



Nan one month after being beaten, Nan Goldin (1984)
Photo: © Tate, London [2026]

Perception of violence against women in art

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Introduction

Art depicting **violence against women** is often **displayed** in a way that **objectifies** and **dehumanizes women** (Peral Jiménez, 2020).

Distancing-Embracing model: explains the increased acceptability and enjoyment of negative content in art (Menninghaus et al., 2017).

- Studies have found that **people accept** and even **embrace** more **negative emotions** such as anger (Wagner et al., 2016) and disgust (Wagner et al., 2014) in the **context of art**.

- We therefore ask:

Are depictions of violence against women perceived differently when labelled as art?

Methods

- 14 photographs** (7 including violence, 7 neutral) from the artist **Nan Goldin**. A short description presented each picture as either art or non-art.
- Online study:** 79 Participants (66 females, 13 males, mean age 24.39, age range 18 to 76) were randomly assigned to either the art or the non-art condition. They rated their emotional response and perceived distance to each picture and the picture’s aesthetic value.

Example pictures:

Violent:



Heart-Shaped Bruise, Nan Goldin, New York City (1980)
Photo: <http://www.moma.org>. [2026]

Example descriptions:

Art: “Künstlerin mit Verletzung nach einer Performance mit ungewolltem Übergriff”

Non-art: “Frau mit Verletzung nach einem Übergriff im Bett”

Example statements:

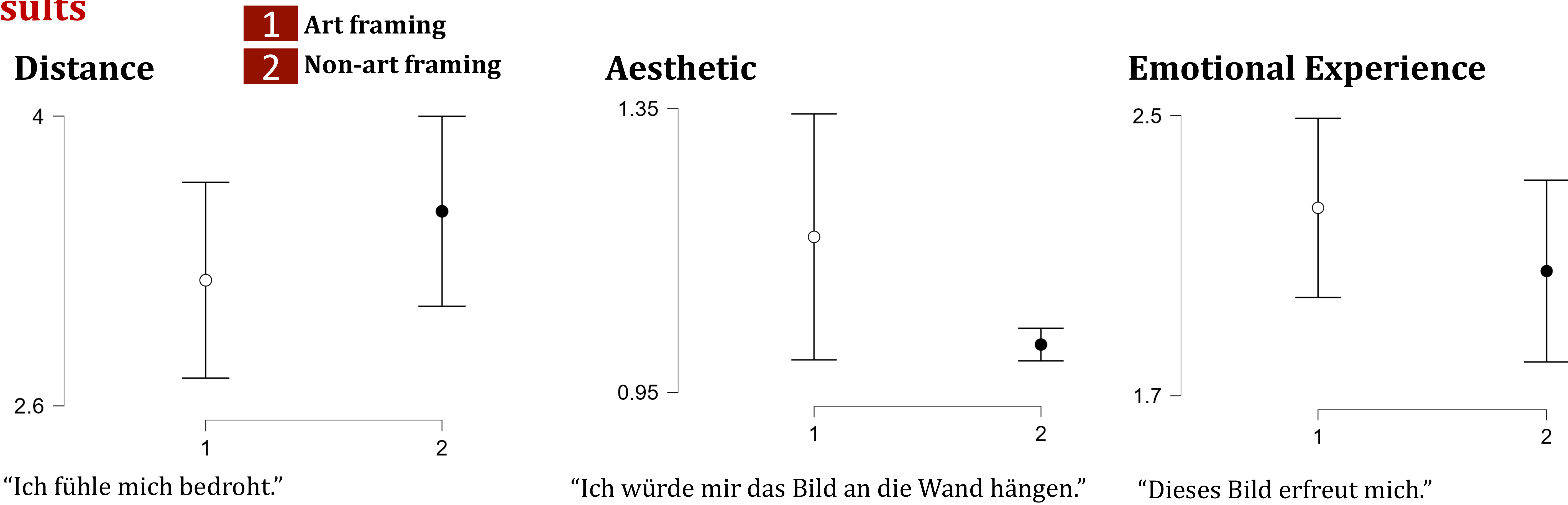
- Distance:** “Ich fühle mich bedroht.”
- Aesthetic:** “Ich würde mir dieses Bild an die Wand hängen.”
- Positive Experience:** “Dieses Bild erfreut mich.”

Neutral:



Self Portrait in Blue Bathroom, Nan Goldin, London (1980)
Photo: © Tate, London [2026]

Results



- Participants responded to the **same violent images** with *no significant difference in **distancing*** when the images were presented as art, compared to non-art.
- Participants rated the **same violent images** as *more **aesthetic*** when the images were presented as art, compared to non-art.
- Participants rated their **emotional experience** of the **same violent images** *not significantly different* when the images were presented as art, compared to non-art.

Conclusion

The **art label** seems to influence the **perception of aesthetics**.

Distance did not seem to play a role in the **perception of violence against women**. This might be due to the **limited amount of items**, **underdistancing** or even **sociological factors** that require more research.

Implications & Future Research

- Is the Distancing-Embracing model too theoretical?
- Which factors play a role in perceiving violence as such?
- Is distancing different for different forms of art?
- Is violence against all genders perceived this way?
- Replicate the study with a larger and more diverse sample size.
- Test the validity of the items used in this study.

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