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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 45(45)

Authors

Kennedy, Briana

Mather, Mara

Publication Date

2023

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Peer reviewed

Negative images distract younger adults more than older adults regardless of their task relevance

Briana Kennedy

University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia

Mara Mather

USC, Los Angeles, California, United States

Abstract

Older adults tend to prioritize positive information more and negative information less than younger adults. This pattern, known as the positivity effect, was recently observed using an emotion-induced blindness task: task-irrelevant negative images distracted younger adults but less so older adults, whereas positive images distracted both groups. One possibility is that older adults simply fail to process the content of complex negative distractors. In the current study, we explored whether older adults were distracted by negative images when they had to report about them. Participants completed a modified emotion-induced blindness task whereby emotional distractors were either task-irrelevant (younger: $n=49$; older: $n=46$) or task-relevant (younger: $n=46$; older: $n=44$). The task-relevance of distractors made no difference, such that younger adults were distracted by negative images more than neutral images, but older adults were not, regardless of task-relevance. Such indicates that older adults saw but remained undistracted by the content of negative images.