

# Engagement with Beauty and Levels of Happiness among Artists in the UK

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## Abstract

In a study with  $N = 204$  participants, artists (painters) demonstrated significantly higher levels of the trait of Engagement with Beauty than non-artists (medium effect size). Artists also showed significantly higher levels of trait Happiness than non-artists (small effect size). There appear to be no published studies comparing artists' and non-artists' levels of the trait of Engagement with Beauty nor trait Happiness. There was no difference in levels of engaging with moral beauty between artists and non-artists; but artists scored significantly higher on engagement with natural beauty (medium effect size), and engagement with artistic beauty (large effect size). The correlations between Engagement with Beauty and trait Happiness, and with Openness, were both positive and significant. However, artists showed no relationship between Openness and Happiness, whereas nonartists did; and the correlation between Engagement with Beauty and Happiness remained significant when controlling for Openness.

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**Index terms**— happiness, appreciation, beauty, artists, artistic beauty, openness.

## 1 Introduction a) Appreciation of Beauty and Levels of Happiness

among Artists in the UK the classic modern personality stereotype of an artist is someone who is moody, anxious, depressed, and neurotic. Joshanloo and Weijers (2014) theoretically affirm that artists not only value negative emotions in themselves, but that they actively spurn the goal of trying to be happy. There also are empirical data to support this view. Martinsen (2011), using trait measures, found artists to score higher on instability/neuroticism, and lower on agreeableness, than non-artists. Likewise, Feist (1998), in his metaanalysis of personality in regard to artistic creativity, found artists to have higher levels of neuroticism and lower levels of agreeableness. Additionally, Gelade (1997) identified artists as having elevated neuroticism within the five-factor model approach. In Burch, Pavelis, Hemsley and Corr's study (2006) of visual artists and non-artists they discovered that the artists had higher levels of schizotypy and neuroticism, and lower levels of agreeableness.

With the consistent finding that artists score high on neuroticism, it is convincing that they experience negative emotions, such as depression, anxiety, and anger more than the general population. A recent study also showed the artists experience these negative emotions with higher intensity than non-artists but experience positive emotions with the same intensity as non-artists (Botella, Zenasi, & Lubart, 2015). Botella et al. also confirmed the stereotype that artists are in touch with their feelings: they found that artists scored significantly lower on a measure of alexithymia than nonartists. Is it possible that artists not only experience more negative emotions than non-artists, but also experience more positive emotions, such as happiness? It is an open question, as no one has published an empirical study examining levels of trait Happiness between artists and non-artists.

## 2 b) Trait Happiness and Artists

With so many studies affirming that artists experience many negative emotions it is not surprising that no one has empirically examined whether artists also experience greater trait Happiness than non-artists. There is one

small qualitative study of 10 young women visual artists that found in certain contexts their art making fostered their "well-being" (Titus & Sinacore, 2013, p. 29), but no measurement of trait happiness was taken in the study. Another small study (Sheldon, 1994, N = 19 advanced art undergraduate students) found that art majors showed no difference in levels of "life satisfaction" from science graduate students. "Life satisfaction" is similar to, but different from trait happiness. Life satisfaction is the cognitive side of Subject Well-Being [SWB], happiness is part of the emotional side of SWB. Yeagle, Privette, and Dunham (1989) examined 29 artists peak experiences (in a Maslowian sense), and defined them as moments of "highest happiness." However, they found no significant differences in artists' descriptions of their peak experiences when compared to the peak experiences descriptions of non-artist undergraduates, and they did not quantitatively measure trait Happiness.

A longitudinal study (Stohs, 1990) that followed two groups of artists, one group of fine artists (producing paintings, sculptures, photographs, etc. for exhibition in galleries, museums and collectors' homes), and another group of applied artists (commercial work, such as designing advertising) found no differences in life satisfaction, work satisfaction, or levels of state happiness between the two groups (despite the fact that the applied artists yearly income averaged 400% more Year 2016 in art income than the fine artists!). Note that in this study happiness was measured with a single item asking about their current levels of happiness; thus they did not measure trait happiness.

In summary, past research has not directly addressed the issue of whether artists are happier than non-artists. Despite the evidence that artists experience many negative emotions, we hold the hypothesis that, due to the happiness involved in creative production, artists may be happier in general than non-artists. We know that making art can help people find meaning and happiness in their lives, even when those people have been suffering from mental problems or serious physical illness. Art therapy, for example, helps people with cancer to express their experience of illness and find meaning in their difficult life (Borgmann, 2002). Research has found that people who produce visual arts after their cancer diagnosis, and thus experience artistic self-expression, are able to rebuild or maintain a positive personal identity (McMurray & Schwartz-Mirman, 2001; Reynolds & Prior, 2003). Benefits of engaging with and making art have been revealed in many studies among cancer, trauma, and other chronic illness patients, including decreases in negative emotions and distress (Puig, Lee, Goodwin, & Sherrard, 2006; Nainis et al., 2006), reduction of stress and anxiety, and increases in positive emotions (Walsh, Martin, & Schmidt 2004), as well as improvement of medical outcomes (Ross, Hollen, & Fitzgerald, 2006). Thus we believe that if producing art can help non-artists in such dire circumstances, then being a "chronic" creator of art (thus an artist) will lead to higher levels of happiness among artists than non-artists.

### 3 c) The Trait of Engagement with Beauty

As noted above in Yeagle et al. (1989), peak experiences can be considered moments of highest happiness. In Maslow's (1964) view about peak experiences, beauty is one of the attributes of reality or essential values of that reality. Maslow, Frager, and Cox (1970) considered the aesthetic needs as one of the highest levels of human needs in his theory of human motivation. He argued that there is a fundamental aesthetic growth need in individuals.

Appreciation of and Engagement with Beauty has played an especially important role in the flourishing of human beings. As Danto (2003) has written in the *Abuse of Beauty*: "Beauty is an option for art and not a necessary condition. But it is not an option for life. It is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it. That is why beauty, unlike the other aesthetic qualities, the sublime included, is a value" (p. 160). Although in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) schema of virtues and character strengths it may seem that appreciation of beauty is just one of 24 strengths, it is much more than that. In the Western canon it is one of the three foundational values: Truth, Beauty and the Good.

What could be more important than love? Alexander Nehamas ponders, invoking Plato, "Beauty is the object of love?" (2007, p. 99). To a Platonist this means that when we love something -a human being, an animal, nature, an idea, a painting -it is the explicit or inherent beauty in the love-object that we love. Love also appears to be the guiding value and principle found in the World's sacred scriptures: bhakti in Hindu scripture, ahavah and chesed in Jewish scriptures, mettá in Buddhist sutras, agapé and philia in Christianity's Evangel, hubb in the Islamic Qur'an, and mehr and hubb in the Bahá'í holy writings. The intimate strength of the connection between love and beauty has also been documented empirically (Diessner, Iyer, Smith, & Haidt, 2013).

### 4 d) Engaging with natural beauty

An empirically based argument for the importance of beauty comes from the research on the benefits of engaging with natural beauty on human flourishing. There has been an explosion of research over the last decade concerning the many psychological benefits of spending time in nature and in green spaces. Howell and Passmore (2013), in summarizing the experimental research findings on the effects that experiences of nature have on human well-being state, "by boosting our positive affect; by eliciting feelings of ecstasy, respect, and wonder; by fostering feelings of comfort and friendliness; by heightening our intrinsic aspirations and generosity; and by increasing our vitality" (p. 242). The results of recent studies by Zhang, Howell, and Iyer (2014) and Zhang, Piff, Iyer, Koleva, and Keltner (2014) make clear that many of these highly desirable effects of experiencing nature are either mediated or moderated by noticing, appreciating, and engaging with the beauty of nature. Zhang, Howell et al. (2014) demonstrated that only their subjects who scored high on the Engagement with Natural Beauty

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subscale of the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS; Diessner, Solom, Frost, Parsons & Davidson, 2008) reaped the benefits of greater life satisfaction due to nature affiliation; those scoring lower on Engagement with Natural Beauty did not. They also found the same pattern for the positive effects of nature affiliation on self-esteem: it was moderated by levels of engagement with natural beauty. They summarized by stating "connectedness with nature only predicts well-being when individuals are also emotionally attuned to nature's beauty" (p. 55).

Zhang, Piff et al. (2014) reported a series of four studies concerning prosociality and the subjective perception of beauty in nature. Participants who scored higher on the Engagement with Natural Beauty subscale of the EBS showed greater levels of prosociality as evidenced by higher scores on empathy, perspective taking, and agreeableness. Likewise, they demonstrated that appreciating nature's beauty led participants to be more trusting and generous, as well as being more helpful to others. They summarize their four studies by noting that they provided "evidence that positive emotions and tendencies to perceive natural beauty mediate and moderate the association between beauty and prosociality?demonstrating the unique prosocial benefits of beautiful nature" (p. 61).

## 5 e) Engaging with artistic beauty

Engaging with artistic beauty is highly associated with Openness (Diessner et al., 2013; and see subsection below on Openness), a quality prized by scientists and other seekers of truth. Appreciating artistic beauty is also related to valuing universalism, benevolence, and spirituality. Those who engage with artistic beauty strongly identify with all humanity, as well as with their community, and also tend to have a strong love for all humanity. They also feel connected to nature (Diessner et al., 2013). The moral emotion of elevation is also one of the "unselfing" emotions. Those who engage with moral beauty are much more susceptible to the moral emotion of elevation (Diessner et al., 2013); and those that experience elevation are much more likely to strive to become morally better human beings, and to seek to serve the needs of others (see Pohling & Diessner for a review of elevation studies, 2015).

Despite the clear importance of beauty to artists, only one small study has been published concerning artists' levels of engaging with natural beauty, artistic beauty, or moral beauty. Diessner et al. (2008) found that students ( $N = 26$ ) enrolled in undergraduate art and music classes scored significantly higher on engagement with artistic beauty than a comparison group (and showed no differences between groups on engagement with natural beauty nor engagement with moral beauty). We predict that a sample of "real" artists would show higher levels of both engagement with artistic beauty and natural beauty than non-artists. g) Openness and Artists Costa and McCrae (1992) proposed that appreciation of beauty and art can be seen as a particular facet trait of Openness to Aesthetics under the broader trait of Openness to Experience. According to Furnham and Chamorro-Premuzic's (2004) findings, there is a significant relationship between the trait of Openness to Experience and art experience in general (artistic interests, activities, and knowledge). Other studies suggest that Openness to Experience as a personality trait is the major predictor of many aspects of appreciation of music (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007; Rentfrow & McDonald, 2010).

Furthermore, people with a high score in Openness are more sensitive to art and beauty, (McCrae & Sutin, 2009). According to previous studies, engaging with art and beauty is connected to the character strength of Openness. ??arcus, Machilek, and Schutz (2006) have explained that open people show both intellectual and artistic tendencies because they express themselves with these interests, they express their emotions, their creativity, their opinions and curiosity. In addition, Yamagata et al.'s work ??2006) indicate that the trait of being intellectually curious is connected to the traits of being imaginative and sensitive to art because the same genes contribute to expressing these three personality traits. In the positive psychology tradition, Haidt and Keltner (2004) predicted that Openness to Experience would display a strong relationship with appreciation of beauty.

A study by Furnham and Petrides (2003) indicated that happiness was positively related to Openness to Experience ( $r = .38$ ,  $N = 88$ ); and it is well known that artists are higher in Openness than nonartists. This reinforces our hypothesis that artists will evidence higher levels of trait Happiness than nonartists. In a similar vein, Csikszentmihalyi (1991) has shown that happiness is related to flow (flow is characterized by engagement with a high level of mindful challenge). He studied artists who would spend hours and hours on artistic activities, such as painting, with full concentration and he argued that it seems they are engaged with artistic activity due to the intrinsic happiness the process brings to them, much more than because of external rewards such as money or status.

## 6 h) Engagement with Beauty and Happiness and Life Satisfaction

Is there a relationship between being engaged with beauty and trait Happiness? A search of the research literature reveals that there are no published empirical studies that have explicitly examined this question. There are, however, some studies concerning subjective well-being (SWB) and life satisfaction. In Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin's (1985) seminal paper on the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) they note that SWB has three components. Two of the components are emotional: high positive affect (such as happiness) and low negative affect; and the third component is a cognitive judgmental process: satisfaction with life. Happiness can also be

viewed as a state (happy in the moment), or a trait (generally happy much of the time and in many contexts). It is trait

Happiness with which we are concerned and Diener et al. (1985) reported correlations of .57 and .58, in two samples, between trait Happiness and the SWLS. This is a fairly stable finding: the cognitive judgement of being satisfied with one's life is moderately highly correlated with being emotionally happy as a trait, but they are also clearly two different aspects of human experience. For example, a study in India found a correlation of .40 between trait Happiness and the SWLS (Davender, Pratibha, Kumar, Kumar, & Nara, 2012).

Isaacowitz, Vaillant, and Seligman (2003) analyzed the relationship between satisfaction with life and various character strengths, including appreciation of beauty.

They found no significant relationship between life satisfaction and appreciation of beauty with their samples of young adults ( $N = 100$ ), middle aged adults ( $N = 96$ ), and a community sample of older adults ( $N = 94$ ). However, with  $N = 89$  participants of an elite sample of Harvard educated older adults (average age 78), they did find that appreciation of beauty predicted life satisfaction ( $r = .38$ ;  $p < .001$ ). It is unclear why the older Harvard sample was the only group to show a significant correlation between life and appreciation of beauty; perhaps the Harvard curriculum offers a lastingly effective aesthetic education.

Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2006), in a retrospective web-based study of 2087 adults found that the character strength of "appreciation of beauty and excellence" ameliorates the negative effects of psychological disorders, increasing life satisfaction (as measured by the SWLS) among depressed persons who score high on the subscale of appreciation of beauty and excellence from the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Of the 24 character strengths measured by the VIA-IS only two had this type of influence: love of learning and appreciation of beauty/excellence. We intend to further explore the relationships among the traits of Engagement with Beauty, Happiness, and Openness.

## 7 i. Hypotheses

The exploration of the literature shows that there are no published studies explicitly examining trait levels of happiness between artists and non-artists. Likewise, there are no published studies examining artists' trait levels of engagement with natural beauty, trait levels of engagement with artistic beauty, nor trait levels of moral beauty. Although there have been many studies showing that Openness is higher for artists than nonartists, we also sought to replicate such studies here. H1. Artists will show higher levels on a trait Happiness measure than non-artists. H2. Artists will show higher levels on trait measure of engagement with natural beauty and on a trait measure of engagement with artistic beauty when compared to non-artists. H3. Artists will show higher levels of the trait Openness to Experience than non-artists.

## 8 II.

## 9 Method a) Participants and Procedure

The participants were a convenience sample with  $N = 102$  artists, and  $N = 102$  people that did not perceive themselves as artists. These 204 participants completed three questionnaires: the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS; Diessner, Solom, Frost, & Parsons, 2008), the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999) and the Openness to Experience subscale from The Big Five Inventory (OE; John, Donahue, and Kentle, 1991). According to the main aim of this study, two groups of people were invited to complete these three online questionnaires: Artists and Non-Artists. We began our questionnaires by asking the participant whether they consider themselves an artist or non-artist. More than 600 visual artists (specifically painters were contacted) who had a profile on one of the big UK artists' directory website (<http://www.artistsdirectory.co.uk/default.aspx>) were invited via email; 102 of these artists completed all three questionnaires. Non-artists were invited from different groups of population in the UK (e.g. students, closed groups on Facebook), and most of them were asked directly by the researcher to fill out the questionnaires. Participants were from a wide variety of cities in the UK and all were over 18 years old. Approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review board at the first author's university. and moral beauty. It measures these forms of Engagement with Beauty as traits. The EBS uses a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from very unlike me to very much like me on questions such as "When perceiving beauty in nature I feel changes in my body, such as a lump in my throat, an expansion in my chest, faster heartbeat, or other bodily responses," "When perceiving beauty in a work of art I feel something like a spiritual experience, perhaps a sense of oneness or being united with the universe or a love of the entire world," and "When perceiving an act of moral beauty I find that I desire to become a better person." The Engagement with Moral Beauty subscale scores can range from and the other two subscales can range from 4-28; the EBS total score ranges from 14-98. Higher scores indicate higher levels of Engagement with Beauty. The EBS has shown strong internal consistency and temporal validity across the scores of its subscales. International studies with translations of EBS in Iran, Germany, Cyprus, and Croatia, as well as in English among bilingual Samoans, demonstrated alphas from .85-.94 and showed a similar factor structure across cultures (Richel et al., 2008). Predictive validity has been shown for the three subscales and for total score In this current study, the EBS total score had an alpha of .93, and the subscales had alphas ranging from .86 to .89.

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## 10 ii. Subjective Happiness Scale

The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) was created by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999). This scale is also known as the General Happiness Scale. The SHS is a brief instrument for measuring subjective happiness as a trait. It contains four questions with a choice of responses on a seven-point Likert scale. Strong internal consistency of the measure has been demonstrated across various samples of age groups, cultures, occupations, and languages (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The construct validity of this scale has also been supported by discriminant and convergent validity studies (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). According to studies by Seligman (2002) the mean score of this scale amongst a group of adult Americans is 4.8 and two-third of scores ranging from 3.8 to 5.8. There were no significant age or gender differences for scores on the SHS. The SHS has shown strong reliability, with Cronbach's alphas of  $M = 0.86$  and ranging from .79 -.94 for various samples. Moreover, test-retest reliabilities from three weeks to one year period displayed correlations ranging from .55 to .90 (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). In this current study, the alpha of the SHS was .88.

### iii. The Big Five Inventory-Openness Sub-Scale

The Big Five Inventory (BFI) is a self-report measure, created by John, Donahue, and Kentle (1991), tapping the five factor model of personality; thus it has subscales to measure Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. This scale includes 44 questions and the Openness subscale in the BFI contains 10 items on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from disagrees strongly, to agree strongly. The alpha reliabilities of BFI subscales range from .75 to .90 with an average alpha above .80 and three-month test-retest temporal stability ranging from .80 to .90 with an average of .85 (John & Srivastava, 1999). In the current study, the alpha for the Openness subscale was .86.

## 11 III.

## 12 Results

H1. Artists demonstrated higher levels on a trait Happiness measure than the comparison group of non-artists,  $t(202) = 2.98$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = .40$  (between a small and medium effect size). See Table ??.

H2. Our second hypothesis was also confirmed. Artists showed higher levels of trait engagement with natural beauty than did the non-artist comparison group,  $t(202) = 4.21$ ,  $p < .001$ , with medium effect size of  $d = .59$ .

Likewise artists also demonstrated higher levels of trait engagement with artistic beauty than did the non-artists,  $t(202) = 6.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a large effect size of  $d = .89$ . Although we did not make a hypothesis concerning artists' levels of engagement with moral beauty, the results showed no significant difference between groups, although there was a tendency towards artists being more engaged by moral beauty than non-artists,  $t(202) = 1.66$ ,  $p = .098$ , with a small effect size of  $d = .23$ .

H3. Artists demonstrated higher levels of the trait Openness to experience, confirming our third hypothesis,  $t(202) = 9.52$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a very large effect size of  $d = 1.3$ .

E1. Our exploratory study of the relationships among Engagement with Beauty, Openness, and trait Happiness revealed interesting results. Openness had large significant positive correlations with Engagement with Beauty and a medium significant positive correlation with Happiness. Happiness had strong medium significant positive correlations with Engagement with Beauty. For Artists there was no relationship between Openness and Happiness, whereas there was for non-Artists. When we partialled out Openness from the relationship between Engagement with Beauty and Happiness for the non-Artists, the correlation remained a medium positive correlation for both Artists and non-Artists (see Table ??).

## 13 IV.

## 14 Discussion

Although past research has shown that artists have many negative emotions, no study has been published concerning whether artists also have higher or lower levels of trait Happiness than non-artists. Our study shows that 102 painters in the UK have significantly higher levels of trait Happiness than did a comparison group of 102 non-artists. We believe this is because the creation of art brings happiness to one's soul; however, we cannot be confident of this conclusion as our data are correlational not causal. According to Maxim Gorkey, a Russian novelist, "when work is a pleasure, life is a joy! When work is a duty, life is slavery" (as cited in Myers and Diener, 1995, p. 15). As we pointed out in our introductory section, artists often experience flow during their artistic activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) and happiness has a relationship with flow (Myers and Diener, 1995). Perhaps artists in our study were happier than non-artists because they might be more engaged with what they do than non-artists.

At first glance it may seem too obvious to hypothesize that artists will score higher on tests of the trait of engagement with beauty than However, for most of the 20 th century artists spurned beauty in art as superficial, and art critics were harsh on the concept of beauty in art as well (Danto, 2003). Therefore we felt we were taking a risk hypothesizing that artists are more engaged by beauty than nonartists. Nonetheless, artists scored much higher on engagement with artistic beauty than did non-artists (large effect size); and we showed that artists also are more engaged by the beauty of nature than non-artists (medium effect size). Perhaps because there is a stereotype of artists being somewhat unconventional when it comes to morality, it is not surprising that they showed no difference on engagement with moral beauty from the comparison group on non-artists.

As has been shown in many past studies, our sample of artists scored much higher on Openness than the comparison group (very large effect size). This again fits the cultural stereotype of artists thinking outside the box, being intrigued by the unusual, and open to new ideas and experiences.

Our exploratory study of the relationships among Engagement with Beauty, Openness, and trait Happiness showed that Openness positively correlated with engagement with natural, artistic, and moral beauty. Past studies have shown this in the general population; in a study with an  $N = 3,498$ , Openness correlated .30 with Engagement with Natural Beauty (ENB), .45 with Artistic Beauty (EAB), and .18 with Moral Beauty (EMB) (Diessner et al., 2013). Our data here show the same pattern with Openness correlating the highest with EAB, second highest with ENB, and third with EMB; see Table ??.

Because trait Happiness is something most people seem to desire for themselves and their loved ones, it is important to know what will predict it. In our study artists' levels of Openness did not predict Happiness, but among our non-Artist group it did (see Table ??). Engagement with Beauty, in the three forms of ENB, EAB, and EMB all predicted Happiness for both Artists and non-Artists. However, when we controlled for Engagement with Beauty on the correlation between Openness and Happiness for non-artists, the correlation dropped to almost nothing (see Table ??). This indicates that whatever relationship Openness has with Happiness, it may well be mediated by Engagement with Beauty.

V.

## 15 Limitations and Future Research

Our biggest limitation is the external validity of our data. Because we did not collect a random sample we cannot generalize to other populations; likewise, as we did not collect gender information, it attenuates the ability to generalize our findings. We invited artists to participate via email, and only one out of six of them participated in our study. It might be that only artists who were open-minded and happy enough to respond to an unsolicited email participated in this study, thus skewing the results. In addition, we invited only artists who are painters. Thus, further studies need to be performed across different groups of artists to evaluate the possibility of differences between artists who engage with various forms of the arts.

We suggested that our finding of artists being happier than non-artists may be due to them experiencing flow more often, and possibly enjoying their work more than non-artists. A further study should investigate the relation between level of happiness and work satisfaction among a random sampling of artists and non-artists to examine this hypothesis.

VI. <sup>1</sup>



Figure 1:

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