Posthumous fame of Vincent Van Gogh:
Role of death positivity bias and death effect

Yuko Shiraiwa (Department of Health Sciences, Saitama Prefectural University, shiraiwa.y@gmail.com, Japan)
Masami Takahashi (Department of Psychology, Northeastern Illinois University, m-takahashi@neiu.edu, U.S.A.)

ヴィンセント・ヴァン・ゴッホの死後の名声
—death positivity bias と death effect の役割—
白岩 祐子（埼玉県立大学 保健医療福祉学部）
タカハシ マサミ（イリノイ州立ノースイースタン大学 心理学部）

要約

死者はしばしば生者より肯定的に評価される。心理学者はこれまで、death positivity bias（DPB）という、亡くなった人が存命中より能力や性格を好意的に評価される現象を検討してきた。一方、経済学者は death effect（DE）、すなわち芸術家の死後、その作品の市場価値が大幅に跳ね上がる現象を扱ってきた。著者らはまず、DPB と DE の先行研究をレビューし、それぞれの概要、検討対象、発生条件などを明らかにした。その上で、画家ヴィンセント・ヴァン・ゴッホをめぐる、「死後はじめて正当に評価された不遇の天才」という一般的な言説に着目し、ゴッホの事例が DPB あるいは DE によって説明可能かどうかを検討した。DPB と DE の発生条件や Heinich（1991）の論考にもとづき検討した結果、ゴッホが死後に得た名声は、単なる DPB や DE によるものではないこと、彼の卓抜した芸術的才能と、死後に上書きされた「悲劇的な殉教者」というイメージが結びついてもたらされたものであることが示唆された。

Key words

death positivity bias, death effect, nostalgia effect, commodity theory, Vincent Van Gogh

1. Introduction

The deceased are generally evaluated more favorably than the living in our culture and this phenomenon appears to be common in many countries. To illustrate, Agatha Christie, a British mystery novelist, had her famous protagonist (detective Poirot) say, "Death, mademoiselle, unfortunately, creates a prejudice. A prejudice in favor of the deceased." (Christie, 2001: 104). By the same token, when a controversial author who once served as an ultra-conservative governor of Tokyo passed away in 2022, many people praised his past achievements and criticized negative comments about his career posted on social media (Mainichi Shimbun, 2022).

Further, this phenomenon is more pronounced if the deceased has extraordinary talents in a specific field such as art, sports, literature, etc. The idea perhaps originates from the young French writer in the 18th century who led many writers and painters in Paris to form "Suicide Clubs" hoping their untimely deaths would bring posthumous fame (Wilkins, 1990). The work of Vincent Willem Van Gogh is another case in point. Born in the southern part of the Netherlands in 1853, he became financially destitute in later years while being supported by his younger brother, Theo. After a series of bouts with mental and physical illness, he shot himself in 1890 (Walther & Metzger, 2016). His life has been characterized as sheer madness, unfortunate, and ill-fated, and his death as tragic and untimely.

Almost a century later, however, exhibitions of his works began attracting a record number of art fans worldwide, and his paintings have constantly been sold at the highest price points in the auction market. He became a legend of sorts, and consequently, his success cemented the belief in the art world that recognition and accolades of artists came after their deaths (Heinich, 1991).

In this paper, the idea that "death benefits the deceased" will be explored using the case of Van Gogh. Although the idea makes intuitive sense, the existing empirical studies are mostly confined to the business literature (e.g., Green & Mohler, 2014; Lester, 2016). In particular, the theory of the Death Effect—the market value of artworks increases after the death of the creator—has been discussed and studied extensively in macroeconomics (e.g., Ekelund, Ressler, & Watson, 2000). However, the death benefits are not only about increasing "fortunes" but also soaring "fame". It is called the Death Positivity Bias, a psychological term coined by Allison & Eylon (2004) who suggest that people tend to evaluate the dead more positively than while he/she was alive. Therefore, we will discuss, from both economic and psychological perspectives, the posthumous fame and fortune in general and of Van Gogh in particular.

2. Death effect (DE)

From a microeconomic standpoint, Van Gogh's posthumous popularity may be explained by the Death Effect (DE)—a substantial price hike in artworks soon after the artist's death. Ekelund et al. (2000) first proposed the concept after analyzing the U.S. auction data (e.g., Christie's, Sotheby's, etc.) of the 630 paintings by 21 Latin American artists between 1977 and 1996.

They found posthumous price hikes for these paintings even after controlling inflation, peso devaluation, etc. Similarly, Green & Mohler (2014) asked college students to read a short story and asked how much they would pay for its original edition if they were collectors. The participants assigned to the "death condition" group offered more than three times as much as the "alive condition" group. Other researchers found similar results in the art market of different eras in different regions of the world (Etro & Stepanova, 2015; Maddison, 2008; P'enasse, Renneboog, & Scheinkman, 2019).

Further, it has been reported that the extent of this effect is influenced by specific factors in the art world. First, the DE is partly based on the Commodity Theory (Brock, 1968) that there is a significant negative correlation between the price and the number of commodities in the market. For example, Lynn (1991) performed an extensive meta-analysis of consumer goods and found that the value of what was left in the market increased when the supply chain was blocked. Second, Frick & Knebal (2007) examined over 290,000 auction results and found that the value of the paintings increased after the death of the artists only if they were famous while alive. In other words, the popularity of the artist largely determines the price of their work after death (P'enasse et al., 2019).

Third, the circumstances of death and media coverage also play a significant role in determining the extent of the DE. In general, the value of artwork is likely to increase when the artists die below a certain age (P'enasse et al., 2019). Specifically, the DE is at its highest sometime during "middle age" when the artist's popularity is soaring, creating an inverse U-shaped relationship between the time of death and the DE (Etro & Stepanova, 2015; Itaya & Ursprung, 2016; Ursprung & Wierman, 2011). Unlike our general perception of untimely death, say in one's 30s-40s, the "middle age" in this context is reported to come relatively later. While the data and analytical methods vary, researchers found this mid-point of life for deceased artists is sometimes around 65 (P'enasse et al., 2019) and even in the 80s (Ursprung & Wierman, 2011).

The cause of death is also an influential factor for the DE.

Especially, the sudden and unexpected deaths of celebrities and famous individuals are associated with price increases in commemorative merchandise such as autographed goods (Radford & Bloch, 2012a). Similarly, the unexpected death of well-known artists is also associated with the price hike of their paintings (Itaya & Ursprung, 2016).

In addition to the timing and the cause of death, media coverage also impacts the DE. Matheson & Baade (2004) found the price hike for Major League Baseball trading cards, which has only limited supply, for those players who were recently deceased. The researchers also found that this hike is only temporary and subsides after a while. This is known as the Nostalgia Effect and is largely due to increased media coverage of the deceased immediately following his/her death (Frick & Knebal, 2007; Maddison, 2008; Ponzo & Scoppa, 2003; Radford & Bloch, 2012b).

For Van Gogh, his posthumous fame does not appear to pertain to the DE. Although he was relatively well-known, he was not a well-established artist at the time of his death. While some of his paintings were praised and favorably accepted by a small circle of other artists and art critics, he was regarded as only one of many young artists of the time (Heinich, 1991). In other words, his popularity cannot explain the DE. Second, he died young, less than ten years since he began his professional career. It was about the time when he was trying to establish his unique style, and his work was getting accepted by the dealers and galleries. In short, he died too young for the DE to take effect.

3. Death positivity bias (DPB)

Unlike the salience of the Death Effect in business literature, the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) is a largely ignored concept in psychology. For example, a quick PsychInfo search, the largest database in psychological literature, with "Death Positivity Bias" as a keyword yielded only one article (Allison, Eylon, Beggan, & Bachelder, 2009). Thus, in the following literature analysis, we adopted a cross-referencing method, using Allison's article as a jumping board to glean related literature (See Table 1 for a list of known psychological studies on Death Positivity

Table 1: List of known Empirical Studies on Death Positivity Bias

Authors	Methods	Evaluator	Evaluated (Real or Fictious)	Dependent Variables
Allison & Eylon (2004)	Scenario experiment	N/A	Business leaders (Fictious)	Respect
Allison et al. (2009)	• Media articles analysis • Scenario experiment	• N/A • College students	• Well-known people (Real) • Business leaders (Fictious)	• Favorable articles • Favorability
Bering et al. (2005)	• Photo experiment • Obituary analysis	• College students • N/A	• College student (Fictious) • Acquaintance (Real)	• Favorable impression • Positive qualities
Drzewiecka & Cwalina (2020)	Public poll analysis	N/A	Former President (Real)	Favorability
Hayes (2016)	Scenario experiment (Web)	N/A	Acquaintance (Real)	Personality traits
Nishi & Shiraiwa (2020)	Scenario experiment	College students	Acquaintance (Real)	Personality traits
Tsutsumida & Shiraiwa (2020)	Scenario experiment (Web)	Mainly college students	Painter (Fictious)	Favorability of artist and painting

Bias).

DPB was first proposed by Allison & others who suggested that the personality and talents of individuals were more positively evaluated after their death than while they were alive. In one of the earliest empirical studies on this topic, Allison & Eylon (2004) conducted a study describing a hypothetical successful entrepreneur as a target. Two groups of participants read identical descriptions of the target except the person was described as either still alive or deceased. The result revealed that the group who read the scenario that the entrepreneur was dead evaluated more positively than those who read the entrepreneur was still alive. Other studies involving the evaluation of real, not hypothetical, people (e.g., personal friends, well-known politicians, athletes, etc.) found similar results. For example, Hayes (2016) first asked the participants to name a living acquaintance and then instructed them to evaluate that person in two conditions: either as this person is still alive or as if this person were deceased. The results revealed that the participants had more positive evaluations if they assumed their friend was dead than alive (see also Nishi & Shiraiwa, 2020).

In addition, Allison et al. (2009) compared the evaluation of pre- and post-death of eight individuals who appeared most frequently on the cover of People magazine in the 1990s (e.g., J. F. K. Jr., Princess Diana, Tupac Shakur, etc.). The researchers compared newspaper and magazine articles about these people written within the four years before and four years after their deaths. It was found that these individuals were depicted more favorably after than before they died in terms of the levels of their talents and morality.

However, the effect of DPB may be more nuanced, and several studies examined potential factors that may influence the DPB, including the characteristics of the target person and the participants (i.e., talents, morality, and social norm), and the relationship (i.e., affinity). First, the DPB is generally consistent regardless of how competent the target person is. Allison et al. (2009) replicated the study of a hypothetical successful entrepreneur but using an unsuccessful entrepreneur as a target and still found a positive bias toward the deceased target. Similarly, Hayes (2016) reported that neither affinity (whether the evaluator likes/dislikes the target) nor social distance (whether or not the evaluator knows the target well) affected the DPB.

In contrast, the extent to which a target person is viewed as ethical or unethical was found to influence the DPB. In the follow-up study of Allison & Eylon (2004), when the entrepreneur was described as morally corrupt (e.g., a person who illegally dumps harmful waste), the post-mortem positive bias disappeared. Similarly, among the eight most well-known individuals according to the People magazine who passed away in the 90s, Richard Nixon, the U.S. president who resigned due to corruption, was the only person whose evaluation remained negative even after his death (Allison et al., 2009).

Second, the values and social norms held by the evaluators may influence the DPB. Nishi & Shiraiwa (2020) found that people who hold strong values that the dead should not be spoken ill were likely to praise the deceased whom they knew well. Since "Respect the deceased" is one of the basic social norms in many cultures (Allison & Eylon, 2004; Bering, Mcleod, & Shackelford, 2005), people generally have a positive bias toward the deceased regardless of affinity to and/or social distance from the deceased.

In addition, fear of death is another widely held in many cultures (Allison et al., 2009; Hayes, 2016). According to the Terror Management Theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), when faced with inevitable death, people, out of fear, are likely to develop an idea of symbolic immortality (e.g., leaving a legacy). This sense of self-preservation, in turn, cultivates respect for the deceased and the legacy they left behind (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). There are other factors that may influence the DPB such as a sense of loss after the death of loved ones (Allison & Eylon, 2004; Eylon & Allison, 2005; Benton, 1978; Hayes 2016; Radford & Bloch, 2012a), ending of hostile relationship and jealousy (Okonogi, 1979), and a sense of the presence of the deceased (Bering et al., 2005). However, none of these factors' impact on DPB has been empirically validated.

Although these findings and ideas suggest a likelihood that the deceased are generally evaluated more positively than the living, this tendency may not hold for those who have special talents including artists such as Van Gogh. Tsutsumida & Shiraiwa (2020) presented participants with a lesser-known painting by Pierre-Auguste Renoir as a work by an unknown artist. Two groups of participants ($n = 79$) were then provided but identical information about the painter except the painter was described as either still alive or dead. The results show that people in these two groups equally evaluated the artist's talent and the quality of the painting. The follow-up web experiment with 119 participants, using the same paradigm, the same painting, and the same scenario (although the painter was changed from an unknown Japanese to a famous French man), also showed similar results. There was no difference in the evaluation of the painting and the painter between the two conditions (Shiraiwa, 2024). These findings suggest that people generally appreciate paintings regardless of social norms (e.g., respect for the dead) and that DPB is an unlikely explanation of Van Gogh's posthumous fame.

4. Discussion

It seems then that respect for the deceased, the popularity of Van Gogh, or any other factors described in the Death Positivity Bias and the Death Effect do not seem to explain why his paintings have been valued so highly throughout the world. After reviewing articles by his critics, letters written by him and his family/friends, and numerous biographies, Heinich (1991) concludes that Van Gogh's success was inevitable even if he did not

end his life at age 37. Heinich argues that the value of artworks is primarily determined by the demand of art collectors and dealers, and Van Gogh's paintings were destined to be highly valued sooner or later regardless. It was his talent and unique style, not his death, that brought the success.

However, the extent of Van Gogh's success in the market seems to go beyond the artist's peerless talent (e.g., Portrait of De. Gachet was the most expensive painting in the 20th century sold at $82.5 million in 1990). Heinich (1991) suggests that it was numerous posthumous publications, including his biographies and letters between the artist and Teho, that accentuated his tragic fate, inadvertently rewrote who and what he was, and made him a "legend." This re-imaging of Van Gogh also made him an ill-fated and unfairly treated "martyr". His popularity soared as a result to an unprecedented level among art lovers and dealers and the general population. It may be this cathartic status of martyrdom for which people continue to pay a considerable sum of money. In addition, Heinich suspects that the price of his art pieces would not be this high if he lived longer as he could have continued producing more paintings.

In summary, Van Gogh's paintings were destined to be recognized and sold at high prices regardless. Further, he likely became a successful artist even if he did not end his life at such a young age. Two prominent theories—the Death Positivity Bias and the Death Effect—about the favorable impact that death has on the deceased fall short of fully explaining Van Gogh's posthumous fame. Instead, the primary reason for his unrivalled "fame and fortune" appears to be his re-drawn image of ill-fated and unfairly treated genius created by numerous publications and media after his death.

Acknowledgements

References

Allison, S. T. & Eylon, D. (2004). The demise of leadership: Death positivity biases in posthumous impressions of leaders. In D. M. Messick & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *The Psychology of Leadership: New Perspectives and Research*, 295-317. London: Routledge.

Allison, S. T., Eylon, D., Beggan, J. K., & Bachelder, J. (2009). The demise of leadership: Positivity and negativity biases in evaluations of dead leaders. *Leadership Quarterly*, 20, 115-129.

Benton, R. G. (1978). *Death and dying*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Bering, J. M., McLeod, K., & Shackelford, T. K. (2005). Reasoning about dead agents reveals possible adaptive trends. *Human Nature*, 16, 360-381.

Brock, T. C. (1968). Implication of commodity theory for value change, In A. G. Greenwald, T. C. Brock., & T. M. Ostrom (Eds.), *Psychological Foundations of Attitudes*, 243-275. New York: Academic Press.

Christie, A. (2001). *The ABC Murders*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. (First published in 1936)

Drzewiecka, M. & Cwalina, W. (2020). "The late leader": Influence of political leader's death on their evaluation. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 1-17.

Ekelund, R. B. Jr., Ressler, R.W., & Watson, J. K. (2000). The "death effect" in art prices: A demand-side exploration. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 24, 283-300.

Etro, F. & Stepanova, E. (2015). The market for paintings in Paris between rococo and romanticism. *Kyklos*, 68, 28-50.

Eylon, D. & Allison, S. (2005). The "Frozen in Time" effect in evaluations of the dead. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 1708-1717.

Frick, B. & Knebal, C. (2007). Is there really a "death-effect" in art markets? Unpublished manuscript, Paderborn: University of Paderborn (Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bernd-Frick-2/publication/228456929_Is_there_really_a_Death-Effect_in_Art_Markets/links/0c960514c8cebc55b3000000/Is-there-really-a-Death-Effect-in-Art-Markets.pdf).

Green, J. P. & Mohler, E. W. (2014). The death effect in literary evaluation: Reverence for the dead? *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 68, 229-239.

Hayes, J. (2016). Praising the dead: On the motivational tendency and psychological function of eulogizing the deceased. *Motivation and Emotion*, 40, 375-388.

Heinich, N. (1991). *La gloire de Van Gogh: Essai d'anthropologie de l'admiration*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Itaya, J. & Ursprung, H. W. (2016). Price and death: Modeling the death effect in art price formation. *Research in Economics*, 70, 431-445.

Lester, D. (2016). The death effect: Is there a suicide effect? A comment on Green and Mohler. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 72, 360–361.

Lynn, M. (1991). Scarcity effects on value: A quantitative review of the commodity theory literature. *Psychology & Marketing*, 8, 43-57.

Maddison, D. J. (2008). The death effect in art prices: Evidence from Denmark. *Applied Economics*, 40, 1789-1793.

Mainichi Shimbun (2022). Are past words and deeds posthumously beautified: Considerations from the death of Shintaro Ishihara. March 14 paid article. (in Japanese)

Matheson, V. A. & Baade, R. A. (2004). The "Death Effect" on collectible prices. *Applied Economics*, 36, 1151-1155.

Nishi, N. & Shiraiwa, Y. (2020). Is the dead idealized?: The influence of the assumption of important others' death on evaluation of them. *Journal of Death and Life Studies and Practical Ethics*, 25, 55-76. (in Japanese with English abstract)

Okonogi, K. (1979). *Loss of subject: Grieving*. Tokyo: Chuo-

koron Shinsha. (in Japanese)

P'enasse, J., Renneboog, L., & Scheinkman, J. (2019). When a master dies: Speculation and asset float (Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3385460).

Ponzo, M. & Scoppa, V. (2023). Famous after death: The effect of a writer's death on book sales. Journal of Economic Behavior and Organizaion, 210, 210-225.

Shiraiwa, Y. (2024). Death positivity bias in the painting. Unpublished raw data.

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1991). A terror management theory of social behavior: The psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural worldviews. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 24, 93-159. New York: Academic Press.

Radford, S. K. & Bloch, P. H. (2012a). Grief, commiseration, and consumption following the death of a celebrity. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 12, 137-155.

Radford, S. K. & Bloch, P. H. (2012b). Consumers' online responses to the death of a celebrity. In T. J. Arnold & L. K. Scheer (Eds.), *2012 Summer Educators' Proceedings: Marketing in the socially-networked world: Challenges of emerging, stagnant and resurgent markets*, 424-425. Chicago: American Marketing Association.

Rosenblatt, A., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., & Lyon, D. (1989). Evidence for terror management theory I: The effects of mortality salience on reactions to those who violate or uphold cultural values. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 681-690.

Tsutsumida, K. & Shiraiwa, Y. (2020). A study of the death positivity bias in the evaluation of a painting. *Journal of Human Environmental Studies*, 18, 31-36.

Ursprung, H. W. & Wierman, C. (2011). Reputation, price, and death: an empirical analysis of art price formation. *Economic Inquiry*, 49, 635-957.

Walther, I. F. & Metzger, R. (2016). *Vincent van Gogh: 1853-1890, vision and reality*. California: Taschen America.

Wilkins, R. (1990). *The fireside book of death: Treasure trove of the macabre*. London: Robert Hale Limited.