

How do we value an artwork?

When evaluating an artwork, we often rely on the aesthetic experience we derive from it, which can vary from ‘shallow’ (liking, pleasantness) to ‘deep’ (e.g., frisson, awe), but importantly it is driven by aesthetic emotions.

Aesthetic emotions are a special set of emotions that are triggered when contemplating on a work of art. The nature of these emotions has preoccupied philosophers for centuries, but insights into them have been gained just recently with developments in self-reporting scales for measuring aesthetic emotions. A synthesis of these is the Aesthetic Emotions Scale (called AESTHEMOS) which has facilitated notable progress in understanding and measuring aesthetic emotions. However, despite the progress and the high relevance of aesthetic emotions for understanding aesthetic experience, little is known about the link between aesthetic emotions and art valuation in monetary terms.

External stakeholder involved:

Rowan is a vibrant, independent registered charity providing an arts centre and forest school for more than 80 adults with learning disabilities living in Cambridgeshire and the adjoining counties.

Rowan provides a range of creative workshops in woodwork, ceramics, textiles, print, mixed media, drama and music and arrange regular trips out to theatres, museums and exhibitions to explore art and culture further. Rowan Rangers, their new forest school, enables Rowan’s students to be creative and connect with nature.

At Rowan, they have always been interested in finding out whether providing information about the artist background alongside an artwork would impact its monetary valuation.

Aim and research questions:

- In our partnership project, we examined the role artist background information plays in the artwork monetary valuation and in the aesthetic emotions evoked by an artwork, considering also the artwork valence.
- How do artist background information and artwork valence influence artwork monetary valuation?
 - How do artist background information and artwork valence impact the valence of aesthetic emotions?

Methodology:

We conducted a lab-based behavioural experiment, where only half of the participants were provided with artist background information. This was the inaugural study in the **Behavioural Insights Laboratory** (BIL).

Funding amount: £5,000

The expenses covered by the funding included: costs for setting up the lab space, salary for a research assistant, payments to participants, and the cost of the frames of the artworks.



Public involvement and engagement elements:

Artworks

Rowan prepared and lent us five artworks from one of their students (Alex). They also provided the artist background information and the description of the print preparation process.

External stakeholder staff

To determine the valence of the artworks, we conducted a pre-test with Rowan’s staff. We had 19 participants (M_{Age} = 50.94; 26% male and 74% female). From the five artworks, we selected two based on their overall valence scores on a 3-point scale (1 = Positive, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Negative).



We also used the pre-test to determine the range of prices for the artworks in the experiment. The average price (print without frame) was £101. We used this as the midpoint for a list of prices between £1 and £200 (at £20 intervals).

ARU staff and students

We thus far (May 2023) had 198 ARU’s students and staff (M_{Age} = 27.12; 52% male, 47% female and 1% other) participating in the experiment. We removed the data of 24 participants who spent less than 15 seconds on reading the print and artist background information.

Preliminary results:

The results showed that providing the artist background had a significant effect on the price participants were willing to pay for the artworks, increasing the average price for both the positive and the negative valence artworks.

The artist background also significantly enhanced the difference in the scores on the valence of the aesthetic emotions between the two artworks for individual participants, showing it heightened the emotional response to the artworks.

Public and business engagement workshop:

The findings of the study will be shared with local artists during the Breaking Boundaries between Arts and Academia workshop in June 2023. Their feedback on the research design will inform future projects and it is envisioned that some of them will become partners in future projects.

