

CAN SAD ARTWORKS HELP US COPE WITH SADNESS?



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DOES SADNESS CHANGE AFTER VIEWING SAD PAINTINGS FOLLOWING A SADNESS INDUCTION? IS THE CHANGE IN SADNESS DIFFERENT AFTER VIEWING REPRESENTATIONAL ART COMPARED TO ABSTRACT ART?

INTRODUCTION

- Studies report: sad music can improve mood for individuals who are already feeling sad (Van den Tol et al., 2016)
 - Such an effect could also be elicited by other forms of art, such as paintings.
 - **H1:** If sad music leads to better coping, so will sad artwork.
- WikiArt annotations show: painting with faces produce more consistent emotional attributions (Mohammad & Kiritchenko, 2018)
- Representational cues carry social and prosocial cues that increase empathy and realism.
 - **H2:** Representational art (especially with faces/bodies) will elicit a stronger coping-effect than abstract art because the viewer can relate more easily.

METHOD

Online survey

- Sample: N=54; 48 Female, 6 Male; Mean Age 23.06**
- Sadness induction** with film clip from *The Lion King*
- Afterwards: watching **7 artworks** that were rated sad in the WikiArt annotations → two conditions: **representational** or **abstract** art
- 3 mood measurements:** baseline, mood manipulation check, after watching the artworks
- Emotions rated by participants: **sadness, anxiousness, upset** (5-point Likert Scale)
- Participants also rated: did they perceive paintings as sad/upsetting/anxiousness-inducing

Examples abstract artworks



Antonio Calderara, Spazio Luce, 1961



Alma Thomas, Atmospheric Effects I, 1970

Examples representational artworks



Nikolai Ge, Last Supper, 1863



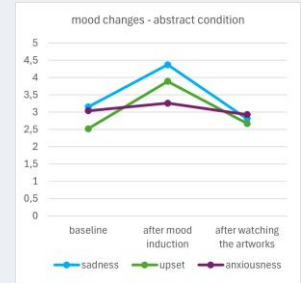
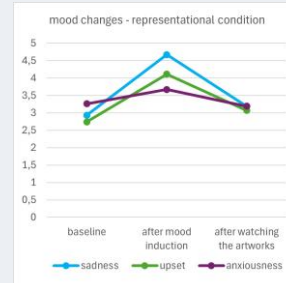
József Rippl-Rónai, Uncle Piacek in front of the Black Sideboard, 1906

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RESULTS

- Mixed ANOVA (between-subject factor: abstract vs. representational; within-subject factor: time)
- Post-hoc t-Tests for H1



H1

- Strongly significant difference** between baseline/after mood induction; after mood induction/after artworks **for sadness and upset** ($p < .001$)
- Significant difference between T2 and T3 for anxiousness ($p = 0,017$)

H2

- No between-subject effect or interactional effects**
 - No significant difference in emotion changes between the representational and abstract group

DISCUSSION

- H1:** As predicted **sadness decreased** after viewing the artworks, however artworks were **not perceived as particularly sad in our sample**
 - Overall sadness rating: $M = 2.32$
 - Representational artworks: $M = 2.47$
 - Abstract artworks: $M = 2.16$
- Prior research suggests that **distraction is more effective for coping with sadness** than actively focusing on emotions (Drake et al., 2011)
- Given the low sadness ratings, **artworks may have facilitated coping via distraction**, rather than through perceived sadness
- H2 : No significant differences** in mood changes between groups
- As artworks were not perceived as sad, **coping via specifically sad artworks could not be directly tested**
- However, **viewing artworks in general** appeared to **support coping**
- Distraction and the passage of time** during the viewing period may have contributed to the observed effects
- Consequently, it remains **unclear whether coping effects were driven by the artworks themselves** or by **time elapsed and distraction**

Limitations

- Non-representative sample (mostly female psychology students)
- No pretest on stimulus material (material was chosen from pre-rated dataset)
- No pretest on video used to induce sadness.
- Online-study: testing conditions were not controlled for

Future research

- pretest for the stimulus materials
- assess empathy scores: this would allow examining whether people's coping differs depending on their level of empathy.
- use another stimulus material, such as music, or simply letting time pass by to see if it is an art (stimulus) specific effect or just time passing