Individual differences in embracing negatively valenced art: The roles of openness and sensation seeking

Fayn, Kirill1; Kuppens, Peter11 Research Group Quantitative Psychology and Individual Differences, KU Leuven-University of Leuven, 3000 Leuven, Belgium . kirill.fayn@kuleuven.be peter.kuppens@kuleuven.be https://ppw.kuleuven.be/okp/people/Kirill_Fayn/ https://ppw.kuleuven.be/okp/people/Peter_Kuppens/ . Fayn, Kirill; Kuppens, Peter.

ProQuest document link

ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

We elaborate on the role of individual differences in the processing mechanisms outlined by the Distancing-Embracing model. The role of openness is apparent in appreciating meaning-making art that elicits interest, feeling moved, and mixed emotions. The influence of sensation seeking is likely to manifest in thrill-chasing art that draws on the arousing interplay of positive and negative emotions.

FULL TEXT

The Distance-Embracing (D-E) model of the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception lays out a framework for understanding the paradoxical exposure to and enjoyment of negatively valenced artworks. But clearly, not everyone enjoys disturbing or unpleasant art. Although some people seek or relish it, others go to great lengths to protest or decry its existence and public display. While the authors acknowledge the existence of individual differences, the D-E model itself does not elaborate on the exact nature of such differences or how these differences should be understood in relation to known dimensions of personality. Yet, a better understanding of how people differ in their engagement with negatively valenced art is crucial for insight into the factors that lead to such engagement. In this commentary, we elaborate on the role of individual differences, focusing on the role of two traits – openness to experience and sensation seeking.

Both openness and sensation seeking are traits that describe approach tendencies, but toward partly different situations. Openness reflects cognitive exploration (DeYoung 2014) and is related to consumption of visual art, literary works of fiction, and classical concert attendance – meaning-making art. Sensation seeking, on the other hand, describes thrill and excitement seeking and is related to enjoyment of horror and thriller movies, disturbing and sexual art – thrill-chasing art.

Openness, as one of the five-factor model dimensions of personality, is not the usual suspect when it comes to predicting emotional experiences. Yet, this is unjustified, particularly in the aesthetic context. Below we identify three pathways of how openness connects to aspects of the D-E model. First, openness is the strongest personality predictor of powerful aesthetic experiences. For instance, open people are more likely to report chills, awe, and immersion and feel like crying in aesthetic contexts (Cotter et al., 2017; Silvia &Nusbaum 2011; Silvia et al. 2015; Weibel et al. 2010). Thus, feeling moved is one mechanism from the D-E model that may be responsible for the association between openness and engagement with negatively valenced art. This is supported by consistent evidence indicating that open people are more likely to enjoy sad music (Ladinig &Schellenberg 2012; Vuoskoski et al. 2012) and appreciate negatively valenced abstract art (Rawlings 2003).

Second, open people's emotional reactions to art tend to be complex. In particular, mixed emotional states and evaluations, an aspect of the D-E model, are more frequently reported by open people both generally (Barford &Smillie 2016) and in response to visual arts (Barford et al., under review). Further, open people have more nuanced

emotional experiences with art, in that they tend to experience negative emotions in a more differentiated way (Fayn et al. in press-a). Thus, open people are less valence focused when it comes to engaging with negatively themed art, which may allow them to appreciate other aspects of artworks. Indeed, art expertise – a strong correlate of openness – has been shown to predict focus on more stylistic, formal, and historical features of artworks (Parsons 1987). Such sensitivity and attentiveness to stylistic and formal features of art relate to the *sensitivity to the aesthetic virtues aspect* of the D-E model. Thus, open people may experience more mixed and nuanced states because of greater appreciation of the aesthetic virtues of negatively valenced artworks.

Third, openness is associated with a particular motivation for engagement with art. Although many people engage with the arts for the sake of enjoyment (a hedonic motivation), open people are more likely to engage with art with meaning-making motivations (a eudemonic motivation [Oliver &Raney 2011]). This particular type of engagement is reflected in the meaning construction part of the D-E model. Interest in particular – a state associated with intellectual pleasure and eudemonic motivation – is crucial in understanding engagement with negatively themed art as it can be experienced independently from pleasure (Turner &Silvia 2006). Because open people are especially prone to experiences of interest, and particularly interest in novel and complex art (Fayn et al. 2015; in press-b; Silvia et al. 2015), they may be more likely to engage and appreciate art with negative themes in the absence of pleasure.

Sensation seeking is similar to openness, in that they both represent approach tendencies, but the traits are distinct in terms of the types of experiences sought. Consequently, associations between aesthetic preferences and sensation seeking are similar yet distinct from those with openness. Sensation seekers, like open people, prefer complex and abstract visual art (Furnham &Bunyan 1988). However, unlike openness, sensation seeking predicts liking violent and horror films (Aluja-Fabregat 2000; Tamborini &Stiff 1987) and unpleasant representational visual art (Rawlings 2003). Thus, sensation seekers appear to enjoy a broader range of negatively valenced art, unlike open people, whose enjoyment of negative art is restricted to more highbrow art forms. As such, the influence of sensation seeking is more likely to manifest because of the increased arousal that negatively valenced art is capable of producing, as described in the *interplays of positive and negative emotions aspect* of the D-E model. Interestingly, both openness and sensation seeking independently predicted liking unpleasant abstract visual art, but not unpleasant representational visual art (Rawlings 2003). Open people may like the negatively valenced art because of its abstract and therefore complex nature, rather than the negative content, whereas sensation seekers may appreciate negative art regardless of type (abstract versus representational), because of the thrills and arousal such art can elicit.

In summary, we propose that individual differences are an important aspect of the D-E model, as not all people engage with negatively themed art. As such, already existing knowledge of the relationship between personality traits and art engagement is informative in understanding the processes that facilitate engagement with negatively themed art. Future work on the D-E model should consider the influence of openness and sensation seeking, particularly with respect to selecting subjects and stimuli for future research.

DETAILS

Subject:	Emotions; Music; Art; Personality traits; Creativity; Quantitative psychology; Personality; Aesthetics
Identifier / keyword:	Sensation seeking; Emotion; Openness
Publication title:	Behavioral and Brain Sciences; New York
Volume:	40
Publication year:	2017

Publication date:	2017
Section:	Open Peer Commentary
Publisher:	Cambridge University Press
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	United Kingdom
Publication subject:	Biology, Psychology, Medical Sciences--Psychiatry And Neurology
ISSN:	0140525X
e-ISSN:	14691825
Source type:	Scholarly Journal
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Commentary
Publication history :	
Online publication date:	2017-11-29
Publication history :	
First posting date:	29 Nov 2017
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X17001686
ProQuest document ID:	1988261610
Document URL:	https://kule uven.e-bronnen.be/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/individual-differences-embracing-negatively/docview/1988261610/se-2?accountid=17215
Copyright:	Copyright © Cambridge University Press 2017
Last updated:	2025-04-25
Database:	ProQuest Central

LINKS

Linking Service

Database copyright © 2026 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.