

BA (Hons) Moving Media Image and Photography

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# **Dissertation.**

**Posing question:**

**What is the relationship between Stendhal  
syndrome and photography?**

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## Introduction.

Stendhal syndrome also known as the 'art disease, the Florence Syndrome or the hyperkulturemia.' is a well-documented disorder that some people have said to experience when observing art, as suggested by Nick Squires in his article for the telegraph UK in 2010, he wrote.

Known as Florence Syndrome, Stendhal Syndrome has been described as a psychosomatic illness that causes rapid heartbeat, fainting, confusion and even hallucinations in people who are exposed to extraordinary artistic achievement, whether it is paintings or sculptures.

Stendhal syndrome effects a person's mind to an extent of them experiencing hallucinations, an urgent need for sugar, excessive emotional states and in some cases, 'require treatment in hospital and even antidepressants' (N. Squires, 2010). The first documented experience of this psychological disorder was witnessed by '19th century French author Henri-Marie Beyle', he documented the experience in his book (Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio). He wrote.

I was in a sort of ecstasy, from the idea of being in Florence, close to the great men whose tombs I had seen. Absorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty...I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations ... Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. Ah, if I could only forget. I had palpitations of the heart, what in Berlin they call 'nerves.' Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling

This experience Stendhal wrote about, was influenced by the sight of Giotto's famous ceiling at Florence's Santa Croce Cathedral. The past documented occasions like many others similar to that of Stendhal's, have said to experience this syndrome in Florence, although it is apparent to have happened in other places and countries around the world. The majority of those being influenced by paintings or statues. I am aiming to explore and investigate whether the effects of Stendhal syndrome can be influenced by a photograph or print, then I aim to conclude with answering the question of: What is the relationship between Stendhal syndrome

and photography? My aims to do this, is to explore the factors around experiencing this disorder, my main focus will be to investigate Stendhal syndrome from a photography point of reference. I aim to find out if this disorder is simply down to psychoanalysis or psychosomatic symptoms and if this disorder has any relationship with photography directly, concluding with has anyone documented to have experienced Stendhal syndrome from the influence of a photograph.

## Methodology.

The data I will collect will be from online articles, blogs and websites along with books I have sourced from a verity of online library's and Sheffield Hallam university library, I will have conducted surveys through an online platform which has been shared via my Blog, my Facebook pages and my twitter feed, the data and participants I collect from this survey will be left anonymous. I also will conduct an interview via email with Connie Imboden, who has experienced Stendhal syndrome herself, this will help me gain a bigger insight into her experience, Imboden is also a practicing photographer whom has a broad insight into the photography fine art industry. All the information I collect on the subject, will then enable me to write my dissertation in full and conclude with my apposing question of: What is the relationship between Stendhal syndrome and photography?

## Case Study

Imboden is a 63-year old photographer from America. Upon her visit to 'Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum' she was met by a painting by Rembrandt in 1962 titled 'The Night Watch'. As she wrote about the painting in her online blog about her visit.

He was a true master of so many things – If I were a painter I would be mesmerized by the variety of his brushstrokes.... Nothing, however, captivates a photographer like light. And Rembrandt's light is nothing short of brilliant. A basic photography class, or any photography class, should be required to study this painting to understand how light defines form and creates a sense of dimension, as well as defining space and depth in an environment.

She states being captivated by the use of Rembrandt's brush strokes and use of light throughout the painting, it is interesting the way she describes the art she sees, with the words 'brilliant' and 'captivating' being that of a few from the quotation above. These explanatory words give us great expectation of the sights she is experiencing, like those of Stendhal's experience of which he documented his experience of 'ecstasy' and 'sublime beauty'. Imboden then goes onto explain her experience through her blog detailing her emotional and physical symptoms and how the painting made her feel, she wrote:

Just as suddenly I felt a gripping need to breathe fresh air. I had to get outside. I craved a Coke. It was as if I had a sudden heaviness in my head that felt a little like having a cold and fever... Immediately overwhelmed and exhausted... I was experiencing the profound and acute power of true beauty. The Stendhal Syndrome does not come on slowly, giving hints as to what is about to happen. It comes on immediately and takes control.

Although Imboden's experience didn't last for a long period of time, it did however affect her in a way of which she describes as being 'held captive' and 'experiencing the profound and acute power of true beauty'. She didn't receive nor require treatment or hospitalisation, as the effects did not create her a lasting problem. This experience, however is rare, as it not frequently experienced outside of the city of Florence, Italy. Due to this unique aspect to her experience it holds credibility for the research aspects and investigation into the causes of Stendhal syndrome. Creating more speculation into the discussion of Stendhal syndrome being solely effective in Florence, Italy. This case study although denies that fact of that being true as this experience was noted to be in Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

## Chapter 1

**With Stendhal syndrome being considered by some as a questionable disorder, what are the main factors that cause the effects of Stendhal syndrome?**

With some debating whether Stendhal syndrome really exists, scientists in Florence, Italy, embarked on a research project in 2010, to discover and investigate the effects people had when they were faced with art and sculptures, that has influenced Stendhal syndrome previously. To investigate this the scientists used specialist equipment to monitor visitor's heartbeat, breathing rate and blood pressure. The monitoring of the symptoms was also combined with the participants giving details on their emotional and physical states during the observations, the art in particular was the 'Palazzo Medici Riccardi' and the portrait named 'Journey of the Megi', painted in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by 'Benozzo Gozzoli'. Although as stated in an article by Allegra in 2016 'Their results have not yet been published.' Although the results have not been published, I still recorded this due to its credibility in regards to this investigation on Stendhal syndrome and its effects. Another research investigation was conducted measuring visitor's cortisol levels when visiting 'the cherubs and prophets of an 18<sup>th</sup> century fresco', Nick Squirels wrote in an interview with one of the scientists of this research investigation, Professor Bertini, the professor said,

It is probable that looking at the beauty of the art did have an effect, but the result should not be seen in isolation.

From this statement, made by professor Bertini, it is not concluded of what has been found or discovered, only that the investigation shouldn't be seen 'in isolation', meaning the results should not be seen alone or out of context to what the investigation was for, further reading of the same article on this investigation also stated, that the participant's cortisol levels dropped up to 60% from the beginning of the investigation to the end. This leading researches to believe those participants had some emotional effect causing their physical symptoms to become apparent. While researching the effects and symptoms a person would experience in a dramatic drop of cortisol levels, my findings were. Cortisol is widely known as the 'stress hormone' and a dramatic change in a person's cortisol levels can cause them to experience, as stated by Paris in 2014.

Mental and psychological ailments such as depression, Faintness and dizziness, Weakness and fatigue, Heart palpitations, Emotional

hypersensitivity, Inability to cope with stress, Social anxiety, Muscle weakness, Headache, scalp ache, or general body ache, Severe or dull lower back pain, Extremely sensitive skin, Nausea, diarrhoea, and vomiting, Abdominal pain and hunger pain despite an empty stomach, Extreme craving for sugary foods, Anxiety and jitters, Clumsiness and confusion.

Some of which, for example: 'mental and psychological ailment such as depression, heart palpitations, faintness and dizziness.' have been documented by those who have experienced Stendhal syndrome. Although this could be a logical and self-explanatory reason as to why people experience this disorder, this has never been stated nor confirmed as the considerable reasoning behind experiencing Stendhal syndrome, it is however unclear as to why this disorder is experienced by some and not others. Although while reading the book 'Photography and Psychoanalysis' (2014) by Stephen Bray, there I found a statement from Bray what could conclude the reasoning as to why people experience Stendhal syndrome and others do not. The quote read.

The fact that a photographer (or painter) doesn't completely understand his own work does not mean that someone with a trained eye cannot deduct something extra about it. After all, in our surreal times, images (or painting's) may be thought of as dreams, and dreams are always open to interpretation.

This quote by Stephen Bray informs us of what can be taken from an image or painting, the influence that can be taken from an image or painting can only be influenced by those whom want to be. As Bray states the 'trained eye' can 'deduct something extra' even if not intended by the artist. This leading me to believe, that the reasoning behind why some are influenced by Stendhal syndrome and others not, is due to what the viewer deducts from what they are observing.

Therefor answering this chapter's question, being: 'With Stendhal syndrome being considered by some as a questionable disorder, what are the main factors that cause the effects of Stendhal syndrome?' I am led to believe that the cause of Stendhal syndrome is due to a person being open to influence, for that influence to then occur and for them then to be emotional effected due to their own

interpretation of their observations, causing that person's cortisol levels to decrease dramatically and for them to experience the symptoms like: 'Emotional hypersensitivity, Extreme craving for sugary foods, Faintness and dizziness', which have all been recorded by those experiencing Stendhal syndrome.

## Chapter 2

### **As the effects and influences of Stendhal syndrome become apparent, what type of imagery or painting is more influential to give the effect of Stendhal syndrome?**

In the case of Stendhal syndrome, the occasions I found through my research, majority of them have happened in Florence, Italy. Although with a small minority being in other parts of the world. The influences within the Italian museum the 'Sistine Chapel', famously holding paintings and sculptures of prophets, biblical scenes and a vast amount of portrait paintings. This also joining up with the case study influence (Page 4) being a painting of Rembrandt's 'night watch' in Amsterdam. A professor from 'Museum Het Rembrandts' describes this painting as 'It is a group portrait of a militia company'. A painting holding mainly men, with guns and spears. This concluding with the main indifference of those at the 'Sistine Chapel' and Rembrandt's 'Night Watch' being the main influential subject matter being group portraiture. For me to understand this further, I looked into the psychology of the human mind and why some of us feel more emotions, when looking at an image or painting of a person rather than a landscape or scene. Through this research, I found, when we see photographs of a person our brains automatically generate emotional connections with the image and the subject photographed, we can read emotions, therefore giving an emotional connection to the viewer. As suggested by John R Suler in his book: Psychology of the human age, he wrote.

We can identify images by the basic psychological issues portrayed in them, such as self-concept, interpersonal relationships, childhood, achievement, conflict, supernatural, health and illness.

An image can be powerful in ways some of us do not understand, our brains can recognise things automatically and subconsciously, giving us, the viewer, no control over our thoughts or feelings towards an image/ painting we see. It is stated by N. Rule that our brains automatically recollect and judge the things we see 'within 50 milliseconds' of viewing it, therefore giving us no power of creating a conscious judgement.

Through conducting an online survey via 'Survey Monkey' I asked the question: *Have you ever had an overwhelming emotional connection to a photograph or painting?* With many answers from the 25 participants being varied from the multiple-choice answers of; yes, no and maybe. 60% of those participant's answers being yes. With majority of those 60% commenting on what the images were that gave them an emotional reaction. Most of them commented a description of a photograph or painting that contained a person or relative. There was one exception to this being a comment from Anonymous participant five, whom gave a link to the specific image that cause him to become emotional when viewing it, observing the image from the provided link, the image is in colour and contains an out of focus scene of a city or town. The upper portion of the image contains an umbrella which is the only part of the image in focus, (see image in appendix). Anonymous participant five also answered a following question being: *What happened when you saw the photograph/ painting?* With the answer given by the participant being 'Other', and didn't elaborate on any description. It is unknown as to what the emotional state he/she experienced from viewing this image. To detail what emotional feeling he had towards this image, he/she only stating it had given them an emotional connection. With twenty-four other participants of the same survey giving details of the images that influenced them emotionally, eight of those stated that the image/ painting that affected them were of portraits. With one stating that an image influenced him/her to feel confusion, along with sorrow, crying and laughing uncontrollably. Although I am unaware if these were all within the same occasions or influenced by the same piece, this occasion is the closest to the effects of Stendhal syndrome, with the main influence according to some, is a person feeling an overwhelming emotion and confusion. This leads on to the questions from my survey of: *If yes to previous question, what did the photograph contain?* Eight out of the 25 participants to my survey gave details on what the images contained, with some responses being

'Black & white portraits, including where that person lived.', 'Family, friends, inspiration' and 'Family', with most of my responses being that of peoples relations or personal life's, I am lead to believe these where personal photographs my respondents where explaining. Although this doesn't conclude the defining answer to this chapters apposing question of: *What type of imagery or painting is more influential to give the effect of Stendhal syndrome?* It does although give speculation on whether the images can influence the onset of Stendhal syndrome. The images detailed in this chapter from the survey's participants are mostly of personal relations, therefor knowing and having a personal connection to its content is not due to snap-judgment or a psychosomatic illness, it is due to a connection to the person the image contains, Arguably as I have previously stated in chapter 1, 'the cause of Stendhal syndrome is due to a person being open to influence'. Giving reason to the argument of whether my speculation is incorrect, therefore did the participants know the people in the images they have detailed, or are these people just open to interpretation and influence through these images, although this arguable point cannot be resolved due to the participants being anonymous and uncontactable. Therefore, to conclude this chapter, there are many influences of Stendhal syndrome through the person observing portraiture, whether this be in paintings of photography, this is due to the two cases as of Imbordán and Stendhal himself. Both observing art, and both observing portrait paintings. Concluding that portraiture is a big factor when influencing people to have a great sense of emotion, through the connection of an observation, this then in some cases leading them to experience the effects of Stendhal syndrome.

### Chapter 3

**After the influence of discovering that Stendhal syndrome may not have any relationship with photography directly, can photography influence the effects of Stendhal syndrome in another form?**

While researching the affects and findings of Stendhal syndrome I discovered a blog written by Joanna Walsh about her travels to Northern Italy and she wrote about her experience of Stendhal syndrome. Although past experiences of the syndrome in Italy have usually been reported to have happened at

the Sistine chapel, or observing the vast amounts of art Florence has to offer. This case Walsh has documented, is said to have being influenced by the view over Ventimiglia. Walsh wrote about her experience of Stendhal syndrome, while she was overlooking a view of Ventimiglia, Northern Italy, she wrote.

As I climb the steps, lines of light sink down into them and I am skating on a surface. *I walked with the constant fear of falling*, like Stendhal in Florence, as though reality might drop away from me, or as though I might sink past it. What is this I am feeling? Is this Stendhal Syndrome – hyperkulturemia? I've heard of it. People faint sometimes, in Italy especially, when they experience great beauty. Faint? An appropriate reaction to beauty is an attempt to escape it – or to escape what you become in its presence – at any rate, an attempt to go into nothingness, to get some distance from the beautiful thing.

This extract from Joanna Walsh's book 'Ventimiglia' states how she felt when she approached the top of a viewpoint in Ventimiglia. She explains how this made her feel and the emotional connection she had with the view she saw.

Although there has never been a proven case of Stendhal syndrome being influenced by photography, there are people who have witnessed something similar although it has not been named Stendhal syndrome, only in this case Walsh states this was from the living experience of seeing the view, although it is not photography that influenced it, it is not paintings, which has been the sole focus of the influences of Stendhal syndrome so far.

From research into this experience by Walsh, I have found a phrase, this phrase I have come across many times throughout my research, it is photographic abreaction. With abreaction being defined as 'the expression and consequent release of a previously repressed emotion, achieved through reliving the experience that caused it'. Researching on the phrase 'photographic abreaction' gave me little details to read upon although did give a definitive answer to what the phrase meant, written by Dr Edward Scheer, he states the following in his 2006 journal named 'The most delicate of operations': Baudrillard's Photographic Abreactions', he wrote:

That is, a participant in the abreacting of the world through – let's repeat it – the precipitation in a representation and the intensive repetition of a problematic experience, the subsequent appropriation of its power and negation of its influence. Isn't the power of the photograph precisely this appropriation of the power and influence of that which troubles us and haunts us most...? This death at the heart of the image which Barthes named the punctum.

Throughout this journal, he lists many different types of abreaction, among those are 'death' and 'ecstasy of the photograph'. Researching the term ecstasy to the photograph and discovering, it was once named by 'Roland Barthes' as punctum, from this discovery, I found a listed google book title: Writing the Image After Roland Barthes. It is within this book that Barthes explains his point of view on the 'ecstasy of the photograph', he explains an image can give ecstasy, from his point of view the image that gave him this was an image of his mother whom had died prior to him viewing the image, it states in the book Writing The image by Jean-Michel Rabale:

Bathes is arguing from the spectator perspective; he empowers the spectator to retrieve from the insulation of culture, the madness, the pain and ecstasy- of the photograph.

His description being of an image containing a portrait of his mother, an image that recalls Barthes to 'open the wound of that death', this gives him a feel of 'ecstasy'. This is the closest I have found in regards to the effect a person, has felt when being influenced by a photograph, closest to what can be experienced through the influence of Stendhal syndrome. Although there can be no definitive match of these two having any common ground, it is apparent that they can be explained in a similar way, and that being influenced by the view or observation of something recorded in time. Concluding this chapter to be on the speculation of what has been named as punctum by Bathes, punctum defining as a 'small distinct point' as suggested by Oxford dictionary. I believe this describes what can be experienced through the emotional connection of an image, in a more definitive way than Stendhal syndrome. A photograph is metaphorically speaking, punctum. Punctum defined as a 'small distinct point' and a photograph being recorded in a distinct point of time. A recording

of a memory, this described as a way of ecstasy, by Bathes as he sees a photograph of his mother, he also described it as punctum and 'This death at the heart of the image'.

## Chapter 4

**In today's culture and society, with images being a part of our day to day life, can people still be influenced by a photograph of true beauty and maybe experience Stendhal syndrome, or punctum?**

In today's society, photography is everywhere, in advertisements, the internet, our homes, our phones. There are not many devices/ inventions that cannot record images within seconds. Statistically as suggested by Kit Smith from brand watch, '80 Million images are shared daily', with that figure only being on the networking sight Instagram, therefore creating the unimaginable number of images we see per day. Unlike paintings, using statistics from 'the museum association' there are only (on average) 34 million museum visits to the UK's History, heritage and culture museums per month. This figure is below half of the images we view and share every day on social media alone.

As we see images and paintings we may not intentionally observe them in depth. This is due to (as it is stated previously in chapter 2): 'our brains automatically recollect and judge the things we see 'within 50 milliseconds'. We do not need to indulge and create a judgment of something, as this is done automatically and subconsciously. This applies to the majority of images we see daily, although in some respects will not apply to some of the 34 million attending museums around the UK, for some of those who attend the museum are looking to be influenced, or to observe the paintings in depth. This leading me to believe that photography cannot be as influential as paintings and sculptures, this not being done intentionally but due to the society and daily exposures we have in relations with photography, I believe this to be the cause and reasoning, as to why there has not been any medical or personal recordings of Stendhal syndrome, that have been influenced by photography. As I have found through my research the only reports of suspected Stendhal syndrome have been influenced by photographs containing relatives of whom are related to the viewers, past and present. Although it is arguable that this is not in fact Stendhal syndrome, or as Bathes claimed and named the experiences of

an emotional connection with a photograph as punctum. Some may argue that this is simply an emotional reaction to missing a loved one or reminiscing happy memories. Although this cannot be proven, the facts are apparent that the exposure to excessive photographic materials in our daily life extinguishes the probability of having an unprovoked emotional reaction. This only being in relation to photographs we do not have any previous relation to. Therefore, leaving this chapter inconclusive. Being that it cannot be proven to be Stendhal syndrome effecting people who have a strong emotional connection to a photograph. The main contributor to this chapter is that people can be influenced emotionally through the viewing of a photograph. Although the people who are effected are those who know the subject within the photograph, this is still a definitive emotional reaction and can influence the emotions and feelings also associated with Stendhal syndrome.

## Conclusion.

**The main question I aimed to answer through undergoing my research and writing this dissertation, was to answer the opening question of: What is the relationship between Stendhal syndrome and photography?**

From undergoing my primary and secondary research, I have considered all the factors surrounding Stendhal syndrome, including its history and the reports of people experiencing the effects of its influence, I have also considered the statistics and factual information provided to me via surveys and my research. All the information I have collected gives an arguable point when aiming to answer the opposing question, Stendhal syndrome is not a common psychosomatic illness reported outside the city of Florence, although with the reliable report from Imboden being from an occasion which happened in Amsterdam, this proves that it does happen around the world, although not as common and it proves that Stendhal syndrome can be influential to anyone viewing art intensely. From this report, it is also apparent that Imboden was also being influenced by a painting not a photograph, although she claimed in an email sent to me 'I am sure that it could be experienced by a photograph though it hasn't happened to me or any one I know. I don't believe it could be experienced by looking at a reproduction, only an original. It is a fascinating phenomenon'.

With there not being any reliable reports from people experiencing Stendhal syndrome influenced by a photograph, I am forced to conclude this dissertation with

the factual information I have collected and a non-bias opinion. Therefore, to answer the question with. There is no apparent nor reported relationship between Stendhal syndrome and photography. In argument, there are emotional influences in connection to them both directly, although there is no direct connection to them alone, some may be lead to believe the emotion alone is the connection to Stendhal syndrome, although this is not the relationship between them both. I aimed to find a direct relationship between photography and Stendhal syndrome, although I found a connection between photography and what emotions it can influence, then for these emotions to have also been listed as symptoms of Stendhal syndrome. This is the only connection between them, the connection of the emotional reaction and symptoms, this is not enough to connect the two as the symptoms or psychosomatic and psychoanalytical illnesses hold a majority of the same symptoms. Therefore, I am now lead to believe that Stendhal syndrome cannot be influenced by a photograph, I have found this difficult to prove or disprove, although maybe we cannot do either until someone who has a reliable case and strong reaction to a photograph, claims the influence was strong enough to provide them with the onset of Stendhal syndrome. Therefore, to answer the question, considering all analysis and research conducted, I conclude with the answer of, there is no direct relationship between Stendhal syndrome and photography. Only the symptoms that the both can influence. With our daily exposures of photography being excessive I doubt there will be any case reported to happen in the future of photography influencing Stendhal syndrome directly.

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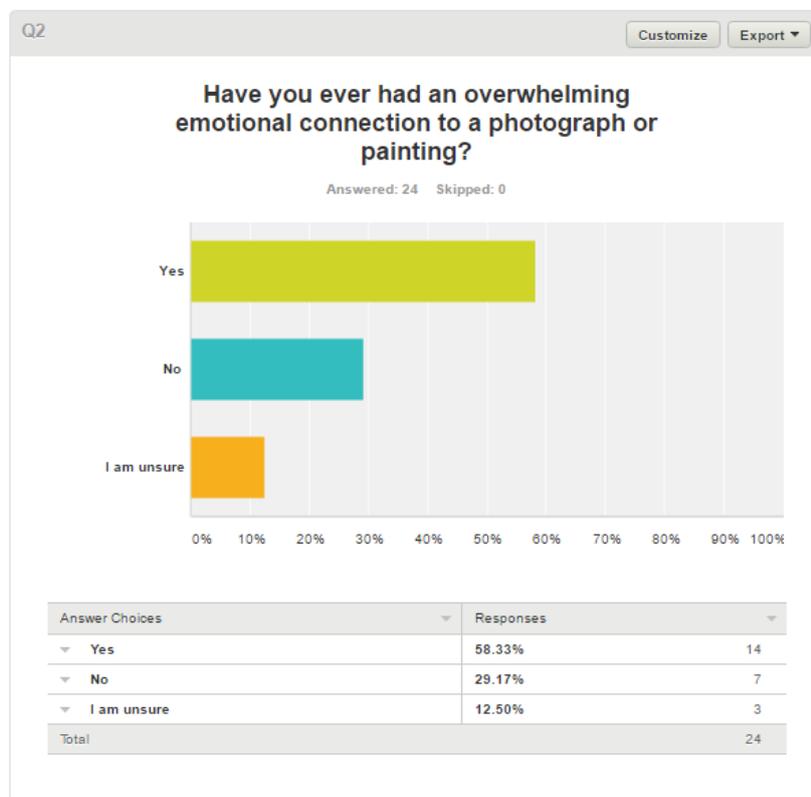
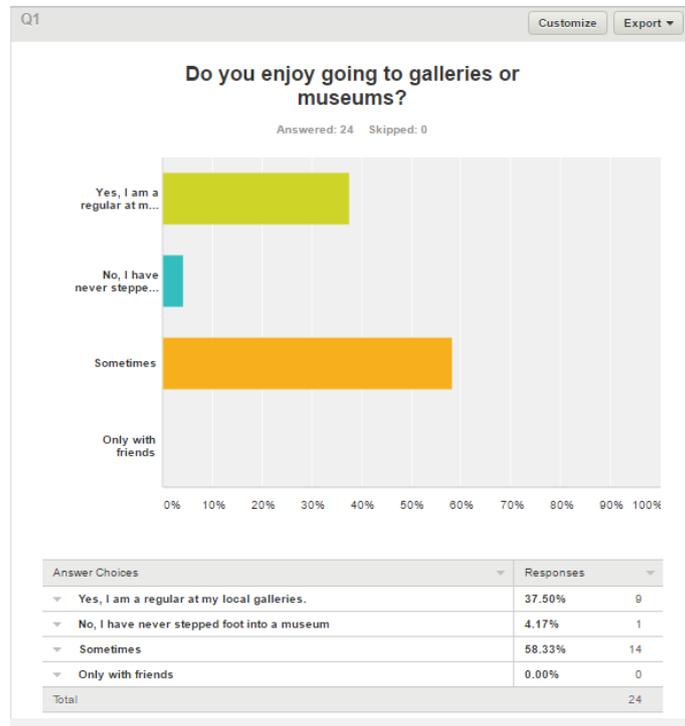
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## Appendix

Image from survey participant- anonymous participant five.



Survey respondent's charts



Q3 Export ▾

### If yes to previous question, What did the photograph contain?

Answered: 14 Skipped: 10

● Responses (14)   Text Analysis   My Categories

Categorize as... ▾   Filter by Category ▾   Search responses

Showing 14 responses

**People**

11/9/2016 10:51 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

I regularly see images in galleries, books, the news, online and in my classroom which move me emotionally - art teacher!

11/9/2016 1:41 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

A painting of a swan

11/9/2016 1:19 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Chinese town that looked like a theatre set

11/8/2016 11:41 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Mountains and sunset

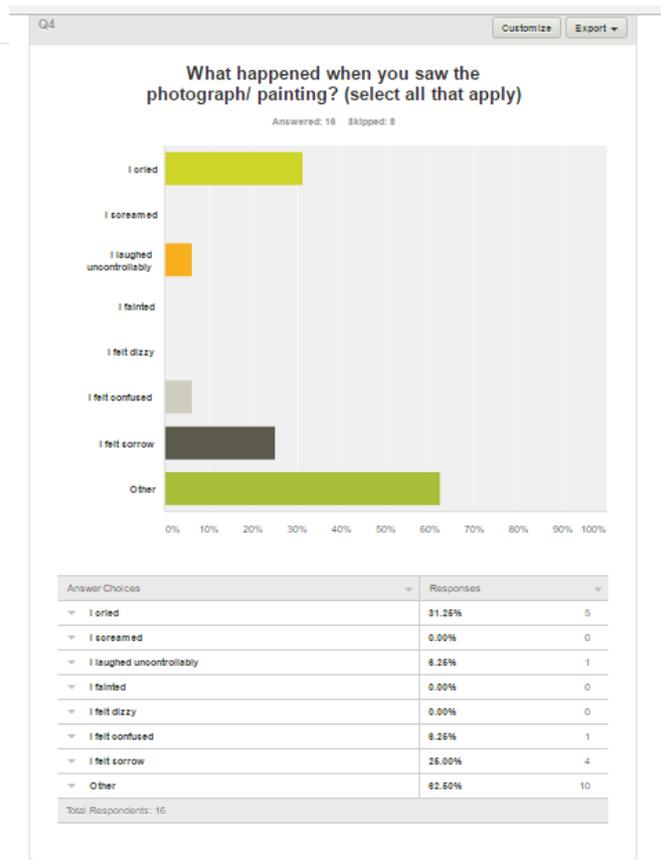
11/8/2016 8:08 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

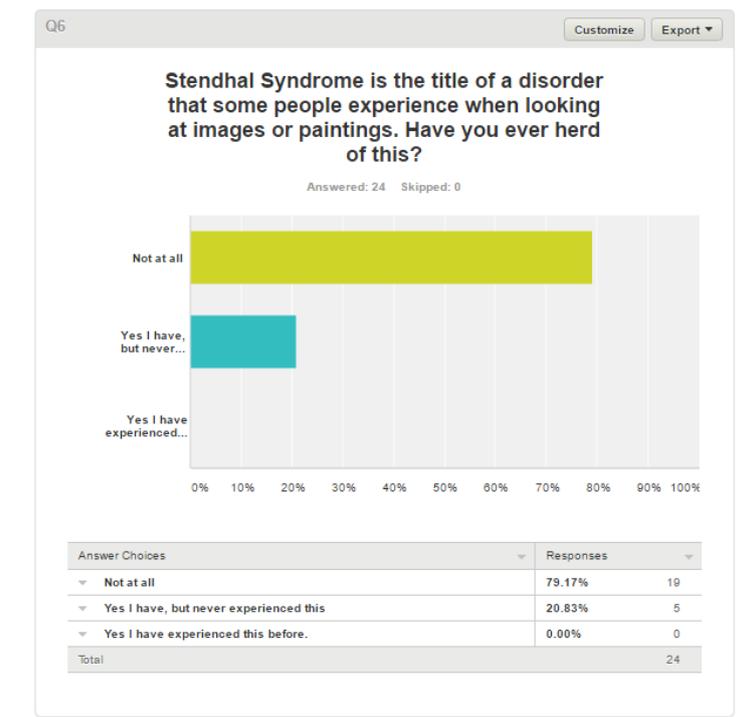
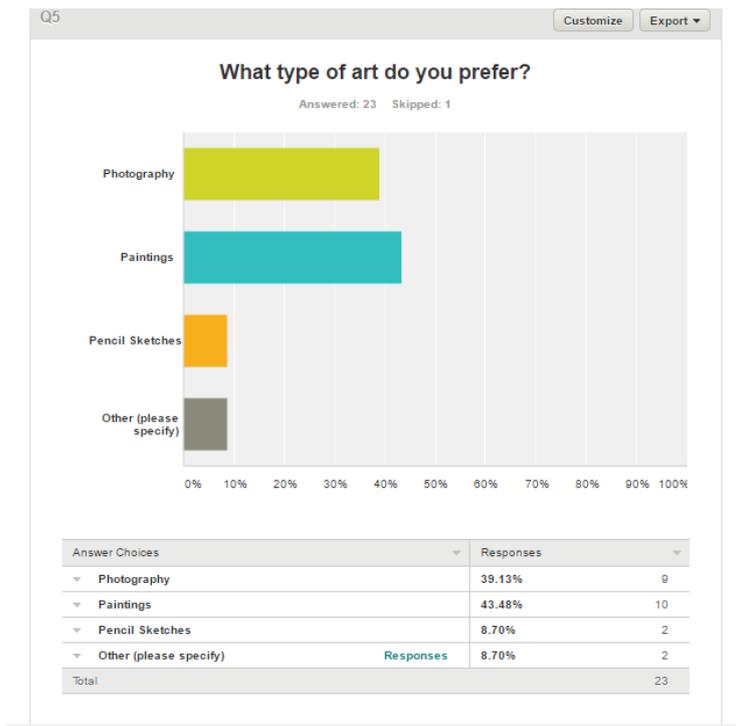
Children playing on the beach

11/8/2016 8:03 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Vidio art

11/8/2016 7:58 PM [View respondent's answers](#)





The screenshot shows a survey question interface. At the top left is the question ID 'Q7' and at the top right is an 'Export' button. The question text is: 'If you have experienced this, or know someone who has experienced this. Could you please leave your name and email address below. Thank you.' Below the question, it shows 'Answered: 1' and 'Skipped: 23'. There are three tabs: 'Responses (1)' (selected), 'Text Analysis', and 'My Categories'. Below the tabs are filters: 'Categorize as...', 'Filter by Category', and a search bar labeled 'Search responses'. The response list shows 'Showing 1 response' with the text 'Not to my knowledge. BTW 4 was for me 'joy''. The date and time are '11/8/2016 5:52 PM' and there is a link to 'View respondent's answers'.