



THE EFFECT OF PUBLIC OIL PAINTING EXHIBITIONS ON CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SHANDONG PROVINCE

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were: (1) to assess the effect of the perceived aesthetic, innovative, and cultural values of public oil painting exhibitions on audiences' cultural identity in Shandong Province; and (2) to investigate how public oil painting exhibitions influence cultural identity in Shandong Province. A mixed-methods approach was used: quantitative data from 423 visitor surveys were statistically analyzed, and qualitative insights from nine expert interviews were thematically analyzed to identify key mechanisms and improvement strategies. **Results showed that** all three values positively influenced cultural identity, with cultural value the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.508, p < .001$), followed by innovative ($\beta = 0.302, p < .001$) and aesthetic values ($\beta = 0.131, p = .004$). Five mechanisms were identified: symbolic representation, interpretive engagement, participatory interaction, emotional resonance, and contextual framing. Experts recommended enhancing curatorial narratives, fostering engagement, and leveraging digital innovation to strengthen cultural identity through exhibitions.

Keywords: Cultural identity; Public oil painting exhibitions; Perceived values

Introduction

China is an ancient, unified, multi-ethnic nation shaped over centuries through ethnic interactions, fostering a stable and diverse social structure rooted in cultural pluralism and integration (Fang, 2023). The philosophy of “harmony without uniformity” embraces diversity, ensuring cultural continuity and innovation. Indigenous culture preserves historical memory and spiritual beliefs, underpinning national identity and unity, while fostering resilience and self-reliance. Shared historical experiences, particularly resistance against foreign invasions, have strengthened national cohesion and shaped a conscious national community (Yang & Rui, 2024).

Cultural identity, the sense of belonging to one’s culture, is vital for social development (Hall, 1990). In China, it links ethnic groups through traditional, revolutionary, and socialist cultures, forming a unique national spirit (Li & Li, 2022). Cultural identity reinforces cohesion, transcends regions, and connects personal and national destinies. It reflects awareness of the national community, demonstrates societal harmony, and serves as a unifying force for shared values (Wang & Liu, 2024). Historical struggles have embedded cultural confidence, supporting national unity and cultural rejuvenation.

Moreover, cultural identity enhances individual well-being. Wexler (2009) found that Indigenous adolescents’ resilience and mental health depend on strong cultural identity, which helps process collective trauma. Similarly, Wang and Giovanis (2024) showed that immigrants’ cultural identity aids adaptation, with flexible integration boosting confidence, creativity, and belonging. Thus, cultural identity bridges past and present while improving social adaptability.

Oil painting, created by mixing pigments with drying oils on canvas or wood, allows rich textures and luminous tones (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). In Shandong, oil painting evolved with local customs and social conditions. From the 1980s, artists emphasized human nature and local culture, gaining national recognition through exhibitions like the “Shandong Local Customs Art

Exhibition.” In the 1990s and 2000s, artists integrated Western forms and contemporary ideas, depicting rural life, landscapes, folk art, and regional traits.



Figure 1: Oil Painting - Sunshine, Beach, and Kelp

Source: Yang Songlin, 2012.

Shandong painters blend Eastern aesthetics with modern flair, maintaining solid craftsmanship and respect for tradition, influenced by Confucianism and geographic position at the Yangtze-Yellow River confluence (Meng, 2020). Compared to other regions, Shandong works are conservative yet rich in heritage. Cultural identity is vital for national unity and cohesion. However, in Shandong, public oil painting exhibitions are underutilized for promoting identity, often failing to emphasize regional uniqueness or engage audiences. This study seeks to address these gaps.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the effect of the perceived aesthetic, innovative, and cultural values of the public oil painting exhibitions on audiences' cultural identity in Shandong Province.
2. To investigate how public oil painting exhibitions influence cultural identity in Shandong Province.

Literature Reviews

Public oil painting exhibitions promote cultural identity and community cohesion by connecting art with heritage in accessible spaces, engaging broader audiences beyond traditional museums. First, oil painting preserves and conveys cultural narratives, educating audiences about local history and symbols. In Shandong, exhibitions can celebrate regional culture through visual storytelling. Second, placing art in everyday spaces encourages spontaneous engagement, breaking access barriers and fostering appreciation among diverse groups. Third, curated themes highlight shared values and history, strengthening cultural identity and collective belonging. Fourth, public exhibitions create dialogue platforms, allowing audiences to interpret and discuss artworks, deepening understanding and enriching the cultural landscape through multiple perspectives. Public oil painting exhibitions serve as a vital medium for cultural expression, artistic innovation, and aesthetic appreciation. They can act as a bridge between the audience and the cultural, historical, and societal narratives embedded within the artworks. The perceived values of such exhibitions, such as perceived aesthetic value, perceived innovative value, and perceived cultural value, play a crucial role in shaping the audience's cultural identity.



Figure 2: Shandong oil paintings exhibition

Source: Li Quan, 2024.

Perceived aesthetic, innovative, and cultural values shape audience experience and cultural identity in public oil painting exhibitions. Aesthetic value reflects viewers' evaluation of visual and artistic qualities, including design, color, composition, and texture, which evoke emotional and intellectual responses (Toufani et al., 2017; Berlyne, 1971). Effective curatorial decisions balance familiarity and novelty, enhancing engagement. Innovative value captures recognition of novel elements, such as experimental techniques, unconventional materials, or contemporary themes that challenge tradition (Tidd et al., 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Innovation sustains interest and encourages critical thinking, distinguishing exhibitions from conventional displays. Cultural value denotes the capacity of artworks to convey identities, histories, and societal values, offering insights into specific communities and periods (Holt, 2004). Curatorial narratives contextualize paintings, enriching understanding and appreciation.

These three values are interrelated: aesthetic appeal, innovation, and cultural significance collectively create holistic experiences, reinforcing cultural belonging and identity (Bourdieu, 1984). Exhibitions that integrate visual beauty, creative novelty, and culturally meaningful themes can profoundly resonate with audiences, engaging their sensibilities, curiosity, and cultural consciousness.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitatively, it examined how perceived aesthetic, innovative, and cultural values of public oil painting exhibitions influence audiences' cultural identity in Shandong Province. Surveys were conducted with 423 exhibition visitors using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), including the Perceived Aesthetic Value Scale (Meini, 2018), Perceived Innovative Value Scale (Tu et al., 2019; Shujin & Juan, 2021), Perceived Cultural Value Scale (Meini, 2018), and Cultural Identity Scale (Huang & Bi, 2021). Data were analyzed with the SPSS program. Qualitatively, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine art committee members, organizers, and artists to explore exhibitions' effects on cultural identity, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results

Analysis of the Effect of the Perceived Aesthetic, Innovative, and Cultural Values of the Public oil Painting Exhibitions on Audiences' Cultural Identity in Shandong Province

Demographic Characteristics of Participants: This study included 423 participants in the survey. The gender distribution indicates a predominance of female respondents, with 66.4% ($n = 281$) female and 33.6% ($n = 142$) male participants. This gender imbalance may reflect the demographic composition of the exhibition audiences or the willingness to participate in the survey. Age distribution analysis reveals a relatively young sample, with the majority of participants aged between 19 and 23 years, accounting for 59.2% of the total sample ($n = 250$). Specifically, the age groups of 20 years (21.7%), 22 years (17.3%), and 21 years (14.4%) represent the highest proportions. The sample also includes a small proportion of younger (11 to 18 years) and older participants (above 30 years), but these are marginal and constitute less than 5% individually, indicating a concentration of younger adults among respondents.

Correlation Analysis between Variables: Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships among Aesthetic Value (AV), Innovative Value (IV), Cultural Value (CV), and Cultural Identity (CI). As shown in Table 1, AV demonstrated strong positive correlations with IV ($r = .874$,

$p < .001$), CV ($r = .794$, $p < .001$), and CI ($r = .798$, $p < .001$). Similarly, IV was highly correlated with CV ($r = .860$, $p < .001$) and CI ($r = .853$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, CV and CI exhibited the strongest correlation ($r = .871$, $p < .001$) among all pairs.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis between Variables

		AV	IV	CV	CI	M	SD
AV	Pearson Correlation	--				4.05	.78
	N	423					
IV	Pearson Correlation	.874**	--			4.11	0.73
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
	N	423	423				
CV	Pearson Correlation	.794**	.860**	--		4.20	.73
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000				
	N	423	423	423			
CI	Pearson Correlation	.798**	.853**	.871**	--	4.25	0.68
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000			
	N	423	423	423	423		
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).							

Regression Analysis: The effect of Aesthetic Value (AV), Innovative Value (IV), and Cultural Value (CV) on Cultural Identity (CI): A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive effects of

Aesthetic Value (AV), Innovative Value (IV), and Cultural Value (CV) on Cultural Identity (CI) among participants in public oil painting exhibitions in Shandong Province. As shown in Table 2, all three predictors were significant contributors to the model. Cultural Value (CV) had the strongest standardized effect on Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.508$, $t = 11.820$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher perceptions of cultural value are strongly associated with stronger cultural identity. Innovative Value (IV) also significantly predicted CI ($\beta = 0.302$, $t = 5.616$, $p < .001$), followed by Aesthetic Value (AV), which had a smaller but still significant effect ($\beta = 0.131$, $t = 2.887$, $p = .004$).

Table 2: Regression Analysis between Variables

Result Variable	Predictive Variables	R	R ²	F	β	t	Sig. (p)
CI	AV	.897	.804	572.987	.131	2.887	.004
	IV				.302	5.616	.000
	CV				.508	11.820	.000

Results of How Public oil Painting Exhibitions Influence Cultural Identity in Shandong Province

This section presents the findings from a qualitative analysis of expert interviews conducted to explore the impact of public oil painting exhibitions in Shandong Province on cultural identity. The analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun et al., 2019), identifying three key themes: (1) mechanisms influencing cultural identity formation, and (2) strategic approaches to enhancing cultural identity through exhibition practices.

Mechanisms Influencing Cultural Identity Formation through Exhibitions: Five key mechanisms were identified through which public oil painting exhibitions shape cultural identity:

Symbolic Representation: The use of local cultural symbols, such as Confucius, Lu embroidery, and rural architecture, articulates a regional narrative that strengthens cultural pride. An artist (Interviewee 7) emphasized that oil paintings serve as carriers of memory, values, and the “Shandong spirit.”

Interpretive Engagement: Guided interpretation is critical for transforming visual experiences into cultural understanding. Interviewee 2 noted that inadequate exhibition texts or curatorial narratives often result in superficial engagement, limiting audiences' ability to grasp deeper cultural connotations.

Participatory Interaction: Workshops, artist dialogues, and co-curation projects enable active audience engagement. A community organizer (Interviewee 9) observed that activities like mural creation or thematic painting workshops help local students reframe their cultural identity.

Emotional Resonance: Paintings depicting everyday life, social changes, and collective struggles (e.g., rural revitalization) evoke empathy and shared memory. Interviewee 5 reported that rural visitors were deeply moved by artworks portraying village scenes or forgotten crafts, fostering a sense of connection to their roots.

Contextual Framing: The exhibition's spatial and technological context shapes meaning construction. Online exhibitions, mobile displays in rural areas, and social media integration (e.g., Douyin/TikTok) enhance accessibility, though Interviewee 6 cautioned that short-form digital content risks reducing cultural depth if not carefully curated.

Strategies for Strengthening Cultural Identity through Exhibitions: Experts proposed several strategies to enhance the impact of public oil painting exhibitions on cultural identity:

Deepen Cultural Translation and Narrative Innovation: Curators should move beyond repetitive symbolic imagery, using metaphorical and contemporary reinterpretations of traditional themes, such as abstract expressions of Confucian ideals like harmony.

Enhance Curatorial Communication and Accessibility: Implementing multi-level interpretation systems (e.g., QR-code-based audio guides, artist annotations, local dialect explanations) and embedding mini-exhibitions (e.g., "Maritime Culture of Jiaodong") can improve engagement and narrative coherence.

Promote Community-Based Participation and Education: Initiatives like "community curators," school collaborations, and participatory workshops can transform exhibitions into platforms for co-creation, fostering bottom-up reimagination of regional identity.

Leverage Digital Tools for Immersive Experiences: VR simulations, color-



emotion interactive displays, and AI-generated storylines can enhance engagement, provided they are curated to balance novelty with cultural depth.

Implement Feedback and Evaluation Systems: Regular audience feedback mechanisms, such as digital comment boards and demographic data analysis, can ensure exhibitions remain relevant and inclusive.

Discussions

The findings highlight the significant influence of aesthetic value, innovative value, and cultural value on cultural identity among audiences attending public oil painting exhibitions in Shandong Province. The strong correlations among aesthetic value, innovative value, and cultural value indicate that these factors are interlinked, collectively contributing to a holistic experience that enhances cultural identity. Cultural value emerged as the strongest predictor of Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.508, p < .001$), underscoring its pivotal role in shaping how audiences connect with their cultural heritage through oil painting exhibitions. This finding resonates with the notion that art, particularly when embedded with cultural symbols and narratives, serves as a powerful medium for reinforcing cultural identity. In the context of Shandong Province, a region with a deep historical and cultural legacy rooted in Confucian traditions and folk arts, oil paintings that incorporate traditional Chinese elements—such as landscape motifs or historical allusions—likely evoke a sense of cultural continuity and pride. This aligns with research by Li et al. (2023), who argue that cultural heritage in visual arts strengthens community identity by connecting individuals to shared historical narratives. Innovative value also significantly predicted Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.302, p < .001$), suggesting that exhibitions featuring novel artistic approaches resonate strongly with audiences. The integration of contemporary techniques with traditional Chinese aesthetics, as seen in modern Chinese oil painting, may appeal to younger audiences. Huang and Jia (2022) note that the “national trend” in visual communication design, which combines traditional elements like ink wash with modern aesthetics, fosters a renewed sense of cultural identity among younger generations. Aesthetic value had a smaller but still significant effect on Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.131, p = .004$). This suggests that while the visual appeal of oil paintings is important, its impact on cultural identity is less pronounced compared to cultural and innovative values. This finding is



consistent with the shift in Chinese art studies from purely aesthetic considerations to cultural and social connotations, as highlighted by Ao et al. (2024). They argue that contemporary Chinese art increasingly serves as a vehicle for cultural reflection rather than mere aesthetic appreciation, particularly in public exhibitions that aim to engage diverse audiences.

The five mechanisms—symbolic representation, interpretive engagement, participatory interaction, emotional resonance, and contextual framing—provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how exhibitions influence cultural identity. Symbolic representation aligns with theories of cultural identity that emphasize shared symbols as identity anchors (Smith, 2020). Interpretive engagement and participatory interaction highlight the importance of active audience involvement, supporting Bennett’s (2013) argument that public art engagement fosters civic identity through dialogue and co-creation. Emotional resonance, particularly among rural audiences, underscores the role of art in evoking collective memory, a finding consistent with Liu’s (2021) study on cultural consumption in China. Contextual framing, especially through digital platforms, reflects the growing role of technology in cultural identity formation, though it requires careful curation to avoid dilution of meaning (Huang, 2022).

The proposed strategies offer practical pathways for enhancing the cultural impact of exhibitions. Deepening narrative innovation and leveraging digital tools align with contemporary trends in Chinese art exhibitions, as noted by Zheng (2022). Community-based participation and feedback systems can democratize cultural engagement, fostering inclusive identity formation (Bennett, 2013). These strategies are particularly relevant in Shandong. This study suggests a need for targeted, participatory, and accessible curatorial approaches.

Conclusions

This study explored the role of public oil painting exhibitions in shaping cultural identity in Shandong Province through a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative results demonstrated that perceived cultural value, innovative value, and aesthetic value of exhibitions significantly influence audiences’ cultural identity, with cultural value exerting the strongest effect. Qualitative findings further deepened these insights by identifying key mechanisms through which

public oil painting exhibitions foster cultural identity. These include symbolic representation, interpretive engagement, participatory interaction, emotional resonance, and contextual framing. Importantly, exhibitions that integrate regional symbols, promote audience participation, and use digital innovation in a meaningful way were found to enhance emotional and cognitive connections to local culture. Experts emphasized the need to move beyond superficial presentation by strengthening curatorial narratives, encouraging community co-creation, and leveraging immersive technologies.

New Knowledges

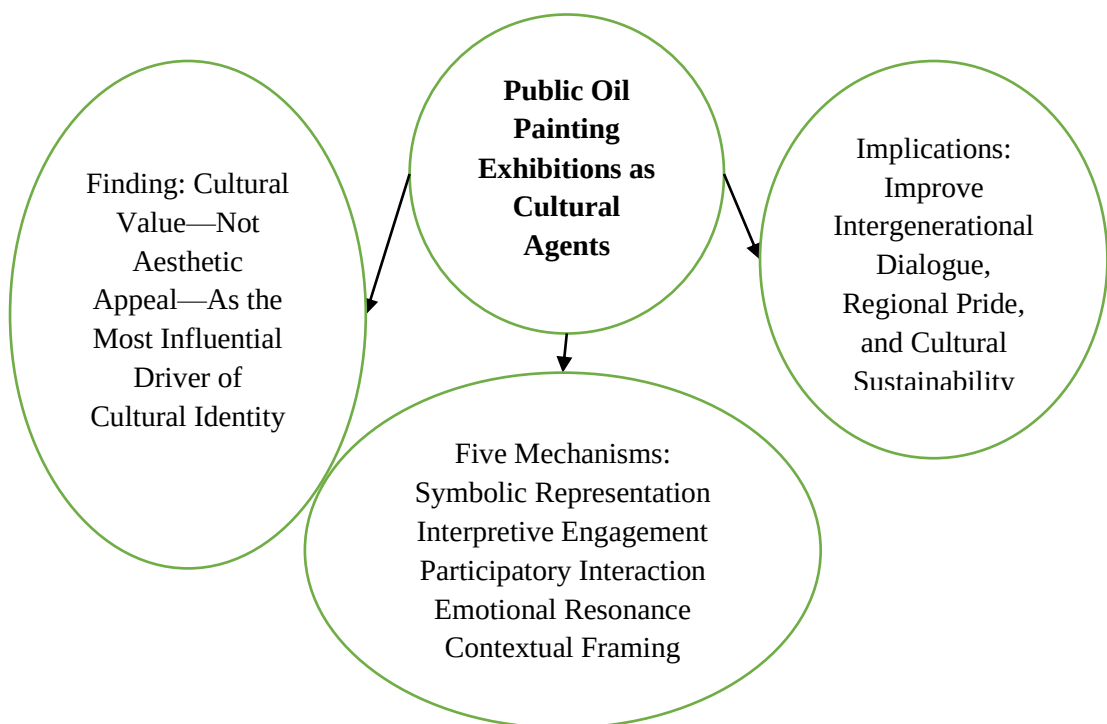


Figure 3: public oil painting exhibitions on audiences' cultural identity in Shandong Province.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Future studies could extend this work in several ways.

First, while the present research focused on public oil painting exhibitions in Shandong Province, comparative studies across different regions in China—or between China and other countries—could reveal how regional cultural contexts shape the relationship between exhibition value and cultural identity.

Second, longitudinal designs would allow researchers to examine whether the impacts of cultural, innovative, and aesthetic values on cultural identity persist over time, particularly after repeated exhibition visits.

Third, incorporating additional variables, such as audience motivation, prior art exposure, or digital engagement patterns, could deepen understanding of the mechanisms identified in this study.

Fourth, future qualitative research might explore underrepresented audience groups, such as rural youth or migrant workers, to assess inclusivity and accessibility in public art exhibitions.

Finally, experimental or quasi-experimental approaches could be used to test the effectiveness of specific curatorial strategies—such as immersive digital storytelling or community co-creation—in enhancing cultural identity. Such research would not only strengthen theoretical models of cultural identity formation through art but also provide practical insights for exhibition design in diverse sociocultural settings.

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