Evolution of Art Consumption Preferences

Evidence from developmental psychology, rather than evolutionary psychology, provides the primary explanation for age-related changes in art consumption preferences.

Abstract

Art and music preferences change over the lifespan in systematic, measurable ways. Studies report that musical taste often peaks in late adolescence or early adulthood, with several papers (e.g., Davies et al., 2022; Hemming, 2013) noting peak preference formation around ages 16–24. One study (Garrido and Davidson, 2019) finds that the number of preferred genres reaches a maximum at ages 45–55. An inverted U-shaped pattern of preference development appears across multiple investigations (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989, 1994; Chmiel and Schubert, 2017), which the authors attribute to developmental shifts in cognitive, social, and cultural priorities.

Studies that explicitly invoke evolutionary psychology (Casenave and Malas, 2018; Leder and Nadal, 2014) propose that aesthetic experiences may stem from adaptive functions, such as those linked to social bonding or survival. However, most evidence derives from developmental psychology, with suggestions that age-related changes in art consumption reflect critical periods for cultural learning rather than directly demonstrating evolutionary mechanisms.

Paper search

Using your research question "Can EP theories explain changes in a person's art consumption preferences across their life cycle (e.g. people tend to stop seeking out new music as they get older)?", 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:

- **Temporal Analysis**: Does the study examine changes in art consumption patterns over time using longitudinal, cross-sectional, or cohort methodology?
- **Evolutionary Psychology Framework**: Does the study incorporate evolutionary psychology theories or frameworks in its analysis?
- **Art Consumption Focus**: Does the study examine consumption of artistic works (such as music, visual arts, literature, or other art forms)?
- **Participant Age**: Does the study include adult participants (18+ years) in its sample?
- **Measurement Approach**: Does the study include quantifiable measurements of changes in artistic consumption or preferences?
- **Normal Population Focus**: Does the study examine typical (non-pathological) patterns of art appreciation?
- **Psychological Focus**: Does the study examine psychological aspects of art consumption beyond purely technical, marketing, or economic factors?

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.

- **Study Design Type**:

  Identify the primary type of study design used:

- Empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods)
- Theoretical/conceptual paper
- Review/meta-analysis

Look in the methods section or abstract. If multiple design elements are present, list the primary design type first, followed by additional methodological details. If unclear, note "design not clearly specified".

- **Sample Characteristics**:

  Extract the following details about study participants:

- Total sample size
- Age range or mean age
- Gender distribution (if reported)
- Demographic characteristics relevant to art/music consumption

Look in methods section under "Participants" or "Sample". If multiple subgroups exist, report details for each. Use percentages or exact numbers. If any information is missing, note "not reported".

Example format:

- Total n = 4,002
- Age range: 18-65 years
- Gender: 52% female, 48% male

- **Key Findings Related to Age and Preference Changes**:

  Extract specific findings that directly address:

- Observed changes in art/music preferences across age groups
- Psychological or evolutionary mechanisms explaining these changes
- Statistical significance of observed trends

Locate in results section. Prioritize direct quotes or numerical findings that explain preference shifts. If multiple findings exist, list in order of importance to research question.

Include:

- Specific age-related trends
- Statistical measures (e.g., correlation coefficients, p-values)
- Theoretical explanations proposed

- **Theoretical Framework**:

  Identify the primary theoretical perspective used to explain preference changes:

- Evolutionary psychology

- Developmental psychology
- Cognitive/neurological
- Other

Extract:

- Specific theoretical model name (e.g., Music Preferences in Adulthood Model)
- Key theoretical propositions
- How the theory explains age-related preference changes

Look in introduction, discussion, or theoretical framing sections. If multiple theories are discussed, prioritize the most prominent or directly explanatory one.

- **Measurement Approach**:

  Describe how art/music preferences were measured:

- Type of assessment tool
- Specific genres/styles examined
- Method of preference evaluation (e.g., self-report, observational, experimental)

Locate in methods section. Include details about:

- Specific measurement instruments
- Validity/reliability of measurement approach
- Any unique methodological innovations

If multiple measurement approaches were used, list all in order of prominence.

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

Study	Study Design	Population Demographics	Primary Focus	Key Variables Measured	Full text retrieved
Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013	Empirical research (quantitative), two large cross-sectional studies	Over 250,000 individuals, adolescence through middle age	Age trends in musical engagement and preferences	Musical attitudes, listening habits, musical preferences	No
Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017	Empirical research (quantitative)	n = 4,002, age range: 18-65 years (Mean = 30.22), 53-54% female	Age trends in musical preferences in adulthood	Musical preferences for genres and clips, age	Yes

Study	Study Design	Population Demographics	Primary Focus	Key Variables Measured	Full text retrieved
Casenave and Malas, 2018	Empirical research (quantitative), two studies with different samples	No mention found	Evolutionary psychology and aesthetic experiences	Preferences for landscape paintings, emotional responses	No
Chmiel and Schubert, 2017	Review/meta-analysis	57 studies on music preference	Inverted-U model of music preference	Familiarity, complexity, preference patterns	No
Davies et al., 2022	Empirical research (quantitative)	n = 1,036, age range: 18-84 years (mean = 48.6), 53% female	Age and preference for popular music	Music preference, age, nostalgia	Yes
Garrido and Davidson, 2019	Empirical research (quantitative)	n = 77, age range: 18-37 years (Mean = 24.83), 70% female	Music preferences across the life span	Music preferences, age, cultural factors	Yes
Hemming, 2013	Empirical research (quantitative), replication study	n = 473, age range: 6-86 years (Mean = 33.25), 56.14% female	Peak in popular music preference at a certain song-specific age	Music preference, song-specific age	Yes
Holbrook and Schindler, 1989	Empirical research (quantitative)	No mention found	Development of musical tastes	Music preference, age	No
Holbrook and Schindler, 1994	Empirical research (quantitative)	No mention found	Age, sex, and attitude toward the past as predictors of aesthetic tastes	Consumer preferences, age, attitude toward the past	No
Leder and Nadal, 2014	Theoretical/conceptual paper	Not applicable	Model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgments	Aesthetic experience, cognitive and affective processes	Yes

Based on the information available in the abstracts and full texts we reviewed:

Study Design:

- Majority (8/10) were empirical quantitative research
- Diverse designs included cross-sectional, multiple samples, and replication studies
- One review/meta-analysis and one theoretical paper provided broader perspectives

Population Demographics:

- Sample sizes ranged from under 100 to over 250,000 participants
- Two studies had between 1,000-10,000 participants
- We didn't find population information for 3 studies, and 1 was not applicable (theoretical paper)

Age and Gender:

- Age ranges covered 6 to 86 years across 5 studies
- Mean age was reported in 4 studies
- Gender distribution was reported in 4 studies, with female representation ranging from 53% to 70%

Primary Focus:

- Half of the studies (5/10) focused on age-related aspects of music preference or taste
- Other focuses included music preference models, predictors of aesthetic tastes, and aesthetic appreciation models
- One study examined evolutionary psychology and aesthetic experiences

Thematic Analysis

Peak Preference Formation

Several studies we reviewed suggested a peak period for music preference formation, often reported to occur in late adolescence or early adulthood. This finding aligns with the research question's interest in life cycle changes in art consumption preferences.

Study	Age of Peak Preference	Key Findings	Theoretical Framework
Davies et al., 2022	16.8-17 years	Strong preference for music from late adolescence/early adulthood	Developmental psychology
Hemming, 2013	17.36 years	Peak in musical preference, shifting from 23.47 years in original study	Developmental psychology
Holbrook and Schindler, 1989	24 years	Inverted U-shaped pattern of preference development	Developmental psychology
Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017	Not specified, but focus on early adulthood	Preferences for music dimensions change with age	Developmental psychology (Music Preferences in Adulthood Model)

Study	Age of Peak Preference	Key Findings	Theoretical Framework
Garrido and Davidson, 2019	45-55 years (for number of preferred genres)	Number of preferred genres peaks in middle adulthood, then decreases	Developmental psychology

Key findings across the studies:

- Two studies reported peak preference around 16-17 years
- One study reported peak preference at 24 years
- One study focused on early adulthood without specifying an exact age
- One study reported peak preference (for number of preferred genres) at 45-55 years

Findings varied across studies:

- Strong preference for music from late adolescence/early adulthood
- Shift in peak preference age observed in a replication study
- Inverted U-shaped pattern of preference development
- Changes in preferences for music dimensions with age
- Peak in number of preferred genres in middle adulthood, followed by a decrease

All five studies used developmental psychology as their theoretical framework, with one specifically mentioning the Music Preferences in Adulthood Model.

Evolutionary Mechanisms

While the research question specifically asks about Evolutionary Psychology (EP) theories, few studies directly applied an evolutionary framework to explain changes in art consumption preferences. However, some findings can be interpreted through an evolutionary lens.

Study	Evolutionary Perspective	Key Findings	Relevance to Age-Related Changes
Casenave and Malas, 2018	Explicit use of evolutionary psychology	Preference for landscape paintings with evolutionary features (prospect and refuge)	No direct link to age-related changes found
Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013	Implicit evolutionary considerations	Age trends in musical preferences correspond with developmental changes in psychosocial development and auditory perception	Suggests biological basis for preference changes
Davies et al., 2022	Consideration of nostalgia	Preference peak for music from adolescence/early adulthood	Potential evolutionary significance of early life experiences

Study	Evolutionary Perspective	Key Findings	Relevance to Age-Related Changes
Leder and Nadal, 2014	Discussion of evolutionary foundations	Aesthetic experiences have evolutionary roots	No specific age-related implications discussed

Approaches to evolutionary perspectives varied across the four studies:

- One study explicitly used evolutionary psychology
- One study had implicit evolutionary considerations
- One study considered nostalgia
- One study discussed evolutionary foundations

Regarding relevance to age-related changes:

- We didn't find a direct link to age-related changes in one study
- One study suggested a biological basis for preference changes
- One study indicated potential evolutionary significance of early life experiences
- We didn't find specific age-related implications discussed in one study

The studies varied in their approach to evolutionary perspectives and their relevance to age-related changes, with no clear consensus across this small sample of studies.

Contextual Factors

Several studies highlight the importance of contextual factors in shaping art and music preferences across the lifespan. These factors provide additional complexity to the understanding of preference changes and may interact with potential evolutionary mechanisms.

Study	Contextual Factors	Key Findings	Implications for Age-Related Changes
Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017	Social influences, perceived musical properties	Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors affect age-related changes in musical preferences	Preferences are shaped by a combination of individual, social, and musical factors across the lifespan
Garrido and Davidson, 2019	Cultural background, musical training	Younger individuals adapt more smoothly to new cultural environments, potentially influencing openness to diverse music	Cultural exposure and learning may interact with age-related preference changes

Study	Contextual Factors	Key Findings	Implications for Age-Related Changes
Davies et al., 2022	Nostalgia, increased music accessibility	Technological changes and increased access to music may influence preference patterns	Historical and technological contexts may affect how preferences develop and change over time
Holbrook and Schindler, 1994	Attitude toward the past	Consumer's attitude toward the past moderates preference formation	Individual psychological factors may influence the strength of age-related preference patterns
Chmiel and Schubert, 2017	Familiarity, complexity	Inverted-U model of preference based on collative variables still prevalent in research	Cognitive factors like familiarity and complexity may underlie age-related preference changes

Our analysis reveals diverse contextual factors, key findings, and implications for age-related changes in musical preferences across five studies:

Contextual Factors:

- Social influences
- Musical factors (including properties and training)
- Cultural background
- Technological factors (increased music accessibility)
- Psychological factors (attitude toward the past)
- Cognitive factors (familiarity, complexity)

Key Findings:

- Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors affect age-related changes
- Younger individuals adapt more easily to new cultural environments
- Technological changes and increased access influence preference patterns
- Attitude toward the past moderates preference formation
- Support for an inverted-U model of preference based on collative variables

Implications for Age-Related Changes:

- Combination of individual, social, and musical factors across the lifespan
- Cultural exposure and learning may interact with age-related preference changes
- Historical and technological contexts may affect preference development over time
- Individual psychological factors may influence the strength of age-related preference patterns
- Cognitive factors like familiarity and complexity may underlie age-related preference changes

These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of age-related changes in musical preferences, encompassing social, cultural, technological, psychological, and cognitive factors.

Synthesis of Findings

Theoretical Integration

The studies reviewed provide a rich but complex picture of how art and music preferences change across the lifespan. While the research question specifically asks about evolutionary psychology (EP) theories, the majority of studies approach the topic from a developmental psychology perspective. However, there are opportunities to integrate these findings with EP theories.

Theoretical Approach	Key Insights	Potential EP Connections	Supporting Studies
Developmental Psychology	Preference formation peaks in late adolescence/early adulthood; Changes in preference types with age	Critical periods align with important life stages in evolutionary context	Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2013, 2017); Davies et al. (2022); Hemming (2013); Holbrook and Schindler (1989, 1994)
Evolutionary Psychology	Aesthetic preferences may have adaptive functions	Landscape preferences and music engagement could serve social or survival purposes	Casenave and Malas (2018); Leder and Nadal (2014)
Cognitive Approaches	Familiarity and complexity influence preferences	Cognitive processing of art/music may have evolutionary roots	Chmiel and Schubert (2017)
Cultural/Contextual Factors	Social influences, technology, and cultural background shape preferences	Interaction between evolved predispositions and cultural learning	Garrido and Davidson (2019); Davies et al. (2022)

Key insights and potential integrations:

- The studies suggest humans may be particularly sensitive to aesthetic experiences during late adolescence/early adulthood. This could potentially relate to the importance of cultural learning and social bonding during this life stage from an evolutionary perspective.
- Preferences formed during this critical period may serve adaptive functions, such as group cohesion or mate attraction, although these specific functions were not directly tested in the reviewed studies.
- Changes in preferences with age could reflect shifting adaptive priorities throughout the lifespan (e.g., from mate attraction to parental investment), but this hypothesis requires further investigation.
- The interaction between evolved predispositions and cultural/contextual factors may explain individual variations in preference patterns.

It's important to note that while this integration is theoretically possible, the studies reviewed do not directly test these EP explanations.

Life Cycle Patterns

The reviewed studies reveal several patterns in how art and music preferences change across the life cycle. While not all studies cover the entire lifespan, combining their findings allows for a tentative mapping of

preference changes from adolescence to late adulthood.

Life Stage	Preference Patterns	Potential EP Explanatory Mechanisms	Supporting Studies
Adolescence/Early Adulthood (15-25 years)	Formation of strong, enduring preferences; Peak in preference for contemporary and intense music	Mate attraction; Social bonding; Cultural learning	Davies et al. (2022); Hemming (2013); Holbrook and Schindler (1989)
Early to Middle Adulthood (25-45 years)	Gradual shift towards mellow and softer music; Decreased preference for contemporary styles	Shift from mate attraction to parental investment; Stress reduction	Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2017)
Middle Adulthood (45-55 years)	Peak in number of preferred genres; Broadening of musical tastes	Cultural accumulation; Social status signaling	Garrido and Davidson (2019)
Late Adulthood (55+ years)	Preference for classical and jazzy music; Decreased engagement with new music	Cognitive optimization; Emotional regulation	Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2013, 2017)

Key findings across life stages:

- Adolescence/Early Adulthood: Strong preferences form, particularly for contemporary and intense music
- Early to Middle Adulthood: Shift towards mellow music, decreased preference for contemporary styles
- Middle Adulthood: Peak in number of preferred genres, broadening of musical tastes
- Late Adulthood: Preference for classical and jazzy music, decreased engagement with new music

Potential explanatory mechanisms vary across life stages, suggesting different adaptive priorities:

- Mate attraction and social bonding in early life stages
- Parental investment and stress reduction in early to middle adulthood
- Cultural accumulation and social status signaling in middle adulthood
- Cognitive optimization and emotional regulation in late adulthood

These patterns and mechanisms, while intriguing, are largely speculative based on the available studies. Direct testing of these evolutionary hypotheses was not found in the reviewed literature.

References

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