

# From Musings to Paper: Mindfulness and Mind Wandering among Expressive Artists

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## ABSTRACT

Mindfulness and mind wandering (MW)- deliberate and spontaneous were explored in the context of the work of visual artists and creative writers. The artists were categorized as professional or amateur. 33 visual artists and 33 creative writers were given three self-report indices- creative activities and achievement, MW and mindfulness. Results showed a significant positive correlation between creative achievement and years of experience, MW deliberate and experience; and a negative correlation between number of hours spent in the activities related to the creative field and spontaneous mind wandering. A significant mean difference in trait mindfulness and MW spontaneous between creative writers and visual artists was observed. Furthermore, a significant mean difference between professional and amateur creative writers in MW deliberate was found, and a significant mean difference between professional and amateur visual artists in MW spontaneous was observed. The findings and future recommendations have further been discussed.

## Keywords

Creativity, Mindfulness, Mind wandering, Visual Artists, Creative Writers

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## Introduction

Over the course of our evolution, we human beings have developed innumerable means to express ourselves. Art, being one of the well-recognised forms of expression, has encouraged individuals from a variety of fields and domains to be creative and produce “something that is both original and worthwhile.” (1) Other than these, there are many other factors that one must take note of while conceptualizing an artist and their product.

First, it is important to conceptualise artists according to their specific domains or fields. Today, there are many ways to understand and classify art. However, any effort to conceptualise or define art would be short sighted. Earlier definitions of art referred to classical arts such as painting, sculpting, and architecture, and to some extent, literature and creative writing. In this study, visual arts (painting, sculpting) and literature (creative writing) are categorized as expressive arts, and individuals engaging in these domains have been termed as expressive artists.

Second, creativity is not only limited to the artist. Mooney (1963) (2) elaborated on the various approaches to creativity, giving a broader view of what constitutes creativity by drawing attention to the creative environment, the creative process, the creative product, and finally, the creative person.

Third, there are various opinions in existing literature about the creative processes leading to the formation of a creative product. There is some ambiguity concerning the forces that make one individual more creative than another. The essence of this state of confusion has been aptly described by Godwin (3) in *Thoughts on Man*, “That portion of every day of our existence which is occupied by us with a mind attentive and on the alert, I would call life in a transcendent sense. The rest is scarcely better than a state of vegetation. And yet not so either. The happiest and most valuable thoughts of the human mind will sometimes come when they are least sought for, and we least anticipated any such thing.”

Conclusions on creative processes are blurred when it comes to deciphering whether it is the state of mindfulness characterised by a state of

awareness of the current moment, (4,5) or that of mind wandering, which is either a deliberate choice to consciously direct our thoughts away from the present task, or a spontaneous capture of attention by a completely unrelated experience (6,7) that help an individual form a creative product. There is very little agreement in literature regarding these processes; especially on expressive artists.

Lastly, Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) (8) in their *Four C Model of Creativity*, provided a useful distinction depending on the level of real-life creativity. The first level, consisting of *Mini-C* includes creativity that is a part of the learning process. The second level is referred to as *Little-C*, which includes everyday activities that a non-expert would participate in during work or leisure time. The third level includes *Pro-C* which refers to professionals in the field. Finally, *Big-C* is the eminent creativity, which focuses on the people who excel on the creativity measures at a high level. Due to a lack of literature in this area, this research focused on *Pro-C* (professionals) and *Little-C* (amateurs).

## Literature Review

### Mindfulness

According to Karr and Wood (2011), (9) being relaxed and attentive, with a touch of awareness, helps one live artistically. With its roots in Buddhism and Hinduism, mindfulness has been shown to have several beneficial effects, (10) especially on creativity. (11-14) Research has shown that this relationship could be mediated by enhanced ability to regulate stress, (15) reduction in the fear of being judged, and the ability to shift one's perspective, (16) being able to respond in a new manner, (17) increased problem solving through insight, (18) as well as increased working-memory capacity. (19)

There is also direct evidence of mindfulness on creativity, thus indicating a plausible causation. Increasing levels of mindfulness have shown to increase creativity. (7) Furthermore, mindfulness training has shown to be beneficial for creativity, (20,21) and through mindful practise of learning as well as drawing. (22) Regular and experienced meditators were shown to be better in verbal fluency and in discovering unique solutions to problems. (23)

### Mind Wandering

Despite our best efforts to stay focused and pay attention to the task at hand, our mind seems to wander away from the present on multiple occasions. Scientific literature has scrutinised this concept of mind wandering, which has received negative connotations in its disruption of performance, cognition, as well as mood. (24,25) At the same time, it has been shown that human beings tend to spend a large part (about 50 percent) of their waking hours on thoughts unrelated to the present events. (26-28) It is indeed fascinating how such a disruptive activity could be carried out to such a large extent without having any benefits (27). Answers to such confusion were provided by Wallas (1926) (29) while defining the stages of creativity, which include preparation, incubation, illumination and verification. Focusing on the incubation period it was seen that engaging in undemanding tasks instead of demanding tasks during the incubation period improves performance on the creative problem-solving tasks. (5,28,30)

### Mindfulness and Mind Wandering

Although it has been established that the constructs of mindfulness and mind wandering are in fact opposite to each other, (31) there is a possibility that different aspects of mindfulness, along with mind wandering, play different roles during different stages of creativity. (7) Zedelius and Schooler (2015) (32) provided a potential explanation for the varying roles played by mind wandering and mindfulness in the creative process. Higher mind-wandering was related to insight-based problem solving; whereas in analysis based creative strategies, higher mindfulness (and lower mind wandering) was linked with better problem-solving capabilities.

Agnoli *et al.*, (2018) (33) proposed that mind wandering (deliberate and spontaneous) and mindfulness may actually not be completely opposing constructs as was shown before. In fact, they interact with each other to predict creativity both as separate constructs as well as in combination. The researchers found an interaction between deliberate mind wandering and the awareness subscale of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) (34) in predicting originality, thus focusing on the importance of

paying attention to irrelevant information while at the same time not losing focus of the task at hand. (33)

### Rationale

Although the existing findings throw some light on mindfulness and mind wandering in creativity, it seems to look at creativity as a singular concept, not accounting for the variety and multiplicity of creative fields. Therefore, the role of mindfulness and mind wandering in everyday creative activities, as well as the achievements of creative persons from expressive arts (especially those of visual arts and creative writing) has not been investigated thoroughly. Existing literature has not shed light on how one's status of expertise in the creative field (professional or amateur), could influence the manner and degree in which they engage in mindfulness and, deliberate and

spontaneous mind wandering. Moreover, through recent research, the concept of mind wandering has shown to consist of two dissociable constructs within mind wandering, i.e. deliberate and spontaneous mind wandering, (6,35) and these developments must be taken into account as well.

### Aim & Objectives

This study aims to understand the relationship between mindfulness and mind wandering (spontaneous and deliberate) among expressive artists. The objectives are first, to explore the differences in mindfulness and mind wandering (deliberate and spontaneous) between visual artists and creative writers. Second, to understand the differences between professional and amateurs on their utilization of mindfulness and mind wandering as creative processes.

## Methods

### Sample Design, Procedure and Participants

Approval for the study was first taken from the Institutional Review Board as well as from the Institutional Ethics Committee. The scales were translated to Kannada for the convenience of the participants. Permission was sought from the concerned authorities from different colleges, universities, and art classes in Udupi district, Karnataka. Potential participants, who had to be minimum of 18 years and maximum of 40, were approached and the study was explained to them. Written and oral informed consent was taken, after which the creativity scale was administered for screening, following which the mindfulness and mind wandering scales were administered.

### Measurements

**Socio-Demographics:** A socio demographics data sheet was administered to gather information regarding age, gender, area of specialty, years of experience in the field, and number of hours spent on activities related to the respective creative domain.

**Inventory of Creative Activities and Achievements (ICAA) (36):** The scale has eight domains, each containing subscales for measuring

creative activities and achievements. The Creative Activities (CACT) scale and the Creative Achievements (CACh) scales of the ICAA showed satisfactory internal consistency ( $\alpha = .78$  for the activities scale and  $\alpha = .71$  for the achievements scale). (37) The CACh scales correlated highly with the Creative Achievement Questionnaire (CAQ) (38) ( $r = .68$ ;  $r_s = .70$ ), a well-known measure of creative achievement. The CACh scale has 11 items, which, when arranged in order, have increasing weightage. Individuals indicating item number 2 to 5 were classified as *Little-C* or amateurs, and those scoring 6 through 10 were classified as *Pro-C* or professionals. The CACT scale has 6 items per domain, and is scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (More than 10 times). The CACh is scored by summing all the checked items per domain; summing across domains provides a domain-general score. As item 2 of CACh of ICAA focuses on originality of the work ("*I have already created at least one original work in this domain*"), it was chosen at the minimum level required to be reported for an individual to be selected in the study, and participants were screened for the study using this scale.

**Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) (4):** The scale was used to measure trait mindfulness. MAAS has good internal consistency for men ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ) as well as for

women ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). The performance on the scale was not significantly associated with previous experience with meditation. (39) Furthermore, MAAS showed both convergent and divergent validity with other psychological well-being measures. (4) There are 15 items in this scale., which are scored using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Almost always) to 6 (Almost never). The scale is scored by computing a mean of all items. Higher scores show higher levels of dispositional mindfulness.

**Mind Wandering: Deliberate and Mind Wandering: Spontaneous Scales (6):** These scales were used to assess both spontaneous as well as deliberate mind wandering. The scales showed high reliability at the first ( $\alpha = 0.81$  and  $0.86$  respectively), and at the second time ( $\alpha = 0.81$  and  $0.90$  respectively) of administration, done over a two-week period. The scales also showed good convergent and discriminant validity. (6,40) These two scales have 4 items each and are scored using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Rarely) to 7 (A lot), except for the item 3 (on both scales) which ranges from 1 (Not at all true) to 7 (Very true). Scoring involves summing and then averaging the responses for each participant for each scale. Higher scores reflect higher levels of deliberate or spontaneous mind wandering.

## Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics were used in order to analyse the demographic data of the participants. Furthermore, Spearman's correlation was done to explore the relationship between experience, mindfulness, mind wandering deliberate and spontaneous, and creative activities and creative achievement. Finally, Independent Samples T test was done to explore the difference between creative writers and visual artists on mindfulness and mind wandering- deliberate and spontaneous.

## Results

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the participants. The sample comprised of 66 expressive artists (50 percent visual artists, 50 percent males, mean age = 20.5 years, SD = 2.43, range = 18 to 32 years). The participants were also asked to mention their experience in their creative field (mean = 6.5 years, SD = 4.7) as well as the number of hours per week that they spent on the activities related to the creative field (mean hours = 11.09, SD = 12.4). The artists were also classified as professionals ( $N = 49$ ) and amateurs ( $N = 17$ ) based on the Creative Achievement subscale of the ICAA.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of the Participants

	Gender	N	Expertise	N
Visual Arts	Male	20	Professional	27
	Female	13	Amateur	6
Creative Writers	Male	13	Professional	23
	Female	20	Amateur	10

  

Years of experience	N	Hours per week spent on creative activities	N
1 to 5 years	33	1 to 10 hours	36
6 to 10 years	19	11 to 20 hours	16
11 to 15 years	10	21 to 30 hours	6
16 to 20 years	3	31 to 40 hours	0
		41 to 50 hours	1
		51 to 60 hours	2
Total	65	Total	61
Missing	1	Missing	5

The creative activities as well as achievement scores were not normally distributed, which is in line with the past research done on creativity. (see 33) Therefore, non-parametric Spearman's correlation was done to explore the relationship between experience, mindfulness, mind wandering deliberate and spontaneous, and

creative activities and creative achievement. Table 2 shows the correlations between the said test scores for expressive artists.

**Table 2.** Correlation coefficients

	Experience	Hours/week	CAct	CAch	MF	MW-D	MW-S
<b>Experience</b>	-	-.118	.223	.356**	.141	.272*	-.143
<b>Hours/week</b>		-	.067	-.045	.236	-.069	-.290*
<b>CAct<sup>1</sup></b>			-	.690**	.028	.175	.040
<b>CAch<sup>2</sup></b>				-	-.051	.193	-.017
<b>MF<sup>3</sup></b>					-	-.186	-.592**
<b>MW-D<sup>4</sup></b>						-	.327**
<b>MW-S<sup>5</sup></b>							-

**Note.** \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

<sup>1</sup>Creative activities

<sup>2</sup>Creative achievements

<sup>3</sup>Mindfulness

<sup>4</sup>Deliberate mind wandering

<sup>5</sup>Spontaneous mind wandering

Independent Samples T test was done to explore the difference between creative writers and visual artists on mindfulness and mind wandering-deliberate and spontaneous. There was significant mean difference between creative writers and visual artists on mindfulness ( $p < .05$ ,  $t(31) = -2.13$ ) as well as on mind wandering spontaneous

( $p < .01$ ,  $t(31) = 3.2$ ), and no significant mean difference between the groups on mind-wandering deliberate scores. Mean differences in the scores are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Mean differences between mindfulness and mind wandering scores among creative writers and visual artists

	Domain	N	Mean	SD
<b>MF*</b>	Creative Writing	33	3.69	0.66
	Visual Arts	33	4.06	0.74
<b>MW-D</b>	Creative Writing	33	5.31	1.31
	Visual Arts	33	4.98	1.55
<b>MW-S*</b>	Creative Writing	33	5.06	1.14
	Visual Arts	33	3.99	1.53

**Note.** \* $p < .05$

Furthermore, there was also significant mean difference in MW-D scores of professionals and amateurs ( $p < .05$ ,  $t(31) = 2.23$ ) among the creative writers. On the other hand, among visual artists, there was a significant mean difference in

the MW-S scores of professionals and amateurs ( $p < .05$ ,  $t(31) = -2.091$ ).

## Discussion



This study provides a novel exploration of the role of mindfulness and mind wandering - deliberate and spontaneous - on the creative activities and achievements of visual artists and creative writers. The negative correlation between mind wandering spontaneous and mindfulness is partially in-line with previous research which showed that the two constructs are opposite to each other. (31) There were significant positive correlations between creative achievement and years of experience, and between deliberate mind wandering and experience. A negative correlation between number of hours spent in the activities related to the creative field and engagement in spontaneous mind wandering was also seen.

The Independent Samples T-Test found a significant mean difference between mindfulness and mind wandering spontaneous scores of creative writers and visual artists, which meant that creative writers showed an increased engagement in spontaneous mind wandering as compared to visual artists, who engaged more in mindfulness. On the other hand, there was no significant mean difference between the visual artists and creative writers on deliberate mind wandering, which could be due to the similarities both groups share as being a form of expressive art, requiring deliberate change of thought stream in order to generate creative ideas. These results show that visual artists, when compared to creative writers, utilize mindfulness while engaging in their creative processes.

Alternatively, the creative writers tend to spontaneously attend to a stream of thought away from the current task. This finding could be explained by considering the nature of creative ideas, a lot of which occur in the spur-of-the-moment. Gable *et al.* (2019) (41) found that physicists and creative writers created about 20 percent of their creative ideas while engaging in spontaneous mind wandering which was independent of the task at hand. Furthermore, one of the most important factors of creativity is its usefulness or utility in the real world. (42,43) Occasionally, when one's mind wanders, an important idea may spontaneously appear. However, this idea could be far removed from reality and to be able to make it appropriate to

one's earthly setting, some amount of deliberate thought is required as well.

Additionally, there was a significant mean difference in deliberate mind wandering scores of professionals and amateurs among the creative writers, with professionals deliberately engaging in mind wandering more than amateurs. Interestingly, for visual artists, there was a significant mean difference in the spontaneous mind wandering scores of professionals and amateurs, with scores of professionals being significantly less than that of the amateurs. Therefore, as professional creative writers engaged more in deliberate mind wandering, amateur visual artists engaged more than professionals in spontaneous mind wandering. These findings point to the possibility that the artist's engagement in deliberate or spontaneous mind wandering could be determined by their level of expertise.

## Conclusion

Although existing research has already established the relationship between mindfulness and mind wandering in the creative population, (7,32,33) there has been little focus into how these processes could differ with expertise in a specific type of creative population. By focusing on visual arts and creative writers, this study showed the unique ways in which expressive artists utilize mindfulness and mind wandering in their creative processes. The current study emphasised the importance of looking at the diversity and multiplicity of creative fields, as well as the expertise of the creative individual, before reaching conclusions regarding the underlying processes involved in creativity. Thus, creative people, as a heterogenous group, have different ways of being creative, and this process of creativity depends several factors- an insight that had not been explored before, and could be essential for future research on art and creativity.

## Limitations and Future Studies

Most participants in the study belonged to academic institutions and were not involved full-time in their creative work. Since the research has shown that the level of expertise could have an

impact on the type of mind wandering one engages in, future research can look at studying these processes among full-time professionals who make their livelihood through these creative fields. Future research could also explore the same relationships and differences among other fields of art, such as dance, theatre, music, etc. Furthermore, this research looked at trait mindfulness, not taking into account the multidimensionality and complexity of the construct. Moreover, the correlational data along with the small sample size could also question the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, an experimental approach focusing on a larger sample could provide more generalisable results.

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### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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