



Understanding Blind Box Consumption: Psychological Mechanisms in the Chinese Blind Box Market

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Abstract. In the Chinese toy market, blind boxed products have gained popularity. As a result of the experience economy, the consumers' demand for emotional and symbolic value is increasing. Unlike conventional products that enhance buying decisions through lessening uncertainty, blind box consumption purposefully builds uncertainty into the buying decision that offers a buyer with a distinctive experience. Nevertheless, the existing studies still do not offer an adequate explanation of the psychological process of consumers' repeated purchase behaviours. The psychological processes of consumption of blind boxes in the Chinese market are discussed in this paper. The paper developed a two-way step framework to describe consumer behaviour through a summary of the existing literature. The former path is concerned with the stimuli living off information gap, where the information gap results in curiosity and impulsive purchasing, emotional reinforcement and cognitive bias promote repetitive consumption. The second direction focused on the internalisation of the worth of the Intellectual Property (IP) as symbolic meaning and emotional attachment, which might contribute towards the perceived value and thus yield consumer satisfaction, brand loyalty and collection behaviour. The results show that blind box consumption is not a mere probabilistic marketing tool, but a hybrid mechanism, which integrates the thrill of the unknown with the internalisation of the emotional long-term value. The framework can be useful in receiving the emotion-based consumption behaviour, and the insights it offers can serve the creative brands which wish to balance the short-term stimulation as well as the long-term brand building.

Keywords: Blind Box Consumption, Uncertainty, Intellectual Property (IP), Brand Loyalty

1 Introduction

The preferences of consumers have changed considerably under the experience economy [1]. The consumers are no longer exclusively concerned with the practicality of the product, they are more concerned about the emotional pleasure, resonance and symbolic meaning in the product [1]. Modern youths are raised in a place of plenty, and they are willing to spend more on the products that provide them with the feeling of

healing and companionship [2]. It has been found that about 58.7% of the consumers consider collectable toys as an instrument in personal expression, and consumption is increasingly turning out to be a means of appeasing emotions [3].

Within the deposit of such trends of consumption based on emotionality, there is a fast-growing significance of sales models of blind boxes alongside IP in the toy market. This type of sales model appeals to the consumer based on uncertainty, unexpected experiences and creating emotional relationships [4, 5]. The blind box market in China has been growing in recent years and reached up to 21.95 billion yuan in 2025, the year when the market grew, starting with about 3 billion yuan in 2019 [6]. The blind box with IP model has been adopted by several Chinese toy brands to promote their markets; these companies are Pop Mart, 52TOYS, TOPTOY, and Miniso [2]. Among these brands, Pop Mart has emerged as the most iconic brand of this business model, with the help of its fully established IP operation system. It also has a business that spans over 90 countries and regions across the globe [2].

The classical theory of consumer behaviour suggests that the less uncertainty there is in the product, the higher the purchasing intention by the consumers [7]. Nevertheless, the blind box consumption is able to induce purchasing behaviour accurately, through the use of uncertainty [8, 9]. The study has established that uncertain rewards are more prone to arousing the willingness and behaviour of consumers in the consumption experience compared to certain rewards [9]. Popularity of blind boxes conflicts with these theories, and this has brought a close examination of the psychological processes involved in blind box consumption [4]. Hence, there is a need to analyse the decision of consumers on consumption in an uncertain situation from a psychological perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the psychological processes that make consumers buy and subscribe to blind box products, and use Pop Mart as an example of the industry. It is a hypothesis that offers two complementary psychological routes: (1) a curiosity-driven route that is centred on uncertainty, which is recommended to describe the initial impulsivity purchasing behaviour; (2) a value internalisation route that is centred on IP value, which explains how consumers shift to long-term emotional attachment and, through this, create continuous consumption behaviour.

2 Blind Box

Blind boxes are consumer items that are packaged in opaque wrapping, and the buyer is unable to view what is contained before buying [6]. The given idea can be dated back to Fukubukuro in the 1980s in Japan [10]. This model of random sale of commodities has later developed into various forms in different countries. For example, the currently popular blind box in the Chinese market in the 1990s was mostly made up of snack packets with randomly selected cartoon cards [6, 10]; however, nowadays, a blind box commonly refers to a collectable toy manufacturer containing randomly designed dolls or toys [8].

The process of transaction and the result-revealing one are intentionally disconnected in this type of sales model [11]. It is only after opening the package that

the consumer can determine the exact design, but the ultimate result of the product is an unknown variable upon purchase [6, 8]. The blind box products are typically a set of different styled products; all boxes remain the same design, and the inside of the boxes is randomly distributed [8]. This model is in the nature of probability-based sales in regard to the marketing aspect [11]. Using the example of Pop Mart, the series that the company tends to have ranges between 12 and 14 standard designs and concealed ones. They have a remarkable likelihood of appearance ranging between 0.69 and 1.5 per cent [3, 12]. Collectable toy culture⁵²TOYS and TOPTOY are examples of collectable toy brands that heavily use similar probability designs [2].

Thus, blind boxes are purely probabilistic items, and their particular value is informed in the form of a probability before buying them. Such a probabilistic structure means that there is some level of uncertainty, which forms a significant basis on which the further discussion of the psychological mechanism will start.

3 Psychological Mechanisms that Are Driven by Uncertainty.

3.1 Initial Impulse Purchase Behaviour

The status of being blind when making purchase choices in the early life of the blind box consumption transformed the consumer decision-making landscape at the time. Such uncertainty created a desire to learn more and quench curiosity in the minds of the consumers, thereby becoming the most important psychological process that initiated the impulse purchase originally [13, 14]. Based on the official data of Pop Mart, 72.3% of shoppers among consumers cited surprise as the primary reason why they have made a purchase [3]. This shows that one of the relevant sources of the blind box is uncertainty.

The information gap theory offers a vital conceptual understanding to explain the capability of uncertainty to provoke the curiosity of consumers [4]. According to this theory, once a person becomes aware that there is a gap between what he already knows and what he wants to know, there will be some level of curiosity and desire to fill the gap, hence pushing the individual to fill the gap [8, 14]. Uncertainty in an environment where consumers lack complete information on which to make decisions is one of the conditions in the blind box consumption. In situations where buyers are exposed to missing sales information, the chances of inquisitiveness to find additional information are increased [14]. Consequently, the external stimulus of uncertainty has the potential of arousing the curiosity of the consumers [8].

Curiosity may easily turn into consumption motivation once aroused, and it may do so soon, as a result of a consumer developing an impulsive purchase intention. Consumers will be ready to fill such an information gap and acquire the results to quench their curiosity [4, 14]. The available literature has also demonstrated that when it comes to blind boxes, uncertainty plays a relevant role in increasing the degree of curiosity in consumers and that the level of curiosity and impulsive purchasing behaviour are strongly linked (when it comes to admitting to blind boxes) [9, 13]. Thus, the blind box consumption generates curiosity because of the unknown factor, which in turn encourages consumers to make their initial impulsive behaviour [14].

It should be mentioned, however, that the studies also show that the uncertainty can increase curiosity, but at the same time it can decrease the subjective well-being of an individual or cause other adverse effects [15]. This implies that uncertainty can affect the psychology of consumers in both ways, inducing them to explore and incidentally negatively [8, 15].

3.2 Reinforcement and Repeat Purchase Behaviour

The consumption of blind boxes after the initial impulse purchase enters the phase of determining the outcomes. At this point, emotion created at the unpacking stage and cognitive biases of the consumers combine, thus becoming more powerful in causing repeat-purchase behaviour.

The consumers tend to create a hierarchy of the various designs in the series and expect particular target designs before the box is opened [6, 11]. Here, the role of uncertainty and personal preferences interact to bring out emotions of anticipation, tension, excitement and eagerness among consumers while waiting to determine the outcome [6]. Such uncertainty based on random outcomes creates the experience that gives the opening process the permanent newness and thrill [4]. This emotional experience is usually the greatest when the blind box is opened, as it gives consumers instant gratification and pleasure [1, 16]. Research has established that such emotional value is one of the determinants of whether consumers make repeat purchases or not [17].

Besides the emotional experiences, the cognitive biases of the consumers also play an important role in this process; they are mainly manifested in two dimensions, namely inherent optimism and illusion of control [4, 10]. Inherent optimism is a habit of people where they hold optimism towards upcoming events. People will automatically assume that they are fortunate and hence exaggerate the likelihood of good things happening in their circumstances, even in unpredictable circumstances [4, 11]. Within the scope of blind box consumption, optimistic consumers tend to underestimate the likelihood of receiving a rare design subjectively and overvaluing the small probability event into a positive anticipation that it may happen to them [17].

Connected with it is the illusion of control, where people tend to over-rate their power to control entirely random occurrences and think they can somehow affect the outcome in some way [4, 11]. Consumers can then continue with the illusion that their probability of success is growing even when they do not receive desired items several consecutive times, as this is considered an independent random event or an occurrence rather than a trend or a pattern [4]. This mental error does not allow consumers to associate their repeated failures with their purchase behaviour and develop negative associations instead of giving them the illusion of an immediate success, which stimulates them into further purchasing [17].

Hence, in the unpacking procedure, the emotional experiences, along with the cognitive biases of the consumers, comprise an essential critical psychological mechanism that fosters the process of transitioning the first purchase to regular consumption.

4 Internalisation of Value through IP

The consumption of blind boxes, which was a source of uncertainty, has been perceived in the discussion above as a psychological stimulation tool. Nevertheless, when a brand simply builds its competitive advantage upon such stimulation produced by chance, the effect of competitive advantage can be short-lived and hard to maintain in the long run [12, 18]. The main objective of IP content is the fundamental base of enduring value of a brand [18]. It, therefore, needs to be clarified further why consumers will develop an unrelenting tendency to purchase a particular IP.

4.1 Emotional Connection of IP and Symbolic Meaning

IP creates more visual aspects of the product and creates an emotional connection between consumers via visual design, character development, and background creation [5]. The perception of product value by consumers is typically multiple. The studies have revealed that functional, emotional, and social value combined make up the primary dimensions affecting the buying decisions of consumers [19]. Concerning the blind box consumption, IP predominantly expresses symbolic meanings and emotional values [16].

Symbolically, IP allows products to be revealed. By selecting one character, the consumer is choosing their own inclinations towards aesthetics and value orientations by their buying behaviour [10]. Emotionally, the therapeutic properties and reassuring nature of most of the IP characters are in line with the emotional desires of young consumers today [2, 18]. Consumers may form an emotional base for certain characters through constant consumption and contact with their environment. The emotional attachments associated with this are far more enduring than the brief sensation accompanying the opening of the package.

Thus, the symbolic meaning and emotional value of IP are the beginning point of the internalisation process of value. Once a consumer has developed an identification with a specific character in the process of buying their products, it no longer revolves around chance outcomes but slowly brings itself to a locale around that particular character.

4.2 Perceived Value and Consumer Satisfaction

When consumers create a purchasing motivation grounded on certain roles, they eventually create a subjective consideration of the total worth of the blind box, which is perceived value. It is the core factor, as perceived value is what defines the purchasing decisions of consumers and their development of satisfaction [17, 19].

The blind box consumption means that the consumers go after something even greater than the practical applications of the toys in question, at least. It covers the emotional meaning, the social meaning and the symbolic meaning created throughout the buying process and following the purchase [19]. The economic value, IP value, symbolic value and social value of blind boxes are all the elements that constitute the consumers' perceptions of value and are positively associated with the satisfaction and loyalty of consumers [16, 20].

A high level of satisfaction will be created when the perceived value among the consumers is at their expectations or higher. Studies have also determined that the perceived value that blind box marketing offers can lead to the achievement of high levels of satisfaction and loyalty in customers [16]. Consumers are highly satisfied and have been loyal to using the series of perceived experiences attached to having blind boxes, thus fulfilling their psychological needs [1, 17].

The perceived value is hence the generic motivator of satisfaction of blind box customers. The consumer has evolved to be more than just an economic exchange through the process of buying, opening, sharing and collecting blind boxes to a holistic value experience. This valuable experience is internalised into a high degree of satisfaction with the brand or product, and this satisfaction creates cognitive biases which make consumers have a continuous purchase intention in future.

4.3 Brand Loyalty and Gathering Behaviour

The unending rising consumer satisfaction has facilitated brand loyalty. Relevant literature revealed that consumer satisfaction has a strong and positive effect on brand loyalty, and brand loyalty, in its turn, increases consumer readiness to make a repeated purchase and general consumption behaviour in the long term [1, 19].

Brand loyalty is specifically exhibited in the form of collection behaviours in the case of blind box consumption. Having achieved a liking towards a specific IP character or series, a complete collection may become a definite consumption purpose [16]. Studies regarding the user behaviour of Pop Mart show that the design of the series is among the main factors contributing to the sustained participation of consumers [5, 12]. The collection behaviour is again different, though the determination of the existence of the hidden version further stimulates the motivation to collect as compared to the probability-based incentives mentioned earlier. In this case, the buyers will make their buying choices more in relation to emotional attachment to the IP character rather than being influenced by random factors [8, 10]. This demonstrates that with the incentives created on uncertainty, the IP allows consumers to create brand loyalty by internalising the value, which enhances repeat, long-term buying [5, 17].

The same discovery is supported by research on the enterprise level. As per the studies that were made relevant, the growth of the Pop Mart revenue is directly connected with the development of the intellectual property portfolio and the innovation of the content [5, 12]. It is implied that in order to be competitive in the long run, brands must constantly present new IPs, not being confined to the sales concept of limited-edition boxes only [18]. Thus, by building up emotional relationships and increasing the perceived value and satisfaction of consumers, IPs will be able to encourage collection behaviour, build brand loyalty progressively, and eventually lead to long-term consumption [1, 17].

5 Discussion and Suggestion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This paper examined the psychological processes associated with blind box consumption, and it can be shown that there are two complementary directions. The uncertainty-driven stimulation is the first way: It is the uncertainty of the purchase result that will induce curiosity among the consumers via the information gap, leading them to make the initial purchase [4, 14]. The scarcity-based design accentuates feelings of tension, anticipation, and surprise during the unpacking [6, 9], whereas cognitive biases lead consumers overestimate their chances of obtaining rare items [4, 17]. All these combined together change the interest in the first purchase into a repeatedly consumed behaviour.

The second feature is the emotional journey of the internalisation of the value of the IP: Through the character design and a background of the narration [5, 16], the IP characters provide the product with symbolic meaning. This allows consumers to get character images with emotive and expressive features in their purchasing, creating the first emotional touch. The constant interaction adds to the interaction experience [17, 19], and in turn, the consumption experience, increased satisfaction as well as the purchase intention through a multi-dimensional examination of perceived value. The repeated positive consumption experience will make customers develop a consistent attitude toward the brand that will ultimately become congealed collection behaviour and an unrelenting tendency to purchase [17].

5.2 Limitations and Research Future Directions

Being a narrative review, this paper is characterised by the following limitations and further research directions. To begin with, the scope of discussion of this paper is primarily restricted to the blind box market in China. Due to the relative scarcity of research in the area of overseas expansion, this research can not exhaustively explain the possibilities that regional cultural diversity may have on the motivations behind the blind box consumption. The varying mechanisms to uncertainty, emotional value and IP recognition may be present in consumers of different cultural backgrounds. With an increasing global growth rate of such brands as Pop Mart, the cross-cultural comparative studies are in high demand. Future studies may consider investigating how customers with various cultural orientations may have varying response systems to uncertainty, emotional value and intellectual property recognition. The study of such variations will aid in the challenge of the universality of the available theoretical constructs, as well as encourage the formulation of localised models.

Secondly, the two-way framework suggested in the paper is founded mainly on the combination of the already existing literature and deduction. It is possible to empirically test the correlations, and people can use techniques like questionnaires and experiments in future studies to upgrade the strengths, mediating variables and moderating variables of these two directions and also increase the reliability and generalisations of the findings.

Lastly, the argument in this paper on these two psychological mechanisms primarily remains at the point of general evaluation without going deep into the possible boundary conditions and the regulatory mechanisms in each of the mechanisms. Research in the future is to engage in comprehensive research on the moderating effect of individual differences on the consumption behaviour of blind box products. Risk tastes of consumers, emotional control skills, and gathering tendencies constitute psychological traits which can affect consumers' sensitivity to uncertain stimuli and the emotional worth of IP rights.

6 Conclusion

This paper takes Pop Mart as a representative case to engage in a detailed analysis of the psychological processes used to explain the consumption behaviour of blind boxes, especially the business model of blind box with IP. Two complementary paths of psychology were explained in this paper: the curiosity path, which is caused by uncertainty, defines how the first impulse purchase is developed and converts into repetitive consumption; and the second path explains how symbolic meanings and emotional attachment can be transformed into brand loyalty, thus supporting sustained purchase behaviour.

The two directions represent the various levels of consumer behaviour. The former can be used to understand the reason behind consumers blindly making their initial and repeat purchases using the blind box sales model, whereas the latter can help to understand why IP helps in encouraging long-lasting purchasing behaviour. This paper therefore concludes that the blind box consumption is not just about the basic marketing of probability but rather a rich model of consumption that involves the stimulation of uncertainty but internalisation of the emotional value.

This paper makes a theoretical approach to explain emotionally-based consumption behaviours in the context of the experience economy. It also gives reference insights in innovative brands that strive to create a balance between immediate stimulation and the creation of value in the long run. Being a representative consumption model of the experience economy, the study of the psychological mechanism of blind boxes not only enhances our knowledge of current consumption behaviours, but also establishes the groundwork for further discussions of how emotional marketing and brand loyalty are going to interplay with one another.

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