



Cultivating Creative Expression in Beijing Theatre Students: A Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Ability as Mediator of Douyin and Xiaohongshu Learning

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ABSTRACT

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This paper proposes a conceptual framework to explain how informal learning through social media influences creative development among theatre-major students in Beijing, China. Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory, the model positions aesthetic ability—defined as the capacity to perceive, interpret, and critically evaluate artistic stimuli—as the key mechanism linking students’ use of platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu to their creative output. After reviewing literature on digital pedagogy, creativity in performing arts, and aesthetic development, the paper identifies three core relationships: (1) social media use in learning positively impacts aesthetic ability; (2) enhanced aesthetic ability, in turn, fosters greater creativity; and (3) social media use exerts an indirect effect on creativity via the mediating role of aesthetic ability. Although the framework is conceptual, it offers clear directions for future empirical research, recommending cross-sectional survey designs, validated Likert-scale measures, and structural equation modeling to test these hypotheses. The study contributes to theory by integrating aesthetic cognition into models of digital learning and creativity, and to practice by suggesting that theatre educators deliberately incorporate curated social media content and reflective activities to cultivate students’ aesthetic sensitivity and creative confidence. Finally, it underscores the relevance of media literacy and aesthetic education as integral components of 21st-century arts curricula.

KEYWORDS:

Social Media
Learning, Aesthetic
Ability, Creativity,
Theatre Education,
Digital Pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

As a higher education institution, in the current arts education environment, specifically in theatre, creativity has become less a characteristic of the artist and more a competency of those who wish to be leaders in their industry and in higher education

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and thus to model/ teach/adapt to a changing and uncertain world. This trend also mirrors wider shifts in global educational values, which are now placing increasing emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, and novelty. Creativity has received increasing attention as a central concern in China’s developing educational environment, particularly in the wake of critiques against traditional forms of pedagogy, which, as some reports suggest, may stifle as opposed to foster creativity (Liang et al., 2021).

Despite the fact that Chinese students have been paid much attention for their excellent academic performances, there is a continuous discussion that relative to Western education circles they lack the strong imagination, active creativity (Zhang et al.,

Hong harden et al, Cultivating Creative Expression in Beijing Theatre Students: A Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Ability as Mediator of Douyin and Xiaohongshu Learning

2020). Such differences have been attributed to fixed educational practices of standardization, high-stakes testing, and uniformity, as opposed to exploratory learning and creative risk-taking (Wei, 2011). While such an educational environment is successful in training discipline and thinking manner, it also has an opportunity to suppress an aesthetic sensibility and fluent creation which are both necessary for theatre education.

In the face of these issues, social media has become an important informal learning platform. Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and other platforms have penetrated into the world of young learners, who have been gaining access to all kinds of different artistic forms, classmates' comments, and aesthetic experiences. In Beijing, the platforms are more than just tools for leisure, but also for artistic creation and group learning among theater students. Social media can cultivate students' aesthetic taste by exposing them to a variety of cultural modes of expression and performance skill, and further fostering their aesthetic ability and creative output (Wu et al., 2024; Giraud, 2017).

At the same time, researchers have become more aware of the role of aesthetic competence, which refers to an individual's ability to experience, appreciate, and critically reflect on works of art, as an important factor in the process of creative development (Corradi et al., 2019; Skov and Nadal, 2020). However, little is known about how digital spaces are shaping this sense of aesthetics, particularly with arts students. Incorporating social media into the learning experiences of theatre students invites relevant questions: Can students learn aesthetically, informally through social apps? And the latter, in turn, promotes creativity?

The present study attempts to contribute to this discussion by introducing a conceptual model with aesthetic ability as a mediator between the use of social media in learning and creativity for college theatre students in Beijing, China. In developing a theoretically driven model, this research contributes to the debate on how digital media can be used to strategically support pedagogical objectives in the arts.

Problem Statement

Despite increasing eagerness for digital tools in education, there is limited empirical and conceptual insight into the impact of social media on creativity – and particularly through

mediating mechanisms, such as aesthetic domain ability. The existing literature either tends to concentrate on creativity as general cognitive trait and aesthetic experiences as independent events and ignore their dynamic interpellations in digital learning spaces. This is particularly true in China, where traditional pedagogy prevails, and the application of social media in education is under-theorized and under-explored in arts education (Wang & Kamal, 2024).

A first limitation is that theoretical models about the use of social media in learning as their impact on creativity among theatre students are sparse. Although some research has focused on motivation as a result of digital content and online peer interaction (Vizcaya-Moreno & Pérez-Cañaveras, 2020), a minority report on how those platforms may serve as the trigger for the development of sensitivity to arts, or for deeper engagement with creative processes.

Second, the attribute aesthetic competence itself has not been reflected on enough as a pedagogical concept in the context of the digital age. The majority of research investigating the role of social media in aesthetics has focused on beauty norms, or consumer behavior (e.g., cosmetic aesthetics) rather than how these platforms might also impact on artistic appreciation and critical thinking within an educational context (Abbasi et al., 2022).

Third, the promotional role of aesthetic aptitudes in the associations of social media use with creativity is to be conceptually specified. This void is especially important to fill where theatrical education is concerned, as creativity is intrinsically related to the quality of perception and sensitivity to the artistic. Without a grasp of these intercurrents, the development of digital media usage for creative learning may be superficial or disconnected from pedagogical purposes (Sun, 2020).

Overall, there is a call for a theoretical framework that examines how social media use can encourage creativity by theatre students, mostly for the betterment of aesthetic talent. To fill this gap, this study developed a model that in which aesthetic ability mediates the association between the social media used in learning and creativity, making theoretical contributions to the digital pedagogy, art education, and creativity.

Hong harden et al, Cultivating Creative Expression in Beijing Theatre Students: A Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Ability as Mediator of Douyin and Xiaohongshu Learning

Research Aim and Objectives

This conceptual paper aims to develop a theoretical framework to examine how the use of social media in learning influences creativity among theatre major students, with aesthetic ability positioned as a mediating variable. The study is situated in the context of Chinese higher education, particularly focusing on theatre students in Beijing, where creativity is a vital but often underdeveloped educational outcome.

To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following research objectives:

- **RQ1:** To examine the relationship between the use of social media in learning and theatre students' creativity.
- **RQ2:** To investigate the relationship between the use of social media in learning and theatre students' aesthetic ability.
- **RQ3:** To assess the relationship between theatre students' aesthetic ability and their creativity.
- **RQ4:** To explore the mediating effect of aesthetic ability in the relationship between the use of social media in learning and students' creativity.

These objectives will inform the construction of a conceptual model and provide direction for future empirical research aimed at enhancing creative development in theatre education through digital learning tools.

Significance of the Study

This study holds theoretical importance by addressing a critical gap in the literature concerning the dynamic relationship between digital media use and creativity in arts education. While prior research has examined the educational applications of social media and the psychological dimensions of creativity, few studies have integrated these two domains within the context of aesthetic development. By proposing a model where aesthetic ability mediates the influence of social media on creativity, this study introduces a nuanced conceptual pathway that deepens our understanding of how perceptual and cognitive processes are shaped by digital environments in theatre education.

The proposed framework encourages scholars to reconsider the simplistic assumption that exposure to diverse content on social media automatically enhances creativity. Instead, it highlights the intermediary role of aesthetic ability—defined as the

learner's sensitivity to, interpretation of, and response to artistic and expressive stimuli. This perspective aligns with emerging interdisciplinary views that creativity is not only a function of cognition and personality, but also of perceptual and emotional engagement with one's environment. In this way, the study contributes to an expanded theoretical understanding of how aesthetic cultivation can be facilitated through informal learning tools such as social media.

Practically, the study offers valuable insights for educators and curriculum designers in the performing arts. With social media now a ubiquitous part of students' lives, the challenge is not whether to incorporate it into learning, but how to do so in a way that promotes rather than dilutes creative expression. By identifying the conditions under which social media use can enhance aesthetic ability and, by extension, creativity, this study provides a roadmap for more intentional and effective instructional practices. Educators can leverage social media content not just for communication or dissemination, but as curated aesthetic experiences that stimulate artistic reflection and inspire creative experimentation.

Finally, the findings of this conceptual inquiry may inform broader educational strategies in China, where creativity development remains a critical but underemphasized goal. As Chinese education transitions from exam-oriented instruction toward more holistic student development, integrating digital tools with a focus on aesthetic and creative growth becomes increasingly relevant. This study provides a timely theoretical contribution that supports this pedagogical shift, especially within specialized fields such as theatre education where imagination, artistic interpretation, and originality are essential learning outcomes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Creativity in Theatre Education

Creativity is increasingly recognized as a core competency in theatre education, not only as an artistic expression but also as a critical cognitive and socio-emotional skill. In the context of theatre studies, creativity is often associated with the generation of novel performances, adaptive problem-solving in dynamic scenarios, and expressive interpretation of scripts and roles. Historically, creativity has been explored through multiple lenses—cognitive, personality-based, environmental, and socio-cultural. Within performing arts education, creativity

Hong harden et al, Cultivating Creative Expression in Beijing Theatre Students: A Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Ability as Mediator of Douyin and Xiaohongshu Learning

involves the synthesis of imagination, emotional sensitivity, and aesthetic judgment (Silveira et al., 2022).

Despite widespread interest, many Chinese students continue to demonstrate limited creativity, a problem attributed to rigid educational practices and performance-based evaluation systems (Zhang et al., 2020). In contrast to Western pedagogical models that encourage open-ended exploration and divergent thinking, traditional Chinese classrooms often prioritize conformity and rote memorization. This cultural and institutional context has been cited as a significant barrier to developing students' creative potential, particularly in the performing arts where spontaneity and originality are essential (Wei, 2011).

Theatre students in Beijing occupy a unique position within this tension between tradition and innovation. While their curriculum may offer opportunities for expressive freedom, systemic pressures and a lack of aesthetic scaffolding may inhibit full creative expression. As such, investigating the determinants of creativity—including digital tools and aesthetic development—is both timely and necessary.

Use of Social Media in Learning

Social media has transformed the educational landscape, providing new avenues for collaborative learning, exposure to diverse content, and creative experimentation. Among theatre students, platforms such as Douyin (TikTok) and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) function as informal learning environments where students consume and produce performance-related content, observe professional practices, and engage with peer feedback (Wang & Ismail Kamal, 2022).

From a pedagogical perspective, social media aligns with Connectivism Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning as a networked process across digital and social environments (Sitti et al., 2013). These platforms facilitate not only content acquisition but also the co-construction of meaning through interactive and multimedia communication. Theatre students may watch performance clips, follow industry trends, participate in challenges, and share their own artistic outputs—all of which may influence their creative capacities.

However, the effect of social media on learning outcomes remains a debated issue. While some studies highlight its ability

to increase engagement and exposure to global artistic practices (Rajan & Ismail, 2022), others caution that overexposure may lead to passive consumption or the dilution of personal creativity (Wu et al., 2024). Thus, the key question is not whether social media can enhance creativity, but how it does so—potentially through an intermediary mechanism such as aesthetic ability.

Aesthetic Ability - Definition and Educational Role

Aesthetic ability refers to an individual's capacity to perceive, evaluate, and appreciate artistic and sensory stimuli, often leading to deeper emotional and cognitive engagement with art. In the domain of theatre, aesthetic ability involves the interpretation of visual, auditory, and narrative elements, shaping how students experience and produce performances (Corradi et al., 2019). Allinson (2019) conceptualizes aesthetic ability across four domains: painting, music, literature, and theatre—making it a particularly relevant construct for performing arts education.

Aesthetic ability is not merely an innate trait but can be cultivated through structured exposure, critical discussion, and reflective practice (Skov & Nadal, 2020). Social media platforms, by offering a stream of diverse artistic expressions, may serve as modern agents of aesthetic education. Students viewing curated content or engaging in aesthetic critique on platforms like Xiaohongshu may develop keener artistic judgment, which in turn can inform their own creative work.

Yet, existing literature often isolates aesthetic ability from learning processes or views it as a passive trait. Few studies have explored how aesthetic sensitivity might actively mediate the link between digital content consumption and creative performance—a gap that this paper aims to address.

The Mediating Role of Aesthetic Ability

The central argument of this conceptual paper is that aesthetic ability functions as a mediator between the use of social media in learning and the development of creativity. Drawing from Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), this relationship can be understood as a process of observational learning and self-regulation: students internalize artistic standards and expressions observed on social media, which shape their aesthetic frameworks and, consequently, their creative outputs.

Hong harden et al, Cultivating Creative Expression in Beijing Theatre Students: A Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Ability as Mediator of Douyin and Xiaohongshu Learning

For instance, when theatre students watch performance clips or aesthetic tutorials on Douyin, they are not simply imitating—they are internalizing stylistic principles, emotional cues, and symbolic conventions (Pan & Lee, 2024). These experiences refine their aesthetic taste, which then informs their original compositions or interpretations. As aesthetic ability develops, it may enhance students' confidence in making creative choices, aligning with Bandura's notion of self-efficacy and outcome expectation (Zhang & Mao, 2025).

Despite its theoretical plausibility, the mediating role of aesthetic ability remains underexplored in empirical literature. Most studies treat social media either as a direct influencer of creativity or focus on aesthetic ability in isolation (Zhang et al., 2021). This paper thus contributes a novel framework by suggesting that social media fosters creativity indirectly, through its enhancement of aesthetic perception and judgment.

3. UNDERPINNING THEORY

This conceptual paper is underpinned by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), originally developed by Albert Bandura (1986), which provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how individuals learn and develop within social contexts. SCT emphasizes that human behavior is shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors—a principle known as reciprocal determinism. In the context of this study, SCT offers a comprehensive explanation of how theatre students' exposure to social media influences their internal cognitive processes (aesthetic ability), which in turn affects their behavioral outcomes (creativity).

A central tenet of SCT is observational learning, which refers to acquiring knowledge or skills by observing others. Applied to this study, observational learning occurs when theatre students engage with performance videos, tutorials, and artistic content on social media platforms such as Douyin or Xiaohongshu. These platforms serve as informal yet rich educational environments where students encounter a wide range of creative performances and aesthetic expressions. Through repeated observation, they internalize artistic styles, techniques, and aesthetic standards. SCT suggests that such modeled behaviors, once cognitively processed, can shape learners' beliefs, motivations, and performance capabilities.

Another key concept in SCT is self-efficacy, defined as an

individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). As theatre students develop their aesthetic ability through repeated digital exposure and practice, they may become more confident in their ability to make creative choices and produce novel artistic work. Social feedback mechanisms on these platforms—such as likes, comments, and shares—also contribute to students' perceived competence, reinforcing their engagement and creative persistence.

SCT also highlights the role of social reinforcement and outcome expectations in shaping behavior. When students receive positive responses to their online performances or aesthetic contributions, they are more likely to sustain or improve their creative efforts. This aligns with the view that aesthetic ability not only reflects a sensitivity to artistic quality but also evolves through socially mediated experiences that reward visual, emotional, or expressive discernment.

In this conceptual framework, aesthetic ability is positioned as a cognitive-perceptual mediator—a skill that is cultivated through social media use (via observational learning and feedback) and subsequently enhances creativity (through higher self-efficacy and artistic decision-making). Social media thus becomes the environmental context that shapes both learning and expression, while aesthetic ability represents the internalized learning outcome that bridges digital engagement and creative performance.

By applying Social Cognitive Theory to the relationship between social media use, aesthetic ability, and creativity, this paper offers a theoretically grounded explanation of how digital tools influence student outcomes in the arts. The theory's explanatory power in modeling learning as a socially and cognitively interactive process makes it particularly suited for examining how theatre students develop and express creativity in digitally enriched educational environments.

4. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), this study proposes a conceptual model that explains how use of social media in learning can influence creativity among theatre students, with aesthetic ability functioning as the key mediating mechanism. Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes observational

Hong harden et al, Cultivating Creative Expression in Beijing Theatre Students: A Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Ability as Mediator of Douyin and Xiaohongshu Learning

learning, modeling, and internalization of skills within a social context. These theoretical principles are particularly relevant in digital environments where students actively consume and replicate artistic content shared by peers and professionals.

In this context, social media functions as an educational and aesthetic arena where theatre students encounter diverse forms of creative expression. Through platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu, students not only access rich visual and performance-based content but also engage in feedback loops—viewing, commenting, liking, and sharing—that reinforce certain aesthetic norms and inspire new ideas. As students observe and interact with this content, they begin to internalize stylistic preferences, performance techniques, and artistic criteria, thereby cultivating their aesthetic ability. This internalized aesthetic sensitivity plays a vital role in shaping

students' creative behaviors, particularly in a performance-based discipline such as theatre.

Based on the above theoretical reasoning and literature synthesis, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** The use of social media in learning has a significant positive effect on students' creativity.
- **H2:** The use of social media in learning has a significant positive effect on students' aesthetic ability.
- **H3:** Aesthetic ability has a significant positive effect on students' creativity.
- **H4:** Aesthetic ability mediates the relationship between the use of social media in learning and students' creativity.

These hypotheses are represented visually in the following conceptual model:

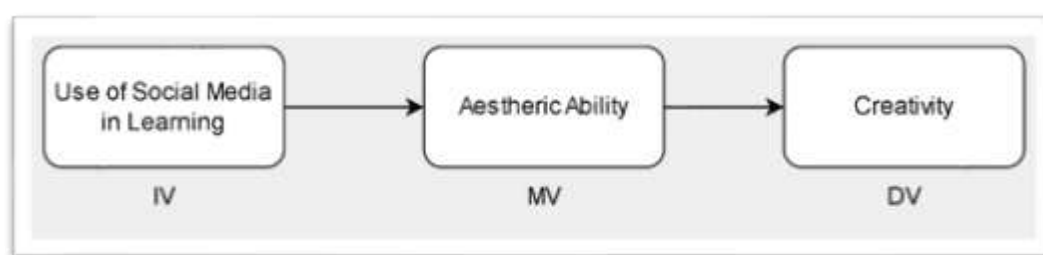


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study
Source: Authors' own work

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although this study is conceptual in nature and does not involve immediate empirical testing, it is important to propose a methodological framework that can guide future research designed to validate the conceptual model. The framework presented in this paper is grounded in the positivist research paradigm, which assumes that relationships between variables can be objectively measured and generalized through statistical analysis. This paradigm is particularly suited for examining the hypothesized causal relationships among the use of social media in learning, aesthetic ability, and creativity in the context of theatre education.

To empirically test the proposed model, future studies may adopt a deductive research approach, which begins with theory-driven hypotheses and employs quantitative methods to assess their validity. A cross-sectional survey design is recommended as it enables the collection of data from a large sample within a

defined period, offering a snapshot of how social media use affects aesthetic development and creativity among theatre students. This design is efficient and suitable for educational settings where time and resources may be limited.

A structured questionnaire would be the primary data collection instrument. Constructs such as social media use in learning, aesthetic ability, and creativity can be measured using previously validated Likert-scale items, adapted to the context of theatre education. For example, items on aesthetic ability can focus on students' sensitivity to theatrical forms, while creativity can be assessed based on students' ability to generate novel and contextually relevant artistic expressions.

To ensure generalizability, it is advisable to recruit participants from multiple universities offering theatre programs, particularly in Beijing, where the study is contextually grounded. A probability-based sampling method, such as

Hong harden et al, Cultivating Creative Expression in Beijing Theatre Students: A Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Ability as Mediator of Douyin and Xiaohongshu Learning

stratified or simple random sampling, can be used to enhance representativeness. Data analysis should involve Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using tools such as SmartPLS or AMOS, enabling simultaneous evaluation of direct and indirect effects, including mediation by aesthetic ability.

Ethical considerations must also be addressed in future research. These include obtaining informed consent, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, and securing institutional ethics approval prior to data collection.

By outlining this methodological framework, the conceptual paper not only presents a theoretical model but also offers a clear and feasible roadmap for its empirical validation. This contributes to the rigor, relevance, and applicability of the study in advancing scholarship at the intersection of digital learning, aesthetics, and creativity in theatre education.

6. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This conceptual paper offers several important implications for theory and practice in the fields of arts education, educational technology, and creativity development.

From a theoretical perspective, the proposed model contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how creativity is cultivated within digitally mediated learning environments. Most existing studies that examine the impact of social media on student outcomes tend to treat creativity as a direct consequence of content exposure or interaction. By introducing aesthetic ability as a mediating construct, this paper extends Social Cognitive Theory into the realm of aesthetic cognition, offering a layered explanation of how perceptual and evaluative skills translate digital experiences into creative outputs. This model encourages researchers to move beyond surface-level analysis and consider the internal cognitive-affective processes that mediate between digital engagement and behavioral expression, particularly within creative disciplines like theatre.

Furthermore, this study offers a discipline-specific perspective that is often missing from broader educational technology research. Theatre education relies heavily on aesthetic judgment, expressive performance, and interpretive skill, which are shaped by students' exposure to and appreciation of artistic elements. By situating the discussion within the context of theatre students in Beijing, the paper contributes to culturally

grounded and context-sensitive theorizing in arts pedagogy. This localized perspective is crucial, especially in China, where traditional educational models may constrain creative development and where digital tools offer a pathway for pedagogical innovation.

From a practical standpoint, the study has implications for educators, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers. For theatre instructors, the findings suggest that social media should not be viewed merely as a communication or promotional tool, but as an integral part of the learning process, which is capable of enhancing students' aesthetic awareness and creative confidence. Integrating structured social media-based activities into classroom tasks (e.g., performance critiques, content curation, aesthetic reflections) may stimulate deeper engagement and foster originality in student work. Educators can also design reflective assignments that prompt students to analyze their aesthetic experiences on social media and connect these insights to their creative practice.

For curriculum developers, this model supports the inclusion of aesthetic education as a formal learning objective, particularly in programs focused on the performing arts. Rather than leaving aesthetic development to incidental exposure, educational programs can adopt intentional strategies that leverage digital platforms to cultivate perceptual and expressive competencies. This also aligns with broader educational reforms in China aimed at promoting holistic development, innovation, and artistic excellence.

Finally, for policymakers, the study underscores the importance of media literacy and aesthetic sensitivity as essential skills for 21st-century learners. Investing in teacher training programs that incorporate digital pedagogy, and aesthetic education can enhance the effectiveness of arts instruction. In this way, social media can be repositioned from a distraction to a developmental tool—shaping not only how students learn but also how they perceive, interpret, and create in increasingly media-rich environments.

7. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper proposes a theoretical framework to examine the mediating role of aesthetic ability in the relationship between social media use in learning and creativity among theatre students in Beijing, China. Drawing upon Social

Hong harden et al, Cultivating Creative Expression in Beijing Theatre Students: A Conceptual Model of Aesthetic Ability as Mediator of Douyin and Xiaohongshu Learning

Cognitive Theory, the paper emphasizes that creativity is not solely a product of digital exposure but is shaped by the internalization of aesthetic knowledge, norms, and values acquired through observation and engagement within social media environments. The model underscores how platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu function as informal yet powerful educational spaces that can enhance students' aesthetic sensitivity and, consequently, their creative capacities.

By identifying aesthetic ability as a key mediating construct, the study fills a critical gap in the literature and encourages a more integrative approach to creativity development in arts education. It challenges the assumption of a direct link between digital tools and creative output and instead proposes a process-oriented pathway grounded in perceptual development and social learning.

The implications of this study extend beyond theory, offering practical strategies for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers to integrate social media meaningfully into educational settings. Rather than treating digital engagement as peripheral or disruptive, this paper advocates for its strategic use to foster aesthetic growth and creative expression, particularly in culturally rich and expressive fields like theatre.

Future empirical research is needed to test this model through quantitative methods, assess the strength of each proposed relationship, and explore additional contextual variables that may moderate or influence these pathways. Ultimately, this conceptual framework serves as a foundation for rethinking the intersection of digital media, aesthetic learning, and creativity in contemporary arts education.

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