

Images of pleasure and winning have unique distracting power

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Images related to pleasure or winning attract attention from demanding tasks, while equally intense but negative images and those associated with losing can be fully ignored, finds a new UCL study.

51 volunteers completed attention tasks involving search for 'target' items. They were found to be highly distracted by emotional images, whether positive or negative, when the search was easy. However when the search was harder and demanded high focus of attention people were able to completely ignore the [negative images](#), while the positive images continued to be highly distracting.

Positive images included graphic photographs of romantic scenes, happy faces, and neutral faces that were previously associated with [winning](#) points in a betting task. Negative images included gory photographs, [angry faces](#) and neutral faces previously associated with losing points in

the betting task.

The study, published in the journal *Emotion*, suggests that it is easier to ignore negative images than positive ones when we are focusing on other things.

"If someone is busy, the best way to capture their attention is with something related to pleasure" explains study author Professor Nilli Lavie (UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience). "For example adverts from charities often use images of suffering to encourage donations. Our study suggests that these images could be overlooked by people who are engaged in other activities such as using their phones, reading the newspaper, or forwarding their TV recordings to resume the program they were watching. To capture the attention from other activities, charities could consider using more positive images such as happy people whose lives have been improved by donations."

The effect was seen not only with intrinsically positive images but also neutral images that were associated with winning in a betting game. Six neutral face images were used with different odds of winning or losing points. Participants were asked to choose between different pairs to maximise points, but these did not represent real money. By the end of the 15-minute game, the patterns of 'winning' and 'losing' faces were clear; participants consistently chose faces with high odds of winning and low odds of losing.

"The attention-grabbing power of images associated with winning meaningless points is staggering," says Professor Lavie. "While people were able to ignore graphic images of mutilated bodies during the more difficult task, neutral, expressionless faces associated with winning still distracted them. People appear to be tuned to the prospects of winning. This could suggest a new way of marketing as any neutral image such as a brand logo can be used to capture attention, if the consumer is offered

to play in some betting game and the image is associated with winning.

"The results are also surprising from an evolutionary perspective, as one would expect the brain to pay most attention to negative images because they can indicate potential threats. Our findings may reflect the changing priorities of modern Western society, where we face relatively few immediate threats to our lives. In this safe space, our minds may be more focused on pleasure seeking instead of paying [attention](#) to potential harm. The power of positive [images](#) and those associated with winning may be a symptom of our competitive, hedonistic society."

More information: Gupta et al., 'Distracted by pleasure', *Emotion* (2015)

Provided by University College London

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