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INTERPRETING SOCIETY THROUGH ART AND LITERATURE: A HUMANISTIC EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL EXPRESSION AND IDENTITY FORMATION ACROSS TIME

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ABSTRACT

Art and literature continue to be prime examples of cultural expression on which social experience is interpreted and common meanings are established. But these areas are frequently disaggregated in scholarship, and seldom is one able to understand the role of cultural expression in identity formation over time in an integrative manner. This paper explores the role played by art and literature as interpretive processes through which societies create and negotiate cultural identity over time and suggests an integrated interpretive approach that provides a connection between cultural meaning-making and identity construction. A qualitative, humanistic research design was employed using a purposively selected corpus of recent peer-reviewed, open-access studies. Analysis was guided by hermeneutic and semiotic approaches, supported by comparative historical interpretation. The procedure involved contextualization, close interpretive reading or visual analysis, thematic identification, cross-domain comparison, and synthesis into a conceptual model. Findings indicate that art and literature operate as complementary interpretive systems: literature tends to organize social meaning through narrative continuity, memory, and discourse, while art materializes meaning through symbolism, visibility, and spatial engagement. Identity formation emerges as layered and relational, shaped

by memory, narrative/language, symbolic forms, and social context. Cultural expression shows continuity in function alongside transformation in form across temporal contexts. Integrating literary and visual analysis strengthens humanistic interpretation by clarifying how societies sustain belonging and adapt identity through ongoing reinterpretation rather than static preservation.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Identity, Interpretive Analysis, Art and Society, Literature and Meaning, Cultural Memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the humanities and social sciences, interpretation has traditionally been viewed as a key approach towards explanation of the production, negotiation and maintenance of meaning in society. The interpretive approaches highlight that social realities are not only observed but also created by using language, symbols, stories, and cultural practices (Kurowska and de Guevara, 2020). In this context, art and literature are accorded a privileged role as forms of culture in which societies declare their values, tensions, as well as shared understanding of the self in the historical context. The tradition of reading, understanding, and interpreting, either literary, visual, or symbolic, has to be systematically justified on the basis of contextual consciousness and analytical severity. Interpretation is a disciplined act rather than an arbitrary one, but it involves the use of historical, linguistic, and cultural knowledge in constructing meaning (Deane, 2020). These forms of interpretation are not limited to the study of literature, but are examples of wider cultural investigation through which scholars can study the influence of creative expressions on the construction and expression of social experience. The recent academic thought is growing to recognize that cultural meaning does not arise through the use of a single disciplinary approach but through an interdisciplinary approach. The bricolage research practice emphasizes the use of a variety of theoretical traditions to explain a complex cultural phenomenon by scholars, especially when studying identity, memory, and symbolic manifestation (Ben-Asher, 2022). The interdisciplinary orientation is particularly applicable to those studies that interact with art, literature, and society at the same time. Art as a cultural activity has been strongly perceived as the way in which human experience is created and conveyed. Art does not exist as pure aesthetic production, but mediates emotional, social, and ethical aspects of life and has a role to play in the self-perception of individuals and communities and in their relationship with others (Rahman, 2023). Equally, the cultural analyses highlight that art exists in the context of the wider social framework, embodying and shaping the cultural norms and values (Rizvi, 2024). Literature is also critical in the expression of cultural identity in terms of narrative, the construction of characters, and the use of symbols. Literary translation and characterisation studies show that cultural values, heroism ideals and assumptions regarding identity and meaning are

negotiated through the interpretation of the text, and the hidden assumptions are displayed (Matkomilovich, 2024). The literary narratives can also provide information about hybrid and disputed identities, especially in the postcolonial and cross-cultural setting, where characters represent conflicts between modernity and tradition (Mertania and Amelia, 2020). Visual culture offers another layer of interpretation to culture through placement of meaning within the spatial and material frameworks. In order to construct cultural narratives and mediate the understanding of history and identity to the population, museums and curated visual spaces have been listed as crucial places (Hooper-Greenhill, 2020). Visual forms like public art and modern media, even when they are not within an institutional environment, are involved with continuing processes of cultural interpretation. The topic of the future of the fine arts has also discussed recently, and it highlights even more the changing place of art in a technologically mediated world, where traditional forms are taking their place alongside digital and hybrid practices (Kozbelt, 2023). These changes underscore the necessity of interpretive paradigms that can centre on continuity and change in cultural expression. Interpretation itself is even presented as an art, entailing being sensitive to context, nuance, and processes of making meaning in various fields (Enciso-Muñoz, 2021). This view makes interpretive methodologies more pertinent to study cultural phenomena that cannot be quantified but are still at the core of social cognition. Although there is a lot of literature on art, literature, and interpretation, the studies that are available tend to separate these three into distinct units or within very limited disciplinary backgrounds. Although the interpretive approaches are highly advanced in the context of the literature studies and the study of visual culture, there are no integrative studies that examine the way in which art and literature cooperate as cultural interpretation mechanisms throughout history. Furthermore, when researching identity formation, it is often emphasized in particular historical events or cultural settings without enough consideration of cross-temporal continuities and changes in cultural representation. To fill these gaps, the current research paper provides a humanistic and interdisciplinary perspective of how art and literature serve as interpretive processes in which societies create and negotiate cultural identity over time. It also looks into the way in which artistic and literary practices turn social experience into figurative and narrative, and considers the processes of identity-making as multi-layered and loci of relationships between memory,

narrative, and visual representation. The study adds to the current discourse on interpretation, culture and identity in a unified humanistic framework by creating an integrated mode of interpretation that explains continuity and transformation in cultural expression.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since ancient times, scholarly interest in art and literature has placed particular stress on the fact that they are major processes by which social experience is construed by societies and through which cultural meaning is negotiated. The art and society studies in the past show that cultural production is highly entrenched in social change, and it mirrors and influences collective consciousness, as opposed to responding to it. A closer look at the artistic activities during the social disruption of the 1960s by Hewison sheds light on how art is used as a critical instrument that helps societies face change, tension and ideological struggle (Hewison, 2023). This historical approach accentuates the ability of art to convey social realities and take part in the bigger cultural discourses. The interpretation aspect of artistic and literary expression is also supported by cultural continuity. Culture has been defined as a stabilizing force that brings social coherence even in times of change, enabling societies to evolve without loss of shared meanings (Ziyatbay, 2024). This knowledge makes cultural expression a mediation structure between the past and the present that allows continuity as a symbolic transmission and not as a time capsule.

Early philosophical methods have also conceptualized art in terms of an experience that links personal perception to shared meaning. The conceptualization of art as experience by Dewey prefigures the relational character of the aesthetic experience, and it is specifically stated that the meaning is produced through the interaction of the artwork with the individual and social world (Dewey, 2024). This experiential view is coupled with anthropological ones that reject any strict version of what art is, emphasizing its culturally relative and cross-cultural aspects (Morphy, 2020). In literary criticism, such understandings of literary history have been challenged using interpretive frameworks. According to Jauss, his theory about reception focuses on the readers as well as historical horizons and changing expectations in the making of literary meaning by positioning literature as a dynamic place of cultural interpretation rather than a closed system of text (Jauss, 2022). These views hold because the literary narratives are active in identity formation by

going between the traditional aspects that are inherited and the modern interpretation. Identity has also been explored increasingly as a relational phenomenon that is being formed in the context of space, environment and culture. According to cross-cultural studies, identity creation is strongly associated with the inhabited spaces and symbolic places, which imply that cultural significance can be created by being in contact with both the physical and social environments (Rapoport, 2025). This relational knowledge is used to supplement sociological critiques of modernity that emphasize the ways in which standardized structures and globalized systems shape since their expression and social identity (Ritzer, 2021). The emergence of the digital culture has also complicated the traditional boundaries between art, literature and society. Recent research states that digital spaces transform cultural production through changes in the communication modes, representations, and participation, and thus change the way meaning and identity are made in the contemporary social environment (Levin and Mamlok, 2021). The progress in this regard supports the fact that interpretive frameworks that can handle continuity and change in cultural expression are needed. The methodological basis of such an analysis is found in hermeneutic and semiotic traditions. Hermeneutics puts more stress on contextual reading and the historically contingent character of meaning, which provides means of perceiving cultural texts as results of social and temporal circumstances (Gilhus, 2021). Semiotics also plays a role in exploring the nature of signs and symbols that operate within the cultural systems, and thus one is able to analyze how meaning is encoded, transferred and re-created across artistic and literary types (Zhao, 2025). The combination of all these scholarly works makes art and literature a primary centre of cultural reading and exposes the necessity of integrative methods that cut across historical, literary, visual and social analysis. The current research work is an extension of these views in that it looks at art and literature as both mutually dependent interpretive processes where societies create and negotiate cultural identity over time.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 *Research Design*

The research design used in this study is a qualitative and interpretive research design based on the humanistic inquiry and cultural analysis. Instead of trying to measure and/or explain in a causal way, the study is interested in how the meaning is created,

expressed, and transfigured through artistic and literary performance. This method is especially suitable when analyzing cultural phenomena since art and literature are symbolized as a representation and weave in a narrative, and interpretation in the context. The study is interdisciplinary in its orientation, relying on the insights of literary studies, art history, cultural theory, and social thought in the effort of studying the mediating role of cultural expression in regard to society and identity over time.

3.2 Data Source

The discussion is informed by a purposely chosen analytical corpus, comprised of academic analyses, investigating the subject of art, literature, and visual culture as the location of cultural expression and the creation of identities. The corpus entails the recent peer-reviewed and open-access sources that respond to the narrative identity, cultural memory, visual representation, and social functions of art. The sources were chosen according to their academic rigor, relationship with the interpretation of culture, the representation of the variety of cultural situations, and their connection with the modern discussions in the humanities and social sciences.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical paradigm of the research depends on the traditions of hermeneutic and semiotic, as the frames of interpretation that present art and literature as culturally encoded texts, the meanings of which are generated during interpretation. Hermeneutic analysis can be used to analyze cultural works in their historical and social context, as it focuses on the relationship between the text, its conditions of production, and reception. Semiotic analysis helps to decipher symbols, stories, and images that carry cultural significance and are used to convey this meaning. Cumulatively, these strategies enable the identity to be perceived as a relational dynamic process that is constituted by narrative, memory, and representation as opposed to defining it as a fixed or necessary category. The comparative historical interpretation goes further to support the contention of continuity and transformation in cultural expression patterns under various social situations.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

It commenced the process of analysis with an attempt to place the works chosen in their contextual, historical and social context, so that they could be grounded on the interpretative plane. This was then

accompanied by close reading and visual analysis to determine recurrent themes concerning identity, belonging, memory, power and cultural expression. These themes were then explored comparatively with artistic and literary forms to make out whatever symbolic structures they shared, and where they deviated, and where they diverged, and how they were cross-temporal. The last step was the synthesis of interpretive insights to describe the way art and literature serve as processes by which societies give expression to cultural identity, negotiate cultural identity and renegotiate cultural identity. In the process, the focus was made on interpretive coherence and contextual sensitivity and not generalization.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Analytical rigour had been secured by clearly expressing the research design, the criteria of source selection, as well as the interpretive framework. The interpretation of it was formed under the conditions of continuous contact with the primary cultural content and the well-established academic discourse that enabled placing the claims about analytical arguments into the framework of larger theoretical discussions. The study gives more importance to interpretive traceability rather than statistical replication, because the readers can follow the reasoning process of the study, and determine whether the conclusions are plausible or not. This methodology is consistent with the standard forms of rigour in qualitative research and humanistic research.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Art and Literature as Interpretive Mechanisms of Society

The comparison has shown that art and literature are always interpretive processes by which societies analyze, structure and express social meaning. In the analytical corpus, culture does not simply mirror social conditions but directly takes part in the process of collective cognition because it transforms social experiences into symbolic, narrative and visual representations to formulate collective meaning. The literature works themselves are articulations of social realities, whose sequencing of narratives, metaphor and memory provide them with a visibility, and artistic practice provides them with a visibility, their spatial composition, symbolism and aesthetic intervention. Although the medium varies, both forms are similar in that they both mediate between personal experience and between individual and collective cultural structures. This interpretive action

is manifested in a variety of historical situations, indicating that the cultural manifestation is more of a stable form of community self-reflection and not a

situational reaction. Table 1 gives an overview of a comparison of how art and literature are interpretive systems in society.

Table 1: Interpretive Functions of Art and Literature in Society.

Dimension	Literature	Art/Visual Culture
Primary mode of meaning	Narrative, language, storytelling	Visual symbolism, spatial form
Social focus	Memory, continuity, discourse	Visibility, presence, materiality
Engagement with society	Reflective and discursive	Immediate and experiential
Interpretive role	Articulation of social meaning	Materialization of social meaning

4.2 Identity Formation as a Layered and Relational Process

One of the key outcomes of the analysis is that identity turns out to be a complex and relational process that is formed in the process of cultural expression and not an inherited or distinct characteristic. Both literary and artistic forms of expression portray identity as a constant negotiation, which is shaped through memory, history and social interaction. The literary

expressions lay stress on identity by way of narrative continuity, intergenerational telling of stories, and symbolic inheritance, whereas the artistic expressions lay stress on identity by way of layering, fragmentation and juxtaposition of visuals. Such a stratified identity implies that cultural belonging is ensured by a process of constant reinterpretation, but not by preservation. Figure 1 represents identity formation as a multi-layered process as a result of a cultural expression over time.

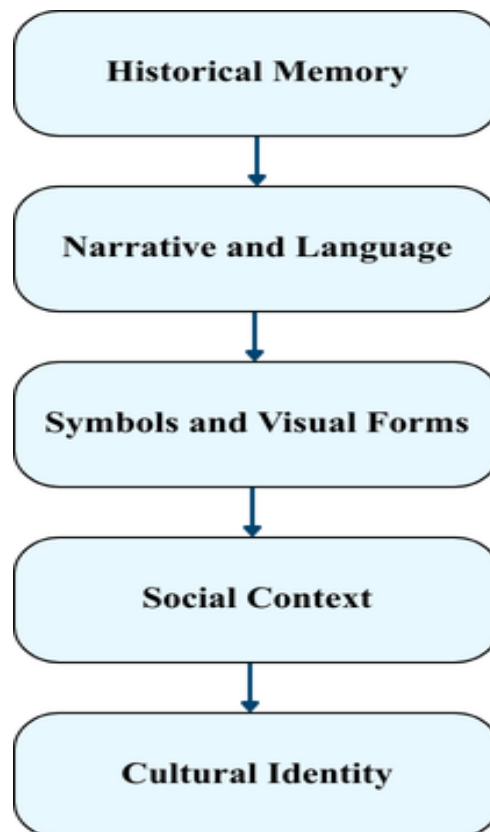


Figure 1: Identity Formation as a Layered Cultural Process.

4.3 Dominant Identity-Related Themes Across Cultural Forms

Analysis of the corpus through thematic analysis demonstrates that there is a group of recurrent identity-related themes evident in both art and literature. These themes are cultural memory, belonging, transformation, power and resistance.

Although there is a commonality in themes, their expressions vary in different cultural forms. These themes are dealt with in literature with narrative depth and temporal continuity and in art in terms of visual immediacy, spatial negotiation and symbolic condensation. Table 2 presents the main themes of identity-related matters identified and the main ways of their manifestation.

Table 2: Identity-Related Themes and Modes of Cultural Expression.

Theme	Literary Representation	Artistic Representation
Cultural memory	Oral tradition, narrative recall	Visual layering, archival imagery
Belonging	Community narratives, language	Spatial markers, public visibility
Transformation	Narrative adaptation	Fragmentation, hybridity
Power and resistance	Counter-narratives	Urban art, visual disruption

4.4 Cross-Temporal Continuity and Transformation in Cultural Expression

The two aspects of continuity in cultural role and change in the form of expression can be traced in comparative analysis, both in the historical and current context. Although the classic cultural forms of expression have been about continuity by way of oral,

textual and ritualistic, the new forms are using digital media, interactive and participatory forms, and community visual practices. Although there are such changes, the cultural role, which is the negotiation of identity, as well as meaning, has remained the same. Figure 2 demonstrates that there is a connection between the context of time and the modes of cultural expression that are observed in the analysis.

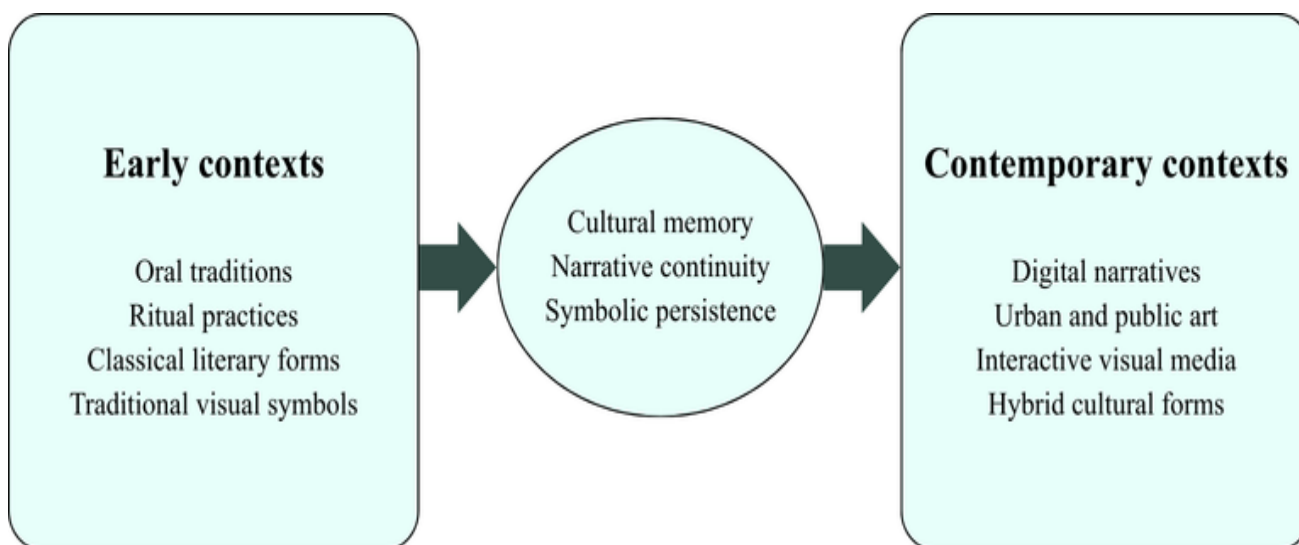


Figure 2: Continuity and Transformation in Cultural Expression Across Time.

4.5 Art as a Site of Social Negotiation and Public Meaning

The findings also show that art is often a locus of social negotiation, especially in the public, urban, and digital setting. When visual art is placed in common territory, it allows one to express group

identity, challenge hegemonic discourses and work with social power relations. Such artistic practices have a meaning that arises in relation to the audience interaction, space and social interpretation instead of being determined at the time of production. Table 3 describes the social roles of art that were found in the corpus.

Table 3: Social Functions of Art in Cultural Identity Formation.

Function	Description
Cultural visibility	Making identity publicly recognizable
Social critique	Challenging dominant narratives
Memory preservation	Visualizing collective memory
Identity negotiation	Mediating belonging and difference

4.6 Complementary Roles of Art and Literature in Identity Formation

Art and literature can be studied as complements to each other, and it can be observed that they play complementary roles in the formation of cultural identity. Literary work is concerned with depth in time, narrative consistency and reflective reading,

whereas the artwork prefigures the present, the spatial involvement and the symbolic negotiation. They collectively constitute a unified cultural system, which lets societies process change, maintain memory and clarify belonging. Figure 3 outlines a conceptual framework of the complementary roles in the formation of identity by art and literature.

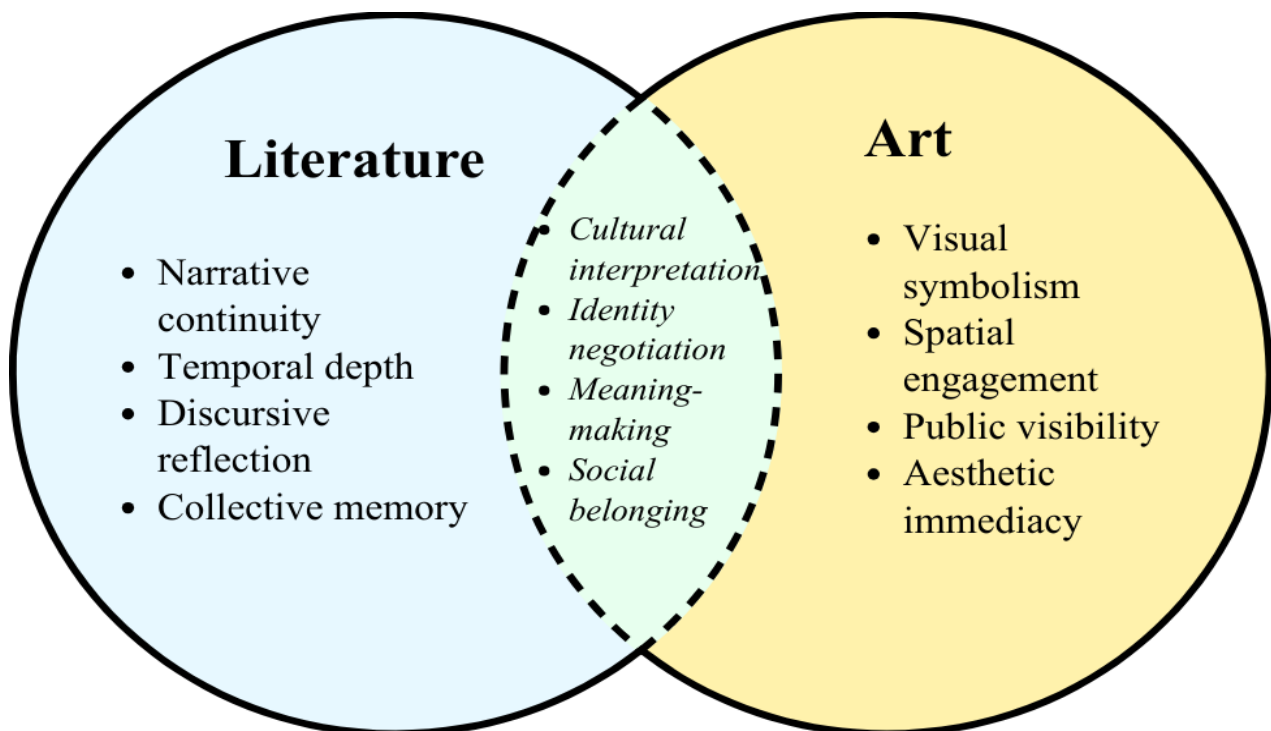


Figure 3. Complementary Functions of Literature and Art in Cultural Identity Formation.

4.7 Synthesis of Cultural Mechanisms and Identity Outcomes

Synthesis of findings shows that cultural expression works in an intertwined mechanism connecting the society, meaning and identity. These four functions, narrative, symbolism, memory, and spatial representation, have a combined role of maintaining cultural continuity and, at the same time, adaptive capability. These processes allow societies to bargain identity with regard to social change without cutting off connections with historical sense. Table 4 aggregates the most important cultural processes and outcomes of an identity nature.

Table 4: Cultural Mechanisms and Identity Outcomes.

Cultural Mechanism	Identity Outcome
Narrative continuity	Intergenerational belonging
Visual symbolism	Collective recognition
Memory articulation	Historical consciousness
Social negotiation	Adaptive identity formation

4.8 Integrated Model of Cultural Interpretation

The findings indicate a combination model where art and literature work together as systems of interpretation between society and identity over time. Cultural expression responds to change in history and technology and maintains its fundamental use of meaning-making and identity negotiation. Figure 4 shows the synthesized interpretive model that resulted in the analysis.

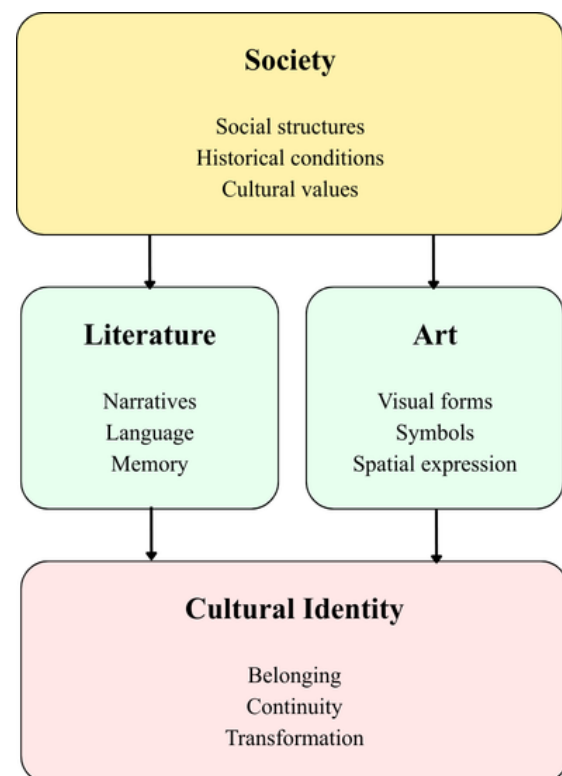


Figure 4: Integrated Model of Cultural Interpretation and Identity Formation.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the present paper confirm interpretation as a historically contextualized process, based on which cultural meaning is made and not found. Art and literature do not exist outside

of social structures, but exist within the context of larger historical, economic and ideological structures that influence the representability and interpretability of things. On the macro-structural level, cultural production cannot be creatively discussed outside of global systems of power and exchange, which mediate symbolic value, circulation and reception before meaning is accessed at the level of individual experience (Wallerstein, 2023). Interpretation, thus, should be thought to be entrenched in the historic conditions, and not as its aesthetic or subjective activity. Meanwhile, the findings stress the fact that cultural meaning is dynamic and open-ended. The identified interpretive functions of the study reveal that meaning is created in the process of interaction of cultural forms and audiences with context and does not remain within the context of the artwork. This is in line with multi-level approaches, which theorize art as existing on a psychological, social and cultural level at once, generating meaning that evolves along with the changing contexts (Busch et al., 2025). Interpretation is therefore a process of relationship, in which it is influenced by layered influences and not a quest to find some definite meaning. This variability of meaning is especially visible in the visual practices of the general and urban population, in which ambiguity and contradiction are the key elements of interpretation. Graffiti and street art tend to hold indeterminate ways between opposition, acknowledgement, and institutional internalization, and thus stay open to interpretation as opposed to definitive ones (Evans, 2025). These kinds of forms are a way of being in which this process of interpretation is renegotiated in the course of social interaction, and the perception of cultural meaning as temporary and responsive to history is confirmed. The findings of the study also reveal that cultural expression is one of the key mechanisms by which identity is negotiated over time. The identity is not an attribute of an object but a stratified practice that is developed through recollection and memory of the past, storytelling, symbolic representation and social order. This stratified form is related to the idea of identity as a palimpsest, where the signs of previous cultural inscriptions are present in the new identity formations instead of being erased (Blair, 2023). This accrual is brought to the surface in visual art, especially in the form of identity made as a layered culture. The cultural expression also allows the identity to continue to exist despite the state of change. The fact that oral traditions are eroded in modern situations exemplifies the fact that identity is neither maintained nor lost but reformed in new

forms of expression. Although oral practices are losing their communal meaning, identity is still negotiated by other forms of narratives and symbols, indicating flexibility and not disappearance (Syam et al., 2024). This promotes the research conclusion of continuity in identity being preserved by reinterpretation and not by preservation. This process is further complicated by the connection between the individual and the collective identity. The intergenerational studies demonstrate that people rebuild cultural identity proactively to adapt to the changing social conditions, having to negotiate belonging instead of bequeathing it directly (Zheng et al., 2025). This negotiation is further enhanced by narrative practices where the personal identity, social affiliation, and digitally mediated self-presentation overlap and occasionally conflict with each other, forming multiple identity formations in different contexts (Hnit and Almann, 2025). The very collective memory is mediated in diasporic and digitally networked environments. The role of social media stories as a communal setting through which cultural memory is created, challenged, and perpetuated is becoming more prominent and allows communities to preserve identity despite space and time, in addition to creating fragmentation and reinterpretation (Kianpour et al., 2025). In a similar way, the digital interactive forms of culture enable the experience of the memory anew when engaged and participating in it, thereby redefining the relationship of identity to the past in the present (Fan, 2025; Jerasa, 2025). These processes point towards identity formation as recursive and relational, as opposed to linear. Lastly, the results support the value of art as an expression and communicative tool of cultural identity in multicultural situations. Through artistic expression, cultural identities are expressed in public, making them realized, negotiated, and dialogued across differences (Al-Zadjali, 2024). Collectively, these views confirm that cultural expression based on balancing memory, adaptation and social interaction holds identity formation across time. The findings are also significant interdisciplinary consequences of cultural studies, digital culture studies, and education. They show that interpretive paradigms that have been used traditionally on art and literature can still be used to understand current digital practices where meaning and identity are more and more negotiated through participatory and networked practices. The new digital cultural spaces are not substitutes for humanistic processes of interpretation, but they are extended ones, and narrative, symbolism and memory can circulate within the new media without

losing their cultural meaning. These results imply that cultural interpretation is an important part of the learning process in educational settings, especially in cases of identity, language, and community overlap. Art and literature, both on the ground or on the internet, allow critical reflection, an understanding of culture, and identity bargaining, and should not be dismissed as long as the question of humanistic inquiry remains timely in modern society. It must be noted that there are two limitations. To begin with, humanistic research has an interpretative subjectivity. Still, despite the structured synthesis and conceptual modelling boosting the rigour of the given study, it is possible to have other interpretations, especially when the cultural expression depends on ambiguity or symbolic openness. Second, the range of works chosen is also restricted. Although the corpus was developed to reflect conceptual variety in art, literature, identity, and digital culture, it has been unable to reflect all the world's cultural traditions. The model can be extended in future studies by adding new cultural contexts and media forms, but the interpretive richness created in this study can be maintained.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that art and literature can serve as the medium of stable forms of

interpretation as societies seek to comprehend social experience and negotiate their cultural identity over time. Through a humanistic and interdisciplinary approach of interpretation, the analysis shows that cultural meaning is not embedded into artistic or literary representations, but is produced through historically specific representations of narration, symbolism and social practices. In its turn, identity formation is shown as a complex and interactive process shaped by memory, cultural inheritance and constant reinterpretation instead of traditional stasis or essentialized belonging. The results indicate that expressing culture helps keep continuity and, at the same time, creates the possibility of adaptation to help the society adapt to social change without losing connection to historical meaning. Through the analysis of art and literature as a unit as opposed to independent fields of study, the paper offers a unified approach, thus explaining the complementary nature of art and literature in terms of creating cultural meaning. This method ensures the applicability of humanistic interpretation in the interpretation of cultural expression in traditional and contemporary practices. Future studies can consider this framework in other cultural contexts and other forms of media and further investigate how societies explain who they are in changing ways of cultural expression.

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