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Fluency modulates ordering of visual narrative layouts

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Abstract

Visual narratives are often used as stimuli in cognitive research under the assumption of their universal transparency, and the arrangement of visual sequencing has been taken as a proxy for spatial metaphors about time. However, this discounts the conventional properties of visual narratives themselves. First, we examined layouts in a cross-cultural corpus of 105 comics (U.S.A, Europe, Asia). Though horizontal arrangements were predominant in layouts of all types of comics, vertical panel arrangements were more common in Japanese manga than European or US comics. Second, reanalysis of data from a prior experiment (reference anonymized) revealed that manga readership predicted preferences for downward arrangements of ordering panels in all comic page layouts. Thus, visual narratives use unique patterns and their comprehension is modulated by fluency in those patterns, undermining assumptions of their transparency and their adequacy as proxies for spatial metaphors.