

Genre Moderates Morality's Influence on Aesthetics

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The present studies investigate morality's influence on aesthetics and one potential moderator of that influence: genre. Study 1 finds that people's moral evaluation positively influence their aesthetic evaluation of an artwork. Study 2 and 3 finds that this influence can be moderated by the contextual factor of genre. These results broaden our understanding of the relationship between morality and aesthetics, and suggest that models of art appreciation should take into account morality and its interaction with context.

Alfred Eisenstaedt's *V-J Day in Times Square* (1945) is perhaps one of the most iconic photographs from World War II. In the photograph, a sailor is kissing a woman in a white dress, with her hand on his chest, as the crowd (and the photographer) observes this passionate moment. The sailor had just disembarked and was celebrating his safe return home with his girlfriend. Her hand was lovingly caressing him as she received his long-awaited kiss. Eisenstaedt's photograph perfectly captured this wonderful moment of humanity. Or so goes the myth that has accompanied this iconic photograph for decades.

The reality has only been recently uncovered (*Crates and Ribbons* 2009). The sailor was indeed returning from the war, but like many sailors returning from the war, he was drunk. After getting off the ship, he grabbed a stranger on the street to plant his kiss onto. The woman in the white dress did not know the sailor. His kiss was not long-awaited, but unwanted. Her hand was not caressing him lovingly, but pushing him away. So instead of capturing a moment in which humanity was at its best, Eisenstaedt had in fact documented a moment in which humanity was at its worst. The reality of the photograph certainly prompts a moral evaluation different from that of the myth. But does it also prompt a different aesthetic evaluation?

This article examines how people's moral evaluations influence their aesthetic evaluations of artworks. The present studies investigate morality's influence on aesthetics and one potential moderator of that influence: genre. Specifically, we test whether people will rate the same work as more aesthetically appealing when it is seen as more moral, and then we test whether different genres can affect how the morality of an artwork affects its aesthetic appeal.

* The studies reported in this article were done around 2010-2011, before people started to take seriously replicability issues. This work has been presented at Yale University's Experimental Philosophy Lab (November 2010), the Metro Experimental Research Group Conference at New York University (March 2011), Kansas State University's cognitive and social psychology colloquium (November 2012), University of Cologne's philosophy seminar (May 2014), and The Moral Domain Conference at Vilnius University (October 2014). I have received excellent feedback from many people, especially from Jonathan Scott Phillips at the start of this project and from Jamie Luguri who suggested the paradigm for Study 2 and Study 3. For one reason or another, I was never really happy with the article, and did not try to submit it for publication until 2016. By then, people are (reasonably enough!) taking seriously replicability issues, and reviewers rightfully pointed out methodological worries with these studies such as small samples sizes. I still think there are some interesting ideas in this article, but it is also time to let it go.

1. Morality and Aesthetics in Philosophy

The relationship between morality and aesthetics has been on philosophers' minds. For example, David Hume (1757) noted that contemporary authors (of Hume's time) have an aesthetic advantage over Homer because contemporary audiences do not share the Greeks' moral evaluations of Homer's rough heroes. That is, Hume seems to suggest that the lowered moral evaluation of Homer's epic poems leads to lowered aesthetic evaluations of those works. In other words, the perceived moral vices of Homer's epic poems turn out to be perceived as aesthetic vices too.

Since around the 1990s, contemporary philosophers have re-engaged with this question about morality's influence on aesthetics under the guise of "ethical criticism of art". Three main positions have developed. Art autonomists say that moral vices are aesthetically irrelevant: they do not constitute aesthetic vices or aesthetic virtues (Anderson & Dean 1998; Cooke 2014; Harold 2011; Posner 1997, 1998). Art moralists say that moral vices are systematically aesthetic vices, and moral vices can never be aesthetic virtues (Booth 1998; Carroll 1996, 1998; Clifton 2013; Eaton 2001; Gaut 1998, 2007; Hanson 1998; Harold 2008; Kieran 2001; Mullin 2004; Nussbaum 1998; Stecker 2008). Art contextualists (also known as art immoralists) say that morality's influence on aesthetics is highly context dependent; sometimes a moral vice is an aesthetic vice, sometimes a moral vice is aesthetically irrelevant, and sometimes a moral vice is even an aesthetic virtue (Eaton 2012; Gilmore 2011; John 2005; Jacobson 1997, 2005; Kieran 2006). Despite decades of refinements and iterations, the ethical criticism of art debate appears no closer to being resolved. More surprisingly, no one in the debate has tried to gather empirical evidence for or against one position or another.

2. Morality and Aesthetics in Psychology

The relationship between morality and aesthetics has been on psychologists' minds too. However, while philosophers have focused on morality's influence on aesthetics, psychologists have investigated other aspects of the relationship between morality and aesthetics: aesthetics's influence on morality, the cognitive overlap between moral and aesthetic judgments, and the comparative objectivity of morality and aesthetics.

Aesthetics's influence on morality has been systematically studied in an extensive literature on the beauty-is-good stereotype (Dion *et al.* 1972; cf. the meta-analyses in Eagly *et al.* 1991 and Langlois *et al.* 2000). The beauty-is-good stereotype holds in a wide variety of domains, such as pedagogy and politics. This literature clearly demonstrates that people's aesthetic evaluations positively influence their moral evaluations of persons.

Psychological commonalities between the processes that underlie moral and aesthetic judgments have also been studied, albeit to a lesser extent. For example, Tsukiura and Cabeza (2011) and Heinzelmann *et al.* (in prep) found that aesthetic and moral judgments share brain activities. People's perception of the objectivity of morality and aesthetics has also been studied, albeit to an even lesser extent. For

example, Goodwin and Darley (2008) found that people perceived morality as more objective than aesthetics (cf. Cova and Pain 2012).

We are aware of no research that directly and empirically addresses morality's influence on aesthetics. Moreover, while the psychological research programs mentioned are suggestive of an interest on the topic, none of them can speak to this aspect of the relationship between morality and aesthetics. The perceived metaphysics of the two domains is orthogonal to their causality. Given the different directionality, establishing aesthetics's influence on morality is insufficient for establishing morality's influence on aesthetics. And, even though the cognitive overlap between moral and aesthetic judgments indirectly suggests that there would be some influence between morality and aesthetics, open questions remain about the directionality of that influence, the magnitude of that influence, as well as moderators of that influence.

3. Overview of Studies

The three studies reported in this article are starting points for addressing a conspicuous absence at the intersection of philosophers' and psychologists' investigations into the relationship between morality and aesthetics.

Study 1 provided an initial test of the hypothesis that people's moral evaluations can influence their aesthetic evaluations of artworks. We manipulated the moral valence associated with an artwork. We predicted that when evaluating the same artwork, participants will make different aesthetic evaluations due to the difference in moral valence.

Study 2 and 3 assessed a plausible moderator of morality's influence on aesthetics: an artwork's genre. In general, genre is a highly salient contextual factor in art appreciation. Moreover, previous research suggests that genre can vary the imaginability and fictionality of moral deviance in a story (Liao *et al.* 2014). To test the role of genre, we manipulated the musical component of a song. Study 2 and 3 made different genre manipulations. Also, study 2 employed a dichotomous prompt while study 3 employed an ordinal-scale prompt.

4. Study 1

4.1. Method

We recruited sixty adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online labor market where people can be recruited for various tasks, including participating in social science studies. (See Paolacci and Chandler 2014 for an overview of the demographic characteristics of the Amazon Mechanical Turk participant pool, its validity for conducting social scientific research, and data quality comparisons with traditional university lab studies.) We restricted the participant pool to users with registered location in the United States. Participants were paid market rate. Thirty-two participants self-identified as male, twenty-seven self-identified as female, and one did not self-identify as either.

We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions in a between-participant design that manipulated the moral valence of an artwork. Each condition contained thirty participants. In both conditions, participants viewed Victor Jorgensen’s photograph *Kissing the War Goodbye* (1945)—a lesser-known, but copyright-free photograph of the exact same scene as Eisenstaedt’s *V-J Day in Times Square*. In the positive moral valence condition, participants read the following text while viewing the photograph:

This photograph was taken on V-J Day, 1945, when soldiers came home from World War II. George, the sailor, was excited and kissing Greta, his girlfriend, in celebration of his safe return. She had been waiting for his presence since he disembarked. She felt cherished by his kiss.

In the negative moral valence condition, participants read the following text while viewing the photograph:

This photograph was taken on V-J Day, 1945, when soldiers came home from World War II. George, the sailor, was drunk and kissing Greta, a total stranger, in celebration of his safe return. She had no idea of his presence until she was in his arms. She felt violated by his kiss.

There are no other differences between the two conditions.

After viewing the photograph and reading the accompanying text, participants in each condition responded to the following two statements (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*), displayed in random order:

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| [aesthetic evaluation] | Do you find the photograph appealing? |
| [moral evaluation] | Do you think what George did was morally wrong? |

For the aesthetic evaluation statement, we chose ‘appealing’ in order to balance two considerations. On the one hand, we do not want participants to indicate a mere subjective liking. On the other hand, we also do not want participants to approximate what, say, what fine arts critics like. So, we chose ‘appealing’ to cue participants to give a normative aesthetic evaluation of their own.

4.2. Results

Participants in the positive moral valence condition found the photograph moderately appealing, $M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.297$. Participants in the negative moral valence condition found the photograph only slightly appealing, $M = 4.63$, $SD = 2.059$. There was a moderate difference between the two conditions in participants’ aesthetic evaluation of the photograph, Mann-Whitney $U = 294.500$, $z = -2.361$, $p = 0.018$, effect size $r = 0.305$. Non-parametric statistics were used because the distribution of participant responses to the aesthetic evaluation statement violated normality (figure 1), but parametric statistics delivers essentially the same verdict, $t(48.886) = 2.626$, $p = 0.012$, effect size $r = 0.352$.

There was a strong correlation between participants' moral evaluation and aesthetic evaluation, $r = -0.451$, $p = 0.001$. That is, participants who judged George's action to be more morally wrong also tend to judge the photograph to be less aesthetically appealing. Somewhat surprisingly, we found no statistically significant difference, $p = 0.615$, between the correlation coefficients for participants who self-identify as male, $r = -0.371$, and participants who self-identify as female, $r = -0.484$.

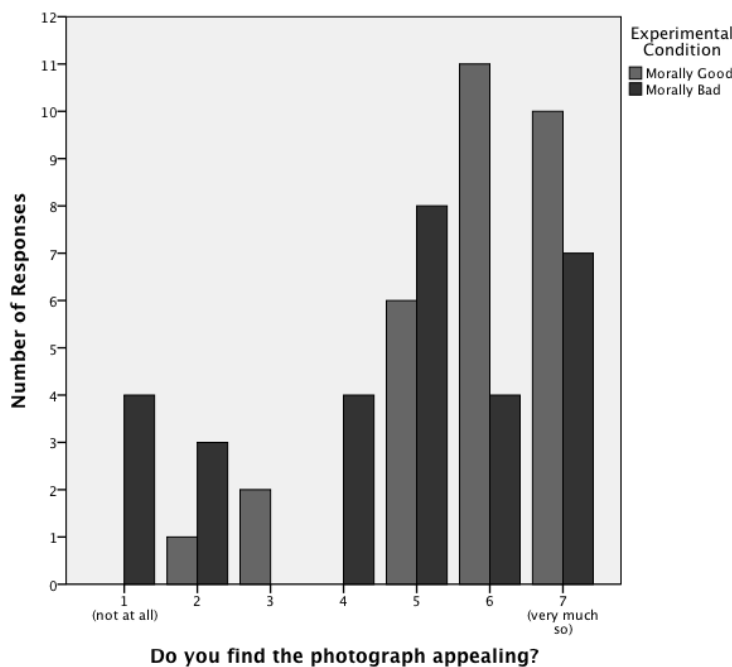


Figure 1. Frequency of aesthetic evaluation ratings between conditions in Study 1

4.3. Discussion

These initial results support the hypothesis that people's moral evaluations can influence their aesthetic evaluations of artworks. In particular, we found that negative moral evaluations tend to lead to negative aesthetic evaluations. This finding is of interest to both philosophers and psychologists who are interested in the relationship between morality and aesthetics.

From a philosophical perspective, this finding contributes to empirically informing the ethical criticism of art debate. It shows that laypeople are typically not art autonomists in their actual evaluations, even if they might profess otherwise. However, it is compatible with both folk art moralism and folk art contextualism because both predicts that in some cases a negative moral evaluation can lead to a negative aesthetic evaluation. Of broader significance, insofar as one takes laypeople's actual evaluations to be a guide to values, even if this guide is imperfect and defeasible, then this finding provides some support for philosophical art moralism and philosophical art contextualism over philosophical art autonomism.

From a psychological perspective, this finding broadens our understanding of the causal relationships between morality and aesthetics. While the aesthetics-to-morality direction has been extensively investigated, the morality-to-aesthetics direction has not. This finding suggests that the causal relationship is not unidirectional from aesthetics to morality, but bidirectional between the two value domains. The bidirectional causality is consistent with existing findings on cognitive overlaps between the processes that underlie both kinds of value judgments.

5. Study 2

The results in Study 1 rule out folk art autonomism but are not decisive with respect to folk art moralism and folk art contextualism. Hence, an open question remains regarding whether contextual factors can moderate morality's influence on aesthetics. This article focuses on the contextual factor of genre because it is one contextual factor that is highly salient for art appreciation. Moreover, there exists recent research (Liao *et al.* 2014) that shows genre can affect morality's influence on imaginability, which is closely related to art appreciation (Walton 1990), which in turn suggests that genre is a plausible contextual factor that can moderate morality's influence on aesthetics. Finally, it has been explicitly suggested in the ethical criticism of art literature that genre can vary morality's influence on aesthetics (Giovanelli 2007).

We changed the design for Study 2 and Study 3 to accomplish another goal. It is arguable that the positive and negative moral valences present in Study 1 do not concern the photograph at all, and are instead solely concerned with the sailor who was depicted in the photograph. We find this unconvincing, since the romantic (and morally positive) myth is often mentioned in evaluations of Eisenstaedt's photograph. That said, it would be even better to construct a study in which the positive and negative moral valences can be clearly found in the artwork itself. Hence, for Study 2 and Study 3, we chose songs as our stimuli. This choice allowed us to manipulate genre with the musical component, and contrast opposing moral valences with the lyrical component.

5.1. Method

We recruited another group of sixty adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk. We restricted the participant pool to users with registered location in the United States. Participants were paid market rate. We introduced an instructional manipulation check (Oppenheimer *et al* 2009), and excluded participants who failed it. Fifty participants remained. Eighteen participants self-identified as male and thirty-two self-identified as female.

We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions in a between-participant design that manipulated the genre of an artwork. The ballad condition contained twenty-three participants and the hip hop condition contained twenty-seven participants.

In each condition, participants were given a 30-second music clip of a song in a foreign language, so that the actual lyrics would not be recognizable. (Specifically, we chose Taiwanese for its obscurity to the American sample; responses confirmed that no participant was able to even identify the language.) Participants were then instructed to examine two sets of “translated” lyrics: one with positive moral valence and another with negative moral valence (Appendix). Specifically, participants were told that since the lyrics are translated, they should focus on the content and ignore surface features such as vocabulary and rhyme. We varied the moral valence of the lyrical component within each condition in order to control for the fact that people may simply like different music—or, indeed, different musical genres—to different degrees.

After listening to the music clip and reading the “translated” lyrics, participants responded to the following forced-choice question:

[aesthetic evaluation] Which set of lyrics do you think would make the song more appealing?

5.2. Results

Participants in the ballad condition overwhelmingly judged that the song would be more appealing with the positive moral valence lyrics than with the negative moral valence lyrics (91%). By contrast, a lesser percentage of participants in the hip hop condition judged that the song would be more appealing with the positive moral valence lyrics than with the negative moral valence lyrics (67%). There is a moderate difference between the two conditions, $X^2(1) = 4.393$, $p = 0.036$, effect size Cramer's $V = 0.296$ (figure 2).

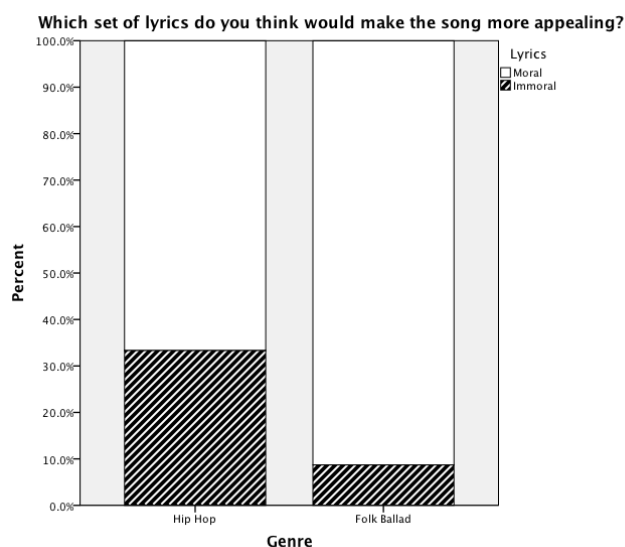


Figure 2. Proportion of aesthetic evaluation responses between conditions in Study 2

5.3. Discussion

This result provides further evidence for the hypothesis that people's moral evaluations can influence their aesthetic evaluations of artworks. More importantly, they show that the magnitude of this influence is sensitive to contextual factors such as genre. The manipulation of a song's musical genre moderates the influence that the moral valence of lyrical content on participants' aesthetic evaluation of the song.

The result on genre's moderation of morality's influence on aesthetics is in congruence with previous theoretical and empirical research on genre's relevance for art appreciation. Although this result provides further data for the ethical criticism of art debate, insofar as one takes laypeople's actual evaluations to be a guide to values, its interpretation requires care. On the one hand, this result shows that laypeople are indeed sensitive to contextual factors, which lends some support to folk art contextualism. On the other hand, this result does not show that genre can invert the valence of morality and aesthetics—that is, turn a moral vice into an aesthetic virtue—and so it does not directly threaten folk art moralism. Sophisticated versions of philosophical art contextualism and philosophical art moralism can both accommodate this result.

6. Study 3

Study 3 follows up on Study 2 to assess the robustness of the genre moderator effect. We chose two new genres and two new sets of lyrics. Moreover, we changed the aesthetic evaluation question from forced-choice to ordinal scale. The study design remained the same in other respects.

6.1. Method

We recruited another group of sixty adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk. We restricted the participant pool to users with registered location in the United States. Participants were paid market rate. We introduced an instructional manipulation check, and excluded participants who failed it. Fifty-eight participants remained. Thirty-two participants self-identified as male and twenty-six self-identified as female.

We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions in a between-participant design that manipulated the genre of an artwork. The pop condition contained twenty-six participants and the metal condition contained thirty-two participants.

In each condition, participants were given a 30-second music clip of a song in a foreign language, so that the actual lyrics would not be recognizable. Participants were then instructed to examine two sets of “translated” lyrics: one with positive moral valence and another with negative moral valence (Appendix). Specifically, participants were told that since the lyrics are translated, they should focus on the content and ignore surface features such as vocabulary and rhyme.

After listening to the music clip and reading the “translated” lyrics, participants responded to the following question on a seven-point scale, ranging from the title of one set of lyrics to the title of the other set of lyrics:

[aesthetic evaluation] Which set of lyrics do you think would make the song more appealing?

For analyses, we used the scale on which 1 corresponds to the positive moral valence lyrics and 7 corresponds to the negative moral valence lyrics. However, for presentation to participants, the anchors were counterbalanced. Scores from reverse presentation were then reverse-coded.

6.2. Results

Participants in the pop condition found that the positive moral valence lyrics would make the song more aesthetically appealing, $M = 1.46$, $SD = 1.272$. Participants in the metal condition also found that the positive moral valence lyrics would make the song more aesthetically appealing, but to a much lesser extent, $M = 2.72$, $SD = 2.232$. A visual inspection of the distribution of participant responses showed a violation of normality; in particular, participant responses in the pop condition appeared to be right-skewed but participant responses in the metal condition appeared to be bimodal (figure 3). Non-parametric statistics showed a moderate difference between the two conditions in the moral valence of lyrical content’s influence on participants’ aesthetic evaluation of the song, Mann Whitney $U = 265.000$, $z = -2.715$, $p = 0.007$, effect size $r = 0.356$. (Again, parametric statistics delivers essentially the same verdict, $t(50.694) = 2.693$, $p = 0.010$; effect size $r = 0.354$.)

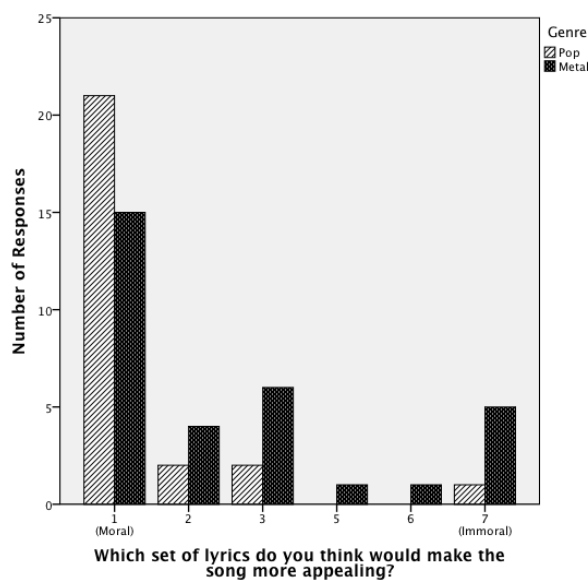


Figure 3. Frequency of aesthetic evaluation ratings between conditions in Study 3

6.3. Discussion

This result provides further evidence for the moral-influencing-aesthetic hypothesis and further evidence for the genre moderation effect. Study 3 complements Study 2 by showing that the genre moderation effect is robust with respect to different genres, different lyrics, and different measures. However, it also suggests an additional layer of complexity with the genre moderation effect: the difference in distribution shapes between conditions suggests that there may be individual variations with respect to genre's moderation of morality's influence on aesthetics.

7. General Discussion

The present studies tested morality's influence on aesthetics and genre as a moderator of that influence. These studies draw on theoretical research in philosophy on ethical criticism of art and genre's role in art appreciation, and they fill in a lacuna in psychological research regarding the relationship between morality and aesthetics. Overall, the studies found that people's moral evaluation of an artwork affects their aesthetic evaluation of that artwork, but also that genre can moderate the magnitude of this effect. Collectively, these results demonstrate a psychological phenomenon in the evaluation of an artwork that has been theorized but not proven.

Insofar as laypeople's evaluations are imperfect, defeasible guides to values, these results show that philosophical art autonomism is less plausible than philosophical art moralism and philosophical contextualism. These results also challenge theorists to develop more sophisticated accounts that respect the empirical contours of this psychological phenomenon. For example, philosopher Noël Carroll, an art moralist, writes that "if the address of a work elicits the wrong moral assessments from the audience, or blocks the required ones, then the work will fail to secure emotive uptake and the work will be blemished on its own terms (that is to say, aesthetically)" (1998: 421). On Carroll's account, audience's negative moral evaluations systematically preclude their psychological involvements with the work, which then leads to lowered aesthetic evaluations. The results of present studies suggest that while Carroll's account may be correct for some cases, it falls short as a uniform account of morality's influence on aesthetics because it fails to take into account genre's moderation of this relationship. Further research can clarify the relative plausibility of folk art moralism versus folk art contextualism, as well as empirically informing the theoretical debate between philosophical art moralism and philosophical art contextualism.

In addition to broadening our understanding of the relationship between morality and aesthetics, these results also increase our understanding of the psychology of art appreciation. While psychological models of art appreciation have become increasingly complex and nuanced (Leder *et al.* 2004, Bulot and Reber 2013, and Leder and Nadal 2014), none mentions the influence of. This state of the art is especially surprising given existing works on the cognitive overlap between moral and aesthetic judgments (Tsukiura and Cabeza 2011; Heinzelmann *et al.* in prep),

but perhaps explained by psychology's near-exclusive focus on the aesthetics-influencing-morality phenomenon (Dion *et al.* 1972). By investigating the causal relationship in the other direction, the present studies provide data points for revising psychological models of art appreciation to include morality, and potentially other normative factors too. Moreover, while context has been noted as an important factor in art appreciation (Bullot and Reber 2013, and Leder and Nadal 2014), the results of present studies suggest the need for investigating the interactions between context, morality, and other factors that influence aesthetic evaluation.

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Appendix: “Translated” Lyrics Used in Study 2 and Study 3

Study 2

Positive Moral Valence

“Show You the Facts”

Men say stupid things like
“Women are not worth anything
I use them and then I toss them”
They don’t treat women like they should
Let me show you the facts, get it right:
Women are equals in every respect

Negative Moral Valence

“Game Over”

Another woman dropped down
I wanted it, I got it, and I’m gone
There’s another one around the corner
I’ll do the same thing with her
You know they want more from me
But the game’s over when I score

Study 3

Positive Moral Valence

“Wise Choices”

We choose to take a stand now
Push back violence and hatred
As the sun, we are the light
Unite as one, raise our voices
Stop the pain and stop the tears
I know happiness is what matters

Negative Moral Valence

“Apt Feelings”

Make them feel pain until they die
Blood soaks the ground like paint
Like Picasso with axe and hammer
To torture, to kill, to destroy
They suffer, die, and decay
I feel nothing for a million new ghosts