



## Self-exploration and social alienation in spiritual painting inspired by taoist seclusion

**Jie Feng**<sup>1+</sup>

**Siti Rohaya Yahaya**<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Minden, Penang, Malaysia.*

<sup>1</sup>*Email: fengjie@student.usm.my*

<sup>2</sup>*Email: ysrohaya@usm.my*



(+ Corresponding author)

### ABSTRACT

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#### Keywords

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This study investigates how spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion (SPITS), an artistic form rooted in Taoist ideals of solitude, balance, and harmony, affects fine arts students' self-exploration (SE) and social alienation (SA). Drawing on 390 Chinese students specializing in spiritual and cultural art, Smart-PLS analysis revealed a strong positive link between SPITS and SE ( $\beta = 0.656$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that this art form significantly fosters introspection. Conversely, SPITS also showed a weaker yet statistically significant positive association with SA ( $\beta = 0.166$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ), suggesting it may inadvertently heighten feelings of social withdrawal. Crucially, emotional regulation (ER) and mindfulness (MF) were found to moderate the SPITS-SA relationship robustly (ER:  $\beta = 0.286$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; MF:  $\beta = 0.225$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while neither significantly impacted the link between SPITS and SE. These outcomes imply that while Taoist-inspired painting enhances self-discovery, it can also evoke alienation unless supported by strong ER and MF. Integrating SPITS into art curricula, particularly through collaborative and emotionally attuned activities, could promote personal growth while mitigating isolation. Furthermore, spiritual painting holds promise as a therapeutic tool to bolster emotional resilience and mindful awareness in contemplative practice. Overall, the study highlights SPITS's dual role in advancing introspection and managing social disconnection, advocating its inclusion in educational and cultural preservation initiatives to revitalize Taoist heritage within contemporary Chinese art pedagogy.

**Contribution/Originality:** The originality of this research lies in relating Chinese landscape paintings with their psychological effects on individuals and society. The research employed Smart-PLS modeling to quantify and analyze the collected data, providing statistically supported results, while highlighting the role of emotional regulation and mindfulness as data moderators.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Art has traditionally served as a medium for exploring human consciousness and existential themes. The essence of spiritual paintings is to explore the relationship between being introspective and feeling lonely within society. Taoist seclusion forms the proposition of this artistic expression as it embodies the struggle between togetherness and aloneness, the search for substantive self-attainment, and social harmony (Niu & Fauzi, 2024; Senel, 2022). Because of the strong emphasis on the concept of *wu wei* (non-action) as well as the balance of Taoist philosophy, artists often retreat from society to engage with their inner spiritual planes (Tai, Tsai, & Huang, 2023). Second, as has been previously mentioned, Jungian psychology, with its main concepts of individuation and the collective

unconscious, aligns with Taoist thinking in providing an analytical structure for the change process of alienation in artistry (Jung, 2020; Nitzan, 2024).

The origin of Taoist seclusion can be attributed to the ancient Chinese proclivities of leaving society in order to seek enlightenment. As such, this discipline of simplicity and nature correlates well with artistic work that may require mastery through self-reflection and long hours of practice. About seclusion, the findings of researchers are that Taoist seclusion creates conditions for creative breakthroughs, especially in artwork where harmony, balance, and spontaneity are at the base (Şenel, 2022). Under such circumstances, spiritual paintings act as a mental exercise to help artists complete personal spiritual processes and accept the practice of searching for the meaning of life together with society (Guan, 2024). The psychological dimension of Taoist-inspired art, rooted in spirituality, profoundly impacts its thematic depth. Jung's theory of individuation, which involves the assimilation of unconscious elements into the conscious self, offers valuable insights into the self-exploration inherent in artistic practices (Jung, 2020). By examining their own challenges and archetypes, artists often produce works that are deeply personal yet widely relatable, reflecting the shared human experience (Nitzan, 2024).

Social alienation, though frequently seen unfavorably, serves as a persistent impetus for significant creativity in this context. Historical and present instances illustrate that societal alienation can foster a rich environment for innovative thought and artistic expression (Youvan, 2024). The writings of Kafka and Dickinson demonstrate how solitude enabled these authors to profoundly explore existential concerns, yielding masterpieces that maintain global resonance. Taoist-inspired painters utilize their sense of alienation to examine issues of detachment, connection, and the ephemeral aspect of existence (Tai et al., 2023).

The rapid technological and social changes of the contemporary day have exacerbated the connection between solitude and creativity. In the ever-fragmented and interconnected societies, the sensation of alienation has intensified, prompting numerous artists to seek solace in Taoist principles. These principles serve as a counterbalance to the chaos of contemporary existence: by pursuing simplicity, natural harmony, and meditative practices (Hongjing, 2024). Taoist isolated art functions as a personal refuge and a universal reflection of the human condition, with its connection to the individual expressed through introspective actions that are then conveyed through collective experiences (Ioannidou, 2022). They have developed innovative integrations of traditional Taoist ideas and contemporary artistic methods that challenge conventional boundaries. Digital technologies have enabled artists to reinterpret Taoist aesthetics within a multimedia context, fostering interactive experiences that engage numerous sensory modalities (Tai et al., 2023). The essence remains intact; nevertheless, the importance of Taoist philosophy is amplified in various renditions, making it accessible to varied audiences across cultural and generational divides (Quanjin & Simatrang, 2024).

The realm of spiritual painting is filled with the interaction between self-exploration and societal alienation, engaging with the human experience. Artists investigate universal truths such as identity, belonging, and the quest for purpose, often utilizing their art to bridge personal experiences with broader societal challenges through introspective study (Niu & Fauzi, 2024).

The importance of these processes resides in the generative and contemplative aspects of art, which can provoke new inquiries and generate original constructs, reflect the artist's conceptual mindset, and foster empathy, understanding, and resilience in the face of estrangement (Ioannidou, 2022).

This study investigates the transformative potential of isolation, focusing on Taoist seclusion, Jungian psychology, and the influence of alienation on artistic expression. The convergence resulted in the birth of spiritual art, which delineates the journey of self-exploration and mirrors the collective human experience. It integrates ancient principles with modern methodologies, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the nuances of human creativity and resilience in addressing contemporary challenges (Nitzan, 2024; Tai et al., 2023). The research seeks to examine the impact of Taoist philosophy on spiritual art and its effects on self-exploration and social alienation. It

is based on Taoist traditional philosophy combined with contemporary artistic expressions to explore the potential of isolation in fostering creativity and self-awareness (Şenel, 2022; Youvan, 2024).

### *1.1. Objectives of the Study*

This study has the following research objectives:

1. To examine the correlation between spiritual painting influenced by Taoist seclusion and self-exploration.
2. To analyze the connection between Taoist solitude and social alienation within the framework of spiritual painting.
3. To investigate the potential moderating effects of emotional regulation on the linkage between spiritual painting influenced by Taoist seclusion and both self-exploration and social alienation.
4. To determine the possible moderating effect of mindfulness on the relationships between spiritual painting influenced by Taoist seclusion and both self-exploration and social alienation.

### *1.2. Significance of the Study*

This body of work is notable in multiple respects. It accomplishes this by enhancing theoretical comprehension and expanding awareness of the roles that emotional regulation and mindfulness exert on the psychological impacts of art. The secondary benefit of the research is that it offers art educators, therapists, and practitioners essential insights on integrating spiritual art into educational and therapeutic practices. Thirdly, the research fosters awareness of cultural heritage by highlighting the significance of Taoist philosophy and traditional Chinese art in contemporary settings. The research underscores the potential of spiritual painting as a method for attaining self-awareness and emotional well-being. This is achieved by tackling concerns such as social isolation and self-reflection.

### *1.3. Scope of the Study*

The study centers on the Chinese cultural context, wherein Taoist principles and their artistic applications are deeply rooted. The study focuses on fine arts students, as they are the pertinent sources directly related to the core themes of the study. Additionally, the study utilizes quantitative methods, including structural equation modeling, to analyze associations among the main variables as well as the moderating effects.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The integration of self-exploration and social alienation in artistic practices, particularly those inspired by Taoist seclusion, has gained attention to deepen individual and collective understanding. This section synthesizes insights from multiple relevant studies. This literature review is structured around three core themes: (a) the philosophical underpinnings of Taoist seclusion, (b) the psychological constructs of individuation and self-exploration, and (c) the sociocultural implications of social alienation in artistic expressions.

Taoism stresses harmony with nature, the balance of opposites, and inner tranquility, making it a cornerstone for spiritual practices and artistic inspiration. The philosophy of Taoism resonates deeply in the realm of creative expression (Niu & Fauzi, 2024). Taoist seclusion, as a cultural and spiritual practice, also fosters a meditative state conducive to artistic creativity. Artistic practices inspired by Taoist seclusion are often characterized by minimalism and introspection, as seen in the use of flowing lines and subtle color palettes that evoke a sense of unity with the cosmos (Tai et al., 2023). This interaction between Taoist philosophy and artistic creation underlines the profound capacity of Taoism to shape the spiritual dimensions of art. Scholars emphasize that Taoism's emphasis on stillness and natural balance nurtures a creative environment (Şenel, 2022). Similarly, the dynamic between traditional art forms and modern technological adaptation illustrates Taoism's versatility as an enduring inspiration for artists (Ioannidou, 2022). Digital methods facilitate the audience's sensory connection to art, replicating the hand-scroll experience digitally while fostering cultural appreciation and modern relevance. Recent advancements in interactive

technologies, such as the restoration of the viewing experience of Chinese scroll paintings, have further demonstrated the enduring influence of Taoist aesthetics. These technologies not only preserve the traditional essence but also enhance the participatory engagement of viewers, allowing them to immerse themselves in the philosophical narratives embedded within these works (Tai et al., 2023).

Jung's analytical psychology provides a valuable framework for understanding the psychological dimensions of spiritual painting. The concepts of collective unconscious, archetypes, and individuation give artists a route to their inner worlds and to a point of understanding common to all humankind (Nitzan, 2024). Taoist ideals of harmony and balance fully dovetail with Jung's idea of individuation. Jungian and Taoist principles, when integrated, do not only create artistic creativity but also contribute to deep psychological healing. If the meditative practices of Taoism and Jung's psychological insights are combined, then artists can go beyond their immediate reality and start exploring the layers of their psyche to discover new reservoirs of inspiration (Niu & Fauzi, 2024). The synthesis of this offers spiritual growth, artistic depth and emotional resilience as such is evidenced in studies of numinous experiences in art therapy (Youvan, 2024). In the therapeutic world, sand play therapy is a Jungian-based therapy that shows the possibility of using symbols and archetypes to facilitate change. Through the control of symbolic resources, beings may gather and incorporate the incomplete parts of their psyche, leading to an overall understanding of who they are. Likewise, spiritual paintings frequently serve as visual embodiments of the artist's quest for individuation, encapsulating the interaction between the conscious and unconscious domains (Nitzan, 2024). Jung's investigation of the numinous underscores art's ability to unveil aspects of the psyche that transcend rational comprehension (Nitzan, 2024; Vikmane, 2023).

The current rapid pace of societal change, driven by technological advancement and globalization, has heightened feelings of alienation. Hongjing (2024) asserts that the pace of contemporary life often leads to a reduced feeling of self-identity and purpose, making art an essential medium for their restoration. Art education, within the context of social acceleration, provides individuals with tools to confront their alienation, enhancing emotional resonance and a sense of connection (Ioannidou, 2022; Vikmane, 2023). Artistic endeavors inspired by Taoist seclusion provide an escape from chaos, enabling a reconnection with inner peace and equilibrium (Lim & Lee, 2020; Senel, 2022; Zolfaghari & Ashayeri, 2021). In contrast to the fragmented experience of contemporary life, Taoist-inspired works of art emphasize simplicity and natural harmony. These principles foster a sense of unity and wholeness, encouraging reflection. This view is supported by studies on traditional themes, which are used to soothe cultural dissonance and social divides (Ioannidou, 2022; Senel, 2022).

For many artists, solitude offers the space to ponder and be inspired. Of particular relevance, therefore, is the paradoxical relationship between solitude and creativity in the works of artists influenced by the spiritual tradition of Taoism (Youvan, 2024; Zolfaghari & Ashayeri, 2021). Research on literary and visual arts such as Senel (2022) and Vikmane (2023), has demonstrated that isolation, imposed on oneself, serves as a medium for examining existential topics in a profound manner while innovatively creating new notions of harmony. This perspective aligns with studies on the use of traditional themes to alleviate cultural dissonance and social divides (Ioannidou, 2022; Senel, 2022).

Social alienation, characterized by feelings of isolation and estrangement, is a common theme in artistic works. This phenomenon often serves as a stimulant for creativity and a subject of inquiry in art (Youvan, 2024). For many artists, solitude provides the mental space necessary for deep reflection and inspiration. The paradoxical relationship between solitude and creativity is especially evident in the works of artists influenced by spiritual traditions like Taoism (Youvan, 2024; Zolfaghari & Ashayeri, 2021). Self-imposed isolation, as demonstrated in research on literary and visual arts, enables profound exploration of existential themes and promotes creative innovations (Senel, 2022; Vikmane, 2023; YinXue, Dzakiria, & Abidin, 2024). This link is explained by Jung's exploration of the shadow self. By exposing artists to darker areas of the mind, they may gain a heightened awareness of themselves as well as artistic insight (Jung, 2020). Another thing it involves is following the Taoist principle of living in harmony with opposite

things such as light and dark (Nitzan, 2024). Personal growth is fostered by isolation and, with it, the freedom to experiment in other forms and using various mediums (Hongjing, 2024; Youvan, 2024).

This integration of creative methods with Taoist and Jungian principles has importance for both education and therapy. These elements are programs that can help with self-exploration and social learning, especially in school settings. According to Ioannidou (2022), art education is a transforming tool for the definition of identity and the nurturing of emotional intelligence. To this end, these programs reflect modern educational paradigms that emphasize self-reflection and teamwork (Zolfaghari & Ashayeri, 2021). Leveraging the amalgamation of Taoist and Jungian ideas, we provide a holistic lens for dealing with psychological problems. With the use of symbols, archetypes, and meditative practices, people can improve emotional stability and resilience. Alienation and detachment have been effectively alleviated through this method to promote personal development and self-actualization (Jung, 2020; Senel, 2022; Vikmane, 2023). In addition, studies show that these methods can reduce stress and improve general well-being when arranged through means of art therapy and meditative techniques (Ioannidou, 2022; Tai et al., 2023).

### 2.1. Research Gap

As philosophical concepts, the principles of balance, harmony, and seclusion are recognized as Taoist, yet their practical influence on individual psychological well-being and emotional regulation in creative environments has not been examined sufficiently. Despite growing interest in the convergence of art, psychology, and spirituality, little research has been conducted on the effects of Taoist seclusion on spiritual painting and its implications for self-exploration and social alienation. Moreover, the moderating effect of emotional regulation and mindfulness on the associations among SPITS, self-exploration, and alienation has not been well understood, particularly with reference to fine arts students in China. The present study aims to bridge these research gaps by (i) exploring new dimensions of spiritual painting, (ii) incorporating moderating variables, (iii) providing empirical evidence through data, and (iv) applying a holistic (interdisciplinary) perspective on the impact of spiritual painting.

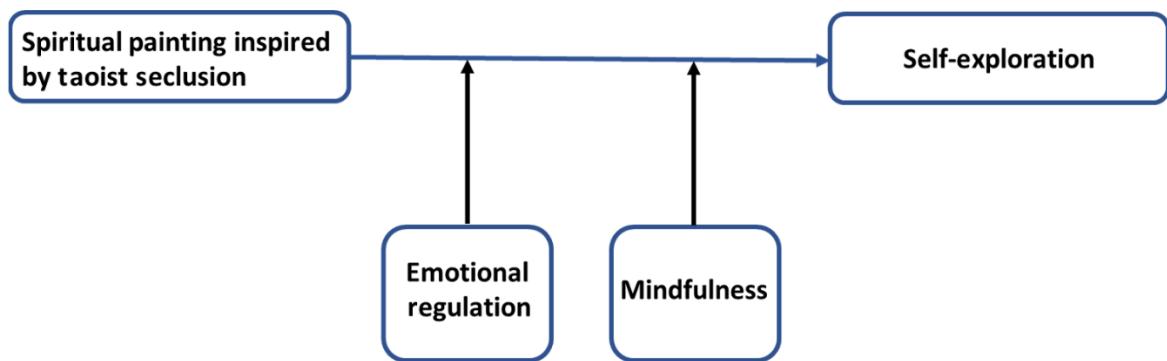
### 2.2. Research Hypotheses

After exploring the relevant literature and identifying the research gap, the following research hypotheses are formulated for the present research.

*H<sub>1</sub>: Spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion is associated with self-exploration.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Emotional regulation moderates the relationship between spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion and self-exploration.*

*H<sub>3</sub>: Mindfulness moderates the relationship between spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion and self-exploration.*



**Figure 1.** Spiritual paintings and self-exploration (Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3).

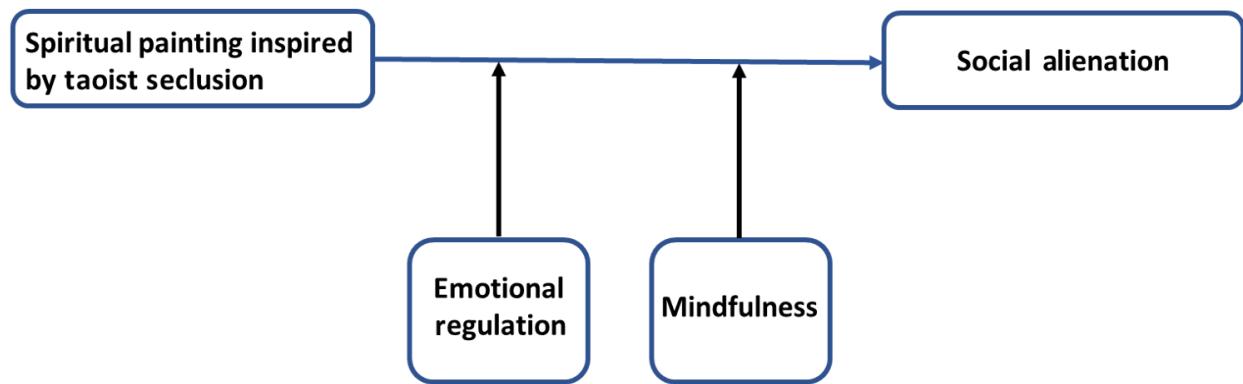
Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion, self-exploration, emotional regulation, and mindfulness. In the journey of self-exploration, spiritual paintings inspired by Taoist seclusion play a key role. During the process of self-exploration, emotional regulation and mindfulness serve as

moderators that coordinate the relationship between spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion and self-exploration.

*H<sub>4</sub>: Spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion is associated with social alienation.*

*H<sub>5</sub>: Emotional regulation moderates the relationship between spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion and social alienation.*

*H<sub>6</sub>: Mindfulness moderates the relationship between spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion and social alienation.*



**Figure 2.** Spiritual paintings and social alienation (Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6).

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion, social alienation, emotional regulation, and mindfulness. In the phenomena of social alienation, spiritual paintings inspired by Taoist seclusion play a pivotal role. During the occurrence of social alienation, emotional regulation and mindfulness of the individual serve as moderators that regulate the relationship between spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion and social alienation.

### 3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Respondents

This study targeted Chinese students specializing in fine arts, particularly those studying spiritual or cultural art forms. A total of 390 students participated in the research, providing diverse insights into the constructs under investigation. The students were chosen due to their familiarity with spiritual and cultural painting, ensuring alignment with the objectives of the study.

#### 3.2. Constructs

The indicators for each construct were utilized to assess the value of the construct. The constructs used were named: Spiritual Painting Inspired by Taoist Seclusion, Self-Exploration, Social Alienation, Emotional Regulation, and Mindfulness. Responses are recorded on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The Appendix 1 includes details about the indicators of each construct.

#### 3.3. Data Collection

The data were collected using a standard questionnaire designed to measure the interaction between the constructs and spiritual painting influenced by Taoist isolation. Similarly, all the constructs and the corresponding indicators under consideration were created to account for all the characteristics of the variables. Purposive sampling technique was used in the study, focusing on specific students who have direct experience with Taoist-inspired spiritual painting. The questionnaires were filled out in simplified Chinese to ensure the accuracy of the results. This was done to make it clearer, easier to understand, less linguistically hindered, and more accurate. The translation of

the questionnaire was carried out, and its precision and cultural appropriateness were verified during the assessment phase before distribution.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Smart-PLS, a structural equation modeling application for exploratory and confirmatory research, was used for the analysis of the collected data. Using Smart-PLS, direct correlations, moderating effects, as well as the overall model fit, were examined and revealed important knowledge about the hypothesized relationships between components.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Convergent Validity of the Constructs

Convergent validity is assessed by examining the factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct. To evaluate the convergent validity of constructs, the commonly used criteria are as follows: (i) factor loadings should be higher than 0.7 to be acceptable; (ii) Cronbach's alpha must be higher than 0.7 for internal consistency; (iii) construct reliability requires a CR value greater than 0.7; and (iv) adequate convergent validity is ensured when the AVE is greater than 0.5.

As shown in Table 1, all items (ER1 – ER5) of the emotional regulation construct have loadings higher than 0.7, thereby indicating good reliability for the separate items. Cronbach's alpha (0.911) indicates exceptional internal consistency. CR (0.934) signifies elevated construct dependability. The AVE (0.738) is above the 0.5 threshold, hence affirming sufficient convergent validity.

All items (MF1–MF5) of the construct mindfulness exhibit loadings beyond 0.7, with the majority surpassing 0.85, indicating robust item dependability. Alpha (0.944) demonstrates excellent internal consistency. CR (0.958) indicates very high construct reliability. AVE (0.820) exceeds the 0.5 threshold, confirming excellent convergent validity.

All items (SA1–SA5) of the construct social alienation have loadings above 0.7, indicating acceptable item reliability. Alpha (0.882) indicates good internal consistency. CR (0.914) demonstrates high construct reliability, and the value of AVE (0.680) exceeds the 0.5 threshold, confirming adequate convergent validity.

For the construct of self-exploration, the items SE1 (0.736), SE4 (0.784), and SE5 (0.743) have acceptable loadings above 0.7. However, the items SE2 (0.678) and SE3 (0.705) are slightly below the ideal threshold. Alpha (0.819) indicates acceptable internal consistency. CR (0.851) exceeds the 0.7 threshold, showing good construct reliability. AVE (0.533) just meets the 0.5 threshold, confirming minimal convergent validity.

The factor loadings for the items SPITS2 (0.864), SPITS3 (0.847), and SPITS5 (0.701) of the construct Spiritual Painting Inspired by Taoist Seclusion (SPITS) are acceptable. However, the loadings of SPITS1 (0.699) and SPITS4 (0.575) are below the ideal threshold. Alpha (0.830) indicates acceptable internal consistency. CR (0.859) demonstrates good construct reliability. AVE (0.555) just meets the 0.5 threshold, confirming minimal convergent validity.

**Table 1.** Convergent validity.

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Alpha	CR	AVE
Emotional regulation	ER1	0.844	0.911	0.934	0.738
	ER2	0.873			
	ER3	0.873			
	ER4	0.829			
	ER5	0.874			
Mindfulness	MF1	0.935	0.944	0.958	0.820
	MF2	0.860			
	MF3	0.932			
	MF4	0.936			
	MF5	0.859			

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Alpha	CR	AVE
Social alienation	SA1	0.867	0.882	0.914	0.680
	SA2	0.830			
	SA3	0.819			
	SA4	0.816			
	SA5	0.789			
Self-exploration	SE1	0.736	0.819	0.851	0.533
	SE2	0.678			
	SE3	0.705			
	SE4	0.784			
	SE5	0.743			
Spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion	SPITS1	0.699	0.830	0.859	0.555
	SPITS2	0.864			
	SPITS3	0.847			
	SPITS4	0.575			
	SPITS5	0.701			

#### 4.2. Discriminant Validity Assessment by Using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion

By using this criterion, discriminant validity is established when the values given on the diagonal are higher than the values given off-diagonal in the same row and column. The values on the diagonal are greater than the corresponding off-diagonal correlations, hence suggesting good discriminant validity (see Table 2).

The highest correlation (0.636) is observed between the constructs ER and SPITS, indicating a strong association between emotional regulation and spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion. Other correlations (for example, between MF and SA = 0.497 and between SPITS and SE = 0.641) are moderate, indicating interrelated but distinct constructs. In this way, none of the off-diagonal correlations exceed the diagonal values, which supports discriminant validity.

**Table 2.** Fornell Larcker.

Constructs	ER	MF	SA	SE	SPITS
ER	0.859				
MF	0.392	0.905			
SA	0.401	0.497	0.825		
SE	0.365	0.369	0.361	0.730	
SPITS	0.636	0.465	0.422	0.641	0.745

#### 4.3. Cross-Loadings for Discriminant Validity Assessment

Cross loadings assess discriminant validity by ensuring that each indicator loads higher on its assigned construct than on any other construct. This assessment helps in confirming that the indicators are strongly related to their respective constructs (see Table 3). Ranging from 0.829 to 0.874, all the items of the construct emotional regulation (ER), from ER1 to ER5, have the highest loadings on ER compared to other constructs, indicating strong alignment with the ER construct. Ranging from 0.859 to 0.936, all the items of the construct mindfulness (MF), from MF1 to MF5, load highest on MF, demonstrating strong construct specificity.

The items SA1 to SA5 of the construct social alienation (SA) have the highest loadings (ranging from 0.789 to 0.867) on SA, confirming alignment with the SA construct. Items SE1 to SE5 load highest on self-exploration (SE), demonstrating their relevance to the SE construct. Items SPITS1 to SPITS5 of the construct Spiritual Painting Inspired by Taoist Seclusion (SPITS) load highest on SPITS (ranging from 0.575 to 0.864). Cross-loadings are significantly lower for most items, confirming good discriminant validity, except for SPITS4, which shows moderate cross-loading with ER (0.645).

**Table 3.** Cross-loadings.

Indicators/Constructs	ER	MF	SA	SE	SPITS
ER1	0.844	0.300	0.344	0.338	0.518
ER2	0.873	0.348	0.344	0.273	0.572
ER3	0.873	0.313	0.324	0.331	0.518
ER4	0.829	0.359	0.306	0.318	0.568
ER5	0.874	0.366	0.397	0.307	0.557
MF1	0.331	0.935	0.442	0.336	0.417
MF2	0.386	0.860	0.465	0.330	0.423
MF3	0.332	0.932	0.444	0.335	0.415
MF4	0.334	0.936	0.436	0.341	0.417
MF5	0.389	0.859	0.458	0.327	0.428
SA1	0.338	0.410	0.867	0.291	0.339
SA2	0.317	0.389	0.830	0.319	0.390
SA3	0.339	0.408	0.819	0.270	0.331
SA4	0.298	0.382	0.816	0.289	0.263
SA5	0.353	0.450	0.789	0.316	0.399
SE1	0.265	0.142	0.248	0.736	0.273
SE2	0.150	0.161	0.121	0.678	0.327
SE3	0.115	0.105	0.108	0.705	0.273
SE4	0.385	0.471	0.400	0.784	0.749
SE5	0.258	0.139	0.252	0.743	0.268
SPITS1	0.676	0.194	0.180	0.324	0.699
SPITS2	0.408	0.466	0.417	0.641	0.864
SPITS3	0.366	0.473	0.439	0.633	0.847
SPITS4	0.645	0.216	0.160	0.199	0.575
SPITS5	0.674	0.193	0.185	0.321	0.701

#### 4.4. Discriminant Validity Assessment Using Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio

In structural equation modeling, the HTMT ratio is used to assess discriminant validity. For conceptually distinct constructs, HTMT values should typically be below 0.85, while in more lenient cases, HTMT values should be below 0.90 to confirm adequate discriminant validity.

All constructs demonstrate adequate discriminant validity based on the HTMT criterion. The relationship between ER and SPITS warrants closer attention as it approaches the threshold (0.827) but remains acceptable (see Table 4). Other construct relationships are distinct and meet the HTMT requirements. HTMT ratios between ER and other constructs are all below 0.85, except for the relationship with SPITS (0.827), which is close to the threshold. This indicates a strong association between ER and SPITS, but still within acceptable limits for discriminant validity.

HTMT ratios between MF and other constructs are below 0.85, confirming discriminant validity for this construct. For example, MF and SA (0.541) and MF and SPITS (0.452) show moderate relationships but remain distinct. HTMT values between SA and other constructs are all below 0.85, demonstrating good discriminant validity. The highest is with MF (0.541), which is well within acceptable limits. HTMT ratios involving SE and other constructs are all relatively low, with the highest being SE and SPITS (0.529). This confirms strong discriminant validity for SE. The HTMT ratio between SPITS and ER is 0.827, which is close to the threshold but acceptable. The ratios with other constructs, such as SPITS and SA (0.415) and SPITS and SE (0.529), are well below 0.85, supporting discriminant validity.

**Table 4.** Heterotrait Monotrait ratio.

Constructs	ER	MF	SA	SE	SPITS
ER					
MF	0.423				
SA	0.443	0.541			
SE	0.356	0.304	0.349		
SPITS	0.827	0.452	0.415	0.529	

#### 4.5. Measurement Model Depicting Relationships Between Constructs and Indicators

The diagram visually assesses the reliability and validity of the measurement items associated with each construct by focusing on the relationships between the latent constructs and their corresponding indicators. Blue circles in the diagram represent abstract variables or constructs being studied. Each latent construct is measured through its indicators (in the yellow boxes), which are specific items in the survey. The indicators are linked to their constructs with arrows showing the loadings, indicating how strongly each indicator correlates with the construct. Most indicators have loadings above 0.7, which is considered acceptable for reliability. For example, ER1 (0.844), SPITS3 (0.847), and MF1 (0.935). Some indicators, like SPITS4 (0.575) and SPITS1 (0.699), have weaker loadings, suggesting potential issues with their contribution to the construct. In the diagram, solid lines represent significant structural relationships. The diagram confirms that most indicators strongly load onto their respective constructs, demonstrating construct reliability. Constructs such as ER, MF, and SA are well-measured by their respective indicators, as seen from their strong loadings. The path from SPITS to SE (0.656) shows that Spiritual Painting Inspired by Taoist Seclusion strongly predicts Self-Exploration. The path from SPITS to SA (0.166) indicates a weaker but still positive relationship with Social Alienation. Figure 3 shows a measurement assessment model as a summary of the relationship between constructs, their indicators, and their respective loadings.

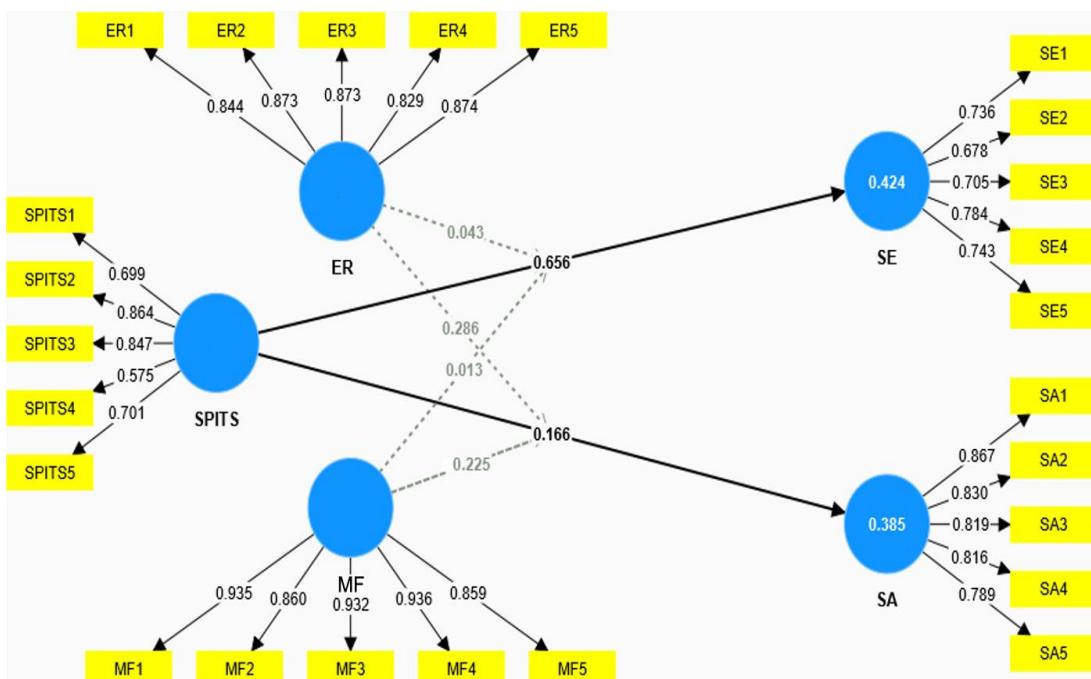


Figure 3. Measurement assessment model.

#### 4.6. Path Coefficients, T-Statistics, and P-Values for Structural Model Analysis

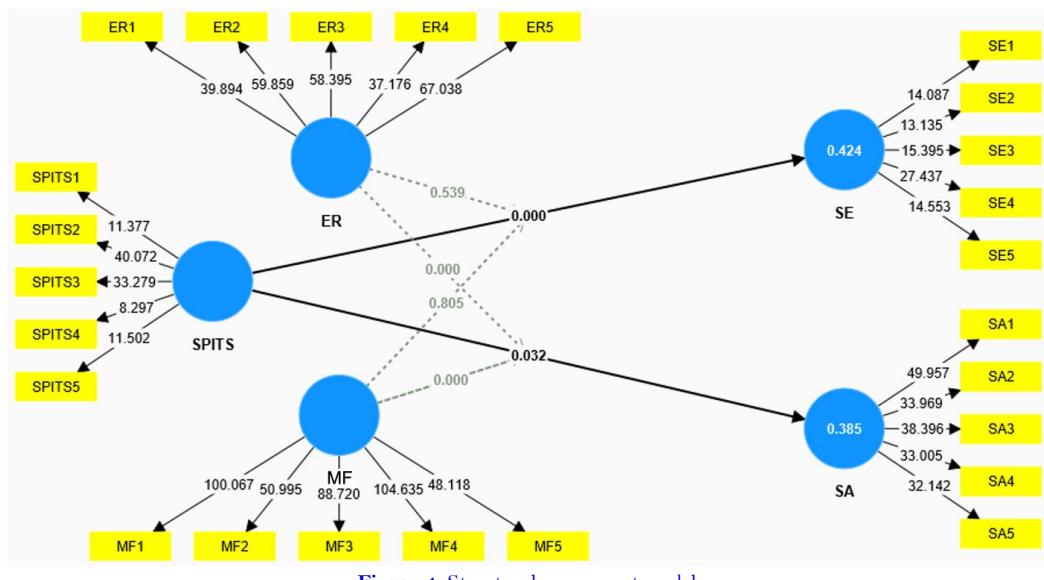
This Table 5 presents the numerical results of the structural model, quantifying the relationships between constructs, their strength, statistical significance, and moderating effects. The values in the table indicate that spiritual painting strongly influences self-exploration but weakly influences SA. Emotional regulation significantly moderates the relationship between SPITS, indicating that individuals with strong emotional regulation skills are better able to manage the alienation effects of spiritual painting. Mindfulness also significantly moderates the relationship between SPITS and SA. It suggests that mindfulness practices reduce the alienation effects by promoting present-moment awareness and acceptance. Both emotional regulation and mindfulness do not significantly moderate the relationship between SPITS and SE.

**Table 5.** Path analysis.

Relationships	Beta	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
SPITS -> SA	0.166	0.076	2.173	0.032
SPITS -> SE	0.656	0.055	11.981	0.000
ER x SPITS -> SA	0.286	0.071	4.054	0.000
ER x SPITS -> SE	0.043	0.069	0.616	0.539
MF x SPITS -> SA	0.225	0.057	3.961	0.000
MF x SPITS -> SE	0.013	0.051	0.247	0.805

#### 4.7. Structural Model with Path Coefficients, T-Statistics, and P-Values

The Figure 4 illustrates the structural model of the study, which evaluates the direct effects and moderating effects of the latent variables on one another, supported by path coefficients, explained variances ( $R^2$ ), and p-values. Spiritual painting inspired by Taoist seclusion has a strong, positive, and significant effect on self-exploration. Meanwhile, SPITS has a weaker but still significant positive effect on social alienation. Emotional regulation significantly moderates the relationship between SPITS and social alienation. Mindfulness also significantly moderates the relationship between SPITS and social alienation, mitigating feelings of alienation. Both moderating effects are non-significant, indicating that emotional regulation and mindfulness do not significantly influence the impact of SPITS on self-exploration. A substantial proportion of the variance (42.4%) is explained by SPITS, indicating its central role in promoting self-awareness. Moderate variance (38.5%) is explained by SPITS, ER, and MF, showing a combined effect. Figure 4 displays a structural assessment model as a summary of the relationships between constructs, their indicators, and their respective loadings.

**Figure 4.** Structural assessment model.

## 5. DISCUSSION

To compare the findings of this study with the insights drawn from previously conducted studies, the discussion focuses on comparisons that shed light on how the current findings align with or diverge from existing literature.

The study reveals a strong positive relationship between SPITS and SE. Niu and Fauzi (2024) and Youvan (2024) also emphasize how Taoist-inspired art fosters introspection by encouraging a connection with nature and solitude. Ioannidou (2022) found that artistic engagement with existential themes leads to a deeper understanding of personal values and beliefs, consistent with the current findings. Şenel (2022) noted the meditative aspect of spiritual art, reinforcing how the balance and harmony in Taoist-inspired paintings promote self-reflection and self-exploration.

Correspondingly, Jungian theory (Jung, 2020) posits that art serves as a conduit for revealing unconscious facets of the self, aligning with the findings provided above.

The study's findings reveal a modest yet statistically significant positive correlation between SPITS and SA. This indicates that spiritual art may exacerbate emotions of isolation, possibly due to its focus on solitude and detachment. The results of this study align with those of Wang, Li, Shi, Shi, and Mi (2018), suggesting that solitary artistic endeavors may sometimes exacerbate feelings of social alienation. Senel (2022) asserted that spiritual painting, despite its contemplative essence, substantially enhances the cultivation of a broader awareness of interconnectedness with universal truths and collective experiences. Quanjin and Simatrang (2024) noted that while spiritual art promotes reflection, it may impede artists' social interactions due to its focus on existential and personal matters. This discovery substantiates the results of the study.

Research indicates that emotional management significantly influences the relationship between SPITS and SA. This suggests that individuals with better emotional regulation report reduced feelings of estrangement during spiritual painting. Nonetheless, ER does not substantially influence the link between SPITS and SE. Ioannidou (2022) proposed that although emotional regulation facilitates the management of alienation, self-exploration via art frequently occurs independently of this regulation, aligning with the found non-significant moderation on SPITS and SE.

Mindfulness significantly moderates the relationship between SPITS and SA, indicating that mindfulness practices mitigate feelings of alienation by promoting present-moment awareness and acceptance. However, mindfulness does not significantly moderate the relationship between SPITS and SE. There are some studies Hongjing (2024) and Quanjin and Simatrang (2024), which discussed how mindfulness enhances the positive effects of spiritual art, particularly by reducing distress and alienation, consistent with the findings of this study. Ioannidou (2022) noted that while mindfulness aids in managing negative emotions, its impact on fostering self-exploration is minimal, supporting the non-significant moderating role on SPITS and SE observed in this study.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Data collected from 390 Chinese fine arts students provided valuable insights into the psychological and social dimensions of Taoist-inspired art. This paper focused on an investigation of the relationship between self-exploration and social alienation. It explored from this perspective the influence of spiritual art, rooted in Taoist isolation. Further, this study investigated emotional control and mindfulness as potential moderator variables. The research findings reveal that SPITS has a significant positive association with SE. Consequently, this finding is convincing testimony to the powerful contribution that spiritual painting can make in stimulating contemplation, self-consciousness, and personal development. These findings are consistent with the overall Taoist goals of self-exploration through the medium of art, i.e., to realize a harmonious harmony and an inward-looking, reflective contemplation. The results of the study show that SPITS has not only a small but also a substantial link with SA. This means that although spiritual painting arouses contemplation, it can also bring about thoughts of loneliness because of the overriding presence of solitude. Spiritual painting considers solitude at a high level. In addition, ER and MF played a role in mitigating the relation between the two variables. Individuals who were better able to control their emotions and demonstrated greater mindfulness did a better job of minimizing perceived alienation from spiritual art. The fact that both groups significantly reduced the relationship between SPITS and SA was evidence of this. However, they were found to exhibit minimal moderating effects on SPITS and SE, meaning that self-exploration was minimally affected by these features, and the introspective part of the painting process was the main driver of self-exploration. As social exploration was a primary driver of social alienation, this is largely because the introspective aspect of the painting process itself was a primary driver of social exploration.

### 6.1. Implications of the Study

This study contributes its findings to an understanding of how spiritual painting changes self-exploration, social alienation, emotional regulation, and mindfulness. The practical applications of the discovery will likely have real-world implications for educational, mental health, and artistic domains. In this direction, it is possible for art teachers to incorporate Taoism-influenced painting techniques into their fine arts classes, resulting in motivating students to engage in self-reflection and personal development activities. By emphasizing the thoughtful and introspective aspects of painting, students are better able to understand their feelings, beliefs, and motivations. It could help students develop their artistic characteristics.

Therapists and counselors can use spiritual painting as a therapeutic method to assist their clients in the study of their own identities and the regulation of their emotions. This can be accomplished through the use of spiritual painting. With the use of art therapy influenced by Taoist seclusion, individuals experiencing social alienation may find it to be a beneficial form of self-expression that supports them in restoring their sense of purpose.

A combination of spiritual painting and mindfulness techniques has the ability to enhance the therapeutic impact. This combination has the potential to assist individuals in concentrating on the present moment while simultaneously reducing levels of stress and anxiety. In the context of employee wellness programs, businesses have the option to incorporate spiritual art workshops to minimize the effects of burnout, improve emotional regulation, and increase creative output. These goals can be achieved by encouraging employees to participate in such workshops. Promoting engagement in reflective creative practices is beneficial for fostering creativity and problem-solving skills within the workforce. These techniques provide workers with opportunities to explore their own feelings and thoughts internally. The significance of Taoist philosophy in contemporary society is highlighted by this research, emphasizing its relevance. Art institutions and cultural groups can promote art influenced by Taoism, thereby preserving this rich cultural tradition while encouraging universal themes of contemplation and harmony.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study involved minimal risk and adhered to ethical guidelines for social science fieldwork. Formal approval from an Institutional Review Board was not required under the policies of School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.

**Transparency:** The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

**Competing Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Authors' Contributions:** Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**Appendix 1. Details on each of the indicators of the constructs SPITS, SE, SA, ER and MF.**

**Spiritual Painting Inspired by Taoist Seclusion (SPITS)**

SPITS1: The painting you observed includes elements that symbolize solitude (e.g., a lone figure, empty space).

SPITS2: The painting features natural elements (e.g., mountains, trees, rivers) that reflect a connection with nature.

SPITS3: The artwork evokes a sense of inner peace and tranquility.

SPITS4: The themes in the artwork resonate with Taoist values such as balance and harmony.

SPITS5: Viewing the artwork made me reflect on spiritual or existential questions.

**Self-Exploration (SE)**

SE1: I often think about my personal values and beliefs.

SE2: I regularly reflect on the motivations behind my actions and decisions.

SE3: I feel more aware of my emotions and how they affect my behavior.

SE4: Reflecting on my life helps me understand my deeper purpose.

SE5: I believe I have grown as a person through my self-reflection and introspection.

**Social Alienation (SA)**

SA1: I often feel disconnected from others, even in social settings.

SA2: I have trouble fitting in with social groups or community events.

SA3: I sometimes feel like I don't belong in society or among my peers.

SA4: I tend to withdraw from social interactions because of my feelings of isolation.

SA5: I often feel misunderstood or out of place when interacting with others.

**Emotional Regulation (ER)**

ER1: I am usually aware of my emotions as they occur.

ER2: When I feel angry or upset, I can control my emotional responses effectively.

ER3: I have developed healthy coping strategies to deal with difficult emotions (e.g., stress, frustration).

ER4: I am able to express my emotions in a way that is socially appropriate.

ER5: I can manage my emotional reactions without letting them negatively affect my behavior.

**Mindfulness (MF)**

MF1: I am able to focus on the present moment without being distracted by past or future thoughts.

MF2: I observe my thoughts and feelings without labeling them as good or bad.

MF3: I find it easy to accept whatever emotions arise, without trying to suppress or avoid them.

MF4: I am aware of my surroundings, my body, and my immediate sensory experience.

MF5: I make a conscious effort to remain present and engaged in my current activity.

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