

Traditional Chinese Painting Visual Language in Illustration: A Conceptual Framework of Aesthetic and Behavioral Responses

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese painting has become an increasingly important visual resource in contemporary illustration, particularly within branding, digital media, and the cultural and creative industries. However, existing studies tend to treat traditional motifs and styles as decorative add-ons or analyse them through art-historical case studies, offering limited insight into how such visual elements shape audiences' aesthetic and behavioral responses. This paper develops a conceptual framework that explains how the innovative integration of traditional Chinese painting's visual language in modern illustration influences audience reactions. Drawing on a narrative review of literature on visual communication, aesthetic quality, cultural identity, and consumer behavior, the study first identifies four core dimensions of traditional painting visual language in illustration: line and brushwork, composition and spatial organization, color schemes and tonality, and symbolic imagery and motifs. It then theorizes how these dimensions jointly contribute to perceived aesthetic quality and culturally grounded interpretations, which in turn foster emotional attachment, cultural pride, and supportive behavioral intentions such as purchasing, using, sharing, or recommending illustration-based cultural products. The paper formulates a set of propositions regarding these relationships and highlights key moderating conditions, including cultural familiarity and artistic involvement. By articulating these pathways, the framework bridges the aesthetic and behavioral perspectives in design research,

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providing a theoretical foundation for future empirical studies that test and refine the proposed model.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the literature by defining CPVL as a modular visual language in product design. It uses a new estimation methodology by embedding CPVL in the stimulus–organism–response framework. It develops a relationship model linking CPVL to aesthetic responses, cultural identity, and behavioral intentions.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, illustration has become a core visual component in brand communication, digital media, and the cultural and creative industries, where it is widely used to build distinctive brand identities and tell visual stories. In China, this development coincides with the revival of traditional culture and the rise of the guochao aesthetic, in which traditional resources are reinterpreted through contemporary design languages.

Within this context, Chinese traditional painting is a major source of visual inspiration. Designers and illustrators translate brushwork, ink textures, compositional schemes, and symbolic motifs from classical painting into contemporary visual identities and illustration-based cultural products. These practices show that Chinese traditional painting is no longer confined to galleries or art-historical narratives but functions as a flexible visual resource for everyday communication, yet there is still limited theorization of how it operates as a visual language and shapes audience responses.

This study therefore introduces Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL), defined as a system of visual elements and conventions rooted in Chinese traditional painting and mobilized in illustration. CPVL is analyzed along four dimensions—line and brushwork, composition and space, color and tonality, and symbolic imagery and motifs—which are proposed to jointly shape audiences' aesthetic and behavioral responses to illustration-based cultural products.

Although CPVL is widely used in practice, its application depends on designers' intuition rather than on a clear understanding of how specific visual elements influence audiences. Designers may imitate traditional brushwork, adopt compositional structures, or reference iconic motifs, yet they rarely distinguish which aspects of CPVL enhance aesthetic quality, which evoke Cultural Identity, and how these effects translate into Behavioral Intentions such as purchasing or recommending illustration-based cultural products.

Several critical questions therefore remain unresolved. First, it is unclear which dimensions of CPVL—line and brushwork, composition and space, color and tonality, and symbolic imagery and motifs—are most crucial in shaping audiences' Aesthetic Responses (Feng, 2023). Second, the psychological mechanisms through which CPVL influences audiences are not well understood: Do traditional visual cues primarily enhance perceived aesthetic quality, do they mainly operate by strengthening Cultural Identity, or do these mechanisms work together? Third, existing research has rarely examined how Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity lead to Behavioral Intentions, leaving the linkage between CPVL and audience behavior implicit. This study therefore

calls for a theoretically grounded model that traces how CPVL influences Behavioral Intentions through aesthetic and cultural responses.

Existing studies relevant to CPVL can be grouped into three strands. One strand examines the use of traditional cultural elements in contemporary design, branding, and illustration and shows that patterns inspired by traditional art, calligraphic lines, and decorative motifs carry symbolic meanings and commercial appeal (Yang, 2025). A second strand investigates Aesthetic Responses in visual communication and finds that formal characteristics such as symmetry, complexity, layout, and color harmony influence aesthetic quality and pleasure and thereby shape attitudes and intentions (Hu et al., 2022; Hermansson et al., 2025). A third strand explores Cultural Identity and Behavioral Intentions in the cultural and creative industries, suggesting that culturally resonant symbols and narratives strengthen group identity, enhance authenticity, and encourage supportive behaviors such as purchasing and recommending cultural products (Zhong et al., 2024).

Despite these insights, important gaps remain. Existing work rarely treats Chinese traditional painting as a structured visual language with clearly defined dimensions that can be linked to audience responses. Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity are often examined separately rather than integrated into a single explanatory chain leading to Behavioral Intentions, and there is still no coherent framework that connects CPVL to these constructs. The present study addresses these gaps by conceptualizing CPVL as a modular visual language and embedding it in an S–O–R-based framework of aesthetic, cultural, and behavioral responses.

1.1. Research Objectives and Questions

In response to these gaps, this study pursues three main objectives. First, it conceptualizes Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) in the context of illustration and identifies its core dimensions—line and brushwork, composition and space, color and tonality, and symbolic imagery and motifs. Second, within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, it theorizes how CPVL shapes audiences' Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity. Third, it constructs a conceptual framework and propositions that link CPVL, Aesthetic Responses, Cultural Identity, and Behavioral Intentions toward illustration-based cultural products, while incorporating Cultural Familiarity, Artistic Involvement, and Application Context as moderating factors.

Accordingly, this study addresses four questions:

- i. RQ1: What are the key dimensions of CPVL in contemporary illustration?
- ii. RQ2: How does CPVL shape Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity?
- iii. RQ3: How do these organismic states influence Behavioral Intentions toward illustration-based cultural products?
- iv. RQ4: How do Cultural Familiarity, Artistic Involvement, and Application Context moderate these relationships?

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study makes three main theoretical contributions. First, it redefines Chinese traditional painting as Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) with identifiable dimensions rather than as a vague stylistic label or static cultural symbol (Zhou & Zhang, 2025). Second, by embedding CPVL within the S–O–R framework and integrating insights

from aesthetic theory, Cultural Identity research, and consumer behavior, it clarifies how features of visual language elicit aesthetic and cultural responses that lead to Behavioral Intentions. Third, by introducing moderating variables such as Cultural Familiarity, Artistic Involvement, and Application Context, the study delineates boundary conditions under which CPVL is more or less effective, enriching discussions of “under what conditions and for whom” traditional visual elements work best (Dobrota et al., 2022).

Practically, the framework offers illustrators, designers, and brand managers a toolkit for employing CPVL strategically rather than merely decoratively. It highlights how different combinations of brushwork, spatial layouts, color schemes, and symbolic imagery can enhance perceived aesthetic quality, strengthen Cultural Identity, and promote supportive behaviors toward illustration-based cultural products (Wei et al., 2025), and provides cultural institutions and policymakers with guidance for creatively transforming traditional artistic resources in contemporary visual communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) as Visual Language

Visual communication research commonly defines visual language as a relatively stable system composed of basic elements such as line, shape, color, texture, and composition together with rules for their combination; meaning is produced through this system rather than through isolated images (Aiello & Van Leeuwen, 2022). In design and illustration, particular configurations of these elements give rise to recognizable styles and genres and help construct narratives, emotional tones, and brand personalities, while layout and hierarchy guide attention and structure interpretation (Li, 2023).

Chinese traditional painting provides a paradigmatic example of such a visual system. Centuries of artistic practice have developed a coherent “grammar” of brushwork, spatial organization, color use, and symbolic imagery for representing landscapes, figures, and abstract ideas. Calligraphic strokes, asymmetrical compositions, layered space, ink-based tonalities, and culturally loaded motifs together form a readily recognizable “Chinese painting” style (Zhao, 2023). Contemporary designers and illustrators have increasingly translated these features into packaging, branding, illustration, and other visual applications, contributing to guochao movements and cultural-creative industries (Xu, 2025). In this process, Chinese painting is no longer confined to the fine-art domain but functions as a flexible repertoire of visual resources.

Studies on traditional and indigenous visual elements in design show that motifs and stylistic cues drawn from folk art, calligraphy, and classical painting can differentiate brands and enhance perceived authenticity, locality, and cultural value (Xu, 2025). However, these works often treat “traditional style” as an undifferentiated label and rarely decompose it into specific visual dimensions. Even in the Chinese context, research documenting the use of ink-wash aesthetics, calligraphic typefaces, and auspicious motifs in guochao brands, national image campaigns, and cultural tourism promotion remains largely descriptive or case-based. Few studies systematically conceptualize Chinese traditional painting as a modular visual language and then link its components to audience responses.

This study therefore conceptualizes Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) as a set of visual characteristics rooted in Chinese traditional painting and mobilized in

contemporary illustration to convey aesthetic and cultural meanings. For analytical purposes, CPVL is divided into four interrelated dimensions—line and brushwork, composition and space, color and tonality, and symbolic imagery and motifs—which can be deliberately integrated into illustration and systematically related to audience responses.

2.2. Aesthetic Responses to Visual Design

Aesthetic responses are generally defined as viewers' subjective experiences of beauty, attractiveness, and pleasure when encountering visual works (Welter et al., 2024). Classical aesthetics emphasizes harmony and balance, while contemporary approaches highlight cognitive and emotional processes such as processing fluency, affective arousal, and meaning construction. Empirical research in graphic, web, and product design shows that formal properties including symmetry, moderate complexity, layout clarity, and color harmony systematically influence perceived aesthetic quality and aesthetic pleasure; designs that are coherent and easy to process tend to be judged as more visually appealing (Clemente et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2021).

Aesthetic responses are closely associated with attitudes, perceived usability, trust, and willingness to use or purchase, indicating that they form a core component of evaluative processes rather than superficial reactions to appearance (Baghirov & Zhang, 2024). Product design studies, for example, find that aesthetic impressions shape judgments of quality, emotional attachment, and willingness to pay a price premium (Baghirov & Zhang, 2024). These findings suggest that design-intensive environments require careful consideration of how visual properties drive aesthetic reactions and, in turn, behavioral outcomes.

At the same time, most studies focus on generic design attributes and pay limited attention to culturally specific visual languages such as CPVL (Buschgens & Figueiredo, 2024). The interaction between aesthetic evaluations and identity-related processes also remains underexplored when traditional visual elements are involved. Building on these insights, the present study conceptualizes aesthetic responses as an organismic state within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model, composed of perceived aesthetic quality and aesthetic pleasure and expected to be particularly sensitive to variations in CPVL.

2.3. Cultural Identity in Visual Communication

Cultural identity refers to the extent to which individuals or groups cognitively accept, endorse, and internalize the values, beliefs, practices, and traditions of their cultural group, thereby developing feelings of belonging and loyalty. Visual representation plays a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing cultural identity by concretizing shared histories, values, and aspirations. Studies on nation branding, place marketing, and cultural heritage communication suggest that culturally resonant symbols, colors, and styles enhance perceived authenticity, strengthen group identification, and evoke pride (Zhang et al., 2024; Liu & Shmelova-Nesterenko, 2025).

Research at the intersection of design and identity further shows that ethnic and local brands that integrate culturally salient visual elements are more likely to foster a sense of belonging and loyalty among in-group audiences (Gao, 2025; Huang et al., 2025; Xiao et

al., 2025). In these contexts, visual language operates as a symbolic resource that allows individuals to affirm their cultural membership and express collective identity.

In the case of CPVL, lines, compositions, tonalities, and classical imagery derived from Chinese painting are closely tied to Chinese philosophical thought, literati culture, and collective memories of landscapes and seasons (Zhang, 2024). When these features are carefully integrated into illustration, they may evoke cultural pride, nostalgia, or belonging, thereby reinforcing cultural identity. If they are used in a superficial or stereotypical manner, however, these effects can be weakened. Existing literature, though, often remains at the macro level of brands or campaigns and pays less attention to the specific visual mechanisms—such as line characteristics, compositional structures, or tonal schemes—through which identity experiences are produced (Gao, 2025). This study therefore treats cultural identity as a key organismic response that is influenced directly by CPVL and indirectly by the aesthetic responses that CPVL elicits.

2.4. Behavioral Intentions in Cultural and Creative Contexts

Behavioral intentions are commonly defined as individuals' readiness and willingness to engage in a specific behavior and are regarded as the most immediate antecedent of actual behavior in psychology and consumer research. In cultural and creative contexts, behavioral intentions include visiting and revisiting, purchasing, retaining, recommending, donating, and other forms of supportive behavior. Studies on museums and cultural heritage sites indicate that perceived educational value, emotional engagement, and aesthetic appreciation jointly predict visitors' intentions to revisit and recommend (Fang et al., 2025; Zhou, 2022). Research on cultural souvenirs and cultural-creative merchandise shows that design quality, originality, symbolic or identity meaning, and local distinctiveness are stable predictors of purchase intentions (Ding & Harun, 2025; Huang et al., 2025).

When traditional art forms are embedded in cultural products, cultural identity and aesthetic enjoyment often function as key psychological drivers of behavioral intentions. Consumers with stronger identification with the relevant culture are more inclined to interpret traditional visual elements positively, perceive higher symbolic value, and exhibit stronger intentions to purchase and engage in positive word-of-mouth (Huang et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2025; Ding & Harun, 2025). Aesthetic enjoyment also enhances experiential and self-expressive value and thus supports favorable behavioral outcomes. Nevertheless, only a limited number of studies explicitly model how aesthetic responses and cultural identity jointly shape behavioral intentions in the context of a specific visual language such as CPVL.

To address this limitation, the present study defines behavioral intentions specifically as intentions to purchase, use, keep, and recommend illustration-based cultural products that incorporate CPVL. These intentions are treated as the response variable in the S-O-R model, shaped by the combined influence of aesthetic responses and cultural identity triggered by CPVL.

2.5. S-O-R Framework and Research Positioning

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework originates in environmental psychology and posits that environmental or design-related stimuli (S) influence individuals' internal organismic states (O)—including cognitive and affective reactions—

which in turn shape responses (R) such as approach–avoidance behavior, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Tymoshchuk et al., 2024). The model has been widely applied in retailing, online environments, tourism, and design to organize relationships among design features, psychological processes, and behavioral outcomes (Ustazah et al., 2025). In visual design settings, stimuli include layout, color, typography, and imagery; organismic states encompass emotional experiences, evaluative judgments, and identity-related processes; and responses are reflected in intentions to use, purchase, revisit, or recommend.

Recent extensions of the S–O–R model introduce individual traits and situational variables as moderators to capture the conditions under which S–O–R relationships become stronger or weaker (Ali & Khan, 2023; Al-Rawashdeh, 2025; Dehghan Pour Farashah et al., 2025). This perspective is particularly relevant for cultural and creative contexts, where the impact of design is likely to vary with audiences' cultural familiarity, artistic involvement, and the application context of the visual language.

Guided by this framework and the literature reviewed above, the present study positions CPVL as the stimulus, aesthetic responses and cultural identity as organismic states, and behavioral intentions toward CPVL-based illustration products as the response. By treating CPVL as a multidimensional visual language, integrating aesthetic and identity-related processes into a single explanatory chain, and incorporating moderating factors such as cultural familiarity, artistic involvement, and application context, the study addresses gaps in prior work that often treated “traditional style” as an undifferentiated label and left the psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions of CPVL's effects under-theorized (Liu & Shmelova-Nesterenko, 2025; Xu, 2025; Al-Rawashdeh, 2025; Dehghan Pour Farashah et al., 2025). This configuration provides the overarching theoretical lens for the conceptual model and propositions developed in the next chapter.

3. Method

This study adopts a conceptual research design aimed at constructing a theoretically coherent framework to explain how Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) in illustration influences Aesthetic Responses and Behavioral Intentions, rather than testing specific hypotheses using primary data. Conceptual papers typically advance theory by integrating existing research, clarifying core constructs, and proposing new relationships, and are particularly suitable in situations where a phenomenon is widely observed in practice but its underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions have not yet been sufficiently theorized (Luft et al., 2022). CPVL has become increasingly prominent in contemporary illustration and in the cultural and creative industries, yet discussions of its audience effects remain fragmented. A primarily theory-building approach is therefore an appropriate choice.

The literature underpinning this framework was identified through systematic searches in databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Search strategies combined the core constructs using keywords including “Chinese painting,” “visual language,” “illustration,” “aesthetic response,” “cultural identity,” “behavioral intention,” “cultural products,” and “creative industries.” To capture relevant work as comprehensively as possible, the search was not restricted to a single disciplinary domain but instead encompassed design research, art history, cultural studies, psychology, marketing, tourism, and related fields. Studies were included if they: (a) discussed the visual or design dimensions of Chinese traditional painting or closely related traditional

art forms; (b) examined aesthetic evaluation, Cultural Identity, or Behavioral Intentions in visual or cultural product contexts; and (c) employed the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework or related theoretical models to explain the relationships between design and audience responses. On this basis, forward and backward snowballing from the reference lists of key publications was used to identify additional potentially important studies and reduce the risk of omitting critical contributions.

The theoretical development follows a three-step analytical strategy. First, the core constructs are identified and clarified. Research on traditional visual elements and Chinese painting provides the basis for conceptualizing CPVL and its four dimensions, while studies on aesthetics, Cultural Identity, and Behavioral Intentions inform the definition and operationalization of organismic and response variables. Second, existing findings are organized within the S–O–R structure. Evidence on how visual features influence aesthetic evaluation is interpreted as indicating potential pathways from CPVL to Aesthetic Responses, and studies that examine relationships among aesthetic experience, Cultural Identity, and Behavioral Intentions in cultural and creative contexts are used to delineate the organismic and response components of the model. Third, a conceptual framework and a set of propositions are developed by synthesizing these strands of evidence. In this framework, CPVL is defined as the Stimulus, Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity are treated as organismic states, and Behavioral Intentions constitute the Response. Cultural Familiarity, Artistic Involvement, and Application Context are incorporated as moderating factors. For each relationship, theoretical arguments and representative empirical findings are integrated to formulate propositions P1–P8 for future empirical testing.

The literature-based conceptual approach adopted here also entails limitations. The proposed relationships among CPVL, Aesthetic Responses, Cultural Identity, Behavioral Intentions, and the moderating variables remain theoretical claims that have not yet been evaluated using primary data, and their strength and form may vary across audience segments and application contexts. The body of literature assembled is selective rather than exhaustive, and omissions are particularly likely in non-English or less accessible publications, which may bias the theoretical synthesis toward more visible perspectives. In addition, the decision to conceptualize CPVL in terms of four dimensions partly reflects the researcher's judgment about the most salient features of Chinese painting in the illustration context; alternative dimensional structures remain plausible and warrant further exploration. In light of these limitations, the framework proposed in this study should be regarded as a starting point for subsequent empirical research and theoretical refinement, rather than as a definitive account.

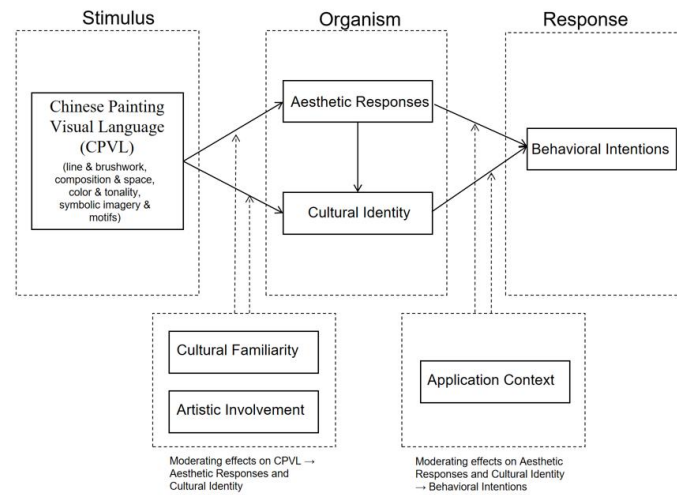
4. Conceptual Framework and Propositions

4.1. Overview of the S–O–R-based Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, this study conceptualizes Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) in illustration as the Stimulus (S), audiences' Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity as Organism (O), and Behavioral Intentions toward illustration-based cultural products as the Response (R). CPVL comprises visual characteristics of Chinese traditional painting. When audiences encounter CPVL-based illustrations, these features elicit evaluations of aesthetic quality and viewing pleasure (Aesthetic Responses) and feelings of belonging and emotional connection to the culture depicted (Cultural Identity) (Liu & Zhao, 2024). These

organismic states in turn shape intentions to purchase, use, keep, or recommend CPVL-based cultural products. The proposed S–O–R-based conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of CPVL based on the S–O–R model



The model also incorporates Cultural Familiarity and Artistic Involvement as individual-level moderators and Application Context as a situational moderator. Cultural Familiarity captures knowledge and prior exposure to Chinese culture and traditional art, whereas Artistic Involvement reflects interest and engagement in art and design. Evidence that culture-related variables, such as cultural traditionalism, strengthen the effect of design aesthetics on perceived value and purchase intention supports this choice (Li & Li, 2022). Application Context refers to how CPVL is used, for example in brand packaging, cultural-creative merchandise, educational materials, institutional communication, or pure art (Liu & Zhao, 2024). These moderators are expected to condition the paths from CPVL to organismic states and from organismic states to Behavioral Intentions.

4.2. Direct Effects of CPVL on Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity (P1–P3)

When audiences encounter CPVL-based illustrations, their visual features are expected to shape Aesthetic Responses. Brush-like lines, uses of solid and void space, ink tonalities, and cultural imagery can enhance perceived beauty and artistic value. Design-aesthetics research shows that visual styles that are distinctive yet coherent, and that combine novelty with familiarity, receive higher ratings on aesthetic quality and pleasure (Han et al., 2021). CPVL embodies this tension between tradition and contemporary reinterpretation, suggesting a positive effect on Aesthetic Responses.

Proposition 1 (P1).

The use of Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) in illustration positively influences audiences' Aesthetic Responses.

CPVL is also expected to directly affect Cultural Identity. Visual elements derived from Chinese traditional painting embody cultural values and collective memories. When audiences recognize these associations, they may experience increased cultural belonging and pride. Studies on traditional symbols in product and brand design show that such symbols enhance identification with brand identity and Cultural Identity (Kwarteng-

[Amaniampong et al., 2025](#)). In CPVL-based illustration, motifs such as landscapes, plum blossoms, or dragons can thus serve as visual reminders of shared narratives and aesthetic ideals.

Proposition 2 (P2).

The use of CPVL in illustration positively influences audiences' Cultural Identity.

CPVL may additionally influence Cultural Identity indirectly through Aesthetic Responses. When CPVL-based illustrations are perceived as beautiful and artistically appealing, the resulting aesthetic experience can heighten audiences' sense of the value and significance of the cultural symbols and thus strengthen Cultural Identity (Lu et al., 2023).

Proposition 3 (P3).

Aesthetic Responses to CPVL-based illustration positively influence Cultural Identity and mediate the relationship between CPVL and Cultural Identity.

4.3. Aesthetic and Cultural Pathways to Behavioral Intentions (P4–P6)

Prior research shows that visually attractive products elicit more favorable attitudes, stronger purchase intentions and greater willingness to recommend or share them. In cultural and creative contexts, aesthetic enjoyment enhances experiential value and increases willingness to purchase cultural products. Applied to CPVL-based illustration, higher perceived aesthetic quality and viewing pleasure should therefore strengthen intentions to support related products.

Proposition 4 (P4).

Aesthetic Responses to CPVL-based illustration positively influence audiences' Behavioral Intentions.

Perceiving a product or visual message as representing "our culture" can also drive Behavioral Intentions. Studies of ethnic and traditional cultural products show that perceived cultural identity associated with a product significantly enhances purchase intentions ([Dong & Li, 2025](#)). For CPVL-based illustration, stronger Cultural Identity should therefore foster supportive Behavioral Intentions.

Proposition 5 (P5).

Cultural Identity elicited by CPVL-based illustration positively influences audiences' Behavioral Intentions.

Cultural Identity may also mediate the link between Aesthetic Responses and Behavioral Intentions. Aesthetic enjoyment can directly encourage purchasing or usage, but it can also strengthen identification with the represented culture and thereby indirectly increase willingness to support related products ([Kumari et al., 2025](#)). In CPVL-based illustration, aesthetically attractive works may thus enhance Behavioral Intentions by reinforcing Cultural Identity.

Proposition 6 (P6).

Cultural Identity mediates the relationship between Aesthetic Responses to CPVL-based illustration and audiences' Behavioral Intentions.

4.4. Moderating Effects and Boundary Conditions (P7–P8)

Not all audiences respond to CPVL in the same way. Cultural Familiarity and Artistic Involvement are likely to moderate its effects on Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity. Individuals who are familiar with Chinese cultural symbols and narratives can better interpret CPVL and thus perceive greater aesthetic value and cultural significance, particularly when they are also engaged in art and design activities (Pei & Cao, 2025).

Proposition 7 (P7).

Cultural Familiarity and Artistic Involvement positively moderate the effects of CPVL on Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity: higher levels of these traits strengthen the positive effects of CPVL.

Application Context may also shape the impact of CPVL on Behavioral Intentions. CPVL can appear in cultural-creative merchandise, brand packaging, educational materials, institutional communication or art. When it is used in contexts that foreground cultural narratives or cultural authenticity, Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity are more likely to translate into strong Behavioral Intentions. Conversely, when CPVL is applied as decoration without clear cultural positioning, these organismic states may still arise but exert weaker effects on Behavioral Intentions.

Proposition 8 (P8).

Application Context moderates the effects of Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity on Behavioral Intentions: in culturally salient contexts these effects are stronger, whereas in primarily decorative or non-cultural contexts they are weaker.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1. Interpretation of the Conceptual Relationships

The proposed framework suggests that Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) in illustration can influence audiences' aesthetic, cultural, and behavioral responses at multiple levels. As a distinctive visual stimulus, CPVL operates through elements such as brush-textured lines, asymmetrical yet balanced composition, ink-based tonality, and symbolic imagery to create a sensory experience that is simultaneously familiar and novel. In doing so, it enhances perceived aesthetic quality and aesthetic pleasure. Empirical research shows that when artworks strike an optimal balance between familiarity and novelty, viewers' aesthetic preferences increase significantly (Song et al., 2021). Moreover, individuals with higher aesthetic appreciation ability tend to experience stronger aesthetic pleasure when confronted with complex or novel visual forms (Pei & Cao, 2025), further indicating that individual differences shape the strength of Aesthetic Responses elicited by CPVL.

Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity jointly shape audiences' Behavioral Intentions toward CPVL-based illustration products. When audiences not only find a work "beautiful"

but also feel that it affirms or expresses their Cultural Identity, they possess multiple reasons—hedonic, symbolic, and moral—to purchase, use, keep, or recommend such products (Dong & Li, 2025). The moderating roles of Cultural Familiarity, Artistic Involvement, and Application Context indicate that this process does not operate uniformly for all audiences: CPVL exerts stronger effects when viewers are more culturally and artistically prepared, and when the context highlights the cultural significance of the illustration rather than treating it as merely decorative.

Overall, the framework portrays CPVL as more than a stylistic choice: it functions as a visual language capable of connecting traditional aesthetic resources to contemporary cultural consumption through a chain of Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity. This interpretation resonates with broader discussions in the creative industries about the “creative transformation and innovative development” of traditional culture, while offering a more fine-grained account of the visual mechanisms through which such transformation occurs.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study offers a new theoretical perspective within the domains of design and visual communication. By conceptualizing the Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) as a structured visual system with distinct dimensions, and embedding it within an aesthetic-behavioral response model, the study moves beyond treating “traditional style” as a vague holistic label. Instead, it highlights the analytical differentiation and interrelation among line and brushwork, composition and spatial arrangement, color and tonality, as well as imagery and symbolism (Lu, Di, & Nie, 2023). This dimensionalized approach provides a more precise foundation for both theoretical reasoning and quantitative measurement of traditional visual languages, while also offering a transferable framework for studying other culture-specific aesthetics.

From the perspective of aesthetics and consumer behavior, the proposed model integrates aesthetic response and cultural identity within a unified Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) chain. It illustrates how CPVL-based visual stimuli evoke aesthetic responses, how these responses further shape cultural identity, and how both jointly influence behavioral intentions (Liu, Samsudin, & Zou, 2025). By linking aesthetic and identity processes within a single framework, this study elucidates the psychological mechanism through which design aesthetics affect cultural consumption, aligning with the theoretical pursuit in the creative industries to integrate hedonic, symbolic, and identity values.

Furthermore, this framework refines the traditional S–O–R perspective by introducing cultural familiarity, artistic involvement, and application context as moderating variables. This suggests that the relationships among stimulus, organism, and response are context-dependent rather than universal. The effectiveness of CPVL relies on the audience’s cultural and artistic preparedness, as well as the extent to which the applied context highlights its cultural significance. Such emphasis on boundary conditions encourages future S–O–R research on design effectiveness to focus more closely on audience segmentation and contextual fit.

Finally, this study positions CPVL at the intersection of art history and contemporary design/marketing theory. Concepts traditionally confined to art-historical discourse—such as brushwork conventions, spatial voids (*liubai*), and *literati* imagery—are

reinterpreted here as core components of a visual language, interwoven with aesthetic response models and consumer decision theories (Lu, Di, & Nie, 2023). This interdisciplinary integration opens a new direction for research, fostering a closer dialogue between traditional art studies and empirical research in visual communication and cultural consumption.

5.3. Theoretical Implications

The proposed framework has implications for design practice, brand management, and cultural policy. For illustrators and designers, the dimensions of Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL)—line & brushwork, composition & space, color & tonality, and symbolic imagery & motifs—should be treated as strategically deployable resources rather than as post hoc decorative add-ons. Prior research indicates that when cultural elements are deliberately integrated into contemporary packaging design, these visual and symbolic resources can significantly enhance consumers' perceptions of cultural authenticity, emotional resonance, and identification (Cui et al., 2024).

For brands and cultural-creative enterprises, embedding CPVL into brand narratives and product stories that emphasize cultural heritage and authenticity, and materializing these narratives through packaging or cultural-creative merchandise, can leverage the combined effect of visual appeal, cultural value, and brand experience to strengthen consumer support and Behavioral Intentions toward the products (Liu et al., 2025; Kumari et al., 2025). Managers should therefore avoid remaining at the level of superficial “retro” or guochao styling and instead develop integrated strategies that align CPVL with brand values, cultural missions, and origin stories.

For cultural institutions and policymakers, the framework suggests that enhancing public understanding and aesthetic familiarity with traditional visual languages (such as Chinese painting)—through public education, exhibition curation, cultural-creative product development, and media communication—can broaden the audience base for CPVL as a “meaningful and appealing” visual-cultural resource. This, in turn, can amplify its impact on cultural-creative product purchases, visitor support, cultural dissemination, and word-of-mouth advocacy (Cui et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

Taken together, these practical implications indicate that the innovative use of CPVL in contemporary illustration and cultural-creative product design should rest on a strategic understanding of the complex relationships among visual language structure, audience psychology, and cultural context, rather than treating CPVL as a transient stylistic fashion or purely decorative trend.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The conceptual framework proposed in this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. As a theory-building model, it is developed from conceptual reasoning and existing literature rather than from primary empirical data. Consequently, the strength and direction of the relationships among Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL), Aesthetic Responses, Cultural Identity, Behavioral Intentions, and the moderating variables remain to be validated through empirical research in specific application contexts (Luft et al., 2022). In addition, the framework predominantly highlights the potentially positive effects of CPVL and does not systematically address possible negative

or ambivalent reactions, such as perceptions of visual cliché, cultural appropriation, or aesthetic fatigue.

The present conceptualization of CPVL and its four dimensions is grounded in widely recognized characteristics of Chinese traditional painting, but it does not fully capture the diversity of regional styles, historical periods, or contemporary experimental practices. Some subtypes of CPVL may require more fine-grained or alternative dimensional structures. Furthermore, the model has been developed primarily within a Sinophone cultural context. Its transferability to other cultural audiences—such as international consumers with limited exposure to Chinese painting—remains uncertain and calls for further examination.

Future research should subject the propositions advanced in this study to systematic empirical testing. An important step is the development of measurement instruments to operationalize the dimensions of CPVL, Aesthetic Responses, Cultural Identity, Behavioral Intentions, and the moderating variables, followed by the use of structural equation modeling or related techniques among different audience groups, such as domestic consumers, art and design students, and international tourists (Ji, 2024). Experimental studies could manipulate the intensity or combinations of CPVL dimensions across illustration versions and examine resulting differences in Aesthetic Responses, Cultural Identity, and Behavioral Intentions. Mixed-method approaches—including in-depth interviews, focus groups, visually elicited interviews, and physiological or behavioral indicators such as eye-tracking data, click-through rates, and dwell time—could further clarify how viewers interpret and engage with CPVL-based designs.

Another promising direction is to extend and compare the framework across other cultural and artistic contexts. Many cultures possess distinctive traditional visual languages, such as Japanese ukiyo-e, Korean minhwa, Islamic geometric patterns, and various Indigenous art traditions. Comparative and cross-cultural studies could test whether similar S–O–R pathways operate across these visual systems and how Cultural Familiarity and Artistic Involvement shape audience responses in both local and global settings.

7. Conclusion

This study develops a conceptual framework for understanding the innovative use of the visual language of Chinese traditional painting in contemporary illustration. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model and integrating insights from design aesthetics, Cultural Identity research, and consumer behavior, it conceptualizes Chinese Painting Visual Language (CPVL) as a multi-dimensional visual system and theorizes how it shapes audiences' Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity, which in turn influence Behavioral Intentions toward illustration-based cultural products. Around this core, the study advances eight propositions that specify CPVL's direct and indirect effects, the mediating roles of Aesthetic Responses and Cultural Identity, and the moderating influences of Cultural Familiarity, Artistic Involvement, and Application Context.

The framework suggests that, when thoughtfully designed and contextually embedded, CPVL is not merely a stylistic resource but a powerful medium linking traditional aesthetics with contemporary cultural consumption. By elucidating the internal mechanisms and boundary conditions of this process, the study contributes to theoretical discussions on visual language, aesthetic experience, and cultural consumption, while also

offering practical guidance for designers, brands, and cultural institutions seeking to “activate” traditional art forms within the creative industries.

Future research is needed to empirically test and refine the proposed model across different audience groups and cultural settings, and to explore its extension to other traditional visual languages. Through such efforts, the conceptual insights offered here may be transformed into more robust empirical knowledge, supporting more deliberate, culturally sensitive, and aesthetically sophisticated uses of the visual language of Chinese traditional painting in contemporary illustration.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study is a literature-based conceptual paper and did not involve human participants, human data, or the collection of any personally identifiable or sensitive information. All materials were obtained from open-access, non-restricted sources; therefore, formal ethical approval and consent to participate were not required.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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