



From Experience to Interpretation: The Mediating Role of Openness to Artistic Experimentation in Abstract Art Preference

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ABSTRACT

The growing prominence of China in the global art market contrasts with the relatively limited engagement of art students with abstract art, highlighting an important gap in understanding the determinants of abstract art perception. Existing studies have primarily focused on cognitive or stylistic interpretations, with insufficient attention to the combined influence of socio-personal and psychological factors. This conceptual paper develops an integrated framework to explain how individual characteristics shape the appreciation and interpretation of abstract art among university art students. Specifically, the model incorporates personal art-making experience, self-assessed artistic knowledge, socioeconomic status, and peer pressure as key antecedents, with openness to artistic experimentation positioned as a central psychological mechanism. Drawing on the Theory of Aesthetic Ability, Social Cognitive Theory, and the Big Five personality framework, the paper proposes that openness to artistic experimentation mediates the relationship between socio-personal factors and abstract art perception. By synthesizing insights from art education, psychology, and social influence literature, the study advances a socio-psychological perspective on art appreciation that moves beyond traditional approaches. The proposed framework offers theoretical contributions by integrating multiple domains into a unified model of aesthetic perception, and provides practical implications for art educators and policymakers seeking to foster inclusive and exploratory learning environments that enhance student engagement with abstract art.

KEYWORDS:

abstract art perception, socio-personal factors, openness to artistic experimentation, art education, aesthetic experience

1. INTRODUCTION

The global art market has experienced substantial expansion in recent years, with China emerging as a major contributor to both market value and cultural production. Despite this growth, a notable imbalance persists between the economic prominence of the art sector and the level of engagement with contemporary and abstract art forms. In particular, traditional artistic categories continue to dominate both market preferences and cultural consumption in China, while abstract art remains comparatively less understood and less widely appreciated (Art Basel, 2024; Artprice, 2024). This disparity is especially significant among art students, who represent the next generation of artists and cultural participants. Understanding how these students develop their perceptions of abstract art is therefore essential for both educational

development and the long-term evolution of the art ecosystem.

Abstract art presents unique interpretative challenges due to its emphasis on non-representational elements such as color, form, and texture, requiring viewers to engage at both cognitive and emotional levels. Unlike representational art, which provides recognizable visual references, abstract art relies heavily on subjective interpretation and individual meaning-making processes (Van Alphen, 2005; Eimert, 2016). As a result, appreciation of abstract art is not solely dependent on formal training, but also influenced by broader experiential and psychological factors. Previous research has highlighted the importance of exposure, emotional engagement, and cognitive interpretation in shaping responses to abstract art (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; King et al., 2017). However, these studies often examine such influences in isolation, limiting the ability to fully explain how multiple factors interact to shape aesthetic perception.

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In the context of art education, socio-personal factors play a critical role in influencing students' engagement with abstract art. Personal experience with art creation enhances understanding of artistic processes and fosters deeper appreciation (Gude, 2013; Asare et al., 2023), while self-assessed artistic knowledge contributes to interpretative confidence and critical evaluation (Duh, 2015). At the same time, socioeconomic status affects access to artistic resources, educational opportunities, and cultural exposure, thereby shaping individuals' engagement with art (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; Fancourt & Steptoe, 2019). Peer influence further contributes to the formation of artistic preferences, as social interactions and feedback can either encourage or constrain creative exploration (Lamont & Fournier, 1992; Sadler, 2014). Although these factors have been widely acknowledged, existing literature tends to treat them independently, resulting in a fragmented understanding of their combined impact on abstract art perception.

Moreover, limited attention has been given to the psychological mechanisms through which these socio-personal influences translate into aesthetic outcomes. Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and the Big Five personality framework (McCrae & Costa, 1997), individual differences in openness to experience have been identified as a key determinant of engagement with novel and complex stimuli, including abstract art. In artistic contexts, openness to artistic experimentation reflects a willingness to explore unconventional forms, embrace ambiguity, and engage in creative risk-taking. This construct aligns with the Theory of Aesthetic Ability, which emphasizes the role of cognitive, emotional, and experiential processes in shaping artistic perception (Chalmers, 1996). Despite its theoretical relevance, the mediating role of openness in linking socio-personal factors to art perception remains underexplored.

To address this gap, the present conceptual paper proposes an integrated socio-psychological framework in which openness to artistic experimentation functions as a central mediating construct between individual characteristics and the appreciation and interpretation of abstract art. By synthesizing insights from art education, psychology, and social influence literature, the study advances a more comprehensive understanding of how external conditions and internal dispositions interact in shaping aesthetic perception.

This paper contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it integrates socio-personal and psychological perspectives into a unified framework, extending existing research on art appreciation beyond single-factor explanations. Second, it highlights the mediating role of openness to artistic experimentation, offering a theoretical mechanism through which diverse influences are translated into aesthetic outcomes. Third, it provides a contextually grounded perspective by focusing on art students within contemporary educational environments, where traditional and modern

artistic values coexist. Finally, the proposed framework offers practical implications for art educators and policymakers by emphasizing the importance of fostering openness and experimentation to enhance engagement with abstract art. Through this integrative approach, the study aims to advance both theoretical understanding and educational practice in the field of art perception.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

Understanding abstract art perception requires a multidimensional perspective that integrates cognitive, social, and psychological processes. This study draws on three complementary theoretical foundations: the Theory of Aesthetic Ability, Social Cognitive Theory, and the Big Five personality framework. The Theory of Aesthetic Ability emphasizes that individuals' appreciation of art is shaped by their cognitive capacity, emotional sensitivity, and prior experiences, suggesting that aesthetic judgment is not inherent but developed through interaction with artistic stimuli and cultural context (Chalmers, 1996). This perspective highlights the role of learning and exposure in shaping how individuals interpret abstract art.

Social Cognitive Theory further explains how behavior and perception are influenced by the dynamic interaction between personal factors, environmental conditions, and social influences (Bandura, 1986). In the context of art education, this implies that students' artistic preferences are shaped not only by their internal dispositions but also by external factors such as peer interactions and access to resources. Complementing these perspectives, the Big Five personality framework identifies openness to experience as a key trait associated with curiosity, creativity, and tolerance for ambiguity (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Individuals high in openness are more likely to engage with unconventional and complex forms of art, making this construct particularly relevant in explaining responses to abstract art. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive foundation for examining how socio-personal factors influence abstract art perception through psychological mechanisms.

Socio-Personal Factors and Abstract Art Perception

Socio-personal factors play a central role in shaping how individuals perceive and interpret abstract art. Personal experience with art creation has been consistently associated with deeper understanding and appreciation of artistic processes. Engaging in art-making allows individuals to develop technical skills and conceptual awareness, which enhances their ability to interpret abstract forms (Gude, 2013; Asare et al., 2023). Through experiential learning, students become more attuned to artistic decisions related to composition, color, and form, thereby fostering a more nuanced appreciation of abstract works.

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Similarly, self-assessed artistic knowledge contributes to individuals' confidence in interpreting art and engaging in critical evaluation. Exposure to art theory and historical contexts enables students to contextualize abstract works and reduces the ambiguity often associated with non-representational forms (Duh, 2015). In contrast, limited knowledge may result in uncertainty or disengagement when encountering abstract art.

Socioeconomic status also influences art perception by shaping access to educational resources, cultural experiences, and artistic opportunities. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to have access to museums, galleries, and specialized art training, which enhances their exposure to diverse artistic forms, including abstract art (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; Fancourt & Steptoe, 2019). Conversely, limited access may restrict opportunities for engagement, thereby affecting appreciation and interpretation.

Peer influence represents another important social factor that shapes artistic preferences. Social interactions, feedback, and group norms can significantly influence students' attitudes toward abstract art (Lamont & Fournier, 1992; Sadler, 2014). Positive reinforcement from peers may encourage experimentation and exploration, while negative feedback may constrain creative expression and reduce engagement. These dynamics highlight the importance of social context in shaping aesthetic perception.

Based on the above arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Personal art-making experience positively influences students' appreciation and interpretation of abstract art.

H1b: Self-assessed artistic knowledge positively influences students' appreciation and interpretation of abstract art.

H1c: Socioeconomic status positively influences students' appreciation and interpretation of abstract art.

H1d: Peer influence significantly affects students' appreciation and interpretation of abstract art.

Socio-Personal Factors and Openness to Artistic Experimentation

While socio-personal factors directly influence art perception, their effects are also likely to operate through psychological orientations. Personal experience with art creation encourages exploration and experimentation, fostering a willingness to engage with unconventional artistic forms. Students who actively participate in art-making are more likely to develop an openness toward new artistic experiences and creative risk-taking (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990).

Artistic knowledge similarly contributes to openness by providing individuals with the cognitive tools needed to interpret complexity and ambiguity. As students gain familiarity with diverse artistic styles, they become more

receptive to abstract forms and more willing to experiment with non-traditional approaches. Socioeconomic status may also shape openness by influencing exposure to diverse cultural and artistic environments. Greater access to artistic resources can broaden perspectives and encourage experimentation.

Peer influence further contributes to openness by creating a social environment that either supports or discourages creative exploration. In contexts where experimentation is valued, peer interactions can reinforce openness and promote engagement with abstract art. Conversely, restrictive social norms may inhibit openness and limit creative expression.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Personal art-making experience positively influences openness to artistic experimentation.

H2b: Self-assessed artistic knowledge positively influences openness to artistic experimentation.

H2c: Socioeconomic status positively influences openness to artistic experimentation.

H2d: Peer influence significantly affects openness to artistic experimentation.

Openness to Artistic Experimentation and Abstract Art Perception

Openness to artistic experimentation represents a key psychological mechanism that links individual characteristics to aesthetic outcomes. Individuals with higher levels of openness are more willing to engage with ambiguity, explore unconventional forms, and reinterpret artistic meaning. This trait is particularly relevant in the context of abstract art, where interpretation requires flexibility, imagination, and tolerance for uncertainty.

Previous research has shown that openness to experience is strongly associated with engagement in creative activities and appreciation of complex artistic stimuli (McCrae & Costa, 1997). In art education, openness facilitates deeper emotional and cognitive engagement with abstract works, enabling students to move beyond surface-level interpretations and develop more meaningful connections with art. This suggests that openness plays a critical role in shaping how individuals perceive and appreciate abstract art.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Openness to artistic experimentation positively influences students' appreciation and interpretation of abstract art.

Mediating Role of Openness to Artistic Experimentation

Although socio-personal factors influence abstract art perception, their effects are not always direct. Instead, these influences are likely to be mediated by psychological processes that determine how individuals respond to artistic stimuli. Openness to artistic experimentation serves as a key mediating mechanism by translating external influences into internal dispositions that shape aesthetic outcomes.

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Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory, individuals' behaviors and perceptions are shaped through the interaction of environmental factors and personal characteristics, mediated by cognitive and psychological processes (Bandura, 1986). In this context, socio-personal factors such as experience, knowledge, socioeconomic background, and peer influence shape individuals' openness, which in turn influences their engagement with abstract art. This mediation perspective provides a more comprehensive explanation of how diverse factors interact to influence aesthetic perception.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Openness to artistic experimentation mediates the relationship between personal art-making experience and abstract art perception.

H4b: Openness to artistic experimentation mediates the relationship between self-assessed artistic knowledge and abstract art perception.

H4c: Openness to artistic experimentation mediates the relationship between socioeconomic status and abstract art perception.

H4d: Openness to artistic experimentation mediates the relationship between peer influence and abstract art perception.

III. DISCUSSION

Integrating Socio-Personal and Psychological Perspectives

The proposed framework advances the understanding of abstract art perception by integrating socio-personal factors with psychological mechanisms into a unified explanatory model. Rather than treating variables such as personal experience, artistic knowledge, socioeconomic status, and peer influence as independent determinants, this study conceptualizes them as interrelated forces that shape aesthetic outcomes through internal cognitive and affective processes. This perspective aligns with the Theory of Aesthetic Ability, which posits that art appreciation develops through the interaction of experiential, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Chalmers, 1996).

From a socio-personal standpoint, each antecedent contributes differently to the formation of aesthetic perception. Personal experience with art creation provides embodied knowledge of artistic processes, enabling individuals to engage more deeply with abstract forms. Artistic knowledge enhances interpretative capacity, reducing uncertainty and facilitating meaning-making in non-representational contexts. Socioeconomic status shapes access to cultural capital and artistic exposure, thereby influencing familiarity with diverse artistic expressions. Peer influence, as a social force, regulates norms and expectations within learning environments, either reinforcing or constraining engagement with abstract art. By situating these variables within a broader socio-psychological system, the

framework moves beyond fragmented explanations and offers a more holistic account of how art perception is formed.

The Role of Openness to Artistic Experimentation

A central contribution of this study lies in positioning openness to artistic experimentation as a key psychological mechanism that mediates the relationship between socio-personal factors and abstract art perception. While prior studies have acknowledged the importance of openness as a personality trait, its role as a dynamic process shaped by external conditions has received limited attention. Drawing on the Big Five personality framework, openness to experience is associated with curiosity, imagination, and tolerance for ambiguity, all of which are essential for engaging with abstract art (McCrae & Costa, 1997). However, the present framework extends this understanding by conceptualizing openness not merely as a stable trait, but as a context-sensitive orientation that can be influenced by experience, knowledge, and social environment.

In this regard, openness to artistic experimentation functions as a bridge between external influences and internal responses. Students with greater exposure to art-making, higher levels of artistic knowledge, and supportive social environments are more likely to develop a willingness to explore unconventional forms and reinterpret artistic meaning. Conversely, limited exposure, lack of confidence, or restrictive peer norms may inhibit openness, thereby reducing engagement with abstract art. This mediating role reflects the principles of Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the interplay between environmental factors and individual cognition in shaping behavior (Bandura, 1986). By incorporating openness as a mediator, the framework provides a more nuanced explanation of how socio-personal factors are translated into aesthetic outcomes.

Abstract Art Perception as a Socio-Psychological Process

The findings of this conceptual analysis suggest that abstract art perception should be understood as a socio-psychological process rather than a purely cognitive or stylistic phenomenon. Traditional approaches to art appreciation have often emphasized formal analysis or individual interpretation, overlooking the broader social and contextual influences that shape aesthetic engagement. The present framework challenges this view by demonstrating that perception is co-constructed through the interaction of personal experience, social environment, and psychological orientation.

This perspective has important implications for understanding the challenges associated with abstract art. The ambiguity and complexity inherent in abstract forms require individuals to move beyond conventional interpretative strategies and engage in exploratory meaning-making. Such engagement is not solely dependent on technical knowledge, but also on an individual's willingness to embrace uncertainty and experiment with new ways of seeing. Openness to artistic

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experimentation thus becomes a critical factor in enabling deeper engagement with abstract art, facilitating both cognitive interpretation and emotional connection.

Furthermore, the socio-psychological nature of art perception highlights the importance of contextual factors in shaping aesthetic outcomes. In educational settings, the interplay between institutional structures, peer dynamics, and individual backgrounds creates a complex environment in which students develop their artistic preferences. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more comprehensive understanding of why some students readily engage with abstract art while others remain resistant. It also underscores the need to move beyond one-dimensional explanations and adopt integrative models that capture the dynamic interactions between external and internal influences.

V. IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the literature by developing an integrated socio-psychological framework that explains abstract art perception through the interaction of socio-personal factors and psychological mechanisms. By extending the Theory of Aesthetic Ability and Social Cognitive Theory, the framework demonstrates that aesthetic perception is not solely a cognitive process but is shaped by experience, social context, and internal dispositions. The inclusion of openness to artistic experimentation as a mediating construct further advances the Big Five perspective by conceptualizing openness as a context-sensitive orientation influenced by educational and social environments. This process-based approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of how external conditions are translated into aesthetic outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of fostering openness to experimentation within art education. Educators can enhance students' engagement with abstract art by promoting exploratory learning environments, encouraging creative risk-taking, and providing opportunities for hands-on artistic practice. At the same time, addressing disparities in access to artistic resources is essential to ensure inclusive participation, particularly for students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, leveraging peer dynamics through collaborative learning and supportive feedback can create a positive social environment that encourages experimentation and reduces barriers to engagement. Collectively, these insights provide actionable guidance for educators and policymakers seeking to cultivate deeper and more inclusive engagement with abstract art.

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VII. DISCLOSURE

The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work.

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