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Impacts of Art Practice and Appreciation on Mental Health in College Students

Introduction

Does art play a significant role in student's busy and stressful lives? Can college students practice art outside the confines of fine art? Do these amateur art practices benefit students? Students are pressed to find accessible forms of art practice for leisure. They may not be able to find time for another task in day to day lives which just takes more of their time. Is it possible however, that short art practices can be incorporated into the day to day lives of college students as stress management techniques? Art can be utilized as a relaxing practice in day to day life to manage stress and benefit students rather than add another task to their plate. To further my research study, I conducted both a survey of a sample of college students, and an interview of a college student who is an amateur artist. In conducting my survey, I found that students frequently practice visual, photographic and musical art for reasons of self expression, leisure and creativity. Students mostly observed visual and musical art within the past day for reasons of leisure, stress relief and relaxation. Increased access to art practice could allow students to reduce their stress levels as well as reduce anxiety all while strengthening community. The applications of art are commonly underestimated by broader society. Since college students are often stressed, they need to have more resources available to them to cope with that stress. Despite the fact that most fields of art are within the restrictive realm of fine arts with monetary and class based barriers to entry, increased access to art opportunities for college students will be beneficial to

students by increasing their mental health through reducing stress and anxiety by reduction in cortisol levels, and fostering a sense of community among students.

Research Findings

Art can be highly beneficial not just as a relaxing break but as an actual reducer in stress levels. According to a research study, when students practice art, and results are analyzed, the students “demonstrated significant decreases in anxiety symptoms and cortisol concentrations” (Beerse et al.) Art is shown to be a significant reducer of both stress and anxiety, benefiting students who participate in it. This is an instrumental tool to students, which they can use in small or large scales. Art can help students to reduce stress, and provide an outlet in an ever changing, and hustle culture world.

Differing the form of art practice which art students utilize can help them to maximize the benefits of their art practice. There are many avenues to expand art practice to increase the mental health benefits and enjoyment of the practice. In another study examining the effects of art on students, it was found that “Both [mindfulness based art therapy] and [neutral clay task] elicited relaxing and calming effects, but [mindfulness based art therapy] provided more proactive and direct benefits, with participants reporting that they could identify and move through stressors” (Van Lith). Art can be especially beneficial to students when an element of mindfulness is added to it. To further the effectiveness of art practices, students can add an element of mindfulness to their thinking patterns. This makes the art practice more effective, and uses the art practice as an avenue to start mindful patterns of thinking.

Art does not only currently benefit college students, but also has positively affected students historically. At a famous and revolutionary Appalachian liberal art college, Black Mountain College, it is said that “what a student gained from Black Mountain College was largely left up to the individual, though their development and progress was reviewed and

discussed by the faculty” (Beggs 12). Art fosters creativity and personal interest in subject matter, allowing students to apply themselves in a manner which is not usually observed in the day to day life of a traditional college student. Even if not for strict academic endeavors, art as a hobby can supply this interest and outlet for creativity.

In addition to the creativity which was encouraged at Back Mountain College, a sense of community was encouraged among the students. Students brought their skills to work to put on “informal social dances led by music teacher John Evarts at the piano,” which were “a great [venue] for trying out the products of the dressmaking class.” In addition to creating a lively cross-disciplinary experience and fostering community, the students “had a marvelous time with it” (Beggs et al.) Students can apply art practice intentionally for enjoyment, and to strengthen community, thus giving opportunity to improve mental health. Similarly to students' experience at Black Mountain College, Paul Rand asserts in his book that good art and design is timeless. Art has the ability to uphold itself as important across generations. If the proper accessibility to art is set up now, then it will transcend generations and sustain itself as a useful tool for generations to come.

Art can additionally improve people’s livelihood, sense and sense of importance. In a video documentary about the artist Vik Muniz, entitled “Waste Land ” he makes a photographic and film project about the lives of the poverty stricken pickers who work sorting recycling out of dumps. He made portraits of them using trash, in this practice; he wanted “to be able to change the lives of a group of people with the same material that they deal with everyday” (Muniz). He did this because he improved the people’s lives by exposing them to something greater than their everyday experience. He also gave them a sense of importance as they saw themselves in each piece of art. Increasing accessibility of art practice can also improve people’s livelihood by building a sense of community and relieving financial stress. In his film,

Muniz also says that he wants to "to step a little bit away from the realm of fine arts, because it is a very exclusive, restrictive place to be" (Muniz). This sentiment was useful to the pickers because it made them feel included in the art community. This perspective can also be utilized among college students to broaden their opportunity and reduce barriers to entry to art, thus opening the practice to a broader audience of students.

While there is some movement to expand art practices to make them more available to students, it can still be very difficult to access for many people. In a newspaper article entitled "The Art World Still Favours the Rich—How Do We Fix That?" by *The Art Newspaper*, The author interviews professional artists who had a difficult journey to becoming artists. When one such artist was interviewed regarding art accessibility they stated that their "greatest concern today is how inaccessible studying art has become- The game has completely changed," he says, "If I was starting out now, I couldn't have afforded art school' ". Art practice may not be feasible for college students because it was previously reserved for the rich who have more access to time, money, and opportunity than most college students have access to. Work can be done to solve this issue by making resources so that college students can have more access to art practice. Overall, art can provide a technique to manage and improve symptoms of anxiety, to improve and strengthen the student community, and be a formative part of cultures. In order to fully utilize these benefits, we need to reduce barriers for art practice for college students.

After conducting secondary research about the benefits of art for students, I conducted primary research so that I could understand the specific art practices which students participate in. To gather primary information on the topic of college student's interaction with art, I conducted both a survey and an interview. The responses to the following questions provide insight on the behaviors of college students in the context of art, and explain how integral or not it is to their daily lives. The responses explain how students currently interact with art on a daily

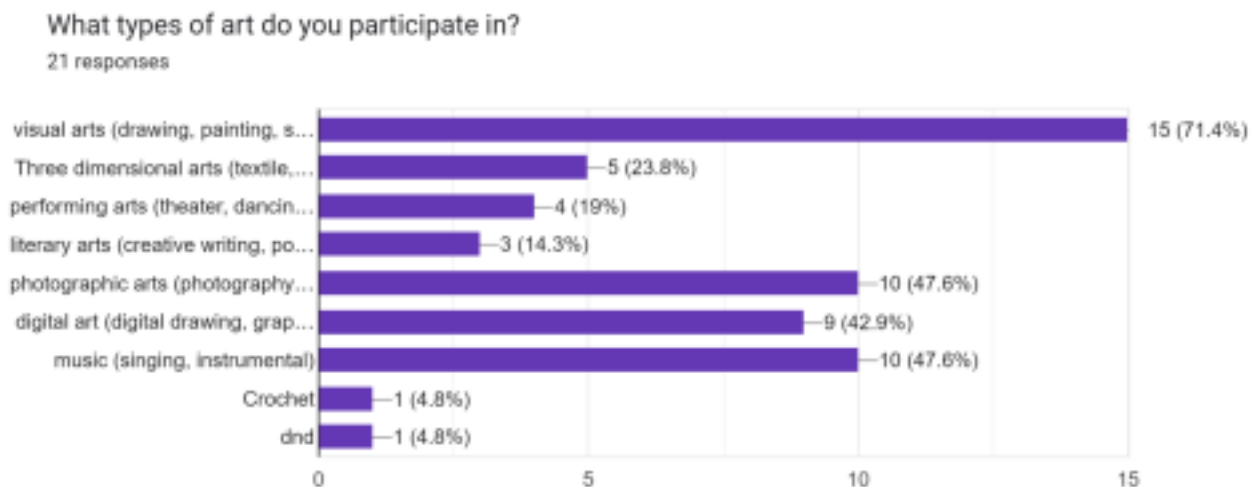
basis in order to understand the needs of the college student community in order to further the accessibility of art practice.

The participants in the survey included twenty-one Virginia Tech students ranging from first years to graduate students. The students who participated in the survey were sampled from an art oriented club at Virginia Tech, students in 1106, and students from the residence hall. These students were chosen because they have a variety of ages within the college space, and the students affiliated with the art club have some experience with art, so they would be able to provide insight on how they utilize art in their everyday lives. Since they have an affiliation with an art club, they do not serve as a representative population of a whole, however they give some insight on how art practices and appreciation can be utilized and in what form. The students are a mixture of gender, age (although within the bounds of college years), ethnic backgrounds and income levels.

The survey was designed to gather insight on both the practice and appreciation of art among college students in a broader sense. The results provide context to the current art scene at Virginia Tech among amateur art students. To distribute the survey, the survey link was given out to the participants after talking face to face. The survey participants were then encouraged to further share the link with their fellow students. The link was additionally shared to students by posting it on the ENGL 1106 course page.

Survey participants were asked what types of art that they participate in by means of check boxes including; visual arts, three dimensional arts, performing arts, literary arts, photographic arts, digital arts, and musical arts along with an “other” option. Participants were asked when the last time they took part in an art practice was, ranging from the last day to the last year. The students were also asked to rank the reasons from most to least important for why they chose to make art. The options included; for leisure, to improve creativity, to improve technique,

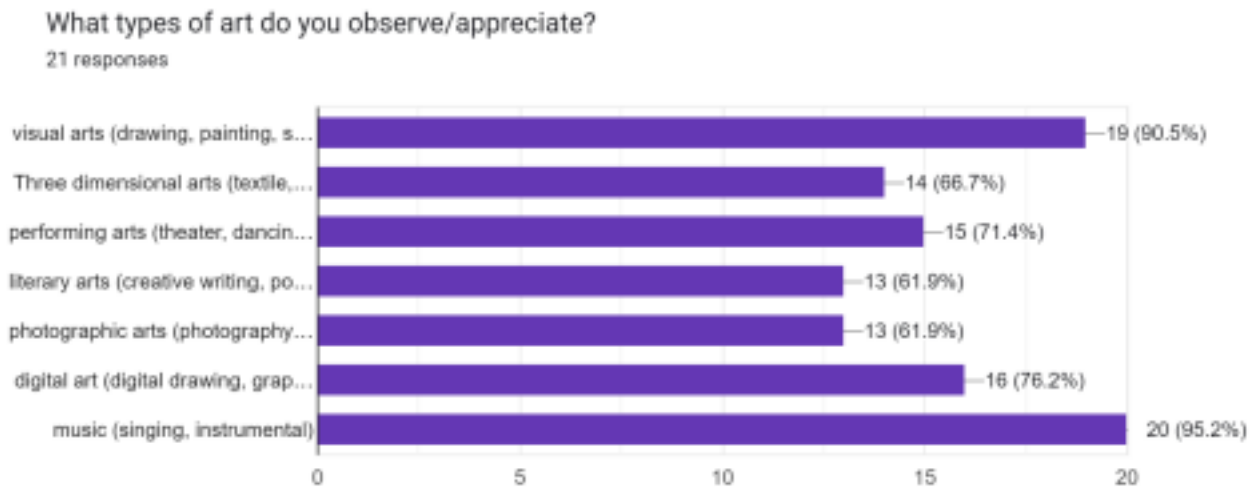
for social context, for relaxation, and for self expression. The same set of questions were asked again but in the context of observing or appreciating art. For example, participants were asked what types of art they appreciate. From the survey, as seen in figure 1, it is evident that the most participated in form of art is visual arts, (71% of respondents) followed by a large margin with photographic arts and musical arts (48%) and digital art (43%). Art was shown to be practiced frequently by the population with 48% having practiced art in the last day, and an additional 19% of respondents having practiced art within the last week. The most important reasons which respondents practiced art for were for leisure and self expression.



(figure 1) student's responses to how they participate in art practices

Participants were asked the same types of questions again, except pertaining to their observing or appreciating art as an “audience” as seen in Figure 2. When participants were asked about their habits involving observing or appreciating art, participants most enjoy music, (95.2%) and visual arts (90.5%). Most of the respondents had appreciated art in the past day (81%) or the past week (90.6%). When participants were asked for their main reason for observing or appreciating art, they said that their first, second and third reasons were Leisure,

Relaxation and Stress Relief respectively.



(figure 2) student's responses to how they appreciate art practices

Students show a clear indication that they enjoy both observing and participating in music on a regular basis. Since students utilize these art practices so frequently, they can further utilize the practice as a form of stress regulation. Since students practiced and observed art for the reasons of leisure, stress relief and relaxation, they are using art practices as a means for stress management. This provides the avenue such that students can further utilize their current art practice as a form of stress management.

To build on the information which I gained from my survey, and to understand personal and specific experiences of art interaction, I interviewed an acquaintance who is an artist and a college student. An interview is beneficial to my study in order to obtain specific quotations and personal experiences pertaining to art practice and observation. The purpose of the interview is to better understand how college students interact with art and their perceptions of the accessibility of art, as well as how they think that increased accessibility of art could benefit the community. I chose my interviewee because they are not a typical art major, however they practice art for their own benefit. They are a first year student at Virginia Tech. They also

understand the struggle of art accessibility as a college student because they are a college student. The interview was conducted in person in a one on one setting. I asked the interviewee questions and they responded. A voice recording was made of the whole interview. During the interview, I asked questions pertaining to their perception and utilization of art practices. I asked whether they thought that there are detrimental effects of considering only certain art practices as fine art, to which they answered that “you should not try to define fine art,” and that they think that “it would be wonderful if college students, and colleges, and everybody can just break away from [the idea of fine art] because I feel like the art that I do none of it would really be considered fine art”. When I asked them whether they thought that opportunities for art practice were accessible to college students, they said that “There is a bit of an accessibility problem, at least with the musician side,” and further explained that the music practice rooms were hard to access, and difficult to be in for long periods of time. When asked about their relationship with art, they explained that, “It's a way to ground myself and to kind of like, take my mind off of everything else that's going on. It's like an escape,”. When asked if they ever used art as a stress relief response, they responded that they have and that they, “definitely benefited from it,”. Students have benefited from art practice and will benefit greatly more from increased accessibility to art practice if art accessibility is expanded to include art practices specified by students as beneficial to them in the survey.

As can be concluded from a synthesis of my primary and secondary research, students can benefit from art practices by relieving stress and providing an outlet of emotional release. Increased access to art practice opportunities could be made available to college students so that they could have more easily accessible art forms. If art is made more accessible to college students, then they can further utilize the art practices in their preferred formats so that they can incorporate stress relief into their art practices.

Conclusion

The purpose of this experiment was to understand the college student's interaction with art, in order to inform the better integration of artistic opportunities to campus. The practice also aimed to discover the correlation between mental health and art practice, and what can be done to better intertwine the two practices. Looking at the opinions and needs of art students in art practice informed the study. Art is practiced by students as a stress reliever. Art is difficult to access in college. If students had greater access to art then they would be able to better utilize art practice and appreciation to improve mental health and to reduce stress. Understanding the need for art practice is significant for students to have a healthful outlet for self expression and an accessible means to release stress and anxiety. Even though most fields of art are within the restrictive realm of fine arts barriers to entry, more access to art opportunities for college students will help students by bettering their mental health. Better mental health can be achieved by reducing stress and anxiety through reduction in cortisol levels, and additionally fostering a sense of community by bringing students together. Students can vastly and effectively improve their mental health if they have greater access to art. I encourage any students or those with power to build community either formally or informally around the practice of art for leisure and relaxation on college campuses.

Limitations

The main limitation of my study was a lack of access to a larger audience of students and professionals in the field. My primary research survey was conducted among only a limited sample of students. Speaking with a professional about the impact of art and stress on communities as a whole would have improved the argument as a whole.

Implications

The information from the study has the potential to lead to inquiries in the fields of

sociological research. The study lends itself to understand how students interact with each other, and whether they use art as an avenue for socialization or community building. The study also provides insight to impactful future development of student resources and campus improvement.

Recommendations

I also did not conduct any primary research on the specific effects of art practice on college students of my own. Continuing with that, I could have investigated which art practices or appreciation are most effective for stress management. Future research could also include surveying students as to their opinion of the best way to reduce barriers to art practices.

Appendix A: Interview questions

1. I understand that you practice many different types of art. Could you tell me more about that? And what about the art you do now?
2. How do you feel about certain types of art being classified as fine art, like where would you put that fine line? Do you think it matters whether we classify things as fine art or popular art?
3. Do you think there is some kind of pressure to be practicing, “real art” or “fine art” as in, “this is real art and this is not real art”?
4. So you feel like [classifying art] creates a barrier to entry?
5. Do you think that opportunities for art practice are accessible to college students? 6. What do you think about the idea of college students breaking out of the idea of fine art being the most acceptable form of art and having more of an emphasis on alternative or accessible form?
7. When you're listening to a song, for example, you're talking about Eleanor Rigby, and then you're making a cover of the song and performing it yourself. Are you then

appreciating the art, or are you making the art?

8. How does the practice of art make you feel like you feel different before and after you take part in an art practice or observe an art practice? And is that different for you based on what you're doing or whether you're participating or observing?
9. Do you think that art helps you with forming a community like getting to know people better or do you think it's like a type of communication?
10. Have you ever consciously thought to yourself "I'm stressed or anxious? Let me do art practice"?

Appendix B: Survey questions

1. Do you consent to your responses being used anonymously in a research paper?
2. year in college
 - a. Years listed first-fifth, graduate student, other
3. What types of art do you participate in?
 - a. visual arts (drawing, painting, sketching, doodling, collage, multimedia art)
 - b. Three dimensional arts (textile, sculpture, ceramics, architecture)
 - c. performing arts (theater, dancing- from classical to dance party)
 - d. literary arts (creative writing, poetry, writing theater)
 - e. photographic arts (photography, cinematography)
 - f. digital art (digital drawing, graphic design)
 - g. music (singing, instrumental)
 - h. Other...
4. Please explain any type of art that you do, not listed above.
5. When was the last time you took part in one of the above art practices? a. Within the past day, 3 days, week, 2 weeks, month, 3 months, 6 months, or year 6. What would you

say is your main motivation for making art? Rank the following from most important to least.

- a. Leisure
- b. Improve creativity
- c. Improve technique
- d. Social context
- e. Relaxation
- f. Self expression

7. Are there other reasons for which you participate in an art form not mentioned above?

Please explain.

8. What types of art do you observe/appreciate?

- a. visual arts (drawing, painting, sketching, doodling, collage, multimedia art)
- b. Three dimensional arts (textile, sculpture, ceramics, architecture) c.
- performing arts (theater, dancing- from classical to dance party)
- d. literary arts (creative writing, poetry, writing theater)
- e. photographic arts (photography, cinematography)
- f. digital art (digital drawing, graphic design)
- g. music (singing, instrumental)
- h. Other...

9. When was the last time you Observed/appreciated one of the above art practices? a.

Within the past day, 3 days, week, 2 weeks, month, 3 months, 6 months, or year 10. What

would you say is your main motivation for appreciating art? Rank the following from most important to least

- a. Leisure

- b. Improve creativity
- c. Improve technique
- d. Social context
- e. Relaxation
- f. Self expression

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