

In the Eye of the Beholder; a Thematic Analysis on How Individuals Find Certain Images Soothing and Not Others

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Introduction

This study is part of a set of studies under Project Soothe¹. Its aim is to build a bank of images complementary to psychotherapies using principles of Compassion Focused Therapies (CFT). CFT seeks to balance functional affect regulation systems by targeting feelings of safety, connectedness, and contentment and our ability to 'self-soothe'². By using photos, Project Soothe will be able to provide a convenient, accessible and self-sufficient way to effectively aid individuals to increase self-compassion³ and to self-soothe⁴. People already make sense of the concept of soothe overall as a complex interaction of interconnected feelings and physical sensations⁵, and the content of some images does appear to have physically and mentally recuperative effects on acute stress⁶. Individual differences, however, moderate the effectiveness of CF Images⁷. These inferences are made by assuming an individual's real-world experiences transfer directly into virtual images⁶, or unique qualities such as self-criticism or shame⁷ hinder a person's ability to soothe using imagery. This implies people are passive actors when interacting with such therapeutic images. However, how people understand soothing and relate to the concept has not been explored within the context of imagery despite growing body of research supporting its possible therapeutic benefits. This highlights a possible gap in the literature which is yet to directly examine how individuals find some pictures soothing and others not. This study seeks to explore how individuals interact with and judge soothing imagery to close that gap.

Method

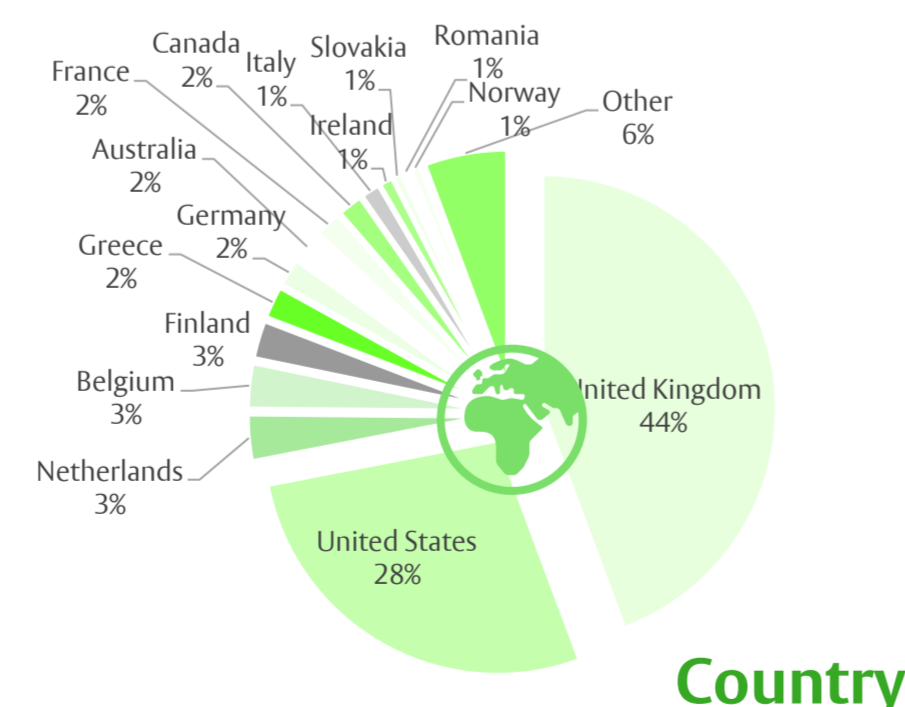
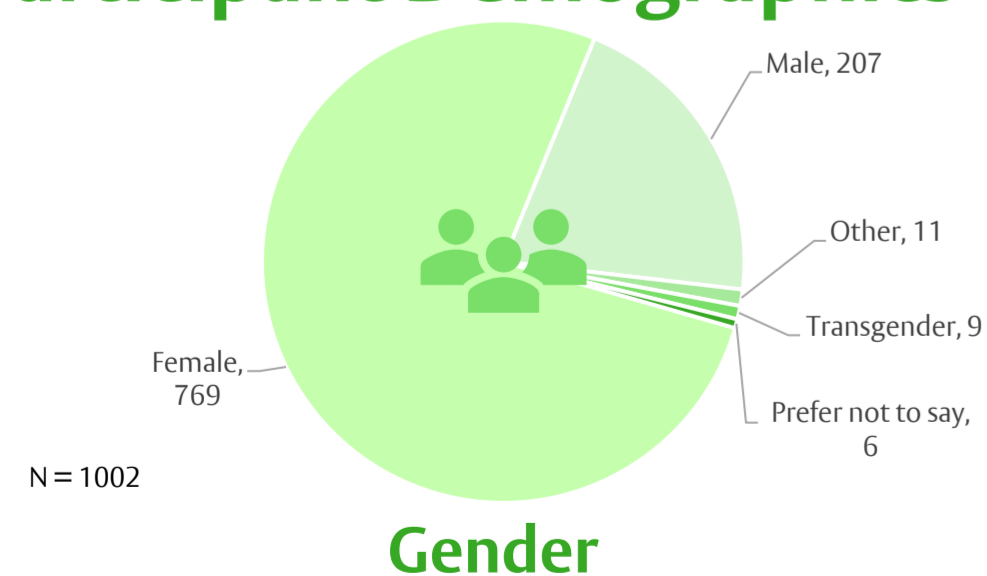
Use of Secondary Data and Ethics

- This study used secondary data. In the original data collection, participants were asked "Which image do you find particularly soothing?", then "Inspired by the image, please tell a brief story based on an experience or imagined scenario that you associate with feeling soothed". They were asked to do the same again separately for an image they did not find particularly soothing.
- Using the narratives formed in this research, the current study conducted a thematic analysis on the content of these responses. The coder remained blind to the images referred to within each response.
- Data was handled securely with participants remaining anonymous and only relevant data being published in accordance with University of Reading Ethical Guidelines.

Thematic Analysis (Phases)

- This study used the stepped phases for Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke⁸:
- 1) Familiarization: data was read repeatedly, noting initial ideas. 2) Code Generation: regularly occurring segments, features and patterns were noted and systematically coded. 3) Theme Generation: codes were collated into more specific groups; data was gathered within these themes. 4) Theme Consolidation and Mapping: themes were checked against the data and extracts to see if they matched. These themes were then grouped together and mapped in relation to one another. 5) Defining and Naming Themes: coding, themes and groupings were refined as specifically as possible to clarify the narratives found. 6) Producing the report: themes fully described and explained with extracts provided as evidence.
- Throughout this process a reflective journal was kept to note any biases or experiences of the researcher which may influence the interpretation of participants' accounts.

Participant Demographics



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Themes

Soothing

Content

Nature

Participants mention the greenery or nature of the picture.
"The world is a beautiful place. Nature is all encompassing and wonderful. I feel connected."

Solitude

The image is described as quiet, empty, or individuals mentioning they feel alone.
"It looks very calm on the quiet beach, very relaxing, which has quite soothing effect on me.. Just me alone with my thoughts."

Content Appeal

Participants like a quality or subject of the image.
"Sunsets make me happy."

Non-Soothing

Artificialness

Participants mention the artificial or man-made nature/interference from of the image.
"The space in the image is non-natural, artificial, man-made."

Busyness

Image is described as busy, chaotic, or generally polluted with lots going on.
"Mess, chaos - disorganization, people displaying things in an incorrect, haphazard way"

Content Aversion

Participants dislike the quality or subject of the image.
"It's a horrible photo which annoys me, and geese are annoying."

Process

Positive Recall

Content prompts positive memories and experiences soothing to the participant.
"The picture reminds me of a lake I went to as a child on a church outing and brings back fond memories."

Positive Sensory Experience

Participants describe generally pleasant physical feelings, sounds, or smells as an account from the image.
"The feeling of warm sand on my feet while listening to the waves of the ocean slowly lapping."

Sense of Peace

Images made participants feel calm, relaxed, safe or protected from stress
"It just makes me feel like I am sitting on the deck with nothing in the world to worry about. Everything will be okay, there are no stressors."

Negative Recall

Content prompts negative memories and experiences which are unconstructive to the participant.
"Church images bring back bad memories -- no longer go to worship ceremonies."

Negative Sensory Experience

Participants describe generally unpleasant physical feelings, sounds or smells from the image.
"The scenario must be very, very loud. Noise in general doesn't make me feel soothed at all."

Threat to Peace

Image causes participant to feel a sense of unease, unrest, danger/threat or anxiety.
"I feel a sense of foreboding of who or what might be lurking in wait to do me harm."

Empathy/Ethical Breach

Image reminds participant of an ethical rule which has been broken in the image or relating those ethics empathically to the subject.
"Looks like hotdogs, which I don't eat, since I'm vegetarian."

Conclusion

- Individuals parsed the images 1) via the quality of the image (i.e., its content), and 2) their connection to it in an imagined or meaningful way (i.e., by processing it).
- Soothing content tended to follow themes of Nature, Solitude and general Positive Appeal, and then processed by some form of Positive Recall, Positive Sensory Experience or eliciting a Sense of Peace. The least soothing images usually worked in contrast; e.g., positive vs. negative recall, nature vs. artificialness.
- The only theme this did not occur was images being non-soothing if they had some ethical/empathic breach, whereas no contrast, such as a sense of altruism, was found in the soothing images.

Discussion and Implications

- The use of imagination was a way in which participants seemed to process images, which qualitatively supports the relationship between individuals' ability to construct positive imagery and positive emotional responses⁴ and overall wellbeing and mindfulness practices⁹.
- The themes from this study will be able to make sense of and inform future models for self-soothing specifically using imagery as positive stimuli.
- The results may also help develop the therapeutic use of imagery by accounting for unique way people make sense of pictures based on their preferences in image content and the way in which they process it.