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Staring at the Store Shelves: Are Consumers Aware That They Are Drawn to the Center When Choosing Products?

Consumers are more likely to select products located in the horizontal center of a display and may not make the best choices as a result, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“A close investigation of visual attention reveals that consumers do not accurately recall their choice process. Our findings emphasize the relationship between horizontal location, attention, and choice,” write authors A. Selin Atalay (HEC Paris), H. Onur Bodur (Concordia University), and Dina Rasolofoarison (Aston Business School).

Many products are arranged horizontally. For example, rows of snack bars in a vending machine, bottles displaying the beer selection in a bar, or jars of peanut butter on a supermarket shelf. How does this influence which option a consumer will choose?

Using eye-tracking devices, the authors investigated how location influences choices for products as varied as vitamins, meal replacement bars, and energy drinks. Consumers had a tendency to increase their visual focus on the central option in the final five seconds prior to a decision and this determined which option they would choose. Consumers did not accurately recall their choice process and were not aware of any conscious visual focus.

Another study in a retail environment demonstrated that the centrally located item within a product category is chosen more often, even when it is not placed in the center of the shelf or visual field. Consumers would make better choices if they were aware that their attention usually focuses on the center.

“In the context of low involvement choice between frequently purchased products, when choosing between unfamiliar yet equivalent brands, the visual search process and consumer choice are biased toward centrally located options. Being unaware that our attention is focused on the center can lead to poor choices,” the authors conclude.

A. Selin Atalay, H. Onur Bodur, and Dina Rasolofoarison. “Shining in the Center: Central Gaze Cascade Effect on Product Choice.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2012. For more information, contact Selin Atalay (atalay@hec.fr) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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