




A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF YOUNG ADULTS' ACCEPTANCE OF CHINESE OPERA ANIMATED FILMS BASED ON EXPECTATION CONFIRMATION THEORY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract:

Chinese opera animation represents a culturally rich yet highly stylized media form, whose acceptance among young adult audiences remains insufficiently explained at the level of psychological mechanisms. Existing studies have primarily emphasized cognitive evaluation, with limited attention to the roles of emotional resonance and cultural identity in shaping sustained engagement. To address this gap, this study conducts a systematic literature review of 93 publications retrieved from CNKI, Scopus, and ProQuest (2005–2025). Using bibliometric analysis and thematic synthesis, the study identifies key constructs underlying audience acceptance and develops an integrated conceptual framework grounded in Expectation–Confirmation Theory (ECT). The findings suggest that audience acceptance follows a dual-path process. The cognitive–evaluative path explains how expectation confirmation generates satisfaction, forming the basis for acceptance. The identity-based path demonstrates how viewing experiences foster cultural identity, transforming evaluative satisfaction into sustained engagement. Based on these relationships, this study proposes the Expectation–Identity Integration Model (EIIM), which integrates cognitive evaluation and identity construction within a unified framework. This study contributes in three ways. First, it extends ECT into culturally embedded media contexts by incorporating cultural identity as a post-viewing mechanism. Second, it develops an integrated model explaining audience acceptance through both cognitive and identity-based pathways. Third, it provides a theoretically grounded

framework to inform future empirical research and the design of culturally resonant animated content.

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Chinese Opera Animation; Young Adult Audiences; Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT); Cultural Identity Model (CIM); Acceptance Mechanisms



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Introduction

Chinese opera, as a vital form of intangible cultural heritage, faces persistent challenges in contemporary transmission, particularly among young and adult audiences (Chen, 2017). With the rapid development of digital technologies and cultural and creative industries, animated cinema has become an important medium for disseminating traditional culture and enhancing national cultural soft power. Characterized by highly stylized aesthetics, symbolic performance conventions, and a distinctive audiovisual language, Chinese opera has long been deeply intertwined with the nationalization of Chinese animation. From the formative achievements of the “Chinese School” to the recent rise of guochao (China-chic) animation, operatic aesthetics—especially stylized performance and visual symbolism—have been repeatedly mobilized to construct an Eastern aesthetic idiom and articulate cultural values in animated cinema (Chen, 2017; Ren, 2017; Zhang & Xu, 2022; Sun & Cao, 2023).

From early classics such as *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), *Havoc in Heaven* (1961), and *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) to contemporary commercial successes including the *White Snake* series and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), Chinese animated films have entered what is often described as a new “golden era” of development (Sun & Ceng, 2025; Yang & Xu, 2024). Correspondingly, academic research on Chinese opera animation has expanded in scope and depth. Existing studies suggest that integrating operatic elements not only constructs a distinctive national visual style but also enables the modern translation of traditional cultural symbols at the narrative and expressive levels (Sun & Ceng, 2025). Such works are increasingly recognized as cultural carriers that bridge tradition and modernity, activate collective memory, and facilitate intergenerational transmission (Yang & Xu, 2024; Li & Naidu, 2025).

However, alongside the industry's transition toward all-age and adult-oriented markets (Zhang, 2019), Chinese opera animation continues to face a persistent dissemination dilemma. While its highly stylized operatic aesthetics are widely recognized as markers of national cultural identity, these same conventions may pose perceptual and interpretive challenges for contemporary audiences who lack systematic exposure to opera culture. The long-standing problem of "high artistic quality but weak dissemination" (Ma, 2021) suggests that aesthetic refinement alone does not ensure audience acceptance.

Although prior research has extensively examined artistic ontology, aesthetic codes, narrative structures, industrial development, technological applications, and educational functions for children (Fang & Mansor, 2024; Wang, 2020; Quan, 2025; Luo et al., 2024; Lv et al., 2023), systematic investigations into adult audiences' psychological engagement processes remain limited. This gap is particularly significant given that adult viewers represent an emerging target group in the contemporary animation market and are more likely to engage with cultural content through reflective evaluation and identity-related interpretation.

In particular, it remains unclear whether engagement with opera animation among contemporary viewers is driven primarily by trend-based novelty associated with *guochao*, or by deeper processes of emotional resonance and cultural identification that support sustained engagement.

In this study, young adults are defined as individuals aged 20-39 years, corresponding to early adulthood in life-span development theory—a stage marked by relatively stable cognitive functioning, independent decision-making, and consolidated preferences (Levinson, 1986; Lachman, 2001). This operational boundary serves analytical rather than policy-classification purposes (Higley, 2019). From a media consumption perspective, this age group constitutes a core audience for contemporary animation, demonstrating high media literacy, strong engagement with audiovisual content, and the ability to critically evaluate complex aesthetic experiences (Livingstone, 2004; Arnett, 2000). Compared with adolescents, young adults show greater autonomy in viewing choices and more stable evaluative judgments, enhancing the reliability of self-reported audience data (Bartsch, 2012; Wendt et al., 2023). While the findings primarily reflect responses of young adults, the conceptual model may offer insights for broader adult audiences, although extrapolation to other age groups or cultural contexts should be approached with caution.

To address the persistent gap between artistic development and audience reception, this study shifts the analytical focus from creation-centered description to audience-centered psychological mechanisms. Specifically, the primary objective of this study is to systematically synthesize existing research and construct a theoretically integrated framework to explain young adults' acceptance of Chinese opera animated films.

More concretely, this study aims to achieve three interrelated objectives. First, it identifies the core dimensions of perceived performance that shape young adults' post-viewing evaluations of opera-related elements in animated films. Second, it clarifies the cognitive-evaluative processes through which expectations, confirmation, and satisfaction interact to influence audience acceptance. Third, it conceptualizes cultural identity as an identity-based affective mechanism that links viewing experiences to continued engagement.

By addressing these objectives, the study develops an integrated conceptual model—the Expectation-Identity Integrated Model (EIIM)—which explains how cognitive evaluation and identity-based meaning-making jointly shape young adults’ acceptance of Chinese opera animated films.

Literature Review

Chinese Opera Animated Films as a Cultural Communication Medium

Bibliometric evidence indicates a sustained growth in scholarship on Chinese animated cinema between 2005 and 2025, with a marked acceleration after 2015, reflecting increasing academic attention to the field. Review studies suggest that Chinese animation research has evolved from an initial phase focused on industrial conditions and technological adoption, through a stage emphasizing cultural expression and narrative logic, to a more recent phase of ontological self-awareness centered on national style and discourse construction (Sun & Ceng, 2025). Within this trajectory, keywords such as nationalization, traditional culture, and Chinese School form dominant clusters. The appearance of terms related to opera and national elements in co-word networks further indicates that the integration of Chinese opera and animation has become a significant pathway within nationalization-oriented research.

Accordingly, Chinese opera animation has gradually shifted from being treated primarily as an aesthetic object to being recognized as an emerging medium of cultural communication. This shift reflects growing concern with how operatic aesthetics function beyond artistic innovation, particularly in relation to audience reception and cultural dissemination.

Aesthetic Construction and Symbolic Translation

The integration of opera and animation is not a simple accumulation of elements but is grounded in deep aesthetic affinities. Scholars identify virtuality and conventionality as shared ontological foundations: the stylized performance system of opera provides a localized aesthetic basis for animation’s exaggeration, deformation, and symbolic expression (Zhu, 2015; Wei, 2024). Research has systematically examined how opera-inspired character design, stage-derived spatial logic, musical and vocal conventions, and story patterns are transformed into animation language (Jiang, 2024). Narratively, opera animation often inherits linear progression and lyrical tension from traditional operatic structures (Wang, 2020).

At the audiovisual level, operatic elements typically require a process of “cinematic translation,” whereby montage, framing, and editing reorganize stage conventions into screen-based storytelling, enhancing narrative flow and emotional efficiency (Chen, 2017; Sun & Cao, 2023). Performance studies further highlight a “virtual bodily performance” paradigm, in which animated bodies preserve operatic expressive spirit while achieving non-realistic vitality (Ma, 2021). Semiotic analyses demonstrate that facial makeup, costumes, props, and symbolic color schemes function not merely as visual ornaments but as carriers of narrative meaning and affective orientation (Fang & Mansor, 2024).

More recent work moves beyond describing stylistic borrowing to theorizing historical transformation. Zhang Kai (2024) proposes a trajectory from “transplantation” to “metaphor,” illustrating how opera elements evolve from external references to internalized narrative and

spiritual functions. Collectively, this body of research provides a content-oriented foundation for operationalizing perceived performance in opera animation.

Dissemination Paradox and the Need for Mechanism Based Reception Research

Despite significant artistic achievements, opera animation continues to face the paradox of “high artistry but weak dissemination,” often attributed to mismatches between creative output and market expectations, limited distribution channels, and insufficient understanding of contemporary audiences (Ma, 2021). While the Guochao phenomenon reflects rising cultural confidence and renewed interest in traditional culture (People’s Daily, 2025), audience-centered research remains underdeveloped.

Existing studies have primarily focused on children or adolescents, especially in educational contexts (Lv et al., 2023), leaving young adult audiences largely underexplored. Adults’ limited exposure to traditional opera can increase perceptual and interpretive challenges when encountering highly stylized conventions (Li & Naidu, 2025). Moreover, emerging evidence suggests that emotional resonance and cultural identification, rather than purely cognitive appreciation, play decisive roles in shaping audience acceptance (Li et al., 2025). Despite these insights, the field still lacks a structured framework that explains how expectations are formed, how confirmation and satisfaction arise, and how these processes translate into sustained acceptance behaviors such as rewatching and recommendation. This gap underscores the need for mechanism-oriented research to clarify the psychological pathways through which adult audiences engage with Chinese opera animation.

Theoretical Foundations and Integration

Expectation–Confirmation Theory as a Post-Viewing Process Framework

In media and cultural consumption research, Uses and Gratifications Theory explain pre-viewing motivations, while Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes observational learning and value internalization. However, neither framework adequately models the post-experience evaluative process leading to continued engagement.

Expectation–Confirmation Theory (ECT) provides a process-oriented framework in which individuals form expectations prior to consumption, evaluate perceived performance after consumption, derive confirmation through comparison, and subsequently develop satisfaction, which predicts acceptance behaviors, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Oliver, 1980; Bhattacharjee, 2001). ECT has been widely validated across domains such as digital media, tourism, cultural experiences, and online platforms, demonstrating strong explanatory power and transferability to cultural consumption contexts (Li et al., 2025; Yao et al., 2025). Given that opera animation reception is fundamentally a post-viewing evaluative process, ECT offers a suitable analytical backbone.

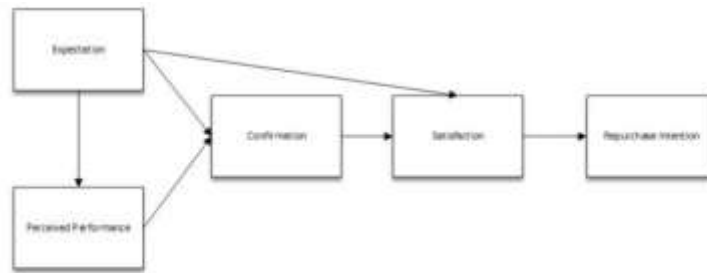


Figure 1: Expectation–Confirmation Theory (ECT)

Source: Adapted from Oliver (1980, 1981).

Cultural Identity as an Affective–Value Mechanism and Behavioral Driver

Cultural identity refers to individuals’ sense of belonging, meaning, and value identification with a cultural system (Phinney, 1992; Ashmore et al., 2004). Rather than a static attribute, cultural identity is increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic process formed through interaction with cultural symbols, emotional resonance, and value internalization (Li & Naidu, 2025). Early research by Kagan and Cohen (1990) conceptualized cultural identity and cultural adjustment as a multidimensional construct involving cognitive understanding, affective response, and behavioral orientation, a tripartite perspective that has continued to inform subsequent empirical studies on cultural identity and media-based cultural engagement, as illustrated in Figure 2.

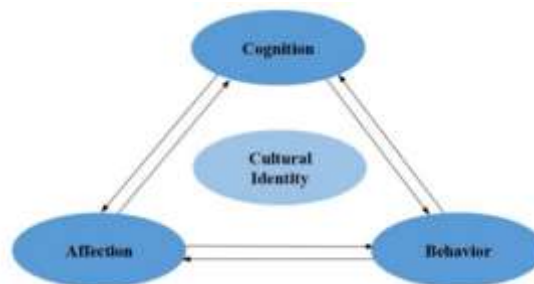


Figure 2: A Tripartite Conceptualization of Cultural Identity

Source: Conceptualized based on Kagan and Cohen (1990), Phinney (1992), and Ashmore et al. (2004).

Studies in cultural heritage and creative consumption consistently show that cultural identity functions both as an affective outcome of experience and as a predictor of continuance-oriented behaviors such as recommendation and loyalty (Li et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2025; Wang & Men, 2025). In culturally laden media such as opera animation, acceptance, therefore, cannot be fully explained by cognitive satisfaction alone.

Conceptual Framework Construction: Integrating Expectation–Confirmation and Cultural Identity

A single theoretical framework is insufficient to explain the dual nature of Chinese opera animated films as both entertainment products and culturally embedded media texts. To address this limitation, this study develops an integrated conceptual framework that combines the cognitive-evaluative logic of Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) with an identity-oriented cultural mechanism derived from cultural identity research, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Within this framework, audience expectation is conceptualized as an overall pre-viewing standard that reflects general anticipations regarding quality and the viewing experience. Importantly, expectation is not assumed to shape specific experiential dimensions of the film. Instead, consistent with classical ECT, expectation functions as a comparative benchmark against which post-viewing evaluations are assessed. Accordingly, audience expectations exert their influence directly on confirmation rather than on perceived performance. In line with Expectation-Confirmation Theory, higher pre-viewing expectations may increase the likelihood of negative disconfirmation when perceived performance falls short of the anticipated standard. Confirmation, in turn, plays a central role in shaping audience satisfaction, which subsequently predicts audience acceptance, conceptualized as continued engagement, such as rewatching and recommendation intentions.

Beyond this cognitive–evaluative pathway, the framework incorporates an identity-oriented route to account for the cultural specificity of opera animation. Viewing experiences—particularly those that generate emotional resonance through operatic aesthetics, narratives, and symbolic meanings—can contribute to the formation of cultural identity. Rather than being treated as a pre-existing condition, cultural identity is conceptualized as a post-viewing psychological mechanism that emerges through engagement with culturally meaningful content. Cultural identity strengthens acceptance by transforming evaluative satisfaction into more enduring attitudinal and behavioral orientations toward opera animation.

Taken together, this integrated conceptual framework explains audience acceptance through two interrelated pathways: (1) a cognitive–evaluative route centered on expectation, confirmation, satisfaction, and acceptance; and (2) an affective–cultural route centered on emotional resonance and cultural identity formation. By combining these two perspectives, the framework provides a coherent explanation of how young adult audiences evaluate, emotionally engage with, and ultimately accept Chinese opera animated films.

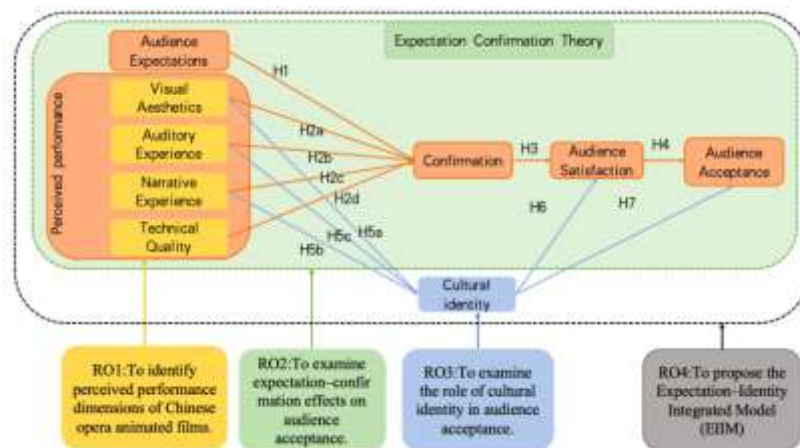


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework Integrating Expectation–Confirmation Theory and Cultural Identity

Source: Developed by the author based on Expectation–Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980; Bhattacharjee, 2001) and Cultural Identity research (Kagan & Cohen, 1990).

To maintain consistency with the review-based nature of this study, the proposed conceptual framework is articulated as a set of review-derived, empirically testable propositions intended

for validation in subsequent empirical research (e.g., questionnaire-based structural equation modeling).

H1: Audience expectations toward Chinese opera animated films negatively influence confirmation.

H2a: Perceived visual aesthetics positively influence confirmation.

H2b: Perceived auditory experience positively influences confirmation.

H2c: Perceived narrative experience positively influences confirmation.

H2d: Perceived technical quality positively influences confirmation.

H3: Confirmation has a significant positive effect on audience satisfaction with Chinese opera animated films.

H4: Audience satisfaction positively influences their acceptance of Chinese opera animated films.

H5a: Perceived visual aesthetics positively influence cultural identity.

H5b: Perceived auditory experience positively influences cultural identity.

H5c: Perceived narrative experience positively influences cultural identity.

H6: Cultural identity positively affects audience satisfaction with Chinese opera animated films.

H7: Cultural identity positively affects audience acceptance of Chinese opera animated films.

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) combined with bibliometric analysis to synthesize existing research on Chinese opera animation, audience acceptance, and cultural identity. The methodological design integrates quantitative bibliometric mapping with qualitative thematic synthesis, enabling both a macro-level overview of research trends and a micro-level examination of acceptance mechanisms. Bibliometric and time-series analyses were used to identify publication trends, research hotspots, and thematic evolution, while qualitative content analysis focused on extracting key constructs, relationships, and theoretical gaps relevant to audience acceptance.

The review followed the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor. Three academic databases—CNKI, Scopus, and ProQuest—were systematically searched to balance contextual depth and international breadth. CNKI was used to capture Chinese-language scholarship grounded in local cultural and artistic contexts, while Scopus and ProQuest provided access to internationally recognized research on media consumption, audience studies, and cultural identity.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search covered publications from January 2005 to December 2025, a period corresponding to the emergence and development of contemporary Chinese animated cinema and the increasing integration of opera-related cultural elements into animation production. This twenty-year time frame was selected to ensure both historical continuity and contemporary relevance in capturing the evolution of audience acceptance research.

The final search was conducted on 15 December 2025, and searches were applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure comprehensive retrieval. Search terms were organized into three conceptual groups and combined using Boolean operators:

Research object (e.g., Chinese opera, opera animated, traditional culture animation, animated films); (2) Outcome variables (e.g., audience acceptance, reception, continuance intention, recommendation); (3) Mechanism variables (e.g., expectation, perceived, performance, confirmation, cultural identity, satisfaction). The combination of multiple concept groups ensured both breadth and theoretical relevance during the literature retrieval process.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

A structured screening process was applied. Inclusion criteria required that studies: (1) Examine Chinese opera animation or cultural products integrating opera elements with animation; (2) Address audience-level outcomes or mechanisms conceptually relevant to Expectation–Confirmation Theory; (3) Focus on young adults or audiences reasonably inferable as young adults; (4) Be peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral or master’s theses, or high-quality conference papers with accessible full texts.

Exclusion criteria included studies limited to textual or aesthetic analysis without audience relevance, studies unrelated to animation or opera elements, duplicate records, publications without full texts, and documents with evident methodological deficiencies or retraction records.

Screening Procedure

Following the PRISMA workflow—including identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion—the initial database search yielded 624 records across the three databases. Duplicate records were first removed, followed by title and abstract screening to exclude irrelevant studies. The remaining articles underwent full-text review to assess eligibility based on predefined criteria.

To ensure the reliability of the synthesized evidence, the methodological quality of the candidate studies was evaluated based on the clarity of the research design, theoretical contribution, and data transparency. Studies that did not meet minimum academic standards were excluded during the eligibility stage.

After the full screening process, 93 studies were retained for final analysis. The detailed screening process is illustrated in Figure 4 (PRISMA flow diagram), and the distribution of included studies by source and publication type is summarized in Table 2.

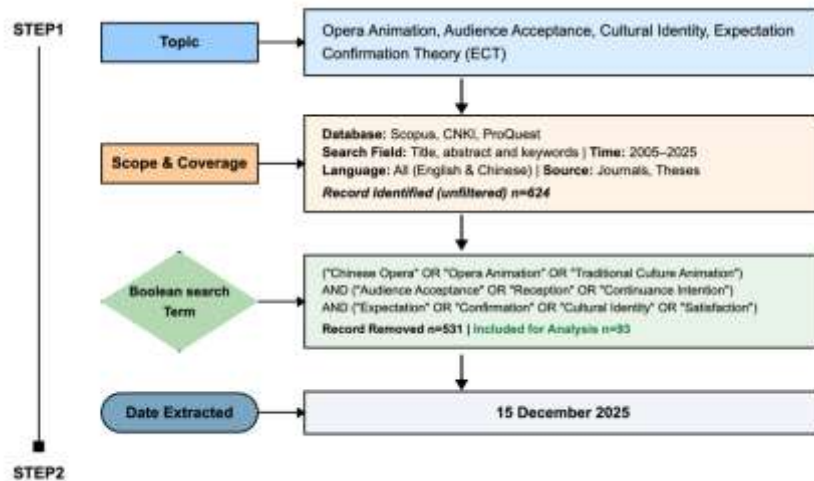


Figure 4: Systematic Literature Review Procedure and Screening Process

Source: Prepared by the researchers

Table 1. Included References in the Systematic Literature Review (N = 93)

No.	Reference
1	Chen, Y., & Zhang, J. (2025). Modeling viewing engagement in long-form video through the lens of expectation-confirmation theory. <i>Applied Sciences</i> , 15(20), 11252.
2	Wang, A., Whyke, T. W., & Dean, L. (2023). The interplay between digital platforms and user-generated content in reinterpreting and recreating mythological narratives with traditional Chinese cultural elements: The animated series <i>Yao—Chinese Folktales</i> . <i>Creative Industries Journal</i> .
3	Oh, J.-E., Chan, Y. K., & van Eenoo, C. (2023). Cultural identity and historical nostalgia in animated film. <i>IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies</i> , 8(1).
4	Zhou, S., Jiang, L., Li, W., & Leng, M. (2025). Meaning in life from a cultural perspective: The role of cultural identity, perceived social support, and resilience among Chinese college students. <i>Humanities and Social Sciences Communications</i> , 12, Article 44.
5	Wang, G., & Men, D. (2025). Understanding continued use intention of digital intangible cultural heritage games through the SOR model. <i>npj Heritage Science</i> , 13, Article 18.
6	Yao, J., Zhang, Y., & Wang, R. (2025). Beyond expectation and confirmation: Unraveling the drivers of continued engagement with Chinese short video apps. <i>Telematics and Informatics Reports</i> , 10, 100209.
7	Li, T., & Naidu, C. S. (2025). Exploring VR animation for Chinese opera dissemination: An immersive and interactive approach to multicultural education. <i>International Journal of Information and Education Technology</i> , 15(3), 2254.
8	Luo, X. F., Chau, K. T., Rabu, S. N. A., & Bei, Y. (2024). Investigating the potential of integrating 2D animation and augmented reality technology in promoting learning motivation and achievement on Chaozhou Opera. In <i>Integrating Cutting-Edge Technology into the Classroom</i> (Chap. 10).
9	Feng, S., & Youya, W. (2024). The influence of traditional culture on role shaping in Chinese local film and television animation. <i>Cultura</i> , 21(1), 296–307.
10	Fang, Z., & Mansor, N. (2024). Visual significations of <i>Monkey King: Hero is Back</i> and <i>Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child</i> . <i>SEARCH: Journal of Media and Communication Research</i> , 16(1), 5.
11	Sun, L., & Cao, S. (2023). Stylized performance of traditional Chinese theater in the animated film <i>New Sanchakou</i> . <i>Journal of Chinese Film Studies</i> .
12	Chen, Y. (2017). Old or new art? Rethinking classical Chinese animation. <i>Journal of Chinese Cinemas</i> .
13	Li, X., Ma, Z., & Wang, S. (2025). Users' recommendation intention of online museums: Cognition–emotion–behavior theory and expectation-confirmation model. <i>npj Heritage Science</i> .
14	Li, S., Li, S., Nang Fong, L. H., & Li, Y. (2025). When intangible cultural heritage meets modernization: Can Chinese opera attract young festival-goers? <i>Tourism Management</i> .
15	Khalis, F. M., & Mustaffa, N. (2017). Cultural inspirations in Malaysian animation character design. <i>Jurnal Komunikasi</i> .
16	Li, Z., Aris, A. B., Nor, Z. B. M., & Chen, S. (2025). Trends in traditional Chinese opera costume research. <i>Cogent Arts & Humanities</i> .
17	Dai, J., & Yaacob, H. (2025). Cross-border integration of Chinese opera and animation under digital technology. <i>European Journal of AI, Computing & Informatics</i> , 1(2), 58–65.

18	Chung, F. M.-Y. (2024). Technology as a transmission strategy in intangible cultural heritage: Cantonese opera. <i>International Journal of Heritage Studies</i> , 30(2), 210–225.
19	Luo, J. (2022). The dissemination of intangible cultural heritage through animation in new media environments. <i>Journal of Environmental and Public Health</i> , 2022, 7857816.
20	Liu, H. (2024). <i>Reception aesthetics of White Snake-themed opera films</i> (Master's thesis). Shaanxi University of Science & Technology.
21	Zhou, Y. (2024). <i>Chinese animated film research from a reception aesthetics perspective</i> (Master's thesis). Chang'an University.
22	Wang, X. (2024). <i>Dual logic of cultural identity among Chinese animation youth audiences</i> (Master's thesis). Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.
23	Chen, Y., & Qin, Z. (2024). Youth cultural identity formation: A grounded theory study of <i>Black Myth: Wukong</i> . <i>China Youth Study</i> , (12), 91–100.
24	Dong, Y. (2020). <i>Integration of operatic visual elements in Chinese animation</i> (Master's thesis). Shanghai Normal University.
25	Han, Y. (2024). <i>Fusion of Chinese animation and operatic visual elements</i> (Master's thesis). Harbin Normal University.
26	Xiong, F. (2022). <i>Aesthetic experience of domestic animation among college students</i> (Master's thesis). Sichuan Normal University.
27	Wang, Y., & Zhong, Y. (2020). Communication value of opera animation. <i>Animation Research</i> , (00), 153–158.
28	Hu, C. (2023). Traditional culture in animation character design: <i>Havoc in Heaven</i> . <i>Art Education Research</i> , (20), 103–105.
29	Zhang, X., & Wang, T. (2020). Aesthetic value of opera animation. <i>Voice & Screen World</i> , (14), 54–55.
30	Wang, Y. (2020). Opera short-video dissemination from a Uses and Gratifications perspective. <i>Science Communication</i> .
31	Zheng, K. (2023). <i>Aesthetic codes of opera animation</i> (Master's thesis). Northeast Normal University.
32	Quan, W. (2025). Traditional cultural IP adaptation in Chinese animation. <i>China Media Technology</i> , (03), 29–34.
33	Zhang, X., & You, H. (2025). Culture–technology integration in <i>Nezha</i> . <i>Publishing Wide Angle</i> , (02), 102–109.
34	Xu, M. (2021). <i>Character modeling in Chinese opera animation</i> (Master's thesis). Yangzhou University.
35	Wang, Z. (2020). <i>Narrative study of Chinese opera animation</i> (Master's thesis). Yangzhou University.
36	Ping, F., & Wang, T. (2022). New-century Chinese opera animation creation. <i>Sichuan Drama</i> , (01), 82–86.
37	Ma, X. (2021). Operatic performance in animation. <i>Sichuan Drama</i> , (01), 86–90.
38	Zhou, B. (2022). From identity recognition to cultural identity. <i>Cultural Heritage</i> , (02), 19–26.
39	Tao, B. (2021). <i>Shanghai Animation Film Studio (1949–1966)</i> (Doctoral dissertation). Shanghai University.
40	You, J. (2021). <i>Evolution of Wukong's visual image</i> (Master's thesis). Northwest University.
41	Wang, Q. (2020). <i>Audience cognitive differences in Chinese animation</i> (Master's thesis). Zhengzhou University of Light Industry.
42	Niu, M. (2020). <i>Chinese School animation characters</i> (Master's thesis). Shenyang Normal University.
43	Xiang, S., & Hong, B. (2025). Visual translation of opera elements in animation. <i>Movie Literature</i> , (03), 94–98.
44	Qin, X., Wang, D., & Liu, L. (2025). Digital branding of <i>White Snake</i> . <i>Movie Literature</i> , (12), 137–143.
45	Li, X. (2025). <i>Narrative functions of operatic visual elements</i> (Master's thesis). Shandong University of Art & Design.
46	Sun, X., & Zeng, C. (2025). Bibliometric analysis of Chinese animation research. <i>Shandong Art</i> , (05), 20–35.
47	Chen, S. (2025). Opera elements in Chinese animated films. <i>Comedy World</i> , (03), 118–120.
48	Huo, X. (2023). Audience aesthetic experience of <i>Nezha</i> . <i>Popular Literature and Art</i> , (13), 108–110.
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55	Fang, S. (2021). Audience psychology of adult Chinese animation. <i>Southeast Communication</i> , (06), 58–61.
56	Xiang, C. (2021). <i>All-age animation development imbalance</i> (Master's thesis). Chongqing Technology and Business University.
57	Hu, L. (2019). <i>Adult-oriented Chinese animation</i> (Master's thesis). Yunnan Normal University.
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90	Luo, J. (2022). Animation-based ICH dissemination. <i>Journal of Environmental and Public Health</i> , 2022, 7857816.
91	Yang, R. (2023). Cultural resonance in <i>White Snake</i> adaptations. <i>SHS Web of Conferences</i> , 174.
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Source: China Knowledge Network (CNKI), ProQuest, and Scopus Literature Statistics of Three Data Points

Data Synthesis and Theory Mapping

Following study selection, a multi-stage qualitative synthesis procedure was conducted to extract, integrate, and interpret key constructs from the included studies. The synthesis process followed established principles of thematic synthesis, ensuring both conceptual depth and methodological rigor.

First, open coding was conducted. All selected studies were systematically reviewed, and key concepts related to audience perception, cultural experience, and behavioral responses were identified and extracted. Particular attention was paid to constructs related to expectations, perceived performance, confirmation, satisfaction, and cultural identity.

Second, descriptive themes were developed. The extracted codes were iteratively compared and grouped into conceptually similar categories. Through constant cross-study comparison, recurring experiential patterns were identified, yielding four stable dimensions of perceived performance: visual aesthetics, auditory experience, narrative experience, and technical quality.

Third, analytical themes were constructed. The descriptive themes were further abstracted into higher-level theoretical categories by linking empirical findings to constructs derived from Expectation–Confirmation Theory (ECT) and cultural identity research. This stage enabled integrating experiential variables with confirmation and satisfaction mechanisms, thereby establishing a theoretical bridge between empirical evidence and model development.

Finally, theory mapping was conducted. The identified analytical themes were systematically organized into a unified conceptual structure. Relationships among constructs were compared with established theoretical pathways to ensure conceptual consistency. This mapping process ultimately resulted in the development of the Expectation-Identity Integration Model (EIIM), which integrates cognitive evaluation processes with identity-based mechanisms.

The coding and thematic synthesis process was conducted iteratively using a constant-comparison approach, in which concepts were continuously refined across studies to ensure conceptual consistency and analytical reliability. To enhance transparency, the mapping between extracted themes and theoretical constructs was explicitly documented throughout the analysis process.

Research Results

Bibliometric analysis based on the Scopus dataset ($n = 191$) indicates that animation remains the core keyword node, closely connected to terms such as motion pictures, computer animation, and virtual reality. This pattern reflects the continued centrality of animation as both an artistic form and a technological system. At the same time, animation is increasingly linked to culture-oriented concepts, including Chinese culture, history, and cultural heritage, suggesting a parallel research trajectory that frames animation as a medium for cultural transmission and heritage revitalization.

This section presents the findings synthesized from the 93 included studies, combining quantitative bibliometric mapping with qualitative pattern interpretation. The results aim to (a) outline the overall research landscape of Chinese opera animation, (b) identify structural imbalances within existing scholarship, and (c) provide empirical grounding for subsequent theoretical integration.

Quantitative Mapping of Research Trends and Hotspots

Quantitative Mapping of Research Trends and Hotspots Based on Scopus retrieval using keywords related to animation films, China, traditional culture, and Chinese opera yielded 191 records. Keyword mapping indicates that “Animation” remains the core node and is densely connected to adjacent domains such as motion pictures, computer animation, and virtual reality technology, suggesting that the interaction between animation as an art form and as a technology remains a dominant research trajectory, as shown in Figure 5. Meanwhile, “Animation” is also linked to culture-oriented concepts, including history, Chinese culture, and cultural heritage, reflecting a parallel scholarly emphasis on animation as a medium for cultural transmission and heritage revitalization.

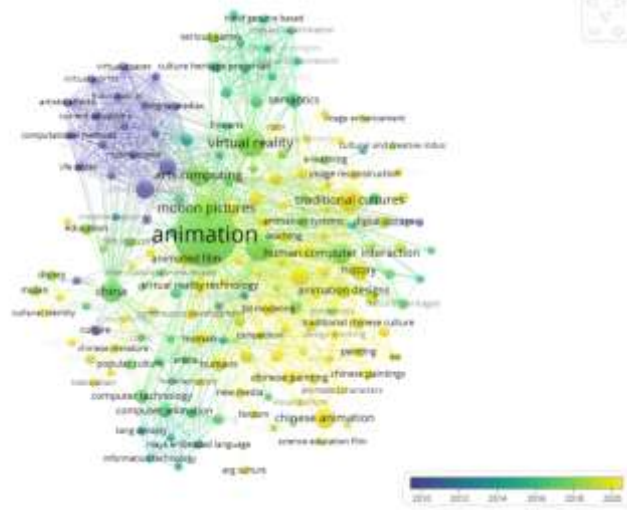


Figure 5: Keyword Co-occurrence Network Centered on Opera Animation

Source: Generated by the authors using VOSviewer based on Scopus data.

Keyword clustering further reveals the emergence of cross-disciplinary connections. Terms related to education, creative industries, and social media form a distinct cluster, indicating that animation research has expanded beyond entertainment to encompass educational, communicative, and creative-economy contexts. Notably, cultural identity appears as a visible but secondary node, suggesting a growing, yet still limited, scholarly interest in identity-related meaning-making within animation studies.

A complementary visualization based on CNKI records (n = 397) reveals a clear temporal evolution of research on Chinese opera animation. As illustrated in Figure 6, publications were relatively sparse prior to 2010, followed by a gradual increase after 2015. Scholarly output reached a noticeable peak around 2020 and has remained at a comparatively high level since then. This temporal pattern indicates that Chinese opera animation has progressively shifted from a marginal research topic to a more established area of academic inquiry, situated at the intersection of animation studies, traditional culture, and cultural heritage communication. The sustained publication activity in recent years further suggests a growing recognition of opera animation as a meaningful subject within broader discussions of cultural transmission and creative media.

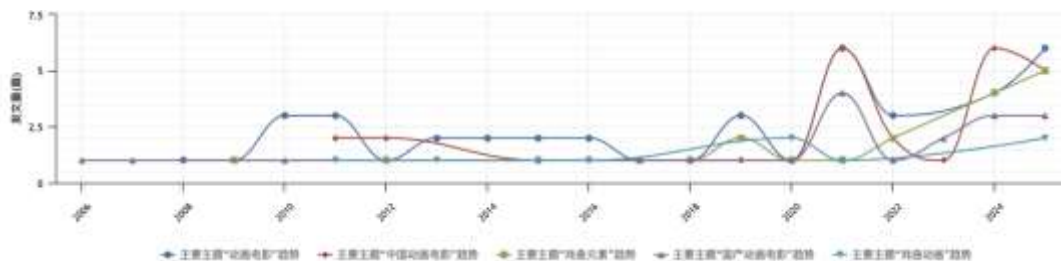


Figure 6: Annual Publication Trends of Chinese Opera Animation Research in CNKI (2005–2025)

Source: Compiled by the authors based on CNKI database records.

Keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals a differentiated knowledge structure in research on Chinese opera animation. Figure 7 presents the overall keyword co-occurrence network based on Scopus data, illustrating how research topics cluster into distinct but interconnected thematic domains.

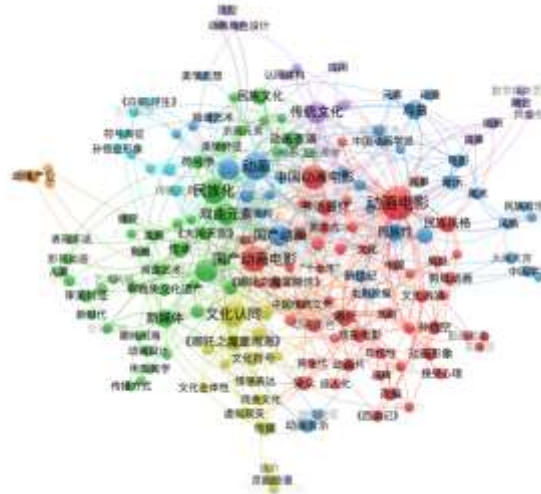


Figure 7: Keyword Co-occurrence Network of Chinese Opera Animation Research
 Source: Generated by the authors based on CNKI bibliometric data using VOSviewer.

As shown in Figure 8, two dominant clusters can be clearly identified. Cluster 1, which is the largest and most densely connected, is predominantly creation oriented. Core keywords include Chinese animation, animated film, Chinese School, national style (minzuhua), and opera elements, indicating a strong scholarly focus on aesthetic construction, symbolic translation, and national-style discourse. Although terms such as audience and cultural identity appear within this cluster, they occupy relatively peripheral positions, suggesting that audience-related concerns are often discussed as secondary extensions of creation-side analysis rather than as independent research foci.

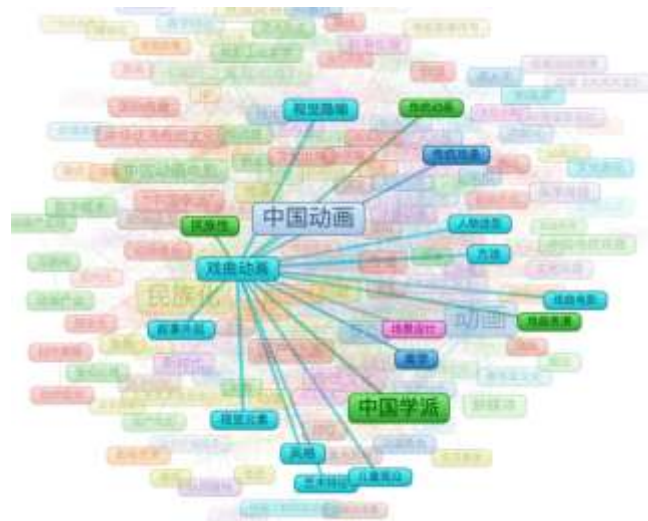


Figure 8: Keyword Co-occurrence Network Centered on Opera Animation
 Source: Generated by the authors based on CNKI bibliometric data using VOSviewer.

From a cultural communication perspective, the presence of cultural identity within the creation-oriented cluster reflects a growing recognition that animated films—especially those

incorporating opera elements—function not only as artistic artifacts but also as media for cultural transmission. Chinese opera elements, including stylized singing, costume systems, and performance conventions, are increasingly conceptualized as culturally distinctive resources that can be translated into audiovisual forms accessible to contemporary audiences, including adults. However, their analytical treatment remains largely embedded within aesthetic and production-centered discourse. By contrast, Figure 9 highlights a second, comparatively smaller cluster that is more explicitly audience oriented. This cluster includes keywords related to acceptance, identity, technology, and age. Notably, this audience-oriented cluster exhibits weaker internal connectivity and looser integration with the creation-oriented core, suggesting that research on audience reception, particularly the psychological mechanisms of acceptance, remains fragmented and under-theorized.

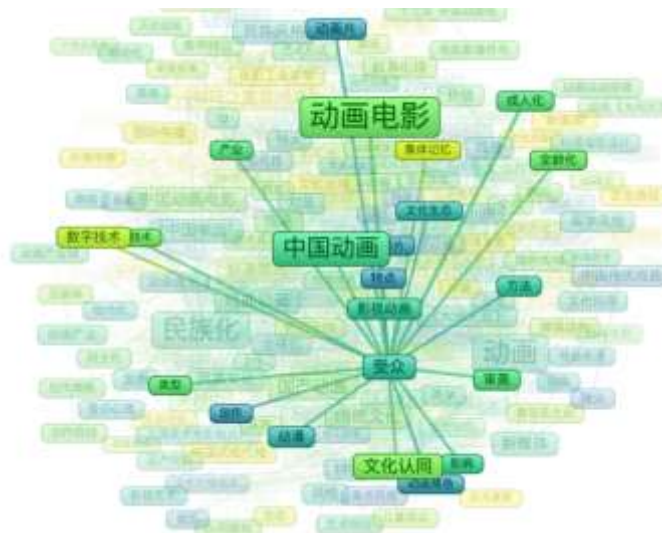


Figure 9: Audience-Oriented Keyword Cluster and Its Structural Position in the Network

Source: Generated by the authors based on CNKI bibliometric data using VOSviewer.

Importantly, theoretical keywords such as expectation–confirmation theory and psychological mechanism are either absent or marginal in the keyword network. This absence highlights a critical gap in existing scholarship: despite growing interest in dissemination and cultural impact, systematic mechanism-based explanations of how audiences evaluate, accept, and sustain engagement with opera animation are largely missing.

Taken together, the quantitative mapping reveals a field characterized by rapid growth, strong creation-side orientation, and insufficient mechanism-based audience research. These findings empirically justify the need for an integrated conceptual framework that links artistic experience to post-viewing acceptance through cognitive and affective mechanisms—an issue addressed in the subsequent theoretical integration.

Qualitative Synthesis: From Artistic Abundance to Acceptance Imbalance

Based on qualitative content analysis of the 93 included studies, three interrelated themes were identified. Together, these themes reveal a structural imbalance between creation-oriented scholarship and acceptance-oriented research, while clarifying how existing literature supports the construction of a process-based audience acceptance framework.

Theme 1: Perceived Performance Dimensions of Chinese Opera Animated Films

The reviewed literature shows that Chinese opera animation has developed a systematic semiotic system on the creation side. To bridge artistic analysis and audience acceptance research and enable empirical operationalization, this review synthesizes recurring findings into four core dimensions of perceived performance: visual aesthetics, auditory experience, narrative experience, and technical quality. These dimensions form the foundation of the subsequent Expectation-Identity Integration Model (EIIM), which integrates audience perceptions, satisfaction, and cultural identity into a coherent framework for understanding acceptance. Importantly, these dimensions consistently function as post-viewing evaluative criteria, rather than pre-consumption expectations.

While audience expectation in this study is conceptualized as an overall pre-viewing judgment (e.g., anticipated quality or experience), opera-specific characteristics in prior research are overwhelmingly discussed at the level of experienced evaluation, supporting their treatment as perceived performance dimensions.

Visual aesthetics emerge as the most extensively examined dimension. Studies rooted in the national-style tradition of the “Chinese School” emphasize the symbolic extraction of operatic visual elements—facial makeup, costume systems, color symbolism, and stylized character design—as the aesthetic foundation of opera animation (Chen, 2017; Ren, 2017; Wang, 2018; Zhang & Xu, 2022). Classic research highlights the semiotic function of Peking opera facial makeup, where color codes signify moral attributes such as loyalty and treachery (Mei, 1962; Zhou, 2021).

Contemporary scholarship documents the selective simplification and modernization of these symbols to align with modern aesthetics (Dong, 2020; Xu, 2021; Ma, 2025). Costume design continues to follow the operatic principle of “rather worn than incorrect,” emphasizing role identity and hierarchy (Dong, 2020; He, 2023), while recent works integrate traditional garments with contemporary design strategies (Ma, 2025; Li, 2025). Visual symbols are thus framed as narrative-bearing elements that convey cultural meaning and evoke affective responses (Fang & Mansor, 2024). From *Havoc in Heaven* (1961) to the *White Snake* series and *Umbrella Fairy* (2024), visual symbolism consistently shapes audience evaluations of artistic quality and cultural distinctiveness (Mei, 1962; Cao, 2011; He, 2023). Studies tracing the evolution from *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) to *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019) further note partial Western influence and the “de-massification” of mythological figures, processes associated with enhanced emotional engagement among young and adult audiences (Dong, 2020; Su & Huang, 2021; Lin, 2024).

Auditory experience constitutes a second core dimension through which audiences evaluate emotional intensity and stylistic authenticity. Early studies identify operatic sound systems—singing styles, percussion patterns, and melodic conventions—as foundational to the national aesthetic of Chinese animation (Wang, 2018; Sun & Cao, 2023). Opera music is often described as compensating for animation’s limitations in conveying subtle emotional shifts while expanding imaginative space (Dahlhaus, 2006; Ye, 2022). Dialogue inherits rhythmic and prosodic features from operatic recitation, with yunbai contributing vitality and realism (Yin, 2018; Sun & Yu, 2017). Recent research emphasizes hybrid sound strategies combining traditional operatic music with popular or electronic elements, enhancing accessibility and

affective resonance for contemporary audiences (Lazarescu-Thois, 2018; Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2021).

Narrative experience represents a third evaluative dimension. The literature identifies a trajectory from tradition-oriented dramaturgical structures to contemporary narrative strategies. Classic works follow linear progression rooted in operatic dramaturgy (Lin, 2012; Wang, 2020), whereas recent productions employ nonlinear techniques to intensify emotional impact (Ma, 2025). Thematically, narratives have expanded from reinterpretations of traditional virtues to explorations of contemporary identity dilemmas involving family, friendship, and self-realization (Su & Huang, 2021; Dai, 2024). Studies repeatedly note that adult audiences resist didacticism rather than tradition itself, with motifs of “rebellion and rebirth” proving particularly effective in generating emotional resonance.

Technical quality is increasingly a salient dimension of perceived performance. Research documents a continuum from two-dimensional ink-wash abstraction to three-dimensional stylized realism enabled by motion capture and advanced rendering (Zhang, 2020; Tao, 2021; Chen, 2024; Dai & Yaacob, 2025). While technologies such as 3D modeling enhance immersion and support preservation and education (Zhou, 2011; Meng, 2025), scholars caution that excessive realism may undermine opera’s core aesthetics of abstraction and virtuality (Dong, 2020; Dai & Yaacob, 2025). Accordingly, technology is conceptualized as a mediating factor that lowers appreciation barriers and positively shapes post-viewing evaluations (Xue, 2019; Chen & Man, 2024).

Taken together, the qualitative synthesis demonstrates that visual aesthetics, auditory experience, narrative experience, and technical quality constitute a stable and recurring structure of perceived performance in Chinese opera animation. These dimensions translate descriptive artistic analyses into empirically operationalizable constructs, forming the experiential basis against which overall pre-viewing expectations are confirmed or disconfirmed, thereby shaping satisfaction, cultural responses, and subsequent acceptance outcomes.

Theme 2: Fragmented Audience Acceptance Research and the Underrepresentation of Young Adults

The reviewed literature indicates a clear shift in Chinese animation audiences from a child-centered orientation toward family co-viewing and youth- and adult-oriented markets (Liu, 2025; Chen, 2022). While this transformation challenges the long-standing assumption that animation is primarily for children (Zhang, 2017), audience research on Chinese opera animation remains fragmented and underdeveloped.

Most existing studies focus on children or broadly defined “youth” groups (Lv et al., 2023), often treating adult audiences as homogeneous and overlooking internal differences such as age, education, and prior cultural exposure. Although market-oriented research highlights the importance of nostalgic adult viewers and family viewing experiences (Qu, 2020; Wang, 2009), systematic empirical investigations of the mechanisms underlying adult audiences’ acceptance are scarce.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes that audience psychology and reception aesthetics are essential for informing animation creation and dissemination strategies (Zhou, 2021; Jine

et al., 2024). However, there remains a lack of mechanism-based research explaining how specific opera-related elements shape young adult audiences' acceptance outcomes, underscoring the need for a more structured analytical framework.

Theme 3: Theoretical Gaps and the Need for Integrated Model Construction

A critical theoretical gap emerges from the review. Empirical applications of Expectation–Confirmation Theory (ECT) are largely confined to utilitarian information-system contexts, with limited extension to aesthetic and culturally embedded media experiences such as animation viewing. Conversely, research on cultural identity in animation predominantly relies on content analysis or qualitative interpretation, offering limited insight into the internal psychological mechanisms underlying acceptance formation.

Many studies remain at the level of descriptive popularity or general satisfaction, without explaining why acceptance and cultural identification occur. For instance, although prior research notes that *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* elicited strong emotional resonance among young audiences, few studies employ structured models to examine how such resonance arises through the interaction between expectation confirmation and cultural identity.

The systematic review confirms that no existing study has integrated ECT and Cultural Identity perspectives to explain mechanisms of acceptance in Chinese opera animation or comparable cultural products. While isolated concepts such as “emotional resonance” or “cultural confidence” have been discussed, they have rarely been tested within a unified causal framework. This gap directly motivates the development of the Expectation-Identity Integrated Model (EIIM).

Discussion

Explaining Limited Adult Acceptance Beyond Artistic Quality

A recurring observation across the reviewed literature is the coexistence of high artistic sophistication and limited audience acceptance in Chinese opera animated films. While earlier studies often attributed this paradox to market positioning, dissemination strategies, or insufficient modernization, the present review suggests a more fundamental explanation: an imbalance between creation-oriented research and audience-centered theoretical inquiry. Existing scholarship has richly documented aesthetic ontology, stylistic inheritance, and symbolic systems, yet has offered limited insight into how adult audiences cognitively and emotionally process opera-related elements during viewing.

The qualitative synthesis indicates that artistic richness alone does not guarantee audience acceptance. Instead, acceptance depends on whether opera elements can be meaningfully perceived, interpreted, evaluated, and affectively integrated by adult viewers. Prior studies have often assumed that improving artistic quality would naturally enhance reception; however, the present findings challenge this assumption by demonstrating that acceptance is shaped primarily by post-viewing evaluative processes rather than by artistic intention or symbolic complexity. From this perspective, the long-cited dilemma of “high artistry but weak dissemination” reflects not a failure of creation, but a lack of theoretical attention to audience-side psychological mechanisms.

A Process-Based Explanation of Adult Audience Acceptance

The Expectation–Identity Integrated Model (EIIM) contributes to audience reception research by providing a process-oriented explanation of adult acceptance that extends existing frameworks. Compared with Uses and Gratifications theory, which focuses on pre-viewing motivations, EIIM emphasizes post-viewing evaluation and meaning construction. Rather than treating acceptance as a static outcome, it conceptualizes acceptance as a dynamic process unfolding through expectation comparison, satisfaction formation, and cultural meaning-making.

By incorporating Expectation-Confirmation Theory, EIIM clarifies how overall expectations and perceived performance interact to produce confirmation and satisfaction. At the same time, the model addresses limitations of purely cognitive approaches by integrating cultural identity as an affective-symbolic pathway, acknowledging the cultural density of opera animation. Importantly, EIIM conceptualizes cultural identity as emerging from viewing experiences rather than as a fixed antecedent, thereby bridging cognitive evaluation models and cultural reception perspectives within a unified, empirically operational framework.

Cultural Identity as a Post-Viewing Psychological Mechanism

The review also invites a reconsideration of cultural identity in media acceptance research. While cultural identity is often treated as a stable background trait, the synthesis of opera animation studies suggests that identity can function as a situationally activated psychological mechanism. In the context of Chinese opera animation, identity is progressively constructed through aesthetic experience, emotional resonance, and narrative engagement, and subsequently reinforces satisfaction and acceptance.

This process-oriented view preserves temporal coherence within the acceptance mechanism and is particularly relevant for adult audiences, many of whom lack formal opera training or strong prior affiliation with traditional performing arts. For these viewers, cultural identity is not a prerequisite for acceptance but a potential outcome of meaningful engagement. Recognizing identity as a post-viewing mechanism enhances the explanatory power of acceptance models applied to culturally embedded animation.

Implications for Adult Audience Research

Finally, the discussion underscores the importance of foregrounding adult audiences in research on Chinese opera animation. Adult acceptance emerges from the interaction between evaluative judgment and cultural meaning-making, rather than from entertainment value or identity appeal alone. By focusing on adult audiences, EIIM aligns with industry shifts toward all-age and adult-oriented markets and provides a conceptual basis for future empirical research examining heterogeneity within adult groups.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide practical implications for cultural content designers, educators, and policymakers engaged in the dissemination of traditional cultural media.

First, for animation creators and content designers, the results suggest that audience acceptance is influenced not only by visual appeal but also by the alignment between audience expectations and culturally meaningful elements. Designers are encouraged to incorporate recognizable cultural symbols, stylistic features, and narrative themes that reflect traditional opera aesthetics, while maintaining contemporary storytelling approaches. Such alignment can enhance expectation confirmation and increase audience satisfaction, thereby supporting identity-based engagement.

Second, for educators and cultural communication practitioners, the study highlights the importance of facilitating deeper cultural interpretation rather than relying solely on exposure. Educational programs, museum exhibitions, and digital outreach initiatives may benefit from incorporating explanatory narratives, symbolic interpretation, and contextual background information to strengthen audience understanding and cultural identification.

Third, for policymakers and heritage organizations, the proposed EIIM framework provides a structured reference for developing audience-centered dissemination strategies. Cultural revitalization policies aimed at promoting traditional performing arts may benefit from incorporating audience feedback mechanisms and identity-related engagement indicators when evaluating the effectiveness of cultural media initiatives. This approach supports the sustainable transmission of intangible cultural heritage by fostering long-term audience participation rather than short-term exposure.

Overall, these implications demonstrate that effective dissemination of culturally symbolic media requires not only technological innovation but also psychologically informed design strategies that promote cultural identification and sustained engagement.

Conclusion

This study addresses a long-standing yet insufficiently explained issue in Chinese opera animation research: the coexistence of high artistic sophistication and limited acceptance among adult audiences. While prior studies have generated rich insights into aesthetics, history, and cultural value, they have lacked an integrated framework to explain how acceptance is formed from the audience perspective.

Based on a systematic literature review of 93 studies, this research identifies a structural imbalance between creation-oriented scholarship and audience-centered explanation. The findings suggest that dissemination challenges stem not only from artistic or strategic factors, but also from the absence of a process-based understanding of audience acceptance.

To address this gap, this study integrates Expectation-Confirmation Theory with cultural identity research to develop the Expectation-Identity Integration Model (EIIM). The model explains acceptance through two interconnected pathways: a cognitive-evaluative pathway, in which expectation confirmation leads to satisfaction and acceptance, and an identity-based pathway, in which experiencing events fosters cultural identity and reinforces sustained engagement.

By conceptualizing cultural identity as a post-viewing psychological mechanism rather than a pre-existing condition, EIIM provides a coherent explanation of how cognitive evaluation and cultural meaning-making jointly shape audience acceptance. In addition to its theoretical

contribution, the model offers practical implications for designing culturally resonant animated content by aligning operative elements with audience perception and narrative engagement.

Overall, EIIM provides a theoretically grounded framework for future empirical validation and contributes to the sustainable development and contemporary transformation of Chinese opera animation as intangible cultural heritage.

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Ethics Statement: This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or personal data requiring ethical approval. All data analyzed in this research were obtained from publicly available academic publications. The authors confirm that the study was conducted in accordance with accepted standards of academic integrity and ethical publishing.

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