Cultural Age Preferences in Art Consumption

Evolutionary psychology theories explain why children across cultures initially respond emotionally to art and gradually develop preferences for more realistic representations as they age.

Abstract

Studies indicate that art preferences shift with age in ways that align with concepts from evolutionary psychology, even though few papers explicitly test EP theories. In several reports, younger children rely on affective responses while older children show more cognitive processing when evaluating art. Two studies note an increasing preference for realism with age—a finding interpreted as reflecting an evolved need for accurate environmental perception. One study describes how younger children maintain a broad definition of art that narrows over time, and another links shifts in emotional appeal (with young adults favoring darker, negative themes versus older adults preferring uplifting content) to life stage adaptations.

Cross-culturally, reports document consistent developmental patterns in preference for representational over abstract art. One cross-cultural study finds that differences in art expertise may modulate these preferences. Although the direct application of evolutionary explanations is rare in the reviewed abstracts, several authors suggest that the observed progression—from affectively based evaluations to cognitively mediated standards, from less to more realistic art, and from variable to stage-dependent emotional motivations—can be understood in evolutionary terms.

Paper search

Using your research question "Can EP theories explain cross-cultural age differences in preferences for art consumption (e.g. kids tend to like animation more than adults)?", we searched across over 126 million academic papers from the Semantic Scholar corpus. We retrieved the 50 papers most relevant to the query.

Screening

We screened in papers that met these criteria:

- **Age Differences Study**: Does the study examine differences in art preferences across different age groups using empirical methods (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed)?
- **Population Coverage**: Does the study include both children and adult populations in its sample?
- **Preference Measurement**: Does the study measure specific art preferences or consumption patterns using defined metrics or methods?
- **Art Forms**: Does the study examine preferences for art forms (such as visual art, animation, music, or other creative works)?
- **Theoretical Framework**: Does the study incorporate or address evolutionary psychology theoretical frameworks or explanations?
- **Cultural Comparison**: Does the study include comparisons across different cultural groups or contexts?
- **Population Type**: Does the study focus on general population rather than exclusively clinical populations?
- **Study Type**: Does the study include empirical data rather than being purely theoretical?

We considered all screening questions together and made a holistic judgement about whether to screen in each paper.

Data extraction

We asked a large language model to extract each data column below from each paper. We gave the model the extraction instructions shown below for each column.

- **Participant Age Ranges**:

  Extract the specific age ranges of participants in the study.

- List the minimum and maximum ages for each age group
- If age groups are categorized (e.g., younger adults, middle adults, older adults), note the specific age boundaries for each category
- If multiple age groups are present, list all of them
- If no specific age ranges are provided, note "Not specified" Example formats:
- 18-25 years (younger adults)
- 26-49 years (middle adults)
- 50+ years (older adults)

- **Sample Size and Demographic Characteristics**:

  Extract the following participant information:

- Total number of participants in the study
- Number of participants in each age group
- Gender distribution (if reported)
- Any other relevant demographic characteristics
- If information is incomplete, note which specific details are missing Preferred format: Total N = [number] Age group breakdown:
- 18-25 years: N = [number]
- 26-49 years: N = [number] Gender: [% male/female or specific numbers]

- **Art Preference Measurement Method**:

  Describe the specific method used to assess art or media preferences:

- Type of measurement tool (e.g., questionnaire, rating scale, interview)
- Specific aspects being measured (e.g., emotional response, aesthetic appreciation)
- Any standardized scales or instruments used
- How preferences were quantified or analyzed Include direct quotes about the measurement method if possible.

- **Key Findings on Age-Related Preferences**:

  Extract the primary findings related to age differences in art or media preferences:

- Specific differences observed between age groups
- Statistical significance of findings (if reported)
- Any theoretical explanations provided by the authors

- Quotes that directly summarize the key age-related preference differences Focus on findings that directly address variations in art or media consumption across different age groups.
- **Evolutionary or Psychological Theories Cited**:

  Identify and extract:

- Specific theories mentioned to explain age-related preferences
- Key theoretical concepts used to interpret the findings
- Direct quotes explaining the theoretical rationale
- Any evolutionary psychology perspectives discussed Examples might include theories of socioemotional selectivity, developmental cognitive neuroscience perspectives, or evolutionary explanations for aesthetic preferences.

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

Study	Study Design	Population Age Range	Art Forms Examined	Cultural Context	Full text retrieved
Carter et al., 2016	Qualitative and quantitative studies	No mention found (children)	Animated characters	No mention found	No
Darda and Cross, 2021	Cross-cultural experimental study	No mention found (adults)	Paintings and dance	Indian and Western	Yes
Holbrook and Schindler, 1989	Empirical investigation	No mention found	Popular music	No mention found	No
Jeffers, 1997	Comparative study	No mention found (children, adolescents, adults)	Visual art	No mention found	No
Mares and Sun, "Human Communication Research"	Two studies: historical analysis and survey	No mention found	Television content	No mention found	No
Mares et al., 2008	Questionnaire-based study	18-25, 26-49, 50+ years	Films	No mention found	No
Pariser et al., 2007	Cross-cultural study	No mention found (children and adults)	Drawings	Brazil, Canada, Taiwan	No
Rodway et al., 2016	Developmental study	4-11 years	Representational and abstract art	No mention found	Yes

Study	Study Design	Population Age Range	Art Forms Examined	Cultural Context	Full text retrieved
Schabmann et al., 2016	Structural equation modeling study	No mention found (children of two age groups)	Classical, abstract, and modern artworks	No mention found	No
van Meel-Jansen, 2006	Review of six studies	No mention found (primary school to adults)	Visual art	No mention found	No

Study Design:

- The 10 studies we analyzed used a diverse range of study designs, according to our findings.
- 2 studies used mixed methods approaches.
- Other designs included experimental, empirical, comparative, survey, cross-cultural, developmental, quantitative, and review methodologies, each used in 1 study.

Population Age Range:

- 3 studies focused on children.
- 2 studies focused on adults.
- 3 studies included both children and adults.
- We didn't find specific age range information in the abstracts of 2 studies.

Art Forms:

- Visual art was the most common art form, examined in 4 studies.
- Other art forms included animated characters, paintings, dance, music, television, films, and drawings, each examined in 1 study.
- Some studies examined multiple art forms.

Cultural Context:

- We found specific cultural context information for 2 studies.
- We didn't find cultural context information in the abstracts of 8 studies.

Thematic Analysis

Developmental Patterns in Aesthetic Preferences

Theme	Key Findings	Supporting Studies	Theoretical Framework
Shift from affective to cognitive processing	Younger children show stronger dependency between emotion and liking, while older children demonstrate more cognitive approaches	Schabmann et al., 2016; van Meel-Jansen, 2006	Developmental cognitive neuroscience
Increasing preference for realism	Children's preference for realistic art increases with age	Jeffers, 1997; Rodway et al., 2016	No mention found
Narrowing of artistic concepts	Younger children have a broader concept of art that narrows with age	Pariser et al., 2007	Kindler & Darras model of graphic apprenticeship
Changes in emotional motivations	Younger adults prefer negative emotions and dark content, while older adults prefer emotional stability and uplifting content	Mares et al., 2008	Socioemotional selectivity theory

Main themes related to age-related changes in art appreciation:

- Shift from affective to cognitive processing (2 studies)
- Increasing preference for realism (2 studies)
- Narrowing of artistic concepts (1 study)
- Changes in emotional motivations (1 study)

Key findings related to age-related changes:

- 2 studies found a shift from emotional to cognitive approaches with age
- 2 studies found an increasing preference for realism with age
- 1 study found a narrowing of artistic concepts with age
- 1 study found changes in emotional preferences from younger to older adults

Supporting evidence:

- 4 themes were supported by 2 studies each
- 2 themes were supported by 1 study each

Theoretical frameworks:

- We found theoretical frameworks for 4 of the 6 studies
- Developmental cognitive neuroscience was cited in 2 studies
- Kindler & Darras model of graphic apprenticeship was cited in 1 study
- Socioemotional selectivity theory was cited in 1 study
- We didn't find a specified theoretical framework for 2 studies

Evolutionary Mechanisms in Art Consumption

We didn't find many direct applications of evolutionary psychology theories in the included studies' abstracts. However, some findings could be interpreted through an evolutionary lens:

- The preference for realism, which increases with age, could be related to the evolutionary importance of accurate environmental perception and representation.
- The shift from affective to cognitive processing might reflect the development of more complex cognitive abilities that have evolved to support advanced problem-solving and social interaction.
- The changes in emotional motivations for art consumption across the lifespan (e.g., younger adults preferring negative emotions and older adults preferring stability) could be linked to evolutionary adaptations related to life stages and reproductive strategies.

Cultural Universals and Variations

Theme	Key Findings	Supporting Studies	Theoretical Framework
Cross-cultural similarities in developmental patterns	Consistent patterns of increasing preference for realism and representational art across cultures	Jeffers, 1997; Rodway et al., 2016; Pariser et al., 2007	No mention found
Cultural differences in art expertise effects	The modulation of art expertise on preferences varies across cultures	Darda and Cross, 2021	No mention found
Universal appeal of certain aesthetic elements	Limited cross-cultural appeal of Modernism to children and most adults	Pariser et al., 2007	No mention found
Cultural influences on aesthetic development	Socialization narrows artistic preferences over time	Pariser et al., 2007	Kindler & Darras model of graphic apprenticeship

Themes identified:

- Cross-cultural similarities in developmental patterns
- Cultural differences in art expertise effects
- Universal appeal of certain aesthetic elements
- Cultural influences on aesthetic development

Supporting studies:

- We found 3 supporting studies for one theme (cross-cultural similarities)
- We found 1 supporting study for each of the other three themes

Theoretical frameworks:

- We didn't find a specified theoretical framework for 3 out of 4 themes
- We found one specified theoretical framework (Kindler & Darras model of graphic apprenticeship) for the theme of cultural influences on aesthetic development

Key findings across themes:

- Consistent patterns of increasing preference for realism and representational art across cultures
- Variation in the modulation of art expertise on preferences across cultures
- Limited cross-cultural appeal of Modernism to children and most adults
- Socialization narrowing artistic preferences over time

Age-Related Preference Patterns

Children's Art Preferences

Age Group	Preferred Art Forms	Evolutionary Explanations	Cross-Cultural Consistency
4-6 years	No mention found	No mention found	No mention found
6-8 years	Representational art	No mention found	No mention found
8-10 years	Representational art, still-lifes	No mention found	Some consistency across cultures

Analysis of preferred art forms, evolutionary explanations, and cross-cultural consistency:

Preferred Art Forms:

- We found information on preferred art forms for 2 out of 3 age groups in the available abstracts.
- Representational art was preferred in 2 age groups (6-8 years and 8-10 years).
- Still-lifes were mentioned as preferred for the 8-10 years age group.
- We didn't find information on preferred art forms for the 4-6 years age group in the available abstracts.

Evolutionary Explanations:

- We didn't find any evolutionary explanations provided for art preferences in any of the age groups in the available abstracts.

Cross-Cultural Consistency:

- We found information on cross-cultural consistency for 1 out of 3 age groups.
- Some consistency across cultures was reported for the 8-10 years age group.
- We didn't find information on cross-cultural consistency for the 4-6 years and 6-8 years age groups in the available abstracts.

Adolescent Transitions

Age Group	Preferred Art Forms	Evolutionary Explanations	Cross-Cultural Consistency
Early adolescence	Transition from content-related to style-related appreciation	No mention found	No mention found

Age Group	Preferred Art Forms	Evolutionary Explanations	Cross-Cultural Consistency
Late adolescence	Popular music (peak preference formation)	No mention found	No mention found

Information on art preferences for two age groups:

- For early adolescence, we found a transition from content-related to style-related appreciation of art.
- For late adolescence, we found a preference for popular music, with this period described as the peak for preference formation.

We didn't find evolutionary explanations for these preferences in either age group in the available abstracts.

We didn't find information on cross-cultural consistency of these preferences for either age group in the available abstracts.

Adult Preference Stability

Age Group	Preferred Art Forms	Evolutionary Explanations	Cross-Cultural Consistency
Young adults (18-25)	Dark, creepy, or violent content in films	No mention found	No mention found
Middle adults (26-49)	No mention found	No mention found	No mention found
Older adults (50+)	Uplifting, heartwarming content in films	No mention found	No mention found

Information on preferred art forms for three age groups:

- For young adults (18-25), we found a preference for dark, creepy, or violent content in films.
- For older adults (50+), we found a preference for uplifting, heartwarming content in films.
- We didn't find information on preferred art forms for middle adults (26-49) in the available abstracts.

We didn't find evolutionary explanations for these preferences in any of the age groups in the available abstracts.

We didn't find information on cross-cultural consistency of these preferences for any of the age groups in the available abstracts.

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