

COGNITIVE DESIGN MECHANISM OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSUMPTION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SHANXI STILTED BEAST MASK CULTURAL PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT

The commercialization of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) requires not only aesthetic transformation but also psychological activation mechanisms. This study investigates the cognitive - design transmission mechanism underlying consumer purchase intention toward Shanxi Stilted Beast Mask cultural products. A design - based mixed-method approach was employed, combining prototype reconstruction and quantitative survey analysis. First, representative beast-mask prototypes were reconstructed through symbolic extraction, geometric simplification, and contemporary visual translation. Second, a questionnaire survey involving 400 respondents was conducted to empirically examine the relationships among ICH cognition, cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention. Reliability and validity tests indicated satisfactory measurement quality (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.80; KMO > 0.85; Bartlett's Test, $p < .001$). Regression analysis revealed that ICH cognition significantly predicted cultural identity ($\beta = .64$, $p < .001$), cultural identity significantly influenced perceived value ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$), and perceived value strongly predicted purchase intention ($\beta = .72$, $p < .001$). Mediation analysis further confirmed that cultural identity and perceived value jointly mediated the relationship between cognition and purchase intention, accounting for 62% of the total effect. The study proposes a Cognitive - Design Transmission Model that explains how visual reconstruction of cultural symbols can activate consumer cognition, strengthen cultural identity, enhance perceived value, and ultimately promote purchase intention. The findings provide both theoretical support and practical guidance for the sustainable transformation of intangible cultural heritage into contemporary cultural and creative products.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Stilted Beast Masks, Cultural Identity, Perceived Value, Purchase Intention, Cultural and Creative Design

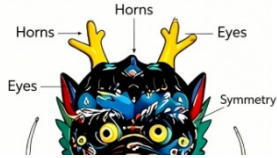
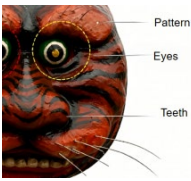
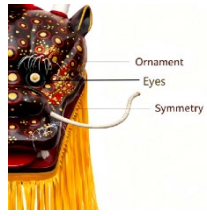
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INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) represents living cultural memory embedded in ritual practices, symbolic forms, and regional identity systems. In recent years, the transformation of ICH elements into cultural and creative products has become a key strategy for cultural revitalization and economic sustainability. However, many ICH-based products suffer from superficial symbolic transplantation and weak consumer engagement. Existing research has primarily focused on heritage preservation policies and design innovation, while limited attention has been paid to the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer purchase intention. In particular, how visual reconstruction of traditional prototypes activates cultural cognition and identity remains underexplored.

This study addresses the following research question: How does visual prototype translation of ICH influence consumer purchase intention through cognitive and identity mechanisms? To answer this question, this research integrates design semiotics and consumer behavior theory to construct and empirically validate a cognitive - identity - value - behavior model.

Table 1 Process of symbolic extraction and modern visual reconstruction of big monsters walking on stilts masks

	Traditional Prototype	Core Symbol Extraction	Contemporary Reconstruction
Qilin Mask			
Black Tiger Mask			
Deer Mask			
Ao Mask			

The figure illustrates the transformation of traditional ritual masks into contemporary cultural design identities. Through morphological analysis, core symbolic features such as exaggerated eyes, horn structures, facial symmetry, and decorative patterns were extracted and simplified. The reconstructed visual forms retain cultural authenticity while adapting to contemporary aesthetic preferences and cultural product development requirements.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To address the gap between intangible cultural heritage preservation and contemporary cultural product development, this study establishes the following research objectives:

- 1) To identify and reconstruct the core visual symbols of Shanxi Stilted Beast Masks.
- 2) To develop a contemporary cultural product design strategy based on symbolic reconstruction.
- 3) To empirically examine the influence of reconstructed cultural symbols on consumer cognition, cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage Transformation

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) represents collective cultural memory embodied in ritual practices, craftsmanship, and symbolic expressions transmitted across generations. Rather than existing as static historical artifacts, ICH continuously evolves through interaction between communities, environments, and contemporary social contexts. Previous studies emphasize that sustainable heritage preservation relies not only on documentation but also on adaptive transformation within modern life systems.

Existing research on Chinese folk masks primarily focuses on historical origin, craftsmanship techniques, and ritual functions. Studies on Shanxi stilted beast masks demonstrate that these ritual objects integrate mythological imagination, agricultural beliefs, and communal identity formation. The hybrid structure combining human performance and zoomorphic imagery constructs a unique symbolic system representing blessing invocation, evil expulsion, and collective protection. However, most heritage studies remain preservation-oriented and rarely address how traditional symbolic systems can effectively enter contemporary cultural consumption contexts.

With the expansion of cultural and creative industries, scholars increasingly highlight the necessity of transforming heritage symbols into market-oriented cultural products. Nevertheless, many practical applications still rely on direct visual imitation or decorative transplantation, resulting in weakened cultural meaning and limited consumer engagement.

Design Semiotics and Symbol Reconstruction

Semiotics provides an essential theoretical foundation for interpreting and transforming cultural symbols. According to semiotic theory, cultural artifacts operate through relationships between signifier, signified meaning, and contextual usage. Folk masks function as multilayer symbolic systems composed of morphological structure, color semantics, and ritual performance scenarios. Previous studies classify mask symbols into syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions. Morphological elements such as exaggerated eyes, animal horns, and symmetrical facial structures operate as visual signifiers, while colors and patterns communicate culturally shared meanings such as auspiciousness, authority, or protection. Through symbolic abstraction and recombination, traditional ritual symbols can be translated into contemporary visual language without losing cultural authenticity. Recent research further proposes that effective cultural design transformation requires systematic reconstruction rather than aesthetic simplification. Symbol transformation typically involves three processes: syntactic reorganization, semantic extension, and pragmatic adaptation. This mechanism enables ritual symbols to shift from sacred ceremonial contexts toward everyday consumption scenarios while maintaining cultural continuity. Despite these theoretical advances, empirical validation linking symbolic reconstruction to user perception and behavioral outcomes remains insufficient in existing design research.

Cultural Identity and Consumer Psychological Mechanisms

Cultural identity theory explains how individuals develop emotional attachment and a sense of belonging through recognition of shared cultural symbols. When heritage elements are

cognitively understood, they activate symbolic meaning and strengthen identity resonance. This psychological process plays a crucial role in determining audience acceptance of culturally derived products. Consumer behavior research further demonstrates that perceived value acts as a mediating factor between cultural meaning and behavioral intention. Symbolic value, emotional value, and cultural authenticity jointly influence purchasing decisions. However, current heritage design studies rarely integrate identity formation mechanisms with visual design transformation processes. In many ICH-based product developments, the absence of cognitive engagement results in products functioning merely as decorative commodities rather than carriers of cultural meaning. Consequently, establishing measurable relationships between cultural cognition, identity formation, and consumer intention has become an important research gap in contemporary heritage design studies.

Consumer Value Theory and Heritage Consumption

According to Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991), consumer choice behavior is influenced by multiple dimensions of perceived value, including functional value, emotional value, social value, epistemic value, and conditional value. In the context of intangible cultural heritage products, consumers often evaluate products not only according to practical utility but also based on cultural authenticity, emotional resonance, and symbolic meaning. Heritage products possessing strong cultural narratives and recognizable symbolic identities are more likely to generate emotional attachment and social recognition. This perspective provides an important theoretical explanation for why reconstructed heritage symbols may influence purchasing decisions. Through effective symbolic reconstruction, traditional cultural elements can be transformed into contemporary visual identities that strengthen emotional engagement and cultural value perception. Therefore, perceived value functions as a critical psychological mechanism linking cultural identity and purchase intention.

Research Gap and Theoretical Integration

To address these limitations, this study proposes a semiotic translation process for transforming traditional ritual symbols into contemporary design language.

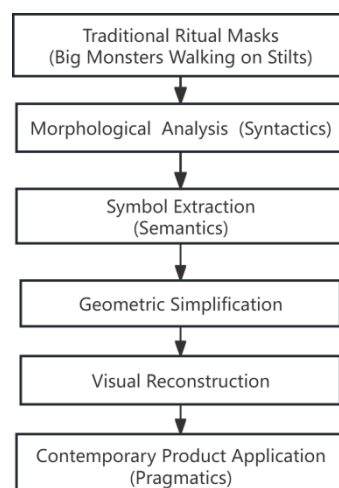


Figure 1 Semiotic Translation Process of Big Monsters Walking on Stilts Masks Based on Morris's Semiotic Dimensions

Figure 1 illustrates the semiotic translation process adopted in this study. Based on Morris's semiotic framework, traditional ritual masks are transformed into contemporary cultural product designs through three interconnected dimensions: syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. The process begins with morphological analysis of visual forms, followed by symbol extraction and interpretation of cultural meanings, and concludes with the application of reconstructed symbols in contemporary cultural and creative products.

Based on this semiotic translation process, the reconstructed visual identities are further examined through a cognitive - design transmission mechanism.

Semiotic Translation Framework

To bridge the gap between traditional heritage preservation and contemporary design application, this study develops a Semiotic Translation Framework. The framework conceptualizes cultural transformation as a sequential process consisting of six stages: traditional ritual prototype identification, morphological analysis, symbol extraction, geometric simplification, visual reconstruction, and contemporary product application. Through this process, culturally meaningful visual elements are retained while being adapted to contemporary aesthetic preferences and product development requirements. The framework serves as the design foundation for the subsequent empirical investigation of consumer cognition, cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention.

A synthesis of existing literature reveals three major limitations: 1) Heritage studies emphasize historical interpretation but lack behavioral verification mechanisms; 2) Design practices frequently adopt superficial pattern transplantation instead of systematic symbolic reconstruction; and 3) Interdisciplinary integration between design semiotics and consumer psychology remains limited. To address these gaps, this study integrates design semiotics, cultural identity theory, and perceived value theory into a unified analytical framework. Prototype reconstruction is therefore conceptualized not merely as visual redesign but as a process of psychological activation connecting cultural symbolism with consumer behavior. Based on this integration, the study proposes a Cognitive - Design Transmission mechanism linking:

ICH Cognition → Cultural Identity → Perceived Value → Purchase Intention

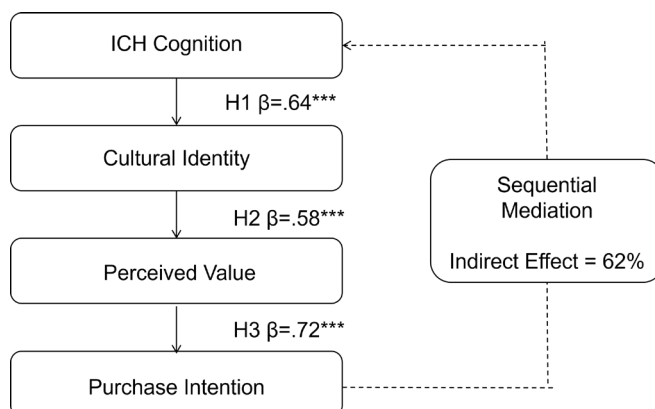


Figure 2 Proposed Cognitive - Design Transmission Model

The model explains how consumers' cognition of intangible cultural heritage influences cultural identity, which subsequently enhances perceived value and ultimately affects purchase intention. The sequential mediation effect indicates that cultural identity and perceived value jointly mediate the relationship between ICH cognition and purchase intention.

This framework establishes a bridge between cultural heritage transformation and empirical consumer research, providing theoretical support for sustainable development of contemporary cultural and creative products.

While Figure 1 explains how traditional ritual symbols are translated into contemporary design language, Figure 2 illustrates the psychological mechanism through which reconstructed symbols influence consumer behavioral intention.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the proposed model explains how reconstructed heritage symbols influence consumer purchase intention through a sequential psychological mechanism involving cognition, identity formation, and value perception.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a design-based mixed-method research design combining qualitative prototype reconstruction and quantitative survey analysis. The qualitative phase focused on symbolic extraction and prototype reconstruction of Shanxi Stilted Beast Masks, while the quantitative phase examined the relationships among ICH cognition, cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention. Based on the proposed conceptual framework, the study aims to empirically test the causal relationships between cognitive perception, emotional identification, and consumer behavioral intention. A structured questionnaire survey was employed as the primary data collection method. The research framework assumes that individuals' cognition of ICH culture influences cultural identity formation, which further enhances perceived value and ultimately affects purchase intention. Hypotheses were developed according to existing theories in cultural consumption and consumer behavior, and statistical analysis was conducted to verify the proposed relationships.

Based on the theoretical foundation and research hypotheses, an overall research framework was constructed to illustrate the relationships among ICH cognition, cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention.

Measurement Development

The measurement items used in this study were adapted from established scales in previous studies related to cultural identity, perceived value, and consumer purchase behavior. All constructs were modified to fit the context of ICH cultural and creative products based on traditional mask culture.

The questionnaire consisted of four main latent variables: (1) ICH Cognition, measuring respondents' understanding and awareness of intangible cultural heritage culture; (2) Cultural Identity, reflecting emotional recognition and cultural belonging toward traditional cultural symbols; (3) Perceived Value, evaluating consumers' perceived functional, cultural, and aesthetic value of cultural creative products; and (4) Purchase Intention, assessing consumers' willingness to purchase or recommend related products.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Prior to formal distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed and refined to ensure clarity and contextual appropriateness. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to evaluate internal consistency. Validity testing, including item correlation and construct suitability analysis, was performed to ensure measurement accuracy and stability.

The required sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) sample size formula for large populations. Based on a confidence level of 95%, a margin of error of 5%, and an assumed population proportion of 0.50, the minimum recommended sample size was 384 respondents. To improve statistical reliability and ensure adequate representation, 400 valid questionnaires were ultimately collected and included in the final analysis.

Data Collection and Sample Characteristics

Table 2 Sample Characteristics (N = 400)

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	60	15.0
	Female	340	85.0
Age	18 - 25	376	94.0
	Others	24	6.0
ICH Knowledge	Very Familiar	36	9.0
	Familiar	119	29.8

Moderate	164	41.0
Not Familiar	81	20.2

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Among the 400 valid participants, females accounted for 85.0% of the sample, while males represented 15.0%. The majority of respondents (94.0%) were between 18 and 25 years old, reflecting the dominant participation of young consumers. Students constituted 93.8% of the sample, and most respondents possessed a junior college education level (93.5%). Regarding intangible cultural heritage awareness, 79.8% of respondents reported having at least a moderate understanding of Shanxi intangible cultural heritage culture. These characteristics indicate that the sample primarily represents the younger generation, which constitutes an important target group for contemporary cultural and creative product consumption. Since the majority of respondents were young students aged 18-25, the findings may primarily reflect the consumption preferences of younger consumer groups rather than the entire Chinese market.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via the Questionnaire Star (Wenjuanxing) platform. Before answering the questionnaire, all participants were presented with a set of reconstructed cultural product prototypes derived from the Big Monsters Walking on Stilts mask system, including the Qilin, Black Tiger, Deer, and Ao mask designs shown in Table 1 and Figure 3. These reconstructed visual prototypes served as the experimental stimuli for the study. Participants were instructed to carefully review the visual materials before evaluating their perceptions of intangible cultural heritage cognition, cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention. The use of standardized visual stimuli ensured that respondents' evaluations were based on the reconstructed design outcomes rather than solely on their prior knowledge of traditional mask culture.

This approach enabled efficient access to respondents with diverse demographic backgrounds and consumption experiences related to cultural and creative products. A total of 400 valid responses were obtained after eliminating incomplete or invalid questionnaires. The sample included participants of different genders, age groups, educational levels, and occupational backgrounds, ensuring adequate representation for statistical analysis. Convenience sampling was adopted due to accessibility and feasibility considerations commonly applied in consumer behavior research. Respondents were informed of the academic purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary and anonymous to ensure response authenticity.

Data Analysis Techniques

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS software to examine the proposed research model. The analytical procedure consisted of several stages.

First, descriptive statistical analysis was performed to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and general response distribution. Second, reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha was applied to assess internal consistency among measurement items.

Subsequently, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among ICH cognition, cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention. Multiple regression analysis was then employed to test the hypothesized causal relationships and evaluate the predictive effects among variables within the conceptual framework. Through these analytical procedures, the study systematically verified the influence mechanism of cultural cognition and identity formation on consumers' perceived value and purchasing intention toward ICH cultural and creative products.

Reliability and Validity Testing

Table 3 Reliability and Validity Results

Construct	Alpha
ICH Cognition	0.842
Cultural Identity	0.876
Perceived Value	0.901
Purchase Intention	0.821
Overall Scale	0.912

Note. KMO = 0.893; Bartlett's Test $\chi^2 = 2856.74$, $p < .001$

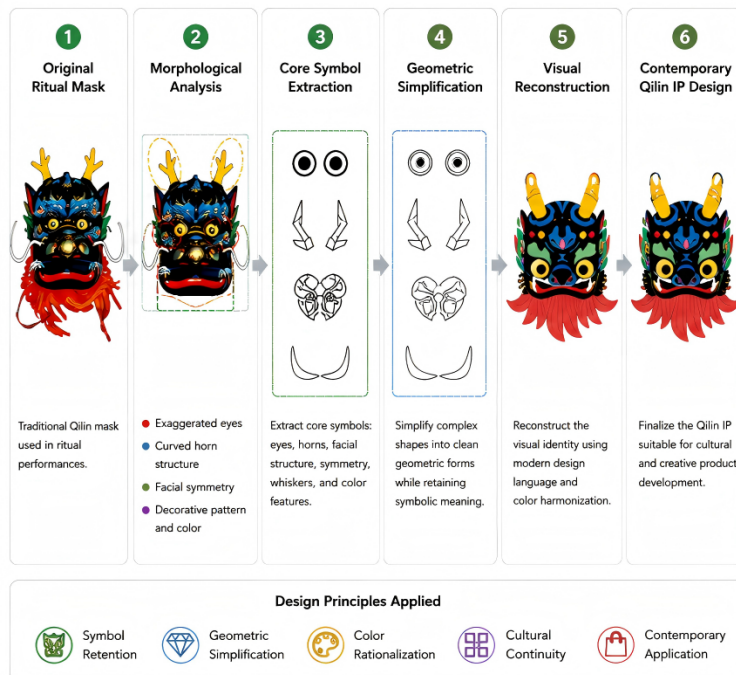
Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The overall questionnaire achieved an Alpha value of 0.912, indicating excellent internal consistency. The Alpha values for ICH Cognition, Cultural Identity, Perceived Value, and Purchase Intention ranged from 0.821 to 0.901.

Construct validity was evaluated through Kaiser - Meyer - Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value was 0.893, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Bartlett's Test was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2856.74$, $p < .001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis.

Exploratory Factor Analysis extracted four principal factors corresponding to the proposed theoretical constructs, explaining 71.3% of the total variance.

RESEARCH RESULTS

To verify the practical applicability of the proposed research framework, this study conducted a prototype reconstruction experiment based on the Qilin ritual mask derived from the mask culture of big monsters walking on stilts. The reconstruction process translates traditional symbolic elements into contemporary cultural product design through a systematic transformation approach.



The figure demonstrates the six-stage process of reconstructing the traditional Qilin mask into a contemporary IP design. Through morphological analysis, symbol extraction, geometric simplification, and visual reconstruction, the design retains cultural authenticity while adapting to modern aesthetic preferences and product development needs.

Figure 3 Prototype Reconstruction Process of Qilin Mask Design

This figure illustrates the practical application of the proposed Semiotic Translation Framework through the reconstruction of the traditional Qilin ritual mask. The process begins with the identification of key morphological features, including horn structures, exaggerated eyes, facial symmetry, and decorative patterns. These cultural elements are subsequently extracted, simplified, and reorganized through geometric abstraction and visual refinement. The final reconstructed design preserves the symbolic characteristics of the original ritual prototype while adapting its visual language to contemporary cultural and creative product development. The example demonstrates how traditional heritage symbols can be transformed into modern design identities without losing cultural authenticity.

Based on the framework illustrated in Figure 3, the design process follows three sequential stages: symbolic extraction, visual simplification, and contemporary reconstruction. First, representative visual characteristics of the original ritual mask including exaggerated eyes, horn structures, symmetrical composition, and decorative color patterns were identified through cultural symbol analysis. These elements represent the core carriers of cultural meaning and visual identity within the traditional mask system.

Second, the extracted symbols were reorganized through geometric abstraction and form simplification. This stage aims to reduce excessive ornamental complexity while retaining recognizable symbolic features, thereby improving adaptability to modern product aesthetics and manufacturing conditions. Color relationships were simultaneously rationalized to enhance visual coherence and user acceptance.

Finally, the reconstructed visual language was applied to contemporary cultural and creative product development. The transformation outcome demonstrates how traditional ritual imagery can evolve into market-oriented design prototypes while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Statistical Analysis Results

Descriptive Statistics: Descriptive statistical analysis indicated that respondents generally demonstrated positive attitudes toward ICH cultural products. The mean scores of all variables exceeded 3.80 on a five-point scale.

Reliability and Validity Analysis: The reliability and validity analyses demonstrated satisfactory measurement quality. Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded 0.80, while the KMO value reached 0.893.

Correlation Analysis:

Table 4 Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4
ICH Cognition	1			
Cultural Identity	.64**	1		
Perceived Value	.58**	.71**	1	
Purchase Intention	.52**	.69**	.72**	1

**p<.01

Regression Analysis: Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses.

Table 5 Regression Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	p
H1	IC→CI	.64	<.001
H2	CI→PV	.58	<.001
H3	PV→PI	.72	<.001

Mediation Analysis: Sequential mediation analysis indicated that Cultural Identity and Perceived Value jointly mediated the relationship between ICH Cognition and Purchase Intention, accounting for approximately 62% of the total effect.

Table 6 Validation of Proposed Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H1	ICH Cognition → Cultural Identity	Supported
H2	Cultural Identity → Perceived Value	Supported
H3	Perceived Value → Purchase Intention	Supported
H4	Sequential Mediation	Supported

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Semiotic Interpretation

The findings support the proposition that reconstructed cultural symbols function as semiotic carriers capable of activating consumer cognition and emotional resonance. Through visual simplification and symbolic reconstruction, traditional ritual imagery is transformed into contemporary design language while preserving cultural authenticity. This result is consistent with semiotic theories suggesting that symbolic continuity is essential for maintaining cultural meaning during design adaptation.

Value Perception Interpretation

The significant influence of cultural identity on perceived value demonstrates that consumers evaluate heritage products through multiple value dimensions rather than functional utility alone. Consistent with Sheth's Theory of Consumption Values, emotional value, social value, and cultural authenticity emerge as important determinants of consumer preference. The reconstructed Big Monsters Walking on Stilts mask designs successfully enhance perceived value because they simultaneously preserve traditional symbolism and satisfy contemporary aesthetic expectations.

Design Implications

The study suggests that successful heritage commercialization should move beyond direct pattern transplantation and instead adopt a systematic symbolic reconstruction strategy. Designers should identify culturally meaningful symbols, retain their core semantic attributes, and reinterpret them through contemporary visual language. Such an approach can strengthen cultural identity, increase perceived value, and ultimately enhance market acceptance.

Academic Contributions

Theoretical Contribution: This study proposes a Cognitive - Design Transmission Model integrating design semiotics and consumer psychology, filling a gap in empirical validation of ICH transformation mechanisms.

Methodological Contribution: By combining qualitative prototype reconstruction with quantitative regression validation, the study establishes a dual-verification framework applicable to heritage design research.

Practical Contribution: The findings demonstrate that effective ICH commercialization requires psychological activation through identity resonance rather than superficial aesthetic adaptation.

Transferability: The proposed framework can be extended to other heritage contexts, such as ritual masks, folk totems, or traditional ornamentation systems, demonstrating broad applicability.

Conclusion

Through systematic prototype reconstruction and empirical validation, this study confirms that the transformation of intangible cultural heritage into cultural products operates through a structured cognitive - identity - value pathway. Cultural authenticity and contemporary expression must be balanced to achieve sustainable consumer engagement. The Cognitive-

Design Transmission Model provides both theoretical support and practical guidance for the living transformation of traditional cultural systems.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was collected through convenience sampling, which may limit generalizability. Second, the research focused exclusively on Shanxi Stilted Beast Mask culture. Future studies may compare different categories of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. Third, the current research primarily examined purchase intention rather than actual purchasing behavior. Future studies may incorporate experimental methods and behavioral tracking to further validate the proposed Cognitive – Design Transmission Model.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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