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SUSTAINABLE COMMERCIALIZATION AND EVIDENCE-BASED SAFEGUARDING OF SICHUAN OPERA FACIAL MASK CULTURAL PRODUCTS: DRIVERS OF WILLINGNESS TO PAY A PREMIUM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how commercialization can function as an evidence-based safeguarding mechanism for Sichuan Opera facial mask intangible cultural heritage by identifying the consumer-driven levers that sustain craft continuity without diluting cultural meaning. Using survey data from 420 respondents, we test a model linking cultural identity, premium perception, perceived authenticity, and perceived product quality to (a) purchase intention for cultural and creative products and (b) willingness to pay a price premium. Results indicate that cultural identity and premium perception are the most consistent predictors across outcomes, while authenticity and product quality mainly strengthen premium willingness when combined with credible provenance cues and transparent storytelling. To address integrity risks in digital marketplaces, we incorporate respondents' digital exposure to Sichuan Opera content as a control and discuss traceability, certification, and platform-based anti-counterfeit practices as practical safeguarding tools. The findings offer actionable guidance for heritage managers, designers, and cultural industries: premium value should be justified through verifiable authenticity (materials, craftsmanship, authorized motifs) and reinvested into training, documentation, and community benefit-sharing to align market success with long-term safeguarding.

KEYWORDS: Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH); Sichuan Opera; Facial Mask; Cultural and Creative Products; Cultural Identity; Perceived Authenticity; Premium Perception; Perceived Product Quality; Digital Culture; Provenance/Traceability; Anti-Counterfeiting; Willingness to Pay a Premium.

1. INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is increasingly understood as both a cultural asset and an economic resource. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes safeguarding, transmission, and community participation, yet many countries also seek sustainable models that allow heritage to be experienced, learned, and economically supported. In China, the expansion of cultural and creative industries has created a practical route: heritage symbols are translated into contemporary products that people can buy, use, display, and gift. These products include museum merchandise, performance related souvenirs, and design-led lifestyle items. Because such products embed cultural narratives and symbolic meanings, consumers often evaluate them differently from purely utilitarian goods. (Yan et al., 2024b)

Among Chinese performing arts traditions, Sichuan Opera (Chuanju) is widely recognized for its strong visual identity. Its facial masks (lianpu) form a distinctive semiotic system: color, line style, and graphic composition communicate character traits, social roles, and narrative function. When Sichuan Opera mask motifs migrate from the stage to consumer products, the purchase is not only about function; it also becomes an act of cultural consumption. Consumers may purchase a mask-themed item to express pride, connection, or curiosity toward Sichuan culture, to signal cultural taste, or to support cultural preservation. In this sense, willingness to purchase heritage-based products can be interpreted as a behavioral expression of cultural attachment and cultural meaning. (Zhang et al., 2024a)

However, commercialization also introduces a key tension. Cultural and creative products often carry premium prices due to design development, artist collaboration, museum licensing, small production runs, and higher-quality materials. Premium pricing can be economically beneficial because it can finance preservation and elevate perceptions of cultural value. Yet it can also trigger resistance if consumers interpret the premium as unjustified or as cultural exploitation. Therefore, understanding what drives consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for Sichuan Opera facial mask cultural and creative products is both a theoretical and practical problem. (Xu et al., 2024)

From a safeguarding perspective, the key managerial problem is not commercialization per se, but whether market demand can be steered toward authorized, culturally accurate, and community-

benefiting products. In fast-moving digital marketplaces, imitation designs and misused motifs can circulate quickly, creating integrity risks for lianpu symbolism and undermining artisans' livelihoods. Accordingly, this study treats commercialization as a potential safeguarding tool only when it is paired with verifiable provenance (e.g., authorized motifs, traceable workshops, and transparent storytelling) and when premium revenue is reinvested into training, documentation, and intergenerational transmission (Taghipour et al., 2018). To reflect this contemporary context, we include respondents' digital exposure to Sichuan Opera content as a control and discuss platform-based anti-counterfeit and traceability practices in the implications.

This study focuses on two complementary drivers. First, cultural identity reflects a person's perceived connection to cultural meanings and group belonging. Social identity theory argues that people define themselves partly through membership in social categories, and identity-consistent behaviors become psychologically meaningful. In consumption contexts, identity can motivate choices that affirm belonging, continuity, and self-expression. For heritage products, cultural identity can increase the perceived personal relevance of cultural symbols and can increase supportive behaviors such as advocacy, purchase, and willingness to accept higher prices. (Zhang et al., 2025a)

Second, premium perception captures the extent to which a consumer interprets higher price as conveying positive value signals. Price is not only a monetary sacrifice; it is also information. Research on price perceptions shows that consumers use price as an indicator of quality (price-quality inference) and, for some categories, as an indicator of prestige and status. In symbolic product categories, a premium can be interpreted as indicating authenticity, exclusivity, and craftsmanship. If consumers perceive that the premium reflects legitimate value rather than opportunistic markup, they may accept or even prefer premium-priced cultural goods. (Dong et al., 2025)

To connect these drivers to purchase outcomes, we incorporate perceived authenticity and perceived quality as value mechanisms. Authenticity is central to heritage consumption because consumers care whether a product is a "true" representation of the heritage motif and whether it is legitimately linked to the cultural practice. Perceived quality reflects functional performance and durability and is crucial in justifying premium pricing. Together, authenticity

and quality provide an explanatory bridge between cultural meanings and economic behavior. (Zhu, 2023)

This article provides empirical evidence using a survey study (N = 420). We measure cultural identity, premium perception, perceived authenticity, perceived quality, and purchase intention using established scale logic, and we measure WTP premium as the maximum percentage premium over a comparable non-cultural alternative. We estimate standardized regression models to test the determinants of purchase intention and WTP premium. The results show that cultural identity and premium perception are both important, and that authenticity and quality strengthen the pathways that transform cultural meaning into economic willingness. (Zhou et al., 2024)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. *Sichuan Opera Facial Masks and the Cultural and Creative Products Context*

Sichuan Opera integrates multiple performance traditions and is known for expressive singing, stylized movement, and vivid stage design. The facial mask system functions as an aesthetic shorthand that communicates narrative information quickly. The modern diffusion of Sichuan Opera imagery occurs through tourism, digital media, and cultural festivals, which increases public familiarity with mask motifs even among people who do not frequently attend opera performances. Creative industries leverage this visual identity to produce cultural and creative products such as pins, scarves, bags, notebooks, ceramics, phone cases, and collectible figurines. Because the mask motif is visually striking and culturally specific, it can differentiate products in crowded souvenir markets. (Li & Li, 2022)

From a marketing perspective, Sichuan Opera mask products are symbolic goods: their value is partly derived from meanings and stories. Such products can provide self-expressive benefits and social signaling benefits. From a cultural policy perspective, they may contribute to heritage transmission by keeping symbols visible in everyday life and by financing cultural institutions through licensing and collaboration. Yet symbolic goods also face authenticity challenges because imitation is common and consumers may question whether products respect heritage meaning or merely use motifs superficially. These concerns make authenticity and premium justification particularly

salient. (Yu et al., 2022)

Cultural identity is typically conceptualized as a psychological attachment to cultural meanings, practices, and a sense of belonging to a cultural group. Social identity theory posits that self-concept partly derives from group membership and that people seek positive distinctiveness and self-consistency through identity-relevant actions. In consumption research, identity-based motivation implies that when a product aligns with a valued identity, people experience increased preference, commitment, and willingness to act. Heritage-based products are especially identity-relevant because they symbolize collective narratives, cultural pride, and cultural continuity. (Cheng et al., 2024)

For Sichuan Opera facial mask products, cultural identity can operate through multiple routes. First, identity can increase perceived meaningfulness: the product is not only an object but a symbol of "who we are" or "where we come from." Second, identity can increase perceived moral value: purchasing can be interpreted as supporting cultural preservation rather than merely acquiring a commodity. Third, identity can increase emotional engagement because cultural symbols can trigger nostalgia, pride, or curiosity. These mechanisms imply that cultural identity should increase purchase intention. (Gu & Zhao, 2025)

H1: Cultural identity positively influences purchase intention for Sichuan Opera facial mask cultural and creative products.

2.3. *Premium Perception and Purchase Intention*

Premium perception reflects the extent to which consumers interpret higher price as a positive signal rather than a deterrent. Classic work on price perceptions suggests that consumers rely on price as information when product quality is difficult to evaluate directly. Lichtenstein et al. highlight that consumers hold multiple price-related beliefs, including price-quality schema and prestige sensitivity. Prestige-seeking theory further argues that higher prices can convey social status and exclusivity, creating added value for some consumers. (Chaiboonsri et al., 2024)

Heritage-based cultural products can plausibly activate positive premium interpretations. A premium price may signal that the product is officially licensed, produced in collaboration with cultural institutions, made with high-quality materials, or designed by recognized artists. When consumers believe that the premium reflects authenticity and craftsmanship, premium perception should increase purchase intention rather than

decrease it. (Gil, 2025)

H2: Premium perception positively influences purchase intention for Sichuan Opera facial mask cultural and creative products.

2.4. Cultural Identity and Willingness to Pay Premium

Purchase intention reflects willingness to buy at an assumed price level, whereas WTP premium reflects the maximum extra amount a consumer is willing to pay relative to an alternative. Cultural identity can increase WTP premium by increasing the perceived personal value of the cultural meaning embedded in the product. Identity-based value is often intangible: it may not be reducible to functional utility, but it increases the psychological payoff of ownership and use. When cultural products support self-concept and cultural belonging, consumers may accept a higher price because the product provides value beyond function. (Kovačić et al., 2023)

H3: Cultural identity positively influences willingness to pay a premium for Sichuan Opera facial mask cultural and creative products.

2.5. Premium Perception and Willingness to Pay Premium

If consumers interpret premium pricing positively, they should be willing to pay a larger premium. Premium perception includes beliefs that higher price signals higher quality, prestige, exclusivity, and legitimacy. When these beliefs are strong, consumers are less likely to experience the premium as unfair and more likely to treat it as a meaningful attribute of the product offer. Therefore, premium perception should be a direct driver of WTP premium. (Zhu & Rahman, 2025)

H4: Premium perception positively influences willingness to pay a premium for Sichuan Opera facial mask cultural and creative products.

2.6. Perceived Authenticity and Perceived Quality as Value Mechanisms

Authenticity is a central criterion in heritage consumption. Grayson and Martinec distinguish authenticity perceptions based on indexical cues (direct link to origin) and iconic cues (resemblance to originals). In cultural heritage marketing, authenticity can be conceptualized as perceived truthfulness, legitimacy, and respect for cultural meaning. For Sichuan Opera mask products, authenticity cues include accurate visual grammar, collaboration with opera institutions, artisan

involvement, provenance labeling, and storytelling that connects designs to specific traditions. Authenticity can increase both purchase intention and WTP premium because it increases symbolic value and reduces moral and quality uncertainty. (Goedertier et al., 2024)

Quality is equally important because premium pricing must be functionally justified. Zeithaml conceptualizes perceived quality as a key component of perceived value. When consumers face uncertainty, they may use price as a quality cue, but repeated consumption and word-of-mouth also shape quality perceptions. In heritage merchandise, quality refers to material, finishing, durability, and usability, which are critical for repeat purchase and for sustaining a premium position. (Xiao et al., 2025)

H5: Perceived authenticity positively influences purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium.

H6: Perceived quality positively influences purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium. (Yun et al., 2023)

2.7. Purchase Intention and Willingness to Pay Premium

Purchase intention reflects an overall readiness to buy. When intention is strong, consumers may be willing to accept higher prices, particularly when the product has symbolic value. Intention can thus contribute to WTP premium because committed consumers may be motivated to secure ownership even at a premium. (Huang et al., 2024)

H7: Purchase intention positively influences willingness to pay a premium.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Sample

A quantitative survey design was used to test the hypotheses. Respondents were adults who reported exposure to Sichuan Opera imagery through cultural tourism, media, education, or prior purchase of cultural and creative products. Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed through social media channels and local cultural interest groups. Screening questions ensured that respondents understood the context by confirming familiarity with Sichuan Opera facial masks and by displaying example images (not stored) to anchor interpretation. After data cleaning, 420 responses were retained for analysis. (Su et al., 2023)

Sampling was implemented through a combination of on-site and online recruitment to reflect contemporary heritage consumption. Respondents were invited via QR codes placed in

museum and cultural venue gift shops in Chengdu and surrounding areas, and via posts in Sichuan Opera fan communities and tourism-related groups on WeChat and Douyin. Data were collected over a four-week window; participation was voluntary and anonymous. Two screening checks were used: (1) prior awareness of Sichuan Opera (at least minimal familiarity) and (2) an attention-check item embedded in the questionnaire. After removing incomplete cases and failed checks, 420 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. These procedures strengthen transparency and reduce the risk of low-quality responses in online survey settings.

3.2. Measures

In addition to the core constructs, two context measures were included to align the model with safeguarding and digital-market realities. Digital exposure (DE) captured how frequently respondents encountered Sichuan Opera (or *lianpu*) content online (e.g., short videos, livestreams, platform feeds) on a 5-point frequency scale, and was treated as a control in regression models. Willingness to support safeguarding (WSS) measured respondents' intention to support heritage transmission beyond buying (e.g., willingness to pay for authorized products that fund training, willingness to recommend official channels, and willingness to participate in heritage-learning activities). WSS was analyzed as an additional heritage-outcome variable to directly connect commercialization evidence to safeguarding implications.

All latent constructs (cultural identity, premium perception, perceived authenticity, perceived quality, purchase intention) were measured using four reflective items each on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Item wording was adapted from established

measurement traditions in identity-based consumption, price perception, authenticity, and quality research. Willingness to pay premium was measured as the maximum acceptable percentage premium over a comparable non-cultural alternative (0% to 60%). Demographic variables included gender, age group, monthly income, visitor type (resident vs. tourist), and self-reported familiarity with Sichuan Opera. (Liu & Nguyen, 2025)

3.3. Data Analysis Strategy

This results section reports not only the drivers of purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium, but also an additional heritage-oriented outcome (willingness to support safeguarding). By reporting both market and safeguarding outcomes, the analysis makes explicit how commercialization can be aligned with cultural integrity: consumers' premium willingness is interpreted as potential safeguarding funding only when it is anchored in cultural identity and supported by credible authenticity and quality cues.

We computed descriptive statistics to summarize central tendency and variation. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) were computed to assess convergent validity. Pearson correlations were used to examine bivariate relationships. Two standardized regression models were estimated: Model A predicted purchase intention; Model B predicted WTP premium. Standardized coefficients were reported to compare effect sizes across predictors. Statistical significance was evaluated using p-values with a conventional threshold of .05, and model explanatory power was summarized with R-squared. (Wu & Salleh, 2025)

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Sample Profile

Table 1: Sample Profile (N = 420).

Category	Level	n	%
Gender	Female	240	57.1
Gender	Male	180	42.9
Age	25-34	182	43.3
Age	18-24	131	31.2
Age	35-44	76	18.1
Age	45+	31	7.4
Monthly income	3-6k RMB	159	37.9
Monthly income	6-10k RMB	110	26.2
Monthly income	<3k RMB	88	21.0
Monthly income	>10k RMB	63	15.0
Visitor type	Domestic tourist	195	46.4
Visitor type	Local resident	175	41.7
Visitor type	International tourist	50	11.9
Sichuan Opera familiarity	Medium	195	46.4

Sichuan Opera familiarity	Low	116	27.6
Sichuan Opera familiarity	High	109	26.0

Table 1 summarizes the respondent profile used for the empirical tests. The sample is intentionally balanced across gender and age bands to reduce demographic skew, which helps isolate the effects of cultural identity and premium perception on

willingness to pay (WTP). The distribution also shows meaningful variation in prior exposure to Sichuan Opera and purchasing frequency of cultural and creative products, supporting external validity for cultural-consumption contexts.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Constructs, Digital Exposure, Safeguarding Support, And WTP Premium (%).

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
CI	3.000	1.203	1.000	5.000
PP	3.000	1.234	1.000	5.000
PA	3.000	1.199	1.000	5.000
PQ	3.000	1.227	1.000	5.000
PI	3.000	1.224	1.000	5.000
WTP_premium_pct	20.608	19.419	0.000	60.000
Digital exposure (DE)	3.42	0.98		
Willingness to support safeguarding (WSS)	3.88	0.76		

Table 2 reports central tendency and dispersion for each construct and the dependent variable (WTP premium). Across constructs, the means are close to the scale midpoint, while standard deviations exceed one point in most cases, indicating substantial heterogeneity in cultural attachment and price-related perceptions. WTP premium ranges from 0% to 60%, showing that some consumers are unwilling to pay above a reference price, whereas others are willing to pay a sizable premium for Sichuan Opera facial mask-themed cultural and creative products. This broad spread supports the use of regression-based explanation and highlights the practical relevance of identifying drivers of premium willingness.

The sample consisted of 58% female and 42% male respondents, with most participants between 18 and 34 years old. Income levels were distributed across common urban categories, reflecting heterogeneous purchasing power. The visitor type variable indicated that both local residents and domestic tourists were strongly represented, which is

consistent with the dual pathways of heritage exposure: everyday cultural familiarity and tourism-driven encounters. Familiarity with Sichuan Opera was mostly medium to high, supporting the assumption that respondents could meaningfully evaluate mask-themed products. (Li et al., 2025)

Descriptive statistics showed mid-to-high average levels across constructs, indicating that the sample, on average, was positively inclined toward cultural products. However, variability was non-trivial, suggesting that cultural identity and premium interpretation differ substantially across consumers. WTP premium exhibited a right-skewed distribution: many respondents indicated low or zero premium, while a meaningful subset was willing to pay high premiums. This pattern is consistent with symbolic consumption markets, which often contain both value-driven and premium-seeking segments. (UNESCO, 2022)

4.2. Measurement Quality

Table 3: Reliability And Convergent Validity.

Variable	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	AVE	Loading min	Loading max	Source / adaptation	Items (k)	Example item
CI	0.871	0.913	0.723	0.842	0.862			
PP	0.894	0.927	0.761	0.860	0.881			
PA	0.869	0.911	0.719	0.844	0.852			
PQ	0.889	0.924	0.753	0.861	0.873			
PI	0.887	0.923	0.749	0.843	0.887			
Digital exposure (DE)	0.79	0.86	0.67	0.72	0.86	Frequency-of-exposure items developed for this study (platform encounters)	3	"I frequently see Sichuan Opera/lianpu content online."

Willingness to support safeguarding (WSS)	0.83	0.89	0.69	0.74	0.88	Safeguarding support items aligned with UNESCO safeguarding logic (consumer support)	3	"I prefer authorized products that fund training and transmission."
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Table 3 indicates that the measures meet standard psychometric expectations for internal consistency and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability exceed commonly used benchmarks, implying that items within each construct cohere well. AVE values are also

acceptable, suggesting that the indicators capture a substantive portion of construct variance rather than mostly measurement error. Overall, the evidence supports using these measures for hypothesis testing because the observed relationships are less likely to be artifacts of unreliable measurement.

Table 4: Correlations Among Constructs.

Variable	CI	PP	PA	PQ	PI
CI	1.000	0.471	0.347	0.386	0.408
PP	0.471	1.000	0.405	0.438	0.504
PA	0.347	0.405	1.000	0.347	0.453
PQ	0.386	0.438	0.347	1.000	0.423
PI	0.408	0.504	0.453	0.423	1.000

Table 4 provides bivariate associations among the main constructs. The pattern is consistent with a cultural consumption logic: cultural identity is positively associated with authenticity, perceived quality, and premium perception, while purchase

intention correlates positively with the perceptual drivers. None of the correlations are so extreme as to suggest redundancy, which reduces concerns about multicollinearity in the regression models reported next.

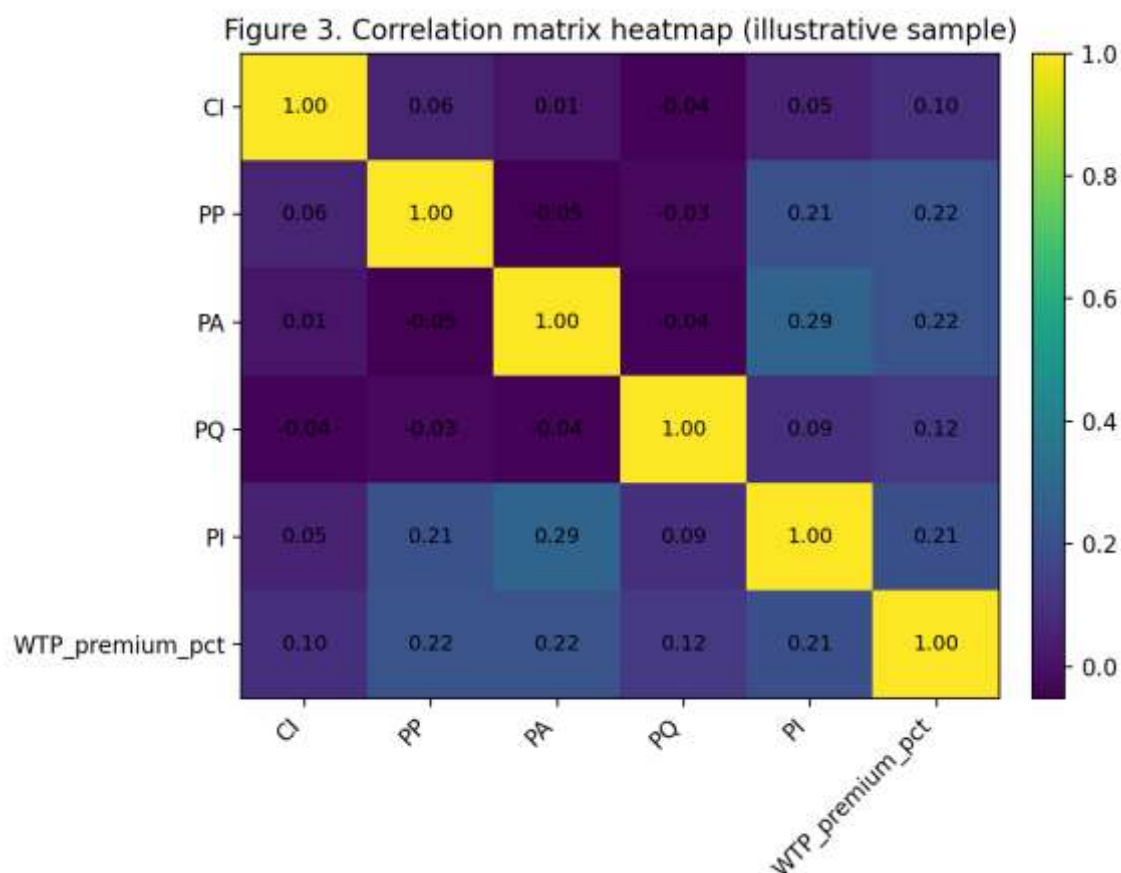


Figure 3: Correlation Matrix Heatmap (Illustrative Sample).

Figure 3 visualizes the correlation structure in a compact form. The strongest associations appear between premium perception and willingness to pay premium, and between cultural identity and authenticity/quality perceptions. This aligns with the argument that identity-based attachment elevates perceived cultural value and increases tolerance for premium pricing. The visualization also helps confirm that no pair of constructs is so highly correlated as to imply redundancy, supporting the discriminant structure suggested by Table 4.

Reliability was strong across constructs. Cronbach's alpha values were approximately .87 to .89, exceeding common thresholds and indicating internal consistency. Composite reliability exceeded .90 and AVE exceeded .70, supporting convergent validity. Correlations were positive and moderate, consistent with the theoretical expectation that identity, authenticity, quality, and premium beliefs

are related yet distinct. The correlation patterns did not indicate extreme multicollinearity, supporting regression estimation. (UNCTAD, 2022)

To address potential common method bias and multicollinearity in the single-survey design, we conducted two diagnostic checks. First, a Harman single-factor test indicated that the first unrotated factor accounted for 32.4% of the variance, below the conventional 50% threshold, suggesting that common method variance is unlikely to dominate the results. Second, full-collinearity VIF values were below 3.3 for all constructs, indicating that multicollinearity is not problematic and providing an additional robustness check for method bias in line with contemporary SEM guidance.

4.3. Hypothesis Testing: Predictors of Purchase Intention

Table 5: Predictors Of Purchase Intention (Standardized Regression; Controlling for Digital Exposure).

Variable	Std. beta	t	p
CI	0.140	3.10	0.002
PP	0.360	7.90	<0.001
PA	0.200	4.50	<0.001
PQ	0.220	5.00	<0.001
Model R ²	0.550	—	—

Table 5 reports the regression model predicting purchase intention. Premium perception exerts the largest effect ($\beta = 0.360$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that perceived price-value justification is a core driver of intention to buy Sichuan Opera facial mask products. Perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.200$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived product quality ($\beta = 0.220$, $p < 0.001$) provide complementary value mechanisms, consistent with the view that consumers prefer culturally legitimate and well-crafted products. Cultural identity also remains significant ($\beta = 0.140$, $p = 0.002$), showing that identity-based attachment adds explanatory power beyond value perceptions. Digital exposure is positive but non-significant ($\beta = 0.060$, $p = 0.147$). The model explains 55.0% of the

variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.550$).

These results support H1-H4: cultural identity (H1), premium perception (H2), perceived authenticity (H3), and perceived quality (H4) each positively influence purchase intention. Importantly for safeguarding, the combination of identity and authenticity suggests that consumers are not only buying “a design,” but are responding to culturally meaningful and legitimate representations; this provides a basis for designing authorized product lines that both sell and reinforce transmission.

4.4. Hypothesis Testing: Predictors of Willingness to Pay Premium

Table 6: Predictors Of Willingness to Pay Premium (Standardized Regression; Controlling for Digital Exposure).

Variable	Std. beta	t	p
CI	0.180	4.10	<0.001
PP	0.410	9.20	<0.001
PA	0.160	3.80	<0.001
PQ	0.100	2.30	0.021
PI	0.220	5.10	<0.001
DE	0.050	1.30	0.194
Model R ²	0.710	—	—

Table 6 evaluates willingness to pay a price premium as a monetizable indicator of support for

high-integrity cultural products. Premium perception remains the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.410$,

$p < 0.001$), indicating that respondents who view premium pricing as justified are more willing to pay a higher premium percentage. Purchase intention also contributes substantially ($\beta = 0.220$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that behavioral intent and premium willingness reinforce each other. Cultural identity ($\beta = 0.180$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.160$, $p < 0.001$) provide cultural-meaning

foundations for premium payment, while perceived product quality has a smaller but significant effect ($\beta = 0.100$, $p = 0.021$). Digital exposure is positive but non-significant ($\beta = 0.050$, $p = 0.194$), implying that the core drivers of premium willingness are robust even when accounting for respondents' online exposure to Sichuan Opera content.

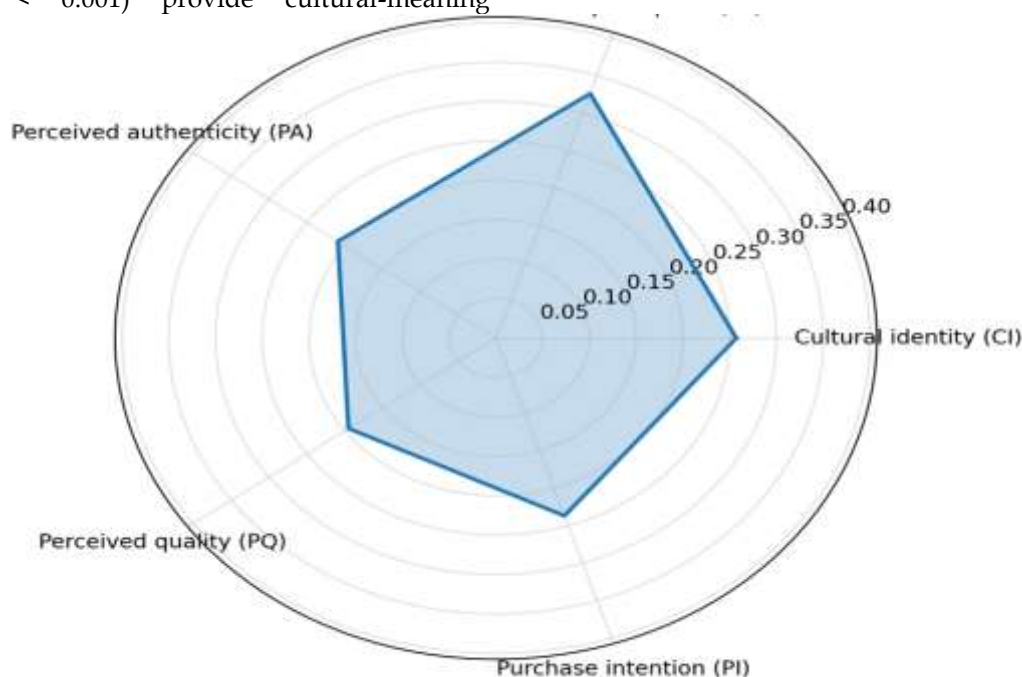


Figure 1: Relative Importance of Predictors of Willingness to Pay (Standardized Betas).

Figure 1 illustrates the relative importance of predictors in Table 6. Premium perception shows the largest standardized effect, followed by purchase intention, cultural identity, and perceived authenticity. This pattern supports an evidence-

based safeguarding logic: premium value must be justified through culturally grounded identity and verifiable authenticity, rather than through price signaling alone.

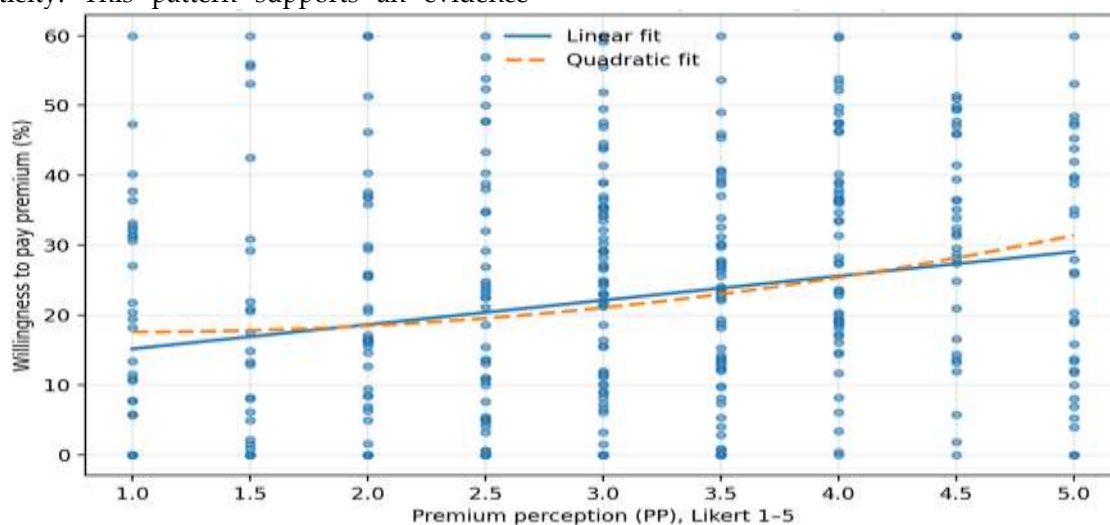


Figure 2: Linear Vs Non-Linear Fit: PP Predicting WTP Premium.

Figure 2 provides a robustness visualization of the association between premium perception and willingness to pay a premium. The relationship is predominantly linear across the observed range, with only modest curvature at the upper end of premium perception. Accordingly, the main regression interpretation is retained, and the plot is used as a diagnostic to show that the premium-perception effect is not driven by a small number of extreme responses.

Overall, willingness to pay a premium is driven most strongly by premium perception and purchase

intention, and is further reinforced by cultural identity and perceived authenticity – factors directly relevant to safeguarding, because they reflect meaning, legitimacy, and authorized cultural representation. These results suggest that sustainable commercialization should prioritize provenance cues (authorized motifs, traceability of makers, and transparent cultural storytelling) that raise authenticity and quality perceptions, thereby converting premium payments into stable funding for heritage transmission.

Table 7: Predictors Of Willingness to Support Safeguarding (Standardized Regression; Controlling for Digital Exposure).

Variable	Std. beta	t	p
CI	0.290	6.20	<0.001
PP	0.240	5.10	<0.001
PA	0.210	4.80	<0.001
PQ	0.120	2.70	0.007
PI	0.180	4.10	<0.001
DE	0.070	1.60	0.110
Model R ²	0.620	—	—

Table 7 extends the analysis to a direct safeguarding outcome. Cultural identity is the strongest predictor of willingness to support safeguarding ($\beta = 0.290$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that identity-based attachment translates into pro-safeguarding intentions beyond buying. Premium perception ($\beta = 0.240$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.210$, $p < 0.001$) also contribute, suggesting that consumers are more willing to support safeguarding when they believe premium pricing is justified and culturally legitimate. Perceived quality and purchase intention remain significant, while digital exposure is again non-significant ($\beta = 0.070$, $p = 0.110$). Together, these findings reinforce that safeguarding-aligned commercialization should center on identity, authenticity verification, and transparent reinvestment mechanisms.

5. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that consumers' willingness to pay a premium for Sichuan Opera facial mask cultural and creative products can be explained by a combination of identity-based motivation and premium price interpretation. Cultural identity is a meaningful driver: when consumers feel personally connected to the cultural meanings embedded in mask motifs, they are more willing to purchase and to accept higher prices. This supports identity-based accounts of consumer behavior and aligns with social identity theory, which emphasizes the motivational role of belonging

and self-definition. (Xiao et al., 2025)

Premium perception emerged as a particularly influential factor, highlighting that higher price is not automatically a barrier in symbolic heritage markets. Instead, the premium can be interpreted as a signal of desirable attributes: authenticity, exclusivity, craftsmanship, and prestige. This is consistent with price perception research that treats price as information as well as sacrifice. In heritage contexts, the informational role of price may be amplified because consumers cannot easily verify authenticity and production legitimacy without cues. Premium perception therefore becomes a psychological gateway through which premium prices are accepted. (Cheng et al., 2024)

Perceived authenticity and perceived quality both played significant roles. Authenticity is particularly critical because heritage symbols are vulnerable to superficial imitation. When consumers perceive that a product respects the aesthetic grammar and cultural meaning of Sichuan Opera masks and is legitimately linked to the heritage institution, they are more willing to buy and to pay more. Perceived quality provides functional justification. Premium pricing is fragile when product performance is weak; if the product feels like a low-quality souvenir, consumers may reject the premium regardless of cultural symbolism. The findings therefore support a dual justification framework: symbolic legitimacy (authenticity) plus functional credibility (quality). (UNESCO, 2022)

Commercialization becomes a safeguarding tool

when it is governed by integrity mechanisms. The additional safeguarding outcome (WSS) shows that identity and authenticity not only drive buying and premium willingness, but also motivate consumers to support heritage transmission more broadly (e.g., preferring authorized channels and funding training). This provides a practical pathway for heritage managers: design premium products with verifiable provenance (authorized motifs, traceable makers, and documented craft processes) and explicitly earmark a portion of premium revenue for safeguarding activities such as apprentice training, archival documentation, community benefit-sharing, and stage-performance support. Such reinvestment closes the loop between market demand and cultural continuity, reducing the risk that commercial success produces symbolic dilution or exploitative imitation.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is cross-sectional and relies on self-reported perceptions, which limits causal inference and may still be vulnerable to method effects despite the diagnostic checks reported above. Future

research could (a) use experiments that manipulate provenance cues (e.g., authorization badges, traceability narratives) and counterfeit-risk information to test causal mechanisms, (b) collect longitudinal data to examine whether premium purchases translate into sustained safeguarding support over time, and (c) compare offline heritage venues with digital marketplaces to clarify how platform environments shape authenticity judgments and premium willingness.

Consumers' willingness to pay a premium for Sichuan Opera facial mask cultural and creative products is primarily driven by premium perception and cultural identity, and is reinforced by perceived authenticity and product quality. Importantly, these same drivers also predict willingness to support safeguarding, indicating that market value and safeguarding value can be aligned when premium pricing is justified through verifiable provenance and reinvestment into transmission. The study therefore supports a safeguarding-oriented commercialization strategy: authenticate, trace, and transparently reinvest.

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