

**Social equality vs. individual freedom: a pilot study on individual differences in adults' preferences**

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### **Abstract**

Motives for social equality and individual freedom are at the heart of group living. However, when equality and freedom are pitted one against the other, would people show a preference for social equality, or would they prefer individual freedom? Moreover, are individual differences in these preferences related to classical measures used in moral and political psychology, such as social dominance orientation, left- and right-wing authoritarianism, competitive jungle social world view and support for social welfare and redistributive policies? In this pilot study (N=29), the topic of interest is how people intuitively evaluate simple social scenarios depicting the presence or absence of social equality and the presence or absence of individual freedom in a certain group of agents. We found that both gender and support for social welfare and redistributive policies significantly predict how people evaluate situations depicting individual freedom vs. social equality. In particular, being a female and showing support for social welfare and redistributive policies are associated with a tendency to prioritise equality over individual freedom. Future studies could use a more representative sample in order to reach stronger conclusions that could be better generalised.

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## **Introduction**

### **Social equality and individual freedom**

Social equality is a strongly egalitarian notion which refers to a state in which each individual within a society has equal status in certain aspects, and occurs when something good, like freedom or income, is equally attained. It is in clear opposition to hierarchies of social status which treats different people as superior or inferior (Fourie, 2012), and concerns the distribution of social goods and burdens, such as education, medical care, wealth and opportunity, as well as civil rights, freedom of expression and property rights, and for these goods to be distributed equally among all members of a society (Journal of socialomics, 2015). In order for a society to achieve social equality, it requires the absence of legally enforced social class, and the absence of discrimination motivated by a part of an individual's identity (Gh, 2022). Research regarding social equality has shown it to have multiple societal benefits, such as a reduction in poverty, an increase in education and economy, and contribution to better life expectancy (Soken-Huberty, 2022).

Individual freedom concerns the relationship between the concept of freedom and autonomy and is essential because freedom, according to many, is a natural requirement for humans. Freedom is the right to govern oneself and is the basis for human flourishing. Autonomy, as part of individual freedom, refers to the feeling of having choice and willingly endorsing one's own behaviour and is also considered one of the three basic psychological needs in the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Aside from autonomy, individual freedom also includes basic rights such as freedom of speech, right to assembly, security, privacy and liberty (Jha, n.d).

While social equality and individual freedom share similarities, they differ in their respective main focus. Both consist of basic civil rights, opportunity and freedom for the people to live their lives. However, where individual freedom is focused on the individual level with a person's right to govern oneself and enjoy social goods such as freedom of speech, property rights and opportunity, social equality is more concerned on the societal level, with everyone enjoying the same level of such social goods and opportunity.

This pilot study sought to investigate whether people prioritise social equality over individual freedom or vice versa, and if such preferences can be predicted by their gender or by their level of social dominance orientation (SDO), left-wing authoritarianism (LWA), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), competitive jungle social world view (Jungle), and

support for social welfare and redistributive policies (Welfare). There has been a lacking in prior research on this topic of adult individual preference, which highlight a gap in literature within political psychology, and so we pursue this study with a hope that this can lead to future studies to expand this section of psychological literature. To investigate this topic, we presented participants with brief, animated movies showcasing individual freedom with the absence of social equality and vice versa. After showing the movie, we asked the participants questions regarding their preference between the two situations shown. But before being shown the animated movies, participants were asked to answer some questionnaires to see if answers from different political scales could show a predictive value in the preference participants held between social equality and individual freedom. Also, using these scales, we constructed the following hypotheses.

Social dominance is a concept which can be applied to social animals as well as humans, where hierarchies of dominance are naturally formed. These hierarchies are thought to form among social animals due to a competition for resources, food, and other goods. Social dominance is an assertion of power where one group is placed on top with greater control than those at the lower level of the hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). In the context of this study, the question would be to see if individuals who agree with the idea that stronger groups should dominate weaker groups and that equality between groups should not be our ideal would prioritise individual freedom over social equality.

H1: High SDO level predicts a preference for individual freedom over equality.

The right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale measures the degree to which individuals defer to established authorities, show aggression towards outgroups when authorities sanction such an aggression, and support traditional values which are endorsed by authorities (Saunders & Ngo, 2017). Alongside SDO, RWA has been found to predict racial and intergroup prejudice, and share distinct psychological features (Heaven & Bucci, 2001). We speculate that participants who show a high level of agreeableness to the items regarding right-wing authoritarianism would show a tendency to prefer individual freedom over social equality.

H2: People high in RWA will prioritise individual freedom over social equality.

Left-wing authoritarianism (LWA) contains similarities towards right-wing authoritarianism. Both show characteristics such as dogmatism, punitive attitudes towards dissenters, and the desire for strong authority figures. However, LWA mobilises these traits on

behalf of left-wing values, such as anti-racism, anti-sexism and wealth redistribution (Manson, 2020). On the political spectrum, the 'left' are known to hold the belief that society would be best served with an expanded role of the government. This expanded role concerns entitlement programs such as social security, public education, medical care and unemployment benefits (Deffen, n.d.) With this, we suggest participants showing a high level of agreement towards the LWA scale would show a tendency to prefer social equality over individual freedom.

H3: People high in LWA will prioritise social equality over individual freedom

Inequality refers to an unequal distribution of goods, with some people at the top attaining more than others at the bottom of a social hierarchy. Duckitt et al. (2002) suggests that a belief in a competitive jungle worldview is associated with social dominance attitudes. In the context of the study, we consider that a competitive mindset (high agreement on a competitive social world view) would be more inclined to prefer individual freedom over social equality.

H3: High competitive jungle social world view predicts a preference for individual freedom over social equality.

Social welfare and redistributive policies refer to explicit programs from the government, initiated to help out distressed groups of people and to promote equality (Rein, 1977). With this in mind, we anticipate participants showing a high level of support for social welfare and redistributive policies to show a tendency to prefer social equality over individual freedom.

H4: Showing a high level of support social welfare and redistributive policies can predict a preference for social equality over individual freedom.

Research regarding the differences in personality traits between men and women have shown women known to score higher in regard to agreeableness, openness, anxiety, neuroticism and sympathy, and men have shown a tendency to be more assertive and willing to take risks (Yehya, 2022). A study from Pratto et al. (2011) have also shown men to be more social dominance orientated than women. In this study we suggest that these differences between men and women can lead to differences in preference between social equality and individual freedom, with women showing a tendency to prefer social equality, and men showing a tendency to prefer individual freedom.

H5: Gender is associated with a preference between social equality and individual freedom, with women prioritising social equality more often than men, and men prioritising individual freedom more often than women.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Data were collected from 30 participants. However, due to one participant being excluded, the data was analysed from the remaining 29 participants. The participants were between the ages of 21 and 38 (mean age = 23.7, SD = 3.86) and consisted of 17 female and 12 male participants. Participation was voluntary and occurred in person. The method for the experiment was neither invasive nor harmful to the participant, and so no ethical consideration was necessary for this study. Data was gathered using a convenient sample, where most participants were students at UIS (University of Stavanger). Participants were recruited for participation either after lecture at UIS or through social media. Participants were given information regarding the study and the treatment of the data. Consent was given by the participant and no personal information was collected. Also, the participants were asked to fill out information about their age, gender, nationality, highest level of education and their English language proficiency level (basic, intermediate, advanced, proficient, and native speaker). The participants' nationality was mostly Norwegian (28 Norwegian, 1 Bosnian), highest level of education written down was high school (20), certificate of apprenticeship (5), and a bachelor's degree (4), and their proficiency level regarding the English language was basic (4), intermediate (5), advanced (8), and proficient (12). This study started with 30 participants; however 1 participant was excluded from the analysis due to failure on at least one attention check placed in the questionnaires.

### **Procedure**

Participants were not informed about the aim of the study prior but were told how the procedure would go. In the first part of the experiment participants were asked to answer some questionnaires in relation to their social dominance orientation (Ho et al., 2012), right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1998), left-wing authoritarianism (Costello et al., 2022), competitive jungle social world view (Duckitt et al., 2002) and some items to assess support for social welfare and redistributive policies (Bullock et al., 2003). In these questionnaires participants were presented with a 7-point Likert scale with the task of circling their degree of agreement/disagreement to different statements (1-strongly disagree, 4-neutral,

7-strongly agree) in the different questionnaires. There were placed two separate attention checks in the questionnaires where participants were instructed to answer a specific number on the scale from 1 to 7 to make sure participants were paying attention while answering the questionnaires (i.e., ‘This is an attention check, please reply with a 5’).

Ho et al. (2012) describes social dominance orientation (SDO) as one of the most powerful predictors of intergroup attitudes and behaviour. SDO has been suggested by analysts to consist of two complementary dimensions. These are SDO-D (preference for some groups to dominate others), and SDO-E (preference for nonegalitarian relations between groups). Such an orientation is emphasising the belief that a superior group should dominate other groups, and that society should be structured unequally, with the people of power at the top and others at the bottom. The SDO scale consisted of 17 items such as ‘Some groups of people are just more worthy than others’ or ‘It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom’. An individual’s score on SDO could provide an estimate on their view of how society should be structured, with a high SDO believing in a society dominated by a superior group, or low SDO in which society should be structured equally. Which is why SDO was included in the questionnaire to see if the participants who score high on SDO have a preference for individual freedom over social equality.

The right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale is a way of measuring the degree to which people defer to established authorities, support traditional values endorsed by authorities, and show aggression towards out-groups when authorities sanction such an aggression (Saunders & Ngo, 2017). Individuals who score high on the RWA scale could hint at a submissive stance towards authority, and could be more likely to conform to the norm. The RWA scale had questions such as ‘Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn’, ‘The way things are in this country, it’s going to take a lot of ‘strong medicine’ to straighten out the troublemakers, criminals and perverts’, and consisted of 13 items.

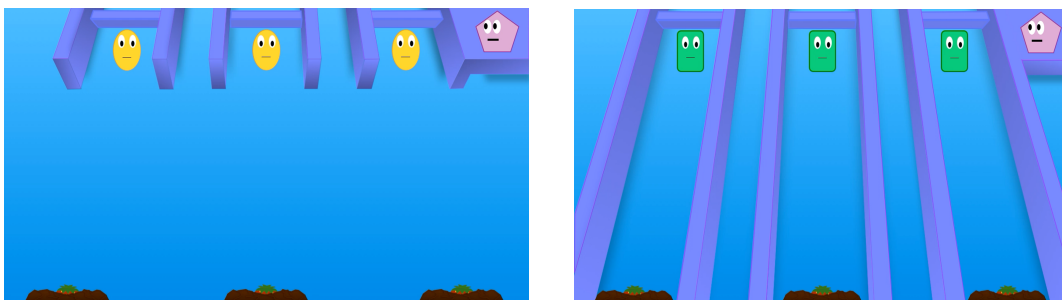
Left-wing authoritarianism (LWA) is characterised by dogmatism, punitive attitudes towards dissenters, and a desire for strong authority figures, and in contrast to RWA, a LWA view mobilises its traits on behalf of left-wing values (redistribution of wealth, anti-racism, anti-sexism). This questionnaire consisted of 14 items, such as ‘The rich should be stripped of their belongings and status’ and ‘Norway would be much better off if all of the rich people were at the bottom of the social ladder’.



Competitive jungle social world view (Jungle) consisted of six questions like ‘It’s a dog-eat-dog world where you have to be ruthless at time’ or ‘You know most people are out to ‘screw’ you, so you have to get them first when you get the chance’, and was included to see if participants who have a competitive view of the social world would have a preference for individual freedom over social equality.

Lastly, eight items to assess support for social welfare and redistributive policies (Welfare) were put in the questionnaire. Welfare and redistributive policies are initiated to help out distressed people and make a society more equal, and items were included to see if high scores on welfare support could predict a preference for social equality, and if low scores on these items could predict a preference for individual freedom. These items included statements such as ‘Incomes should be more equal, because everybody’s contribution to society is equally important’ or ‘Welfare recipients should be able to access education and job training free of charge’.

After the participants finished answering the questionnaires, they were presented with four brief movies showing animated characters in both a social equality situation, and an individual freedom situation. In one situation (equality/freedom), the characters in the movies were four oval shaped, yellow characters with eyes and mouth, and in the other situation the characters were rectangle shaped, green characters with eyes and mouth. Also, during both situations, an outside, pink character with a pentagon shape can be seen observing the situations the other characters are in. The pink character does not interact in any way, but is connected to the questions after the movies.



(yellow characters in individual freedom situation, green characters in social equality situation, pink character observing both situations from the side)

Before the movies showing the different situations, the participants were shown a 21s video of the characters being introduced. These introduction videos start with the characters moving onto the screen one by one. With the yellow characters they jump up and down while

saying 'We are Bømmene' (in Norwegian, 'Vi er Bømmene') in a light, girlish voice. After doing this three times they move out of the screen by going into a separate corridor. The corridor is then shut off and the introduction movie ends. The other introduction video (with the green characters) follows the same procedure, but while jumping they say, 'We are Tibbene' (Vi er Tibbene) in a light, girlish voice.

The first video (showing the social equality situation) following shows a 53s video of the characters being inside a closed off hallway with little opportunity to move freely. The first character moves down the corridor and starts to bump itself into the walls on the side and then saying, 'oh no, I can't get out' (Å nei, jeg kommer ikke ut), showing their freedom of movement is restricted. This procedure is done three times with the two other characters. Afterwards a strawberry is presented down the hall to each of the characters one by one. The character moves towards the strawberry and eats it while saying 'mmm'. This procedure repeats with the remaining two characters and then the movie ends. Each character had restricted movement, but each one got a strawberry, showing social equality.

The other situations were a 53s movie (individual freedom situation) showing the characters one by one walking into an open area. The characters move to the side one by one while saying 'Now I am going over here' (Nå går jeg bort hit), showing they are free to move as they please. A strawberry is then presented to the characters one by one. The first character walks down and eats a strawberry and says 'Mmm'. The second strawberry is placed before the character in the middle which then walks down to get its strawberry, but then the first character moves over and steals the other character's strawberry and eats it. The second character then says, 'Oh no!' (Å nei!) while shaking left and right. A third strawberry is then presented before the last character, which then walks down and eats it and the movie ends. Each character could move freely, but that resulted in an unequal distribution of strawberries, with one character getting two strawberries at the cost of one character receiving no strawberries.

After the videos, the participant was presented with four questions:

- *Attribution-of-preference-question*: 'The pink agent should decide on which group to join. Which group do you think it will choose?'
- *Preference-question*: 'Which group would YOU like to join?'
- *Happiness-question*: 'In your opinion, which group is the happiest?'
- *Moral-judgement-question*: 'In your opinion, which situation is morally better?'

Participants were divided into eight different groups. Each group experienced the experiment in a different order. Half of the participants were presented with the social equality situation first, and then the individual freedom situation. Also, the order in which the answers were asked to the participants. The order of the questions was counterbalanced across participants using a Latin square. The whole process took about 15 minutes for a participant to complete (10 minutes on questionnaire and 5 minutes on videos) and was done individually and in a silent room.

## Results

To verify our hypotheses, we used IBM SPSS statistics to run correlation analysis, a multiple regression analysis, and some descriptive statistics. In the analyses, the answers to the four questions regarding attribution of preference, preference, happiness, and moral judgement were combined into a single dependent variable (which was called “Preference”).

SPSS gave some insights to the descriptive statistics of the data gathered from the participants. Results are presented in Table 1. It is interesting to note that the distribution of preference for social equality or individual freedom were split 50/50 among participants, suggesting a high degree of individual variability ( $M = .50$ ,  $SD = .438$ ).

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics*

	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Std.deviation
Preference	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.50	0.44
SDO	1-7	1.00	4.75	2.17	0.90
RWA	1-7	1.15	3.62	2.91	0.52
LWA	1-7	2.54	5.69	3.63	0.71
Jungle	1-7	1.17	4.33	2.64	0.76
Welfare	1-7	4.00	7.00	5.22	0.80
Age	21-38	21.00	38.00	23.67	3.87
Gender	0-1	0.00	1.00	0.41	0.50
N	29				

Next, we wanted to see how the different variables correlated with the Preference-score and used SPSS to run a correlational analysis. Results are presented in Table 2. Only SDO

was shown to significantly and negatively correlate with the Preference-score (0 = individual freedom, 1 = social equality), meaning that a high level of social dominance orientation would show a tendency to prefer individual freedom over social equality ( $r = -.401, p = .031$ ). Also, gender (0 = female, 1 = male) showed a trend towards significance with a negative correlation ( $r = -.366, p = .051$ ) with the dependent variable, showing that being female could be associated with a tendency to support social equality over individual freedom.

**Table 2**

*Correlations Between Variables*

	Prefer.	SDO	RWA	LWA	Jungle	Welfare	Gender
Prefer.	-						
SDO	-.401*	-					
RWA	.056	.292	-				
LWA	-.207	.100	-.403*	-			
Jungle	-.303	.638**	.506**	-.301	-		
Welfare	.359	-.399*	-.582**	.289	-.567**	-	
Gender	-.366	-.062	-.318	-.156	.042	.111	-

Gender (0 = female, 1 = male), Preference (0 = individual freedom, 1 = social equality)

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level, \*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level

Last, the dependent variable (Preference) was regressed on the predicting variables of SDO, LWA, RWA, Jungle, Welfare, and gender. The overall model was significant,  $F(6, 22) = 3.87, p = .009$ , and the independent variables explained 51% of the variability in participants' answers,  $R^2 = .51$ . Furthermore, coefficients were assessed to understand how each of the individual factors influenced the dependent variable. Only 'Welfare' ( $p = .027$ ) and gender ( $p = .017$ ) had a significant effect, and the remaining independent variables (SDO, RWA, LWA, Jungle) did not show a significant effect on the dependent variable (see Table 3). Thus, only H5 and H6 were supported.

**Table 3**

*Regression Analysis*

Hypotheses	Regression weight	Beta Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Hypotheses supported
H1	SDO -> Preference	-.098	-0.95	.350	Not supported
H2	RWA -> Preference	.121	0.65	.523	Not supported
H3	LWA -> Preference	-.220	-1.90	.070	Not supported
H4	Jungle -> Preference	-.037	-0.27	.789	Not supported
H5	Welfare -> Preference	.260	2.38	.027*	Supported
H6	Gender -> Preference	-.383	-2.58	.017*	Supported
R <sup>2</sup>	.51				
F (6, 22)	3.87				

*Note:* \* regression is significant at the .050 level

## General Discussion

This pilot study investigated how young adults evaluate simple social scenarios depicting the absence and presence of social equality, and the absence and presence of individual freedom. Participants were then asked questions regarding which situation they viewed as more desirable (situation containing social equality, or situation containing individual freedom) to establish a general preference. The findings showed a divide in preference for social equality and individual freedom ( $M = .50$ ) and using SPSS demonstrated the possibility to predict such a preference using some political scales.

Correlational analysis showed a significant, negative correlation between the dependent variable 'Preference' and social dominance orientation. Also, there was a trend towards significance with a negative correlation between the dependent variable and gender ( $p = .051$ ). The regression analysis showed an overall significant model, and both gender ( $p = .017$ ) and support for welfare and redistributive policies ( $p = .027$ ) were shown to have a significant effect on the dependent variable 'Preference'. However, the regression analysis showed the other independent variables (SDO, RWA, LWA, 'Jungle') did not have a significant effect on the preference for either social equality or individual freedom.

The independent variable gender (0 = female, 1 = male) showing a negative correlation with 'Preference' (0 = individual freedom, 1 = social equality) could imply women as more inclined to prefer social equality over individual freedom. How gender can affect a preference towards either social equality or individual freedom can be viewed in the context of how men

and women differ in terms of personality traits. Research on personality traits has shown men to have a tendency to be more assertive and willing to take risks (Yehya, 2022). This could imply a more competitive mindset, with people willing to take risks and assert themselves above others in order to come out on top. Placing oneself above another in terms of assertion suggests more willingness to dominate others in general. One group dominating 'inferior' groups are more in line with the idea of individual freedom, which emphasises a person's right to govern himself/herself and endorses one's own behaviour, and is less in line towards a society with an emphasis on equality.

Research regarding personality traits, and how they differ from men and women has shown women to have a stronger level of agreeableness, neuroticism and sympathy (Yehya, 2022). This could factor into women showing a preference for social equality over individual freedom. The trait of sympathy is associated with feeling compassion for someone else. As well as agreeableness includes a person's ability to put others before themselves. A stronger feeling of compassion could be inclined to prefer a society constructed equally, with the people less-fortunate getting helped out by means of social welfare and redistributive policies. This could explain how being female can be associated with a tendency to prefer social equality over individual freedom.

Social dominance orientation reflects to what extent a person would endorse between-group hierarchy and a society constructed unequally with some groups dominating other groups. Therefore, showing a negative correlation with the dependent variable 'Preference' (0 = individual freedom, 1 = social equality) would support that a person with high SDO score would show a preference towards individual freedom over social equality. SDO was shown to align with the competitive jungle social world view through correlational analysis, further emphasising a mindset containing 'winners' and 'losers', with people at the top dominating other groups. A society structured around equality would be at odds with the idea of social dominance, and could explain why a high level of SDO showed a negative correlation towards social equality..

The support for social welfare and redistributive policies was shown to have a significant, positive effect on the score of 'Preference', as shown from the regression analysis. This suggests a high level of support for social welfare and redistributive policies would show a tendency to prefer social equality over individual freedom. The items on the social welfare scale measured support for equal distribution of goods, which aligns with the concept of social equality. One can see a clear comparison between supporting welfare and redistributive

policies and the idea of social equality. Given how social equality emphasises a distribution of social goods in order to achieve a higher level of equality by helping out the people in need. However, that begs the question as to why there were shown no significant correlation between support for welfare and redistributive policies and the dependent variable 'Preference' in the correlational analysis. The reason for this could be people supporting social welfare and redistribution policies, but still have a preference for individual freedom over social equality when the two are put one against the other.

The remaining independent variables (SDO, RWA, LWA, Jungle) were shown to not hold a significant effect on preference between social equality and individual freedom through the use of regression analysis, and those hypotheses were therefore not supported. This could be explained by the level of agreement on these scales not depicting an accurate prediction of what participants would prefer. Participant's might have agreed or disagreed on items such as 'Charity (i.e., giving somebody something for nothing) is admirable not stupid' (from 'competitive jungle social world view'), but still have a preference for either individual freedom or social equality.

### **Limitations**

This was a pilot study, and the first to cover research regarding adult preferences between social equality and individual freedom when pitted against each other. With no prior research made it unable to compare findings to previous studies.

The study consisted of a small, convenient sample (N=29), where most participants were young adults ( $M_{\text{age}} = 23.69$  years) and students at UIS, which makes the results difficult to generalise, being this a non-representative sample (of Norway, for instance).

The answers given after being presented with the brief movies depicting a situation with the absence of individual freedom, and a situation with the absence of social equality could have been influenced by how the different situations were depicted, regardless of any pre-existing preference between either. One video shows the animated characters locked inside a thin hallway with little opportunity for proper movement, and the other depicts one character stealing a strawberry from one other character. How these situations were presented could have had a deciding factor on a participant's answer in regards to which situations they deemed as more desirable.

## **Future studies**

Moving forward, further research could replicate our study using a larger sample in order to make a more generalizable conclusion. A larger and more representative sample could prove social dominance orientation, left- and right-wing authoritarianism, and competitive jungle social world view as a significant predictor for a preference between social equality and individual freedom. It would also be interesting to see if results would differ if using different means of showing cues to establish social equality and individual freedom situations. Also, using different questions to establish a preference could be interesting to see if the findings would be different. This could show if the results would be different depending on how the situations are presented, and how the questions of preference are phrased.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this pilot study (N=29) investigated what people would prefer when social equality and individual freedom is pitted one against the other. This study employed a quantitative methodological approach to highlight some key aspects into what adults would show a preference to between social equality and individual freedom. The findings showed an overall significant model, with the independent variables explaining roughly 51% of the variability in participants answers of preference. Also, support for redistributive policies and gender were shown to have a significant effect on a preference between social equality and individual freedom. In particular, being female and/or showing support for welfare and redistributive policies is associated with a tendency to prefer social equality over individual freedom. However, with a small sampling and low statistical power, more studies in regards to such preference is needed to achieve a more concrete conclusion.

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