

Research reveals the truth behind the evil eyebrows of a cartoon villain

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(Medical Xpress) -- New research from the University of Warwick could explain why the evil eyebrows and pointy chin of a cartoon villain make our ‘threat’ instinct kick in.

Psychologists have found that a downward pointing triangle can be perceived to carry threat just like a negative face in a crowd.

In a paper published in *Emotion*, a journal of the American Psychological Association, Dr Derrick Watson and Dr Elisabeth Blagrove have carried out a series of experiments with volunteers to find out if simple geometric shapes can convey positive or negative emotions.

Previous research by these scientists showed that people could pick out a negative face in a crowd more quickly than a positive or neutral face and also that it was difficult to ignore faces in general. The researchers carried out a series of experiments asking volunteers to respond to computer-generated images. They were shown positive, negative and neutral faces, and triangles facing upwards, downwards, inward and outward. This latest study shows that downward triangles are detected just as quickly as a negative face.

Dr Watson said: “We know from previous studies that simple geometric shapes are effective at capturing or guiding attention, particularly if these shapes carry the features present within negative or positive faces.”

“Our study shows that downward pointing triangles in particular convey

negative emotions and we can pick up on them quickly and perceive them as a threat.”

Dr Blagrove added: “If we look at cartoon characters, the classic baddie will often be drawn with the evil [eyebrows](#) that come to a downward point in the middle. This could go some way to explain why we associate the downward pointing triangle with negative faces. These shapes correspond with our own facial features and we are unconsciously making that link.”

More information: ‘Negative Triangles: Simple Geometric Shapes Convey Emotional Valence’, Derrick G Watson, Elisabeth Blagrove, Chesney Evans and Lucy Moore. *Emotion*, 2012, Vol 12, No.1 18-22

Provided by University of Warwick

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