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Seeing the handmade: production visibility, cultural framing, and consumer valuation of handmade cultural products

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Introduction: Handmade cultural products derive value not only from how they are made but also from what consumers understand them to mean. This study examines how production visibility and cultural framing make different bases of worth available in consumer evaluation.

Methods: A sequential mixed-methods design combined deductive specification, qualitative theory elaboration, and experimental testing. Study 1 combined 20 semi-structured interviews with fieldwork and observation in Chinese art-market settings to elaborate literature-derived pathways and identify an additional relational judgment concerning the connection between making and meaning. Study 2 tested the resulting framework in a 2 × 2 online experiment with 480 Chinese participants (120 per condition), following a separate stimulus pretest.

Results: Production visibility increased perceived effort and handmade authenticity, whereas cultural framing primarily increased perceived cultural value. The joint presentation of production and cultural cues produced a significant interactive effect on purchase intention. Although both cues increased perceived process-meaning fit, their interaction did not, and process-meaning fit did not significantly mediate their interactive effect on purchase intention. As a secondary monetary outcome, willingness to pay showed positive main effects of both cues but no interaction.

Discussion: The findings distinguish an evidential route through which visible production makes human labor and handmade origin available for inference from an interpretive route through which cultural framing makes product meaning intelligible. They further indicate that making multiple evaluative resources available does not necessarily mean that consumers integrate them into a coherent relational judgment.

KEYWORDS
consumer valuation, cultural framing, cultural value, handmade cultural products, perceived handmade authenticity, process–meaning fit, production visibility

1 Introduction

Handmade cultural products have become increasingly visible across art markets, museum shops, cultural festivals, creative retail spaces, and digital commerce. Combining manual craft, aesthetic design, cultural motifs, and references to tradition, heritage, or local identity, such products are valued not only for their material form but also for how they were made and what they are understood to mean. Research on museum

products, intangible-cultural-heritage consumption, and online cultural-product commerce similarly highlights the importance of aesthetic, cultural, experiential, and market value (Cheng et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2022; Yingqing et al., 2024). Yet many of these value-relevant attributes are not directly observable. Human labor may remain invisible in a finished object, while the significance of particular motifs, materials, or techniques may remain unclear without contextual information. Consumers may therefore appreciate a product aesthetically without recognizing the labor behind it, recognize its handmade character without understanding its cultural significance, or encounter cultural claims without being convinced that they are grounded in genuine production practices.

Existing research provides important but largely separate explanations for these processes. Handmade consumption research shows that production mode can shape product attractiveness and symbolic evaluation (Fuchs et al., 2015), while research on operational transparency demonstrates that making hidden work visible can increase perceived effort and consumer valuation (Buell et al., 2017). Related authenticity research emphasizes cues concerning origin, production method, indexical connection, heritage, credibility, and distance from excessive commercialization (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Beverland, 2006; Newman and Dhar, 2014; Morhart et al., 2015). In parallel, research on consumer value and consumer culture shows that products acquire emotional, social, symbolic, and culturally situated meanings beyond functional utility (Sheth et al., 1991; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001; Arnould and Thompson, 2005), while studies of cultural and creative products indicate that cultural value and interpretive information can shape consumer responses (Cheng et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2022). From a sociology-of-valuation perspective, however, valuation is not simply the recognition of value already contained in an object, but a situated process through which actors attribute worth using available evaluative criteria and interpretive resources (Lamont, 2012; Heinich, 2017). Seen in this way, production-related and cultural information provide two analytically distinct but psychologically interconnected routes through which different bases of worth become available for evaluation. Information that makes how a product was made perceptible can provide evidential grounds for judgments of effort and handmade authenticity, whereas cultural framing can organize otherwise ambiguous motifs, materials, and techniques within an interpretive context through which cultural value is constructed. Evaluator-side differences in knowledge, experience, and interpretive resources remain important within this broader account of valuation; the present study isolates a complementary part of that process by examining how the information surrounding a focal object makes particular bases of worth available and intelligible for evaluation.

Within this bounded account, a less resolved question is not simply whether production and cultural information improve evaluation, but how these distinct bases of worth operate when they appear together and whether their joint availability produces a coherent relational judgment. Production visibility can make human labor credible without explaining why a particular material, motif, or technique matters culturally, whereas cultural framing can make product features symbolically meaningful without demonstrating that those meanings are grounded in the product's production process. Their joint presence may therefore enhance evaluation without necessarily producing relational coherence. Research on culture-laden marketing communication suggests that consumers evaluate cultural representations partly in terms of their fit with products and other relevant mental categories (Bartikowski et al., 2023), but it offers limited guidance on whether consumers also judge the relationship between cultural interpretation and the material process through which a handmade object is produced. This distinction is consequential for handmade cultural products, whose market positioning frequently depends on simultaneous claims of craftsmanship and cultural significance. To address this issue, the present study uses a theory-elaborating sequential mixed-methods design that combines deductive specification, qualitative theory elaboration, and experimental testing. Existing literature provides the initial pathways, while Study 1 combines semi-structured interviews and field observations using a hybrid deductive–inductive qualitative analysis to elaborate these pathways and identify relationships not fully specified by prior theory. The qualitative findings suggest that perceived effort may contribute to handmade-authenticity judgment and identify a further relational evaluation concerning whether cultural meaning appears coherently grounded in material and production practice, which we term perceived process–meaning fit. Study 2 subsequently tests both the literature-derived propositions and the qualitative extensions by independently manipulating production visibility and cultural framing.

The study makes two main contributions. First, it specifies how two forms of information make different bases of worth available for judgment: production visibility provides evidential grounds for judgments of effort and handmade authenticity, whereas cultural framing provides interpretive resources for cultural value. This identifies a specific mechanism within a broader relational account of valuation: value-relevant qualities do not necessarily enter evaluation merely because they are present in an object, but must become perceptible or interpretable within the evaluative encounter. Second, the study distinguishes the availability of multiple evaluative resources from their integration. By identifying perceived process–meaning fit as a relational judgment and testing it alongside the joint effects of production visibility and cultural framing, the study examines whether making and meaning become coherently connected rather than merely co-present. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical background and initial hypotheses; Section 3 reports the qualitative study and the resulting theoretical extensions; Section 4 presents the experimental study and hypothesis tests; and Sections 5 and 6 discuss the findings and conclude the article.

2 Theoretical background and initial hypotheses

2.1 Valuation of handmade cultural products

Handmade cultural products invite multiple forms of valuation because they are encountered simultaneously as material objects, craft outcomes, cultural signs, market commodities, and

forms of personal expression. From a sociology-of-valuation perspective, worth is not simply contained in objects but emerges through processes in which particular qualities become salient, interpretable, and available for evaluation (Lamont, 2012; Heinich, 2017). Research on contemporary craft consumption and culturally specific craft goods similarly shows that product value can be associated with material production, design, maker involvement, and culturally situated meaning-making (Kim and Kwon, 2017; Khaire, 2019). Aesthetic qualities constitute an important basis of response to designed objects (Wu et al., 2017), while labor, skill, authorship, materials, techniques, and cultural associations provide additional grounds on which consumers may judge an object's worth. Valuation of handmade cultural products is therefore inherently plural: product qualities become bases of worth insofar as they are made salient and interpretable within the consumption encounter.

Evaluators may also differ in the knowledge, familiarity, and interpretive resources they bring to an encounter. Bourdieu's account of taste emphasizes that aesthetic judgment is related to accumulated cultural capital and familiarity with cultural forms (Bourdieu, 1984). Such differences may influence which product qualities are readily recognized and how they are interpreted. They form an important part of the broader valuation process, but the present study focuses on a complementary question: how information surrounding a focal object changes which bases of worth become perceptible and interpretable. At the same time, neither handmade status nor cultural reference guarantees a favorable evaluation. Recent research shows that responses to handcrafted products vary with how consumers interpret the meaning of handmaking (Song et al., 2023). The evaluative significance of product qualities thus depends not simply on their presence, but on whether consumers have grounds for recognizing and interpreting them.

Consumers may see a finished object without knowing how much effort its production required, whether its handmade origin is credible, or what its motifs and techniques signify culturally. This informational incompleteness makes cues surrounding the object especially important to valuation. Consumers use available cues to infer missing product attributes and to categorize and interpret unfamiliar objects (Walters and Hershfield, 2020; Moreau et al., 2001). In handmade-product encounters, production-related cues can provide evidence about how an object was made, whereas cultural framing can organize product features within an interpretive context through which culturally situated meanings become intelligible. These functions suggest two complementary routes through which bases of worth become accessible: an evidential route centered on production and an interpretive route centered on cultural meaning. Perceived effort, handmade authenticity, and cultural value capture judgments formed within these routes, while purchase intention represents a downstream behavioral orientation toward the evaluated object.

2.2 Production visibility as an evidential route: effort and handmade authenticity

The evidential route begins with the visibility of production. A handmade label provides categorical information, whereas production visibility supplies perceptual and descriptive cues—such as tools, unfinished materials, manual procedures, maker involvement, and descriptions of making—from which consumers can reconstruct aspects of the production process. Research on operational transparency shows that revealing hidden work can increase perceived effort and consumer valuation (Buell and Norton, 2011). More recent research similarly demonstrates that allowing consumers to observe labor and effort during service production can affect subsequent value judgments and behavioral responses (Hwang et al., 2024). Across these settings, visibility matters because it makes otherwise concealed human input available as evidence in evaluation.

Production visibility should therefore strengthen effort inferences. Observing manual shaping, adjustment, material handling, or related activities makes the time, patience, skill, and bodily involvement required for production easier to infer. More generally, the effort heuristic suggests that products believed to require greater production effort can receive higher evaluations, particularly when quality is difficult to assess directly (Kruger et al., 2004). For handmade cultural products, visible traces of making can thus render human labor more concrete and diagnostically useful.

H1a: Production visibility will positively affect perceived effort.

Production visibility should also strengthen perceived handmade authenticity. Consumers rely on cues that help them determine whether an offering is genuine and connected to a credible source (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), while broader authenticity research emphasizes credible origin, sincerity, and quality commitment (Napoli et al., 2014). In handmade-product settings, authenticity centers on whether manual production and human involvement appear genuine rather than merely claimed. Experimental research on transparent brand communication provides more direct support for this logic by showing that disclosure of production information can increase perceived authenticity and improve subsequent consumer responses (Yang and Battocchio, 2021). Visible tools, materials, procedures, and maker involvement should therefore reduce uncertainty by connecting the finished object to identifiable human action.

H1b: Production visibility will positively affect perceived handmade authenticity.

Perceived effort and handmade authenticity should in turn contribute to purchase intention. Inferred effort can increase perceived value and liking (Kruger et al., 2004), and perceived effort can help explain why greater transparency enhances valuation (Buell and Norton, 2011). Authenticity can likewise strengthen favorable behavioral responses by making an offering appear more credible, distinctive, and meaningful (Fritz et al., 2017). Production visibility should therefore matter not because it creates labor or handmade origin, but because it makes these otherwise partly hidden qualities available for inference. We consequently propose two parallel indirect pathways:

H2a: Perceived effort will mediate the positive effect of production visibility on purchase intention.

H2b: Perceived handmade authenticity will mediate the positive effect of production visibility on purchase intention.

Effort and handmade authenticity may nevertheless be more closely connected than parallel pathways alone imply. Evidence of sustained, difficult, or skilled labor can itself make human involvement appear more credible. Existing research offers less guidance on this relationship, leaving open whether effort inferences also contribute to judgments of handmade authenticity. Study 1 examines this possibility as part of the qualitative theory-elaboration stage before the relationship is tested experimentally in Study 2.

2.3 Cultural framing as an interpretive route: constructing cultural value

The interpretive route concerns how cultural significance becomes attached to otherwise ambiguous product features. Handmade cultural products may incorporate traditional motifs, local symbols, heritage-inspired techniques, or reinterpretations of cultural forms, yet the physical presence of such features does not guarantee that consumers will recognize or understand their significance. Heritage research similarly shows that the cultural and historical associations attached to products depend partly on which interpretive elements are made salient (Pfannes et al., 2021). Research on intangible cultural heritage products further indicates that culturally situated communication can shape consumer identification and purchase responses, illustrating the importance of interpretive context in rendering heritage-related products meaningful (Guo et al., 2022).

Research on narrative processing helps explain more generally how contextual information can make otherwise ambiguous cultural cues meaningful. Interpretive information can organize product features into meaningful structures and connect them with existing knowledge and self-relevant understandings (Escalas, 2004); in heritage settings, representations linking past and present can likewise shape coherent perceptions of cultural continuity (Martin et al., 2024). A cultural feature can therefore be materially present without functioning as a basis of cultural value if its significance remains unclear to the consumer. Cultural framing can provide the interpretive connections through which visible motifs, materials, or techniques become culturally meaningful.

In this study, cultural framing refers to information that situates motifs, materials, techniques, or design choices within a cultural context and explains their symbolic associations. Its function is to render cultural associations interpretable rather than to assume that cultural significance is self-evident from the object itself. Such framing can make otherwise ambiguous product features culturally intelligible, consistent with research showing that information concerning history, technology, people, place, and continuity shapes heritage perceptions (Pfannes et al., 2021). Cultural framing should therefore primarily increase the extent to which consumers perceive the object as carrying culturally and symbolically significant value.

H3: Cultural framing will positively affect perceived cultural value.

Perceived cultural value should subsequently enhance purchase intention. Symbolic and socio-cultural value can contribute to consumer valuation beyond utilitarian benefits (Tsai, 2005). Recent experimental research on tourism cultural and creative products provides related evidence that perceived cultural value can mediate the effects of product design on consumers' willingness to pay a premium (Zhang et al., 2024). Research on cultural and creative products similarly links perceived cultural value to purchase intention (Lu et al., 2026). When a product becomes intelligible as culturally meaningful rather than merely decorative, it may acquire greater distinctiveness, symbolic relevance, and appeal as an object of ownership.

H4: Perceived cultural value will mediate the positive effect of cultural framing on purchase intention.

The evidential and interpretive routes emphasize different bases of evaluation, but their effects need not remain confined to separate psychological domains. Production information may carry implications for cultural value, while cultural framing may also affect how consumers interpret handmade origin. The distinction therefore concerns the dominant evaluative function of each resource rather than an assumption that the two routes are psychologically independent.

2.4 The relationship between making and meaning

Once production and cultural meaning are treated as distinct but potentially connected bases of worth, a further question concerns how consumers relate them to one another. Congruity research shows that evaluation depends not only on the favorability of individual cues but also on whether they can be reconciled with one another and with existing schemas (Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989). More recent integrative work similarly conceptualizes congruence as a relational property among sensory and semantic cues, emphasizing that consumer responses can depend on how multiple sources of meaning fit together rather than on the isolated effects of each cue (Eklund and Helmefalk, 2022).

Production and cultural information may operate in parallel, with each independently supplying a positive basis for evaluation. Yet multiple favorable cues do not necessarily produce stronger responses merely because they are presented together (Tangari et al., 2019). Their joint availability therefore raises a further question: whether the two resources can be understood as belonging to the same product account. A cultural frame may make a handmade object symbolically meaningful while remaining only loosely related to its material or technique, just as a visible production process may demonstrate skill without explaining why that process matters culturally. Related research shows that consumers respond differently when verbal and visual cultural cues are congruent (Teng et al., 2014) and that congruence between culturally laden products and their interpretive contexts can improve evaluation (Song et al., 2018). Recent work on culture-ladenness fit likewise demonstrates that culturally laden communication is evaluated relationally, according to how well its cultural content fits the product and other relevant interpretive categories (Bartikowski et al., 2023).

Existing congruity research has examined relationships between products and category schemas, sensory and semantic

cues, verbal and visual messages, promotional claims and product goals, and cultural content and broader marketing contexts. For handmade cultural products, an analogous relational question arises between material production and attributed cultural meaning. A product may be judged both genuinely handmade and culturally meaningful while leaving open whether its production process and cultural interpretation are perceived as coherently connected. This distinction separates the availability of multiple favorable bases of worth from their integration into a relational judgment concerning making and meaning.

Study 1 serves as the theory-elaboration stage for this relational question while also examining how the literature-derived evidential and interpretive routes operate in situated art-market encounters. Its qualitative findings are then used to refine the initial framework and formulate additional relationships for experimental examination in Study 2.

3 Study 1: Qualitative theory elaboration

3.1 Study design and method

Study 1 served as the qualitative theory-elaboration stage of the sequential mixed-methods design. Existing research provided a deductive starting framework concerning production visibility, perceived effort, perceived handmade authenticity, cultural framing, and perceived cultural value, as reflected in H1a–H4. Rather than causally testing these hypotheses, Study 1 examined how the proposed evidential and interpretive routes of valuation operated in situated encounters and identified relationships or contextual processes not adequately specified by prior theory. Accordingly, Study 1 used a hybrid deductive–inductive qualitative strategy: theory-informed concepts provided an initial analytic structure, while the analysis remained open to emergent relationships and contextual patterns that could elaborate that structure. The qualitative phase therefore neither deductively tested a fixed model nor inductively generated the entire framework from the data (Creswell and Clark, 2007).

Three exploratory questions guided the analysis: how consumers use production-related cues to infer handmade labor and handmade authenticity; how cultural framing shapes the interpretation of product meaning; and how consumers and market actors understand the relationship between production process and cultural meaning when both become relevant to evaluation. The analysis also remained open to additional patterns emerging from participants' accounts and field observations.

The dataset comprised 20 semi-structured interviews and fieldwork, observation, and product-presentation materials collected between May and November 2025. Nine participants were primarily market-side actors and eleven were primarily consumer-side participants. Fieldwork covered six art-market and craft-related events in eastern China, including eight observation visits totaling approximately 30 h. Interviews lasted 18–48 min. Recruitment proceeded iteratively and was concluded when the sample provided sufficient variation across the focal market-side and consumer-side positions and additional interviews were yielding limited new information relevant to the developing themes. This stopping logic was guided by thematic sufficiency rather than by a predetermined numerical threshold (Hennink et al., 2017). Additional details on the qualitative sample, field context, and data sources are provided in Supplementary material.

The sample was designed to capture variation in participants' positions and experiences within the handmade cultural-product ecology rather than to support demographic subgroup comparisons. This variation informed the qualitative elaboration of valuation processes, but participant characteristics were not systematically operationalized as measures of cultural competence or evaluative repertoire. Accordingly, the qualitative analysis does not make gender-, age-, experience-, or education-specific claims.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first author, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used as a flexible approach for identifying patterned meanings across the qualitative materials (Braun and Clarke, 2006), operationalized here through a hybrid deductive–inductive codebook procedure combining theory-informed coding with openness to emergent relationships and contextual patterns (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). Initial codes concerning production visibility, effort, handmade authenticity, cultural framing, and cultural value were combined with inductive coding, and iterative comparison across interviews and field materials produced six retained themes.

Approximately 25% of the qualitative materials were independently coded by the first and second authors, yielding substantial intercoder agreement ($\kappa = 0.84$). Such procedures can enhance the transparency and systematicity of shared codebook-based qualitative analysis (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). Disagreements were discussed to refine code definitions and thematic boundaries before the finalized framework was applied to the remaining materials. Analytic credibility was further supported through cross-source comparison among interview accounts, field observations, and product-presentation materials, allowing recurring interpretations to be examined across different forms of evidence. Further coding details are provided in Supplementary material.

Participant identifiers were removed from the qualitative materials, and quotations are identified only by participant number. Quotations were translated from Chinese into English and lightly edited for readability without altering substantive meaning. All participants provided informed consent before participation.

3.2 Qualitative findings and theory extension

The qualitative findings elaborated the two literature-derived valuation routes and identified specific relationships not adequately specified in the initial framework. Production-related cues primarily provided evidence from which participants reconstructed human labor and handmade origin, whereas cultural framing supplied interpretive resources through which ambiguous motifs, materials, and techniques acquired culturally situated meaning. Two additional relationships emerged. First, inferred effort

appeared to contribute to handmade-authenticity judgment rather than functioning only as an independent evaluative judgment. Second, participants raised a further relational question concerning whether cultural meaning appeared grounded in material and production practice rather than merely accompanying the product. Aesthetic entry and monetary hesitation emerged as further contextual patterns.

3.2.1 Production visibility, effort, and handmade authenticity

The first theme concerned the evidentiary role of production visibility. Participants did not consistently treat "handmade" as self-evident from a finished object; instead, maker presence, visible tools, unfinished materials, demonstrations, traces of handwork, and production explanations were used to reconstruct how an object had been made.

This concern was particularly explicit among market-side participants, who distinguished genuine handmade production from commercially sourced or resold products. A university-student art-market manager described the screening of participating stalls:

> "We require each stall to be at least 80 percent original, handmade, or related to intangible heritage. Otherwise, some people may buy things from Taobao or small wholesale markets and resell them. If it becomes second-hand reselling, the whole market will feel impure." (P02)

The account illustrates an evidential problem: a product can be presented as handmade while providing little access to its production history. Similar concerns appeared among consumers. P17 described individual style and visible traces of handwork as making products easier to recognize as handmade, whereas objects that appeared "too perfect" could seem mechanically produced. Field notes associated with P09 likewise recorded visitors asking "What material is this?" and "Did you make all of these yourself?" when tools, materials, or unfinished products were visible.

Production visibility also shaped inferences about the labor invested in an object. Visible making made time, patience, technical difficulty, bodily control, and repeated adjustment easier to imagine. A frequent market visitor with an art/design background explained:

> "If I see the stallholder making something there, it will increase my interest. I once saw a girl crocheting very fine yarn to make little hats, and I became very interested. I went over and asked her about it." (P10)

Visible production thus did more than certify origin; it directed attention to the human activity required to create the product. Other participants similarly described reassessing objects after learning how long production took or how much manual correction was involved.

These observations elaborate H1a and H1b by showing how production information functioned as an evidentiary cue, making otherwise hidden human action available as a basis for judgments of effort and handmade origin. Effort and handmade authenticity nevertheless remained distinct: a product could appear labor-intensive without being fully accepted as genuinely handmade, or be regarded as handmade without seeming especially difficult to produce.

The materials also suggested that effort and handmade authenticity were related rather than purely parallel. Evidence of difficult, time-consuming, or skilled work often strengthened the credibility of handmade claims because inferred effort made human involvement more plausible, consistent with research showing that consumers rely on diagnostic cues when judging authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). This relationship was not specified in the initial literature-derived framework. The qualitative evidence instead suggested a possible sequential pathway in which production visibility makes labor perceptible and inferred effort, in turn, contributes to handmade-authenticity judgment. This pattern motivated the following theoretical extension for experimental examination in Study 2:

H2c: Perceived effort and perceived handmade authenticity will sequentially mediate the positive effect of production visibility on purchase intention.

3.2.2 Cultural framing as meaning-making

The second theme concerned the interpretive role of cultural framing. Participants did not assume that traditional-looking motifs, craft techniques, or materials automatically communicated cultural meaning; the same feature could remain primarily decorative unless sufficient knowledge or contextual information connected it to a broader cultural frame.

A paper-art instructor described how material and technique could carry meanings not immediately apparent in the finished object:

> "The texture of a fine paper artwork is actually what the paper artist wants to tell the viewer. It records the maker's experience, aesthetic sense, control over the paper and the work, and even the maker's personality." (P07)

The account illustrates the interpretive distance between material form and perceived meaning. Cultural framing therefore did not merely add information to an already meaningful product but supplied interpretive resources through which otherwise ambiguous features could acquire cultural or symbolic significance.

Participants also distinguished meaningful interpretation from the mechanical attachment of cultural labels. An art-market organizer explained:

> "If intangible heritage is popular this year, it does not mean we must immediately do that. What we need to do is to integrate the suitable and good parts into the culture we want to express. It should not be a stiff arrangement." (P01)

Cultural information was thus not automatically persuasive merely because it was present. Participants attended to whether it made the object more culturally intelligible or functioned as an external label weakly connected to the product. Consumer accounts reflected a similar process: P19 preferred motifs that could be connected to recognizable cultural meanings rather than functioning only as decoration, while P20 described how product images and accompanying stories shaped what subsequently attracted attention.

These findings elaborate H3 and H4 by clarifying cultural framing's dominant evaluative function: it organized motifs, materials, techniques, and design choices within an interpretive context through which culturally situated meanings became legible. In this sense, cultural framing made otherwise ambiguous cultural associations available as a basis of worth. This differs from production visibility's primarily evidential function. Cultural framing concerns what product features are understood to mean, whereas production visibility concerns what can be inferred about how the object came into being.

3.2.3 From co-presence to process–meaning fit

A further theoretical extension concerned the perceived relationship between production process and cultural meaning. Participants distinguished cultural meanings plausibly grounded in material and making practices from cultural claims that appeared externally attached to otherwise unrelated products.

A student craft-community organizer described the risk of indiscriminate cultural labeling:

> "Traditional things are the same. If you see intangible heritage today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, everywhere is intangible heritage, you will get tired of it. What we need to do is to integrate the suitable parts into the culture we want to express." (P06)

The concern was not with heritage-related design itself, but with whether cultural references were appropriate to the object rather than applied generically. A felt-craft maker expressed the material dimension even more directly:

> "It should not be intangible heritage for the sake of intangible heritage. The key is to find what this material is suitable for, and to do what this material is suited to do." (P04)

These accounts suggest a relational judgment not reducible to handmade authenticity or cultural value. A product may be genuinely handmade and culturally meaningful while leaving open whether its material or production method appears meaningfully connected to the cultural interpretation attributed to it.

Consumer-side materials reflected a similar concern with whether cultural elements were meaningfully connected to the product. P19 preferred motifs that could be linked to recognizable cultural meanings rather than functioning merely as decoration and also described participation in making as a way through which heritage could become more personally meaningful. These observations suggest that consumers attended not only to the presence of cultural references but also to whether cultural significance could be connected to the material and creative practices surrounding the object.

Process–meaning fit is conceptually distinct from effort, handmade authenticity, and cultural value. Effort concerns perceived labor, time, skill, or patience; handmade authenticity concerns whether the object is perceived as genuinely handmade rather than mass-produced; and cultural value concerns whether it is culturally or symbolically meaningful. Process–meaning fit instead concerns whether how the product is made and what it is understood to mean appear coherently related. Consumers could therefore evaluate a product positively on handmade authenticity and cultural value while still varying in their perceptions of process–meaning fit.

The qualitative evidence further distinguished the availability of multiple favorable evaluative resources from their integration into a coherent relational judgment. Cultural framing without production visibility may communicate cultural meaning while providing limited evidence that this meaning is grounded in making practice; when production becomes visible, the cultural frame can be evaluated against a more concrete representation of how the object was made. Production visibility may therefore strengthen the effect of cultural framing on perceived process–meaning fit.

H5: The positive effect of cultural framing on perceived process–meaning fit will be stronger when production visibility is present than when it is absent.

The materials further suggested that cultural framing may contribute more strongly to purchase intention when consumers can connect cultural meaning to credible handmade production. Production visibility provides evidence of human labor and origin, whereas cultural framing provides interpretive resources for cultural significance; their joint availability may therefore strengthen this downstream behavioral response.

H6: The positive effect of cultural framing on purchase intention will be stronger when production visibility is present than when it is absent.

Finally, if the advantage of jointly available production and cultural information arises partly from their integration into a coherent product account, process–meaning fit may provide a psychological route from the interaction of the two cues to purchase intention.

H7: The interactive effect of production visibility and cultural framing on purchase intention will be mediated by perceived process–meaning fit.

3.3 Contextual findings: aesthetic entry and monetary hesitation

Two additional themes were retained as contextual findings rather than incorporated into the core hypothesis structure. First,

participants often described visual qualities such as color, delicacy, texture, and style as the initial reason for noticing or approaching an object, with questions about production or cultural meaning arising subsequently. This is consistent with research showing that product design can constitute an early point of consumer contact and shape subsequent evaluation (Kumar and Noble, 2016). A heritage-inspired ornament maker described this sequence:

> "You cannot force people to buy it just because it is intangible heritage. First, the fact that they buy it means they like it; it means they think it looks good. Only then do they discover what technique it uses." (P03)

Consumer accounts showed a similar "aesthetics before heritage" pattern. P15 and P16 initially responded primarily to appearance, while P10 described visual and material qualities as reasons for approaching a stall before asking about technique. Aesthetic attraction thus appeared to function as an entry point into deeper interpretation rather than as an alternative to craft or cultural value. Study 2 consequently measured aesthetic evaluation as a contextual measure rather than a core mechanism.

The second theme concerned a gap between recognizing value and assigning monetary value. Participants could acknowledge effort, craftsmanship, originality, or cultural significance while remaining reluctant to pay prices reflecting those qualities. A clay-accessory maker explained:

> "The advantage is that it attracts people and proves that the product is handmade. The disadvantage is that some customers think handwork is not worth money, that time is not worth money. They only care about the cost of raw materials." (P05)

P18 similarly described liking handmade products while hesitating when small accessories cost approximately RMB 70–80. Such accounts suggest that recognizing labor or cultural meaning does not automatically revise consumers' monetary reference points. Consumer pricing research likewise shows that price judgments depend partly on internal standards and reference prices rather than solely on perceived product attributes (Niedrich et al., 2001). Favorable evaluative judgments and willingness to sacrifice money may therefore diverge, reinforcing the distinction between valuation itself and its monetary expression.

This pattern motivated the inclusion of willingness to pay as a secondary exploratory monetary outcome in Study 2. Because the qualitative findings did not provide a sufficiently specific basis for predicting whether production visibility, cultural framing, or their combination would affect WTP in the same way as purchase intention, no formal directional hypothesis was proposed.

Taken together, Study 1 elaborated rather than replaced the literature-derived framework. The observed relationship between effort and handmade authenticity motivated H2c; the recurring concern with the connection between making and cultural meaning generated the process–meaning fit construct and H5–H7; aesthetic entry motivated the inclusion of aesthetic evaluation as a contextual measure; and monetary hesitation motivated the inclusion of WTP as a secondary monetary outcome. Study 1 thus linked the deductive starting framework to the subsequent experiment by identifying specific theoretical extensions for testing in Study 2.

4 Study 2: Experimental test

4.1 Design, participants, and procedure

Study 2 experimentally tested the literature-derived hypotheses and the theoretical extensions elaborated through Study 1 in a 2 × 2 between-subjects online experiment manipulating production visibility and cultural framing. Participants were randomly assigned to control, production-visible, cultural-framing, or combined conditions.

The target product was a small cloisonné-enamel-inspired floral brooch situated in an art-market or cultural-retail context. The stimulus was presented as a contemporary culturally inspired accessory drawing on a traditional floral-leaf reference; it was not presented to participants as a historical artifact or an authenticated heritage object. Accordingly, the experiment concerns the evaluation of a contemporary culturally framed product rather than judgments of historical or heritage authenticity. A separate stimulus-selection pretest ($N = 80$) compared five candidate motifs on aesthetic appeal, cultural association, familiarity, brooch suitability, and perceived price. The floral-leaf motif was selected because it combined high aesthetic appeal and product suitability with comparatively moderate spontaneous cultural association and familiarity. This pretest was separate from the main experimental sample described below. Pretest details are provided in Supplementary material.

All participants viewed the same finished-product image. Production visibility was manipulated by presenting either a neutral product display or the brooch being made by hand with visible tools and materials, whereas cultural framing was manipulated by presenting either a neutral contemporary context or a traditional floral-leaf reference accompanied by information explaining its cultural associations. The textual materials followed the same factorial structure: all participants received identical basic product information plus one production-related and one cultural-information module, with treatment and control versions approximately matched in length and format. Table 1 summarizes the four experimental conditions. Each condition therefore contained the same number of visual and textual components. All materials were administered in Chinese, and complete translated stimuli are provided in Supplementary materials.

The main experiment was conducted in December 2025 using Credamo. A target of 120 valid participants per condition was set in advance. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, and recruitment continued until each condition reached the target of 120 valid responses after the application of prespecified data-quality screening procedures (Oppenheimer et al., 2009; Meade and Craig, 2012). The main experimental sample therefore comprised 480 participants in total ($n = 120$ per condition), distinct from the $N = 80$ stimulus pretest.

Participants had a mean age of 25.32 years ($SD = 4.82$); 52.1% identified as female, 46.7% as male, and 1.2% did not disclose

TABLE 1 Experimental conditions in Study 2.

Condition	Production component	Cultural component
Control (G1)	Neutral finished-product display	Neutral contemporary context
Production visible (G2)	Visible handmaking with tools and materials	Neutral contemporary context
Cultural framing (G3)	Neutral finished-product display	Traditional floral-leaf reference with cultural explanation
Combined (G4)	Visible handmaking with tools and materials	Traditional floral-leaf reference with cultural explanation

All conditions included the same common finished-product image and matched production-related and cultural-information components. Complete visual and textual stimuli are reported in Supplementary material.

gender. Prior handmade-product purchase experience was reported by 64.6%, and 58.5% had previously visited an art or craft market. Randomization checks showed no significant between-condition differences in these characteristics; additional sample information is provided in Supplementary material. Prior purchase and market-visit experience were collected as broad descriptive indicators and randomization checks rather than as validated measures of cultural capital, cultural competence, involvement, or evaluative repertoire; they are therefore not interpreted as measures of evaluator-side heterogeneity in the present study.

After providing informed consent, participants viewed their randomly assigned stimulus and completed the questionnaire measures, the willingness-to-pay item, and demographic questions. Participants received a small monetary payment.

4.2 Measures and preliminary checks

All focal multi-item measures used seven-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Perceived effort, perceived handmade authenticity, perceived cultural value, and perceived process–meaning fit represented evaluative judgments, whereas purchase intention represented a downstream behavioral orientation. Table 2 reports the complete items and descriptive measurement information for these core constructs. Aesthetic evaluation was retained separately as a contextual measure of visual appeal.

Aesthetic evaluation was measured with four items assessing visual attractiveness ($\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.07$) and was retained only as a contextual check; complete item wording is reported in Supplementary material. Willingness to pay was measured by asking participants to report the maximum amount in RMB they would pay for the product. Because responses were positively skewed, log(WTP + 1) was used in the main analyses; WTP was treated as a secondary hypothetical monetary outcome rather than as an interchangeable measure of purchase intention or consequential market behavior. Separate manipulation checks assessed perceived production visibility and perceived cultural information and were distinguished from the focal product evaluations.

Across the six multi-item measures, internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.86$–0.91). A six-factor confirmatory factor model showed good fit, $\chi^2/df = 1.96$, CFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.956, RMSEA = 0.045, and SRMR = 0.037 (Hu and Bentler, 1999); all standardized loadings were significant and exceeded 0.65. The six-factor model also fit substantially better than alternative models combining perceived process–meaning fit with perceived cultural value or perceived handmade authenticity and than a one-factor model. Full measurement-model comparisons and the complete correlation matrix are reported in Supplementary material.

Separate 2 × 2 ANOVAs confirmed that each manipulation primarily affected its intended informational dimension. Production visibility strongly increased the production-visibility check but was unaffected by cultural framing or the interaction; conversely, cultural framing strongly increased the cultural-information check but was unaffected by production visibility or the interaction (Table 3).

4.3 Analytic strategy

H1a, H1b, H3, H5, and H6 were tested using factorial 2 × 2 ANOVAs, whereas H2a–H2c, H4, and H7 were tested using bootstrap indirect-effect analyses. Aesthetic evaluation and WTP were treated as secondary outcomes rather than components of the core indirect-effect framework. Significant experimental interactions were followed by simple-effect analyses.

The indirect-effect analyses were hypothesis-specific rather than estimates from one simultaneous mediation model. Indirect effects were tested using 5,000 bootstrap resamples (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). H2a–H2c were estimated within a serial multiple-mediator model in which production visibility predicted perceived effort and perceived handmade authenticity, with perceived effort additionally predicting perceived handmade authenticity. H4 was examined in a separate model testing the indirect effect of cultural framing through perceived cultural value, and H7 in a separate model testing the indirect effect of the production visibility × cultural framing interaction through perceived process–meaning fit while retaining the lower-order main effects (Hayes, 2015).

4.4 Results

4.4.1 Main and interaction effects

Condition means are reported in Table 4, and factorial ANOVA results in Table 5. Production visibility significantly increased perceived effort and perceived handmade authenticity, supporting H1a and H1b, whereas cultural framing strongly increased perceived cultural value, supporting H3. Cultural framing also produced a smaller positive effect on perceived handmade authenticity, and production visibility a smaller positive effect on perceived cultural value, consistent with the two routes being distinguishable but not fully independent.

TABLE 2 Core measures and descriptive statistics in Study 2.

Construct	Items	α	M	SD
Perceived effort	This product seems to require considerable manual effort; This product seems to require substantial time and patience to make; This product seems to involve skilled handwork; The maker appears to have invested substantial work in this product.	0.88	5.09	1.19
Perceived handmade authenticity	This product feels genuinely handmade; This product feels personally made rather than mass-produced; This product appears to have a real handmade character; This product feels authentic as a handmade object.	0.86	5.01	1.11
Perceived cultural value	This product has cultural meaning; This product is connected to traditional or cultural elements; This product expresses cultural or symbolic value; This product feels more culturally meaningful than an ordinary decorative accessory.	0.87	4.83	1.15
Perceived process–meaning fit	The product's making process and cultural meaning fit well together; The cultural meaning of the product is consistent with the way it is made; The product forms a coherent combination of handmade production and cultural meaning; The cultural meaning of the product seems naturally connected to its production process.	0.89	4.91	1.17
Purchase intention	I would consider buying this product; I would like to own this product; If I saw this product in an art market, I would be interested in purchasing it.	0.89	4.94	1.26

$N = 480$. All items were administered in Chinese; the English wording is provided for reporting purposes. Measurement sources and additional measurement information are reported in Supplementary material.

TABLE 3 Manipulation-check ANOVA results.

Dependent variable	Effect	F	p	η_p^2
Production-visibility check	Production visibility	448.62	< 0.001	0.485
	Cultural framing	0.72	0.397	0.002
	Production visibility × cultural framing	0.31	0.578	0.001
Cultural-information check	Production visibility	1.04	0.308	0.002
	Cultural framing	361.38	< 0.001	0.432
	Production visibility × cultural framing	0.44	0.508	0.001

For all effects, $df_{\text{effect}} = 1$ and $df_{\text{error}} = 476$.

Both manipulations significantly increased perceived process–meaning fit, which was descriptively highest in the combined condition. Their interaction, however, was not statistically significant, $F(1, 476) = 3.75$, $p = 0.054$, and H5 was therefore not supported. The results thus did not establish a reliable interactive increase in perceived process–meaning fit beyond the positive main effects of the two cues.

Purchase intention showed a different pattern. Both main effects and their interaction were significant, $F(1, 476) = 6.69$, $p = 0.010$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.014$, supporting H6. Cultural framing had a smaller positive effect when production visibility was absent ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.034$) than when it was present ($b = 0.84$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$). Among the secondary outcomes, aesthetic evaluation did not vary significantly across conditions, suggesting that the focal effects were unlikely to reflect differences in visual attractiveness, whereas WTP showed positive main effects of both manipulations but no interaction. Thus, the interactive pattern observed for purchase intention was not reproduced in the monetary outcome.

4.4.2 Indirect effects

Separate bootstrap tests of the hypothesized indirect pathways are summarized in Table 6. Production visibility showed significant indirect effects on purchase intention through perceived effort and perceived handmade authenticity, providing evidence consistent with H2a and H2b. The serial indirect effect through perceived effort and perceived handmade authenticity was also significant, consistent with H2c, although the analysis does not establish temporal ordering between the two mediators. Cultural framing showed a significant indirect effect through perceived cultural value, providing evidence consistent with H4.

The indirect effect of the production visibility × cultural framing interaction through perceived process–meaning fit was not statistically significant because its 95% confidence interval included zero; H7 was therefore not supported. Although higher perceived process–meaning fit was associated with stronger purchase intention, the analysis did not establish it as the mechanism transmitting the interactive effect of production visibility and cultural framing.

Taken together, H5 and H7 were not supported despite positive main effects of both cues on perceived process–meaning fit. The results therefore indicate that perceived process–meaning fit was evaluatively relevant but was not established as the mechanism underlying the interactive effect on purchase intention. The joint presentation of production visibility and cultural framing strengthened purchase intention, but the present experiment did not establish greater process–meaning

TABLE 4 Means and standard deviations by experimental condition.

Condition	Perceived effort	Handmade authenticity	Cultural value	Process–meaning fit	Aesthetic evaluation	Purchase intention	Log WTP
G1	4.46 (1.10)	4.51 (1.07)	4.21 (1.09)	4.18 (1.12)	5.17 (1.08)	4.31 (1.20)	3.69 (0.56)
G2	5.62 (0.95)	5.26 (1.00)	4.41 (1.05)	4.76 (1.04)	5.22 (1.06)	4.99 (1.12)	3.96 (0.53)
G3	4.49 (1.08)	4.67 (1.07)	5.22 (1.01)	4.88 (1.02)	5.16 (1.09)	4.62 (1.16)	3.83 (0.51)
G4	5.80 (0.91)	5.60 (0.96)	5.48 (0.94)	5.82 (0.88)	5.21 (1.05)	5.83 (1.00)	4.17 (0.49)

G1, control condition; G2, production-visible condition; G3, cultural-framing condition; G4, production-visible plus cultural-framing condition. Log WTP = log(WTP + 1). Values are means with standard deviations in parentheses.

TABLE 5 Two-way ANOVA results.

Dependent variable	Effect	F	p	η_p^2
Perceived effort	Production visibility	178.26	< 0.001	0.272
	Cultural framing	1.30	0.255	0.003
	Production visibility × cultural framing	0.66	0.417	0.001
Perceived handmade authenticity	Production visibility	80.37	< 0.001	0.144
	Cultural framing	7.15	0.008	0.015
	Production visibility × cultural framing	0.92	0.338	0.002
Perceived cultural value	Production visibility	6.05	0.014	0.013
	Cultural framing	123.79	< 0.001	0.206
	Production visibility × cultural framing	0.10	0.752	< 0.001
Perceived process–meaning fit	Production visibility	66.79	< 0.001	0.123
	Cultural framing	89.54	< 0.001	0.158
	Production visibility × cultural framing	3.75	0.054	0.008
Aesthetic evaluation	Production visibility	0.26	0.610	0.001
	Cultural framing	0.01	0.918	< 0.001
	Production visibility × cultural framing	< 0.01	0.982	< 0.001
Purchase intention	Production visibility	85.10	< 0.001	0.152
	Cultural framing	31.50	< 0.001	0.062
	Production visibility × cultural framing	6.69	0.010	0.014
Log-transformed WTP	Production visibility	40.74	< 0.001	0.079
	Cultural framing	13.45	< 0.001	0.027
	Production visibility × cultural framing	0.54	0.463	0.001

For all effects, $df_{effect} = 1$ and $df_{error} = 476$.

TABLE 6 Separate bootstrap tests of hypothesized indirect pathways.

Hypothesis	Indirect pathway	Effect	SE	95% CI
H2a	Production visibility → perceived effort → purchase intention	0.12	0.04	[0.05, 0.21]
H2b	Production visibility → perceived handmade authenticity → purchase intention	0.17	0.05	[0.09, 0.27]
H2c	Production visibility → perceived effort → perceived handmade authenticity → purchase intention	0.09	0.03	[0.04, 0.16]
H4	Cultural framing → perceived cultural value → purchase intention	0.34	0.07	[0.22, 0.48]
H7	Production visibility × cultural framing → perceived process–meaning fit → purchase intention	0.094	0.051	[−0.005, 0.193]

Bootstrap samples = 5,000. H2a–H2c were estimated within the same serial multiple-mediator model; H4 and H7 were estimated in separate hypothesis-specific models. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant when its 95% confidence interval did not include zero.

coherence as the mechanism producing this advantage. The results therefore reinforce the distinction between making multiple evaluative resources available and integrating them into a coherent relational judgment.

5 Discussion

Viewed through a sociology-of-valuation perspective, the present study identifies one bounded process through which valuation is organized: the informational resources available in an encounter shape which product qualities become perceptible and interpretable as bases of worth (Lamont, 2012; Heinich, 2017). Across the two studies, production visibility and cultural framing emerged as distinct but interconnected resources within this process: the former primarily provided evidential grounds for judgments of effort and handmade authenticity, whereas the latter primarily made culturally situated meanings interpretable. The findings therefore do not offer a complete account of valuation across objects, evaluators, and contexts; rather, they isolate how

variation in encounter-level information changes the bases on which a constant focal object can be judged. Evaluator-side differences in cultural competence, prior knowledge, and evaluative repertoires remain part of the broader valuation process but were not directly tested here. Within this scope, two findings are particularly consequential: value-relevant qualities must become evaluatively legible before they can enter judgment, and the availability of multiple evaluative resources does not necessarily imply their integration into a coherent basis of worth.

5.1 Making bases of worth evaluatively legible

The first contribution concerns the conditions under which potentially valuable product qualities become usable in evaluation. Existing research shows that handmade products can evoke perceptions of human involvement, effort, care, uniqueness, and authenticity (Fuchs et al., 2015). The present findings extend this perspective by emphasizing the informational conditions under which such evaluations become possible. When consumers encounter only a finished object, the labor through which it was produced may remain largely inaccessible; production visibility reduces this opacity by making otherwise hidden human action available for inference.

Production visibility therefore provides an evidential basis for handmade evaluation. Visible tools, unfinished materials, intermediate stages, and descriptions of manual procedures allow consumers to reconstruct a plausible production history rather than simply accept a handmade claim. This interpretation is consistent with operational-transparency research showing that making hidden work visible can increase perceived effort and consumer appreciation (Buell et al., 2017). Study 1 showed that participants actively sought such evidence when distinguishing handmade objects from commercially sourced or mechanically produced alternatives, while Study 2 showed that production visibility increased both perceived effort and handmade authenticity. Handmade authenticity can therefore be understood partly as an evaluative inference concerning genuine human production rather than as a judgment of historical or cultural authenticity.

The relationship between effort and handmade authenticity further develops this argument. Study 1 suggested that evidence of time, difficulty, patience, and skilled manual involvement could strengthen the credibility of handmade claims, while Study 2 yielded a significant serial indirect effect consistent with a pathway from production visibility through perceived effort and handmade authenticity to purchase intention. Because effort and handmade authenticity were measured within the same experimental encounter, this pattern does not establish that effort judgments temporally or causally precede authenticity judgments. It nevertheless suggests that inferred effort may function not only as a source of positive evaluation in its own right but also as information consumers use when assessing whether human involvement appears genuine.

The interpretive route reflects the same general principle in a different form. Cultural framing increased perceived cultural value, indicating that motifs, materials, techniques, and design forms do not necessarily communicate their cultural significance by themselves. Cultural references may be materially present while remaining semantically opaque unless consumers can connect them with a meaningful interpretive context. Cultural framing therefore makes selected product features culturally legible by locating them within such a context. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that heritage perceptions depend on which historical, technological, and continuity-related elements are made salient through interpretive narratives (Pfannes et al., 2021).

Taken together, the two routes suggest that a value-relevant quality is not automatically a basis of worth simply because it is present in an object. Labor must become perceptible enough to support evidential inference, while cultural associations must become interpretable enough to support judgments of cultural value. This is the more specific contribution of the present study to a relational account of valuation: it identifies how encounter-level information can make different criteria of worth evaluatively usable without implying that information alone determines valuation. The smaller cross-route effects observed in Study 2—from production visibility to cultural value and from cultural framing to handmade authenticity—also indicate that the evidential and interpretive routes are distinguishable in dominant function rather than psychologically independent. Production cues can acquire cultural implications, just as cultural framing can influence how handmade origin is interpreted.

This interpretation should not be taken to imply that all evaluators use these resources in the same way. The experiment estimates average effects of changing informational conditions; it does not establish invariance across levels of cultural knowledge, experience, or evaluative competence. The present contribution therefore concerns the availability of evaluative resources within the encounter rather than the full heterogeneity of the actors who interpret them.

5.2 From cue availability to cue integration

The second contribution concerns what happens when multiple favorable bases of worth become available at the same time. Perceived process–meaning fit extends the framework from individual evaluative judgments to the relationship among them. Consumers may regard an object as genuinely handmade and culturally meaningful while still considering whether its cultural interpretation is coherently connected to the way it was produced. Study 1 revealed this concern in participants' emphasis on connecting cultural or heritage claims to suitable materials, techniques, and making practices rather than attaching them generically to otherwise unrelated products. This perspective complements research on the fit of culturally laden communication with relevant product and brand categories (Bartikowski et al., 2023), but shifts attention to the perceived relationship between material production and attributed cultural meaning.

The experimental results, however, qualify rather than simply confirm this extension. Production visibility and cultural framing each increased perceived process–meaning fit, but their interaction was not statistically significant, and fit did not mediate their

interactive effect on purchase intention. These results caution against assuming that the co-presence of production and cultural cues necessarily produces stronger relational coherence. The significant interaction for purchase intention indicates that cultural framing had a stronger positive effect when production visibility was also present, but the unsupported mediation does not establish that this advantage arose because consumers integrated making and meaning into a coherent relational judgment.

The key distinction is therefore between cue availability and cue integration. Multiple favorable evaluative resources can be jointly available and can even strengthen downstream desirability without being experienced as one coherent basis of worth. In theoretical terms, adding positive criteria to an evaluative encounter is not equivalent to establishing a meaningful relationship among those criteria. This distinction also clarifies the status of process–meaning fit in the present research: Study 1 identified it as a potentially important relational judgment, whereas Study 2 provides an initial but qualified test rather than evidence that it constitutes the mechanism underlying the joint-cue effect.

This qualification also points to an important direction for future research. Stronger process–meaning coherence may depend on a demonstrable relationship between particular materials, techniques, forms, and attributed meanings rather than simply on the availability of both types of information. The present experiment manipulated cue presence rather than congruence, and process–meaning fit was initially operationalized from the qualitative findings of Study 1. Lower or higher fit judgments may therefore partly reflect the information available for evaluating coherence rather than congruence itself. Future research should validate this relational judgment across products and cultural settings and directly manipulate congruent and incongruent process–meaning combinations while holding the presence of production and cultural information constant. Such designs would provide a stronger test of when culturally framed meanings become integrated with material production rather than simply presented alongside it. For practice, the implication is correspondingly cautious: cultural framing should explain how particular motifs, materials, or techniques relate to the product rather than simply attach generic references to tradition or heritage. The results do not support the assumption that placing production and cultural information side by side is sufficient to create perceived coherence.

5.3 Secondary translation into behavioral and monetary outcomes

A secondary implication concerns how favorable evaluations translate into different downstream responses. Production visibility and cultural framing both increased purchase intention, and their joint presentation produced a significant interactive effect. Hypothetical willingness to pay showed positive main effects of both cues but no corresponding interaction. This contrast was not a central test of the valuation framework, but it indicates that purchase intention and WTP should not be treated as interchangeable downstream outcomes.

Study 1 provides one possible explanation for this pattern. Participants could recognize time, skill, originality, and cultural significance while continuing to evaluate prices against ordinary accessories, mass-produced alternatives, raw-material costs, or established expectations for small decorative products. Purchase intention represents a prospective behavioral orientation that can incorporate attraction, preference, and imagined ownership, whereas WTP requires perceived worth to be translated into an explicit monetary sacrifice. The two may therefore reflect related but non-equivalent downstream expressions of valuation.

This pattern may reflect a gap between recognizing product value and revising existing monetary reference points. Research on willingness to pay indicates that product-category cues can serve as value anchors, drawing monetary valuations toward the prices associated with the category in which an offering is positioned (Kuijken et al., 2017). Small handmade accessories may therefore remain partly anchored to familiar accessory-price expectations even when production visibility and cultural framing enhance their perceived value. Importantly, the findings do not imply that these cues have no monetary consequences: both increased WTP. Rather, their combined effect did not translate into the same interactive pattern observed for purchase intention.

These results therefore provide a boundary observation rather than a separate core theoretical contribution: making additional bases of worth available may strengthen desirability without producing an equivalent change in monetary valuation. For practitioners, stronger production and cultural communication may consequently increase consumer interest without necessarily supporting a proportional price premium. Communication strategies should therefore be coordinated with product positioning and consumers' existing reference prices rather than assuming that greater cultural or handmade value will automatically translate into higher willingness to pay.

6 Conclusion

This study examined how production-related and cultural information make different bases of worth available in the evaluation of handmade cultural products through a theory-elaborating sequential mixed-methods design. The findings show that value does not become evaluatively available simply because labor or cultural references are present in an object. Across qualitative art-market encounters and a 2 × 2 experiment, the findings distinguished two analytically different but psychologically interconnected routes of valuation. Production visibility made otherwise hidden labor perceptible and supported judgments of effort and handmade authenticity, whereas cultural framing provided interpretive resources through which product features acquired culturally situated and symbolic meaning. The findings therefore identify one bounded process within a broader relational account of valuation: value-relevant qualities become consequential partly when encounter-level information makes them perceptible or interpretable as bases of worth.

The findings also qualify this framework in two respects. First, perceived process–meaning fit captures a relational judgment concerning whether production practice and cultural meaning appear coherently connected. Production visibility and cultural framing each increased perceived fit, but their interaction was not statistically significant, and fit did not mediate their interactive effect on purchase intention. The present experiment therefore

did not establish that the joint availability of production and cultural cues necessarily produces greater relational coherence. The availability of multiple evaluative resources should thus be distinguished from their integration into a coherent basis of worth. Second, purchase intention and hypothetical willingness to pay showed different response patterns. Although both cues increased both outcomes, their joint presentation produced a significant interactive effect only for purchase intention. This difference is best interpreted as a secondary boundary observation: favorable evaluative judgments may translate differently into behavioral orientation and monetary valuation, with willingness to pay remaining partly constrained by existing reference prices and economic considerations.

Several limitations define the scope of these conclusions. The qualitative materials and experimental stimuli were grounded in Chinese art-market contexts and focused on a small handmade cultural ornament, limiting generalization across cultural settings, product categories, price levels, and forms of craft production. Study 2 also relied on controlled online stimuli, self-reported purchase intention, and hypothetical willingness to pay rather than consequential market behavior. More importantly for the broader valuation framework, the study did not directly measure evaluator-side resources such as cultural competence, cultural capital, field-specific knowledge, or evaluative repertoires. The prior handmade-purchase and art/craft-market-visit indicators collected in Study 2 were broad binary descriptors rather than validated measures of these constructs and were therefore not used to make claims about evaluator heterogeneity. Such differences may shape how readily consumers recognize production and cultural cues and may condition the effectiveness of production visibility and cultural framing. Future research should therefore directly measure such evaluator-side resources and test whether they moderate the effects of encounter-level informational cues. The qualitative phase was designed to elaborate theory across participant positions rather than to support demographic subgroup comparison, so the present findings should not be interpreted as gender-, age-, experience-, or education-specific. In addition, perceived process–meaning fit was identified in Study 1 and initially operationalized within a single experimental context, while lower fit judgments under limited production or cultural information may partly reflect insufficient grounds for assessing coherence rather than perceived incongruence itself. Future research should therefore examine this relational judgment and its measurement across products and cultural settings, directly manipulate congruent and incongruent process–meaning relationships while holding information availability constant, and employ field experiments, behavioral choice tasks, actual sales data, or incentive-compatible willingness-to-pay measures.

Data availability statement

The complete interview transcripts and field materials from Study 1 are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifiable contextual information and were collected under conditions of participant confidentiality. De-identified information supporting the qualitative findings may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations. The quantitative data generated and analyzed in Study 2 are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Jie Xin, xinjie@mail.sdu.edu.cn.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Academic Committee of the School of Arts, Shandong University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

XS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft. ST: Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JX: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. ChatGPT 5.6 Sol was used to assist with language polishing and improving the clarity of the manuscript. The author(s) reviewed and approved all AI-assisted revisions and take full responsibility for the final content.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1976144/full#supplementary-material

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