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## The inspirational power of arts on creativity

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## ABSTRACT

We propose that openness to aesthetics and the experience of art enhances individuals' creativity by imbuing them with a sense of inspiration. Although previous literature has claimed that aesthetic experiences increase creativity, there is a shortage of empirical evidence documenting the psychological process that underlies this effect or testing whether it can transfer to domains outside of the arts. To shed light on the process mechanism and test the domain-generalizability of the effect, we investigated the relationships among appreciation of art, inspiration, and creativity in four studies. Participants with open attitudes toward aesthetic experiences were more likely to be inspired and therefore better able to generate creative solutions (Study 1). Appreciating works of art brought about inspiration, which in turn enhanced creativity (Study 2). Finally, the power of art appreciation extended to a business environment, where it enhanced performance in product design, brand-naming, and problem solution generation (Studies 3a and 3b).

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to the ways in which art might benefit business organization, marketing, and strategy, and research has revealed several beneficial effects of art interventions for companies. For instance, exposure to art positively influences profitability and marketing persuasiveness, external and internal company relationships, the development of leadership and organizational culture, self-discovery and personal growth, collaboration, activation of emotions and energy, and creativity through openness to new experiences and widened perspectives (Artlab, 2009; Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013; Eriksson, 2009; Katz-Buonincontro, 2008; van den Broeck, Cools, & Maenhout, 2008). Among these effects, the last has generated some of the most interest, as creativity is essential for generating unusual and novel ideas, which can drive organizational success—especially in a rapidly changing and competitive economic climate.

Creativity is the generation of ideas or problem solutions that are both novel and appropriate (Amabile, 1983; Guilford, 1967). Consumer creativity is a similar problem-solving capability specifically applied to consumption-related problems (Hirschman, 1980). Firms including Home Depot, Ikea, and Michaels rely heavily on consumer creativity, using consumers as a source of creative new product ideas and even as co-producers of products. In this role as “prosumers,” consumers actively engage in new product development, offering fresh and creative ideas to companies through contests or crowdsourcing platforms and

innovative alternative uses of products. Companies such as Dell, Electrolux, Threadless, LEGO, General Mills, BMW, and Starbucks, just to name a few, have developed open innovation platforms that allow consumers to post ideas to the company online and through social media. Creativity among employees who think outside the box can also be strategically exploited by companies to generate innovative new product ideas (Bare & Oldham, 2006; Burroughs, Dahl, Moreau, Chattopadhyay, & Gorn, 2011; George & Zhou, 2001; James, Brodersen, & Jacob, 2004). To this end, a substantial number of companies have implemented creativity training programs for employees working in areas such as new product design (Burroughs et al., 2011).

As companies' recognition of the benefits of creativity has increased, many art programs have been employed in workplaces as a fresh approach to bring about innovation (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013). The literature on such approaches, however, is nascent and almost entirely anecdotal, and only a few studies have tried to theoretically investigate the effects of art appreciation on creativity and unveil the underlying psychological processes. The key objective of our research was therefore to empirically document that experiencing art leads to greater creativity because art inspires people.

We took an experimental approach to theoretically test the effects of art and, further, to test whether inspiration and creativity induced through the experience of art can transfer to business-related contexts. Although it is generally accepted that involvement in artistic activities fosters creativity in the field of art education (Dewey, 1989; Guetzkow, 2002), there remains skepticism about the notion that psychological

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aspects underlying successful creative performance can transfer from domain to domain (Baer, 1998).

In the next section, we review literature establishing the relationship between art and creativity. Next, we introduce the concept of inspiration as a psychological construct to explain how art stimulates creativity. Last, we present the results of four studies in support of our hypotheses.

## 2. Creativity and art

Previous research empirically investigating the effects of the arts in business settings has shown that art interventions elicit positive reactions from those involved, including both managers and employees (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013). For example, Eriksson (2009) investigated Arts in Residence in Science (AIRIS) projects and reported that through these projects, employees increased their creativity by “getting a new outlook on [work] and breaking conventional patterns” (p. 2), which increased their innovation and competitiveness and, in consequence, that of their whole organizations (Eriksson, 2009; Styhre & Eriksson, 2008). These findings thus support the argument that art can serve as a tool for generating creativity and innovation within firms (Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013; Eriksson, 2009; Styhre & Eriksson, 2008).

Research in art education has also demonstrated art's potential for enhancing creativity. Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles (1999) studied students with high exposure to drama, dance, music, and art and found that they outperformed those with less exposure to arts-related activities on creativity tasks (TTCT: the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, which measure fluency, originality, elaboration, and resistance to closure) and the Teacher Perception Scale, which measures idea expression, risk-taking, and imagination. Arts-based improvisational activities such as dancing and acting also increased divergent thinking among elementary students: Sowden, Clements, Redlich, and Lewis (2015) showed that students who participated in an improvisational dance class outperformed those who participated in a non-improvised dance class in a subsequent toy-design task.

Research has examined the creativity-enhancing potential of not only engagement with art but aesthetic experiences as they relate to individual dispositions such as openness to aesthetics. Costa and McCrae (1992) defined openness to aesthetics as “a deep appreciation for art and beauty” and included it as a facet of openness to experience, one of the Big Five traits of personality differences (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Individuals with high openness to experience actively seek and appreciate experiences for their own sake, are imaginative and sensitive to art and beauty, and have rich and complex emotional lives (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Many studies have found that the more open an individual is to new experiences, the more he or she will engage in artistic activities, and more open individuals show a greater capacity for imaginative and divergent thinking, which is a more flexible and fluent processing style facilitating idea generation (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009; Feist & Brady, 2004; Furnham & Avison, 1997; McCrae, 1987; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Rawlings, Barrantes, Vidal, & Furnham, 2000). Greater openness to aesthetics has been shown to be highly predictive of self-reported creative pursuits and interests (Griffin & McDermott, 1998). These findings provide theoretical support for the main hypothesis that we empirically tested in the studies reported here—that there is a positive relationship between experiencing works of art and being creative.

## 3. Inspiration and creativity

The view that inspiration is closely linked to the development of creative ideas has existed since ancient times. In Greek mythology, Muses were the goddesses of inspiration, who whispered ideas of brilliance to creators and guided their creative processes in literature, science, and the arts. Now, the term “muse” is used to depict a source of

creativity for any field that requires creative insight (Miller & C'Debaca, 1994; Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Empirical psychologists have recently turned their attention to inspiration and examined whether muses can be elevated from their mythical origins to a scientific level (Milyavskaya, Ianakieva, Foxen-Craft, Colantuoni, & Koestner, 2012).

The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines “inspiration” as “the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative.” Thrash and colleagues conceptualized inspiration as comprising three components: evocation, transcendence, and motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Inspiration is, first, unintentionally evoked by external or internal stimuli. Afterward, a sense of transcendence occurs, making the individual aware of more than his or her usual concerns. Finally, this awareness encourages the individual to actualize the evoked idea, transforming into motivation. Based on this tripartite conceptualization, Thrash and Elliot (2003) constructed the Inspiration Scale as a measure of inspiration and showed that it predicted “creative self-conception” in subjects.

In a departure from this conceptualization, Oleynick, Thrash, LeFew, Moldovan, and Kieffaber (2014) emphasized that inspiration explains “the motivational transmission” to creative ideas rather than a source of creativity. Unlike previous theories on the relationship between inspiration and creativity, Oleynick et al.'s conception hinges on the idea that inspiration may mediate the generation of creative ideas. Taking this point of view, it can reasonably be suggested that appreciating works of art can enhance creativity because such appreciation triggers inspiration. Indeed, composers of poetry, science writing, and fiction who felt inspired while writing were more motivated and actualized more creative ideas than those who did not (Thrash, Maruskin, Cassidy, Fryer, & Ryan, 2010).

Our review of the literature suggests that individuals with more open attitudes toward artistic activities tend to engage in more divergent thinking (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2009; Feist & Brady, 2004; Furnham & Avison, 1997; McCrae, 1987; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Rawlings et al., 2000), to display more creative behaviors and interests (Griffin & McDermott, 1998), and to experience more inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). We therefore expected aesthetic experiences, inspiration, and creativity to positively correlate, predicting the following:

**H1.** *Individuals with more openness toward aesthetic experience should be inspired more often and more deeply in their daily lives and show greater creativity than those with less open attitudes toward aesthetics.*

Building on this idea, we also predicted that when participants recalled a time they had experienced works of art—an induction of aesthetic experience—their state inspiration (measured using items associated with evocation, transcendence, and motivation; Thrash et al., 2010) would be increased and would in turn enhance their creative performance. Thus, we proposed the following:

**H2.** *Individuals who recall experiencing works of art should show greater inspiration and, thus, more creativity than those who recall aspects of their typical daily lives.*

Next, we extended the effect of art appreciation on creative performance to the business domain (Table 1). More specifically, we examined participants' problem-solving capability in a business-relevant context. Previous research on creativity has provided mixed suggestions about whether creativity transfers from domain to domain (Baer, 2010). Some researchers have argued that creativity derives from a general set of psychological descriptors—skills, aptitudes, traits, propensities, motivations, and behaviors—that can be productively deployed in any domain (Plucker, 1998). Others have claimed that the psychological descriptors underlying creative performance vary across domains (Baer, 1998). For instance, art appreciation might lead to higher creativity in the arts but not transfer to the realm of business.

Thus, we investigated whether people exposed to painting or poetry would design a computer keyboard, name a brand, and provide

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