



Exploring Visual Art and Aesthetic Preferences Among 5–6-Years: Case Study of a Preschool from China

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ABSTRACT

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The present research investigates the aesthetic preferences and perceptions of children between 5 and 6 years inclined toward artworks. Special focus was given to emotional, sensory and cognitive factors that shape their engagement with visual art. The study aimed to investigate how these children who like artworks respond to specific artistic elements, such as color, subject matter and style, and how familiarity and novelty influence their preferences. The methodology for this study is purely qualitative, with eight children participating in an in-depth examination of individual children's responses to art within their naturalistic environment. The findings of the present research work show that children who prioritize aesthetics exhibit preferences due to their emotional responses toward vibrant colours, familiar subjects, and dynamic forms. Synesthesia revealed itself in this investigation through visual stimuli leading to sensory modality associations. Non-verbal expressions, such as facial reactions and body movements, provided valuable insights into their emotional engagement with the artworks. It is concluded by present research work that children's aesthetic development is shaped by a combination of familiarity, novelty, emotional resonance, and multisensory experiences, and the findings of present research have implications for art education, suggesting that incorporating both familiar and novel artistic elements can enhance young children's engagement with art and foster creativity.

Keywords: Children's Aesthetic Preferences, Early Childhood Education, Emotional Responses, Visual Art

1. INTRODUCTION

Childhood aesthetics remains a major field of investigation within developmental psychological research and educational art studies. It focuses on understanding child art perception and appreciation to develop a psychological and cognitive explanation of their aesthetic sensibilities (Acer & Ömerođlu, 2008). It developed people's ability to identify the artistic elements, which shapes their understanding of beauty and

cultural and creative aspects (Damon et al., 2021). The initial stages of children's early development hold essential value in developing artistic taste and lead to cognitive and emotional growth in children.

They start exercising artistic preferences between the ages of five and six, but further investigations are needed to understand their mechanisms of art perception and assessment methods (Chen, 2023). During the developmental stage of 5–6 years, they need special attention because of the transition from unstructured early childhood toward a period of emerging conceptual understanding of colour, shape and composition. Further, it investigated that young children prefer art that lacks depth, mainly when conducted outside Western countries with various artistic forms, thus creating an opening to expand scientific knowledge (Ardizzi et al., 2023).

The study of Marzidi et al. (2024) investigated the elements affecting artistic choices while evaluating visual art by exploring cognitive processes, emotional responses, and social influences on five and six-year-old children. They concentrated on the aesthetic taste preferences of older adolescents while overlooking younger participants and identifying the particular visual art elements that early-stage children are attracted toward, colours, shapes, figures, and styles to comprehend their aesthetic capabilities. Chheda-Kothary et al. (2024) argued the glance of young children genuinely experiencing art encounters as they assume that sensory preferences naturally correspond to adult standards of cognition. In this way, (Ardizzi et al., 2023) stated that children's aesthetic preferences among five to six-year-olds generate fresh insights regarding artistic appreciation growth patterns while offering better comprehension of their early aesthetic judgment functions.

Hempel (2021) focused on identifying the visual parts of artwork affecting the sensory tastes of children under 5–6 years old. Visual art is subjected to observational and experimental tasks to find features that affect visual art preferences and attract maximum viewing from children. The influence of aesthetic preference selection is assessed regarding the surrounding atmosphere where children are exposed to art, the social background characteristics, and the involvement of adult guidance. It has been stated that the art preferences of young children are based on a combination of inherent cultural factors and outside environmental influences, dictating the visual art that might interest them to understand the complete knowledge of aesthetic tastes and artistic assessment's intellectual and emotional steps.

Rosdiana and Pratiwi (2023) addressed a significant gap in knowledge deficit in the study of infant and preschooler taste preference development due to its being out of the focus of aesthetic research that usually studies children over 6 years along with adults by analyzing abstract and figurative paintings and symbols rather than restricting itself to one specific art form; within this framework, multiple evaluation techniques allow researchers to investigate children's responses to different artistic styles and materials. They investigated that psychological art evaluation models are combined with emotional aspects to connect quantitative and quantitative art appreciation methods in which children are involved in visual signal engagement. It expects to make groundbreaking developments in the fields of developmental psychology along with art education and cognitive science because it reveals new knowledge about how emotions combine with cognitive processes to affect early childhood aesthetic preferences.

A significant gap exists in understanding the aesthetic preferences and perceptions of 5–6-year-old children despite the aesthetic preferences because they primarily focus on older children or adolescents and frequently disregard the unique development time in early childhood because they generalize sensory preferences of young children based on adult cognitive criteria, neglecting to account for the distinct cognitive, emotional, and sensory experiences that moulded their aesthetic judgments. This study sought to

address this gap by focusing specifically on the preferences of children between the ages of 5 and 6, a crucial developmental period in their aesthetic development. It aims to investigate artwork's visual and sensory elements that mainly resonate in 5-6-year-old children by examining the role of emotional responses, cognitive processes, and contextual influences on their aesthetic preferences. It identified the specific features of visual art, such as color vibrancy, subject matter, and artistic style, captivating young children's attention and shaping their preferences through the combination of observational and experimental methods. Additionally, it explores how familiarity, novelty, and social context influenced these preferences by providing a comprehensive understanding of emotional and cognitive dimensions that intersected in the early stages of aesthetic development. Through this approach, the study contributed new insights into childhood aesthetics, with practical implications for art education and developmental psychology.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The evaluation of aesthetic preferences among young children has generated interest in both developmental psychology and art education, as it may provide insights into early cognitive, emotional, and cultural development (Wang, 2024). It indicates that even at a very young age, children will have such preferences when encountering visual art and that this preference is a combination of intrinsic developmental factors and external schemas (Wang et al., 2023). According to a growing knowledge base in this field, next to what is known about the aesthetic preferences of children aged 5–6 years, when cognitive skills and emotional responses are developed. It is investigated that young children's aesthetic preferences regarding the attractive art aspects, the cognitive and emotional processes they use to evaluate the art components, and the influence of contextual circumstances on their preferences (Bally et al., 2023).

The development of aesthetics in children is examined as a domain where emotional, cognitive, and social variables influence the child's preferences (Zavareh & Hedayatzadeh, 2024). A child's emotional reaction to visual stimuli is fundamental to their aesthetic judgments. Even infants and toddlers can react emotionally to art. The preliminary findings suggested they favour particular colours or shapes that evoke pleasant feelings. Children's preferences and justifications for preferring or condemning anything become more apparent as they grow up. The developmental trajectory of these preferences indicates that emotional reactions have a dominant role in early childhood. As the child grows, cognitive processes allowing categorization, pattern recognition, and understanding of the ideas begin to influence the child's aesthetic evaluation. Thus, it is particularly noticeable between 4 and 7 when children become more sensitive to the complexity and organization of artworks (Xu et al., 2022). As a result, young children's preferences for aesthetics are often contingent on the emotional response to a visual stimulus, coupled with the development of a more sophisticated cognitive capacity, enabling a more refined assessment type (Ismail et al., 2021).

According to Korinth's (2024) research, the kind of art children are exposed to determines their choices. An example of this is abstract versus figurative art. Children prefer figurative art, mainly if the art includes familiar or recognizable objects such as animals or human figures. Development of a child's visual recognition skills renders their preference for figurative representation because familiarity with the subject matter enhances their emotional bonding to the artwork. Also, the ability to recognize human figures and link the figures to the individual experience may improve the emotional impact of the artwork displaying a person (Bara et al., 2021). However, abstract art is less popular since it lacks recognition and does not fit into children's emotional and cognitive frameworks.

According to Fingerhut et al. (2021), abstract art can gradually help kids become more tolerant and appreciative of nonrepresentational art's expressive potential, not simply new shapes and hues. It suggested that as kids experience and gain an understanding of many visual genres, their tastes change. Nakauchi et al. (2022) argued that social and cultural contexts are another important factor influencing children's aesthetic preferences and demonstrated the influence of external factors like family, people, and the educational environment on children's art preferences. For example, their parents' preferences and art discussions affect children's beliefs and perceptions of art. The broader cultural context of child development also influences his aesthetic preferences apart from family influences. Cultural differences in aesthetic development show that children from different cultural backgrounds will have different preferences for specific colours, themes, or styles in the art they encounter in their communities (Specker et al., 2021). Such cultural differences point out that aesthetic preferences are not caused only by universal cognitive or emotional processes but are also strongly associated with the child's social and cultural environment. In addition, formal art education in educational settings affects children's art preferences by offering them art tools to appreciate and critically think about various artistic industries and ideas. Although such contextual factors determine that children favour art, cognitive factors like age, developmental stage, and attention span also affect the assessment of art among young children (Wang et al., 2023).

At the critical time of mental development, when children begin to move from early childhood towards a period of understanding the outside world, it is primarily egocentric and concrete, into a time where they can begin to use more abstract concepts. In this way, Christensen et al. (2023) describe it as a critical point in a child's cognitive development. During this time, the children may not be able to see how complex compositions or nonrepresentational art are. However, their eyes are open to appreciate the combination of colours and visual organization. According to the research by Fingerhut et al. (2021), children who are already young prefer to compose in balanced forms and for harmonious colour contrasts. However, their knowledge of these elements could be easier than rational. It implies that children's preferences for art are not purely cognitive.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the aesthetic preferences and perceptions of 5-6-year-old children towards artworks. It allows a comprehensive, in-depth examination of children's responses towards art within their naturalistic environment, providing an understanding of young children's engagement with interpreting artworks. It also focuses on their preferences for artistic elements such as colour, subject matter and style. The study seeks to provide rich, detailed insights into the cognitive, emotional and social aspects of aesthetic development during early childhood. In response to the challenges of using semi-structured interviews with young children, the study adopts participant observation as the primary data collection method. It is often difficult to fully articulate the thoughts of young children in the developmental stage in an interview setting, but a more effective tool for capturing their natural reactions to artworks, as it allows to observe the children's non-verbal expressions and behaviours, such as facial expressions, body movements, and gestures. It provides valuable insights into their emotional engagement with the artworks and their preferences for colour, subject matter and artistic style.

The critical aspect of the study was the familiarization process to ensure that the children felt comfortable and open during the observation process. Since young children may be hesitant to engage with

unfamiliar adults, particularly in the context of an art-related activity, establishing trust and rapport with the participants was a key component of the research process. The researcher spent a few days in the preschool environment before the official observation sessions, engaging with the kids in a non-research setting to help them feel comfortable and familiar. The children could get used to the researcher's presence by playing with them, participating in everyday activities, and having informal chats. This procedure was crucial to encourage the kids to be more open and expressive during the art sessions. During the art observation sessions, the researcher also used a soft and unobtrusive approach, letting the kids engage with the pieces at their speed. In order to ensure that the children's reactions and preferences were sincere, the researcher's primary role was observational; they were not led or prodded in any way. As the kids engaged with the artwork, this method reduced discomfort and allowed them to communicate their choices orally and nonverbally.

3.2 Data and Sample

The study sample consisted of eight children 5-6 years old, and the purpose of such age range was to identify critical periods in children's aesthetic preferences, when their cognitive abilities begin to mature, allowing them to form more nuanced judgments about art. The children were recruited from local preschools in Qingzhen Guiyang, ensuring a diverse socio-cultural background to capture a broad spectrum of aesthetic experiences. The small sample size is appropriate for the study's exploratory nature, as it provides an in-depth examination of the individual preferences and perceptions of the children without overwhelming the research process with an impractically large dataset. Parental consent was obtained before the study, and the children were made aware of the nature of the study through age-appropriate explanations. The children were not selected based on their prior exposure to art, allowing the study to examine aesthetic preferences from a broad developmental perspective without biasing the sample based on familiarity with the art forms. The artworks used in the study were carefully chosen to reflect the developmental characteristics of aesthetic psychology in children aged 5-6. Six renowned artists selected six classic artworks based on their potential to engage young children, offering a balanced representation of color, style, and subject matter. The selected works included:

Morning in a Pine Forest (Ivan Shishkin)

Broadway Boogie Woogie (Piet Mondrian)

The Tooth Puller (Frans Hals)

Harlequin's Carnival (Joan Miró)

Starry Night (Vincent van Gogh)

Galleries Lafayette (Maurice Utrillo)

These artworks were chosen for their high artistic quality and prominence in the art world and their potential to appeal to children's developing aesthetic sensibilities. The variety of styles, colours, and subject matter that explore different aspects of art influences children's preferences.

Data analysis was a thematic approach for this study that identified and interpreted patterns in the children's responses. The thematic analysis focused on the richness of the data, allowing the researcher to explore how the data related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data gathered from the participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal interactions were transcribed and analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns that reflected the children's aesthetic preferences and

perceptions about them. The analysis began with initial coding, where the researchers went through the observational notes and searched for instances of data that mapped to the themes of interest. These included preferences expressed by the children concerning specific aesthetics (color, subject matter) and nonverbal cues (such as facial expressions, body movements, and vocalizations). The researchers also paid special attention to how the children might have imagined synesthetically, noting any visual/auditory, visual/gustatory, or visual/tactile synesthesia, as these provided further insights into the children's sensitivity to the artworks. After the initial coding, the next step involved grouping similar codes into more prominent themes. These themes were then analyzed about the research questions to better understand the children's aesthetic preferences and the cognitive and emotional processes that underlay their art evaluations.

3.3 Ethical Consideration

This study brings ethical considerations to the forefront; it is conducted using the participation of young children. Since informed consent was obtained from each child's parents or legal guardians before the study, they were fully informed about its purpose, procedures and risks. Age-appropriate explanations about the study were also given to the children, and their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without consequence. In order to create a comfortable environment for children throughout the data collection process, efforts were made to create a respectful atmosphere. The children were made to feel at ease during the interviews in order to avoid any pressure to specify answers. Since the study is exploratory, the researchers encouraged the children to express their opinions open-mindedly and creatively. They were sensitive to the moods and facial expressions, indicating that the child did not want to participate or was not interested in the study. The study was kept confidential throughout. All written records and analyses of the children's identities were to be anonymized, and whatever information could identify the children was securely kept in memory of the applicable data protection regulations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Identified Themes

The analysis of the interviews with the children revealed several key themes that provide insight into their aesthetic preferences and perceptions of art. These themes reflect the cognitive, emotional, and sensory factors influencing their engagement with the artworks. The primary themes identified in the study include emotional responses to visual elements, preferences for specific colours and subject matter, sensory experiences such as synesthetic imagination, and the role of familiarity and novelty in shaping preferences. Additionally, non-verbal expressions such as facial reactions, body movements, and vocalizations were integral to understanding the children's aesthetic engagement. These themes offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted ways in which children aged 5-6 perceive and respond to visual art, shedding light on the developmental process of aesthetic judgment in early childhood.

Table 1. Identified Themes

Theme	Description
Emotional responses to visual elements	Children's emotional reactions to various visual elements in the artworks, such as colour, shape, and form.
Preferences for specific colours and subject matter	Children's attraction to particular colours or subject matters, including preferences for recognizable figures or objects.
Sensory experiences such as synesthetic imagination	The presence of synesthetic experiences, where children link visual stimuli to other sensory modalities, such as sounds or touch.
The role of familiarity and novelty in shaping preferences	The balance between familiar and novel aspects in the artworks and how this influences their preferences.
Non-verbal expressions	Non-verbal cues like facial expressions, body movements, and vocalizations reflect the children's engagement and emotional responses to the artwork.

4.2 Emotional responses to visual elements

The research established emotional responses to visual elements as the foremost theme because it demonstrated robust emotional connections children (aged 5-6) show toward visual artworks. The children reacted with immediate, powerful emotions toward artistic features, including colour schemes, shape designs, and depiction content. Children experience profound emotional effects, often surging without inhibition because visual stimuli powerfully affect their aesthetic development. Many children demonstrated distinctive emotional preferences toward bright, joyful colours, which included yellow, red and orange because they evoked positive emotions, including happiness and excitement. Children's emotions toward blue or green colour palettes were generally flexible and included peaceful experiences; nevertheless, these tones could sometimes produce sadness or emotional tranquillity in response to artwork contexts.

The theme echoes findings from earlier research investigations about emotional reactions in children's aesthetic experiences. The research demonstrates that young children make aesthetic judgements through emotional reactions towards vibrant, vivid visual elements and recognizable familiar images (Zhang et al., 2021). Colour displays emotional importance because children immediately connect to it when they encounter visual art for the first time. Previous research confirms that children exhibit emotional reactions to visual aspects during their early aesthetic learning, yet their reactions differ based on their age group. Studies conducted previously show that children develop advanced emotional processing of colour and form throughout their growth as their ability to understand how these elements construct artwork meanings increases (Zito et al., 2021). The current investigation demonstrates that 5-6-year-old children mainly notice the emotional power of artistic elements instead of developing extensive interpretive skills. Children between 5 and 6 years old demonstrate preoperational thinking, according to Yuan et al. (2023), by focusing on sensory aspects of art since they are still developing conceptual abilities. During this study, child participants exhibited additional emotional reactions beyond basic colour and form responses—the artwork's content and visual elements directed children toward specific emotional connections with the artwork. The findings of Chitturi et al. (2022) receive validation through this research due to children's

explicit emotional response to visual features, which indicates that their aesthetic evaluation mostly depends on emotional perceptions rather than analytical assessments of complexity and quality in art. The intense emotional reactions of children developed when they viewed relatable subjects consisting of familiar animals or people but did not respond as intensely when viewing abstract or unfamiliar subjects. Research by Yang et al. (2021) confirms through their findings that children develop emotional connections more easily toward artworks that present familiar, recognizable figures or situations.

4.3 Preferences for specific colours and subject matter

The theme of preferences for specific colours and subject matter emerged as a critical aspect of the children's aesthetic responses to the artworks presented during the interviews. The study showed that children displayed distinct preferences for colours and artwork subjects because of their emotional responses to visual elements combined with their age-related brain functions. The children strongly preferred vivid, warm colours such as red, yellow and orange, which they linked to optimistic feelings, including joy, energy and warmth. The reactions to blue and green colours were neutral to positive yet mood-linked differently based on the artwork context researchers showed children.

Child colour preference research supports the discovered outcomes that Children's attracted toward bright, warm colours continue to appear in research studies because these hues symbolize warmth, vitality, and positive feelings. The human mind selects vivid colours based on developmental stages and psychological sources. Visual stimulation and emotional appeal in colours influence children under five to produce positive responses. These colour choices stem from the sensory reaction of vivid hues because such hues generate faster emotional responses than softer shades. According to Maule et al. (2023), colour is a crucial element that promotes children's aesthetic reactions, especially during early childhood, when their emotional response to visual stimuli reaches its peak intensity. The artwork subjects strongly shaped which colour the children chose to favour. The children preferred artworks that depicted familiar subjects, such as living beings or natural scenes, compared to abstract or unfamiliar scenes. Children had positive, enthusiastic feedback to the artwork *Morning in a Pine Forest* by Ivan Shishkin because it depicts playful bears within a beautiful forest. Research by Yuan et al. (2021) confirmed that children develop stronger positive emotions toward familiar characters which appear in artwork. The selected familiar subjects activate both cognitive performance and emotional involvement by enabling children to connect between art representations and their personal experiences.

People showed restrained reactions toward artistic pieces that employed unfamiliar abstract imagery. The children adopted a tepid response to examine *Broadway Boogie Woogie* by Piet Mondrian because it presents geometric patterns without despicable content. According to West et al. (2021) and previous studies, young children between 5-6 years of age have difficulty understanding abstract art because their cognitive abilities remain focused on recognizing familiar concrete images. Children demonstrate increased appreciation for familiar subject matter instead of abstract forms because they strongly depend on perceptual familiarity during aesthetic evaluations (San Alberto et al., 2022). The aesthetic judgment of children depends heavily on the subject matter because they need to understand and relate to what they see as much as they do to the artwork's formal elements.

4.4 Sensory experiences such as synesthetic imagination

The theme of sensory experiences, such as synesthetic imagination, emerged as a fascinating and unexpected aspect of the children's engagement with the artworks. Many child participants reported visual synesthesia when they experienced sensory stimulation in different modalities, producing gustatory and, auditory and tactile sensations. Synaesthesia occurs frequently in young children since their developing sensory functions create unexpected connections between sense perceptions. Synesthetic experiences described by children demonstrated different patterns but shared multiple standard connections between their sensory perception and art-related emotions and cognitive reactions. Several children relayed their experience matching particular colours with particular sounds and notes. According to children's reports, red activated a hearing experience similar to loud drums, whereas yellow produced a tone with high brightness. Research shows that these children's brain processes for visual colour perception included simultaneous auditory perceptions. Studies confirm that synaesthesia typically appears in minimal ways since early childhood when brain development shapes perceptual processes. Their sensory processing demonstrates that the children blend their everyday sensory experiences into holistic perceptions, which link perceptual categories without specific separation.

Children showed visual-gustatory synesthetic tendencies, which made them relate particular artistic elements to specific flavours. In *Starry Night*, the child observed swirling forms and colours that inspired them to think about "sweet chocolate" while they experienced "cold ice cream" when viewing *Morning's* light blue and white elements in a Pine Forest. The gustatory associations showed high sensory integration because visual elements and colours directly affected taste perception. Literature about synaesthesia contains limited discussion about this particular sensory experience, but it reveals both children's powerful sensory awareness and their imaginative approach to art. Some students connected their artwork perceptions to touch sensations after observing architectural elements and designs in the paintings (Kwon & Iedema, 2022). During *Harlequin's Carnival* observation by Joan Miró, children experienced "the angular shapes as sharp as knives." At the same time, another child saw in *The Tooth Puller* that the flowing lines felt as smooth as a blanket. The physical closeness of the children with different artworks demonstrates that they forfeited traditional observation behaviour to interact through multiple senses fully. Young children form their art judgments based on a broad spectrum of sensory experiences (Glasser, 2023). Children's sensory engagement with artwork appears in their responses through descriptions of touch because embodied sensory experiences heavily influence their world perception.

The synesthetic experiences described by children provide crucial information about their psychological development and mental processing abilities (Young, 2021). Children described sensory encounters that tied to their emotional responses because they reported that specific colours and shapes produced powerful sensory connections, which ranged from positive to adverse effects. The child who heard red like a loud drum percussion instrument simultaneously linked the colour to feelings of excitement, showing how their emotional reception improved because of their multiple sensory interactions with art. The research indicates that children base their aesthetic choices on visual recognition and combinations of emotional reactions and sensory experiences, which enriches their responsive behaviour. The synesthetic imagination theme is important because it shows how young children use their perceptions and emotions to understand art.

4.5 The role of familiarity and novelty in shaping preferences

The theme of the role of familiarity and novelty in shaping preferences emerged as a significant factor influencing the children's aesthetic responses to the artworks. Children aged 5-6 years chose familiar aspects of paintings more than unfamiliar ones, especially if they quickly recognized or connected the contents to their own experiences. The analysis showed that young children displayed explicit engagement toward unfamiliar artwork aspects simultaneously with their clear preference for familiar content in artworks. All interviews demonstrated that children preferred images they already knew. Works of art that displayed familiar entities, including animal and human figures and natural elements, received more intense positive feedback from participants. Most children are delighted to see playful bears in the Ivan Shishkin painting "Morning in a Pine Forest", expressing their happiness and joy about the animals shown in the artwork. Children naturally seek recognizable artwork content because developmental theories show their preference for familiar experiences. All children need to recognize the content of artwork to generate emotional and cognitive connections that create comfort and ease for their aesthetic experience. Children express positive emotions toward familiar artwork subjects; thus, recognition is crucial in their art appreciation through its connection to relatable content. According to the study findings, children showed interest in artworks that contained unfamiliar elements, and their attraction toward familiar subject matter was that dynamic compositions, along with abstract elements within artworks, became particular points of attraction for the children because these elements brought fresh visual experiences.

Their inclusion of recognizable components affected novelty elements in works of art. Children tended to engage more deeply with abstract works featuring recognizable elements (Brooks et al., 2023; Song et al., 2021). Damon et al. (2021) work children encountered child-like shapes that enabled them to find familiar patterns which helped them relate to the abstract artwork. Novelty shows its most significant engagement when familiar elements accompany new concepts, which enable children to handle unfamiliar artwork parts using their known knowledge viewpoints. How new pieces affect previously known material resonates with developmental theories (Min & Schwarz, 2022). He suggested that children learn through assimilation and alteration of understanding frameworks when processing new knowledge. The novelty and familiarity of the responses from the children gave researchers a significant understanding of their psychological responses. Familiar artistic works caused children to express joy and excitement, while novel artworks typically led them to respond with neutral emotions, from curiosity to confusion. The study's data matches the theory that children base their aesthetic choices on cognitive processes and emotional responses because familiar pieces create emotional safety, yet novel art generates curiosity and difficulty.

4.6 Non-verbal expressions

The theme of non-verbal expressions emerged as a crucial component of the children's engagement with art, providing insight into their emotional and cognitive reactions beyond verbal communication. During the interviews, children demonstrated many non-verbal actions and facial expressions supported by body movements and vocalizations, which helped researchers understand how they experienced and preferred the artworks. The non-verbal cues revealed direct emotional responses from children while looking at the artwork by providing an important understanding of their aesthetic reaction, which becomes essential since the children lack fully developed vocabulary skills to express their artistic choices effectively. Interviewers detected Facial expressions during the research period as the most visible non-verbal communication signals. The children showed evident facial emotions, which revealed their reactions toward the artwork through smiles, frowns and expressions of surprise. Many students reacted with immediate smiling and laughter to Morning in a Pine Forest by Ivan Shishkin because they found the bear

characters endearing. People viewed Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* with abstract geometric patterns and exhibited neither positive nor negative reactions because they used frowns and tilted their heads. Research data demonstrates the significant emotional reactions of children to visual elements because it demonstrates their deep sensory response to art. The researchers could read facial cues, which hinted that emotional responses were the main factors determining children's favourite artworks since faces provide authentic instant feedback regarding artwork taste.

Body movements were vital non-verbal communication methods that appeared throughout the interview. Artworks sparked children's physical interactions, including careful examination of details and neutral posture when confronted with confusing visual components and physical descriptions using their hands. Children expressed their understanding of the artwork through their dynamic hand movements that resembled the forms within the piece. According to this study, children demonstrate that they move through artworks rather than see them because their bodies transmit similar physical reactions to artistic content. Children demonstrated more substantial involvement by engaging in physical body movements because they wanted to reproduce the emotional and kinetic aspects of the pieces (García-Pinar, 2022; Isakova, 2021). Children experience aesthetic encounters through their physical body responses, demonstrating their multiple sensory engagement between vision and physical movements. As a key way through which the children communicated their responses to different artworks, the children used vocal expression.

4.7 Policy Implications

This research's results provide essential guidelines for early childhood education policies regarding curriculum integration of art education. The study confirms that children approach art through emotional and sensory processes and cognitive mental models of perception; thus, educators must adopt policies that deliver comprehensive artistic experiences appropriate for each stage of their development. The educational approach to art must evaluate the emotional multisensory bonding students show when encountering multiple artistic expressions. Teachers and educators should undergo training to identify when children show artistic feelings while teaching diverse artworks, which can spark their intellectual and emotional growth. A supportive network of policies should establish art as a vital instrument to improve students' social and emotional learning since art allows children to develop emotional abilities by engaging with visual content. Educational settings will experience substantial holistic growth in young children when environments are designed to promote both experiential and expressive art learning experiences.

4.8 Discussion

The study aimed to investigate 5 – 6-year-old children's aesthetic preferences and perceptions of artworks, focusing on how certain cognitive, emotional and sensory factors influenced children's engagement with art. The results of this study reveal in great detail how emotional responses, sensory experiences and interactions between familiar and novel elements combine to influence young children's aesthetic preferences. These findings fit with and add to previous research on aesthetic development in early childhood, providing a further understanding of how young children perceive, experience, and judge art. The most notable discovery of this study was how influential emotional responses to visual elements were on children's preferences for aesthetics. As expected, children reacted emotionally to differing artworks about color, form, and subject matter. It is consistent with previous research emphasizing that emotional responses are central to early childhood aesthetic development (Acer & Ömerođlu, 2008). The children in this study were particularly drawn to vibrant, warm colours such as red, yellow, and orange, associating them with positive emotions like happiness and energy. This preference for bright, warm colours reflects

the emotional salience of colour, which has been well-documented in the literature. Furthermore, the children's responses to more fabulous colours like blue and green align with previous studies, indicating that children tend to associate these colours with calmer or more neutral emotional states (Marzidi et al., 2024).

Study findings match previous research about early childhood, favoring common themes in the visual appreciation of art. The artwork that children reacted to favourably most often depicted recognizable objects such as animals and human figures. The research data supports the findings from Chen (2023) because children have emotional attachments to artwork that shows relatable figures in scenes. The children experienced joy when viewing *Morning in a Pine Forest* by Ivan Shishkin because they recognized the playful bears in the painting, highlighting that familiarity determines aesthetic preferences. Children's attraction to recognizable artwork demonstrates their ability to understand art by connecting its content to personal experiences. It corresponds to Hempel's (2021) developmental theory about children of this age group focusing on concrete objects. The study proved that familiarity did not determine the entire pattern of children's preferences regarding artistic aesthetics. The reactions to the abstract artwork *Broadway Boogie Woogie* by Piet Mondrian were split or unenthusiastic among the children. A few children showed interest and curiosity toward the artworks, but some remained unclear or uninterested during the observation session. Research on abstract art preferences shows that children in the preoperational stage tend to dislike abstract art since they prefer concrete art (Ismail et al., 2021). This analysis shows that children displayed unremarkable or indifferent responses toward abstract art because their cognitive skills make non-representational art challenging to interpret during this developmental stage.

The research study discovered sensory experiences called synesthetic imagination as a novel finding. The children linked colour experiences to auditory and oral sensations and touch sensations based on their artistic engagement and processing. Research findings show young children interact with the world through multiple senses because their perception systems continue developing (Rosdiana & Pratiwi, 2023; Shem-Tov & Mor, 2024). The synesthetic experiences reported by children during this research demonstrate their vivid and inventive visual stimulus processing, including hearing loud drum sounds when they see red colours and tasting chocolate by observing swirling patterns. The discovery proves vital since it helps researchers grasp how simultaneous sensory input affects artistic and emotional acceptance during early childhood development. This study demonstrates synesthetic experiences within young children's aesthetic encounters, which should be incorporated while studying their responses to art. The study discovered that children revealed their emotional engagement with art through their non-verbal expressions, including facial reactions, body movements, and vocalizations. Through their non-verbal communications, children demonstrated emotional states better than through verbal comments, thus highlighting the importance of non-verbal signals for child aesthetic evaluation understanding.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study delivers critical findings about children aged 5-6 who view art as demonstrating intricate relationships between emotional reactions, sensory interactions, and intellectual development. Children primarily form their aesthetic experiences through emotional responses based on color preferences while processing subject matter and form features because familiarity is an essential factor in their choices. Research reveals that children establish connections between colours and sounds and tastes and touch sensations, which provides our comprehension of child-art engagement with new understanding. Children expose their emotional states and preferences through non-verbal communication, including facial

reactions, body movements, and vocalizations. These discovery results support existing research studies that show that early childhood aesthetic development consists of combined emotional and sensory encounters when children interact with art. The study highlights important conclusions about how early childhood education should support diverse artistic activities that enhance emotional growth and cognitive development. Studying synesthetic experiences in aesthetic development requires additional research to help establish educational approaches to cultivate creativity and emotional skills in young students.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Eight children participated in this study, which used appropriate qualitative methods for case exploration but lacked a suitable representation of the broader 5-6-year-old age group. Future research needs to evaluate larger diverse participant groups that include children from different cultural backgrounds, socio-economic groups, and geographically dispersed regions to validate the identified results across multiple contexts. Children's preferences and responses tend to shift when they encounter artwork selection beyond traditional classical pieces, including contemporary and culturally unique art. Future research should investigate how young participants would respond by showing them artistic works from various styles within different media beyond the chosen classic sets. The study faces a significant limitation because the researchers might introduce interpretation bias when evaluating non-verbal responses from children. Adults can use non-verbal signals such as facial expressions and body movements to understand better how children feel when experiencing art. However, these readings may vary from interpreter to interpreter.

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Ethical Statement: Before conducting the study, the authors proposal was reviewed by the Guiyang Preschool Education College, School of Preschool and Special Education and approval was granted. This study prioritizes ethics, obtaining parental consent and providing children with age-appropriate explanations. Participation was voluntary, with withdrawal allowed anytime. A respectful atmosphere ensured comfort during data collection. Researchers encouraged open expression while monitoring discomfort. Identities remained confidential, with anonymized records securely stored per data protection regulations.

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