Examining the Role of Aesthetic Experiences in Self-Realization and Self-Transcendence: A Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Numerous scholars, philosophers, and experts in aesthetics have underscored the profound significance of a life enriched by the presence of beauty. Consequently, the appreciation of aesthetic experiences is considered pivotal for achieving self-discovery and self-transcendence (Howell et al. 2017). Despite theoretical prominence, limited qualitative research has been conducted on this topic. To address this gap in research, this study's objective emphasized two questions guiding the inquiry; What is the role of aesthetic encounters in aiding self-realization or individuation? and, how do these experiences foster self-transcendence?

A thematic analysis was performed on the online interviews conducted (*N=25*), and their results revealed seven themes pertaining to self-realization: a) Losing Yourself to Find Yourself; b) Relatability and Self-Reflection in Art; c) Identity as a Collection of Skills; d) Art as a Medium for Self-Expression and Acknowledgment; e) Aesthetic Genres and Taste as Identity; f) Belonging and Social Identity through Art; and g) Personal Interests and Choices in Artistic Consumption. Furthermore, seven themes for the second research question of self-transcendence were also discovered: a) Mother Nature's Beauty; b) Intense, Passionate, and Overwhelming Experiences of Heightened Consciousness; c) Sacred Symbolism, Archetypal Imagery, and the Collective Unconscious; d) Collective Effervescence, Social Connection, and Shared Meaning; e) The 'Profound' Found in the Mundane; f) Feelings of Spiritual Elevation and Wellbeing; and g) Self-Referential Meaning-Making through Art. These findings evidenced the transformative potential of aesthetic experiences, shedding light on the facets of personal growth and meaning that individuals derive from such encounters.

KEYWORDS:

Aesthetic experiences, Aesthetic sensitivity, Ego-identity, Self-realization, Identity formation, Self-transcendence, meaning in life, Authentic self, aesthetic needs

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INTRODUCTION

> "Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears."
> (Poe, 1846/2021, p. 163)

Self-realization is considered by many philosophers and aestheticians to be an important aspect of aesthetic experience (see e.g., Dewey, 1934; Hegel, 1826/2010; Kant, 1790/1987; Schiller, 1795/1989). Aesthetic moments thus become an important part of identity, wherein individuals feel a profound alignment with their true selves during such encounters (Larrain & Haye, 2019; Simondon, 1989). Howell et al. (2017) note that many philosophers, aestheticians, religious scriptures, and various psychological findings point to the fact that there is a strong need for engaging in aspects of beauty and aesthetics for leading a meaningful life, and these experiences are essential in the pursuit of self-actualization and thereby moving towards self-transcendence. Furthermore, they elucidate the presence of a 'tragedy of beauty' within American culture, which serves as a significant barrier to fulfilling our innate humanistic needs for self-actualization and self-transcendence. This observation underscores a systemic undervaluation of aesthetic needs within American society.

Despite the challenges associated with beauty, aesthetic experiences remain a pervasive facet of our daily lives. Aesthetics not only enable us to creatively express our unique identities but also facilitate connections to broader and more profound dimensions of existence. Dewey's work *Art as experience* (1934) is regarded by many scholars as the best initiation for new aesthetic thinking, where he notes that aesthetic experiences are integral for the development and fulfillment of our human nature. He reports the puissance of the aesthetic experience as being a profoundly transcendent and spiritual experience – "a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experience" (p. 195). His writings underscore how aesthetic experiences fulfill our fundamental human requirement for spiritual nourishment in the context of self-realization and transcendence, by emphasizing an idealistic perspective.

In his first book, *Psychology* (1887), Dewey highlights this idealism by focusing on various aspects of imagination, aesthetic feelings, and sensitivity, in relation to the appreciation of beauty. Building upon the foundation laid by Kant and his work on Transcendental Idealism (Kant & Palmer, 1983), Dewey's scholarship contends that the objective of creative imagination lies in the unimpeded flow of the self's faculties (Leddy & Puolakka, 2021). Drawing inspiration from Dewey's exploration of aesthetic encounters, this academic inquiry seeks to investigate the role of aesthetic experiences in fulfilling humanistic needs of self-actualization and transcendence, by enhancing individual well-being and remaining rooted in the idealistic perspective.

The humanistic psychology movement, beginning with Maslow (1908–1970) identified most prominently the concepts of self-actualization and self-transcendence (Kaufman, 2020; Maslow 1971). Maslow (1968) cited that most people cannot resist the overwhelming forces of culture and society without ever coming to know "how wonderful it is to be creative, to react aesthetically, and to find life thrilling" (p. 7). This observation highlights the profound impact of external social con-

straints on our ability to heed the inner call for self-evolution. According to Maslow, these aesthetic needs form a fundamental cornerstone of our personal development and progress. Without their fulfillment, he contended, the average person is destined to become a "mere psychopathology of the average" (p. 15).

Kaufman (2020, p. 26) presents a "new hierarchy of human needs for the 21st century" and highlights that human growth is rather a 'two step forward, one step back' dynamic. Kaufman employs a "sailboat" approach to re-contextualize the misleading pyramid of Maslow's hierarchy of needs by emphasizing deficiency and growth needs (p. 81). In this paper, aesthetic needs are highlighted to be growth needs, and it follows from that, that satisfying these humanistic needs through aesthetic experiences becomes a pathway toward seeking personal growth and meaning in our lives. Furthermore, the common description of Maslow's hierarchy (1943, 1954/1970) does not account for the updated model (Maslow, 1964) that placed self-transcendence a step above self-actualization.

Rogers (1961, p. 112) further expounded upon the concept of a "fully functional person," describing an individual who attains a state of flourishing through self-actualization, akin to Aristotle's concept of eudaemonia (Robbins, 2008, p. 98). Furthermore, the field of positive psychology emerged out of this movement, as Seligman (2005, p. 7) espoused humanistic psychologists to be the ancestors of the positive psychology movement. This paper centres on this eudaemonic notion of human flourishing espoused by the humanistic movement and furthered by the positive psychology movement. In our research, we aim to investigate vis-a-vis the humanistic perspective – the role of aesthetic experiences in facilitating self-discovery, identity formation, and transcendence among individuals.

Additionally, this paper incorporates Dabrowski's (1964, 1967, 1972) Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) to evaluate the significance of aesthetic experiences in addressing these humanistic needs. Dabrowski's theory transcends ontogenetic considerations, as it is not contingent upon developmental maturation related to age (Dabrowski et al., 1970). Instead, it emphasizes a developmental process in which emotional conflicts and neuroses serve as catalysts for personal growth, particularly conflicts that arise between the existing self and the ideal self (Dabrowski, 1975, p. 234). Thus, self-actualization and potential for transcendence is evident in individuals faced with problems, particularly of a humanistic nature.

Dabrowski's (1964) theory emphasizes how through the disintegration process, a higher psychic structure is formed (pp. 5–7). His framework also underscores the pivotal role of developmental potential within individuals, which may be contingent upon their unique sensibilities and sensitivities, referred to as "overexcitabilities." This concept gives rise to the "third factor", namely, autotelic intrinsic motivation for self-improvement (Thigpen, 2019). Our research illuminates how engagement with aesthetics can be instrumental in triggering this third factor. The notion of a "third factor" towards individuation can be correlated with the "third force" that humanistic psychology represents beyond Freudian Psychoanalysis (akin to the first factor of lower instincts in Dabrowski's theory) and Behaviourism (akin to the second factor of social conditioning in Dabrowski's theory; see Evans & Hearn, 1977).

Ideas of the Self and Identity-Formation Through Aesthetics

> "Self-realization suggests a making real or seeing as real something that had only until then been a vague intuition"
>
> (Metzner, 1986. p. 3)

Our inherent human drive toward authenticity and self-realization is deeply ingrained in our nature, as Csikszentmihalyi (1993) eloquently asserts, stating that "to know ourselves is the greatest achievement of our species" (p. 16). Throughout the annals of history, various notions concerning the self and the process of identity formation have arisen, with the Greek aphorism 'know thyself' standing out most prominently in collective consciousness (e.g., Plato, 1892/2018). It can be posited that our loftiest aspiration lies in the pursuit of self-knowledge, and within this pursuit, aesthetic experiences assume a pivotal role. For the scope of this paper, "self-actualization" has been operationally defined, as Goldstein coined the term (Goldstein, 1939; Modell, 1993), as a process of human development, whereby one actualizes one's full potential. Furthermore, self-actualization fundamentally linked to the development of an authentic 'self-identity', whereby one actualizes one's innate essence (Dabrowski, 1976).

Kierkegaard (1846/1992), for instance, regards authenticity as the highest attainable principle, asserting that a failure to be true to oneself serves as the wellspring of despair for many individuals. Kierkegaard emphasizes 'passion' over logic (Levin, 1992) as the primary motivator for establishing the self within a subjective framework of faith, highlighting its unique perspective. This fervent immersion finds resonance in profound experiences of beauty and aesthetics, which can aid individuals in uncovering their authentic selves. For example, Sohmer (2020), in her research, explores the quest for nurturing, and expression of the authentic self, shedding light on the importance of these aspects in the context of aesthetic engagement –

> Plausible to locate the authentic self-concept (vs. the actual, experiential authentic self) at the intersection of the ideal and real, perhaps as an integrative or regulative principle that is oriented toward growth given supportive conditions. We also found our experiences of our authentic selves as fundamentally relational, suggesting that authenticity is intimately connected with interpersonal and environmental contexts.

Correspondingly, Larrain and Haye (2019) describe the dialectical synthesis between the self and aesthetic experiences in the process of becoming,

> The self, as a process and a relation, implies a constitutive difference between me, the perspective of everything I can call mine, such as my body, past experiences, and singularities, and I, the perspective of the subjective position from which certain tracts of experience are felt as mine or not, evaluated and thought about. This means that self implies both objectification and subjectification because it involves the synthesis of the agent (I) and object of thought (me), which is not a dialectical synthesis, because each act of appropriation of oneself generates a new I position that is not contained in the experience of me that is integrated gradually at each moment.

Hence, the role of aesthetic experiences is prominent in this generative process of becoming one's true self. Larrain and Haye (2019) also describe that the 'self' refers to the emotionally unified expe-

rience with an aesthetic object, and this immersive process makes it a deep component of self-realization. These experiences thus help us answer the question of "who am I?" through a connected sense of 'being' that one experiences in aesthetic events.

The experience of art viewing is what Dewey (1934) describes as one of surrender, "only through a controlled activity that may well be intense. It is the act of going out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy," (p. 53) and within this process, the entire being is regarded to be ultra-active and not passive. This process of immersive surrender is one of intense receptivity where the viewer/perceiver takes in the aesthetic experience in a way that the self merges into it.

Aesthetic absorption thus involves both a suspension of one's sense of self, and the realization of one's self-identity. Dewey (1934) also states that this "absorption is characteristic of aesthetic experience but is an ideal for all experiences" (p. 280). Benson (1993) explained that this absorption involves a kind of transcendental unification. This aspect of realizing oneself through immersive absorption, therefore, leads to self-transcendence and this concept has been explored further in the work of Lifschitz (1999). This study further examines the importance of absorption and engagement in aesthetic experiences using Dabrowski's (1972) concept of "overexcitabilities" and its relation to 'peak experiences' that are pivotal to the process of achieving humanistic growth.

Aesthetics in the Transcendence of Self

The transcendence of one's self-identity is described as the epitome of human development in humanistic theory. Maslow's conception of self-transcendence grew from his study of self-actualized individuals and their experiences with "peak experiences" (Maslow, 1964, 1968). These experiences were defined by him as rapturous and ecstatic moments (Maslow, 1968, 1954/1970). Kaufman (2020) further defines self-transcendence as a phenomenon that occurs when an individual fulfills both deficiency and growth needs, and thereby moves towards values that go beyond the self.

In *Self-transcendence as a Human Phenomenon*, Frankl (1966) posits that self-transcendence is a virtue that goes beyond the 'homeostasis principle.' He describes how motivational theories, based on the 'homeostasis principle,' neglect this virtue by reducing bodily tension through the pleasure principle. He mentions how Allport (1955) objected to such motivational theories where he said that it "falls short of representing the nature of appropriate striving, whose characteristic feature is its resistance to equilibrium: tension is maintained rather than reduced" (p. 97). This feature of maintaining tension is similar to Kierkegaard's idea of "passion" transcending logic and reason, and only through this passion can one discover himself and achieve self-transcendence as he says, "passion is existence at its very highest – and we are, after all, existing persons" (1992, p. 197).

Frankl (1966) also describes how the pleasure principle is self-defeating, where, the more pleasure is aimed at, the more one's purpose is defeated. Therefore, the essence of beauty and aesthetics is one that transcends the lower biological tendency towards self-gratification and enhances one's bodily tension in the process of experiencing what one may call 'peak experiences.' Here Frankl adds:

Self-transcendence is the essence of existence. Existence collapses and falters unless there is "a strong idea," again to quote Freud, or a strong ideal to hold on to. As Einstein once said, "The man who regards his life as meaningless is not merely unhappy but hardly fit for life." (p. 104)

The most prominent kind of 'peak experience' where one experiences an increased sense of tension is the feeling of 'awe.' Awe as an emotion is one that 'activates' a spiritual sense of transcending the self. It is properly the "feeling of being in the presence of something vast and greater than the self, that exceeds current knowledge structures" (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Keltner and Haidt (2003) also hypothesized that the feeling of awe has transformational potential for the self and binds the individual with broader social communities and entities (like nations and families), where one feels a sense of unity and oneness with others – a deep sense of connection and shared meaning.

This concept of awe as a self-transcendent emotion is felt in 'peak experiences' of maximized bodily tension and is appreciated as extremely rapturous by an individual. Maslow's humanistic goals (1964, 1968) involved spending a lot of his time and energy studying these intense personal experiences, which he coined to be "peak experiences." Lacan (1994) similarly introduces the concept of 'Jouissance' as a deeply transcendent emotion, where he considered that "there is a Jouissance beyond the pleasure principle" (p. 184) and this he describes to be an "excess of life… a superabundant vitality" (Lacan, 1992). Dabrowski (1964), in his book *Positive Disintegration*, uses the terms "hyperexcitability," "increased excitability," "overexcitability" and simply "excitability," interchangeably with nervousness. He further remarks "The prefix 'over' attached to 'excitability' serves to indicate that the reactions of excitation are over and above average in intensity, duration and frequency" (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 7). He believes that psychological tension is necessary for growth and the formation of a unique self. Thus, aesthetics and beauty play a major role in facilitating intense engagement through experiences in individual lives that transcend the pleasure principle and move us toward transcendental meaning.

A study by Wilson and Spencer (1990), reported several categories of these peak experiences such as – 'experiencing romantic love, being in nature, getting married, during aesthetic experiences, giving birth, etc.' In another study, Van Cappellen and Saroglou (2012), found that there is a transformational power to the feeling of awe. Here, they found two dimensions of spirituality experienced, such as 'universality and connectedness,' and two types of awe elicitors (nature and childbirth), as well as a sense of oneness with everything.

We aim to capture the nature of these 'peak experiences,' specifically as they relate to aesthetic experiences of beauty. Understanding the varying dimensions of experienced self-transcendence through aesthetic experiences, and its relation to self-actualization is one of the major goals of this paper. As according to Frankl (1963), self-actualization is actually impossible without self-transcendence –

Being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actual-

izes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participant Demographics and Procedure

This study encompassed a cohort of 25 participants, consisting of 11 females and 14 males (N=25). The study did not impose explicit expectations for participants to openly disclose their gender/sexual identity, disability status, or socio-economic status. Nevertheless, during the interview process, a significant number of participants voluntarily shared information regarding these facets of their identity. Participants were assembled through a convenience sampling approach, supplemented by snowball sampling derived from initial contacts. Data collection transpired virtually through online video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, Skype, and Facebook. Transcription of the collected data was conducted with the assistance of Otter AI. This research assumes a non-experimental, exploratory, and qualitative framework. All participants unequivocally volunteered their involvement in this study, and the study received ethical approval from the Department of Psychology.

Research Questions and Study Objective

Q1: What is the role of aesthetic experiences in helping individuals discover themselves (or self-realize) and answer the question of "who am I?"

Q2: What is the role of aesthetic experiences in helping individuals achieve a sense of self-transcendence and a deeper connection with something greater than themselves?

The principal objective of this investigation is to discern and document recurrent patterns and thematic elements inherent within the dataset, thereby we aimed to generate hypotheses about the function of aesthetic experiences in the pursuit of humanistic objectives associated with self-actualization and self-transcendence.

Approach to Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a Thematic Analysis consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), where interviews were semi-structured – a guide list of two major questions and three sub-questions was created, where each provided a loose structure, upon which variable questions were asked back-and-forth, from time to time.

Table 1. Formalized Interview Questions for the Semi-Structured interview

	Main Question	Sub Questions
Self-Realization	Q1: Please describe an aesthetic/art-related episode or similar series episodes from your life that helped you with self-discovery and shaping your identity in some shape or form. Any aesthetic experiences that may to some degree help you answer or understand the question of "Who am I?"	A) Explain the story's situational context. B) What makes you pick this episode other others in your life? C) How does this episode make you see your identity in a broader social context?
Self-Transcendence	Q2: Please describe an aesthetic/art-related episode or similar series of episodes from your life that made you feel a spiritual connection with something greater than yourself? Explain how any aesthetic experience made you feel a sense of transcending your identity and connecting with something beyond just yourself (maybe other individuals, something sacred or divine, or with the vastness of nature/universe).	A) Explain the story's situational context. B) What makes you pick this episode other others in your life? C) How does this episode make you see your connection to things beyond yourself (others, nature, humanity, society, the universe etc.) at a broader level?

The interviews were each 30–45 minutes long and were transcribed using Otter AI. At first, these transcripts were read to generate an initial list of codes, from which a coding guide was created. A full list of codes was generated later, using the initial coding guide, for all the transcripts.

Thereafter, emergent themes and sub-themes were identified for each research question (i.e., self-realization and self-transcendence), which informed the process. An Excel Spreadsheet was used for creating codes and themes. Following the finalization of major themes, the quotes that were congruent with each theme and exemplified it most prominently were chosen.

The themes were reviewed again to define and rename them accordingly, and after this finalization, the writing of the report was initiated. During this process, analytic memos were collected, and an audit trail of the process was maintained. The analysis of the data was done by maintaining data cleaning, coding steps (like creating a guide), grouping categories, and creating themes and sub themes. In the forthcoming results section of the paper, the frequencies of the themes and relevant quotes are reported.
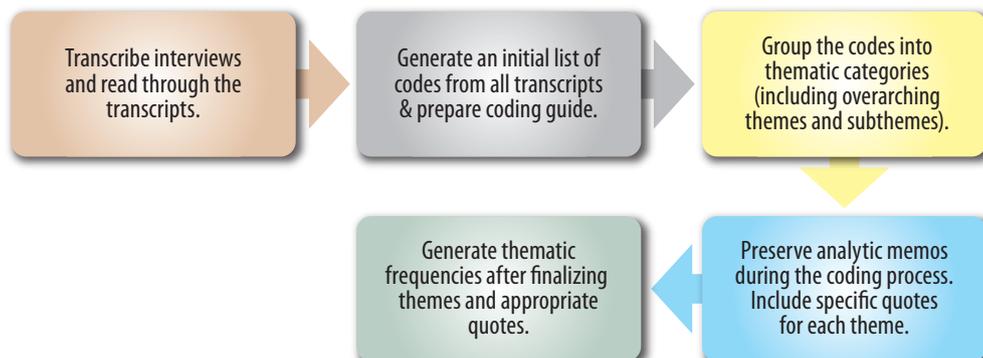
Figure 1. Steps employed in conducting thematic analysis for (*N=25*) interviews

Further, Braun and Clarke (2006) mention that in thematic analysis, researchers can employ either an inductive or a deductive approach for theme analysis. The inductive approach is data-driven, where participants may not stay on topic and the research outcomes may not be totally reflected, whereas a deductive approach uses a pre-existing theory or framework (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In our specific investigation, we opted for the inductive approach, which allowed for an unbiased examination of the data. This choice aligned with our research objectives, as it empowered us to explore the dataset with a fresh perspective, devoid of any prior assumptions or theoretical predispositions.

RESULTS AND INQUIRY OUTCOMES

The ensuing exposition of research outcomes and findings constitutes a direct response to the two previously delineated research inquiries, which are predicated on the examination of personal experiences as articulated in the interview accounts. Thematically, a comprehensive total of 150 codes were derived from these interviews, with 80 codes pertinent to the exploration of self-realization and an additional 70 codes germane to the investigation of self-transcendence. Subsequently, the frequencies associated with each thematic category were computed individually and subsequently reported for each of the research questions.

Thematic Findings for Aesthetic Experiences of Self-Realization
The thematic analysis of the inquiry data for the primary research question – What is the role of aesthetic experiences in helping individuals discover themselves (or self-realize), thereby answering the question of 'who am I?' – generated 7 thematic categories. These categories were not independent of one another, but rather interconnected different facets of the same 'whole.' These categories include – a) Losing Yourself to Find Yourself (11.25%); b) Relatability and Self-Reflection in Art (10%); c) Identity as a Collection of Skills (11.25%); d) Art as a Medium for Self-Expression and Acknowledgment (20%); e) Aesthetic Genres and Taste as Identity (11.25%); f) Belonging and Social Identity through Art (10%); and g) Personal Interests and Choices in Artistic Consumption (13.75%; see Figure 2). Furthermore, the codes that did not fall into any of the thematic categories were classified as Miscellaneous (12.5%).

Losing yourself to find yourself. 11.25% of the codes relevant to the primary research question were coded for this theme. This theme represents the nature of aesthetic absorption and immersion in art, which makes one feel a sense of losing one's egoic self in the process of gaining a connection with something aesthetic. The concept of the self as a dynamic entity continually shaped by its environmental interactions, akin to what William James (1842–1910) posited as a "stream of consciousness," has been a subject of scholarly discourse (Levin, 1992, p. 78). In this perspective, the self undergoes shifts and transformations in response to its surroundings, contributing to the fluidity
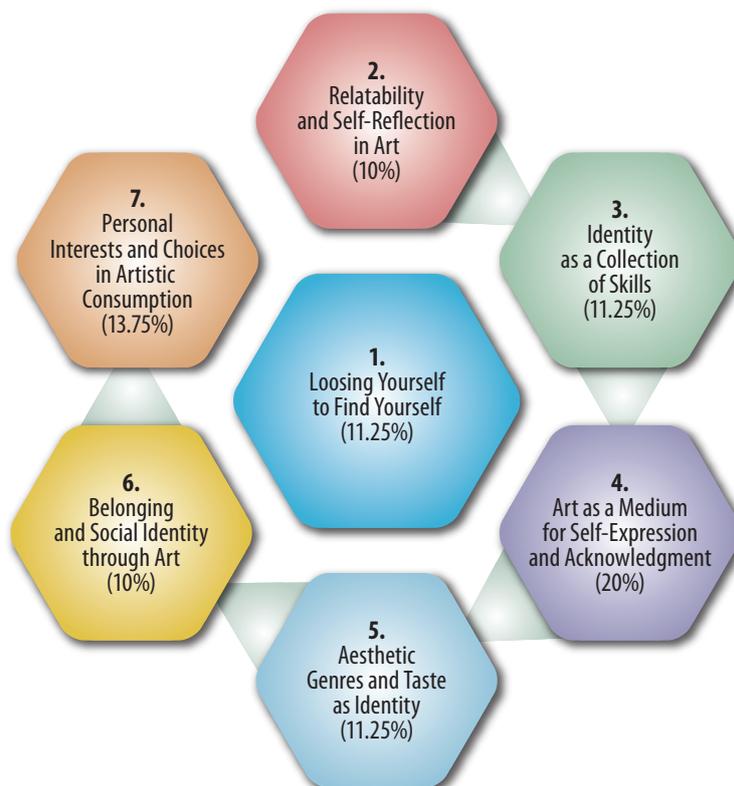
Figure 2. Thematic analysis outcomes for the primary research question (self-realization & identity)

of identity. This facet of self-realization, entailing an augmentation of the flow-like experience, was introduced by Csikszentmihalyi (1990/2009). Within this framework, individuals find themselves engrossed in what he termed an 'optimal experience,' almost transcending their conventional sense of self. Many participants in our study attested to a notable sense of aesthetic absorption, during which they reported experiencing a suspension of their customary self-identity. This suspension was often surpassed by a unified state of being, manifesting as a profound sense of absorption and a transient loss of self.

For instance, Participant 6 vividly described his engagement with art, highlighting the need to 'let go' of his established self-identity in order to foster receptivity to its reshaping.

> I started to shape my own identity and I started to realize that I need to break down a lot of boundaries and break down a lot of my 'story,' and rebuild a new story or a new narrative. Just the initial steps of breaking my identity down and then becoming more open to the world, and to possibilities. So, that became one of the core parts of my identity, being open, curious, and playful. That identity to us is so emergent that you do not really want to fixate on one thing. It is like it just comes in, it flows, and whatever. It is like the moment the music is taking over you. You are like, I am okay with it taking over me because it feels like it resonates with me; because if there is some song that really does not vibe with me, I would not surrender to it like that. I am like, Okay, come in flow. That is if it really is something that you were in tune with, then you are able to embody it at a level that you are describing.

The quoted passage encapsulates the notion of self-surrender within the context of an aesthetic experience, characterized by profound immersion and flow. It illustrates a unitive process facilitated by art, signifying the act of surrendering one's 'self' through a receptive and inclusive form

of energy. This energy, notably unitive in nature, resonates with the individual's self. In this specific context, one's self-identity expands and achieves a transcendental unity with the aesthetic object.

Another participant (number 5), a hypnotherapist, spoke of this feeling of "letting go of oneself" while speaking of their hypnotic and trance states. This illustration refers to the time when they developed their first interest in hypnosis:

> The hypnotist basically acts as a human placebo for the other person. Like they are not giving them anything apart from the help with visualization or just the creative suggestions or whatever. It was one of the first times I directly experienced the physical effects (and I had not yet connected it to hypnosis). The metaphors give the impression that the individual has complete control over bringing about the transformation. I did not realize it, but that was the first time I had just put on some headphones and within 15 minutes, you know, my shoulders had dropped and I had stopped caring about the sounds outside and all that stuff. I also believe that the feeling of total immersion and engagement was profound and spiritual because I had to be so focused during that experience.

The prevalence of these experiences of aesthetic absorption and the feeling of a sense of immersion and receptivity were prominent findings within the codes. For many individuals, this dissolved sense of self-identity was a 'means' of gaining a connection to one's spiritual self. This phenomenon underscores the intricate interplay between the self, aesthetic experiences, and the temporary suspension of traditional self-identities, constituting a fundamental aspect of this thematic exploration.

Relatability and self-reflection in art. The emerging thematic category pertains to the individual's experiences of identifying with representations in media, art, literature, and related domains. Approximately 10% of the codes fell within this thematic domain. The capacity to relate to characters or perceive one's uniqueness mirrored in aesthetic encounters contributes significantly by fostering self-discovery through introspection. Mann (1994, p. 5) postulates that "human consciousness arises from a confrontation of the subject with object," suggesting that the acknowledgment of one's, self and identity necessitates a form of engagement with elements in the external world that reflect the 'self' back to the individual. Within this study, numerous participants recounted their encounters with art that elicited a profound sense of self-reflection and relatability.

For instance, Participant 21 shared their experience of grappling with depression and loneliness, during which they discovered a sense of relatability with a fictional character. This underscores the pivotal role of aesthetic experiences in facilitating self-recognition and personal connection –

> So, I think, the thing that I like about the show is that it is distinctly human. This is odd because I feel it shows something that is very real, but at the same time, in my real life, I do not really see people expressing the same sentiments as the ones that the characters in that show express; like, it just explores their neuroses and their loneliness. And to me, that seems like what I would assume most people are experiencing. I liked that the show because it explores that in a very upfront, visceral way. So, I do not know whether it is about the loneliness that comes from being an individual person as a recurring aspect of life, or if I had a theme in my life, it would be loneliness. And I think that s one thing that, is pretty much every character, especially the main character in the show, Shinji Accardi, displays. He is incredibly shy and uncomfortable and stressed, and I do not know if a lot of this comes from not knowing his place or his usefulness in the world. And I think, that is something that I can relate to, even if it is not as explicit as it is in his character. I feel as if there is a Shinji in all of us.

Miller (1981, p. 59) says that "depression is the disease of our time" and therefore, this condition demands that "the individual find support within themselves." Finding relatability with TV shows about issues that are prevailing in modern life allows us to feel understood and not feel alone in our pain. Finding emotional support through relatability with TV characters can provide us with a strong sense of solace. Participant 11 similarly described his experience with relating to a fictional character –

> I have to say that the single aesthetic piece that shaped my identity the most is *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. I felt as if I identified completely with the main character and his struggle to try to find his love, Daisy, even after achieving the 'American Dream', because he was not a part of the same social class as the other people or maybe because he was late to approach her, as he had to go to war. I identified with him, and it shaped my identity because I felt, as if I need to be financially successful and pursue a lucrative career in order to find love and happiness.

Hence, the identification of oneself through the process of being "mirrored" and the cultivation of a sense of "relatability" within aesthetic encounters have played a crucial role in individuals' self-realization and the deepening of their emotional awareness. The prominent function of aesthetics in promoting self-reflection establishes its integral position within the construct of personal identity, facilitating a form of self-representation.

Identity as a collection of skills. The concept of "doer-ship" is widely regarded as a key contributor to one's self-identity. Brouwer (2019), in his scholarly work published in the journal *Identity*, expounds upon the notion of the self as a "doer-identity." This perspective posits that the self is characterized by its association with behavioral actions. To further elucidate this point, Cupchik (2011) eloquently highlights, "Ego is a collection of skills. Self is the ego of which I am aware. Identity is the ego that my Self approves of."

In the context of our empirical investigation, a significant theme that emerged among study participants pertained to the nexus between art and identity. Specifically, many participants underscored their profound connection with their artistic talents, which, in turn, served as a fundamental component of their personal identity. Notably, 11.25% of the coded data within our analysis pertained to this particular theme. The dimension of self-identification with one's skills and the concept of "doer-ship" loomed large as a salient motif within our research. For instance, Participant 23 shared insights on their interactions with Participant 24, shedding light on the manner in which they both identified themselves as writers and storytellers, further underscoring the centrality of this theme in the context of their self-identity:

> I have been writing stories all my life, as I wanted to be a storyteller, a TV screenwriter. Today, I want to speak about stories that I wrote in high school when I made friends for the first time (after not doing that for most of my life). That is when I met *Participant 24* and collaborated with him. That was a very important time for me because this was the first time, I collaborated with someone. Until then, the stories were only just in my head, and I could only bounce ideas off myself. But after the collaboration, suddenly my artistic and literary side 'expanded' massively because I was not alone in the literary process now. I often refer to this period as the golden era of Pastor chronicles, because that was the name of the story I was writing. This was indeed a very meaningful and satisfying experience.

We uncovered further dimensions of artistic aptitude among participants who identified themselves as non-professional artists. Participant 10 eloquently recounted their profound and heartfelt engagement with art, underlining their self-identification as an artist:

> Yeah, I definitely identify as an artist. I believe that my love of art saved me from committing suicide. As a result, I believe it to be integral to who I am. I believe I am an artist because if I were not, I would already be dead. Without being an artist, I would not exist. So, intrinsically, I have a soul of an artist even though I am not a professional artist.

In several interviews, we came across this identification with an artistic skill with being an amateur artist (such as being a singer/songwriter, musician, painter, etc.). However, participants (13) and (25) showed higher professional affiliations with their skills (especially for their occupation and source of money). Participant 13 shared their experience of becoming a professional photographer:

> The first thing, I can think of, is when I was 15. I met this person who gave me a really cool piece of advice, which was to take pictures of everything at any point. And I really liked this person and was inspired by them, so I started photographing. Over time, I kind of got really good at it, and it made me want to be a photographer at one point. This has influenced me to this day, and I still have my side business of photography, as well as my entire Instagram account, which revolves around my photos and everything.

Meanwhile, participant 25 had a more formal professional activity to share. They employed a visually artistic method in their research work, which requires the aspect of their identity (as a scientist and a communicator) to merge with a more visual expression –

The root of my identity as a science communicator is visual and aesthetic. These are two images from my first major paper, which was published in the journal 'Nature' a few years ago. These pictures are of the inside of a cell and this visual method of communication that I used in my research work, was a big deal back then i.e., to take pictures of the inside of a cell. We put a red label on just one protein, and it assembles into a polymer (a line, a fiber). This was indeed a unique achievement back then.

This thematic section highlights the importance of doer-ship and one's skills and talents in the formation of one's self-identity. This basically implies that 'who' we are, is intrinsically connected to what we can 'do' and accomplish.

Art as a means of self-expression and acknowledgment. The inclination to manifest one's self-identity and the inherent desire for recognition and acceptance from one's peers are prominent focal points within this segment of thematic outcomes. The act of divulging one's inner thoughts and feelings to others is an integral facet of creative self-expression. Within the context of the thematic findings, it is noteworthy that 20% of the coded data pertained to the subject of art and its pivotal role in facilitating individual self-expression. As an illustrative instance, Participant 5 provided insights into their involvement in the art of freestyling within a community of fellow artists:

> Yeah, especially when it came to freestyling, I would end up saying things about myself that would help me reach clarity. Because everything is on the tip of your tongue. Freestyling is a prime example of spontaneous self-expression. It is happening right now, and you are just pushing it out of your mind. It assisted me in gaining clarity about who I was, whom I aspire to be, and whom I pretended to be. For whatever reason, I know a lot of men who find it more difficult to express themselves artistically. We all have different, messed-up ways of dealing with these repressed, balled-up emotions. So, through these freestyle sessions, we get to know each other's more authentic selves.

The capacity of art to enable individuals to convey their innermost selves is of substantial magnitude. Participant 20 recounted her personal journey with the realm of fashion and how it facilitated the exploration and outward manifestation of her unique style, allowing others to witness her expressive identity:

> It was always difficult for me to figure myself out, and I believe that is a shared experience with every child or teenager. My style and fashion sense were inconsistent throughout my life, and I used them to express my inner feelings. I went through several episodes and experimented with various aesthetic subcultures in fashion just like the emo look in high school when you are feeling alienated, and angsty. However, one might assume that as you get older, your sense of style settles and becomes consistent, but ironically, now that I have a better sense of my identity, I am more comfortable switching styles more frequently to express different aspects of myself. This allows others to perceive the developing part of my identity and speaks of my dissatisfaction with being confined to a particular style or aesthetic.

These instances serve as illustrations of how art and aesthetics can provide us with the means to convey our inner selves externally, allowing them to become visible to others. Beyond aiding individuals in the process of self-discovery, this capacity for aesthetic expression plays a pivotal role in their self-identification, affording them the opportunity to garner validation and admiration from their peers.

Aesthetic genres and taste as identity. Fingerhut et al. (2021) explored this link between aesthetic tastes and identity in their paper and found a strong link between aesthetic preferences and personal identity, and further linked these preferences to social identity, class, status, and subculture membership. Many people described their sense of identity, as a specific aesthetic genre (e.g., pastel, girly, grunge, dark, etc.). In our study, several types of aesthetic preferences and inclinations were discovered, as indicative of personal identity. Numerous participants described their relationship with aesthetic styles and genres or subcultures as a reflection of their personal identity. 11.25% of the codes fell under this thematic category. For example, Participant 8 described their aesthetic taste to be 'darker' than average:

> I guess I have always been a dark sort of person. Growing up, it was something my father would teach me since he is an artist and learned how to make tattoos in prison. But at first, he liked to sketch and stuff like that, and he was very into history and 'War Gods', you know, and the war in general. He would give me these photos, like severed skulls and all kinds of terrible things. And I believe I have always preferred the dark. Like, I was an emo child as well. I was thinking, just a little fun in the dark, and this is all weird. I have always been fascinated by the Mayans, a violent group of people who deal with sacrifice and stuff.

Participant 12 expressed their relationship with avant-garde aesthetics and historical propaganda methods, in the same way:

> I clearly have a more left-leaning mindset and whatnot. I was so attracted by the pictures of white Russians and tartar, Muslims, and all these different types of peasants and laborers, and the vision of a kind of communal unity and working towards a higher objective. I love avant-garde art styles. That kind of work drew me in because it was so different from what you see in America, a lot of the time, and it even resembled previous American propaganda efforts.

However, Participant 15 had a contrasting aesthetic style, which was softer and more feminine – "I enjoy, like nice outfits, or pastel colors, very cutesy, soft, feminine stuff. You know, I am a normal feminine girl." This shows that aesthetic preference need not be unique, for it to be an authentic expression of one's identity.

Belongingness and social identity experienced through art. According to Levin (1992), in Cooley's theory, the sense of self is influenced not only by the social matrix (i.e., contacts and connections with others) but also by language, which contributes to its development. One's unique 'self' interacts with others to generate 'meaning' and develop one's identity. Levin states that Mead believed the self to be both the subject and the object, due to its capacity for reflection, as well as social roles. According to Dunning (1991), if the self is a reflective creation of society and culture, it evolves in synchrony with society and culture. Furthermore, Stevens (1996) asserts that "the self is a profoundly social phenomenon" (p. 2). This statement describes that the self is not only about one's subjectivity, but a shared sense of interaction between the individual and the social environment. Aesthetic experiences play a major role in this synthetic and interactionist 'experience' of self-identity within our socio-cultural environment.

Several participants defined this component of social identity and belongingness, with cultural characteristics. 10 % of the codes fell into this category. This is how participant 16 described their relationship with music and community belongingness:

> Well, what this makes me think of is I have always liked performing music and not necessarily just as an expert performer but with a group of people producing something that people can dance around to. So that is where I had a strong sense of belonging. Music, in my opinion, is a pretty amazing thing that people can share. One of the key things I believe I desire in life is a sense of belonging. It is simply the moment when all you can think about is playing music as people move around you, and it is just so wonderful to me.

Another participant, 18, spoke about their experiences with community belongingness and music, particularly how it helped them feel accepted for their gay identity:

> Ever since I was little, I have been pretty much into punk music. I believe it has helped me better identify as a gay person since the community is so different. And it was helpful in understanding my own peculiarities. So, in addition to discovering other individuals who like the same music, I found more queer belonging through the punk scene.

Finally, another participant (22) explained their bond with their community, friends, and family through their singing rituals:

> Singing has never been about performance for me, but rather about how it makes me feel and relate to others around me. It has always been a tradition in our house to sing Karaoke with each other. These karaoke customs have always strengthened our family's closeness.

Hence, this thematic exploration centers on the profound experience of robust social connections and a sense of belonging fostered through engagement with art, elements deeply interwoven within the identities of numerous participants.

Personal interest and choice of artistic consumption. This thematic construct elucidates the character of exercising deliberate personal choices within the realm of art, along with the burgeoning development of an art-related interest that ultimately becomes an integral facet of one's self-identity. The phenomenon of being drawn toward a particular aesthetic choice or feeling compelled to make specific artistic decisions often serves as a conduit to the exploration of deeper dimensions of self-identity.

Notably, the frequency of the final topic category in the overarching research inquiry stands at 13.75%. Participant 7, for instance, offered an account of their experiences in making serendipitous artistic choices and the profound connection between such choices and their self-identification with an intense passion for the art form:

> Because I traveled to Europe on my own. I was maybe 23 years old and had always been fairly self-sufficient. But the fact that I was young, you know, that I had to take a decision because I had never traveled alone, so giving up a prospective traveling partner, staying behind, because I wanted to go and visit, you know, a certain art museum was a difficult option. And I get the impression that a portion of your intuition is always directing you towards your own choices. I had a deeply emotional moment when I eventually went there. It was not just the beauty of the romantic sculpture, but it was also the relief, that I had made the right decision. And I think that you know that intuition has directed me a lot in my life. Because that is what life is. Life is a set of choices. I've always gone with my intuition and my choices, and this choice reflected my inner being.

Participant 23 also similarly described the role of choice and personal interest in the art that they consumed and how that allowed them to shape their identity:

> My life has basically been a long series of all the media that I have consumed. These choices in media consumption that I have made have basically shaped who I am today. This has also shaped my writing style because how I write is inspired by these media choices of consumption. I then try to use the same style in my writing.

There seems to be a prominent role in what kind of choices we make in consuming art and what piques our interest. This last thematic category for the primary research question of how aesthetic experiences contribute to self-realization and identity formation is demonstrative of the role of personal choice in art consumption. Therefore, it is intuitive to think that our agency and decision-making are a deep part of our self-identity.

Miscellaneous. Lastly, 12.5% of the codes fell into the miscellaneous category as they did not follow (clearly) any of the broader themes. These include, for example, codes such as "The humbling experience of art" and "Artistic mastery is never archived."

Thematic Findings for Aesthetic Experiences of Self-Transcendence

The thematic analysis of the inquiry data for the secondary research question— "What is the role of aesthetic experiences in helping individuals achieve a sense of self-transcendence and a deeper connection with something greater than themselves?" – generated 7 themes. These include: a) Mother Nature's Beauty (14.3%); b) Intense, Passionate, and Overwhelming Experiences of Heightened Consciousness (11.4%); c) Sacred Symbolism, Archetypal Imagery, and the Collective Unconscious (17.2%); d) Collective Effervescence, Social Connection, and Shared Meaning (15.7%); e) The 'Profound' Found in the Mundane (7.1%); f) Feelings of Spiritual Elevation and Wellbeing (21.5%); and g) Self-Referential Meaning-Making through Art (7.1%; (see Figure 3). Other codes that did not fall into any category were labelled as Miscellaneous (5.7%).
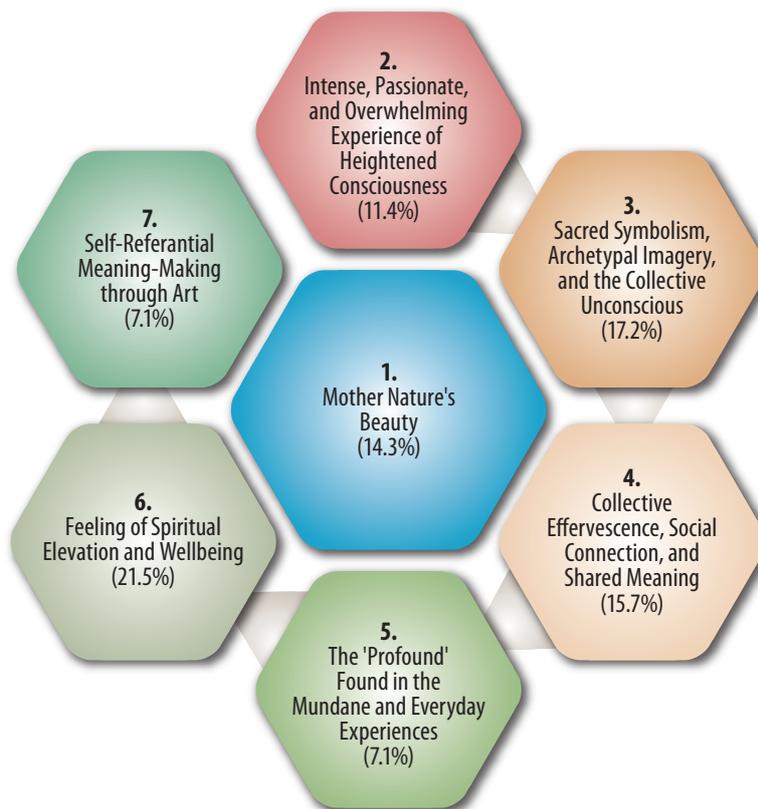
Figure 3. Thematic analysis outcomes for the secondary research question on self-transcendence

Mother nature's profound beauty. The appreciation of the beauty of nature was a major theme in reporting the experiences of self-transcendence. This thematic category had a frequency of 14.3%. The potential of nature to evoke strong emotions, particularly those of transcendence, is acknowledged in research by Bethelmy and Corraliza (2019), and people strongly experience sublime emotion toward nature. A mystical connection to nature was felt by participant 7:

> And I witnessed the most breathtaking sunset of my life there. It was startlingly lovely. Was this area over there where the large swathes of orange were crimson? I turned around to see pink streaks in the sky to the west or east. And the moon was full and rising. The full moon was therefore on one side and on the other, there was this breathtaking sunset, in my own neighborhood. It was a magical experience, almost romantic I mean, it has a somewhat unfavorable connotation when someone refers to you as romantic. If you are romantic, you are kind of considered naïve. Yes, but I am not gullible. Such a wonderful encounter, in my opinion. I, think such a romantic experience of beauty is almost illusory, dare I say magical?

Another participant similarly shared another mind-blowing experience of being amid the natural splendor of the Grand Canyon and Sedona, Arizona:

> It takes you to tears. I will admit that I thought the Grand Canyon in particular was lovely. One of my favorite days ever is right now. It was truly such a strange, transcending day, I mean that. However, there is a spiritual aspect to Sedona as well, and you can not talk about it because it makes you speechless. because you are experiencing a weird feeling inside when you see this 'pure' natural wonder. That is the best way to phrase it, in my opinion. Words cannot adequately express the breathtaking splendor of this location. And there are several locations on our planet that we may travel to somewhat replicate that feeling.

It would appear that this sensation of being affected and awed by the beauty of nature is one that each person feels very deeply. Another participant's deceased son was a part of his experience of admiring nature's beauty:

> Experiences involving a connection to nature and its visual expression through photography have made me feel particularly connected. This is not just about my recent photography; it is also about my relationship with my son, who primarily took pictures of nature. He put a lot of effort into developing his relationship with landscapes and nature. As a result, my relationship with photography and nature involves a connection with another person. I have a feeling of responsibility to continue my son's work after he died away. Therefore, this relationship between nature and photography has been extremely significant to me.

Several participants have described the connection to nature as one that takes one beyond oneself to experience a strong feeling of connection with something bigger. Thus, transcendence (through nature) is immanent in individual lives.

Intense, passionate, and overwhelming experience of heightened consciousness. The requirement to transcend the pleasure principle in order to achieve self-transcendence entails a deeper component of experiencing a heightened level of physiological arousal as was stated in the introduction by Frankl (1966). This requires an increase rather than a decrease in physiological arousal (as is through the pleasure principle). Many participants talked about being overwhelmed by feelings of awe and beauty, which caused them to feel intensely and passionately excited. Participants were overcome by intense sentiments of passion and intensity brought on by aesthetic impressions. This category made up 11.4% of the codes. Participant 8 spoke of her experience of being spiritually overwhelmed and feeling completely immersed in a song when she appeared to enter a higher realm of awareness:

> I was listening to a song called Mind Flowers, which is very psychedelic. So, I was motivated to create this work of art as a result. This song made me feel really vibrant on the inside, so I simply wanted to utilize all the colors I had. The color scheme I went with for the flowers was purple, followed by blue for the face, green for the body, and red for the hands. With each hue, I felt my body move in sync with the song and the painting. It was such a powerful experience for me that I felt like my consciousness had expanded. I felt my chakras opening during the entire aesthetic process.

Participant 22 also talked about this feature of experiencing expansion in one's awareness and having a profound sense of transcendence:

> At the end of the program, there was a sudden surprise when someone near me started singing this song, and everyone followed, I was in the middle of the crowd and 360 degrees surrounded by the song being sung by people. This moment of harmonic singing made me feel something in my body, a quiver like I could not contain the joy and the overwhelming feeling that I felt. I was so overjoyed, I felt something awaken in me at that moment.

Participants expressed how deeply relevant these sensations of elevated consciousness and physical arousal were in their lives. In light of this, transcendence is fundamentally this notion of having heightened physiological responsiveness to stimuli and aesthetics. According to Dabrowski, developmental potential extends beyond mere talent and abilities, necessitating the expression of heightened sensitivities known as overexcitabilities and the pivotal role of self-directed emotional growth, often referred to as the "third factor." (Dabrowski, 1964; Dabrowski, 1996; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). This thematic category is explained using Dabrowski's theory, whereby intensity and passion in experiences form the foundation for self-growth, development and discovery.

Sacred symbolism, archetypal imagery, and the collective unconscious. Levin (1992) postulates that Jungian archetypes are principles of thematic energy embodied in specific cultural formulations. He mentions how Jung had proposed a pantheon of innate archetypes that existed in the collective unconscious. Many people in this 'theme' section reported their transcendent experiences as having a strong connection to holy symbols, archetypes, and the unconscious. 17.2% of the codes belonged to this group. For instance, Participant 4 spoke of their encounter with a friend in which they appeared to observe the same archetypal pattern in a shared imaginative environment:

> I do not know why this was happening to me as I would automatically like wake up from my sleep at 6 am in the morning, and I will see the same pattern in the tree. But at any other time of the day, I will not see that part. Even at night, I would not see that pattern but at 6 am specifically, I would wake up, see that and then go back to sleep. This kept happening for a few days. Then at one point my boyfriend and I both looked out of the window and we both shared the same imagery. It was like spiders and their webs were on the tree, and maybe I had a placebo effect on him or both on each other, but the fact that we both saw it meant something. I do not know what it means, it felt mysterious, but if there was an explanation for what it meant, it would have been great,

Similar experiences with the 'unconscious' and 'symbols' were recounted by participant 6 in their interview discussion:

> So, I recently traveled to Mexico. And I was meant to stay there for about a month and three weeks into my trip. I was imprisoned., because I had accidentally gone there without my passport. After being detained for 48 hours at the Immigration Detention Center, I made the decision to give up rather than resist and provide evidence that I was not an illegal immigrant. Something happened on Thursday afternoon, and I learned that even though I had given them my passport, they still needed to process it. As a result, they might not be able to release me until Friday, and if they do not, it will be over the weekend. I kind of went into a downward spiral and thought, "This is absurd". And how will I go about doing this? I then felt like killing myself. I was extremely awful. After then, I concluded that I could just pretend that I was someplace else instead of in prison because I had this sensation that I had shut myself out of the world. I am not imprisoned. I am not, yeah. In fact, I am free. You may realize that I felt surprisingly liberated as I was lying down in the tiny bed they had provided for me and stared up at the pipes hanging from the ceiling. I was not locked up at that precise time. I managed to instill in myself a sense of freedom and release despite the fact that I was actually imprisoned; perhaps in the sensory world I was, but not in my conscious experience. Suddenly, I felt like I was not locked up and I was a liberated man.

Finally, another participant (16) described their experience with a religious rosary that held a very sacred symbolic meaning to them:

> When my grandma died, I received an amethyst rosary from her belongings I put it in this box. Even though I am not very religious, this item has a family connection to rituals for me. Thus, using the rosary for prayer now seems profound and holy every time I open this box." This shows that holy symbols still have a spark of divinity that may evoke religious sentiments in those who are not themselves religious.

This demonstrates that even for individuals who are not religious themselves, sacred symbolism still has a spark of divinity in it that can strike religious feelings.

Collective effervescence, social connection, and shared meaning. Feeling a sense of collective effervescence and experiencing a sense of transcendence via shared meaning were included in this area of theme results. In this study, a number of participants talked of having a powerful sense of connection to something greater than themselves while they were engaged in a communal experience of shared meaning. This group of codes made up 15.7% of the codes. Participant 20 characterized their feelings of this sense of communal effervescence as follows:

> Like when, when you go into a techno music festival, a lot of people who share the same level of passion for techno get into this 'trance' state. And I feel like that experience is in itself, like, sort of a spiritual experience because you are sharing with so many people, way bigger than yourself. It is just a bunch of people who are madly turning to tech sounds and I feel like that is powerful because it really like brings together this, collectively shared experience that I do not think I have experienced in any other setting.

This category may include an event discussed by participant 22 that was referenced in the thematic category of "Intense, Passionate, and Overwhelming experiences." They recounted being encircled by people, while they sang in unison as a group. The same thing happened to Participant 14:

I do not know if this is regarded as sacrilegious or divine, but I had an experience of feeling entirely and utterly united with other people. I do not know if this is considered a divine or sacrilegious experience. I took part in the group marching during a parade we had one day at school, and I was overcome with a profound sense of social cohesion. I believe that this particular experience has made me more socially connected. It helped me see beyond what I wanted. Even at school where you are competing with others, this unity took us beyond our needs to advance ourselves before others so that we can all be one.

Participants in the research regarded this feature of sharing collective meaning and feeling this deep connectedness with others as a profoundly transcendent feeling.

'Profound' found in the mundane and everyday experiences. This thematic category in particular, exemplifies that self-transcendence is not only a phenomenon reserved for extraordinary experiences but for everyday mundane experiences as well. 7.1% of codes fall into this category. Participant 23 shared their experience with finding some time to be in the moment and experience mindfulness in everyday life:

I feel like I struggle with, that I struggle with being in the moment. I like to escape in fantasy. One day I was just riding my bicycle and I felt that moment of being present so deeply. I was present and appreciative of the sensations and everything that was around me like the sound of the bicycle moving, and the bicycle bumping along the trail and all that and I am like, Man, I really am happily living this moment that I am currently experiencing. And I am fully just appreciative of it. And I do not really want it to end because I am really enjoying this moment. And that felt like kind of a rare moment for me of being in the moment, being present with everything that's around you, and not trying to change it or anything like that, just being present with it.

Participant 2 similarly described their experience with just being in their backyard and looking at the clouds and a mountain climber and being amused by it:

So one day I was just looking out and I saw this weirdly shaped cloud and I also saw a guy climbing up the side of the mountain. It made a really funny shape with him climbing while the cloud was moving. It dawned on me that day that it does not take much to amuse me or entertain me.

These examples of finding profundity and amusement in everyday situations and even the mundane, appear to show that transcendence cannot be removed from everyday life, but rather it is an integral part of it.

Feelings of spiritual elevation and wellbeing. Participants in this thematic category shared their own experiences of how aesthetics had positively impacted their wellbeing and sense of spiritual elevation. This group of codes made up 21.5 % of the codes. Participant 24 talked about how aesthetics gave them more optimism, and hope and made them feel empowered to achieve their dreams:

I would say that the movie Ratatouille really helped me connect with the idea of following your passion and having confidence in yourself. The movie's overarching message—that anybody can cook—inspired me because I took it to mean that great artists can emerge from anywhere, and the key is to believe in oneself and your aspirations. I felt quite optimistic about the future after viewing this movie. I found this movie to be rather spiritual.

Participant 4 also spoke about how music helped them feel better about themselves, more in control of their lives, and more motivated:

> So, the other day, I was listening to this song, and I felt quite empowered by the lyrics since the song is about 'power'. It also featured a line that genuinely seemed to resonate with me since I frequently use music to motivate and support myself in reaching my goals: "Do you have the power, to let power go?" Although this particular lyric stood out because it did not just make me feel positive about my aspirations but also made me question whether I will be able to keep my morals and ethics and not let power get to my head if I actually am able to amass power and influence in this life. This felt like a spiritual revelation to me because a song not only has the power to empower you but also to make you question deeper aspects of yourself and your soul's purpose.

This theme placed a heavy emphasis on the contribution that aesthetics may make to people's sense of wellness, sense of empowerment, and sentiments of hope and optimism.

Self-reference and meaning making through art. Finding meaning and a sense of self-reference is the final theme topic (i.e., a feeling of being communicated to, having a revelation, etc.). This category, which describes the connection between art and personal meaning and reference, contained 7.1% of the codes. Participant 21 described their experience with a song that seemed to communicate something profound to them:

> I have been listening to the song for, like, my entire life, so it is interesting. And just one movie truly presented it. I was maybe 13 at the time. I watched it then. It is intriguing that this song was the one that eventually inspired me to look beyond myself. It is named The Killing Moon by Eco. I felt as though I had to surrender myself to God, and this song was asking me to do it. The lyrics were "Fate, up against your will, Through the thick and thin, He will wait until you give yourself to him,". If there is one thing in particular that has elevated my spiritual state, it would be music. It is the thing that touches me the most.

A similar story about music and transcendence was related by Participant 11 who said that one song "Rise up, oh man of God" struck out and seemed to convey a message or sign:

> And I am not very religious at the moment, but it is just, I think when I when I listened to it, like two years ago or something like that, it was I was just not in a great place. And I felt like I was kind of in a rut, very depressed and procrastinating. And I began listening to that song every morning as I was getting ready, and it was just like, "Okay, rise up." Oh, Man of God' We must live like men have done with lesser things, as stated in the song's lyrics. 'Rise up, O Man of God! Have done with lesser things. Give heart and soul and mind and strength to serve the King of Kings'. And I guess that made me appreciate all I did have, despite the fact that I was at the time completely broke and had lost a lot of money playing poker. But this song appealed to me on such a deep level that it enabled me to escape that rut.

These instances demonstrate the ability of aesthetics to convey to us profound messages of divine significance when we most need them. When it comes to discovering purpose and establishing a link with the transcendent, art has a significant impact on our lives. This direct communication via art is one way that the transcendent meaning may touch us in our everyday life.

Miscellaneous. 5.7% of the codes did not fit into any of the broader themes perfectly and therefore were reported as Miscellaneous.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The outcomes of this thematic analysis yield significant implications, offering compelling evidence of personal growth and the profound experiential meaning derived from engagements with aesthetics. These findings underscore the pivotal role played by such experiences in the cultivation of self-actualization and self-transcendence, thereby establishing their centrality within the individual's life context. In light of prior scholarly investigations (e.g., Brouwer, 2019; Fingerhut et al., 2021; Larrain & Haye, 2019; Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012) that have acknowledged the pivotal role of aesthetic encounters in the realization of these humanistic objectives, the present study gives rise to several noteworthy implications pertaining to the influence of aesthetics in contributing to human flourishing at the individual level:

1. **Importance of Art in the Revelation of Personal Identity**: This investigation sheds light on the manner in which artistic expressions possess a reflective capacity, enabling the recognition and actualization of latent facets of one's self-identity, which may otherwise remain concealed. Art not only fosters a subjective understanding of the self but also enables its external manifestations. Consequently, aesthetic experiences emerge as a linchpin for self-discovery, reinforcing the seminal findings of Larrain and Haye (2019) regarding the role of aesthetic experiences in this generative process of self-realization. Aesthetics can thus be useful for individuals seeking to discover themselves.

2. **Aesthetics in Social Bonding**: In this study, aesthetic experiences emerge as a potent means of fostering connections within larger social groups, cultivating a profound sense of belonging. The shared aesthetic experiences can serve as a foundation for collective identity, particularly in culturally defined communities. Thus, belonging experienced through shared aesthetic experiences fosters both self-realization and self-transcendence, and these experiences can foster deep connections with others.

3. **Inherent Aesthetic Preferences and the Aesthetic Nexus**: The study underscores the role of aesthetics in enabling individuals to discern their intrinsic preferences, tastes, and choices, thereby imparting qualitative insights into their selfhood. The individual's connection to an aesthetic object is contingent upon personal inclinations and predilections, which, in turn, underpin the experience of aesthetic congruence with the aesthetic object. Consequently, individuals can employ aesthetic experiences as a means to unearth constituent elements of their innate selfhood.

4. **Expression of Selfhood**: This inquiry unveils that aesthetics, with its capacity to facilitate the sharing of inner worlds, recognition by others, and the development of individual

talents, becomes an integral component of one's identity, thus satisfying humanistic needs for self-expression and acknowledgment. These findings posit that aesthetics not only facilitate self-discovery but also empower individuals to articulate their identities within the societal context and experience recognition.

5. **Transcendence through Aesthetics**: Aesthetic experiences, encompassing not only traditional art but everyday encounters such as nature and recreational activities, are seen as a path to self-transcendence, providing profound experiences that enhance bodily tension and induce the experience of awe. These findings clearly indicate that engaging with aesthetics can be pivotal in moving beyond oneself and experiencing a transcendent connection through such experiences.

6. **Uncovering the Unconscious**: Art is acknowledged for its potential to unveil deeper facets of the unconscious through archetypal imagery and symbolic representations, offering individuals a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

7. **Transformation of Inner Lives**: Art and aesthetics possess the capacity to transform individuals' inner worlds, improving well-being, elevating consciousness, and fostering connections with others and the collective.

8. **Recovering from the Tragedy of Beauty**: Building upon the concept of the "tragedy of beauty" identified by Howell et al. (2017) within the context of American culture, which purportedly obstructs the realization of humanistic goals of self-actualization and self-transcendence, this study offers insights into potential strategies for individuals to surmount this impediment and find avenues for growth and meaning through aesthetic experiences.

9. **Transcendence through Nature and Everyday Experiences**: Another implication of this study is that aesthetic experiences are prevalent in our day to day lives. Thus, one could experience transcendence through aesthetics during everyday experiences; whereby transcendence becomes immanent in our day to day lives, rather than being a farfetched ideal that is only reserved for extraordinary experiences.

10. **Aesthetic Sensibility and the role of Intensity**: These research findings correspond with Dabrowski's (1964, 1972, 1976) framework, who highlighted the role of intensity, passion and sensitivities in the development of an ideal or true self. Furthermore, these findings suggest that aesthetic experiences can facilitate the development of overexcitabilities (OE) and trigger the "third factor", that is critical to becoming an authentic and autonomous individual.

11. **Growth Needs**: Lastly, Kaufman (2020) identified growth-oriented needs such as love, exploration, purpose etc. Within this framework, aesthetic needs are recognized as growth needs and these findings are consistent with the evaluation that the growth needs related to actualization and transcendence can be fulfilled by aesthetic experiences.

These findings align closely with humanistic perspectives, emphasizing the significance of "aesthetic needs" in the journey toward self-realization and transcendence, as posited by Maslow (1968). They affirm that beauty and aesthetics significantly aid individuals in their quest to discover their authentic selves and to connect with a larger, transcendent reality.This research further opens avenues for future exploration, particularly in delving deeper into the themes that have emerged from the data. It would be beneficial to have individuals assess the relative significance of various types of transcendental experiences and aesthetic encounters, examining distinctions between everyday transcendent experiences and those associated with profound revelations. Additionally, exploring the relative importance of aesthetic encounters compared to other expressive experiences in shaping self-identity is a promising direction for future inquiry.

Given the imperative role of aesthetic needs in human flourishing, there is a call for a cultural transformation in which these needs are prioritized above the mere pursuit of averageness, as articulated by Maslow (1968). Elevating aesthetic involvement to a larger socio-cultural level can inadvertently satisfy deeply ingrained humanistic ideals, enriching the quality of human existence on moral, social, practical, and spiritual planes. By embracing aesthetics not merely as consumer goods but as a means of enhancing the overall quality of life and contributing to human happiness, we can collectively influence society, stimulating the collective imagination with positive imagery, messages, and spiritually uplifting concepts. Consequently, we possess the potential to effect profound societal transformation through aesthetics. This research unveils potential pathways for self-realization through aesthetic experiences and elucidates how such encounters can offer individuals a sense of self-transcendence. Participants acknowledge that aesthetics contribute to a profound sense of meaning beyond the routines of daily life, underscoring their significance in creatively enriching the human experience.

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