

# Location, location, location: Study shows the middle is the place to be

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Choice is a central tenet of a free society. From the brand of cereal we eat for breakfast, to the answers we give on a survey, or the people we select to be our leaders, we frequently define ourselves by the choices we make. Yet a recent study appearing in the journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology* suggests that there are factors that can significantly influence our free will without us even knowing it.

In their article 'Preferring the One in the Middle: Further Evidence for the Centre-stage Effect', researchers Paul Rodway, Astrid Schepman and Jordana Lambert of the University of Chester, UK analyze three separate but related experiments in which they tested the association between the location of an item in a series and how often that item is selected as preferable over other choices. The results indicate a clear tendency toward favoring items located in the middle of a row – regardless of whether it runs horizontally or vertically.

"People may not be aware of this preference, but it may influence choice in a wide range of day-to-day settings, such as the products people buy in shops or via online shopping, the responses they provide in surveys, and potentially the people they select for a range of tasks or functions," Rodway said.

In the first experiment 100 participants evaluated 17 rows of pictures. Half the survey-takers were asked to choose which of the five pictures in each row they "most prefer" with the other half choosing the one they "least prefer." A significant trend toward the item in the middle was

identified when participants were asked to declare a positive preference. However, location did not appear to influence selection when choosing the least preferred pictures.

A second experiment mirrored the first except that the pictures were arranged vertically and only the "most prefer" questionnaire was used. Although one might reasonably predict that items at the top of a column would be viewed more positively than those located at the bottom, this was not the case. Instead the data again revealed a trend for items occupying central locations.

In the final test, researchers attempt to generalize the results of the previous experiments. Instead of presenting pictures on a questionnaire, they asked participants to choose among a display of actual pairs of socks. Half of those surveyed viewed the column of socks at head level and the remainder observed it at thigh height. Once again the results supported the so called 'center-stage effect'. Most participants chose the middle pair of socks – though researchers noted that pairs in the lowest two locations on the display were chosen least often – a result that could indicate a relationship between the relative height of an item on display and consumer preference.

This research builds on previous studies showing that middle preference is applicable to non-identical items as well as items arranged vertically and those that appear in the form of a questionnaire. More broadly, Rodway concluded, "it's possible that this preference applies in a range of social contexts, including televised political debates where being in the middle may convey an advantage."

With millions of choices being made each day – from purchases in shops and online to choosing up teams or political candidates – the possible long-term implications of this new and exciting research are profound.

Provided by Wiley

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