

Research on Approaches to Enhancing College Students' Aesthetic Sensibility in the New Era

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Abstract: Aesthetic competence constitutes a vital component of the core competencies among contemporary college students, profoundly influencing their personality development, innovative growth, and spiritual elevation. Grounded in the requirements for aesthetic education in modern higher education institutions and informed by current research findings and empirical observations regarding students' aesthetic development, this study identifies prominent issues including fragmented aesthetic cognition, utilitarian approaches to aesthetic judgment, and insufficient creative capacity in aesthetic appreciation. By examining four dimensions—the socio-cultural environment, university aesthetic education frameworks, family educational guidance, and students' personal cognitive development—the paper analyzes the root causes of these challenges. It subsequently proposes targeted solutions across four dimensions: refining university aesthetic curriculum systems, expanding campus-based aesthetic practices, enhancing the social aesthetic environment, and fostering self-directed aesthetic cultivation, thereby providing theoretical insights and practical recommendations for advancing aesthetic education and improving students' aesthetic literacy in the new era.

Key words: college students; aesthetic ability; aesthetic education; core competencies

1. Introduction

The Ministry of Education has explicitly mandated the comprehensive integration of aesthetic education across all levels and types of schools, spanning every stage of learning, with the goal of cultivating well-rounded successors and builders for socialist construction who excel in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor development. Contemporary college students are exposed to vast amounts of aesthetic information daily, which while broadening their aesthetic horizons, also reveals certain issues. Some students become overly engrossed in the sensory pleasures offered by popular culture, neglecting the exploration of deeper aesthetic values. In some cases, this even leads to distorted aesthetic perceptions, such as the tendency to regard ugliness as beauty. Such phenomena not only negatively impact individuals' spiritual well-being but also hinder universities' mission of nurturing high-quality talent. This paper analyzes the current state of students' aesthetic capabilities, identifies root causes, and explores improvement strategies. Grounded in the cultural characteristics of the new era, it constructs an analytical framework encompassing four dimensions—social, institutional, familial, and individual—to examine the logic and pathways for enhancing college students' aesthetic competence, aiming to advance research in this field and provide insights for the practice and development of aesthetic education in higher education institutions.

2. Current Status of Aesthetic Competence Among Contemporary College Students

2.1 College students possess a relatively acute aesthetic perception, but exhibit fragmented aesthetic cognition

Most college students lack a systematic framework of aesthetic knowledge. Their understanding of aesthetics typically stems from fragmented online information, lacking structured learning and resulting in limited familiarity with fundamental theories of aesthetics or art history, making it difficult for them to comprehensively grasp the developmental trajectory and key significance of aesthetic culture. For instance, while they may recognize Van Gogh's paintings, they often have little knowledge of the historical context and core tenets of Impressionism, and struggle to distinguish between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Moreover, their aesthetic experience remains confined to superficial sensory pleasures. When encountering aesthetic objects, many students tend to focus primarily on direct visual and auditory stimuli rather than actively exploring their deeper emotional and cultural dimensions.

2.2 Aesthetic choices have become more diverse, yet aesthetic judgments have become increasingly utilitarian

Influenced by consumerist culture, many college students regard price or brand as the primary criterion for evaluating beauty, believing that the more expensive a product is and the more renowned its brand, the more aesthetically pleasing it becomes. Some students are overly enthusiastic about pursuing luxury goods, equating the level of material consumption directly with personal aesthetic taste, thereby falling into the misconception that "the higher the price, the more beautiful the product." In the realm of artistic appreciation, there is a greater emphasis on a work's market value while often neglecting its cultural depth and artistic significance—a phenomenon that deviates from the non-utilitarian principle inherent in aesthetics.

Secondly, aesthetic engagement is driven by clear practical objectives. Many university students participate in aesthetic activities not out of genuine appreciation for beauty or fulfillment of spiritual needs, but rather motivated by strong utilitarian motives. For instance, involvement in artistic events primarily serves to secure bonus points in comprehensive evaluations, while visiting popular tourist sites and art museums aims to gain attention and likes on social media platforms, rather than purely seeking the spiritual pleasure derived from aesthetics.

2.3 The vulgarization of aesthetic appreciation

In recent years, the internet has witnessed a surge of content focused on ugliness and the bizarre. Many college students, driven by curiosity, actively pursue such topics, even viewing vulgarity and eccentricity as forms of personal expression or considering inappropriate behaviors as creative manifestations. This trend has gradually blurred the boundaries between beauty and ugliness. Students excessively embrace taste elements with vulgar tendencies within traffic-driven culture. Under a mindset dominated by viral appeal, many online platforms deliberately degrade artistic quality to cater to lower-level sensory preferences. Prolonged exposure to such content has fostered superficial appreciation among some students, eroding their enthusiasm for refined traditional art and leading them to perceive classic works as outdated and unattractive—considering only content that directly stimulates senses as interesting. This vulgarized aesthetic not only diminishes students' intellectual depth but also negatively impacts the development of well-rounded personalities.

3. Analysis of the Causes of Issues in Contemporary College Students' Aesthetic Competence

3.1 Conflicts among multicultural conflicts and the evolution of aesthetic ecology

3.1.1 The rise of consumerism has gradually eroded the core significance of aesthetics. Under its influence, aesthetic culture has been increasingly commercialized and utilitarian, with beauty being reduced to a tool for marketing. Various

advertisements promote the notion that “beauty is demonstrated through consumption” among college students, closely linking beauty with material consumption and encouraging them to use purchasing behaviors as proof of their aesthetic taste. This phenomenon has directly led to a shift in college students’ aesthetic judgment toward a utilitarian orientation. In pursuit of revenue from user traffic, capital continues to produce entertainment-oriented products catering to basic sensory desires, resulting in a decline in overall aesthetic standards and negatively impacting college students’ aesthetic interests.

3.1.2 The fragmented dissemination of information online undermines the holistic aesthetic understanding and cognitive framework. In the internet era, information dissemination is characterized by fragmentation and brevity, with short videos and concise texts gradually becoming dominant forms of expression. This approach reduces rich aesthetic culture to isolated symbols, severing them from their original cultural context and spiritual significance. When exposed to such fragmented aesthetic content over extended periods, college students often struggle to develop a systematic and comprehensive aesthetic perception, remaining limited to superficial recognition of symbols rather than comprehending the profound meanings underlying aesthetic objects.

3.1.3 Driven by the logic of online traffic, “ugliness” often proves more eye-catching; many online content creators deliberately showcase their physical imperfections or promote vulgar ideas to attract attention. The proliferation of an ugliness-oriented culture in cyberspace has a particularly significant impact on college students, who are at a critical stage of value formation and possess relatively weak discernment abilities. Motivated by curiosity, they are easily influenced, gradually blurring the boundaries between beauty and ugliness, potentially developing distorted aesthetic views or even adopting an attitude of “treating ugliness as beauty,” thereby leading to severe distortion of aesthetic values.

3.2 The Aesthetic Education System in Higher Education Institutions: Lack of Clear Objectives and Weak Framework Development

3.2.1 The significance of aesthetic education is often underestimated and fails to receive adequate attention. China’s higher education system has long emphasized intellectual education while neglecting aesthetic education; many universities treat it as a non-core subject or elective course, considering its limited impact on graduation outcomes and employment prospects, resulting in relatively low investment in this area. Some institutions offer only basic public elective courses in aesthetic education to meet the assessment requirements set by the Ministry of Education, yet fail to integrate aesthetic education throughout the entire educational process or establish a systematic framework for its cultivation.

3.2.2 The content of aesthetic education courses lacks close integration with practical applications, and teaching methods remain relatively monotonous. Currently, most aesthetic education courses offered in universities rely primarily on theoretical instruction, focusing on abstract topics such as the fundamentals of aesthetics and the history of art development—emphasizing academic discourse while having limited connection to college students’ daily lives, thereby failing to effectively stimulate their learning enthusiasm.

3.2.3 Aesthetic education remains disconnected from other forms of education, lacking an effective collaborative educational framework. The development of aesthetic competence should permeate the entire educational process, integrating with moral, intellectual, physical, and labor education, while also being advanced through initiatives such as campus culture development and social practice. However, current professional education programs inadequately explore the aesthetic elements inherent in specific disciplines, preventing students from appreciating the beauty within their fields and hindering their ability to enhance aesthetic literacy through specialized learning.

3.3 There are conceptual biases in family education

In the context of exam-oriented education, many families place excessive emphasis on children’s academic performance as the primary measure of success. This cognitive bias often leads to the neglect of aesthetic education. Many parents limit their children’s exposure to art solely to meeting academic requirements or acquiring a skill, rather than genuinely fostering their aesthetic literacy. Such an approach may instead foster children’s aversion to art. Furthermore, the

aesthetic atmosphere within households remains inadequate. The development of aesthetic sensibilities requires nurturing within the family environment, where parents' aesthetic standards subtly influence their children. Yet currently, many parents themselves lack a genuine appreciation for beauty, dedicating most leisure time to entertainment activities while rarely engaging in aesthetic-related pursuits, and failing to create a home environment with artistic refinement. This situation clearly hinders the cultivation of children's aesthetic habits.

3.4 Individual Level: Insufficient recognition of the importance of aesthetic ability

Many college students perceive aesthetic cultivation as irrelevant to their personal development, lacking intrinsic motivation to enhance their aesthetic literacy. They devote most of their time to studying or job hunting and rarely actively engage in related activities, resulting in stagnant aesthetic development over time. During leisure hours, they tend to passively consume online recommended aesthetic content rather than proactively exploring classical art, immersing themselves in nature, or participating in aesthetic creation. Moreover, passive exposure to fragmented information not only fails to foster profound aesthetic experiences but may also expose individuals to inappropriate content. Even when participating in aesthetic-related activities, their primary goal is often social engagement through check-ins, preventing them from truly appreciating the beauty of art and thus hindering effective improvement of their aesthetic competence. Even when influenced by vulgar aesthetic trends, they remain unaware of the issues and reluctant to make adjustments, further impeding the enhancement of their aesthetic standards.

4. Recommendations for Enhancing the Aesthetic Sensibility of Contemporary College Students

4.1 Improve the aesthetic education system in higher education institutions and strengthen their role as the primary platform for such education

4.1.1 Clarify the direction of aesthetic education and strengthen planning and financial support for related resources. Universities should comply with national requirements for aesthetic education and increase resource allocation. They should build a high-quality team of aesthetic education teachers by combining the recruitment of professionals with enhanced training for existing faculty to improve educational quality and teaching capabilities; additionally, they should increase investment in aesthetic education venues and facilities to create diverse practical spaces that provide necessary hardware support for student activities. Furthermore, aesthetic education should be incorporated into the university's performance evaluation system to encourage all departments to prioritize it and foster a collaborative approach to its advancement.

4.1.2 Improve the structure of aesthetic education courses and expand the depth of teaching content. First, general aesthetic education courses—including Introduction to Aesthetics and Art Appreciation—should be offered to all students to comprehensively impart core knowledge and help establish a systematic framework for aesthetic cognition, thereby addressing the issue of fragmented knowledge. Simultaneously, diverse skill-based courses should be designed according to students' varying interests to meet individual learning needs and enhance their aesthetic and innovative abilities. Course content requires further adjustment to better align with students' actual needs, encompassing not only education in classical and refined art but also keeping abreast of developments in modern aesthetic culture; this will guide students in distinguishing between online trends and prevailing aesthetic preferences, ensuring that teaching content remains relevant and substantive rather than superficial.

4.1.3 Promote the deep integration of aesthetic education with teaching practices and establish a collaborative training mechanism. It is essential to eliminate the separation between aesthetic education and other educational components, integrating the cultivation of aesthetic competence throughout the entire talent development process. For instance, in science and engineering disciplines, we should explore the aesthetic dimensions inherent in science, technology, and engineering to enable students to appreciate the appeal of scientific research. By leveraging multidisciplinary resources, we can delve into the unique charm of humanities and culture. In applied fields such as design and architecture, aesthetic literacy should be incorporated into the entire professional training curriculum to enhance students' creative

abilities in aesthetics. Additionally, aesthetic education resources within campus culture must be effectively integrated for systematic application. Schools should develop art education programs that combine classroom instruction with practical experience.

4.2 Enhance aesthetic perception and creative ability

Universities should regularly organize diverse aesthetic activities, actively encourage broad student participation, support the establishment of relevant arts and cultural groups, and provide necessary resources for their operations. Simultaneously, they should integrate aesthetic principles into campus environment development to foster an artistic atmosphere that inspires students through daily experiences, thereby gradually enhancing their perception and appreciation of beauty. Institutions should establish facilities such as art creation centers and design studios, providing students with dedicated spaces and equipment, while organizing regular creative competitions to motivate original design projects. Outstanding works should be showcased on dedicated platforms to increase public recognition. Additionally, universities should promote the integration of aesthetic creation into social practice, guiding students to address societal needs through innovative designs.

4.3 Enhance the societal aesthetic atmosphere and foster a high-quality aesthetic ecosystem

Higher education institutions should emphasize leveraging the guiding role of mainstream aesthetic culture, disseminate correct aesthetic values, thoroughly explore and promote the aesthetic essence of traditional Chinese culture, and utilize various channels to promote traditional aesthetic concepts, thereby fostering higher-level aesthetic literacy among college students. It is essential to purify the online aesthetic environment and curb the proliferation of vulgar and ugly cultural content; online platforms must fulfill their primary responsibilities by strengthening content moderation and combating vulgar material; cultural regulatory authorities should enhance oversight, refine legislation, suppress the spread of vulgar culture, and ultimately purify the online aesthetic ecosystem.

4.4 Strengthen collaboration between families and individuals to foster personal aesthetic habits

First, college students should integrate the enhancement of their aesthetic ability into their personal development plans and abandon the misconception that “aesthetic ability is unimportant.” Second, they should actively engage in aesthetic education practices and consistently cultivate their own aesthetic sensibility. Students should transcend the limitations of fragmented online content, proactively appreciate classic works of art, and increase exposure to nature and society to experience and discover beauty in daily life. They are encouraged to participate actively in the process of creating beauty, acquire relevant skills, and persist in creative endeavors. Additionally, they should regularly reflect on their aesthetic perspectives, avoid the influence of vulgar culture, and continuously refine their personal aesthetic taste to develop a healthy and proper aesthetic outlook.

5. Conclusion

Enhancing college students’ aesthetic literacy is a crucial measure for achieving the fundamental goal of fostering virtue through education and promoting their holistic development. To cultivate this ability, universities must fully leverage their primary role in establishing a robust aesthetic education system, expand channels for aesthetic practice, and foster a favorable aesthetic ecosystem alongside supportive external conditions. Only by developing a collaborative training mechanism involving multiple stakeholders can we effectively improve students’ aesthetic competence, nurture well-rounded youth who excel morally, intellectually, physically, aesthetically, and through labor, thereby providing essential talent support for building a socialist cultural powerhouse and realizing national rejuvenation.

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