

Cultural Identity, Technological Experience, and Social Influence: An Integrated Model of Consumer Willingness to Pay in the Micro-Short Drama Market of Henan, China

Haotian Ma ¹, Yining Wang ²

¹ College of Arts and Science, the Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, the United States

² Department of Public Foundation Courses, Henan Medical College, China

Abstract

This study examines the determinants of consumer willingness to pay for micro-short drama content in Henan Province, China. The micro-short drama market in Henan has grown rapidly, fueled by Generation Z's interest in culturally resonant content and immersive digital experiences. However, content homogeneity and uneven engagement across demographic segments pose challenges. We integrate the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to develop a conceptual framework linking cultural identity, technological experience (with immersion as a mediator), and social influence to users' purchase intentions. A survey of 1,104 micro-short drama consumers (aged 18–45) in Henan provides the data for analysis. Multiple regression results indicate that cultural identity is the strongest predictor of willingness to pay, followed by social influence and technological experience (all $p < .05$). A logistic regression reveals that high price sensitivity significantly lowers paid content adoption among rural users (odds ratio = 0.62, $p < .01$). No evidence of endogeneity is found, and subgroup analyses show notable urban–rural and generational differences in behavior. These findings underscore the importance of aligning content with local cultural narratives, leveraging peer influence, and carefully incorporating immersive technology. The study offers theoretical contributions by uniting TPB and TAM in a cultural context, and provides practical implications for content creators and policymakers – including strategies for content development, pricing, and digital inclusion.

Keywords

Micro-short drama; Generation Z; Cultural identity; Technology Acceptance Model; Theory of Planned Behavior; Willingness to pay.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Henan Province has witnessed a significant transformation in its film and television cultural market, notably characterized by the explosive growth of the micro-short drama sector. As of 2024, the number of registered micro-short dramas in Henan exceeded 5,000 – accounting for nearly 40% of the national total. Furthermore, an impressive 557 productions from Henan secured positions on national popularity rankings, underscoring the province's central role in shaping China's burgeoning micro-short drama industry. Concurrently, Zhengzhou (the provincial capital) is rapidly positioning itself as the "Micro-Short Drama Capital of China," reflecting local policymakers' drive toward cultural innovation and economic revitalization through digital media.

This remarkable growth aligns closely with the consumer behavior of Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2009), a demographic distinguished by unique cultural consumption preferences. Particularly prominent among these preferences is the "Guochao Wenlv" (national cultural tourism) trend, characterized by the integration of traditional local culture with

modern digital entertainment technologies. Generation Z's preference for local cultural narratives and immersive technological experiences has catalyzed significant shifts in consumption patterns, elevating Henan's cultural products to broader national visibility. Nonetheless, the rapid expansion of micro-short dramas has simultaneously given rise to critical market dilemmas – most notably content homogenization, uneven quality, and consumer fatigue induced by repetitive narrative tropes and algorithm-driven recommendations. These issues pose serious challenges for sustained industry growth and long-term user engagement.

The substantial growth of Henan's film and television industry is largely attributed to supportive policies under the province's *Integrated Cultural and Creative Tourism* strategy. The annual registration of micro-short dramas now surpasses 5,000, supported by the development of 14 major filming bases which generate significant clustering effects. This policy-driven initiative aims to increase the cultural industry's contribution to Henan's GDP to over 5% by 2025, illustrating the strategic importance of cultural-economic integration in provincial development planning.

Consumer behavior in Henan exhibits distinctive traits influenced predominantly by Generation Z's demand for immersive experiences. For example, interactive cultural activities (such as the fusion of traditional Hanfu culture with modern tourism) have gained popularity among young consumers. However, the regional market also shows a stark urban-rural duality: urban consumers in metropolitan areas like Zhengzhou demonstrate high-frequency paid content consumption, while penetration and adoption rates remain significantly lower in rural areas – highlighting uneven market development.

Despite these advances, persistent issues hinder the long-term sustainability of this market. Industry players face challenges including content homogenization, excessive reliance on algorithmic content recommendations, and a general lack of depth in cultural narratives – all of which compromise user engagement and market vitality. Moreover, despite observable market successes, little is understood about the underlying mechanisms guiding consumer choices within Henan's micro-short drama market. The decision-making processes through which consumers transition from passive viewing to active paid subscriptions remain largely within an unexamined "black box." Insufficient empirical research exists to clarify how specific factors (such as cultural identity perceptions, technological experiences, pricing strategies, and social influences) interact to shape consumer behaviors across different demographic groups. This knowledge gap restricts effective strategic interventions aimed at overcoming the prevailing market bottlenecks.

Exploring the determinants of consumer choice behavior is therefore critical not only for understanding individual preferences but also for addressing systemic issues within Henan's micro-short drama industry. Identifying influential factors can illuminate pathways for enhancing content quality, innovating consumer engagement strategies, and ultimately ensuring sustainable development within the broader cultural economy.

This study aims to address these gaps by quantitatively examining the factors influencing consumer choices in Henan's micro-short drama market. Specifically, we integrate two widely recognized theoretical frameworks – the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) – to propose an integrated analytical framework of "Cultural Identity – Technological Experience – Consumption Decision." Through this theoretical synthesis, the research seeks to quantify the marginal contributions of critical determinants such as cultural identity, immersive technological interactions, price sensitivity, and social dynamics in shaping consumers' purchase intentions and behaviors.

Moreover, the study advances existing scholarship by applying the integrated TPB-TAM framework in a specific regional context, offering nuanced insights into demographic

heterogeneities in consumer behavior. The empirical results will serve as foundational evidence to formulate targeted policy recommendations, aligning with Henan's strategic vision as outlined in the province's *14th Five-Year Plan for Integrated Cultural and Tourism Development*. Consequently, this research is expected to provide both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for facilitating the sustainable growth of the micro-short drama industry and the broader cultural consumption sector in Henan Province.

2. Literature Review

The shift in film and television consumption from traditional long-form viewing to fragmented short-form content represents a significant transformation driven by technological advancements and changing consumer preferences. Traditionally, film consumption involved scheduled, location-bound viewing experiences (e.g. going to a cinema or watching broadcast television). However, with the proliferation of smartphones, streaming platforms, and short-form video content, consumption has evolved into highly fragmented, on-demand, mobile-driven behaviors (Lobato, 2019). This transition aligns particularly with the preferences of Generation Z, who favor flexible, interactive, and personalized viewing experiences (Twenge, 2017).

Multiple theoretical frameworks explain film and digital media consumption behavior. Two prominent models are the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). TPB, proposed by Ajzen (1991), emphasizes intention-based behavior prediction influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. TPB effectively explains deliberate, cognitively planned behaviors in various consumption contexts (Ajzen, 2011). In contrast, TAM, introduced by Davis (1989), highlights user acceptance of technology as mediated by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, predicting consumers' adoption of new media technologies. Previous studies have integrated these models, revealing complementary insights into digital entertainment adoption (Lee, Kozar, & Larsen, 2003).

Prior research has identified three critical determinants within these frameworks: cultural identity, technological acceptance, and social influence. Cultural identity significantly affects consumer engagement – content aligned with local cultural narratives can enhance emotional connection and loyalty (Zhang & Li, 2022). Technological acceptance (especially involving immersive and interactive experiences such as augmented reality) has a strong influence on consumer satisfaction and continued use (Gao & Bai, 2014). Lastly, social influence – particularly through peer sharing and online social networks – substantially shapes consumption decisions (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011).

Despite extensive research on digital media consumption globally and nationally, a notable gap remains in region-specific studies, particularly regarding Henan Province. The Central Plains region of China possesses distinct cultural characteristics, featuring prominent historical narratives (such as Luoyang's "Center of Heaven and Earth" heritage and Kaifeng's Song Dynasty legacy). Yet, empirical research exploring how these unique cultural factors influence contemporary digital media consumption behaviors is scarce. This study seeks to address that empirical gap by analyzing the cultural specificity of Henan's micro-short drama consumption, providing both theoretical contributions and practical insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders.

Hypotheses Development: Drawing on the above literature, we propose an integrated framework wherein cultural, technological, and social factors jointly influence consumers' willingness to pay for micro-short drama content. In particular, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Cultural identity positively influences consumers' willingness to pay for micro-short dramas.

H2: Technological experiences positively influence consumption, with immersive experience acting as a mediating factor.

H3: Social influence positively predicts micro-short drama consumption behavior.

This integrated conceptual model combines TPB's emphasis on social-psychological drivers with TAM's focus on technology adoption factors. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relationships among cultural identity, technological experience (with immersion as a mediator), social influence, and consumer willingness to pay.

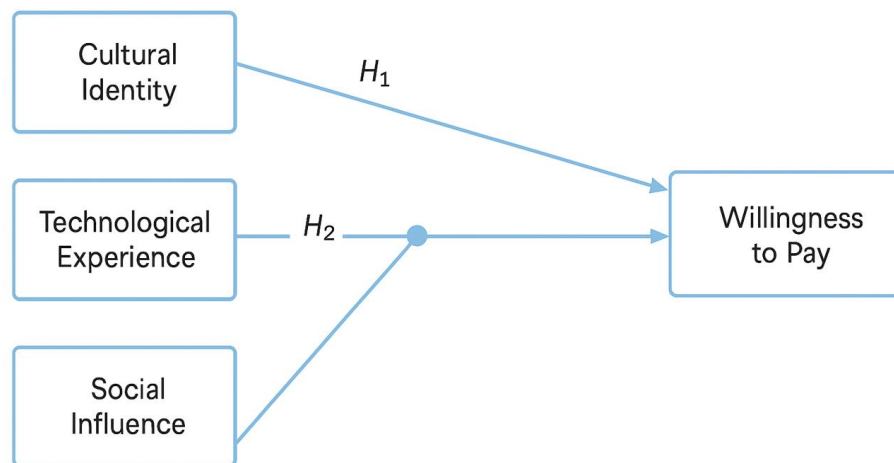


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Cultural–Technological–Social Determinants of Micro-Short Drama Consumption Behavior.

3. Methodology

3.1. Operationalization of Variables

This study adopts a quantitative survey design to test the proposed integrated model. The core latent variables were measured through standardized and adapted multi-item scales from prior research:

Cultural Identity: Measured by two aspects – (1) recognition accuracy of Henan-based cultural IP (e.g., references to Luoyang mythology, Kaifeng Song Dynasty heritage) and (2) an emotional affinity scale adapted from Zhang and Li (2022).

Technological Experience: Measured by self-reported augmented reality/virtual reality usage frequency and user interface/user experience (UI/UX) satisfaction, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

Social Influence: Captured through the frequency of peer recommendations and social media sharing behavior (items adapted from Cheung et al., 2011).

Immersive Experience: Assessed via an immersion inventory based on Gao and Bai (2014), including dimensions such as focused attention, time distortion, and involvement.

Willingness to Pay (WTP): Evaluated with a 5-point Likert item (“I am willing to pay for quality micro-short drama content”), cross-validated against self-reported monthly expenditure on such content.

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

A stratified random sample of $N = 1,200$ micro-short drama consumers (ages 18–45) was recruited across six major cities in Henan (Zhengzhou, Luoyang, Kaifeng, Xinxiang, Nanyang, and Xuchang). The sampling strategy ensured proportional representation across key demographics: urban vs. rural residence, gender and age cohort (Generation Z vs. middle-aged

viewers), and varying income and education levels. Data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed through local social media groups and entertainment platform communities. After data cleaning for completeness and quality (e.g., removing inattentive responses), a total of 1,104 valid responses were retained (an effective response rate of 92%). Post-stratification weighting was applied to align the sample with Henan's population demographics, ensuring that the results are representative of the province's micro-short drama consumer base.

3.3. Reliability and Validity

All multi-item constructs demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$ for each latent variable scale. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to examine construct validity. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure was above 0.75 for all constructs, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < .001$), confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis and that the constructs displayed adequate convergent validity.

3.4. Data Analysis Plan

We employed the following analytical procedures to test the research hypotheses:

Descriptive Statistics: First, we computed frequencies, percentages, and means to profile the respondents and examine data distributions. This step also verified the normality of continuous variables and helped identify any demographic patterns in content consumption behavior.

Multiple Linear Regression: We then tested the direct effects proposed in H1 and H3 using a multiple regression model. In this model, willingness to pay was the dependent variable and cultural identity, technological experience, and social influence were the key independent variables. The regression equation can be represented as:

$$WTP = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Cultural Identity}) + \beta_2(\text{Technological Experience}) + \beta_3(\text{Social Influence}) + \varepsilon,$$

where *WTP* denotes willingness to pay, and ε is the error term. This analysis estimated the β coefficients for each factor, indicating their marginal contributions to willingness to pay, and assessed their statistical significance.

Mediation Analysis: To test H2 (the mediating role of immersive experience in the effect of technological experience on consumption decisions), we conducted a mediation analysis using Hayes's PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples for confidence interval estimation. This analysis evaluates whether technological experience has an indirect effect on willingness to pay through enhancing the user's immersive experience.

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS and the PROCESS macro. Significance levels were set at $p < .05$ for hypothesis testing.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The final sample ($N = 1,104$) was predominantly young and urban, aligning with the Generation Z demographic that drives the micro-short drama market. The majority of respondents (68%) were between 18 and 29 years old (Generation Z), underscoring the central role of young consumers. In contrast, 32% of users were age 30 or above. Urban users comprised 79% of the sample, while rural users accounted for 21%, highlighting the market's concentration in city centers and the limited penetration into rural regions. This urban–rural split reflects broader digital divide patterns in content consumption.

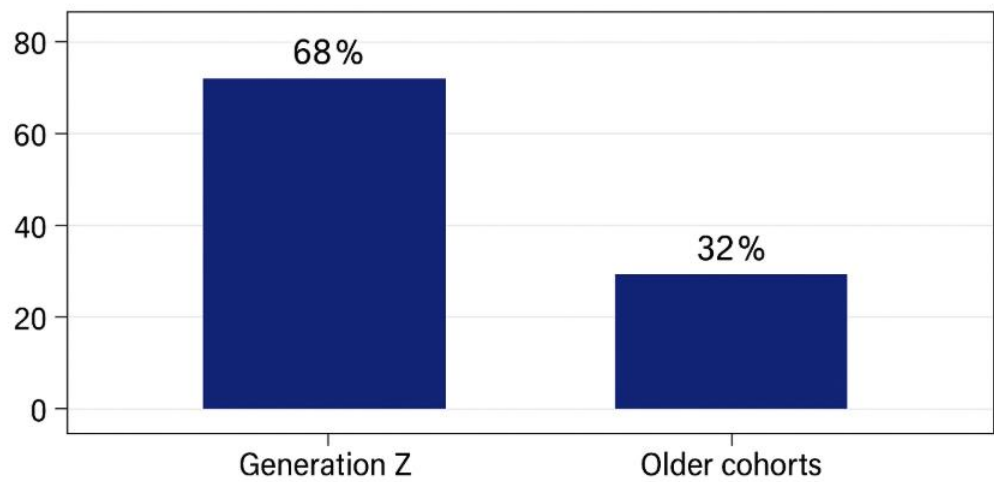


Figure 2. Age Demographics of Micro-Short Drama Consumers (Generation Z vs. older cohorts).

In terms of content preferences, users showed a strong inclination toward ultra-short episodes. Fully 74% of respondents preferred episodes with durations under 2 minutes. This dominance of bite-sized content reflects broader trends toward mobile-first, on-the-go entertainment consumption. Conversely, only about 26% expressed a preference for episodes longer than 2 minutes, illustrating a clear skew toward brevity in this market.

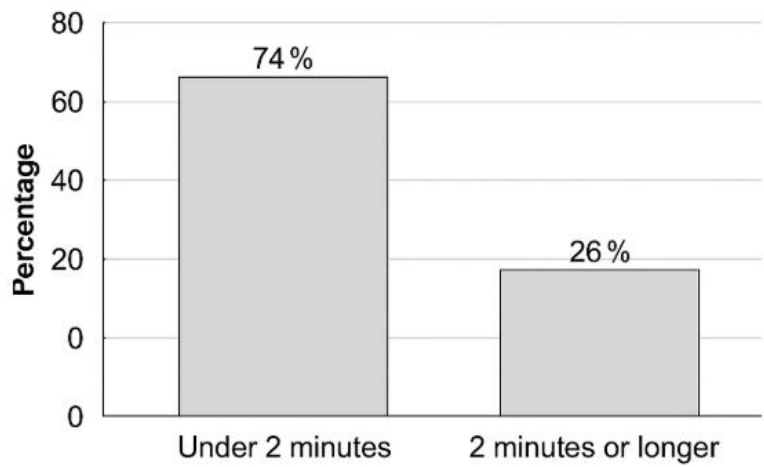


Figure 3. Episode Length Preference

Thematic preference data indicate a clear dominance of traditional Chinese-style (“Guofeng”) narratives. Content with strong Guofeng elements captured 52% of total clicks and views. This suggests that culturally resonant content plays a significant role in attracting and retaining viewer attention. The remaining 48% of viewership was split among various other themes (modern, international, etc.), showing that while Guofeng-themed productions lead in popularity, there is still substantial interest in alternative content genres.

Additional descriptive insights reveal notable behavior patterns. For example, among Generation Z users, 64% reported consuming micro-short dramas during fragmented time intervals (e.g. on public transport or in waiting lines), compared to only 19% of older respondents who reported this habit. Furthermore, 58% of all users discovered new content primarily via algorithmic recommendations, yet only 27% of those users expressed long-term satisfaction with algorithm-driven content. This highlights a tension between convenient discovery through algorithms and the depth or quality of content discovered in that way.

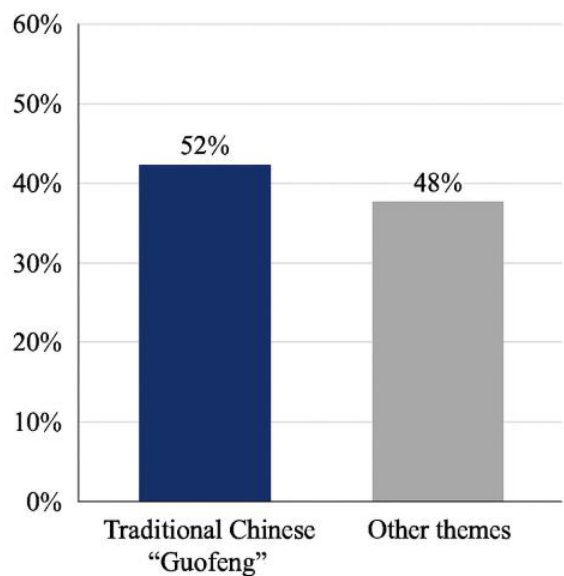


Figure 4. Thematic Preferences of Micro-Short Drama Content

4.2. Multiple Regression Analysis

To test the direct effects of cultural identity, technological experience, and social influence on willingness to pay, we estimated a multiple linear regression model. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Multiple Linear Regression Results Predicting Willingness to Pay (N = 1,104)

Predictor	Beta	SE	p-value
Cultural Identity	0.42***	0.10	< .001
Social Influence	0.37**	0.12	.003
Technological Experience	0.28*	0.14	.035

Note: Unstandardized coefficients reported. $R^2 = 0.45$. $p < .05$ (), $p < .01$ (), $p < .001$ ().

These findings support H1 and H3, confirming that all three factors positively influence consumers’ willingness to pay. Among them, cultural identity emerges as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$). This suggests that emotional resonance with local culture and recognition of Henan-based cultural IPs have significant commercial implications. For instance, respondents who could recognize more than three Henan-specific cultural IP references (such as “Luoyi City,” “Kaifengfu,” or “Shaolin Kungfu”) were 45% more likely to express a high willingness to pay for premium content, compared to those with lower cultural recognition.

Social influence also shows a notable effect on willingness to pay ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < .01$). Peer-to-peer content sharing – especially through social platforms like WeChat Moments and Douyin (TikTok) reposts – was significantly correlated with higher platform engagement and subscription uptake. However, this effect was more pronounced among users who had a moderate prior interest in local culture, indicating a potential interaction between social signals and cultural predispositions. In other words, social recommendations tend to amplify willingness to pay particularly for those already inclined toward Henan’s cultural content.

Technological experience, while significant ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < .05$), showed a somewhat smaller impact on willingness to pay relative to cultural and social factors. There is evidence of a **ceiling effect** for technology: qualitative feedback from follow-up interviews suggested that users appreciate immersive interfaces and AR filters primarily as novelties; when such features are overused or not backed by substantive storytelling, their marginal value diminishes. This points to the necessity of balancing technical enhancements with content depth.

4.3. Logistic Regression Analysis

We further explored the determinants of conversion from free viewing to paid content by estimating a logistic regression model. In this analysis, the dependent variable was whether a user had paid for micro-short drama content (subscription or pay-per-episode), and key predictors included price sensitivity and user demographics. A pivotal finding from this model is the significant negative effect of price sensitivity among rural users. As summarized in Table 2, rural consumers with high price sensitivity were far less likely to pay for content.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Results for Paid Content Conversion by User Segment

User Segment Price Sensitivity (OR) p-value		
Urban Users	0.92	.27
Rural Users	0.62**	.004

Note: OR = odds ratio for the effect of high price sensitivity on the odds of paying for content. $p < .01$ (**).

The odds ratio (OR) of 0.62 for rural users indicates that, for this group, higher price sensitivity is associated with a 38% decrease in the likelihood of paying for content ($OR = 0.62, p < .01$). In practical terms, while 71% of urban Generation Z users in our sample were willing to accept a price point above 2.99 CNY per episode, the rejection rate for the same price among rural users aged 35 and above was 79%. This stark contrast underscores the urgent need to consider pricing strategies when targeting less affluent or less digitally immersed markets. In urban segments, users appear more willing to tolerate higher pricing for micro-dramas, whereas in rural segments, even modest fees can deter adoption.

4.4. Robustness Checks

Endogeneity control: We addressed potential endogeneity between cultural identity and willingness to pay by employing an instrumental variable (IV) approach. As an instrument for cultural identity, we used respondents’ regional cultural exposure (e.g., frequency of participation in local cultural festivals or museum visits), which is correlated with cultural identity but assumed not to directly affect willingness to pay except through that identity. A Hausman test comparing the IV regression with the OLS model indicated no significant endogeneity bias (Hausman χ^2 test, $p = .47$). This result increases confidence that the positive effect of cultural identity on willingness to pay is not spurious or driven by omitted variable bias.

Subsample analysis: We conducted separate regression analyses for key demographic subgroups (urban vs. rural users, and Generation Z vs. older consumers) to examine heterogeneity in the effects. The subgroup results revealed important differences. For urban users, cultural identity remained the dominant factor influencing willingness to pay, especially among those who reported high exposure to Henan’s cultural marketing campaigns. Among rural users, however, social influence was the strongest predictor of willingness to pay ($\beta \approx 0.41, p < .01$ in the rural subsample), suggesting that rural audiences rely more on social endorsements and word-of-mouth in their decision to support content financially. In the Generation Z subsample, technological experience had an amplified effect ($\beta \approx 0.39$), implying that younger users respond more positively to AR/VR-enhanced narrative forms compared to older viewers. These subgroup analyses validate the importance of tailored content and platform strategies: a one-size-fits-all approach would likely lead to suboptimal engagement given the distinct drivers in each demographic segment.

5. Discussion

Our findings paint a layered picture of digital cultural consumption in the micro-short drama market. Foremost, the high explanatory power of cultural identity affirms the central role of local narratives and emotional familiarity in driving digital content monetization. Consumers who strongly identify with Henan's cultural heritage are markedly more inclined to financially support content that reflects that heritage. This underscores the theoretical point that cultural affinity can directly translate into economic behavior in online media markets.

Social and technological factors, in contrast, function more as facilitators than core drivers, and their impacts vary across user groups. The influence of social networks and peer recommendations is significant but contingent – it appears to especially boost engagement for culturally moderate users and for those in rural communities where personal networks guide content discovery. Similarly, immersive technological features (like AR filters, interactive storytelling, etc.) do enhance user experience and willingness to pay for younger, tech-savvy audiences; however, we observed diminishing returns among highly experienced users who have come to expect such features as standard. This suggests a maturing audience that demands more than just flashy interfaces – ultimately, content substance must complement technical style.

The pronounced rural–urban divide in our results reveals a fundamental market asymmetry. Urban users generally show higher baseline willingness to pay and are more responsive to content that celebrates local culture. Rural users, on the other hand, are more price-sensitive and heavily dependent on social networks for content awareness. These distinctions highlight the need for context-sensitive strategies. For example, premium pricing models that work in urban areas may not translate well to rural markets, where disposable incomes are lower and online payment behaviors are less ingrained. Instead, alternative monetization strategies (such as ad-supported models or group purchase discounts) might be necessary to engage rural consumers.

Additionally, the diminishing marginal effect of technological novelty among veteran users implies that the micro-short drama industry may be reaching a new phase of maturity. Early on, novel tech features could attract users, but as the user base becomes accustomed to them, the industry must re-center its focus on storytelling and content quality. In other words, immersive technology should enrich a compelling narrative rather than act as a substitute for one. Content creators and platforms would benefit from balancing innovation in delivery with investment in script writing, character development, and cultural depth.

In sum, this study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, we demonstrated the value of an interdisciplinary model that bridges cultural consumer research with technology acceptance and social influence theories. By integrating TPB and TAM within a cultural context, we offered a more holistic lens to examine digital content markets. Practically, our findings furnish a strategic toolkit for content producers and policymakers aiming to sustain the vibrant growth of micro-short dramas in Henan and similar markets. A nuanced, segmented approach – one that differentiates strategies for urban vs. rural audiences, leverages local cultural identity, and pairs meaningful storytelling with technology – will be key to unlocking the next stage of market development.

6. Policy Implications

Based on the empirical findings and consumer insights discussed above, we propose several policy and industry strategies to support sustainable growth in Henan's micro-short drama sector. These recommendations focus on three key dimensions: content upgrading, scenario innovation, and institutional design.

Content Upgrading: Since cultural identity was found to be the most influential factor driving willingness to pay, it is crucial to deepen and diversify content rooted in Henan's local culture. Stakeholders should systematically develop new micro-short dramas drawing on the province's rich cultural heritage—for example, narratives from Yellow River civilization lore, Shaolin Kungfu legends, or famous Song Dynasty tales from Kaifeng. Such content could be coordinated with provincial branding initiatives like *“Walking in Henan, Understanding China”* to create cohesive cultural portfolios that reinforce regional identity. In addition, a tiered quality support system could help curb the overproduction of low-quality, repetitive dramas. This might include establishing a “High-Quality Micro-Drama Fund” to provide grants or production assistance to projects meeting certain cultural, aesthetic, and engagement benchmarks. Online platforms can complement this by algorithmically boosting high-quality content (while de-emphasizing subpar content), thereby incentivizing producers to prioritize quality over quantity.

Scenario Innovation: Younger users show a strong preference for immersive experiences, and current algorithm-driven content discovery has its limitations. Therefore, a hybrid virtual-physical strategy could create more engaging consumption scenarios. For instance, Henan's major filming bases (for example, in Zhengzhou and Luoyang) could be developed into augmented reality (AR)-enhanced tourism sites tied to popular micro-short dramas. A viewer might watch a Shaolin Temple-themed short drama online, then visit the actual Shaolin Temple, where an AR application provides interactive story extensions or kungfu demonstrations. This blending of digital storytelling with physical tourism can deepen engagement and create a feedback loop between online content and offline cultural activities. Additionally, platforms and content creators can cultivate fan communities centered on popular IPs—effectively “micro-drama + tourism” fan clubs. These communities, hosted on social media or dedicated apps, could foster both online interactions (such as discussion forums and fan art contests) and offline events (like themed meet-ups or cosplay gatherings at cultural heritage sites). By strengthening peer networks and encouraging user-generated content around micro-dramas, such fan ecosystems would promote repeat viewership and organic promotion.

Institutional Design and Inclusion: Our analysis also highlighted significant barriers for certain demographics, particularly rural consumers who are price-sensitive and have limited access. Institutional measures can make the market more inclusive. For example, the government could partner with streaming platforms to offer an affordable “1 Yuan Universal Package” subscription targeted at rural residents. This could be implemented as part of broader digital inclusion initiatives, such as subsidized broadband expansion in rural areas. By lowering the economic hurdle, such packages can cultivate content consumption habits in underserved communities without greatly sacrificing revenue (especially if combined with advertising support). Another important measure is to strengthen intellectual property protection and regulation as the micro-short drama industry matures. Issues like unauthorized reuploads and content plagiarism across platforms are becoming more common. Establishing a blockchain-based copyright registry for micro-short dramas could help transparently track and enforce IP rights across different platforms. Stronger IP protection would encourage creative investment and make producers more comfortable sharing content across multiple streaming services, thereby broadening the overall market.

Taken together, these policy and strategy recommendations align with Henan's vision of building a robust cultural and digital economy hub. They not only address current market inefficiencies—such as content saturation and uneven access—but also create conditions for the next wave of innovation and regional branding. It will be crucial for stakeholders, including content creators, platform operators, and cultural policymakers, to work collaboratively in implementing these measures, ensuring that Henan's micro-short drama industry continues on a path of sustainable and inclusive growth.

7. Conclusion

This research provides several key contributions to understanding consumer behavior in Henan Province's micro-short drama market. First, the findings highlight **cultural identity** as the most significant predictor of consumers' willingness to pay for micro-short dramas. In our empirical analysis, cultural identity emerged as a dominant factor influencing purchase intentions, aligning with evidence that a strong identification with local culture can exert a direct and powerful impact on consumer decisions. Audiences in China's Central Plains region (like Henan) who strongly identify with their heritage are markedly more inclined to financially support content that reflects and reinforces that identity.

Second, our study breaks new ground by integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) into a unified analytical framework. This novel three-dimensional model encompasses cultural, technological, and social influence factors. By combining TPB's social-psychological components (e.g., attitudes and subjective norms) with TAM's technology adoption factors (e.g., perceived usefulness and ease of use of viewing platforms), we constructed a more comprehensive explanation of consumer intentions. Prior studies have shown that an integrated TPB-TAM approach can yield greater explanatory power than either model alone. Consistently, our integrated model captured how cultural identity (a cultural-psychological driver), technological factors (e.g., ease of accessing and using micro-drama apps), and social influence (peer and societal norms around content consumption) collectively shape willingness to pay. This interdisciplinary approach advances theory by bridging domains – connecting cultural consumption research with technology acceptance and social behavior theories – and offers a holistic lens for examining digital content markets.

Finally, the study carries regional significance by focusing on a cultural market often overlooked in broader studies. Henan's Central Plains region, with its deep historical heritage, provides a distinctive context where traditional culture and modern digital media intersect. For instance, Luoyang (an ancient capital in Henan) boasts over a millennium of cultural history; understanding consumer behavior in such a setting is crucial for leveraging local culture in new media formats. Our findings, tailored to this *Zhongyuan* (heartland) market, enrich the literature on cultural media consumption by illuminating how Central Plains audiences engage with micro-short dramas. In practical terms, the results suggest that strategies leveraging strong cultural identity cues and local pride can be particularly effective in this region. By bringing attention to China's "heartland" cultural market, our study helps balance the geographic scope of consumer behavior research, ensuring that Henan's booming micro-short drama industry – now a nationally significant content hub – is examined through an appropriate cultural lens.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the research has several limitations that open avenues for future inquiry. First, our study adopted a demand-side focus, concentrating on consumer attitudes and willingness to pay, without incorporating the supply-side or production perspective. Factors such as content creation processes, producer strategies, and distribution channels were outside our scope. This omission means we did not account for how supply-side dynamics – for example, the influence of micro-drama production hubs or the variability in content quality – might interact with consumer willingness to pay. Future studies could address this gap by examining producers' perspectives, such as how creators respond to cultural trends or how different business models (e.g., advertising-supported vs. subscription-based) impact consumer payment behavior. Integrating supply-side data would provide a more balanced view of the micro-short drama ecosystem, potentially revealing feedback loops between content production and consumer demand.

Second, the rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence in media presents a new frontier that our study could not fully explore. AI-driven content generation (often referred to

as AIGC, or AI-generated content) is poised to influence content quality, personalization, and cost in the micro-short drama industry. For instance, AI can be used to auto-generate scripts or create virtual actors, enabling highly customized storylines and interactive experiences at scale. Such innovations may enhance content output and tailor narratives to individual viewer preferences, potentially increasing audience engagement. We suggest that future research investigate how these AI-driven advancements might shift consumer behavior. Will audiences be more willing to pay for micro-dramas that are algorithmically personalized to their tastes? Could lower production costs via AI lead to pricing adjustments for consumers? Moreover, the introduction of AI could blur the line between creators and consumers if viewers eventually co-create story branches or endings. Studying consumer acceptance of AI-mediated content – perhaps by extending TAM with new variables for trust in AI-generated media – would be a timely extension of our work and ensure that our model remains robust amid technological evolution.

Third, cross-regional comparisons would strengthen the generalizability of our findings. We focused on Henan's market, but consumer dynamics might differ in other cultural hubs. We propose extending the research to the so-called "*costume drama corridor*" along the Zhengzhou–Kaifeng–Luoyang high-speed rail zone. This corridor connects three culturally significant cities in Henan, each a major hub for historical costume drama production and tourism. For example, Zhengzhou now hosts a dedicated "vertical screen" film base that produces several micro-dramas per day and ranks among the top in China for output. Kaifeng and Luoyang, with their rich imperial histories, serve as authentic backdrops and markets for culturally themed content. A comparative study across these hubs could test whether the consumer behavior patterns observed in our Henan study hold consistently or exhibit local variations. Specifically, future research could examine if cultural identity's influence on willingness to pay is equally strong in each city, or if factors like differing local subcultures, economic development levels, or tourism exposure lead to divergences in what drives consumers. Such an inquiry, possibly by replicating our TPB–TAM–culture model in each location and comparing results, would reveal whether our integrated model has broad applicability across Central Plains markets or if it requires city-specific adjustments. Any divergences might uncover important contextual nuances, informing content creators whether marketing strategies need to be tailored to each city's cultural audience profile.

By pursuing these future directions, researchers can build upon our findings to gain a more holistic understanding of the micro-short drama market. The insights from this study – particularly the central role of cultural identity and the efficacy of an integrated TPB–TAM framework – form a foundation for both academic inquiry and industry application. Addressing supply-side factors, embracing technological innovations like generative AI, and conducting cross-regional comparisons will not only validate and refine our three-dimensional model but also contribute to the sustainable growth of cultural creative industries in Henan and beyond. The convergence of culture, technology, and social influence explored in this research marks a step forward in explaining consumer behavior; future work can continue to bridge these domains for enriched theoretical and practical outcomes in the evolving landscape of micro-short dramas.

References

- [1] Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211.
- [2] Ajzen, I. (2011). The theory of planned behaviour: Reactions and reflections. *Psychology & Health*, 26(9), 1113–1127.

- [3] Cheung, C. M., Chiu, P. Y., & Lee, M. K. (2011). Online social networks: Why do students use Facebook? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(4), 1337–1343.
- [4] Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology. *MIS Quarterly*, 13(3), 319–340.
- [5] Gao, L., & Bai, X. (2014). A unified perspective on the factors influencing consumer acceptance of internet of things technology. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 26(2), 211–231.
- [6] Zhang, Z., & Li, W. (2022). Customer Engagement Around Cultural and Creative Products: The Role of Social Identity. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13.
- [7] Lee, Y., Kozar, K. A., & Larsen, K. R. (2003). The technology acceptance model: Past, present, and future. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 12(1), 752–780.
- [8] Lobato, R. (2019). *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. New York: NYU Press.
- [9] Twenge, J. M. (2017). The Costs of overprotecting the young-iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy-and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood-and What That Means for the Rest of Us. *Journal of Psychology*, 1-13.