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Motivated Information Search

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of social contexts on the efficiency of information search in children (6-14 years), adolescents (15-17 years), and adults. Participants are placed on a team for a competition. When the championship trophy goes missing, the participant's team has either won or lost. Participants are then tasked with playing a 20-Questions game to try to find the trophy. Beyond the developmental trajectory in their ability to select the most informative questions, we found, as hypothesized, that all participants actively biased their search strategies: the efficiency of their questions was contingent upon whether it was in their best interest to find the culprit. In particular, they were more likely to select the most efficient question when they were winning and were more motivated to identify the target. Overall, our findings suggest that social contexts play a strong role in modulating the efficiency of information search across age groups.