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The Impact of Cultural Identity on the Export Competitiveness of Afghan Traditional Handicrafts: Mechanisms and Pathways

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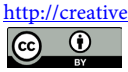

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Abstract

This study investigates how intangible cultural attributes are associated with the export competitiveness of Afghan handicrafts amid global market standardization. Grounded primarily in the Resource-Based View (RBV), the framework conceptualizes cultural authenticity, heritage value, and symbolic meaning as strategic firm-level assets that influence product differentiation and export competitiveness. Analyzing survey data from 331 managers across 142 Afghan export-oriented firms and artisan cooperatives using Structural Equation Modeling, the empirical findings demonstrate that cultural authenticity, heritage value, and symbolic meaning exhibit strong positive associations with product differentiation, which in turn strongly relates to export competitiveness. Furthermore, mediation analysis confirms that product differentiation serves as a significant mediating pathway linking cultural assets to export performance. While cross-sectional manager-reported data limit strict causal claims, the results suggest that strategically translating cultural attributes into distinctive product features may enhance export positioning. Practical implications highlight authenticity certification and culturally grounded branding as key mechanisms for craft export strategies.

Keywords

Product Differentiation, Export Competitiveness, Cultural Authenticity, Heritage Value, Symbolic Meaning, Afghan Handicrafts

1. Introduction

The global economy has increasingly recognized the value of culture-driven products rooted in intangible cultural heritage (ICH). UNESCO defines ICH as tradi-

tions, expressions, knowledge, and skills recognized by communities as part of their cultural identity (UNESCO, 2003). Unlike mass-produced goods, ICH-based products embody history, craftsmanship, and symbolic meaning, making them attractive to consumers seeking authenticity and uniqueness (Petronela, 2016; Cai et al., 2025). This creates opportunities for developing economies to leverage cultural assets for export diversification and international positioning. Afghanistan provides an important context for examining this phenomenon. Despite political and economic constraints, the country possesses a rich cultural heritage embedded in traditional handicrafts, including Herati carpets, Kandahari embroidery, lapis lazuli crafts, and traditional jewelry (Hall, 2002; Cao et al., 2024). These products represent longstanding traditions, regional identities, and artisanal knowledge, while cultural identity remains important for their survival in a globalized market.

Increasing globalization has intensified competition and encouraged firms to differentiate products beyond price and functional attributes (Del Bosque & Martín, 2008; Pardo-García et al., 2018; Chauhan, 2022). In this context, cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value can serve as important sources of differentiation. Consumers tend to value products that reflect cultural authenticity and symbolic significance because these attributes enhance perceived value and emotional connection (Gao & Zhang, 2018). Cultural authenticity reflects the extent to which products represent genuine cultural traditions and can increase their desirability among consumers seeking unique and meaningful experiences (Dong & Hong, 2015; Timothy, 2011). Afghan handicrafts, such as Herati carpets, demonstrate authenticity through traditional techniques and distinctive regional patterns, potentially strengthening their differentiation in export markets.

Symbolic meaning similarly contributes to the value of cultural products by embedding them with social and emotional significance. Cultural products can represent identity, tradition, and status, influencing consumer behavior in culturally oriented markets (Zhang, 2005). In Afghan handicrafts, symbolic elements associated with traditional crafts can enhance uniqueness and strengthen their appeal in international markets.

Heritage value represents another important dimension. It reflects the historical significance and cultural continuity associated with a product, potentially enhancing its legitimacy, prestige, and perceived value (Esfehani & Albrecht, 2018). Afghan jewelry and embroidery, for example, embody heritage elements connected to ethnic identities and historical narratives. Such value can strengthen product differentiation while supporting cultural preservation. Despite these cultural strengths, Afghan handicrafts face challenges related to branding and the translation of cultural attributes into sustained export competitiveness (Chen et al., 2020; Zhu & Han, 2018). Thus, cultural richness alone may not be sufficient; cultural attributes must be strategically transformed into marketable product advantages.

Export competitiveness refers to the ability to produce and market products that meet international demand while generating sustainable economic returns

(Li & Luo, 2018). For cultural products, competitiveness depends not only on cost efficiency but also on distinctive value propositions. Accordingly, integrating cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value into market-oriented strategies may strengthen the international positioning of Afghan handicrafts. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a useful perspective for understanding how perceptions and attitudes influence behavioral intentions. The theory proposes that behavioral intentions are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Tolkes & Butzmann, 2018; Han et al., 2017). Cultural attributes such as authenticity and symbolic meaning can influence consumer attitudes and perceptions, making TPB relevant to understanding the market potential of cultural products (Beldad & Hegner, 2018).

Product differentiation therefore represents a potential mechanism through which cultural attributes can be transformed into competitive advantages. By incorporating authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value into product design and marketing, Afghan handicrafts can develop distinctive market positions and potentially command premium prices. Overall, Afghanistan's rich intangible cultural heritage presents an opportunity for export development. However, the key challenge is understanding how cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value can be transformed into product differentiation and, ultimately, export competitiveness. This study addresses this issue by examining product differentiation as a mechanism linking cultural attributes with the export competitiveness of Afghan traditional handicrafts.

Despite its rich cultural heritage, Afghanistan has not fully leveraged product differentiation to achieve sustainable competitive advantage in international markets. Although Afghan handicrafts possess strong cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value, cultural richness does not automatically translate into export competitiveness (Petronela, 2016; Chen, 2023). Previous research has largely examined intangible cultural heritage in tourism and cultural consumption, with comparatively limited attention to product-level outcomes such as product differentiation. Although authenticity influences consumer preferences (Gao & Zhang, 2018), insufficient empirical attention has been given to how cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value collectively contribute to differentiation in export-oriented industries.

Moreover, the mediating role of product differentiation between cultural attributes and export competitiveness remains underexplored. The application of the theory of planned behavior and resource-based view to cultural product competitiveness is also limited. Therefore, this study examines how cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value influence product differentiation and how differentiation subsequently enhances export competitiveness in the Afghan handicrafts sector. The study's primary innovation is its multidimensional examination of cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value as distinct cultural resources influencing product differentiation. Rather than treating culture as a single construct, the study conceptualizes these dimensions as separate drivers of

market outcomes (Sharma, 2010; Zhang, 2005; Handarkho et al., 2025).

The primary theoretical innovation of this study is the integration of the theory of planned Behavior (TPB) with resource-based view (RBV). Traditionally, TPB has been utilized to predict individual consumer intentions in stable, high-consumption markets (Ajzen, 1991; Beldad & Hegner, 2018). This study innovates by applying these behavioral constructs to the high-stakes environment of international trade and export competitiveness. By treating cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value not just as feelings but as strategic intangible assets, the study redefines how a nation's heritage can be a source of sustained competitive advantage (Zhu & Han, 2018). This synthesis provides a new lens through which we can view traditional crafts as "Strategic Cultural Capital" rather than mere relics.

A significant limitation in current heritage research is the lack of a clear pathway from culture to profit. Many studies assume that because a product is authentic, it will automatically succeed (Timothy, 2011). This study challenges that assumption by introducing product differentiation as a critical mediating variable. The innovation here lies in the empirical testing of the cultural-differentiation-export Path. I propose that cultural attributes do not lead directly to competitiveness; they must first be converted into unique, differentiated market positions that resonate with the cognitive-affective models of global consumers (Del Bosque & Martín, 2008). This nuanced modeling provides a more realistic and academically rigorous explanation of market success.

This study is the first in its focus on the Afghan handicraft sector during a period of global transition. Afghanistan presents a unique extreme context for studying a region where traditional ICH is exceptionally high, but institutional support and market access are exceptionally low. While most studies on ICH products focus on stable economies like China or Europe, this research provides rare data-driven insights into how artisans in conflict-affected or developing regions can bypass traditional industrial hurdles by leveraging their unique sense of place and cultural narratives. This adds a significant layer of diversity to the global discourse on cultural economics.

Heritage studies are often purely descriptive or ethnographic. This study innovates by employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to provide quantitative evidence for concepts that are usually considered unmeasurable, such as symbolic meaning and emotional resonance (Wu, 2009). By utilizing rigorous scales to measure personal cultural orientations and perceived authenticity (Sharma, 2010), this study elevates the study of Afghan handicrafts from a localized narrative to a globally relevant empirical model.

Theoretical Framework (Figure 1): Resource-Based View (RBV) and Strategic Motivation

Grounded primarily in the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm, this study conceptualizes intangible cultural attributes—specifically cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value—as strategic, valuable, rare, inimitable,

and non-substitutable (VRIN) organizational assets. Within export-oriented craft sectors, these cultural resources provide the foundation for sustainable competitive advantage when deployed effectively through firm-level strategies. While consumer-level frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offer contextual motivation by explaining why end-consumers place value on authentic and symbolic artifacts, the empirical model tested in this study operates strictly at the organizational unit of analysis. Because the empirical model does not directly measure TPB's core individual-level constructs (attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) or consumer purchase intentions, TPB is positioned solely as background rationale. The structural relationships among cultural assets, product differentiation, and export performance are strictly grounded in RBV and Product Differentiation Theory.

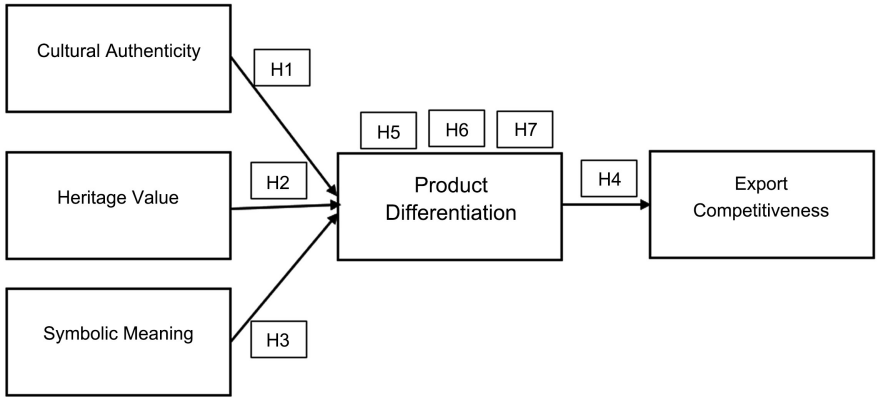

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Cultural Authenticity and Product Differentiation

Cultural authenticity refers to the extent to which a product reflects genuine traditions, craftsmanship, materials, and cultural identity rooted in a particular society. Within intangible cultural heritage, authenticity represents an important value-adding attribute because culturally genuine products preserve originality and cultural integrity (UNESCO, 2003). In traditional handicrafts, authenticity is particularly important because production techniques, indigenous materials, and designs are embedded in localized cultural knowledge. Product differentiation refers to the process of creating distinctive product attributes that distinguish an offering from competing products. Cultural authenticity can enhance differentiation by embedding products with unique characteristics that are difficult to imitate. Authentic products are often perceived as more valuable, trustworthy, and meaningful by consumers (Timothy, 2011; Gao & Zhang, 2018). In Afghan handicrafts, traditional weaving techniques, indigenous materials, and culturally distinctive patterns provide a recognizable sense of place that can distinguish products from standardized alternatives.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) further suggests that consumers de-

velop favorable attitudes toward products that correspond with their values and beliefs (Ajzen, 1991). Authentic cultural products can therefore enhance perceived value and preference by reflecting genuine traditions and heritage (Beldad & Hegner, 2018). From the resource-based view (RBV), authenticity may also represent a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resource because traditional knowledge and localized production practices are difficult for competitors to replicate (Petronela, 2016). Thus, cultural authenticity provides both symbolic and strategic foundations for product differentiation. Accordingly, authentic Afghan handicrafts can achieve greater distinctiveness by transforming traditional techniques, indigenous materials, and cultural narratives into recognizable product attributes. Therefore:

H1: *Cultural authenticity is positively related to product differentiation*.

2.2. Symbolic Meaning and Product Differentiation

Symbolic meaning refers to the cultural, emotional, and social significance associated with a product beyond its functional utility. Products can serve as carriers of meaning through which consumers express their identities, values, and social affiliations (Zhang, 2005). Cultural products are particularly rich in symbolic meaning because they embody traditions, beliefs, and historical narratives. Symbolic meaning can strengthen product differentiation by adding emotional and social value that is difficult to standardize or imitate. Afghan handicrafts, such as lapis lazuli crafts and traditional jewelry, incorporate historical, cultural, and identity-related meanings that enhance their uniqueness and appeal to consumers seeking meaningful consumption experiences (Sharma, 2010).

TPB provides further support for this relationship. Consumers are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward products that are consistent with their values and self-concept (Ajzen, 1991). Symbolically rich products can therefore generate emotional attachment and purchase intentions (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). Similarly, self-congruity theory suggests that consumers prefer products whose symbolic meanings correspond with their self-image. Such alignment increases perceived value and distinctiveness. Moreover, symbolic meaning supports storytelling and brand identity by allowing firms to communicate cultural narratives and artisan skills (Hall, 2002). From the RBV perspective, culturally embedded symbolic attributes can represent valuable and difficult-to-imitate resources (Petronela, 2016). Therefore, symbolic meaning can transform Afghan handicrafts from functional products into distinctive cultural offerings. Accordingly:

H2: *Symbolic meaning is positively related to product differentiation.*

2.3. Heritage Value and Product Differentiation

Heritage value refers to the historical, cultural, and social significance embedded in products that have been preserved and transmitted across generations. It reflects cultural continuity, collective identity, historical narratives, and accumulated artisanal knowledge. Heritage-based products are therefore often perceived

as authentic, prestigious, and culturally rich (Esfehani & Albrecht, 2018).

Heritage value can enhance product differentiation by providing historical and cultural characteristics that distinguish products from standardized, mass-produced alternatives. Heritage products carry stories of origin, generational craftsmanship, and cultural evolution that are difficult to replicate (Petronela, 2016). In Afghanistan, traditional carpets and jewelry reflect centuries of cultural development and artisanal expertise, creating distinctive attributes that can appeal to international consumers seeking authenticity and cultural richness (Hall, 2002).

TPB suggests that heritage value can positively influence consumer attitudes by creating perceptions of tradition, cultural continuity, and belonging (Ajzen, 1991). These favorable evaluations may enhance perceived value and purchase intentions (Beldad & Hegner, 2018). Heritage can also evoke nostalgia and emotional attachment, making products more memorable and meaningful than contemporary alternatives. From the RBV perspective, heritage represents a valuable, rare, and inimitable resource because it is embedded in a specific cultural and historical context (Petronela, 2016). Firms can leverage this resource through product design, branding, and storytelling to establish distinctive market positions. Hence:

H3: *Heritage value is positively related to product differentiation.*

2.4. Product Differentiation and Export Competitiveness

Product differentiation refers to the creation and communication of unique product attributes that distinguish an offering from competitors. These attributes may include design, quality, branding, functionality, cultural significance, and emotional appeal. Differentiation enables firms to create competitive advantages by offering consumers value beyond standardized alternatives. Differentiated products can attract consumer attention, command premium prices, reduce price sensitivity, and strengthen customer loyalty. These benefits are particularly important in export markets, where firms compete with numerous international producers offering similar products. Rather than competing primarily on cost, differentiated products compete on unique value propositions.

For cultural products, differentiation can be derived from authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value. Such cultural attributes create distinctive value propositions that are difficult for competitors to imitate (Gao & Zhang, 2018; Zhu & Han, 2018). TPB further suggests that distinctive and valuable products can generate favorable consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Ajzen, 1991; Beldad & Hegner, 2018). Differentiation can also signal quality, uniqueness, and credibility, helping reduce uncertainty in international markets. This relationship is particularly relevant to Afghan handicrafts because carpets, embroidery, and jewelry possess cultural attributes that can be transformed into distinctive market offerings. By emphasizing traditional designs, indigenous materials, and artisanal craftsmanship, Afghan producers can strengthen perceived value and international market positioning. Therefore:

H4: *Product differentiation is positively related to export competitiveness.*

2.5. Cultural Authenticity, Product Differentiation, and Export Competitiveness

Although cultural authenticity can increase the intrinsic value of handicrafts, authenticity alone may not automatically generate export competitiveness. International consumers must be able to recognize, understand, and value the authenticity embedded in a product (Chen, 2023). Product differentiation provides the mechanism through which this latent cultural value can be translated into visible and marketable product attributes. When authenticity is incorporated into traditional designs, indigenous materials, artisanal craftsmanship, branding, and cultural narratives, it becomes more recognizable to consumers and can strengthen product distinctiveness (Gao & Zhang, 2018). TPB suggests that authentic products can generate favorable consumer attitudes by aligning with consumers' values and desire for meaningful consumption (Ajzen, 1991; Beldad & Hegner, 2018). Product differentiation makes these benefits more salient by communicating authenticity through observable product characteristics.

Signaling theory further suggests that differentiation can communicate quality, origin, and authenticity in international markets where information asymmetry exists. Certification, geographical indications, culturally inspired designs, and storytelling can transform authenticity into credible market signals (Hall, 2002). Similarly, RBV suggests that cultural authenticity represents a valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resource, while product differentiation provides the organizational mechanism for deploying this resource to create competitive advantage (Petronela, 2016; Zhu & Han, 2018). Thus, cultural authenticity is expected to enhance export competitiveness primarily when it is transformed into distinctive product attributes. Accordingly:

H5: *Product differentiation mediates the relationship between cultural authenticity and export competitiveness*.

2.6. Symbolic Meaning, Product Differentiation, and Export Competitiveness

Symbolic meaning provides cultural, emotional, and social value, but its influence on export competitiveness may remain limited when such meanings are not effectively communicated to international consumers. Product differentiation can serve as the mechanism that transforms abstract symbolic meaning into recognizable and marketable product features. Firms can incorporate symbolic meaning into product design, branding, packaging, and storytelling, thereby making cultural meanings visible and relevant to consumers (Zhang, 2005; Gao & Zhang, 2018). TPB suggests that products aligned with consumers' self-concepts and values can generate favorable attitudes and stronger purchase intentions (Ajzen, 1991; Beldad & Hegner, 2018). However, differentiation is necessary to communicate these symbolic benefits clearly in competitive international markets.

Symbolic meaning can also operate as a signal of cultural richness and social significance. Differentiated designs, meaningful motifs, and narrative branding help consumers interpret these symbolic attributes and reduce uncertainty re-

garding product value (Hall, 2002). From the RBV perspective, symbolic meaning constitutes a valuable and difficult-to-imitate cultural resource, while product differentiation enables firms to deploy this resource strategically (Petronela, 2016; Zhu & Han, 2018). Consequently, product differentiation is expected to translate the symbolic value of Afghan handicrafts into stronger international market positioning and export competitiveness.

H6: *Product differentiation mediates the relationship between symbolic meaning and export competitiveness.*

2.7. Heritage Value, Product Differentiation, and Export Competitiveness

Heritage value provides cultural depth through historical narratives, traditional techniques, collective memory, and intergenerational knowledge. However, heritage value alone may not guarantee export competitiveness because international consumers may not immediately recognize its significance. Product differentiation can therefore transform heritage value into visible and meaningful market attributes. Heritage can be incorporated into product design, craftsmanship, branding, and storytelling to distinguish products from mass-produced alternatives (Esfehani & Albrecht, 2018; Gao & Zhang, 2018). Through TPB, heritage value can shape favorable consumer attitudes by generating connections with history, cultural identity, nostalgia, and cultural appreciation (Ajzen, 1991). Product differentiation strengthens this process by making heritage-related characteristics observable and relevant to consumers (Beldad & Hegner, 2018). Heritage can also function as a signal of authenticity and product credibility in international markets. By highlighting traditional patterns, artisanal techniques, and cultural narratives, differentiation makes heritage value more recognizable and reduces uncertainty about product origin and authenticity (Hall, 2002). From an RBV perspective, heritage represents a valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resource because it is embedded within a particular cultural context (Petronela, 2016; Zhu & Han, 2018). Therefore, product differentiation is expected to convert the historical and cultural significance of Afghan handicrafts into observable market advantages and, consequently, stronger export competitiveness.

H7: *Product differentiation mediates the relationship between heritage value and export competitiveness.*

2.8. Sample and Procedure

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design to investigate the relationships among intangible cultural resources, product differentiation, and export competitiveness. Data were collected between August and November 2024 from export-oriented handicraft firms, artisan cooperatives, and specialized craft export businesses operating in major artisanal hubs across Afghanistan, including Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, and Balkh. A non-probability purposive sampling approach was implemented to target key decision-makers (e.g., firm owners, export

managers, senior craft directors, and cooperative leaders) possessing strategic knowledge regarding product design, cultural heritage assets, and international sales performance. Recruitment was conducted through two primary channels: 1) direct on-site administration across registered artisan cooperatives and production centers, and 2) structured digital questionnaire distribution sent via industry associations and export trade networks.

Respondent Eligibility Criteria: To be included in the final sample, respondents were required to be: 1) active managers, owners, or export officers with at least two years of experience in the business; and 2) associated with an entity engaged in exporting traditional Afghan handicrafts (such as Herati carpets, Kandahari embroidery, lapis lazuli crafts, or traditional jewelry) to international markets over the preceding 24 months.

Sample Screening and Response Flow: A total of 415 questionnaires were distributed. From the returned instruments, 84 responses were excluded during data cleaning: 39 were incomplete, 28 failed initial screening criteria (non-exporting entities or insufficient management tenure), and 17 were removed due to unengaged response patterns (straight-lining). The final analyzed sample comprises 331 valid responses representing 142 distinct export-oriented firms and artisan cooperatives (averaging 2.3 respondents per entity). All constructs were operationalized using multi-item scales adapted from validated literature, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

3. Results

3.1. Reliability and Validity

Reliability is examined using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. The results indicate whether the items within each construct are internally consistent. Values above the recommended threshold confirm that the constructs are reliable and suitable for further analysis. Convergent validity is assessed by examining factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). High factor loadings indicate that the indicators strongly represent their respective constructs, while AVE values above the threshold confirm that a sufficient amount of variance is captured by the constructs.

Table 1. Construct reliability and validity.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (ρa)	Composite Reliability (ρc)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CA	0.967	0.970	0.978	0.937
SM	0.969	0.975	0.98	0.942
HV	0.970	0.973	0.98	0.944
PD	0.924	0.925	0.952	0.868
EC	0.938	0.939	0.961	0.891

N = 331: Cultural Authenticity (CA), Heritage Value (HV), Symbolic Meaning (SM), Product Differentiation (PD), Export Competitiveness (EC).

The reliability and convergent validity of the study constructs were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (ρa and ρc), and average variance extracted (AVE). As shown in Table 1, all constructs exhibit excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.924 (Product Differentiation) to 0.970 (Heritage Value), exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7. Similarly, composite reliability values (ρc) range from 0.952 to 0.980, indicating high internal consistency of the measurement items. The AVE values for all constructs, ranging from 0.868 to 0.944, demonstrate strong convergent validity, confirming that the items adequately capture the variance of their respective constructs. Overall, these results indicate that the measurement model is both reliable and valid, providing a robust basis for subsequent structural analysis of the impact of cultural identity on the export competitiveness of Afghan traditional handicrafts.

Discriminant validity is evaluated to ensure that the constructs are distinct from each other. This is assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio. The results confirm whether each construct is empirically unique and not overlapping with other constructs in the model.

3.2. Discriminant Validity Assessment

To rigorously assess construct distinctness, discriminant validity was evaluated using both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct must exceed its highest inter-construct correlation with any other latent variable. Furthermore, HTMT values should remain strictly below the conservative threshold of 0.85.

Table 2. (a) Fornell-Larcker criterion assessment; (b) Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) matrix.

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
			(a)		
1. CA	0.968				
2. HV	0.032	0.972			
3. SM	0.043	0.024	0.971		
4. PD	0.616	0.556	0.537	0.932	
5. EC	0.595	0.542	0.437	0.529	0.944
			(b)		
1. CA					
2. HV	0.033				
3. SM	0.044	0.026			
4. PD	0.651	0.587	0.567		
5. EC	0.625	0.568	0.458	0.569	

Diagonal bold values represent the square root of AVE; As shown in Table 2, off-diagonal values represent inter-construct correlations.

As demonstrated in Table 2(a), the square root of AVE for every latent construct (ranging from 0.932 to 0.972) is substantially higher than all corresponding inter-construct correlations. Furthermore, all HTMT values. As shown in Table 2(b), range between 0.025 and 0.651, remaining well below the conservative 0.85 threshold. These statistical assessments collectively confirm robust discriminant validity, establishing that all constructs are empirically distinct.

Table 3 presents the outer loadings and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for the indicators of all constructs: Cultural Authenticity (CA), Symbolism (SM), Heritage Value (HV), Product Differentiation (PD), and Export Competitiveness (EC). As shown in Table 3, Outer loadings indicate how strongly each indicator reflects its respective construct. Values above 0.7 are considered acceptable, and values above 0.9 indicate very strong indicator reliability. In this study, outer loadings for all indicators range from 0.921 (PD2) to 0.976 (SM3), which demonstrates that all items have high indicator reliability and effectively measure their intended constructs. VIF assesses collinearity among indicators. Values below 5 are generally considered acceptable, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues. In this study, VIF values range from 2.733 (CA3) to 4.847 (HV3), which are within acceptable limits. This suggests that multicollinearity among indicators is not a concern, and each indicator provides unique information about its construct. The results confirm that the measurement model has high indicator reliability and low multicollinearity, making it suitable for structural model analysis. All indicators strongly represent their respective constructs, ensuring the robustness

Table 3. Indicators outer loading and VIF.

Construct	Indicator	Outer Loading	VIF
CA	CA1	0.969	4.389
	CA2	0.972	4.652
	CA3	0.963	2.733
SM	SM1	0.974	3.842
	SM2	0.962	3.622
	SM3	0.976	2.975
HV	HV1	0.97	4.159
	HV2	0.972	3.044
	HV3	0.972	4.847
PD	PD1	0.932	3.594
	PD2	0.921	3.187
	PD3	0.942	3.914
EC	EC1	0.949	4.745
	EC2	0.952	3.023
	EC3	0.93	3.482

N = 331: Cultural Authenticity (CA), Heritage Value (HV), Symbolic Meaning (SM), Product Differentiation (PD), Export Competitiveness (EC).

and accuracy of subsequent path analysis to examine the influence of cultural identity on export competitiveness.

The R^2 value is used to measure the explanatory power of the model. It indicates how much variance in the dependent variable is explained by the independent variables. Higher R^2 values suggest better predictive accuracy of the model.

Table 4. R-square and adjusted R-square.

Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
PD	0.85	0.846
EC	0.749	0.746

Note: Product Differentiation (PD), Export Competitiveness (EC).

Table 4 presents the R^2 (coefficient of determination) and Adjusted R^2 values for the dependent constructs: Product Differentiation (PD) and Export Competitiveness (EC). As shown in Table 4, R^2 indicates the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variables in the model. In this study PD has an R^2 of 0.85, meaning 85% of the variance in product differentiation is explained by cultural identity dimensions (CA, SM, HV). EC has an R^2 of 0.749, indicating that 74.9% of the variance in export competitiveness is explained by product differentiation and cultural identity constructs. Interpretation: Both constructs show high explanatory power, suggesting that the independent variables strongly predict the dependent variables. Adjusted R^2 accounts for the number of predictors in the model and provides a more conservative estimate of explained variance. PD has an Adjusted R^2 of 0.846 and EC has 0.746, which are very close to the respective R^2 values. Interpretation: The small difference between R^2 and Adjusted R^2 indicates that the model is well-specified and not overly influenced by the number of predictors. The R^2 and Adjusted R^2 values demonstrate that the structural model has strong explanatory capability, confirming that cultural identity significantly contributes to product differentiation, which in turn strongly influences the export competitiveness of Afghan traditional handicrafts.

Effect size (f^2) is calculated to determine the impact of each independent variable on the dependent variable. It helps in understanding whether the effect of a predictor variable is small, medium, or large.

Table 5. f-square effect size.

Relationship	f-Square	Effect Size
CA → PD	2.14	Large
SM → PD	1.537	Large
HV → PD	1.804	Large
PD → EC	2.984	Large

Note: Cultural Authenticity (CA), Heritage Value (HV), Symbolic Meaning (SM), Product Differentiation (PD), Export Competitiveness (EC).

The f^2 effect size was calculated to assess the impact of each independent construct on its respective dependent construct. As shown in Table 5, all relationships exhibit a large effect size, indicating substantial contributions to the model. Specifically, Cultural Authenticity (CA → PD) has an f^2 of 2.14, Symbolism (SM → PD) has 1.537, and Heritage Value (HV → PD) has 1.804, all reflecting a strong influence on Product Differentiation (PD). Furthermore, Product Differentiation has an even larger effect on Export Competitiveness (PD → EC) with an f^2 of 2.984. These results demonstrate that the dimensions of cultural identity significantly enhance product differentiation, which in turn strongly drives the export competitiveness of Afghan traditional handicrafts, highlighting the critical role of cultural heritage in international market performance.

Table 6. Model fit summary.

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.03	0.037
d_ULS	0.107	0.168
d_G	0.292	0.311
Chi-square	181.798	188.968
NFI	0.911	0.908

The model fit of the structural model was evaluated using multiple fit indices, including SRMR, d_ULS, d_G, Chi-square, and NFI. As shown in Table 6, the estimated model demonstrates a good fit to the observed data. The SRMR value of 0.037 is well below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating minimal discrepancy between the observed and predicted correlations. The discrepancy measures, d_ULS (0.168) and d_G (0.311), are close to the saturated model values, suggesting that the estimated model adequately represents the data. The Chi-square value of 188.968, slightly higher than the saturated model (181.798), is acceptable for complex SEM models. Additionally, the NFI value of 0.908 exceeds the 0.9 threshold, confirming a satisfactory comparative fit. Overall, these results indicate that the measurement and structural models are well-specified, providing a reliable basis for examining the relationships between cultural identity, product differentiation, and export competitiveness of Afghan traditional handicrafts.

3.3. Hypotheses Testing

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is employed in this study to examine the hypothesized relationships among cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, heritage value, product differentiation, and export competitiveness (Figure 2). SEM is considered an appropriate technique as it allows the simultaneous estimation of multiple relationships between observed and latent variables, thereby providing a comprehensive assessment of the proposed research model. After establishing the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the structural model is evaluated to test the direct and indirect relationships among constructs. The analysis is conducted using SmartPLS, and the significance of path coefficients is assessed

through the bootstrapping procedure with a large number of resamples. The results of the structural model include path coefficients (β values), t-statistics, and *p*-values, which are used to determine whether the proposed hypotheses are supported.

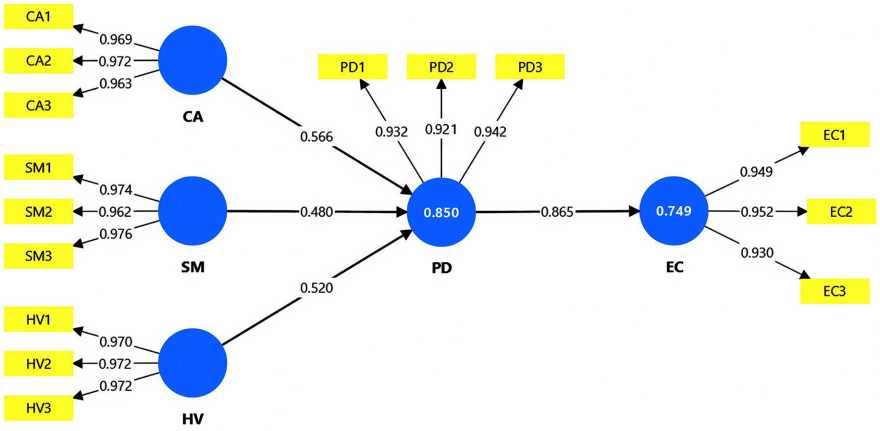

Figure 2. Structural model.

The findings indicate that cultural authenticity has a positive and significant effect on product differentiation, supporting hypothesis H1. Similarly, symbolic meaning and heritage value also demonstrate significant positive relationships with product differentiation, providing support for hypotheses H2 and H3. Furthermore, product differentiation is found to have a significant positive impact on export competitiveness, thereby supporting hypothesis H4. These results suggest that culturally embedded attributes play a crucial role in enhancing product uniqueness, which ultimately improves competitiveness in export markets.

In addition to direct effects, mediation analysis is performed to examine the indirect effects of cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value on export competitiveness through product differentiation. The results reveal that product differentiation significantly mediates these relationships, supporting hypotheses H5, H6, and H7. This indicates that the influence of cultural factors on export competitiveness is transmitted through the differentiation of products in international markets. Overall, the structural model demonstrates strong empirical support for the proposed theoretical framework. The results highlight the importance of cultural identity factors in shaping product differentiation and en hancing export competitiveness, thereby providing valuable insights for both

Table 7. Direct path analysis (Hypothesis testing).

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient (β)	T-Value	*p*-Value	Result
H1	CA → PD	0.566	11.776	0.000	Supported
H2	SM → PD	0.480	11.556	0.000	Supported
H3	HV → PD	0.520	10.874	0.000	Supported
H4	PD → EC	0.865	35.576	0.000	Supported

N = 331: Cultural Authenticity (CA), Heritage Value (HV), Symbolic Meaning (SM), Product Differentiation (PD), Export Competitiveness (EC).

researchers and practitioners.

The direct path analysis results indicate that all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant and positively supported. As shown in Table 7, Cultural Authenticity has a significant positive effect on Product Differentiation (β = 0.566, t = 11.776, $p < 0.000$), suggesting that the authenticity of Afghan handicrafts plays a crucial role in distinguishing them in international markets. Similarly, Symbolism positively influences Product Differentiation (β = 0.480, t = 11.556, $p < 0.000$), highlighting the importance of symbolic elements in enhancing product uniqueness. Heritage Value also contributes significantly to Product Differentiation (β = 0.520, t = 10.874, $p < 0.000$), emphasizing the role of cultural legacy in shaping market perception. Furthermore, Product Differentiation strongly drives Export Competitiveness (β = 0.865, t = 35.576, $p < 0.000$), demonstrating that culturally distinctive and well-differentiated handicrafts achieve a competitive advantage in international markets. Overall, these findings provide robust empirical evidence that cultural identity dimensions—authenticity, symbolism, and heritage value—enhance product differentiation, which in turn significantly boosts the export competitiveness of Afghan traditional handicrafts.

Table 8. Bootstrapped indirect path analysis.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient (β)	Sample Mean	Standard Error	T-Value	*p*-Value	Result
H5	CA → PD → DV	0.490	0.491	0.039	12.546	0.000	Supported
H6	SM → PD → DV	0.415	0.416	0.035	11.729	0.000	Supported
H7	HV → PD → DV	0.450	0.452	0.040	11.241	0.000	Supported

N = 331: Cultural Authenticity (CA), Heritage Value (HV), Symbolic Meaning (SM), Product Differentiation (PD), Export Competitiveness (EC).

Mediation hypotheses (H5, H6, and H7) As shown in Table 8, were evaluated using non-parametric bootstrapping with 5000 resamples to estimate 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (BCa CI) for the indirect effects.

Model Specification Note: The structural baseline model specified indirect paths operating strictly through Product Differentiation Because direct structural paths from CA, SM, and HV to Export Competitiveness were not simultaneously estimated in the primary structural model, Product Differentiation is confirmed as a significant mediating pathway, but cannot be claimed as an exclusive or strictly necessary pathway without further comparative model testing against full direct-path specifications.

4. Discussion

The findings provide strong support for the proposed framework, with all hypotheses receiving empirical support. First, cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value significantly enhance product differentiation. These findings indicate that Afghan handicrafts derive their uniqueness not only from physical characteristics but also from cultural narratives, emotional meanings, and histor-

ical significance. Authenticity enhances perceptions of originality and trustworthiness, symbolic meaning adds emotional and identity-related value, and heritage value connects products with tradition and cultural continuity. Second, product differentiation significantly mediates the relationships between cultural attributes and export competitiveness. This finding suggests that cultural resources alone are insufficient to generate competitive advantage; they must be translated into distinctive product features and value propositions. Product differentiation therefore serves as the strategic mechanism through which authenticity, symbolism, and heritage are transformed into market competitiveness. This finding is consistent with the logic of Product Differentiation Theory and the behavioral perspective of TPB.

Third, product differentiation positively influences export competitiveness. Differentiated products can reduce price sensitivity, enhance perceived value, facilitate niche-market positioning, and support premium pricing. For Afghan handicrafts, emphasizing cultural uniqueness and traditional craftsmanship can therefore strengthen their position in international markets. Overall, the findings demonstrate that intangible cultural attributes can become important sources of export competitiveness when strategically transformed into differentiated products.The findings are broadly consistent with previous research on cultural products, differentiation, and international competitiveness. Hypotheses confirm that cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value contribute to product differentiation. Previous studies similarly identify authenticity as a source of product uniqueness (Handarkho et al., 2025), symbolic meaning as an important influence on consumer perception and emotional attachment, and heritage value as a source of historical and cultural distinctiveness. The present study extends these findings by validating these relationships in the Afghan handicraft context.

The mediation results of the hypotheses extend the resource-based view (RBV) and differentiation literature by demonstrating how cultural resources are converted into competitive outcomes. Cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value can function as valuable and difficult-to-imitate intangible resources, while product differentiation provides the mechanism through which these resources generate market competitiveness (Chen, 2023). This process-based explanation extends previous research that has primarily examined direct relationships.

The positive relationship between product differentiation and export competitiveness is also consistent with international marketing research. Differentiation enables firms to reduce price competition, target niche markets, and command premium prices. Previous evidence indicates that differentiated products can perform better in export markets by responding to diverse consumer preferences and strengthening brand identity. The present findings extend this argument to Afghan traditional handicrafts.

The study also contributes to research on cultural industries by providing firm-level evidence from Afghanistan. Previous studies have highlighted the economic potential of traditional crafts, while this study demonstrates how specific cultural

resources can be linked to competitive outcomes through product differentiation. Finally, the findings are consistent with the underlying logic of TPB (Ajzen, 1991), suggesting that cultural attributes embedded in differentiated products can shape consumer perceptions and intentions. The Afghan context further extends existing literature by providing evidence from a developing economy with rich cultural heritage but relatively weak market integration.

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes four main theoretical contributions. First, it extends product differentiation theory by demonstrating that differentiation in cultural industries is not limited to functional attributes such as quality, price, design, and technology. Cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value can also serve as sources of differentiation, particularly in industries where cultural narratives and meanings constitute important sources of value.

Second, the study contributes to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) research by positioning cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value as strategic economic resources rather than merely elements of cultural preservation. By linking these resources to export competitiveness through product differentiation, the study demonstrates how cultural heritage can contribute to economic development and international trade. Third, the study identifies product differentiation as a mediating mechanism through which cultural resources influence export competitiveness. This provides a process-based explanation of how cultural values are transformed into economic outcomes rather than assuming that cultural resources directly produce competitive advantage.

Fourth, the study extends the application of TPB (Ajzen, 1991) to cultural products by connecting culturally differentiated products with consumer attitudes, perceived value, and purchase intentions, thereby linking consumer-level processes with firm-level export outcomes. Finally, the study contributes a contextual perspective by examining Afghanistan, an under-researched setting in international business and cultural-product research. It demonstrates that cultural resources may provide alternative sources of competitiveness for economies with rich heritage but limited industrial capacity.

4.2. Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for Afghan handicraft producers, exporters, and policymakers. First, firms should strategically incorporate authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value into product design and branding to strengthen differentiation. Storytelling, cultural narratives, traditional craftsmanship, and historical information can help communicate these attributes to international consumers.

Second, exporters should focus on value-added differentiation rather than price competition. Distinctive cultural features can help Afghan handicrafts target niche markets, enhance perceived value, and potentially command premium prices.

Third, policymakers and trade organizations should support artisans through training, certification, branding, and international marketing initiatives. Certification mechanisms can strengthen the credibility of authenticity claims, while effective promotion can improve the international visibility of Afghan handicrafts. Overall, the findings suggest that protecting cultural heritage and commercializing it strategically can simultaneously support cultural preservation and export competitiveness.

4.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some limitations. First, its cross-sectional design limits causal inference because data were collected at a single point in time. Future research could employ longitudinal or time-lagged designs to better examine the dynamic relationships among cultural authenticity, product differentiation, and export competitiveness. Second, reliance on self-reported data may introduce common method bias and social desirability concerns. Future studies could address this limitation through multiple data sources, including expert assessments, archival export data, and third-party evaluations.

Third, the study focuses on Afghan traditional handicrafts, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other countries, industries, and cultural contexts. Comparative cross-country and cross-sector studies could therefore provide broader validation. In addition, the subjective nature of constructs such as heritage value and symbolic meaning may introduce measurement bias. Mixed-method approaches could provide deeper contextual understanding. Finally, the model does not incorporate potentially important institutional and macro-level factors, such as government support, technological capability, market access, branding, trade policies, global competition, and geopolitical conditions. Future research should integrate these factors and examine potential non-linear and interaction effects to provide a more comprehensive explanation of export competitiveness.

Future research could extend this study in several ways. First, longitudinal and multi-wave designs could examine how cultural authenticity and heritage value evolve over time and influence sustained export competitiveness. Second, future studies could combine quantitative and qualitative methods, including interviews, case studies, and ethnographic research, with objective indicators such as Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) and archival export data to strengthen the validity of findings. Researchers could also examine additional mediating mechanisms, including brand equity, innovation capability, institutional quality, government support, digital infrastructure, and participation in global value chains (GVCs). Integration into global production networks may enhance the export potential of culturally differentiated products.

Third, comparative studies across countries and sectors could assess whether the proposed relationships hold in different institutional and economic environments. Comparisons involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Bangladesh,

particularly within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) context, could provide valuable insights into how policy and industrial conditions shape cultural-product competitiveness. Future research should also examine digitalization and e-commerce, particularly the role of digital branding, storytelling, and online marketing in communicating authenticity and symbolic value to global consumers. In addition, theories such as Signaling Theory, Institutional Theory, and the resource-based view (RBV) could complement the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and provide broader theoretical explanations.

Finally, future studies could investigate non-linear and interaction effects among cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, heritage value, and product differentiation, while also incorporating macro-level factors such as trade policies, geopolitical dynamics, tariffs, and global market trends.

5. Conclusion

Grounded in the Resource-Based View, this research provides empirical evidence that cultural authenticity, symbolic meaning, and heritage value are strongly associated with firm-level product differentiation, which subsequently relates to the export competitiveness of traditional Afghan handicrafts. The findings highlight product differentiation as a vital mediating bridge linking internal cultural capital with international market performance. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, these findings offer strong empirical support for structural associations rather than absolute causal conclusions. Protecting cultural heritage while strategically commercializing craft distinctiveness offers a compelling, asset-based strategy for enhancing export capabilities in developing economies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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