

# Bridging Physical and Digital Spaces: A Study on Teaching and Learning Art Education Through Virtual Art Galleries

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## ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines the role of virtual art galleries in enhancing teaching and learning in the context of Art Appreciation. In line with the increasing integration of digital technology in education, virtual galleries have emerged as an innovative platform that broadens learning, transcending the traditional physical space. However, despite the growth of digital technologies in education, the pedagogical application of virtual art galleries in Art Appreciation particularly in relation to how they can be systematically integrated into teaching practice to support meaningful learning outcomes, remains underexplored.

Leaning on constructivism theory and digital pedagogy, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that positions the virtual art galleries as a tool to enhance students' involvement, interactive learning, and deeper visual understanding. This paper discusses main elements such as accessibility, interactivity, and flexibility, other than challenges technological constraints and the lack of direct sensory experience.

The proposed framework aims to guide educators in integrating the virtual environment effectively in art education, simultaneously closing the gap between physical and digital learning. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion regarding digital transformation in art education, and provides direction for future empirical research.

**Keywords**—Virtual art gallery, art appreciation, art education, conceptual framework, digital learning

## INTRODUCTION

The growth of digital technology has brought about a significant change in various fields, including art education (Marty, 2008; Parry, 2007). In recent years, this transformation has become more prominent and noticeable in higher education, particularly with the rise of online, blended, and technology-enhanced learning environments. Post-pandemic, the shift towards digital learning has fuelled the need for innovative teaching strategies that promote accessibility, engagement, and flexible learning experiences across disciplines (Chen et al., 2021).

In the subject of Art Appreciation, traditional teaching approaches such as the use of static slides, textbooks, and visits to the physical galleries often face various challenges, such as costs, geographical access, and time constraints. This can restrict students' opportunities to experience and understand the works of art in a comprehensive manner. In response to these limitations, virtual art galleries have thrived as an innovative digital platform with strong educational possibilities (Schweibenz, 2004).

Virtual art galleries allow students to access various art collections from around the world through online platforms, at any time and from any location (Bellido, 2006). Other than that, these platforms are often equipped

with interactive features such as 3D dimension, the high-resolution image enlargement, as well as multimedia elements that enrich the learning experience (Sylaiou et al., 2010).

The use of virtual art galleries not only increases access to global art sources, but it also supports the student-centred learning approach. Students are able to explore artworks on their own, make interpretations, and build their understanding based on their own experience. The benefit of this approach is that it indirectly increases students' critical thinking, creativity, and active involvement in learning (Wu et al., 2013). There is clear indication from other studies that virtual museum and gallery environments can improve student motivation, engagement, and interaction through immersive and self-directed learning experiences (Xu & Fagan, 2023).

Digital technology in art education also helps enhance student motivation and contributes to interesting and interactive learning process (Akçayir & Akçayir, 2017). As aforementioned, despite the growing relevance of digital learning environments, unfortunately the pedagogical integration of virtual art galleries in Art Appreciation remains underexplored.

The manner in which they can be systematically incorporated into teaching practice to improve learning outcomes has yet to be known. Thus, in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and exponential digital education, integrating virtual art galleries into art education cannot be at a better time. Thus, this study has the aim to discuss the concept of the manner in which the use of virtual art gallery can make teaching and learning in Art Appreciation subject more effective. Lastly, the aim is to identify key elements that support a more meaningful learning experience in a digital environment.

## **Problem Statement**

Although digital technology is increasingly expanding, the use of virtual art galleries in Art Appreciation teaching has yet to be maximized. Most teaching approaches still depend on conventional approach which are really relatively non-interactive and restricted, in providing student meaningful visual experiences (Anderson, 2004). Recent studies established that digital and immersive learning environments can drive student engagement, motivation, and visual understanding in arts-based learning contexts.

That said, the integration of virtual gallery technologies in art education focuses more on technological access rather than on pedagogical application. The features of the virtual platforms such as 3D navigation and multimedia interaction do not help the fact that there remains limited understanding of how these features can be meaningfully aligned with teaching strategies and learning objectives in Art Appreciation (Sylaiou et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2021).

In addition, the existing literature on digital museums and virtual exhibitions mostly look into technological innovation and user experiences. Limited attention has been given to pedagogical frameworks that explain how virtual art galleries aid students' learning processes, interpretation, and learning outcomes within formal educational settings. This creates a gap between technology availability ~~from~~ effective classroom implementation. The lack of clear pedagogical guidance means that the virtual art galleries risk being used merely as supplementary digital tools rather than as meaningful learning environments that can improve students' appreciation and understanding of art (Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

Furthermore, due to differences in digital literacy, curriculum design, access to technology, and uncertainty regarding appropriate instructional approaches, educators may face challenges in bringing virtual gallery environments into teaching. Not having a structured conceptual framework makes it difficult to explain the link between virtual gallery features, learning activities, and student outcomes in Art Appreciation (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

Therefore, having a conceptual framework that provides a clearer pedagogical understanding of how virtual art galleries can be effectively integrated into Art Appreciation teaching and learning would be vital. Such a framework can support educators in linking digital technology with pedagogical practice, while finding a feasible

way to promote students' engagement, visual understanding, and appreciation of artworks in contemporary learning environments (Economou & Meintani, 2011).

## Research Objectives

This study sets to explore the role of virtual art galleries in the teaching and learning of Art Appreciation. Its next aim is to identify the key elements that influence effective learning through virtual art galleries. In addition, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework to guide the integration of virtual art galleries in art education while enhancing students' appreciation, understanding, and engagement with artworks in digital learning environments.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature shows that the use of the digital technology in art education is able to increase the access to the source of learning and enrich students' experience remarkably. Through the virtual art gallery, students will be able to explore into works of art from all over the world without the geographical and time boundaries at the same time lending support to a more flexible and inclusive learning (Dede, 2009).

Next, recent studies have illustrated that virtual museum and digital gallery environments can increase student engagement via more interactive and immersive learning experiences. 3D navigation, multimedia displays, and self-exploration are modern features that aid students' understanding of artworks more deeply, simultaneously leveraging their motivation and spurring active learning (Chen et al., 2021).

Virtual art galleries are also the platform that supports the development of higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, interpretation, and critical reflection that can be applied through exploration-based learning. This is proof that digital museum technology not only improves one's cognitive engagement, but also actively consolidates the knowledge construction process (Xu & Fagan, 2023; Yang et al., 2026). To add, virtual art galleries are also utilized as collaborative learning spaces that boost social interaction, as evidenced through the discussion and sharing of interpretations. Looking at it as a whole, the use of virtual art galleries can certainly transform art education into a more interactive, collaborative, and meaningful learning experience.

Sylaiou et al. (2010) explained interactivity elements such as the 3D navigation, exhibition space simulation and image enlargement enable students to conduct the visual analysis in more detail and more critically, in line with the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning requirements. This approach also facilitates the development of higher-order thinking skills among students, because they are not merely the passive recipients of information, but are active participants in the artwork interpretation process.

Moreover, through the exhibition space simulation, this allow students to become more familiar with the curatorial context of an artwork, which includes aspects of layout, lighting and the relationships between works in the exhibition space. This is a significant element, owing to the fact that the context of an exhibition often gives influence to the artworks' meaning and interpretation (Bishop, 2012). The simulation enables students to form a more holistic and critical analysis of the works they are assigned to visualize. Next, the image enlargement function provides the avenue for a thorough observation of visual elements such as texture, brushstrokes and production techniques, which can enhance students' visual literacy and analytical abilities (Pass & Czirr, 2015).

Other than the cognitive benefits, this element of interactivity is also a proponent of a student-centred learning approach. Anderson (2004) positively pointed out that student-centred learning lays an emphasis on students' active involvement, autonomy, and responsibility in the learning process. Here, interactive digital learning environments promote student autonomy because they are at liberty to delve into the learning materials at their own pace and based on their own interests. A study by Mayer (2009) also maintained that interactive multimedia learning can help improve the understanding when students show active involvement in the cognitive process. Subsequently, this increases intrinsic motivation and engagement, thereby creating a more meaningful learning experience. In sum, this element of interactivity not only brings improvement to the visual analysis skills, but it

also lends support to the formation of a more active, flexible, and student-centred 21st century learning experience.

Even so, challenges such as the technological infrastructure, different digital literacy levels, or the absence of authentic physical experience in appraising the actual artworks remain to be major issues. There are issues such as poor internet access, lack of digital devices and technical support, which can slow down or dampen the virtual learning process (Selwyn, 2016). It is also an issue that the different digital skill levels among students and lecturers impede their ability to use virtual platforms productively in both processes of teaching and learning. It has to be realized that the virtual art galleries cannot entirely be in place of the authentic experience of seeing a physical work of art, especially when students need to appraise the texture, size, colour, as well as feel or experience the actual atmosphere of the work (Champion, 2015).

The varying levels of students' digital literacy also pose a great challenge. Not all students possess the same skills in handling 3D technology or virtual gallery platforms, so this automatically creates gaps in the learning experience. These differences also have the possibility to affect the effectiveness of technology-based learning approaches if not equipped with adequate training and guidance (UNESCO, 2018). It is the responsibility of the teachers to play an active role in ensuring that technology integration would be effective through relevant pedagogical methods.

Thus, despite virtual art gallery boasting great potential, its use needs to be backed by appropriate pedagogical strategies, which is seen as complementary to the physical experience, instead of being seen as a replacement to it.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

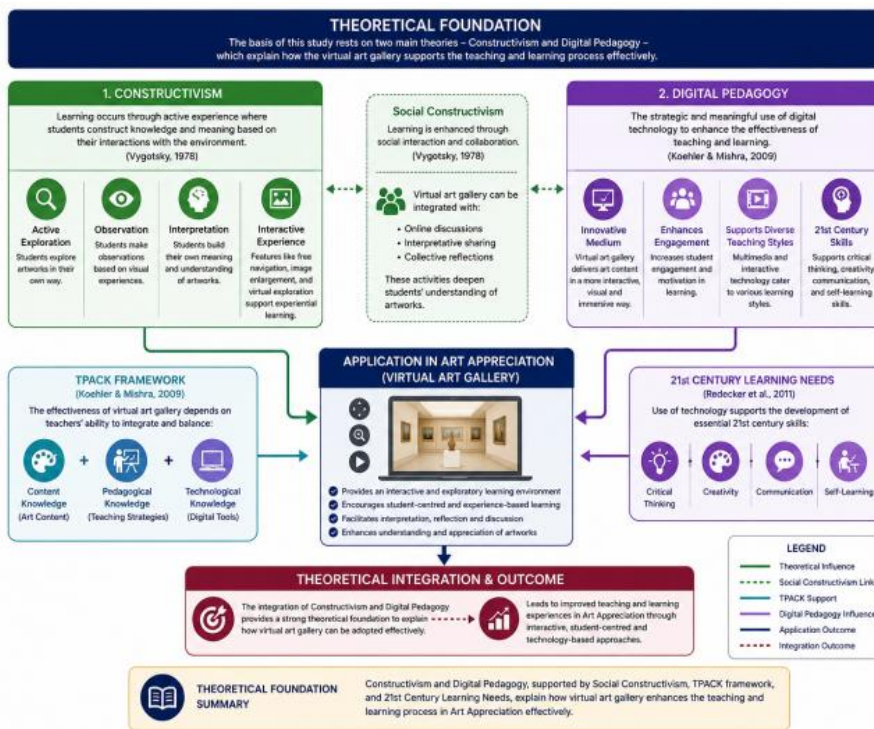
The basis of this study rests on two main theories, namely Constructivism and Digital Pedagogy. They are the foundation that helps us to understand how the use of the virtual art gallery can support the teaching and learning process in an effective way.

Constructivism emphasizes how learning takes place through active experience, where students build their knowledge and meaning based on their interactions with their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of Art Appreciation, this approach is very relevant, as the understanding of artworks does not only rely on the information delivered by the teacher, but also the students' own interpretations. The use of virtual art gallery provides an interactive exploratory space, allowing students to do some exploration on the artworks in their own way, make observations, also build their understanding based on their own visual experiences. Elements like free navigation, image enlargement, and the virtual space exploration advocate learning based on experience, at the same time strengthening the building of knowledge actively (Sylaiou et al., 2010).

Then, the Social Constructivism theory by Vygotsky (1978) also highlights the importance of social interactions in learning. In the digital environment, the virtual art gallery can be integrated with some collaborative activities like online discussions, interpretative sharing, and collective reflections, all of which aid students' understanding on the works of art.

Digital Pedagogy refers to the strategic and meaningful use of digital technology to increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning (Henderson et al., 2017). In this context, the virtual art gallery functions as an innovative medium that enables the delivery of art content that is more interactive, visual and immersive. This approach not only enhances students' engagement, but it also supports various teaching styles through the use of the multimedia and interactive technology.

At par with the *Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK)* framework, the effectiveness of *virtual art gallery* is dependent on the capability of educators to integrate and strike a balance among the knowledge of art content, the right pedagogy, and technology (Angeli & Valanides, 2009). In addition, the use of technology also supports the needs of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that stress on the critical thinking, creativity, communication and self-learning skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019).



**Figure 1.** Illustrates the theoretical foundation of this study, integrating Constructivism, Social Constructivism, and Digital Pedagogy (TPACK). This collectively underpins the use of virtual art gallery in Art Appreciation learning.

In sum, the integration of Constructivism and Digital Pedagogy provides strong theoretical grounds in explaining how the virtual art gallery can be adopted effectively to enhance the learning experience in the subject of Art Appreciation, especially through approaches that are interactive, student-centred and technology-based.

### Conceptual Framework

This study recommends a conceptual framework based on the Input–Process–Output (IPO) model that has been expanded to explain the link between the use of the virtual art gallery, learning activities and the learning outcomes in the context of Art Appreciation. The IPO provides a structured way to explain how technological input is transformed into educational outcomes, and this is why it is adopted. This framework asserts that the learning effectiveness does not only attach to the technology, but also to the accompanying pedagogical process.

The input variable in this framework is Virtual Art Gallery Features. These refer to the technological characteristics of the virtual gallery that support learning. Interactivity, accessibility, and multimedia presentation are included in these features. Interactivity refers to students' ability to navigate themselves through the artworks using various functions such as zooming, or moving through the digital exhibition. Accessibility refers to students' ability to access artworks anytime and from any location. Multimedia presentation offers additional interpretive information and enhances the learning experience. These features enable students to go into the artworks flexibly and interactively without being bound by space and time, also to expand the access to the global arts learning resources (Economou & Meintani, 2011; Sylaiou et al., 2010). This technology also advocates a more immersive, student-centred learning experience (Dalgarno & Lee, 2010).

Next, *Teaching and Learning Activities* plays the role as the mediator variable covering exploration, observation, interpretation and discussion. This mediator is vital, as it explains how virtual art gallery features influence learning outcomes indirectly through students' learning experiences. In other words, the technological features alone do not automatically improve learning outcomes unless students are willing to engage themselves actively in meaningful learning activities. This activity encourages active learning and meaning construction by students, in line with the constructivism theory that emphasizes the role of experience in the formation of knowledge

(Piaget, 1972). In this context, virtual art galleries serve as a learning space that supports cognitive interactions and students' reflections (Falk & Dierking, 2013).

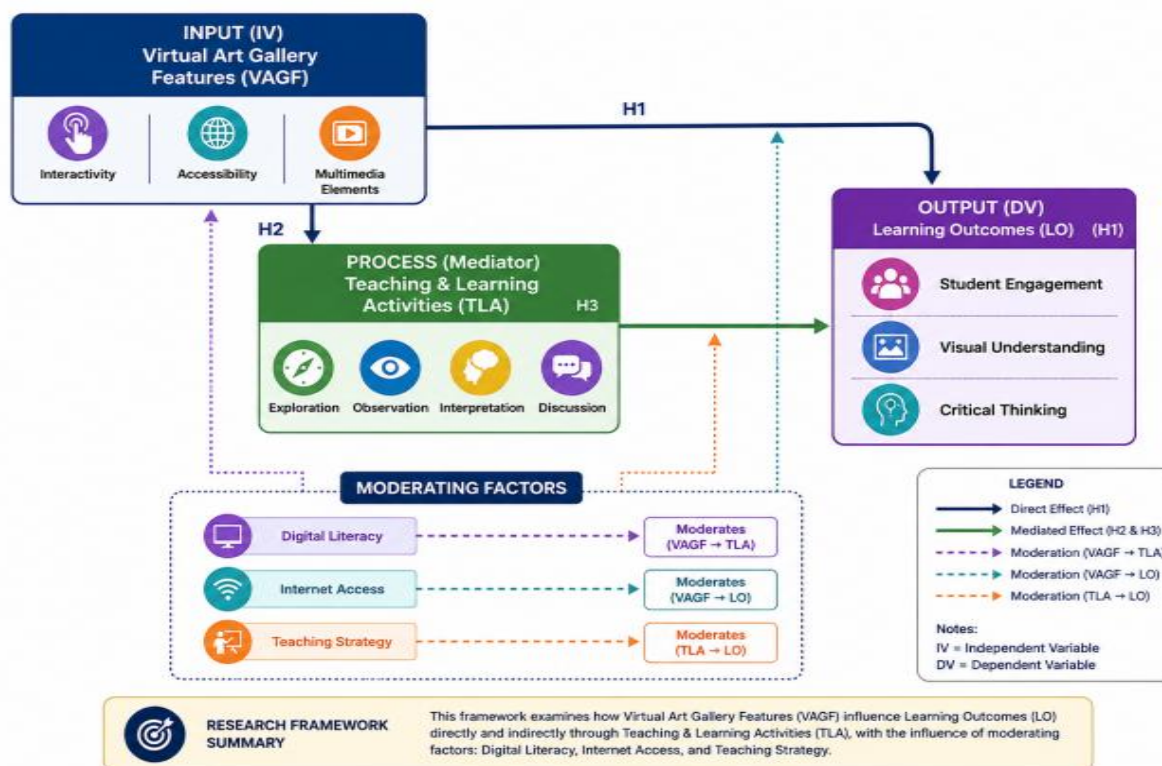
Learning outcomes, which include student engagement, visual understanding, and critical thinking, are the output variable. Student engagement is portrayed by the students' level of participation, motivation, and involvement during the learning process. Visual understanding means the ability to observe, interpret, and analyse artworks using visual elements and artistic concepts. Critical thinking is all about students' ability to reflect, evaluate meaning, and form interpretations, guided by their artistic observation and discussion. With the digital technology integrated with the learning of arts, this is able to increase students' involvement and analytical capability on the artworks when they are supported by appropriate pedagogical designs (Redecker et al., 2011).

This framework also considers digital literacy, internet access, and teaching strategies as the moderating variables, which influence the effectiveness of virtual art gallery on attaining learning outcomes. Students with better digital skills may take part more effectively with virtual platforms, while limited access to technology may be a sign of reduced participation. The role of effective teaching strategies also cannot be underestimated in supporting meaningful learning through technology (Kirkwood & Price, 2014; Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

Virtual art galleries show off several strengths in Art Appreciation education, including wider access to artworks, and flexible learning opportunities. These strengths are key to increasing student engagement, appreciation, and visual understanding.

However, the limitations of virtual art galleries are also evident. They may not be able to fully replicate the direct experience of viewing original artworks, and technical challenges such as limited internet access and digital skills may dampen the participation. In other words, without appropriate pedagogical support, their educational achievement may also be affected.

Overall, this framework shows that virtual art galleries can enhance Art Appreciation learning, only if effective pedagogy, meaningful learning activities, and a supportive learning environment are available and activated.



**Figure 2.** Illustrate the study's conceptual model that integrates Virtual Art Gallery Features, Teaching and Learning Activities, and Learning Outcomes.

## DISCUSSION

The adoption of the virtual art gallery in art education opens new avenues in improving students' learning experiences. Not only that it widens the access to artworks in general, but it also encourages active and interactive learning. Yet, the success of this integration relies on several factors like technological readiness, digital skills, and the teaching approach used by the educator. Thus, a balanced approach between technology and pedagogy is crucial to ensure that the learning process is effective.

It is understood that this approach is harmonious with 21st century learning that strongly leans on student-centred learning, the adoption of digital technology and active involvement in the learning process. Students do not only gain the information passively, but they are also given the opportunity to explore artworks independently, which further increases their motivation, creativity and interest in art learning. However, the effectiveness of virtual art galleries is determined by several factors such as technological readiness, internet access, level of digital skills and educators' pedagogical approaches. The constraints in the technological infrastructure and the differences in digital literacy among students and educators can affect the productiveness of the teaching and learning process. As aforementioned, virtual art galleries are not the replacement for the authentic and physical experience of seeing artworks, particularly when the requirement is to appraise the texture, size, colour and the actual atmosphere of the artwork. Therefore, it is crucial to strike a balance between the use of technology and pedagogy, to ensure that the use of virtual art galleries can be maximized as a support medium in art education.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the virtual art gallery carries a great potential in bridging the gap between the physical and digital spaces in art education. It is through this technology that access to artworks can be expanded, other than helping to materialize a more interactive, flexible and student-centred learning experience. These virtual platforms enable students to explore, observe, interpret, and appreciate artworks which defeat the limitations of time and location. This altogether makes Art Appreciation learning more accessible and interesting.

This study contributes to the development of a sound conceptual framework that explains the relationship between virtual art gallery features, teaching and learning activities, and learning outcomes in Art Appreciation. The framework credibly offers a theoretical guide for understanding how digital technology can be meaningfully integrated into art education using suitable pedagogical processes. It is an eye-opener, as the effectiveness of virtual art galleries does not only depend on appealing technological features, but also on the learning design, student interaction, and contextual factors.

Moreover, the conceptual framework proposed can be the guidance for educators in integrating virtual art gallery technology in a more systematic and effective way into the teaching and learning process. Educators can study the framework to understand the relationship established between the use of technology, pedagogical strategies and student learning outcomes in art education.

This study also provides a foundation for future empirical research to weigh upon the effectiveness of the proposed framework in the context of real learning. Further studies may be able to pinpoint students' and educators' acceptance, the impact on student motivation and engagement, and the effectiveness of virtual art galleries when it comes to increasing the understanding and appreciation of art.

In conclusion, virtual art galleries stand strong as an important innovation in art education. When equipped with effective pedagogy and appropriate digital learning environments, meaningful opportunities to improve Art Appreciation learning are ready to be seized. This will be in perfect response to the continuing development of digital technology.

## Conflict of Interest Declaration

The author and all co-authors declare that this manuscript is an honest, true and original research achieved by the authors, and none of the named authors have any conflict of interest regarding this work. This manuscript is

substantiated through precise data and references. All authors read and approved the final manuscript for publication. All authors also agree with the findings and interpretations of this study reported in this manuscript. They also declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the content, materials or issues discussed in this study. One last thing, this manuscript has never been published, submitted or considered for publication in any other journal or publication.

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