parties people dress up in traditional Indian attire and light diyas and burst firecrackers. The food at Diwali is a mix of many sweet dishes and vegetarian fried Savoury dishes like Besan Ladoo's, crispy chakli's, Kaju katli (sweet made of cashews), etc.

#### How experiential dining works

Experiential dining is a broad concept, and below that umbrella there are various ideologies and techniques, and within those there is a term known as 'menu storytelling.' This label simply means to transform any sort of dish into an emotional and personal dining experience by drawing attention to the origin, inspiration, and hard preparation behind the food. While this seems like a smart and easy way to give customers the experience of dining, this also has many branches to it. The first is 'sensory language,' which means to describe textures and the method of cooking for the food that is presented; descriptive and evocative names for food have been shown to increase the sales of those items by 27% (Seontaik Kim, Vincent Mangini, July 2020) . Next comes 'Origin story.' This is one of the most important branches, as it means to accentuate locally sourced products and tell the origin of the ingredients and the dish presented. Next is 'brand alignment.' This means ensuring that the tone of portrayal and outline matches the concept of the restaurant. The fourth is a "reinvented description," which means to use fancier and more sophisticated terms. for describing the dish; for example, switching "Roasted Tomatoes" to "Parm Crusted Tomatoes" & "Idli" became "semolina steamed rice cakes." And lastly, 'emotional connection': when somehow customers are given nostalgia or any sort of emotional warmth, the willingness to pay automatically rises"

(TEAM RARE, NOV 22, 2024). There are more such units, but these are the main five that are used to curate menu storytelling.

## II. WHY MENU STORYTELLING WORKS

Menu storytelling works because it simply makes the restaurant seem very real and genuine. When customers feel something is authentic, they trust it more and believe it is of higher quality. This strengthens the reputational value of the brand; brands perceived as authentic are seen as more trustworthy and preferred. Most times the consumer is easily influenced by the language or the tone that is used in the menu or by the server who does the menu storytelling. As mentioned, selling is like acting, where an actor's job is to approach and persuade a customer by evoking emotions. Such stories immerse a person fully into the story; this phenomenon is called 'narrative transportation.' 'Three areas where logical-scientific and narrative formats differ are in their direction of generalizability, their reliance on context, and their standards for legitimacy.' (Dahlstrom M. F. 2014) It always has a positive effect on effective brand engagement and increases strong purchase intentions of the customer. Effective description refers to adjectives that promote emotional responses from the customers and reactivate pleasing memories. This way owners justify premium pricing in restaurants, and hence, the urge to try something different to lure the customers in evolves.

### Case study of experiential dining #1

In 2016 the founders, Sahil Kapoor & Sanchit Gupta, started "The Sunset Cinema Club" in Delhi, India, and then in cities like Mumbai, Bangalore & Chennai. The club offers an open space & rooftop movie dining experience, with iconic Bollywood movies playing in the background. The club quickly gained popularity and now has more than 264 thousand followers from all over India. Witnessing this, the sunset club was also started in the UK. 'The club curates a reel tapestry that unfolds in settings ranging from sandy beaches to taprooms, with the seating comprising comfortable beanbags. It is not just about the movies but an immersive rendezvous with storytelling, ambience, and maybe even a hint of the unexpected. The founders said in an interview with The Hindu: "Our screenings are distinct. In contrast to a typical theatre, we have

conversations, food, beverages, and occasionally even dance. We think we are not in competition with traditional theatres and place more emphasis on the experience than the movie." Sangita Rajan, (January 2018)

### Case study of experiential dining #2

Additionally, the study delves deeper into the concept of "Fork n' Films," which originated in Los Angeles, California, and went viral worldwide. The business began as a pop-up event in 2023 by its founders, Francesca Duncan and Nick. It quickly became well-known throughout the world thanks to social media and the internet. Today, it is a fully fledged and prosperous enterprise with over 180 monthly screenings in 11 cities, including London, Manchester, Las Vegas, New York, and many more. The main idea behind this event was to taste and feel like you were in the movies instead of just watching them. The chefs created specially designed menus that revolved around dishes from well-known films, such as "Ratatouille," "Home Alone," "Shrek," etc., so you were served what the characters were eating in real time. In an interview with Amber Pfister (NBCLA, 2024) the pair revealed that the epiphany of "eat what you see" came from seeing a scene involving chocolate cake in the well-known film "Matilda." They initiated by hosting a pop-up event & inviting only friends and family. By posting small snippets of the events on social media, they gathered views and attention and added more customers willing to experience their creations. Customers paid between 150 and 175 pounds, or 18,421 and 21,491 rupees. This experience directly hits the sensory congruence, where all your senses align; you smell, eat, taste, and touch what you see on the screen, which automatically heightens the intensity of the flavor.

### Variations of experiential dining

There are also a lot of affordable options in experiential dining, for example, gaming cafes and pottery/art cafes, where dining is secondary and the real experience is the activity. A gaming café is a social venue with multiple high-end gaming equipment like PS5s, Xboxes, PCs, TVs, etc., and they also serve food and drinks to customers to enhance the gaming experience & not the other way around. "Gaming cafes work because most people do not have access to expensive gaming equipment, and in a gaming café

they have multiple options to choose from, and hence they come to gaming cafes so that they can experience the games the way they were made to be experienced” (Dae Langhorn, 2024). Gaming cafes charge from rupees 50/- to rupees 250/- per hour plus the food charges depending on the locality, the type of equipment used, the service, etc. Since pottery is a slightly expensive hobby, pottery cafes charge more and are more exclusive.

Clay or art cafes are hybrid spaces where people can come to colour & paint canvases or premade ceramics or sign up for making the ceramics, all while enjoying food and drinks. Such cafes usually charge the customer beforehand or work on a reservation-based system and offer a meal within the payment; they also offer aprons and allow customers to take home their creations. Here is why pottery cafes work: ‘Modern urban life is overstimulated, screen-heavy, and socially fragmented. Pottery cafés offer controlled slowness. Your hands are busy, your phone is irrelevant, and conversation happens naturally without pressure.’ (Layla, February 25, 2026). Art and clay cafes generally charge around rupees 800/- to rupees 3500/- per person, and while they also offer private sessions, it costs up to rupees 10,000/- per person.

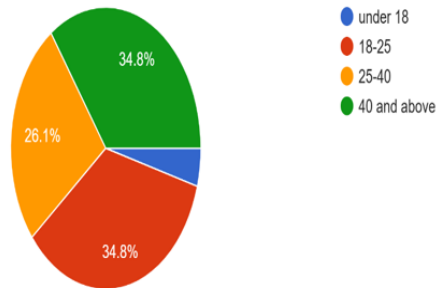
Financial aspect of Experiential dining

Although many people seem interested in these ideas, are they for everyone? Are they affordable? The simple response to these queries is that it varies. Locality, activity, consumer mindset, market demand, production cost, and other variables all have a role. Experiential dining activities charge from anywhere between 150/- per person to 1 lakh Indian rupees; for example, the restaurant “Trèsind” in Mumbai that serves a well-executed 14-course menu charges 12 thousand for their non-vegetarian menu for 2 covers, and their Dubai branch charges 2190 AED, which rounds up to 54 thousand Indian rupees. and the famous restaurant ‘La Petit Chef,’ which is a 2-hour-long 3D animated dining show where a small (6 cm) chef cooks food for you on your table and serves you, charges 22 thousand rupees for 2 people. The Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai charges 1.5 lakh rupees for a pair and serves a 7-course candlelit dinner. The guests are served on a 24K gold Versace plate that costs half the price of this entire meal. There is a classic vintage bottle of champagne that you can enjoy amongst the many other lavish experiences in this romantic dining experience.’ (Kamiya jani Curlytales, 2023) However, activities like the sunset cinema club charge 1000 per person, which includes food & beverages, and hence there is no one correct answer to these questions.

Here the researchers conducted a survey regarding this topic, and the following are the responses:

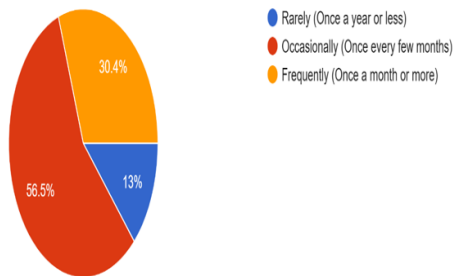
Sr. No.	Questionnaire	yes	Maybe	no
1	Age group			
2	How often do you dine out at restaurants?			
3	Are you a fan of themed events?			
4	What is the average expenditure you have made on a meal while dining out?			
5	While choosing dining establishments, how important is the ambience and atmosphere of the restaurant?			
6	Would you consider paying more if your server apprises you of your food?			
7	How likely are you to pay a premium price for a dish that recreates a memory from a movie or an era that you admire?			
8	Have you ever heard about the movie dining experience, such as Fork n Films?			
9	Do you think about food as only a meal, which you need to survive, or is food an important experience for you?			
10	Would you pay more for food that's catered and altered according to a theme, a festival, a cinema, a place, or food that transports or makes you feel connected to the atmosphere?			

Age Group  
23 responses



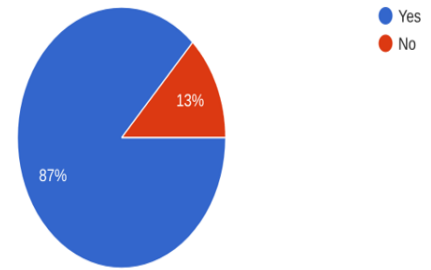
1. In terms of age, we surveyed people from various age groups. Where in 26.1% are between the age groups of 25 to 40, 34.8% are between 18-25, the other 34.8% are 40 and above and the rest are under 18.

How often do you dine out at Restaurants?  
23 responses



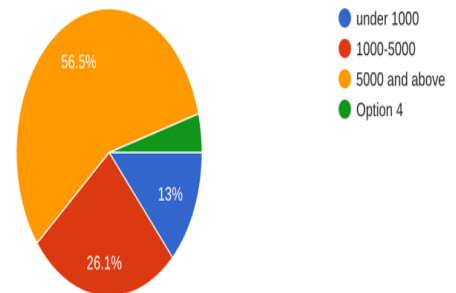
2. Dining out as of 2026 has become very accessible hence 30.4% people Frequently dine out that is once a month or even more, in majority 56.5% people occasionally dine out that is once every few months and only 13% dine out rarely, once a year or less.

Are you a fan of themed events?  
23 responses



3. Consumers though media and other sources are now aware of concepts like such, and hence 87% people enjoy themed events, and the rest 13% do not.

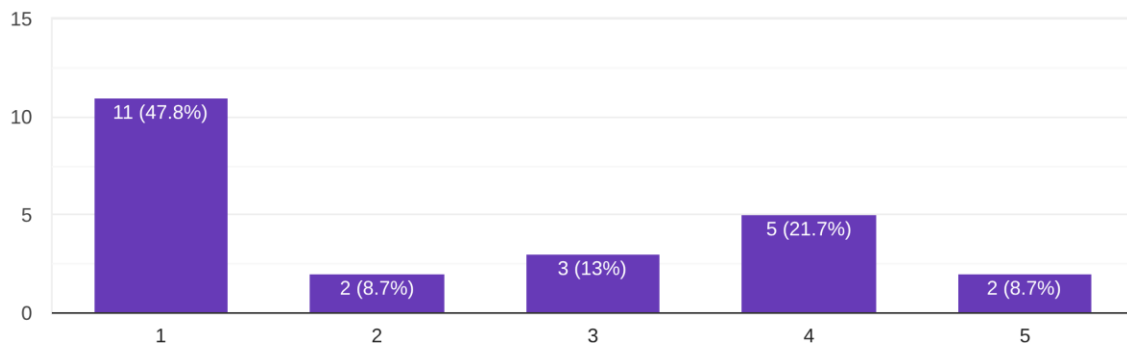
What is the average expenditure you have made for a meal while dining out?  
23 responses



4. When asked about their expenditure the majority being 56.5% has spent 5000 and above on food while dining out, other 26.1% has spent 1000-5000 and only 13% people have spent under 1000, this also indicates the inflation in the hospitality sector.

While choosing dining establishments, how important is the ambience and atmosphere of the restaurant?

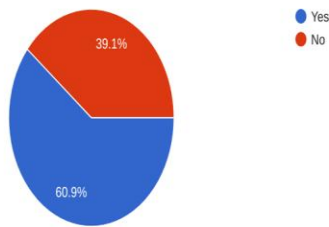
23 responses



5. In terms of the ambience, customers are more inclined towards it as we currently associate everything with social media, and hence, the atmosphere and ambience play a very important role in choosing a restaurant, as per the chart: 47.8% of people think ambience is the most important part, while only 8.7% of people think it is the least important.

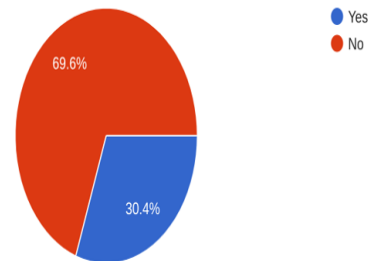
imported from another country, and hence, menu storytelling works because 60.9% want to know the origin of the dishes and are willing to pay more for it and the rest, 39.1%, would not consider paying more for the same.

Would you consider paying more if your server apprises you of the origin of your food?  
23 responses



6. Consumers are always keen to know that the food they are paying for is locally sourced, organic or

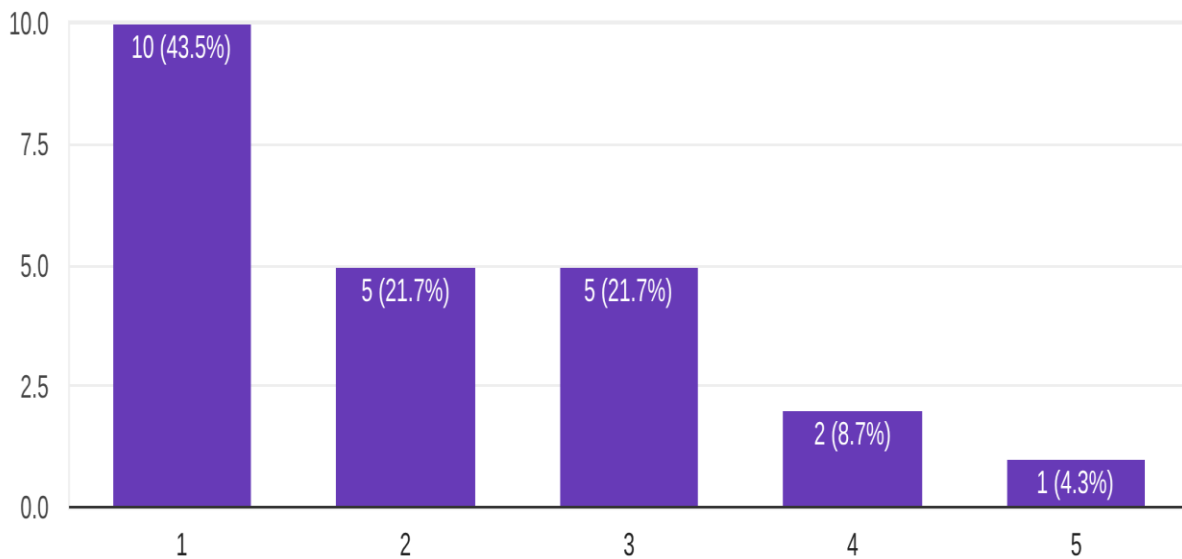
Have you ever heard about the Movie dining experience, such as Fork n Films?  
23 responses



7. The new venture that is taking over the internet is still not that popular throughout India as shown in the chart: only 30.4% of people know about "Fork n Films," while the rest, 69.6%, do not.

How likely are you to pay a premium price for a dish that recreates a memory from a movie or an era that you admire?

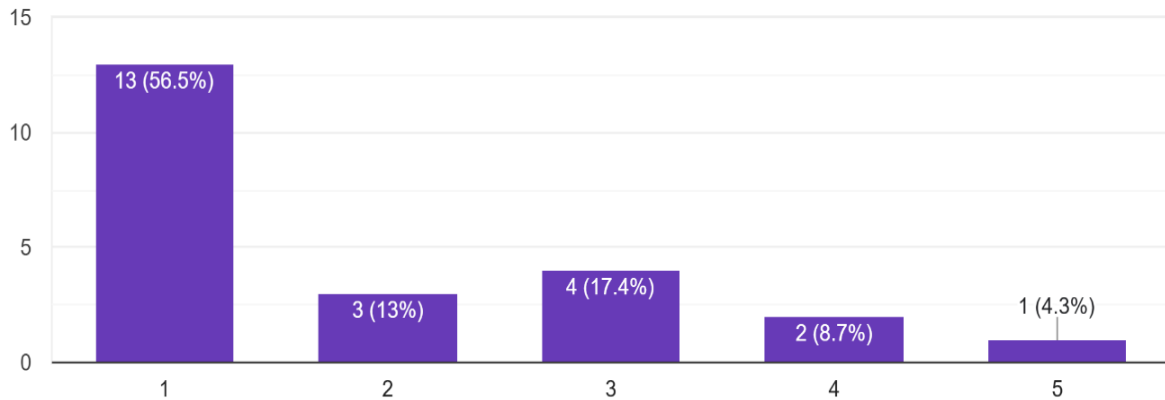
23 responses



8. According to the chart only 4.3% people would not be interested in paying more for a dish that recreates a memory from a movie or an era whereas 43.5% would be interested and the rest lie in the middle.

Do you think about food as only a meal, which you need to survive or is food an important experience for you?

23 responses



9. To understand a customer, this is a fairly important criterion. People who view food just as a means to survive would not be interested in experiential dining in the first place. As per the chart, 58.5% of people view food as an important experience & only 4.3% think of it as a means of survival, and the rest lie somewhere in the middle.

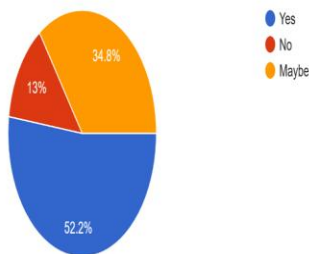
customers willingness to pay'; based on the survey, some important points are as follows.

#### IV. LIMITATIONS

The analysis was only based on the information obtained through the survey's limited breadth and perspective. The survey was relevant to current market conditions, and respondents' information, judgment, and forecast may fluctuate depending on time, status, mindset, and geographical zone. Future researchers can take more variables to get more output from the topic. The survey was conducted with a limited number of people; it can be maximized in the future for some different results.

Would you pay more for food that catered and altered according to a theme, a festival, a cinema or a place, food that transports or makes you feel connected to the vibe?

23 responses



10. As per the chart, majority of the people that is 52.2%, would be interested in food that altered according to the theme; only 13% of people would choose not to pay more and 34.8% are not sure.

#### III. FINDINGS

A survey was conducted in a small population of 23 respondents from various age groups. The questionnaire was related to 'experiential dining and

#### V. CONCLUSION

All this information shows and proves that menu storytelling indeed adds value to the dish/service. When a consumer can understand the story behind a particular product, it shows that their psychological barriers to a bargain deteriorate. Descriptive data analysis revealed that the factors such as complexity of menu, language used in menu description, nature of menu description, and origin of food may influence the purchase intention (Norazlina Rahmat, January 2021) The ideology behind menu storytelling mainly works because a customer is always afraid of ordering a meal that he/she will not find palatable; hence, the detailed

storytelling instills confidence in the consumer, making him/her feel safe to spend 699/- instead of 300/- on a product. The results of this study have demonstrated that there is a fundamental shift in the psychology of consumption and that the relationship between menu storytelling and the consumer's willingness to pay (WTP) is far from accidental. Indeed, throughout this research, we have witnessed the way in which the removal of the story from the product equates to a commodity that is governed by the logical laws of price comparison; however, the addition of the narrative equates to a multisensory experience rather than a tangible object. The key driver of the increased WTP is the shift from the former to the latter. By telling the story of the artisanal nature of the ingredient, the history of the recipe, or the complexity of the production methodology, the brand can successfully shift the framework of the consumer from the 'cost-benefit analyses' to the 'experiential indulgence.' Moreover, this research also highlights the importance of 'sensory priming' in the overall menu design. Words that evoke the sense of taste, texture, and smell are the precursors to the action of eating. 'Sensory priming' increases the 'anticipated pleasure' of the consumer. 'Anticipated pleasure' is a much stronger driver for a consumer to part with his/her money than the overall utility of the product. However, it is also important to realize that 'Storytelling' is based on 'Narrative Integrity.' If the story in the menu is way higher in quality than the actual quality, a 'trust deficit' is created, and the customer lifetime value of the brand is destroyed. 'An impactful menu storytelling experience doesn't stop at the paper. Your staff is instrumental in bringing the menu's stories to life. Investing in training that helps them understand the origins, flavors, and techniques behind each dish allows them to share these stories with diners. When staff can confidently narrate the tale behind a special dish, it creates a personal connection with guests, making them feel more valued.' (22nd November 2024, Team Rare)) And as the F&B industry continues to get increasingly digitalized, where the ambiance of the restaurant is not available, the storytelling in the digital menu is the only option left to create value. This research has proven that by investing in narrative architecture, brands can successfully protect themselves against price wars, create loyal customers, and achieve a competitive advantage in the long run. Storytelling is not an "add-

on" to the product; it is part of the value equation of the product in the new economy. Descriptive data analysis revealed that the factors such as the complexity of the menu, the language used in the menu description, the nature of the menu description, and origin of food may influence the purchase intention.

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