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Know Your Artist: Factoring Artist Identity into Aesthetic Responses to Art

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Abstract

Recent studies of art museums have revealed a bias towards artwork made by white, male artists in their permanent collections, special exhibitions, and new acquisitions. This bias is also present in the art market and among art collectors. However, studies of the art market and museums do not consider factors such as the viewer's identity or the viewer's affective state. The preliminary results of this experimental survey found that, when it comes to emotional response, it makes no difference if the artist is male or female. However, women looking at work by female artists had stronger reactions than men did.

Aim

Trending art advocacy movements have noted that art museums hold a disproportionate amount of artwork by white, European, male artists (Meloche & Katz-Buonincontro, in press). Perhaps it is due to this lack of recognition that artwork by female artists sell for 47.6% of comparable work by male artists (Adams et al., 2017). Advocates for equity have been pushing for more inclusive policies for art museum collections and exhibitions (e.g. Schneider, 2019).

Problem

While many feel that diversifying collections is the right approach, there have not been studies into how what viewers *know* about an artwork affects how they *feel* about it. The studies that do so focus on cognitive rather than affective aspects or look at titles rather than the artists' identity (Gerger & Leder, 2015). Theory suggests that the identity of an artist may not be an important factor for the average museum goers' emotional reaction, but studies have not researched solely the reactions of populations who are underrepresented in museums, nor have they looked into non-museum goers. The popularity of recent shows that feature traditionally underrepresented artists is a testament to the potential of diversifying art collections (Davis, 2019).

Method

Aesthetic emotions are affective states caused by external stimulus. When looking at a painting, a viewer may cognitively seek to understand what is going on in the scene, they may also appreciate the skill demonstrated, or even pass judgement deciding on whether or not they like it, but artwork also causes a viewer to affectively experience aesthetic emotions (Gerger & Leder, 2015). The Geneva Emotion Wheel (GEW) is an instrument that lists 20 emotions around a wheel and extends each emotional "spoke" with 5 circles that increase in size as they get further from the center (Sacharin, Schlegel, & Scherer, 2012).

Participants (n=81) in this study were given an electronic survey that showed them 11 paintings and asked them to select their emotions. Forty-six percent of the participants (n=37) were randomly assigned to see a picture of the artist with identifying information and 54% saw only the artwork without a picture of the artist and identifying information (n=44). These paintings were selected by an art expert. To control for art stylistic preference, the paintings

were all mid-to-late-twentieth century Impressionist/Realist work portraying landscapes and bodies of water. Six of the artworks were done by male artists, and five by female artists.

In addition to the GEW, to measure their familiarity with art, participants were given the Art Experience Questionnaire (AEQ) (Chatterjee et al., 2010). Lastly, participants were asked to select a gender and mark all ethnicities with which they identified (table 1).

Table 1: *Demographics of the sampled population.*

Variable	n	%	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. D.
Artist	37	45.7				
No artist	44	54.3				
Gender						
Male	30	30				
Female	51	63				
Education						
High school or equivalent	2	2.5				
Some college	7	8.6				
Associate degree	8	9.9				
Bachelor's degree	29	35.8				
Graduate degree	35	43.2				
Ethnicity/Race						
White	58	71.6				
Black/African American	7	8.6				
East Asian	7	8.6				
South Asian	7	8.6				
Middle Eastern (non-white)	3	3.7				
Hispanic/Latino, Latina	3	3.7				
Caribbean	2	2.5				
Number above who selected 2	8	9.6				
Age in years	81	100	20	73	41	12.32
AEQ score	81	100	0	33	5.11	6.42

Research question
1. Does knowing the artist's identity make a difference in viewer's emotional ratings?

2. Do viewers experience stronger emotions to artwork made by men, if they do not know the artists identity?
3. Do female viewers experience stronger emotions to artwork made by women when they know the artists identity?

Preliminary findings
Because the researcher allowed participants to select multiple emotions, there were three ways to calculate the GEW scores: looking at the totals of emotions selected for each painting, the totals for positive emotions, and the highest single rating for any emotion. For each of these means of totaling, the top four paintings remained consistent, therefore, it was determined to use the totals of emotions selected for each painting.

For research question 1, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the total emotion scores of the group of participants who saw the artist's (N=37) identity to the group that did not have information on the artists' identity (N=44). There is not a significant difference between the emotion scores of people who saw the artists' identities (*M*=4.84, *SD*=.64) and those who did not (*M*=4.89, *SD*=.65) see the artists' identities (t(79)=.33, p=.74).

Closer inspection of individual paintings for both groups yielded some interesting results. Table 2 shows the ranked painting according to the total emotion scores for the population that did not see the artists and table 3 shows the ranked pairing for the population that did see the artists' identity. The top two paintings by female artists fared slightly better when participants saw the artists' identities than when they did not. The top two paintings by male artists fared slightly better when participants did not see the artists' identities.

Table 2: *Table showing descriptive statistics of each artwork's total emotion score for the population that did not see the artists, n=44. Blue background designates that the artist of that painting is male, pink represents female artists.*

Painting ID	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
7	2	61	17.18	12.271
11	0	62	16.30	12.641
4	2	51	16.18	11.688
10	3	51	16.14	11.810
1	0	54	15.73	12.556
3	0	62	14.73	12.113
6	3	60	14.57	12.533
8	0	77	13.98	14.135
5	1	66	13.61	12.002
2	1	59	13.11	11.502
9	0	69	13.05	12.691

Table 3: *Table showing descriptive statistics of each artwork's total emotion score for the population that did see the artists, n=37.*

Painting	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation

10	0	40	17.22	11.096
4	3	53	16.46	12.529
7	1	45	15.76	11.826
11	0	45	15.00	10.804
9	0	45	14.89	12.353
1	0	60	13.70	12.122
5	1	42	12.65	11.290
6	0	56	12.59	12.484
3	0	39	12.46	10.002
8	2	44	12.19	10.036
2	0	50	11.97	11.087

For research question 2, a paired samples t-test was conducted among the participants who did not see the artists (*N*=44) to compare their total emotion score for works made by male artists and female artists. Among those who did not see the artists identities, there was not a significant difference in emotion score for work by female artists (*M*=2.49, *SD*=.68) and work made by male artists (*M*=2.48, *SD*=.65) (t(80)=43, p=.76).

Research question 3 sought to investigate further the role that the identity of the view has on their emotional scores. The researcher planned to compare means between total emotion scores for paintings by male artists and female artists. She first calculated the average of the total emotions for three white, male artists and then the three highest ranked female artists. Two of the works by female artists were low quality images, and that seems to have depressed their emotion scores. Answering this research question with the data that were collected was difficult because once the sample of participants was pared down to only those who viewed the artists and only those who were female, there were only *N*=23 individuals. The Wilcoxian signed-rank test is appropriate to use with small sample sizes, when the results are not normally distributed, thus it is appropriate for testing this research question. For female viewers who saw the identity of the artists, emotion scores were significantly higher when viewing artwork made by female artist (*Mdn*=15.35) than male artists (*Mdn*=13.03), *T*=52, *p*=.01, *r*=-.39.

Discussion

This research demonstrates that there is nothing about paintings by male artists that inherently elicits more emotional reactions than paintings made by female artists. Additionally, knowing the identity of the artist did not significantly alter the viewer's emotional reaction. However, there are interesting nuances in these results that indicate that more research, with a larger sample size, may reveal that emotional response may vary depending on both the identity of the viewer and of the artists. Two of the works by female artists were ranked higher when participants were able to view the identity of the artists. Additionally, female participants reported stronger emotional responses to artwork that they knew were made by female artists than to artwork by male artists. I intend to iterate this survey based on lessons learned and deploy it again, with a larger population sample.

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