



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



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## INTRODUCTION

Humans have a biological desire to survive, and an inherent awareness of their mortality. This discrepancy perpetuates the potential for death-related anxiety, a concern that has likely been heightened during the COVID-19 era. The Terror Management Theory proposes that cultural belief systems alleviate existential insecurity and, historically, many forms of art have represented cultural beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

When mortality is salient (due to COVID-19), people may

1. **increase** reliance on their cultural belief systems, and thus be more favorable to culturally supportive art.
2. **decrease** openness towards other beliefs

## PRESENT STUDY

**Guiding Research Question:** Can religious themed artwork help manage existential concerns elicited by the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Specific Research Questions:**

- Death Thought Accessibility (DTA):** Will threatening COVID-19 headlines increase how much participants think about death (DTA)?
- Liking:** Will Christians rate Christian paintings more positively than Hindu paintings after reading threatening COVID-19 headlines compared to benign headlines? Will Atheists rate both Christian and Hindu paintings poorly regardless of reading threatening (vs. nonthreatening headlines)?
- Openness:** How will reading threatening COVID-19 headlines affect openness to experiences among Christians and Atheists after viewing worldview affirming/non-worldview affirming artwork?

## PILOT: METHODS AND RESULTS

### Pilot Study - October 2020

**Participants:**  $N = 175$ , Mturkers;  $M$  age = 43.70,  $SD = 13.43$ ; 91 (51.7%) women  
**Procedure:** Participants assessed 30 Hindu & 30 Christian paintings  
**Assessment Categories (scale 1-7):**

- Liking
- Reflecting Christian/Hindu values
- Familiarity
- Conveying positivity/negativity

### Results:

- Paintings were matched based on liking ratings
- 4 Christian paintings and 4 Hindu paintings were selected for the main study

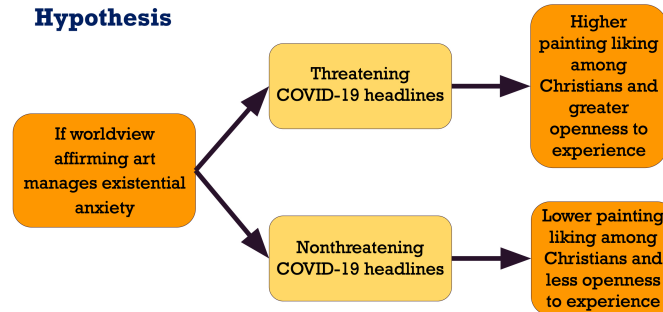


## METHODS

### Main Study - November 2020

- Participants** ( $N = 390$ , Mturkers):  $M$  age = 40.91,  $SD = 12.73$ ; 220 (56.4%) women
- Viewed threatening or nonthreatening COVID-19 headlines
    - Threatening example: *COVID-19 death toll reaches an all-time high of over 200,000 in U.S.*
    - Nonthreatening example: *Only 0.07% of the US population has contracted COVID-19.*
  - Completed measure of DTA<sup>3</sup>
  - Rated liking of 4 Hindu and 4 Christian paintings from pilot study
  - Completed openness to artistic interests/aesthetic appreciation scale<sup>4</sup>

### Hypothesis

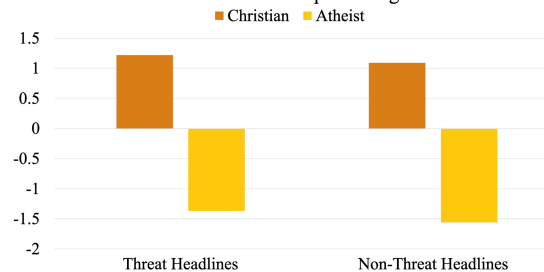


## RESULTS

Only a slight difference in DTA by COVID-19 manipulation:

- Threatening Headline:  $M = 1.51$  (.92)
- Non-Threatening Headlines:  $M = 1.35$  (.92)
- $F(1,388) = 2.77$ ,  $p = .097$

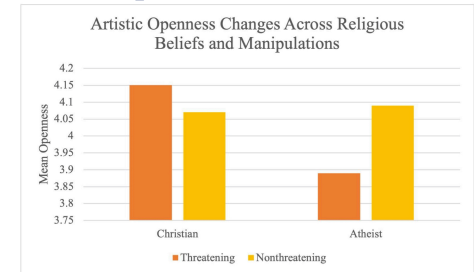
Difference in Liking between Christian and Hindu Paintings (Christian liking - Hindu Liking) by Condition and Participant Religion



Condition by Participant Religion Interaction:  $p = .860$

## RESULTS

### Openness to Experience



**Interaction:**  $F(1,340) = 3.70$ ,  $p = .055$

- Within Threatening Manipulation
  - Atheists had lower openness than Christians,  $F(1,161) = 6.53$ ,  $p = .012$ .
- Nonthreatening Manipulation
  - No difference in openness between participant religions ( $p = .880$ )
- Within Participant Religion
  - No condition differences in openness among Christians ( $p = .402$ )
  - Atheists had lower openness after threatening headline ( $p = .073$ )

## DISCUSSION

Although threatening COVID-19 headlines increased DTA, there was no interaction between participant religion and COVID-19 condition on painting ratings. However, results support previous TMT findings which show that existential threats lower people's openness to experience, and suggest novel possibility that worldview-consistent art offers psychological protection.<sup>1</sup> It may be that because all participants viewed Christian and Hindu paintings, the artwork functioned as a worldview affirmation for Christians, but not for Atheists - resulting in lowered openness for Atheists after the threatening headlines (in accordance with Self-Affirmation Theory.)<sup>2</sup>

**Proposed Process** - When exposed to the threatening COVID-19 condition:

- Christian participants may have been protected by religious paintings
- Atheist participants appear to not be protected by religious paintings
  - Thus reported lower openness as a compensatory reaction to the threat

### Future Research

**Research Question:** Do these paintings make people feel more open if their beliefs are affirmed and, in turn, mitigate threat?

**To further understand this interaction:**

- A better validated mortality salience manipulation will be used
- Christian and Atheist participants will only view Christian paintings

## REFERENCES

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