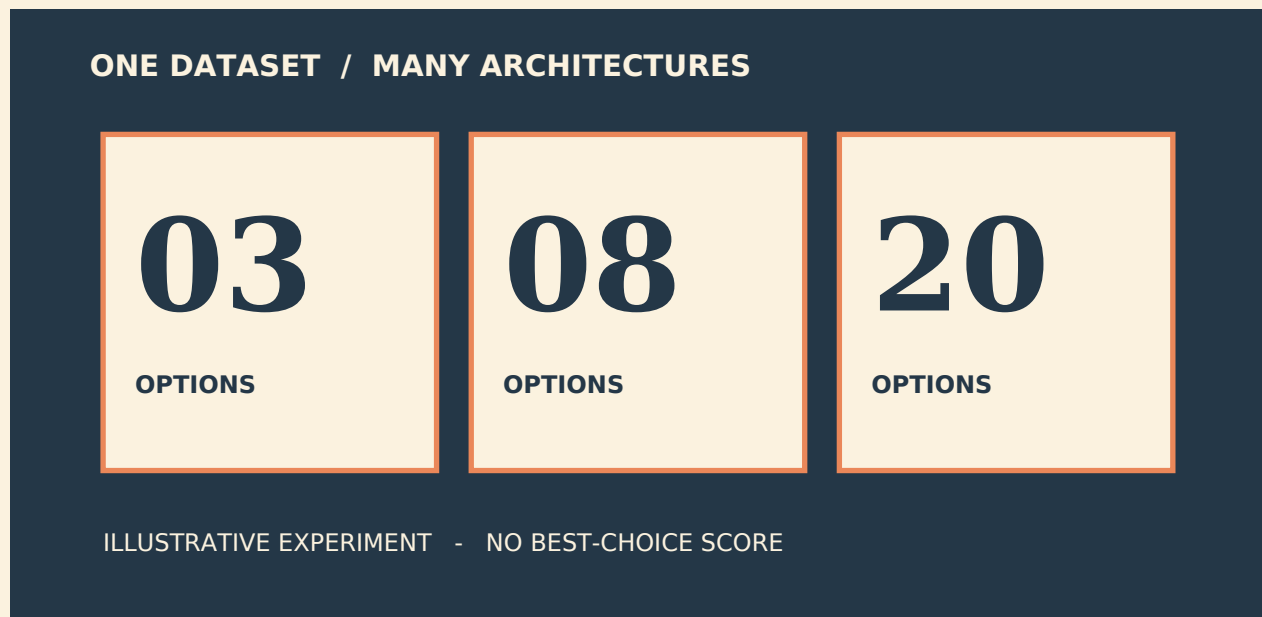


SAHIL TAYAL / FIELD MANUAL NO. 003

A field manual for enough.

Choice, comparison, and the freedom to revise.

CHOICE OVERLOAD STUDIO · THE ARCHITECTURE OF ENOUGH · 2026 EDITION



Explore how the size and presentation of a choice set can alter what is easy to notice, compare and question. This book pairs cautious research interpretation with a transparent fictional exercise and printable worksheets.

Original explanatory text, diagrams, exercises and the fictional catalogue: © Sahil Tayal. CC BY 4.0. Third-party research and marks are not relicensed. Attribution details: page 14.

02 / THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Does more choice mean less freedom?

“Sometimes a wider shelf matters most to the person whose needs are least common.”

A large assortment can reveal a niche option. It can also make comparing alternatives slower or obscure which differences matter. The claim that more options always produce worse decisions is stronger than the evidence supports. This manual treats option count and presentation design as separate variables.

Three learning outcomes

1. Distinguish the number of options from the architecture of comparison. 2. Identify which attributes a display makes visible, suppresses or prioritises. 3. Build a reversible shortlist without pretending that a single optimum exists.

Two rival explanations

Overload interpretation: under some conditions, more complex sets can increase decision difficulty, invite deferral, or change satisfaction. Agency interpretation: broader assortments can improve fit for people with specific needs, especially when grouping, search, or comparison is good.

The experiment here does not test either hypothesis on humans. It is a deterministic illustration: the same stored attributes appear through three interfaces. It cannot infer motivation, regret, time spent, psychological condition, or actual purchasing outcomes.

Epistemic key: DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE = verified source information. DOCUMENTED PRACTICE = published design guidance. INTERPRETATION = reasoned reading. ILLUSTRATIVE MODEL = constructed rules. FICTION = invented names, settings and values.

03 / THE COMPARISON MACHINE

The anatomy of a choice frame

When a catalogue changes its display, at least three distinct levers are available. A changes how many options appear. B changes how many attributes are visible. C changes the structure that holds those options. A fair experiment changes one at a time while keeping the underlying records fixed.

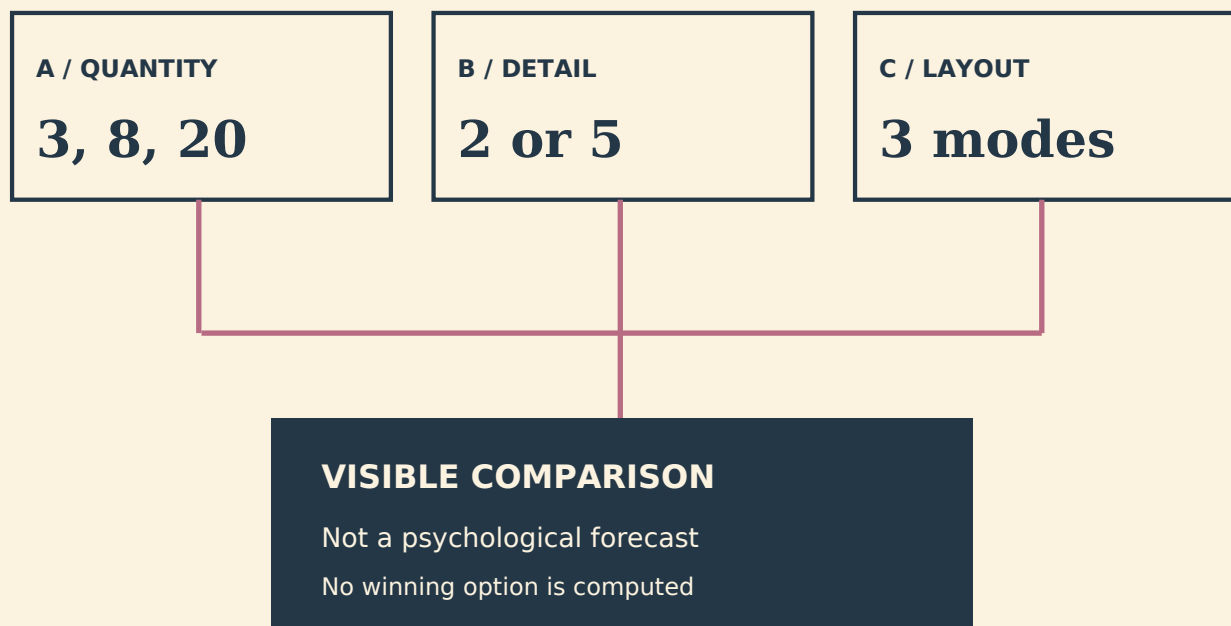


FIGURE 01. Original explanatory diagram. The arrows show how authored UI inputs affect what the browser presents; there is no inferred brain-state or response-time model.

Five fictional fields

Accessibility: level access, step-free, ask organiser, or route unverified. Time: synthetic planning units. Points: synthetic resource points (not prices). Novelty: illustrative 1-5 descriptive scale. Repairability: illustrative 1-5, or a visibly missing value. None of these values is a real venue claim.

Your first and second priorities control which two fields appear in the reduced view. In a criteria table, they also determine sorting order. Sorting is an interface rule, not a claim about human preferences.

04 / CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

Count is not complexity.

Assortment size

The number of available alternatives. A set of twenty items is simply larger than a set of three. That observation alone says nothing about whether the options are easy to distinguish, sufficiently diverse or relevant to a visitor.

Choice-set complexity

Differences within the set: how many attributes matter, how conflicting they are, whether any crucial information is missing, and whether the option labels themselves are intelligible. The more visible fields in this experiment can help careful comparison even while increasing visual density.

Preference uncertainty

A visitor may not yet know which criteria matter most. Changing priorities in the demo moves the emphasis. That is not irrationality: it may be the natural work of discovering what one values.

Satisficing

Herbert Simon's work on bounded rationality motivates thinking about adequate choices under real information and computation constraints. A good-enough stopping rule is not laziness; it can be a reasoned boundary. It is also not always appropriate: high-stakes or irreversible choices warrant more scrutiny.

Reversibility

Being able to return to earlier steps and revise an option may matter more than making every initial decision effortless. But a reversible screen cannot guarantee a reversible real-world commitment. The distinction matters for public services, health and finance alike.

Source leads: Simon (1955), Chernev et al. (2015), Thaler & Sunstein (2008). These concepts are presented as interpretations and research traditions, not as direct output formulas for the simulator.

05 / REAL-WORLD CASE STUDY I

The jam display and its limits.

DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE / IYENGAR & LEPPER, 2000

Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper published three experiments examining whether large assortments always motivate choice. Their well-known field setting compared displays of six and twenty-four jams. The broader research programme also included chocolate and essay-choice studies. The published abstract reports that smaller sets sometimes produced more actual selection or purchasing and greater satisfaction in the studied settings.

Why the study remains useful

It refutes the simple assumption that offering more options must always improve motivation. It also poses better questions: were visitors browsing or ready to buy? Did the display attract different people? How did the visible attributes and consequences of deciding vary?

Why the lesson is not “always offer six”

The sample, setting, outcome and presentation style are not universal. The jam study is often retold as if the numerical size alone caused a general cognitive rule. Later work documents contradictory findings and asks about moderators. Our own workshop catalogue differs radically from grocery tasting: it is fictional, user-controlled, and does not record behaviour.

Working counterexample: someone needing accessible transport may only find a suitable service when the full, searchable twenty-option set remains available. Hiding the other seventeen entries could remove choice rather than reduce confusion.

Original study and verification: Iyengar, S. S. & Lepper, M. R. (2000), *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(6), 995–1006. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.79.6.995.

06 / REAL-WORLD CASE STUDY II

When reviews disagree.

DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE / SCHEIBEHENNE ET AL., 2010

In a meta-analysis covering fifty published and unpublished experiments and 5,036 participants across sixty-three conditions, Scheibehenne, Greifeneder and Todd reported a mean choice-overload effect that was approximately zero across the studies they reviewed, with substantial variance. The conclusion did not mean that overload never occurs. It questioned broad unconditional generalisations.

DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE / CHERNEV ET AL., 2015

Another conceptual review and meta-analysis considered 99 observations from prior research involving 7,202 participants, and identified four moderators: choice-set complexity, task difficulty, preference uncertainty and decision goal. This work argued that context helps explain when an assortment can help or hinder.

Read the disagreement carefully

These two bodies of work use different analytical approaches. They are not interchangeable votes for yes or no. Their shared lesson for the museum is methodological: a visible difference in our layout is not a validated change in decision quality. A real study would need participant measures, carefully controlled conditions and preregistered outcomes.

Source 1: Scheibehenne et al. (2010), *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37, 409–425, doi:10.1086/651235. Source 2: Chernev et al. (2015), *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25, 333–358, doi:10.1016/j.jcps.2014.08.002.

A useful question for designers: If people are struggling to choose, is the remedy fewer options—or clearer attributes, better grouping, less missing information, improved reversibility or a different decision goal?

07 / DOCUMENTED DESIGN PRACTICE

Make choices revisable.

GOV.UK DESIGN SYSTEM / HELP USERS CHECK ANSWERS

The GOV.UK Design System publishes a pattern for a “Check answers” page near the end of a small or medium transaction. It recommends showing what a user entered, allowing changes, and preserving earlier information so a person does not have to repeat the entire transaction after editing a field. That is a concrete public design pattern; it is not a study of this website.

What the example reveals

A service can make the cost of revision lower through explicit “Change” links. The important interaction is not reducing the number of application questions to a magic count; it is exposing relevant information at the right stage and making reconsideration feasible. The guide also advises teams to test large-transaction variants with their users.

What remains contestable

Review screens can create extra steps and may be inappropriate for very short tasks. Conversely, eliminating a review stage can make consequential mistakes harder to catch. The reasonable answer is context-sensitive user testing, not aesthetic preference alone.

How this translates into the exhibit

Our shortlist permits bookmarking up to three synthetic options, removing an option, returning to the full catalogue and writing a private stopping rule. We preserve all source options, so deciding to shortlist never irreversibly deletes an alternative.

Documented reference: GOV.UK Design System, “Help users to Check answers”, <https://design-system.service.gov.uk/patterns/check-answers/> (accessed 28 October 2026). This is public guidance, not an effect estimate. Additional practice: NHS Digital Service Manual, “Select component”.

08 / EXACT INTERACTION MECHANICS

How the exhibit actually works.

Input	Allowed values	Visible consequence
A / option count	3 / 8 / 20	Shows exactly that many entries from a fixed ordered catalogue.
B / field density	2 / 5	Displays selected priorities or all five fields; underlying records unchanged.
C / architecture	Shelf / Table / Drawers	Original order, priority-sort, or three visual groups.
Two priorities	Different fields from five	Sets B=2 display columns; changes table sort order.
Bookmarks	Up to 3	Creates a removable shortlist, never a rank.

Precisely defined sort: table first sorts by the first priority, then the second, then stable ID. Fewer points and fewer time units appear first; a larger novelty/repair score appears first; the synthetic access categories use an explicitly authored display order. The ordering is not an ethical preference or objective recommendation.

Missing information: one record lacks a repairability value and displays “Not specified”. Invalid input: count outside 3/8/20, density outside 2/5, duplicate priorities and more than three bookmarks are rejected. State: local memory only during the current visit. Reset returns to eight options, two attributes, shelf mode. Undo restores the preceding valid state.

Golden rule: A changes the quantity; B changes the visibility; C changes the grouping. No preset changes a person’s actual well-being or minutes spent. The on-screen trace names every display rule in plain language.

09 / FULLY WORKED TRANSCRIPT

The controlled one-variable change.

STEP 0 / BASELINE

Context: fictional neighbourhood workshops. A=8 options. B=2 visible attributes. C=shelf order. Priority 1=accessibility; priority 2=time. Workshop 01, “Neighbourhood Print”, appears first, with “Level access” and “2 units”. The ledger says cost, novelty and repairability remain hidden. The catalogue still has all those fields internally.

STEP 1 / PERTURB B ONLY

Change B=5. A stays 8; C stays shelf; both priorities remain unchanged. Workshop 01 remains first. Its additional fields now become visible: four synthetic planning points, novelty two of five, repairability four of five. The visitor may identify a new reason to include or exclude it—but the system never predicts that they will.

STEP 2 / EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCE

Before: eight cards show two fields per card. After: eight cards show five fields per card. The visible increase is exactly three fields for each complete record; the same eight records remain. Nothing was measured about reaction time or satisfaction. The experiment demonstrates information exposure, not a psychological treatment.

One counterexample

Switch to twenty options, five fields, criteria table, novelty then accessibility. Under the project’s fixed data, the first sorted record is “Mapmaking Evening” (file 08). A visitor looking for an uncommon activity may value the larger, searchable set; the table can make an expanded list more usable. This is an illustration, not proof that twenty always beats eight.

Acceptance fixtures in QA_REPORT.md contain literal inputs and expected visible outputs. The same fixtures are executable in test-model.mjs.

10 / THE TWELVE FICTIONAL DECISION ROOMS

Rooms 01-06

situations, not prescriptions.

Each room is an authored vignette. “Stop A” and “Stop B” represent plausible alternatives; no rule is universally right. One unseen value can reverse the comparison. All examples are FICTION, not field observations.

01. Book club

Stop A: Stop after finding one accessible session and one shared genre. Stop B: Try two meetings first. Unseen value: Transport and social comfort. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

02. Workshop

Stop A: Pick three within travel constraints. Stop B: Ask the organiser one missing access question. Unseen value: Schedule equity. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

03. Repair circle

Stop A: Confirm the material requirement. Stop B: Try a low-commitment session. Unseen value: Right-to-repair access. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

04. Art exhibition

Stop A: Keep a niche medium visible. Stop B: Visit an unfamiliar format. Unseen value: Representation. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

05. Neighbourhood meal

Stop A: Verify dietary and access needs. Stop B: Choose a revisable booking. Unseen value: Inclusion. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

06. Walking route

Stop A: Choose step-free documented information. Stop B: Agree on a fallback route. Unseen value: Weather and maintenance. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

Reflection: Which attribute would change this decision most? Who defined that attribute? Can the choice be reversed at acceptable cost?

11 / THE TWELVE FICTIONAL DECISION ROOMS

Rooms 07–12

situations, not prescriptions.

Each room is an authored vignette. “Stop A” and “Stop B” represent plausible alternatives; no rule is universally right. One unseen value can reverse the comparison. All examples are FICTION, not field observations.

07. Library books

Stop A: Filter by language rather than popularity. Stop B: Borrow two and revisit. Unseen value: Language access. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

08. Volunteer shifts

Stop A: Surface flexibility early. Stop B: Try one shift first. Unseen value: Care obligations. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

09. Feedback form

Stop A: Keep only necessary questions. Stop B: Pilot before scaling. Unseen value: Privacy. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

10. Tool sharing

Stop A: Inspect condition before scoring. Stop B: Borrow before owning. Unseen value: Damage accountability. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

11. Study group

Stop A: Compare in-person and remote access. Stop B: Attend a sample meeting. Unseen value: Group safety. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

12. Civic meeting

Stop A: Publish agenda and access upfront. Stop B: Keep contribution revisable. Unseen value: Missing voices. Counterreading: a wider set may improve fit; a smaller set may reduce irrelevant comparison.

Reflection: Which attribute would change this decision most? Who defined that attribute? Can the choice be reversed at acceptable cost?

12 / CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

When more is better. When less is better.

A strong case for wider sets

People with unusual requirements may be harmed by aggressively collapsed catalogues. A larger set can contain a particular language, accessibility provision, travel schedule or learning style unavailable in the first three. Here, the ethically important intervention may be to improve filters, not remove options. This is a plausible argument from inclusion; its actual benefit must be assessed in context.

A strong case for smaller sets

A visitor doing a brief, low-stakes action may prefer not to examine twenty nearly identical alternatives. In that scenario, a short, clear set with visible justification might make the task easier to understand. But the designer must not turn reduced visibility into hidden paternalism or a biased commercial shortlist.

Where our model breaks

The synthetic numbers are chosen by the author, not estimated from real decisions. The criteria do not cover emotional fit, community identity, personal history or opportunity costs. A field may be missing or ambiguous. The sorting rule uses deliberate but contestable assumptions about what “first” means. No physiological or behavioural measure is collected.

What evidence could change the interpretation?

A comparative study could hold the dataset fixed, vary the display and invite participants with different familiarity and needs. It would need clearly defined outcomes such as error correction, information recall or self-reported usability, as well as safeguards against overgeneralising. Our website offers none of those measurements.

Avoid the false dichotomy: adding options and improving comparison are not mutually exclusive. “Enough” is a judgement about purpose and conditions, not a number.

13 / PRINTABLE EXERCISE

Build a reversible shortlist.

FILLED EXAMPLE / FICTIONAL WORKSHOP CATALOGUE

Candidate	Why it stays	What is still unknown
Neighbourhood Print	Level access; 2 units	Does the schedule work?
Mapmaking Evening	Level access; novelty 5/5	Are materials provided?
Repair Basics	Step-free; repair 5/5	Does this fit the goal?

Example stopping rule: “I will pause when two accessible options fit my time budget, then ask one concrete missing-data question before committing.” It makes stopping revisable, not automatic.

BLANK WORKSHEET / WRITE ON THIS PAGE

My choice context:

First priority: Second priority:

Option 1 and reason:

Option 2 and reason:

Option 3 and reason:

Most consequential unknown:

My reversible stopping rule:

Evidence that would make me reopen this decision:

Printable alternative to the interaction. No data leaves your page. To create a private digital note, the website also offers a local text export with no server upload.

14 / ANNOTATED SOURCES & IMPRINT

Research ledger and reuse rights.

01. Iyengar & Lepper (2000) — Jam/essay/chocolate studies; context-limited.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.6.995>
 02. Scheibehenne et al. (2010) — Meta-analysis: near-zero mean with variation.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/651235>
 03. Chernev et al. (2015) — Moderators of assortment effects; contextual account.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2014.08.002>
 04. Simon (1955) — Bounded rationality, foundation for satisficing.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1884852>
 05. Hyman (1953) — Reaction time study; not a website choice prediction.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0056940>
 06. Scheibehenne et al. (2009) — Moderators of too-much-choice effects.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20271>
 07. Thaler & Sunstein (2008) — Choice architecture framework; critical debate exists.
<https://yalebooks.co.uk/book/9780300146813/nudge/>
 08. GOV.UK Design System — Check answers pattern, review and change.
<https://design-system.service.gov.uk/patterns/check-answers/>
 09. NHS Digital Service Manual — Select component design guidance.
<https://service-manual.nhs.uk/design-system/components/select>
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