

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Jamie Arndt, Psychological Sciences

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Art of Death: Can Religious Artwork Manage Existential Concerns of COVID-19?

Jee Eun “Jenny” Park, Kate Bushnell, Erin Zimmerman, Megan E. Edwards, Madhwa Galgali, Peter J. Helm, and Jamie Arndt

The human awareness of mortality perpetuates the potential for death-related anxiety. Terror Management Theory proposes that people use cultural worldviews to cope with this existential crisis, finding that people increase their reliance on cultural beliefs (and decrease openness towards other beliefs) when mortality is salient. Historically, many forms of art have displayed cultural beliefs, thus viewing worldview affirming artwork after reminders of death may return an individual to equilibrium. This study asked: can religious themed artwork help people manage existential concerns elicited by COVID-19? If threatening aspects of COVID-19 increase thoughts of death, and if worldview consistent art offers psychological protection, then Christians will rate Christian paintings more positively than Hindu paintings after reading threatening COVID-19 headlines (vs. benign headlines). Atheists were selected as a control group who should not be comforted by any religious art. An online survey recruited and randomly assigned participants (N = 390) to read threatening or nonthreatening COVID-19 headlines. Afterwards, participants rated previously piloted Christian and Hindu paintings, and reported their openness to experience.

Results indicated that threatening COVID-19 headlines increased thoughts of death. However, there was no interaction between participant religion and COVID-19 condition on painting ratings. Christians rated Christian paintings highly and Atheists rated paintings poorly regardless of condition. Interestingly, further analysis revealed a participant religion by COVID-19 condition interaction predicting openness to experience. Christians’ openness remained constant regardless of condition, while Atheists’ openness decreased in the threatening COVID-19 condition. Results suggest that existential threats may lower openness to experience, and worldview consistent artwork may offer psychological protection enabling people to maintain openness to experience. Specifically, Atheists’ decreased openness after threatening COVID-19 headlines may be attributed to a lack of exposure to worldview affirming art. Additional studies will seek to better understand this possibility.