

The Formation Conditions of Aesthetic Experience in Digital Media Environments and Their Implications for Aesthetic Education in Higher Education

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Abstract. Digital media environments constitute a new cultural condition in contemporary society. They have changed and enriched the ways in which aesthetic objects are presented and, to a certain extent, have affected the objective environments, modes of perception, and paths of meaning formation through which aesthetic experience becomes possible. This paper takes the formation conditions of aesthetic experience in digital media environments as its object of inquiry. Through theoretical conceptual analysis and critical interpretation, it discusses how such environments reorganize the perceptual, temporal, spatial, actional, and meaning-related dimensions of aesthetic experience. The paper argues that aesthetic experience in digital media environments shows a stronger dependence on interface structures, immediacy, platform-based contexts, and operational forms of participation. Contemporary aesthetic education in higher education therefore needs to consider the problem of educational transformation, and to explore how students' aesthetic experience in digital cultural environments can be transformed into higher-quality perception, understanding, interpretation, and judgment, thereby realizing the comprehensive cultivation of aesthetic competence.

Keywords: Digital culture, aesthetic experience, aesthetic education, higher education, pedagogical responses

1. Introduction

Aesthetic experience is an important foundation for aesthetic practice to unfold and acquire meaning. Contemporary aesthetic activities increasingly take place within digital media environments. Works of art, visual texts, virtual exhibitions, digital museums, and platform-based cultural content enter people's perceptual world through screens, interfaces, algorithmic recommendations, and social communication. Digital media environments have changed the ways in which subjects enter, remain with, interpret, and judge aesthetic objects, and show stronger characteristics of interface dependence, immediacy, platform-based contexts, and operational participation.

In aesthetics, aesthetic experience is often understood as an experience characterized by wholeness, perceptual quality, and the capacity for meaning formation. Dewey places artistic

experience within the continuous process of lived experience, emphasizing the organization, completion, and condensation of meaning in experience [1]. Merleau-Ponty's analysis of bodily perception further shows that viewing is a relational activity formed when the body is situated in the world [2]. In response to the fact that digital media environments have changed how aesthetic experience can take place, higher education should move beyond the application and development of digital tools or the expansion of online resources. Therefore, from an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective, this paper draws on relevant theoretical resources in aesthetics, education, and media theory, takes aesthetic experience in digital media environments as its object of inquiry, and conducts conceptual analysis by combining typical phenomena and cases in digital cultural environments. The "formation conditions" discussed in this paper refer to the structural preconditions through which aesthetic experience can be formed.

2. Theoretical background and research position

In contemporary research in education and aesthetics, aesthetic experience is usually understood as an experiential process characterized by integral organization, perceptual participation, and meaning formation. It involves the subject's perception of and affective response to aesthetic objects, and also includes understanding, judgment, and reflection. Dewey argues that aesthetic experience exists widely in everyday experience, and that there is continuity among everyday experience, aesthetic experience, and artistic experience [1]. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology understands perception as an activity in which the embodied subject is situated in the world and enters into practical relations with the environment [2]. Rancière's discussion of "the distribution of the sensible" further shows that aesthetic issues involve how the visible, the sayable, and the sensible are socially arranged [3]. In sum, what individuals are able to perceive, how they perceive, and how they interpret the perceived object are influenced by the sensible order, social relations, and media structures within specific media environments.

The rapid development of digital technology is continuously renewing media environments. New media often shape viewing experience by absorbing, reorganizing, and rewriting the modes of presentation of existing media [4]. Screen interfaces, image flows, platform mechanisms, and digital cultural spaces reorganize how subjects encounter objects, allocate attention, enter spaces, and generate meaning. Manovich regards databases, interfaces, and variability as important formal characteristics of digital culture [5]. Platformization research further points out that digital platforms intervene in cultural production and circulation through technical infrastructures, traffic distribution, commercial mechanisms, and governance rules [6]. The operational logic behind interfaces and platforms influences the visibility, order of presentation, and interpretation of meaning of aesthetic objects, and participates in the formation of subjects' aesthetic experience.

Recent studies have continued this line of inquiry. A systematic review on the transformative power of aesthetic experience points out that aesthetic experience can change individuals' ways of understanding themselves, others, society, and the world [7]. This means that aesthetic experience in digital media environments cannot be simply understood as "stimulation" or "immersion." Its educational significance lies in whether the experience promotes more detailed attention, richer associations, fuller understanding, and more conscious reflection. Therefore, the aesthetic education discussed in this paper points to a broader question: how higher education responds to the experiential changes brought about by digital media, platform culture, the digitization of heritage, and new visual environments.

3. Formation conditions of aesthetic experience in digital media environments

Aesthetic experience in digital media environments is not completely detached from traditional aesthetic experience, but the experiential basis through which it takes place has undergone significant change. Based on the preceding analysis, this paper summarizes this experience into five dimensions: perception, time, space, action, and meaning. These five dimensions are different structural aspects of the same experiential process. The perceptual condition concerns how objects are seen; the temporal condition concerns how viewing is sustained; the spatial condition concerns the situation in which experience takes place; the actional condition concerns how the subject participates; and the meaning condition concerns how experience obtains interpretation and value judgment.

3.1. Perceptual condition: from object viewing to the organization of visibility

In traditional contexts of aesthetic education, the cultivation of sensation and perception often centers on the form, color, composition, material, and style of artworks. Digital media environments add a new spatial dimension, namely how objects are presented. Screen size, image arrangement, scrolling logic, recommendation order, and spatial layout affect what viewers first see and how they continue to view. This change makes perception increasingly appear as a form of organized visibility. Images, interfaces, algorithmic ordering, and spatial layout jointly organize visibility, and viewing is situated within a certain prearranged order of visibility.

In digital media environments, platform data structures, retrieval mechanisms, and visual interfaces also participate in this distribution of visibility. For example, as a European digital cultural heritage platform, Europeana uses the Europeana Data Model to process metadata, relational structures, and retrieval issues among different institutions, thereby reorganizing the visible pathways of cultural objects. Digital objects are discovered, associated, and browsed within new systems of classification and connection. Thus, aesthetic perception in digital media environments is organized within platform-based data structures and interface relations.

3.2. Temporal condition: from continuous experience to immediate browsing

The formation of aesthetic experience requires a certain temporal unfolding. It does not rely solely on the sensory stimulation of the viewing moment, but also requires pause, feeling, hesitation, comparison, and renewed understanding before the object. Dewey's discussion of the integrity of experience shows that aesthetic experience is a process in which materials, emotions, and understanding gradually form a structure [1]. However, the logic of acceleration in modern society has changed this temporal condition. Technological acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life have jointly changed human temporal experience [8]. In digital media environments, viewers often move on to the next object before a stable understanding has been formed. The processes of prolonged gazing, repeated viewing, accepting ambiguous feelings, and waiting for meaning to gradually emerge are easily weakened. The increase of digital resources does not necessarily bring deeper aesthetic experience; the continuous presentation of too many objects may instead reinforce the logic of speed.

3.3. Spatial condition: from place-based experience to platform-based contexts

Aesthetic experience always takes place within certain spatial relations. Traditional spaces such as museums, exhibition halls, theatres, and classrooms influence the relationship between the subject and the object through viewing distance, routes of movement, modes of staying, and rules of behavior. Digital media environments move aesthetic objects from fixed places into media spaces that can be navigated, searched, copied, and redirected through links. In this sense, space becomes a structure through which the subject accesses the object, shifts perspectives, and establishes relations.

Digital collections, online cultural heritage resources, AR/VR display spaces, and classroom activities based on digital resources shift on-site viewing in traditional places to spatial situations jointly organized by technological interfaces, cultural resources, and educational activities. Zhou and Li's research points out that the use of media in space can provide students with aesthetic experiences different from those of traditional exhibitions, while this experience is closely related to scene design, modes of participation, and user experience [9]. In platform-based contexts, viewers' spatial experience shifts from bodily movement within exhibition halls to navigation between pages, movement across links, and the juxtaposition of content.

3.4. Actional condition: from contemplative experience to operational participation

In digital media environments, individuals engaged in aesthetic activities are usually not mere spectators. Subjects form new modes of participation through media operations, interaction, and secondary editing. Clicking, saving, commenting, sharing, and manipulating media facilities turn viewers into operational participants. However, participation does not naturally amount to deep experience. Platform-based interaction may also transform aesthetic experience into immediate feedback, social expression, or identity display. Thus, a distinction can be made between operational participation and interpretive participation. Only when action is incorporated into processes of reflection and interpretation can digital interaction become part of aesthetic experience. In educational digital cultural fields, the key to the actional condition lies in how learning tasks guide students from immediate viewing toward expression, comparison, interpretation, and reflection.

3.5. Meaning condition: from immediate response to reflective understanding

Meaning formation in aesthetic experience is usually not an evaluative activity completed at the very moment of viewing. Under certain conditions, art and aesthetic experience may become triggers for the transformation of experience. This process usually involves prior expectations and situational conditions, cognitive differences encountered in the aesthetic encounter, subsequent insight or epiphany, and the continuing impact after the experience on self-understanding, views of others, understanding of the world, and awareness of relationships [7]. The deeper value of aesthetic experience lies in whether it can generate cognitive tension in the subject and form new understanding through reflection, discussion, and reinterpretation.

In platform-based contexts, the formation of meaning has a more obvious social dimension. Digital platforms organize user actions through account systems, recommendation logic, tagging systems, and mechanisms of interaction [6]. After an aesthetic object enters a digital platform, it is often situated within an interpretive environment composed of tags, comments, ratings, reposts, and community discussions. The object encountered by the viewer has already been named, classified, ordered, and evaluated. Platform tags, popularity rankings, instant comments, and recommendation logic often enter the process of interpreting the object in advance. For this reason, aesthetic

education in higher education needs to guide students to establish a relatively stable relationship among perception, interpretation, and value recognition.

4. Implications for aesthetic education in higher education

From the perspective of recent international theoretical and policy backgrounds, aesthetic education has gradually gained a clearer educational status. UNESCO places culture and arts education within the framework of quality education, lifelong learning, and cultural participation, while the European key competence framework regards cultural awareness and expression as an important dimension of lifelong learning [10, 11]. These policy orientations show that aesthetic education is increasingly understood as part of subject formation. Although different countries and regions do not use exactly the same terminology, these discourses point to a basic trend: arts, culture, and aesthetic education are being incorporated into frameworks of quality education, subject formation, cultural understanding, and competence development.

The preceding analysis shows that the core task of aesthetic education in higher education should shift from the expansion of digital resources to the educational organization of aesthetic experience. It should be understood within the process through which students perceive the world, understand culture, express experience, and form judgment. This paper regards the five formation conditions as an organically connected whole. They cooperate with and influence one another; therefore, educational responses should also address them as an integrated whole.

From the perspective of changes in the perceptual condition, sensations with genuine aesthetic significance need to develop from brief contact and visual stimulation into refined perception. Nannicelli's perceptual-cognitive model understands aesthetic education as the development of perceptual and cognitive capacities, through which the subject can obtain richer aesthetic experience and improve aesthetic appreciation [12]. From the perspective of changes in the temporal condition, effective viewing is a necessary premise for aesthetic accumulation and the sedimentation of meaning. In educational contexts, it is necessary to recreate essential intervals of time for students and to support fuller experience through extended viewing, renewed recognition, and repeated interpretation.

From the perspective of changes in spatial and actional conditions, aesthetic education can expand the ways in which students enter aesthetic situations and guide their participation. Dussel's research on image culture offers an important educational reminder: schools, media, and visual regimes jointly shape how subjects see, what they see, and what they understand as meaningful [13]. Educational methods can guide teachers and students to enter the formation of experience through searching, comparison, commenting, sharing, and public discussion, and transform unconscious operational participation into active interpretive participation.

From the perspective of changes in the meaning condition, aesthetic judgment should be regarded as a core dimension of aesthetic education. In digital media environments, tagged naming, visual packaging, popularity ranking, and group evaluation often enter the process of meaning formation in advance, influencing students' understanding and judgment of aesthetic objects. Aesthetic education in higher education needs to guide students to understand the operating logic behind these external markers and form relatively conscious aesthetic judgments through perception, interpretation, comparison, and reason-giving.

5. Conclusion

From ancient times to the present, discussions of aesthetic experience have always been concerned with the ideal development of human individuality, although aesthetic experience is a highly complex concept. Especially in an era in which digital intelligence and cultural information are intertwined, what appears in many cases to be a complete aesthetic experience does not necessarily lead to a rich state of experience. Digitalization and technologization should not be simplified as teaching tools or channels of communication. This paper argues that digital media environments have indeed changed the perceptual, temporal, spatial, actional, and meaning conditions required for the formation of aesthetic experience. The key issue lies in how education grasps and uses these conditions, so as to provide new opportunities for the development of contemporary aesthetic education.

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