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Sad Art Gives Voice to Our Own Sadness

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Abstract

People tend to show greater liking for expressions of sadness when these expressions are described as art. Why does this effect arise? One obvious hypothesis would be that describing something as art makes people more likely to regard it as *fictional*, and people prefer expressions of sadness that are not real. We contrast this obvious hypothesis with a hypothesis derived from the philosophical literature. On this alternative hypothesis, describing something as art makes people more inclined to *appropriate* it, i.e., to see it as an expression of their own sadness. Study 1 found that describing the exact same sad text as art (e.g., a monologue) as opposed to not-art (e.g., a diary entry) led to increased liking for the work. Study 2 showed that this effect is not mediated by fictionality. Study 3 showed that the effect is mediated by appropriation. Study 4 looked at the impact of a manipulation of fictionality. Describing a work as fictional did lead to increased liking, but this effect was completely mediated by appropriation. These results provide at least some initial support for the appropriation hypothesis.

"Whenever I feel depressed and overwhelmed, I feel the urge to shout to the world the anguish of my soul, the torments I've experienced, all my sorrows—but no one wants to hear about them. Then a good man comes along who portrays all my sufferings in his films, and I can go see them over and over again"

Hossain Sabzian in Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up*

Many people enjoy sad art. As existing research has shown, people show a tendency to like sad literature (Koopman 2013; Koopman 2015; Kraxenberger & Menninghaus 2017; Rozin et al. 2013), sad music (Garrido & Schubert 2011; Huron 2011; Huron & Vuoskoski 2020; Sachs et al. 2015; Taruffi & Koelsch 2014; Vuoskoski et al. 2011) and sad films (De Wied et al. 1995; Goldstein 2009; Hanich et al. 2014; Oliver 1993; Oliver 2008; Schramm & Wirth 2010).

For a concrete example, consider Carlos Fuentes' novel *Las Buenas Conciencias*. The novel introduces the reader to a character, Jaime Ceballos, and describes his slow but methodical progression from independence of mind to social conformity. We watch, with unremitting sadness, Jaime's transformation into the good man of society his family expected him to be. Although the novel is profoundly bleak, it has been popular for over six decades. Many people have chosen to spend money to purchase the book and read the story.

Part of what makes interest in sad art so puzzling is that people do not seem to enjoy sadness in the same way outside the domain of art. Indeed, when people are outside the domain of art, they may have almost exactly the opposite reaction. Imagine that you are not reading a novel but are instead simply having an ordinary conversation. You meet a stranger who tells you that his name is Jaime Ceballos. He begins to tell you about how his life has been going: his tyrannical upbringing, his betrayal of everything he values, his life as a corrupt politician. Even if the words he is saying are drawn verbatim from *Las Buenas Conciencias*, you might find that you are not exactly enjoying his barrage of complaints.

As we will see, some existing research seems to suggest that there might be some important difference between these two kinds of cases, i.e., that people appreciate expressions of sadness within art in a way that they do not appreciate them outside the domain of art. If this effect does turn out to be real, it seems to be revealing something fundamental about why people like sad art. In particular, it seems to be suggesting that there is something about conceptualizing a work as art rather than just as an ordinary part of life that leads people to especially appreciate the sadness expressed in it. A key question, then, will be whether this is a real effect and, if so, what explains it. What is it about seeing something as art that transforms people's reactions in this way?

One obvious hypothesis would be that it is a matter of *fictionality*. On this first hypothesis, what makes us enjoy sadness within the context of art is that we recognize that the sadness is not real. We recognize, for example, that Jaime Ceballos does not actually exist and that none of the sad things that happen to him in the novel occurred in reality. Thus, whatever would be upsetting or disturbing about these events had they occurred in real life is absent, or at least much diminished, in a merely fictional version.

However, work within the philosophy of art suggests another, very different hypothesis. On this other hypothesis, the enjoyment of sadness within art is primarily a matter of what philosophers call *appropriation* (Elliott 1966; Levinson 1982; Ribeiro 2014, 2022; Walton 1988). That is, when a work of art expresses sadness, we don't merely experience it as being about someone else's sadness. We experience it as expressing *our own* sadness. For example, if you yourself are feeling alienated and hopeless, you might read *Las Buenas Conciencias* and feel that the words of this novel are somehow expressing your own feelings of self-betrayal and guilt. But you experience the work in this way in part because it is presented as a work of art. If you

were outside the domain of art and a person uttered those same words, you might feel that these words were simply a description of the speaker's life, and you would not experience them as capturing or expressing your own emotions.

The appropriation hypothesis offers a very different explanation from the one offered by the fictionality hypothesis. Of course, there is a general tendency such that if something is presented as a work of art, people will be more inclined to guess that the events depicted within it did not actually happen, but the appropriation hypothesis suggests that this tendency does not itself explain people's greater liking for sadness in the art context. Rather, this change in appreciation is driven by a different process: when people conceive of something as a work of art, then regardless of whether they think the events depicted within it happened to a real person, they do not experience the work as simply an expression or depiction of that person's emotions. They experience it, at least in part, as expressing the emotions they have themselves.

Conceptualizing an object as art

The present studies are concerned with the impact of conceptualizing an object as a work of art on the liking of works that express sadness. If we take something that expresses sadness and simply frame it as a work of art, will this change the way people react to it? And if so, how?

This relatively specific question can be seen as one part of the much broader question as to why people seek out and enjoy art that expresses negative emotions. A tremendous amount of work has been devoted to exploring this broader question, and although the issue is not resolved, existing research has led to many important insights (Aristotle 1997; Augustine 1960; Hume 1987; for contemporary discussion, see, e.g., Bloom 2021; Carroll 1990; De Clercq 2014; Eaton 1982; Feagin 1983; Menninghaus et al. 2017a; Morreall 1985; Neil 1982; Levinson 2014;

Robinson 2004; Sizer 2019; Todd 2014; Walton 2000; Yanal 1999; for reviews, see Smuts 2009; Strohl 2019).

Much of this research has been devoted to the fundamental question as to why people would ever value expressions of sadness or other negative emotions in the first place. In response to this question, researchers have developed a number of different theories, including theories that emphasize catharsis (Aristotle 1997; Koopman 2013; Nussbaum 1986; Scheele 2001), theories that emphasize feeling connected to others (Attie-Picker et al. 2024), art-derived solace (Taruffi & Koelsch 2014; Van de Cruys, Chamberlain, & Wagemans 2017), and many others (Ahn, Jin, & Ritterfeld 2012; Busselle & Bilandzic 2008; Green, Brock, & Kaufman 2004; Green, Chatham, & Sestir 2012; Oliver & Bartsch 2011).

The present paper is not an attempt to answer this broader question. Rather, it is simply an attempt to explore the difference between art and non-art. For example, suppose one accepts a theory based on catharsis. One would then immediately face a question as to why expressions of sadness within art are more likely to create catharsis than expressions of sadness outside of art. Similarly for each of the other possible theories.

One obvious initial suggestion would be that the key difference between art and non-art lies in the formal features of works of art. For example, part of the reason why people enjoy reading expressions of sadness within poems and novels is that they are written in a way that is deeply different from anything an ordinary person might say in an everyday conversation. Existing research has explored our enjoyment of these features with great detail and sophistication (Alter & Oppenheimer 2008; Menninghaus et al. 2017b; Oppenheimer 2008;

Reber, Schwartz, & Winkielman 2004; Rolison & Edworthy 2012). For example, increasing the presence of alliteration, meter, and rhyme in a poem increases liking of the work (Menninghaus et al. 2017b). Conversely, rearranging the musical structure of pop and rock songs led to a decrease in liking (Rolison & Edworthy 2012). These findings are deeply important to the larger question as to why people enjoy expressions of sadness in art, but they do not bear directly on the question as to whether merely conceptualizing something as art will itself lead to greater enjoyment.

However, a number of studies do show that merely framing something as a work of art can have an impact on people's reactions. For example, framing an excerpt of text as a newspaper article versus a work of literature impacted how long it took people to read the text and how much they remembered it afterwards (Zwaan 1991). Participants spent more time attending to the meaning of the text when they thought they were reading a work of literature. Similarly, a study presented the exact same visual stimuli in an art context vs. a realistic context and found that participants rated the same visual stimuli as more pleasant and spent more time viewing them when engaging with the image in the art context (Arai & Kawabata 2016). Finally, a study presented disgusting photographs either as pictures from a recent exhibition at a famous art museum or as pictures for a website on hygiene instruction. Participants reported higher levels of positive affect when the photographs were presented as art (Wagner et al. 2014).

Furthermore, functional magnetic resonance imaging studies have also found that presenting an image as art triggers brain activation patterns associated with aesthetic appraisal and hedonic pleasure. For example, presenting an image as an artwork rather than one from everyday life influenced patterns of brain activation in ways that suggested stronger emotional reactions and greater attention to the details of the image (Cupchick et al. 2009). Relatedly, researchers found greater activation of the right precuneus, bilateral anterior cingulate cortex,

and temporoparietal junction when participants were told they were viewing an image from the Museum of Modern Art versus an adult education center (Silveria et al. 2015). Finally, another fMRI study found greater activity in the medial orbitofrontal cortex and prefrontal cortex when participants were told they were viewing an image from a gallery versus an image generated by a computer (Kirk et al. 2009). The study also found that the framing of the image impacted liking and hedonic value of the image such that participants liked it more and thought it was more valuable when they were told it was from a gallery.

Turning now to the central topic of the present paper, we face a question as to whether framing an object as a work of art specifically leads to an increase in the degree to which people report liking the object itself. To our knowledge four studies have explored that question (Greger, Leder, & Kremer 2014; Mocaiber et al. 2011; Pelowski et al., 2017; van Dongen et al. 2016). All of these studies focused on photography or images. Three studies found an increase in liking, while one found no significant effect. One study presented photographs as either works of art or press photographs (Greger, Leder, & Kremer 2014). When the content of the photograph was negative, people rated the photo more positively in the art than in the non-art framing. A second study found that framing affective images as either art (e.g., stills from a movie) rather than non-art (e.g., scenes from a documentary) led to greater appreciation (van Dongen et al. 2016). Additionally, a correlational study which asked participants to classify a series of images as either “art” or “not-art” found that there was a positive relationship between classifying something as “art” and liking of the image (Pelowski et al. 2017). Finally, a study looked at the effect of presenting photographs of mutilated bodies as stills from a movie vs. images taken in real life (Mocaiber et al. 2011). Presenting the pictures as movie stills led to decreased cardiac activity (associated with lower stress levels), but there was no significant effect on ratings of the actual photographs.

Overall, then, existing work provides at least some evidence that conceptualizing something as a work of art leads to increased liking. A key question now is how to explain this effect. What explains why we find sadness in art pleasurable?

The Fictionality Hypothesis

One obvious hypothesis would be that it is a matter of *fictionality*. On this first hypothesis, what makes us enjoy sadness within the context of art is that we recognize that none of the sad events actually occurred. In other words, whatever would be upsetting or disturbing about these events had they occurred in real life, is absent. Much as we enjoy a scary amusement ride, experiencing the thrills while knowing full well that we are perfectly safe, fiction lets us experience sadness in a context without practical implications, for ourselves or others (Bloom 2021; Morreall 1985). In this way, fictionality functions as a background condition for the enjoyment of an otherwise aversive emotion (Strohl 2018).

There is some empirical evidence in support of this hypothesis. A neuroimaging study found that merely labeling a text as fiction led to importantly different patterns of activation, including greater activation in brain regions associated with offline simulation and theory-of-mind (Altmann et al. 2014). When people watched a sad video clip that was presented as either fictional or real, they reported equal amounts of sadness in the two conditions, but they reported lower anxiety levels when they were told the clip was fictional, suggesting that fictionality allows people to experience sadness in a way that is not adulterated with anxiety (Goldstein 2009). Similarly, participants reported lower negative affect and higher positive affect in episodes of being sadly moved by fiction in contrast to non-fictional episodes represented in media and episodes from their own life (Menninghaus et al. 2015). Self-report data suggest that

listening to sad music is often rewarding precisely because there are no real-life implications (Taruffi & Koelsch 2014).

The fictionality hypothesis, then, has two parts. First, it posits an effect of art on perceptions of fictionality—conceptualizing an event as being part of an artwork leads us to take the event as fictional. Second, it posits an effect of fictionality on liking—taking a sad event to be fictional increases our enjoyment of the event.

A key test of this hypothesis is whether it can make accurate predictions about works of art that are not understood as fictional. Suppose that people read a poem about being a drug addict, and suppose that they think this poem is not fictional at all but just a completely accurate description of what actually happened in the life of the poet. The fictionality hypothesis predicts that since work of this type is not seen as fictional, there should be no impact of conceptualizing it as art on liking. In other words, this sort of work should generate no greater liking than what we would find for equivalent works that were not conceptualized as art.

The Appropriation Hypothesis

We will be proposing a very different hypothesis, which draws on philosophical work on the notion of *appropriation* (Elliott 1966; Levinson 1982; Ribeiro 2014, 2022; Walton 1988). When people engage with a work of art, they often experience it as an expression of their own emotions. Thus, if a person listens to a song about heartbreak, she might experience it as expressing her own feelings of heartbreak, and similarly for a poem about despair, or a short story about melancholy. In such cases, we can say that the person is "appropriating" the emotions in the work of art. The appropriation hypothesis says that it is this tendency to appropriate that explains why people show greater liking for expressions of sadness when they conceptualize those expressions as art rather than non-art.

At the core of this hypothesis is the claim that people show a greater tendency to appropriate when they conceptualize something as art. To illustrate, suppose a friend says to you: "I feel so alone." What is she trying to do by saying that? She presumably wants to communicate something about her own emotions, and she wants you to respond accordingly. When she expresses how sad she is to you, you coordinate a set of psychological processes in response to her distress (Batson 1987; Tomasello 2020). For example, you might feel empathetically sad yourself, you might outwardly express distress as way of acknowledging her sadness, and you might try to hug her or engage in other soothing behaviors (Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, & McShane 2006; Zahn-Waxler et al. 1992).

Now imagine your friend using the very same sentence as part of a theatrical monologue. Whether or not her sentence is meant to be fictional—and so whether or not the sentence is a true statement about her emotions—she is clearly trying to do something very different here. Because she is presenting what she is doing as part of a work of art, she is not simply attempting to communicate her own emotions. Indeed, it would be inappropriate if the audience were to respond by showing concern for her well-being. In saying "I feel so alone," she is inviting the audience to *appropriate* this expression, i.e., to experience it as an expression of their own emotions. As the philosopher Arthur Danto writes, when a work is meant to be appropriated in this way, "it is about each individual that reads the text at the moment that individual reads it, and it contains an implied indexical: each work is about the 'I' that reads the text" (Danto 1984: 16).

The hypothesis we will be exploring is that appropriation explains why people show greater liking for expressions of sadness when they conceptualize those expressions as art. The hypothesis is that conceptualizing an expression as art leads to increased appropriation and that increased appropriation leads to increased liking.

Importantly, the appropriation hypothesis predicts that there should be an impact of being perceived as art on liking even controlling for fictionality. Consider an artistic monologue about feeling alone. Even if participants regard the monologue as a literal and non-fictional description of real events, the appropriation hypothesis predicts that the fact that they conceptualize it as a work of art should lead them to show greater liking. They might think that the monologue describes something that actually happened to the author, but all the same, the fact that they conceptualize it as a work of art should make them more inclined to appropriate it, i.e., to experience it as an expression of their own emotions.

Current Studies

In the present studies, we use an established paradigm in which the same stimuli (e.g., text or an image) is framed as either art or non-art. We investigate whether the experience of engaging with sad art is preferred to engaging with sad non-art, and the extent to which fictionality and/or appropriation explains that preference.

Study 1 aims to establish the basic effect underlying the two hypotheses, namely, the effect of art (vs. non-art) on liking. Study 2 (fictionality) and Study 3 (appropriation) use mediation analysis to determine whether fictionality or appropriation might explain the effect of art on liking. Finally, Study 4 explored the relationship between fictionality and appropriation by testing whether the effect of fictionality on liking is mediated by appropriation. All data and code are available on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/8v9yw/?view_only=478aa7ee218e4d7eb1aefd0733b945c8).

Study 1

Study 1 investigated whether people show greater liking for a text that expresses sadness when they think of the text as a work of art versus when the same text is framed as non-art. Participants read one of eight texts and were told that they were either reading a work of art (e.g., a monologue) or something outside the context of art (e.g., a diary). They were then asked to rate how much they liked what they read. Thus, this study provided a basic test of the hypothesis that conceptualizing something as art leads to increased liking even when controlling for the formal properties of the stimuli.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate differences in evaluations of art versus non-art for non-visual based stimuli. Moreover, the two studies which compared liking for art versus non-art for negative stimuli directly probed participants to make judgements where there was active harm involved (e.g., Mocaiber et al., 2011, presented participants with images of mutilated bodies). In the present study, the vignettes contained a variety of different kinds of sad content.

Methods

After completing Studies 1, 2 and 3, we had some concerns about the methods used in those studies, and we decided to re-run Study 1 using improved methods. The study reported here is the improved version; the original version is available in Supplementary Materials. This study differs from the original Study 1 in two respects. (In both respects, Studies 2 and 3 use the methods of the original Study 1.) First, participants were recruited through Prolific rather than through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, which was leading to excessively high rates of failure on our comprehension checks and attention checks . Second, instead of referring to the

person who wrote the text as an artist in one condition but not in the other, the person is referred to simply as "someone" in both conditions.

Participants. Six hundred participants (37.3% Female, M_{age} = 34.3 years, SD_{age} = 11.7years) were recruited via Prolific Academic. They were paid $.85 in exchange for taking part in this three-minute study. All methods and analyses were pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/YQP_DTT). This research was approved by the Yale Institutional Review Board number 0907005485.

Stimuli. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (art/non-art) x 4 (vignette pair: short story/blog post, song lyrics/tweet, monologue/diary entry, movie script/dialogue) between-participants experimental design.

For example, participants in the monologue (art) condition were told the following:

> *Suppose you read an excerpt of a monologue from a play written by someone which appeared in their new production. This person then posted the excerpt of their monologue on their social media page, which is what you're about to read.*

Participants in the diary entry (non-art) condition were told the following:

> *Suppose you read an excerpt of a diary entry written by someone which was featured in their journal. This person then posted the excerpt of this diary entry on one of their social media pages, which is what you're about to read.*

Participants in both the monologue and diary conditions then read the same text (taken from Plath, 1962/2000).

Tonight I am ugly. I have lost all faith in my ability to attract males. And in the female animal that is a rather pathetic malady. My social contact is at the lowest ebb. Bill, my one link with Saturday night life, is gone, and I have no one left. No one at all. I don't care about anyone, and the feeling is quite obviously mutual. What is it that makes one attract others? Last year I had several boys who wanted me for various reasons. I was sure of my looks, sure of my magnetism, and my ego was satiated. Now, after my three blind dates – two of which flopped utterly and completely, the third has also deflated. I wonder how I ever thought I was desirable. Someone, somewhere, can you understand me a little, love me a little? For all my despair, for all my ideals, for all that – I love life. But it is hard, and I have so much – so very much to learn –

Now I'm going to be more ambitious: this week I won't share my
worry about visiting with Ted, Nor my worries in general. work.
Confiding in him is my worst weakness. I feel he deserves to bear my
pain and share it, but I must shoulder my aloneness somehow.

See https://osf.io/8v9yw/ for the full list of stimuli used in Studies 1-3. Participants were then asked to answer three questions presented in a randomized order: *"How much did you enjoy reading this [text]", "How much did you like reading this [text]?", and "To what extent did you find reading this [text] pleasurable?"* Responses were recorded on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much so.

Results

Thirty-five participants were excluded for failing to answer all the questions and failing the manipulation and attention checks. The following analyses were conducted with the remaining five hundred and sixty-five participants.

First, we assessed the internal consistency of our three measures of liking (Like, Enjoy, and Pleasurable). These measures were found to have good consistency (α = .96) and were therefore averaged into a single measure of Liking. Figure 1 shows the results for this Liking measure by condition.

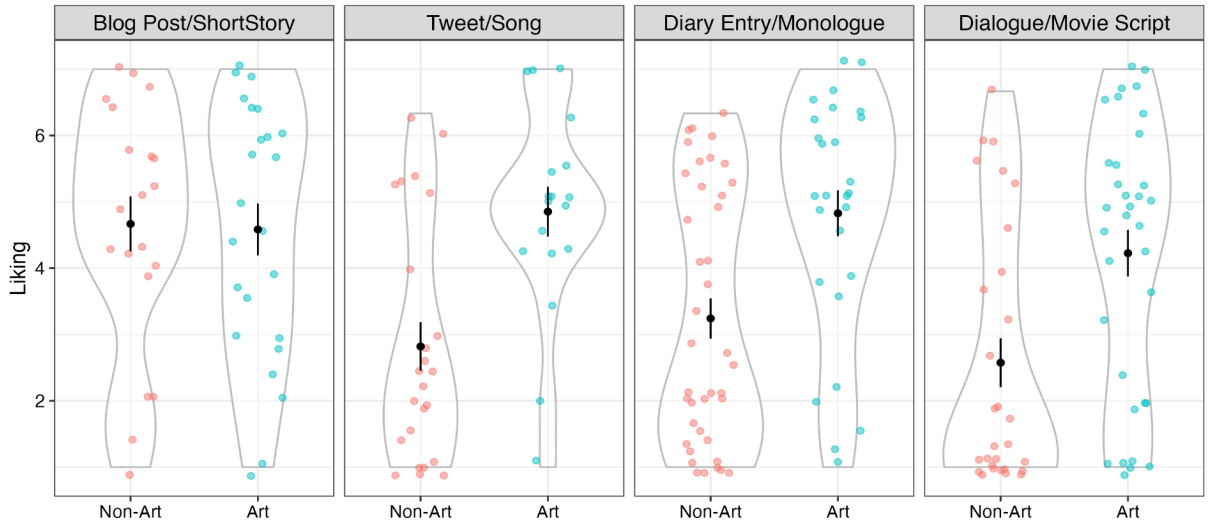

Figure 1: Violin plot showing liking ratings by vignette and art/non-art in Study 1. Error bars indicate +/- 1 standard error.

Results were analyzed with linear mixed-effects regression using the lme4 and lmerTest packages in R (Bates et al., 2015; Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2017), using art/non-art (0 = non-art, 1 = art) as a fixed factor and vignette pair as a random factor (random intercepts

only). We found that liking was significantly predicted by art/non-art, $b = 1.49$, $SE = .14$, $p < .001$, $t = 10.98$, 95% CI = [1.23, 1.76]. Inspection of the pairs indicated that there was a difference between all pairs of art/non-art vignettes (see Table 1 for pairwise comparisons).

Table 1: Pairwise comparisons of art vs. non-art conditions for each vignette pair

Vignette Pair	Text Type	*M*	*SE*	*df*	*t*	*p*
Short Story/Blog Post	Art	4.58	.39	41.04	.15	.88
	Non-Art	4.67	.42			
Song/Tweet	Art	4.85	.38	38.76	-3.88	<.001
	Non-Art	2.82	.37			
Monologue/Diary Entry	Art	4.83	.35	58.21	-3.45	.001
	Non-Art	3.24	.30			
Movie Script/ Dialogue	Art	4.23	.35	60.04	-3.24	.002
	Non-Art	2.57	.37			

Discussion

There was a significant main effect of art/non-art on liking such that people rated the text higher on liking in the art conditions compared to the non-art conditions. In other words, simply

conceptualizing a text as art increased liking across vignette pairs. The Tweet, diary entry, and dialogue were liked significantly less than the song, monologue, and movie script respectively. Extending previous work, we find this effect of art/non-art across a range of different kinds of art forms. Thus, it does not appear to be an effect that arises only for one specific art form. These initial findings support the hypothesis that people prefer sad things when they think of them as art. This means that simply regarding a text as art increases liking for an identical text that is not characterized as art.

Study 2

In this study, we were interested in whether perceived fictionality accounts for the difference in liking between art and non-art found in Study 1. To test this hypothesis, participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in the same between-subjects design and asked to rate the extent to which they believed that the events and emotions described in the vignettes were based on reality. They were also asked how much they liked what they read. If people preferred sad art because they thought that the sadness in it was not real, then there should be no difference in liking between the art and non-art conditions after controlling for perceived realness. In other words, if fictionality explains liking, then a text that is *not* seen as fictional should be liked just as much whether people think of it as art or not.

Methods

Participants. Eight hundred participants (50.6% Female, M_{age} = 37.2 years, SD_{age} = 12.5 years) were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. They were paid $.10 in exchange for

taking part in this five-minute study. All methods and analyses were pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=44j225).

Two hundred and sixty-one participants were excluded for failing to answer all the questions and failing the manipulation and attention checks. To determine whether the proportion of participants being excluded differed by condition, we used generalized linear mixed effects models with exclusion as the dependent variable, art/non-art as a fixed effect and vignette pair as a random effect. This analysis found no significant effect of condition on rates of exclusion, χ^2 (1, N = 261) = 1.8, p = .18. To calculate power, we used bootstrap resampling from the data collected in Study 1 (1000 resamples). With the sample size after exclusions, this analysis indicates a power of 1 to detect the impact of art/non-art on liking.

Stimuli. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (art/non-art) x 4 (vignette pair: short story/blog post, song lyrics/tweet, monologue/diary entry, movie script/dialogue) between-participants experimental design. They were shown the vignettes used in the previous study.

Participants were then asked to answer the same three questions about liking presented in the previous study. They were also asked two questions about perceived realness presented in a randomized order: *"To what extent do you think the author really felt the emotions expressed by the [text]?"* (perceived realness of emotions) and *"To what extent do you think the events described in this [text] actually happened?"* (perceived realness of events). All responses were recorded on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much so.

Results

The three measures were combined in a scale of Liking (α = .95). Results were analyzed with a linear mixed-effects regression, using art/non-art as a fixed factor and vignette pair as a random factor (random intercepts only). First, a linear mixed effect regression analysis was conducted without the perceived realness covariates. We found that liking was significantly predicted by art/non-art, $b = .95$, SE = .16, $t = 5.97$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.64, 1.3]. All pairwise comparisons are included in Table 2. As the table shows, there was a significant difference between the art and non-art conditions within each vignette pair for all pairs except the short story/blog post pair.

Table 2: Pairwise comparisons of art vs. non-art conditions for each vignette pair

Vignette Pair	Text Type	*M*	*SE*	*df*	*t*	*p*
Short Story/Blog Post	Art	4.44	.23	123.89	-1.73	.086
	Non-Art	3.89	.23			
Song/Tweet	Art	4.01	.24	117.33	-3.63	<.001
	Non-Art	2.86	.21			
Monologue/Diary Entry	Art	4.00	.21	136.76	-2.20	.029
	Non-Art	3.31	.23			
Movie Script/ Dialogue	Art	3.81	.25	136.34	-4.27	<.001
	Non-Art	2.45	.20			

Then, a second linear mixed effect regression analysis was conducted with covariates. This analysis was the same as the previous one except that the two perceived realness questions were entered as fixed factors. In this model, there was still a significant effect of liking on art/non-art, $b = 1.03$, $SE = .16$, $t = 6.61$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.73, 1.34].

We then looked at the coefficients for realness of emotions and realness of events. Strikingly, these coefficients were in the opposite direction of what one might have expected. There was a significant effect such that the more people perceived the emotions to be real, the more they liked the text, $b = .17$, $SE = .07$, $t = 2.49$, $p = .013$, 95% CI [.04, .30] (see Figure 2). Similarly, there was a significant effect such that the more people perceived the events to be real, the more they liked the text, $b = .12$, $SE = .06$, $t = 1.97$, $p = .049$, 95% CI [.00, .25] (see Figure 3). In other words, we did not find that when participants regard an expression of sadness as purely fictional, they tend to like it more. Instead, we found a significant effect in the opposite direction: the more people regard an expression of sadness as real, the more they like it.

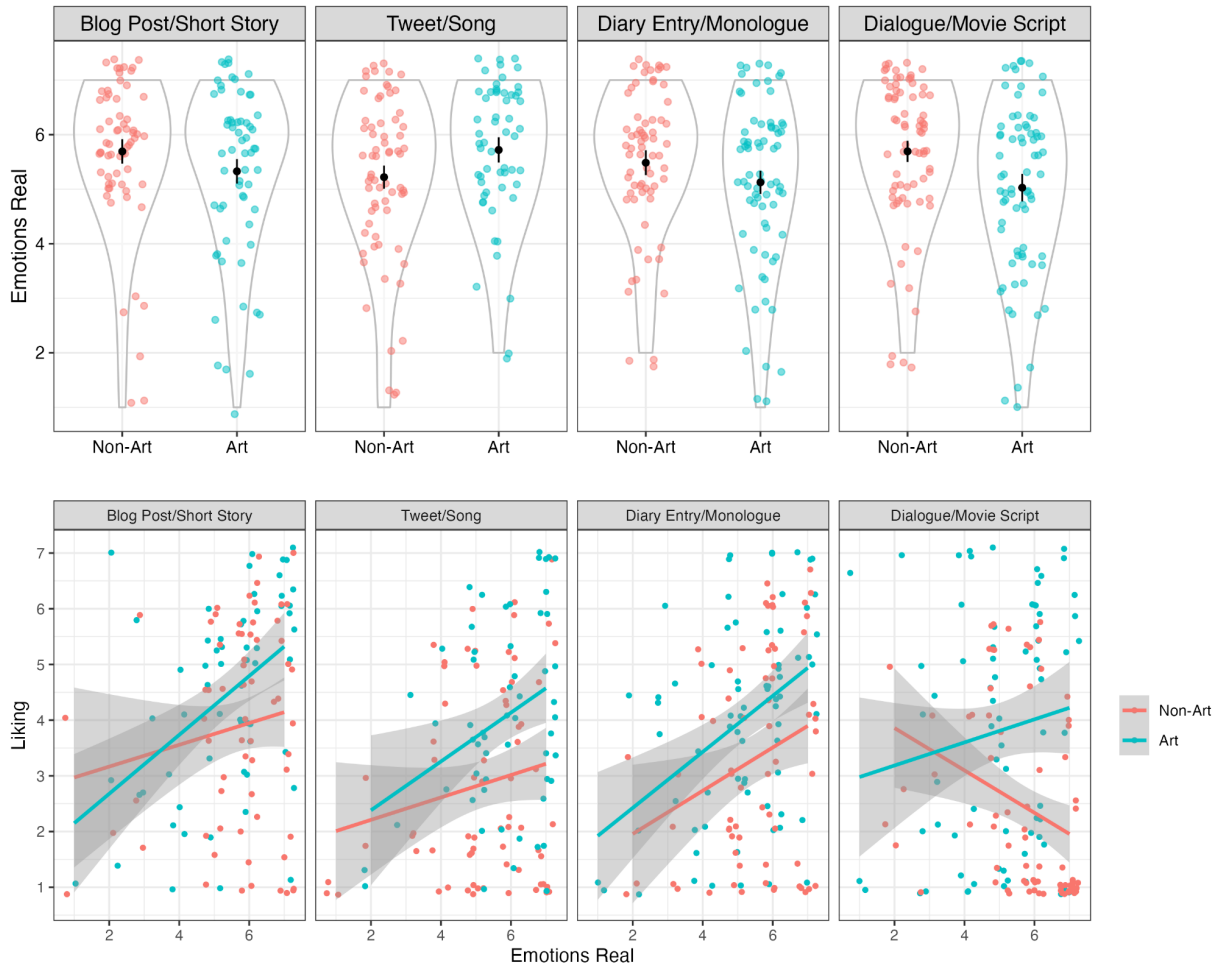

Figure 2: Violin plot of mean ratings of perceived realness of emotions. Error bars indicate +/- 1 standard error. Scatterplot of perceived realness of emotions and liking by art/non-art and vignette pair.

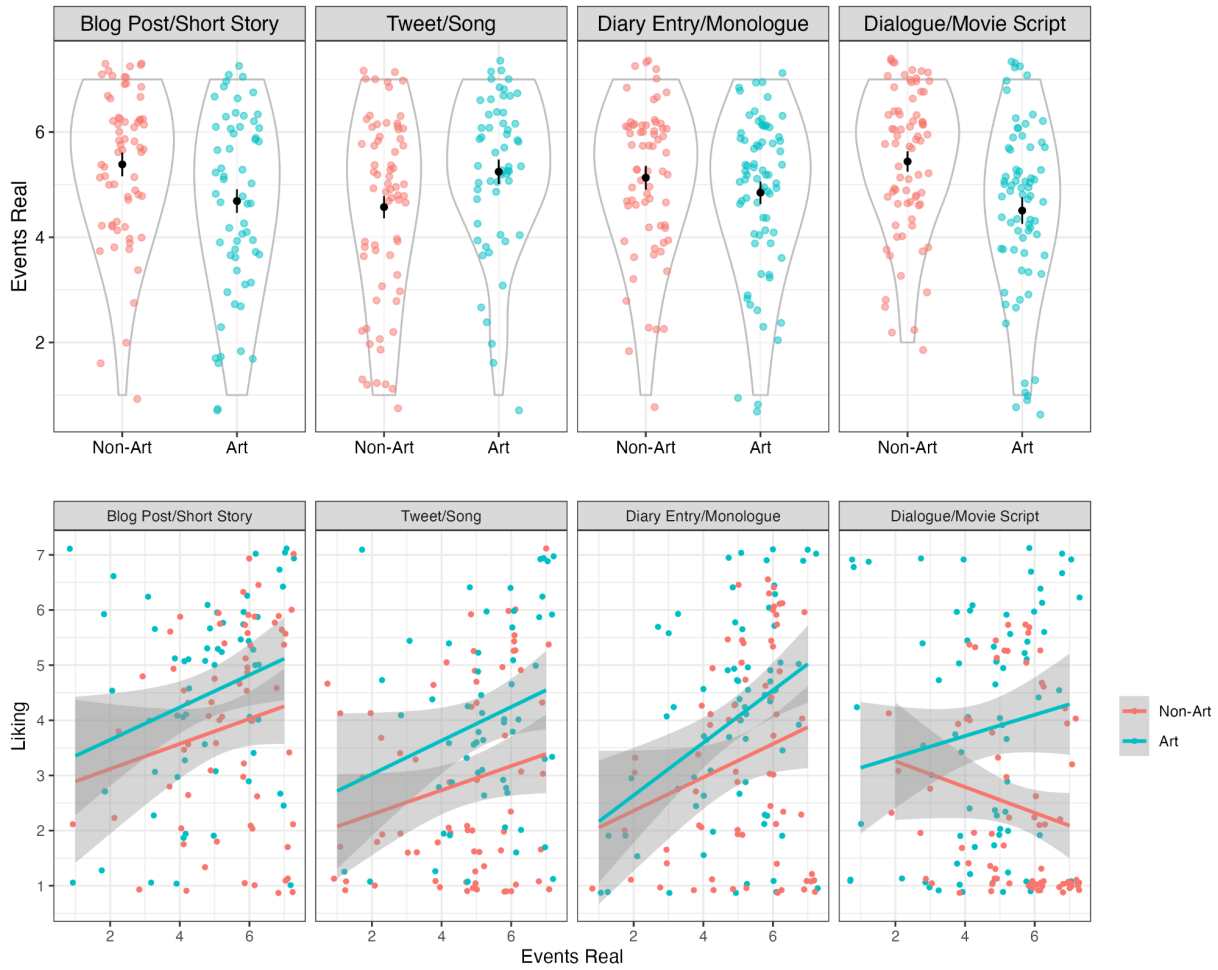

Figure 3: Violin plot of mean ratings of perceived realness of events. Error bars indicate +/- 1 standard error. Scatterplot of perceived realness of events and liking by art/non-art and vignette pair.

We were surprised by this result, so we ran additional analyses (not preregistered) to further explore the role of realness in these judgments. To determine whether there was an indirect effect of art/non-art on liking, we conducted mediation analyses using the mediation package in R (Tingley, Yamamoto, Hirose, Keele, & Imai 2014).

First, we looked at judgments of the realness of the emotions. There was a significant effect of condition on perceived realness of emotions, $b = -.25$, 95% CI [-0.50, -0.01]. There was also a significant effect of perceived realness of emotions on liking, $b = 0.22$, 95% CI [.11, .33]. We examined the average causal mediation effect (ACME) and the average direct effect (ADE). We found evidence for a significant ADE = 1.01, $p < .001$, CI [.70, 1.32]. We also found a significant indirect effect, ACME = -0.06, $p = .04$, CI [-0.14, 0.00], but strikingly, this indirect effect was in the opposite direction of the total effect. On the whole, participants showed greater liking for sad art than for sad non-art, but the indirect effect went in the opposite direction: participants thought that art was less likely than non-art to be real, and they actually show *more* liking when they thought the sad emotions were real than when they thought the sad emotions were purely fictional.

Next, we conducted a mediation analysis using exactly the same method, except that the mediator was perceived realness of events. There was a significant effect of condition on perceived realness of events, $b = -0.34$, 95% CI [-0.60, -0.07]. There was also a significant effect of perceived realness of events on liking, $b = 0.18$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.29]. Results indicated a significant indirect effect, ACME = -0.08, $p = .004$, CI [-0.15, -0.02]. We also found evidence for a significant ADE = 1.02, $p < .001$, CI [.74, 1.34].

Discussion

Just as in the previous study, there was an overall preference for sad vignettes that are described as art over sad vignettes that are not described as art. Strikingly, however, we found

that there was still a significant effect of art/non-art on liking, even after controlling for fictionality.

Indeed, the effect of fictionality actually went in the opposite direction. Participants thought that the emotions and events in a text were less likely to be real when the text was classified as art, but they liked the text *more* when they thought that the sad emotions and events described were real. So, for example, when participants read the lyrics of a song, they liked this song more to the extent that they thought that the sad emotions and events it described were completely real.

We were surprised by this correlational result. One possible interpretation would be that it reflects the causal impact of judgments of realness, i.e., that perceiving the sad events and emotions as real causes increased liking. If this causal interpretation is correct, we would face a further theoretical question as to why people show greater liking for expressions of sadness when they believe that the sadness is real. (For one possible theory, see Ribeiro 2022.) We explore this issue further in Study 4.

In short, it seems that the greater liking participants show for expressions of sadness in art (vs. non-art) is not explained by fictionality. If we want to explain this effect, we will have to look elsewhere.

Study 3

Study 2 found that perceived fictionality did not account for the difference in liking between art and non-art. In Study 3, we asked whether the concept of appropriation explains why people enjoy the expression of sadness more in the art conditions. We predicted that people would enjoy the expression of negative emotions to the extent that they could appropriate them, and that

people would appropriate to a greater extent in the art conditions. To test this hypothesis, participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in the same between-subjects design, read the same texts as in the previous two studies, and were asked how much they liked what they read. In this study, participants were also asked questions about appropriation, that is, the extent to which they felt that what they read expressed or gave voice to their own thoughts and feelings. We predicted that appropriation would mediate the effect of art/non-art on liking.

Methods

Participants. Four hundred participants (49.0% Female, M_{age} = 38.7 years, SD_{age} = 11.7 years) were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. They were paid $.10 in exchange for taking part in this five-minute study. All methods and analyses were pre-registered *(https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=8qw6jp*).

One hundred and fifty-three participants were excluded for failing to answer all the questions and failing the manipulation and attention checks. To determine whether the proportion of participants being excluded differed by condition, we used generalized linear mixed effects models with exclusion as the dependent variable, art/non-art as a fixed effect and vignette pair as a random effect. This analysis found no significant effect of condition on rates of exclusion, χ^2 (1, N = 241) = 2.6, p = .11. To calculate power with the sample size that remains after exclusions, we used bootstrap resampling from the data collected in Study 2 (1000 resamples). With the sample size after exclusions, this analysis indicates a power of .97 to detect the impact of art/non-art on liking.

Stimuli. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (art/non-art) x 4 (vignette pair: short story/blog post, song lyrics/tweet, monologue/diary entry, movie

script/dialogue) between-participants experimental design. They were shown the vignettes used in the previous study.

Participants then answered the same three questions about liking presented in a randomized order as in the previous studies. They were also asked three questions about appropriation, presented in a randomized order (scale created drawing on work by Elliott 1966; Levinson 1982; Ribeiro 2014): *"To what extent do you feel that this [text] expresses your own thoughts and feelings?", "To what extent do you feel the words in this [text] as coming from yourself?"* and *"To what extent does this [text] give voice to your own thoughts and feelings?"* All responses were recorded on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much so.

Results

The three liking measures were combined in a scale of Liking (α = .96). The three appropriation measures were combined in a scale of appropriation (α = .96). Results were analyzed using linear mixed-effects models, with art/non-art as a fixed factor and vignette pair as a random factor (random intercepts only). We found that liking was significantly predicted by art/non-art, $b = 1.23$, $SE = .23$, $t=5.27$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [.77, 1.69]. See Table 3 for pairwise comparisons.

Table 3: Pairwise comparisons of art vs. non-art conditions for each vignette pair

Vignette Pair	Text Type	*M*	*SE*	*df*	*t*	*p*
Short Story/Blog Post	Art	4.53	.33	60.07	-1.66	.103

	Non-Art	3.79	.30			
Song/Tweet	Art	4.76	.40	49.84	-3.47	.001
	Non-Art	3.08	.33			
Monologue/Diary Entry	Art	4.83	.31	62.81	-2.02	.067
	Non-Art	3.97	.32			
Movie Script/ Dialogue	Art	4.21	.31	59.39	-3.47	<.001
	Non-Art	2.57	.32			

Next, we tested the effect of art/non-art on appropriation, with the vignette pair as a random factor (see Figure 4). We found that there was a significant effect of art/non-art on appropriation ($b = .76$, $SE = .25$, $t=2.99$, $p = .003$, 95% CI = [.26, 1.26]). There was also a significant effect such that liking was predicted by appropriation ($b = .66$, $SE = 0.043$, $p < .001$, $t = 15.36$, 95% CI = [.58, .7 5]). Then, a mediation was conducted to test if appropriation mediated the effect of art/non-art on liking. Results indicated a significant indirect effect, ACME = .50, $p < .001$, CI [.165, .83]. We also found evidence for a significant ADE = .75, $p < .001$, CI [.41, 1.08]. Overall, the significant ACME indicates that appropriation partially mediated the relationship between art/non-art and liking.

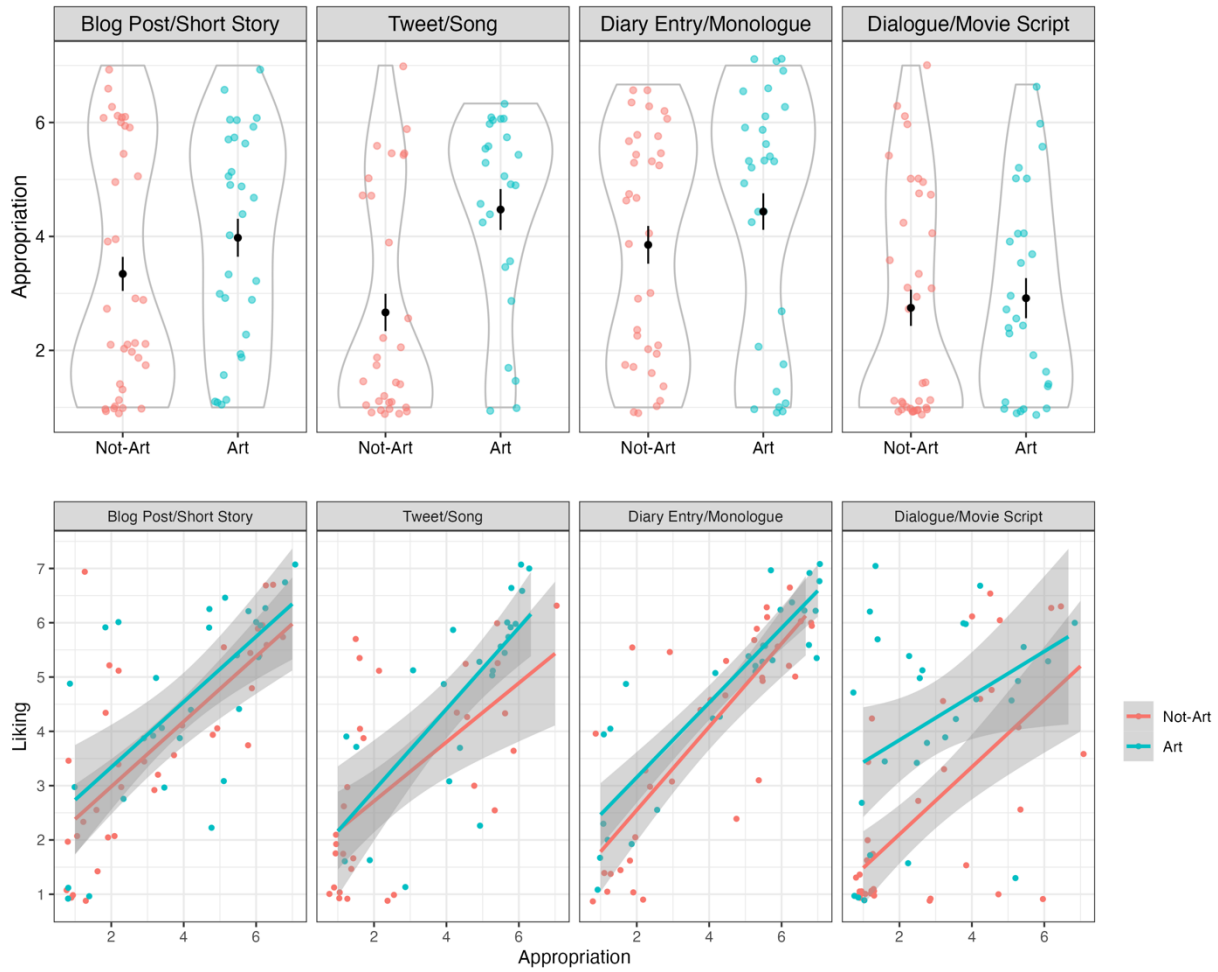

Figure 4: Violin plot of mean ratings of appropriation for post type and vignette pair. Error bars show +/- 1 standard error. Scatterplot of the effect of appropriation on liking by vignette and art/non-art.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 indicate that appropriation partially mediates the effect of art/non-art on liking. We found evidence for the hypothesis that describing something as a work of art leads to increased appropriation, and that increased appropriation leads to increased liking.

Together, these two findings provide evidence for the claim that appropriation partially explains why people enjoy the expression of sadness in art.

Finally, it should be noted that the overall results of Studies 1-3 indicate that the impact of art vs. non-art on liking is not equal for all of our pairs of stimuli. In particular, the impact is consistently smaller for the blog post/short story pair (and indeed falls short of significance in Studies 1, 2, and 3). An inspection of the means indicates that this difference is driven by responses in the non-art condition. That is, liking is approximately equal across the four pairs in the art condition, but liking is higher for the blog post than it is for the other non-art stimuli. We are not sure precisely why this is happening, but one hypothesis would be that since the blog post/short story pair expresses grief at the death of a loved one, this pair in particular leads to sympathy and support for the author in the non-art condition.

Study 4

Thus far, we have seen that fictionality does not mediate the impact of art/non-art on liking (Study 2), and that appropriation does mediate this effect (Study 3). A natural next step would be to directly manipulate fictionality and appropriation.

However, these two variables are very different in the degree to which it is possible to directly manipulate them. In a study reported in Supplementary Materials, we attempted to directly manipulate appropriation. One group of participants was asked to provide narratives about how they appropriated a text; a second group of participants was asked to select the best of these narratives; the selected narratives were then given to a third group. In this study, we found that the manipulation had no significant effect on appropriation. Thus, although there are presumably ways

to shift people's levels of appropriation, it may be that these methods are always quite indirect. It might not be possible to directly manipulate appropriation itself in a reliable way.

In this final study, we therefore adopt a different strategy. We directly manipulate fictionality and check for effects on liking and appropriation. For the manipulation of fictionality, all participants were presented with works of art (paintings, song lyrics, etc.). Then participants in one condition were given additional information about those artworks which allowed them to understand that the sad events and emotions depicted in them were real. This strategy allows us to explore the impact of fictionality on liking, and also to ask whether that impact is mediated by appropriation.

Methods

Participants. Six hundred participants (52.7% Female, M_{age} = 37.6 years, SD_{age} = 12.5 years) were recruited via Prolific Academic. They were paid $1.00 in exchange for taking part in this six-minute study. All methods and analyses were pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/CH8_DBQ).

Stimuli. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (real/control) x 3 (type: painting, poem, song-lyrics) between-participants experimental design. All vignettes in all conditions provided real information about real artists. The stimuli for this study differed from the previous studies, as we needed work created by artists for whom this information was available.

Participants in the real condition were explicitly told that the events and emotions in the work of art were actually experienced by the artist, e.g.,

"The painter Francis Bacon suffered a horrible loss when his best friend and lover, George Dyer, committed suicide by drug overdose. Dyer's body was found in a hotel bathroom in Paris"

Participants in the control condition were not told whether the events and emotions in the art were actually experienced by the artist, e.g.,

"The painter Francis Bacon was a British painter who lived from 1909-1992. He was inspired by the work of Picasso and is known for painting diptychs and triptychs."

After reading the description, participants saw/read the work of art. They then answered the same three questions about liking presented in a randomized order as in the previous studies. They were also asked two questions from the appropriation measures used in the previous study, presented in a randomized order: *"To what extent do you feel that this [text] expresses your own thoughts and feelings?"* and *"To what extent does this [text] give voice to your own thoughts and feelings?"*. One question used in the previous study (*"To what extent do you feel the words in this [text] as coming from yourself?"*) was dropped from this study as it did not make sense for the painting condition. All responses were recorded on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much so.

Results

Seventeen participants were excluded for failing to answer all the questions and failing the manipulation and attention checks. The analyses were conducted with the remaining 583 participants.

The three liking measures were combined in a scale of liking (α = .95). The two appropriation measures were combined in a scale of appropriation (*r* = .81). Results were analyzed using linear mixed-effects models, with realness as a fixed factor and art type as a random factor (random intercepts only). We found that liking was significantly predicted by realness such that people liked the art less when they were told that the art was based on the real experiences of the artist, *b* = -0.28, *SE* = .13, *t* = -2.19, *p* = .028, 95% CI = [-0.54, -0.03]. See Table 4 for pairwise comparisons for mean ratings of liking for realness condition and art type.

Table 4: Pairwise comparisons of realness conditions for each art-type

Type	Text Type	*M*	*SE*	*df*	*t*	*p*
Painting	Real	3.20	.17	189.87	-0.34	0.73
	Control	3.12	.16			
Poem	Real	4.53	.15	197.70	0.88	0.38
	Control	4.71	.15			
Song-Lyrics	Real	3.21	.14	185.30	3.37	<.001
	Control	3.96	.17			

Next, we tested the effect of realness on appropriation, with the art-type as a random factor. We found that there was a significant effect of realness on appropriation such that people were less likely to appropriate when they were told that the art was based on the real experiences of the artist, *b* = -0.40, 95% CI [-0.65,-0.14] (see Table 5 for pairwise comparisons). There was

also a significant effect of appropriation on liking, $b = 0.54$, CI [.48, .61]. See Figure 5 for violin plot of mean ratings of appropriation for realness condition and art type and scatterplot of the effect of appropriation on liking by realness.

Table 5: Pairwise comparisons of appropriation conditions for each art-type

Type	Text Type	*M*	*SE*	*df*	*t*	*p*
Painting	Real	3.20	.17	189.77	-0.10	.921
	Control	3.12	.16			
Poem	Real	4.53	.15	196.65	3.12	.002
	Control	4.71	.15			
Song-Lyrics	Real	3.21	.14	188.61	2.48	.014
	Control	3.96	.17			

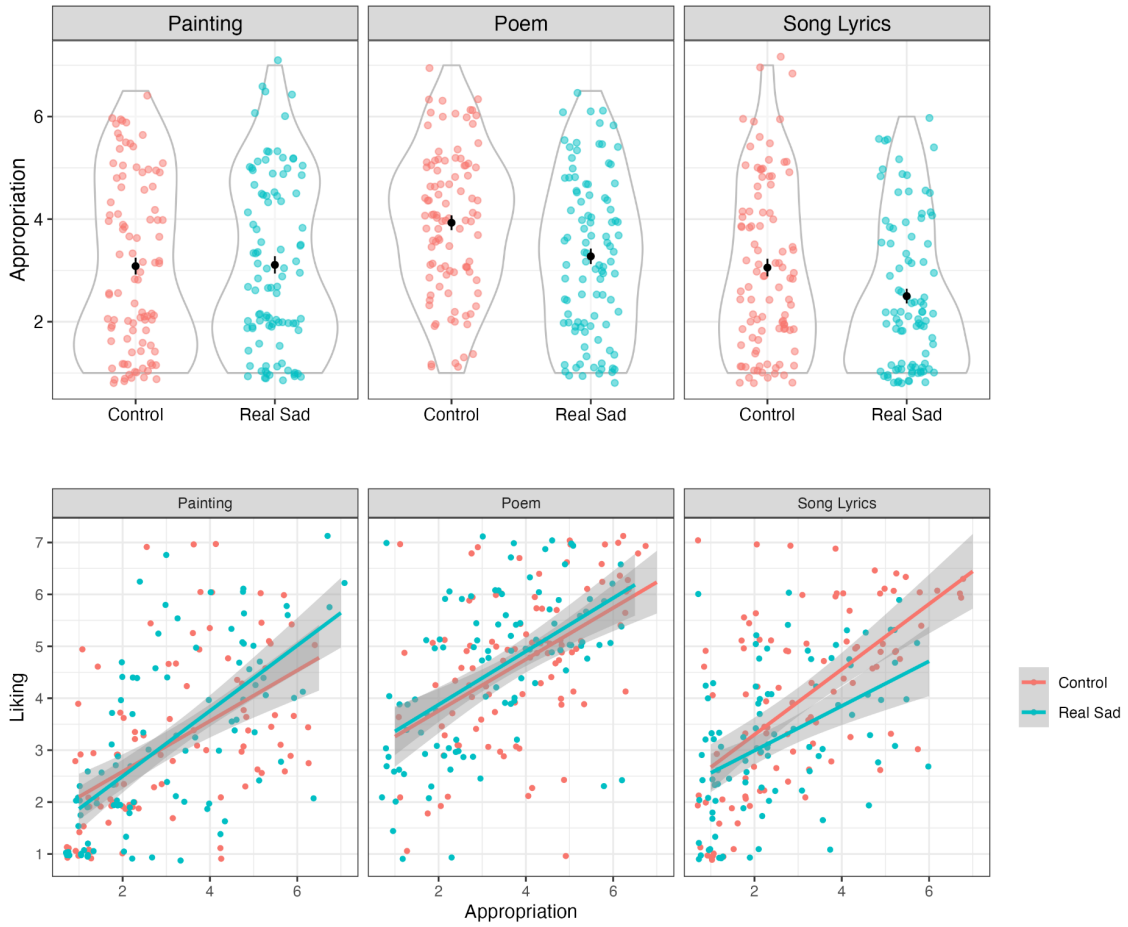

Figure 5: Violin plot of mean ratings of appropriation for realness and art type. Error bars indicate +/- 1 standard error. Scatterplot of the effect of appropriation on liking by realness.

A mediation analysis was conducted to test if appropriation mediated the effect of realness on liking. Results indicated a significant indirect effect, ACME = -0.21, $p < .001$, CI [-0.36, -0.07]. We did not find evidence for a significant ADE = -0.07, $p = 0.55$, CI [-0.28, 0.15]. Overall, the significant ACME indicates that appropriation fully mediated the relationship between realness and liking and there is no significant effect of realness on liking after controlling for appropriation.

Discussion

In this final experiment, we looked at the relationship between fictionality and appropriation. The results showed that manipulating fictionality led to significantly greater liking, but this effect was completely mediated by appropriation. This finding provides further evidence regarding the relationship between appropriation and liking.

Although the primary purpose of this study was to examine the role of appropriation, the results also provide some evidence about the impact of fictionality on liking. In Study 2, we found that fictionality was negatively correlated with liking, whereas in the present study, we find an effect in the opposite direction: the manipulation of fictionality led to increased liking. One obvious interpretation of these divergent results would be that they arise because of the difference between merely measuring fictionality (in Study 2) and actually manipulating fictionality (in the present study). When fictionality is only measured, there could easily be spurious correlations that are eliminated in a study that uses manipulation. But, on the other hand, it should also be noted that the impact of the fictionality manipulation on liking in the present study was driven almost entirely by one specific item (song lyrics) and did not emerge for the other two items (painting and poem). So, another possible interpretation would be that this result does not reflect a more general pattern but instead arises because of highly specific facts involving that one item. This is an important question for further research.

In any case, the more central point for present purposes is that, regardless of what people perceive about the realness of sad art vs. sad non-art, fictionality alone does not appear to explain why people are drawn to sad art. Instead, the explanation seems to be grounded in the notion of appropriation.

General Discussion

Existing research suggests that people show greater liking for expressions of sadness when those expressions are framed as works of art. The present studies investigated two possible explanations of this effect. One natural hypothesis is that the effect arises because people tend to see works of art as *fictional*; i.e., because when expressions of sadness are framed as works of art, they belong to a world removed from the real world, and therefore carry no practical implications. A second, very different hypothesis is that the effect arises because describing something as a work of art leads to greater *appropriation*, i.e., a greater tendency to experience it as an expression of one's own emotions.

Study 1 found that even when a text was kept word for word identical, participants showed greater liking for that text if it was described as a work of art (e.g., a song rather than a Tweet). Study 2 found that this effect was not mediated by perceptions of fictionality and, indeed, that there was a negative correlation between liking and perceptions of fictionality. Study 3 found that the effect was mediated by appropriation. Study 4 then found that a manipulation of fictionality did lead to increased liking but that this effect was itself mediated by appropriation. These findings have important implications both for the fictionality hypothesis and for the appropriation hypothesis.

When it comes to the question as to whether fictionality leads to increased liking, our results were inconclusive. In a correlational study (Study 2), we found a negative correlation – meaning that people actually liked expressions of sadness less when they perceived the events and emotions as fictional than when they perceived them as real. When we manipulated fictionality (Study 4), we found that describing an expression of sadness as real (i.e., non-fictional) led to significantly lower liking, but this effect was driven almost entirely by a single

item (namely, song lyrics). Strikingly, we then found that the impact of fictionality on liking was fully mediated by appropriation.

However, when it comes to the question as to whether fictionality explains the impact of the art vs. non-art distinction on liking, our results were more telling. In Study 2, we found that even controlling for perceptions of fictionality, there was still an effect such that people showed greater liking for a text expressive of sadness when it was described as a work of art. This result suggests that fictionality does not explain the impact of the art vs. non-art distinction.

To illustrate, participants showed greater liking for a text that expresses insecurity and self-loathing when that text was described as a short story (art) than when it was described as a blog post (non-art). However, Study 2 found that this effect was not explained by fictionality. Even when participants specifically said that the text was not fictional and was a real expression of the author's own emotions, they still showed greater liking for it when it was described as art than when it was described as something else.

When it comes to the appropriation hypothesis, our findings were more promising. Study 3 found that appropriation partially mediated the impact of conceptualizing something as art on liking. In other words, even if people think that a particular text is a completely factual description of something that happened to the author, there is still an impact of presenting that text as a work of art. Specifically, when the text is presented as art, people are more inclined to appropriate it, i.e., to experience it as an expression of their own emotions. This tendency to experience the text as expressing their own emotions then predicts greater liking for the text itself.

This finding provides evidence for a different view about the impact of conceptualizing an expression of sadness as art on liking. Suppose that your friend is experiencing insecurity and self-loathing, and she writes a text that is a literal and accurate expression of her own emotions.

If she frames this text as a blog post, you might feel that you are supposed to react by showing concern for your friend. By contrast, if she frames the text as a work of art, then even if you know that it is a factual expression of her emotions, you might feel that you are not supposed to react to it by showing concern about her emotions. Instead, you might experience the text as an expression of *your own* emotions.

In other words, the text has ceased to be solely *about* your friend, even if the content remains a true description of your friend's state of mind. The text is now also about the person that reads it. This change suggests a way of understanding the two hypotheses we have considered as closer to each other than might have at first appeared. Both hypotheses underscore the point that the negative emotions expressed by an artwork are ultimately not about the author. Of course, the fictionality hypothesis posits that it is the fictionalization of the emotions—the change from seeing them as the emotions of a real person (in the case of a blog post) to those of a fictional one (in the case of a short story)—that leads to increased liking. And that, our results suggest, is a mistake. What leads to increased liking is rather our coming to experience the emotions as being about ourselves, and not only about the author.

Why does conceptualizing an object as art lead to appropriation?

The present results leave open the question of why art leads to appropriation. What is it about, say, a text being art (e.g., a short story), as opposed to something else (e.g., a blog post), that leads its readers to appropriate the emotions in it?

One possible hypothesis points to the importance of the author's *intentions* (Bloom & Markson 1998; Preissler & Bloom 2008). This hypothesis posits that artists often have the intention of making their own emotions, so to speak, part of the public domain. Artists intend to express something universal, something that can apply to, and thus be about, each member of the

audience. This is why it is natural to appropriate the emotions expressed in a short story but not those expressed in a blog post, even if they are the same emotions and even if one knows that what's being expressed is a real description of the author's inner life. The crucial difference is that in the latter the author lacks the intention to turn her inner life into something universal. Her emotions are *her* emotions, and are meant to be treated as such—as something she felt or is feeling, and not in any way about her readers.

Indeed, one might think that in most contexts outside the domain of art, the intention to express one's sadness to another involves the implicit assumption that what one is saying is solely about oneself and hence the expectation that it should be treated as such by one's interlocutors. This is why appropriating someone's emotions is often morally problematic, if not downright wrong. To see this, suppose a friend decides to confide in you about his enduring feelings of sorrow following his divorce. And suppose you react by telling him that his emotions capture perfectly your own feelings of sorrow at your own failed relationships. In truth, you say to him, "to listen to you speak about it is to experience your sorrow as if it were my own." Needless to say, your friend might not be your friend much longer. And this is because there is something about his *intention* in talking *to you* about his sorrow that makes your reaction—your treating his experience as something to be appropriated—fundamentally misguided. The crucial point is that art might involve the giving up of this intention: the intention that, in communicating one's experience, others treat it as being about oneself and oneself only. Art, that is, might involve the 'divesting' of your own experience in lieu of making it part of the public domain.

A very different hypothesis denies the importance of the artist's intentions and instead points to the nature of art itself. The claim is that people's understanding of the concept of art is

bound up with the practice of appropriation. On this second hypothesis, the link between seeing an object as art and being able to appropriate its content is an essential feature of experiencing the object *as* art. A work whose content could not be appropriated at all would be a work whose audience would have a hard time conceptualizing as a work of *art*. In short, art might be by nature 'appropriable' whether or not the artist intends it as such. When an artist turns her thoughts and feelings into a work of art they are no longer *just* about the artist. They become, by becoming a work of art, about the audience as well. Here is how Joaquín Sabina, Spanish singer and poet, puts the point: "When one writes songs about heartbreak, one scratches in one's own memory, in one's own biography, and scratches also in the memory of the people, because if people can't appropriate the songs as theirs, the songs do not exist" (Castillo 2013: 97). The songs might come from one's biography, and so be, in one sense, about the artist who sings them. But insofar as they are *songs*, they are also about the one who listens to them.

Relation to existing theories

Another important task for further work will be to explore the relationship between the present findings on appropriation and existing theories about why people are drawn to sad art. First off, we should emphasize that appropriation is not a rival to those existing theories. s. Existing theories focus on the psychological processes that are involved in people's liking for sad art, whereas the present findings are concerned with what it is about conceptualizing an object as art in particular that leads to increased liking. To explore the relationship between appropriation and these existing theories, one would have to look at the specific psychological processes posited by those theories. Then one would have to ask how those processes would be likely to be altered or amplified in the presence of appropriation.

Perhaps the most natural theory to turn to here would be one that emphasizes catharsis (Aristotle 1997; Koopman 2013; Nussbaum 1986; Scheele 2001). There are multiple interpretations of what exactly is meant by catharsis (see Destrée 2021 for work in philosophy and Koopman 2013 for work in psychology). But regardless of the details of each interpretation, these theories are united in positing a transformation of one's *existing* emotions by their engagement with works of art that express emotions of their kind. A work of tragedy, for instance, might be cathartic in the sense of giving release to one's own sadness, either by 'clarifying' the existing emotion (Koopman 2013, Scheele 2001; Nussbaum 1986) or by 'purging' its excesses (Janko 1992) from one's emotional life. Such views could then explain the impact of appropriation. Specifically, it might be that what allows an expression of sadness in art to be cathartic is precisely the fact that people appropriate it, i.e., that they experience it as an expression of their own sadness.

Another possible theory would be one that emphasizes connection (Attie-Picker et al. 2024). On this theory, part of what makes people feel drawn to expressions of sadness in art is their power to make people feel less alone. Here again, there might be a role for appropriation. It might be that when people appropriate a work of art, they have the experience of feeling like someone else understands their sadness (Ribeiro 2014), and they therefore enjoy it in the same way they might enjoy discussing their sadness with another person.

Future work could explore these two competing hypotheses by looking more specifically at the downstream consequences of appropriation. For example, in following a method like the one used here, future research could seek to disentangle whether feelings of catharsis (i.e., appropriating sad art allows me to release my sadness) versus feelings of connection (i.e., appropriating sad art makes me feel that I am not alone) best explain the positive feelings that

result when people appropriate sad art. Note, however, how this question is importantly different from the focus of the current studies: The current studies examine how framing the same stimulus as art (versus non-art) results in greater feelings of appropriation which in turn, enhance people's liking.

Extending the account

Finally, the present studies have been concerned exclusively with questions about sad art, but future work should broaden this inquiry and ask whether the notion of appropriation can also be used to understand other phenomena. To begin with, a question arises as to whether the importance of appropriation extends to negative emotions other than sadness. When people like angry music, is it because they experience the music as expressing their own anger? When they read works that express shame, do they experience such shame as their own?

Extending the inquiry even further, one could ask whether appropriation helps to explain reactions to art that expresses positive emotion. Consider the braggadocio that characterizes some hip hop music. Why do listeners enjoy hearing self-aggrandizing boasts in a rap song, while the exact same boasts would be insufferable in any other context? Perhaps part of the answer is that the experience of listening to Jay-Z singing "I sell ice in the winter, I sell fire in hell/ I am a hustler baby, I'll sell water to a well" is the experience of feeling that *you* sell ice in the winter and fire in hell—not Jay-Z. Appropriation, that is, might be a psychological phenomenon worth exploring not only in understanding our experience with painful art, but in understanding our emotional engagement with art more generally.

Still, there might be cases in which appropriation does not adequately explain the phenomenon. Some people enjoy experiencing fear when watching horror movies (Carroll 1990; Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, & Johnson 2020; Martin 2019; Rozin et al. 2013), but is this

due to appropriation? To explore this question, future studies could ask people who watch scary movies the same questions we used as measures of appropriation in Study 3, such as "To what extent do you feel that this expresses your own thoughts and feelings?" In the context of sad art, we found that answers to these questions were highly correlated with liking (and perhaps the same correlation would emerge for other emotions, such as anger and shame). If the correlation does not emerge for perceptions of scary movies, that would provide some evidence for the claim that liking of scary movies does not involve appropriation in the way that liking of sad art does.

Broadening the inquiry yet farther, we might ask whether appropriation can explain phenomena that lie outside the domain of art entirely. Take a recovered alcoholic addressing a group in an AA meeting. What the person says might not be art; it might have no aesthetic function whatsoever, and yet its impact on the listeners might make use of the same mechanism of appropriation. Even in this non-artistic context, appropriation might serve as a powerful interpersonal tool for the transformation of painful and even aversive experiences into something valuable. Paradoxically, it is often through the voice of others that we find our own.

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