

Effect of Dance Pedagogy on Social Aesthetic Perception in Adult Learners: A Pilot Study on the Validation of the Social Aesthetic Perception Scale

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Abstract

This pilot study investigates the impact of dance pedagogy on adults' social aesthetic perception. A pilot Social Aesthetic Perception Scale (SAPS) was developed to assess emotional resonance, social connectedness, bodily awareness, and cognitive flexibility in adult learners (ALs). Using purposive sampling (N = 30), participants engaged in structured dance sessions over 60 days. Quantitative results from the 15-item SAPS showed moderate increases, particularly in emotional attunement and social connectedness (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.766$), demonstrating acceptable reliability for this pilot study. Qualitative data were collected from a subsample of three participants through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and thematic analysis. Participants reported greater empathy, trust, and appreciation of collective movement, alongside enhanced cognitive flexibility, including improved tolerance for ambiguity, openness to novelty, and adaptive decision-making. These findings support the SAPS as a valid tool and suggest that dance pedagogy fosters social-aesthetic perception, interpersonal adaptation, and overall social-emotional development in ALs. Importantly, dance classrooms function as dialogical spaces, where aesthetic and relational meaning is co-created through verbal reflection and embodied interaction.

Keywords: adult learners, cognitive flexibility, dance pedagogy, social aesthetic, scale

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Introduction

Dance pedagogy, as a learner-centered approach, offers unique opportunities for adults to engage with social aesthetics—how individuals perceive and interpret aesthetic experiences within social contexts (Berleant, 2023). Within the dance classroom, social aesthetics can manifest in the mutual awareness of movement, coordinated rhythm, and emotional resonance with partners or groups. These experiences are not limited to visual or artistic appreciation but encompass how people relate to others emotionally, empathetically, and physically in communal settings. By engaging in these processes, ALs not only develop artistic and relational skills but also participate in experiences that support broader goals of adult education, including lifelong learning, social integration, and enhanced wellbeing.

Building on frameworks of dance pedagogy (Mainwaring & Krasnow, 2010; Sheets-Johnstone, 2024), social aesthetics (Berleant, 2023; Cross, 2024; Martin & Merriman, 2015; McMahon, 2018; Nielsen, 2001), and adult education (Boateng et al., 2022; Knowles et al., 2015), this pilot study investigates the impact of dance pedagogy on adults' social aesthetic perception. It explores dance as an art form that deepens participants' aesthetic awareness as they adapt to new challenges and social environments, both within dance settings and in everyday life. Thus, this study views the dance classroom as a dialogical space where aesthetic and relational meaning are co-created through verbal and embodied interaction. Against this background, the pilot study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does participation in dance pedagogy influence self-perceived cognitive flexibility among ALs with no prior dance training?
2. How does engagement in structured dance pedagogy ALs' broader social-aesthetic perception?
3. To what extent is SAPS a valid and reliable instrument for measuring changes in social aesthetic perception among ALs?

Theoretical Framework

Social Aesthetics and Dance Pedagogy

Social aesthetics refers to the perception and experience of art as shaped by social interactions and the dynamics of group participation (Born et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Dewey (1934) emphasized that art is intrinsic to human development, with aesthetic experience emerging from continuous interaction with the environment. In dance classes, this is evident in group dynamics, where participants' synchronized movements and shared experiences cultivate both art appreciation and social engagement. The harmony of a well-synchronized routine or the fluidity of partner work encourages learners to perceive beauty in everyday human interactions, such as teamwork or natural rhythms. Heidegger (1962) similarly suggests that beauty is relational rather than standardized, grounded in authenticity and vulnerability. This understanding promotes cultural humility and respect for diversity. It also encourages an optimistic worldview in which challenges are approached as opportunities for growth.

Building on these philosophical perspectives, empirical findings demonstrate how social aesthetics operates in practice. Thus, within dance pedagogy, social aesthetics is enacted through communication, partnership, and shared aesthetic experiences that strengthen social bonds. Research shows that successful group collaboration and learning depend on cohesion. For example, Giguere (2021) and Sorokowski et al. (2024) found that joint dancing fosters pro-

sociality. Their studies suggest that cognitive activity is influenced by both embodiment and the social environment, while group cohesion supports cooperation. In this context, social and cognitive abilities are enhanced, and dialogue—both verbal and embodied—emerges as a key component of learning and co-creation. One way these dynamics are reinforced in practice is through ritualized activities that build trust and cohesion.

Rituals and Group Cohesion

Rituals in dance pedagogy are structured activities, such as warm-up routines, closing exercises, symbolic gestures, partner-switching protocols, and shared celebrations, that help establish trust, cohesion, and cultural norms (Turner, 1969). Additional practices, including punctuality, greetings, expressions of appreciation, and eye contact, further structure the learning environment and promote adaptability. Turner (1969) emphasized *communitas*—social equality and solidarity fostered through rituals—while Vygotsky (1978) highlighted that learning is socially contextualized through interaction with peers and instructors. Dewey (1934) and Jackson (1998) similarly proposed that communal practices merge practical, social, and educational domains to produce aesthetic outcomes. Together, these rituals not only shape the structure of dance classes but also enhance the embodied experience, reinforcing the social and aesthetic bonds central to dance pedagogy.

Embodied Learning and Dialogue

Embodied learning and dialogue are central to dance pedagogy, integrating perception, emotion, cognition, and social interaction. Learners use bodily experiences and movement to construct social meaning, while verbal and non-verbal dialogue fosters empathy, trust, and shared aesthetic understanding (Freiler, 2008; Freire, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Dance thus functions as a medium for co-creating knowledge and cultural expression, supporting cognitive, emotional, and relational growth beyond technical mastery. SAPS is designed to capture these unique, embodied, and socially co-created experiences, differentiating it from previous instruments that primarily measure individual or cognitive aspects of aesthetic perception.

These philosophical and pedagogical perspectives justify the development of a new scale to measure social aesthetic perception, as existing instruments do not fully capture the relational and embodied dimensions emphasized in dance pedagogy.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Participants ($N = 30$) were adult beginners (18+ years) with no prior formal dance education. SAPS items, detailed in Table 1, measured emotional engagement, social connection, metacognitive awareness, aesthetic sensitivity, and transformative experience on a 1–5 Likert scale, with reliability assessed using Cronbach's α . SAPS items, adapted from the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory, measured participants' cognitive flexibility, not only as a trait but as a responsive quality shaped through embodied, cooperative experiences in which learners adapt to nonverbal cues and shifting group dynamics. Participants were 18 men and 12 women, with a mean age of 36.5 years ($SD\ 7.8$).

Table 1
SAPS Component

Item N	Statement	Dimension
1	I feel deeply connected to others when I participate in dance.	Emotional Engagement
2	Dancing helps me feel like I belong to a caring community.	Social Connection
3	I am aware of how my emotions change when interacting through dance.	Metacognitive Awareness
4	I notice and appreciate the aesthetic qualities of partner movements.	Aesthetic Sensitivity
5	I often reflect on how my dance affects others emotionally.	Transformative experience

Qualitative data from three participants were collected via semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, then coded thematically to identify patterns of social-aesthetic growth (Table 2). Due to the small sample, these data are exploratory. Interview questions explored participants' perceptions of interpersonal connection, aesthetic meaning, and emotional resonance during dance activities. Transcripts were then coded thematically, focusing on recurring patterns and individual reflections that pointed to dimensions of social-aesthetic growth (Table 2).

Table 2
Thematic Analysis Coding Scheme. Semi-structured Interviews

Theme	Description	Sample Codes	Example Excerpt
Emotional engagement	How learners feel emotionally engaged in dance	Feeling moved, emotional flow, empathy	"When I dance, I feel connected to everyone, like we're sharing the same emotion."
Social Connection	Development of trust within community through dance	Trusting partners, group belonging, support	"I trust my dance partner completely — it makes me more confident."
Metacognitive Awareness	Awareness and reflection on own learning process	Self-monitoring, strategy use, reflective practice	"I think about how I learn steps best and try to apply that every time."
Aesthetic sensitivity	Heightened awareness and appreciation of beauty in movement, rhythm, and shared expression	Perceiving beauty, flow awareness, attunement to movement	"I notice small details in how the group moves together — it feels beautiful and makes me appreciate the art more."
Transformative Experience	Changes in personal or social identity through dance	Self-confidence boost, changed perspective, social growth	"Dancing has made me more outgoing and comfortable in social settings."

Table 3 illustrates a sample of the observation instrument used to assess participant behavior during dance classes. Indicators included emotional engagement, verbal interaction, synchronization, self-correction, and overall engagement. Each indicator was operationalized through observable examples (e.g., smiling, giving feedback, moving in sync) and rated on a 5-point scale to capture the intensity or frequency of occurrence.

Table 3
Observation Instrument

Indicator	Example	Score (1–5)
Emotional Engagement	Smiling, expressive gestures	1 = rarely observed, 5 = consistently observed
Verbal Interaction	Giving/asking feedback, showing interest	1 = rarely observed, 5 = consistently observed
Synchronization	Moving with group/partner, maintaining rhythm	1 = rarely observed, 5 = consistently observed
Self-Correction	Adjusting based on cues	1 = rarely observed, 5 = consistently observed
Aesthetic sensitivity	Noticing and appreciating beauty in movement or flow	1 = rarely observed, 5 = consistently observed

Over six months, participants engaged in structured dance courses, including improvisation, rhythm exercises, partner work, and choreography designed to foster interpersonal coordination. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and reliability testing, while qualitative data were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns and individual reflections, providing a comprehensive understanding of participants’ social-aesthetic and cognitive development in dance pedagogy.

Results

Quantitative Findings. Preliminary results indicated a moderate increase in SAPS scores across participants, particularly in emotional attunement and social connectedness. Cronbach’s α values showed 0.76 (Table 4), suggesting acceptable internal consistency for a pilot instrument:

Table 4
Cronbach’s α Values

Cronbach’s Alpha	N of items
.766	15

Qualitative data from interviews further supported these trends. Using a 1–5 Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), SAPS-related items addressing the five themes—engagement, connection, awareness, aesthetic sensitivity, and transformation—generally fell within the 3–5 range (Table 5), suggesting:

- High levels of social aesthetic awareness and engagement
- Meaningful social and emotional experience

Table 5*SAPS-Related Items*

Interview Statements	Likert Scale (1–5)
<i>I feel emotionally engaged and connected while dancing</i>	3–5
<i>I appreciate social interactions more through dance</i>	4–5
<i>Participating in dance helps me reflect on my learning process</i>	4–5
<i>Positive shared aesthetic experiences build trust</i>	5
<i>Dance helped me grow personally and socially</i>	4–5

Although based on a small number of interviews, these qualitative data align with SAPS scores, supporting the scale’s validity in capturing the social-aesthetic and emotional effects of dance participation. Participants reported growing recognition of the relationship between social interactions and aesthetic judgments during dance learning. Many noted their increasing ability to read others’ body language, empathize with partners, and appreciate moments of collective movement as “beautiful” or “emotionally meaningful.” Several participants described an unexpected sense of comfort and bonding in the group, emphasizing how non-verbal interactions during dance led to trust and mutual respect. Moreover, learners articulated how their dance experiences influenced their well-being in daily lives. For instance, some expressed greater confidence in social situations, more patience in listening to others, and a stronger appreciation for diversity in expressive forms. Participants linked their learning in dance to increased cognitive flexibility, citing improved tolerance of ambiguity, openness to novel situations, and adaptive decision-making in interpersonal encounters outside of class.

Observation data indicated moderate to high levels of participation, with scores generally ranging from 3 to 5 across indicators. Emotional engagement and synchronization were frequently rated at the higher end, reflecting strong affective involvement and coordinated group movement. Verbal interaction and self-correction showed more variability, typically falling in the mid-range, suggesting that learners were beginning to develop reflective and dialogical practices but had not yet reached full consistency. Overall, participants demonstrated robust engagement with dance activities, confirming that this observation instrument effectively captures social-aesthetic behaviors.

Discussion

Findings from this pilot study suggest that dance pedagogy enhances social-aesthetic perception and cognitive-emotional development in ALs. Quantitative SAPS results indicate that learners generally rated their experiences in the mid-to-high range (3–5) across five key themes: emotional engagement, social connection, metacognitive awareness, aesthetic sensitivity, and transformative experience. Participants reported feeling emotionally engaged, socially connected, reflective about their learning, and attuned to trust and shared aesthetic experiences, highlighting both personal and social growth.

Complementing these self-reported data, observational indicators provided direct measures of participant behaviors within dance classes. Scores ranging from 3 to 5 suggest that participants were moderately to consistently engaged in smiling and expressive gestures, actively giving and responding to verbal feedback, synchronizing with partners or the group, self-correcting based on cues, and noticing aesthetic qualities in movement and collective flow. These observed behaviors map directly onto the SAPS items. For example, emotional engagement and verbal interaction align with the SAPS items capturing connectedness and social

appreciation, while synchronization and aesthetic sensitivity correspond to participants' recognition of shared beauty and trust-building through group movement. Self-correction reflects metacognitive awareness, highlighting learners' reflective engagement with their own learning process.

Qualitative interview data further support the trends captured in both tables. Participants described growing recognition of the relationship between social interactions and aesthetic judgments during dance learning, often noting increased ability to read others' body language, empathize with partners, and appreciate collective movement as beautiful or emotionally meaningful. Reports of comfort and bonding in the group, as well as the influence of dance on daily social interactions, align with high SAPS scores for social connection and transformative experience, and with observed behaviors such as synchronization, aesthetic sensitivity, and verbal interaction. Moreover, participants' descriptions of adaptive decision-making, tolerance of ambiguity, and cognitive flexibility are consistent with self-correction and reflective practices observed in class.

Together, the SAPS responses, observational indicators, and interview excerpts provide a triangulated picture: dance pedagogy promotes social-aesthetic awareness, embodied and dialogical engagement, and cognitive-emotional growth. These findings align with international studies showing that joint dance fosters pro-sociality, cognitive flexibility, and emotional engagement (Giguere, 2021; Sorokowski et al., 2024), suggesting that social-aesthetic benefits of dance are observed across cultural contexts.

This pilot study is part of a larger doctoral project, which will incorporate additional instruments and larger samples to further investigate the effects of dance pedagogy on ALs' social-aesthetic perception. Small sample size and pilot design limit generalizability. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias, as participants' perceptions could be influenced by social desirability or personal expectations. Larger-scale validation of SAPS, cross-cultural studies, and longitudinal designs are recommended.

Conclusion

This pilot study validates the SAPS as a promising tool for measuring social-aesthetic perception in ALs. Findings indicate that dance pedagogy fosters empathy, trust, collective meaning-making, and cognitive flexibility. Functioning as dialogical and embodied spaces, dance classrooms provide not only artistic learning but also pathways for interpersonal and social transformation. Beyond the aesthetic experience, rituals play a key role in structuring the learning process, strengthening social bonds, and supporting embodied learning that integrates cognitive and emotional growth. Future work could explore how the SAPS performs across different adult learning environments, extending its application beyond dance to other creative and communal settings.

Declaration of AI-Generation or AI-Assistive Technology in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, ChatGPT was used only to assist with language editing. All ideas, interpretations, and analyses presented in this work are solely those of the author. The use of AI did not influence the study design, data collection, analysis, or conclusion.

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