

A Study on the Addictiveness of Blind Box Economy Based on Hunger Marketing and Psychological Manipulation Strategies: Taking Pop Mart as an Example

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of a burgeoning experience economy, blind box products have rapidly become a cultural phenomenon among young consumers, driven by their "unknown surprise" mechanism. This study employs semi-structured interviews to investigate the impact of hunger marketing strategies on consumer psychology and behavior within the blind box economy, using Pop Mart as a case study. Following in-depth interviews with a demographically balanced sample of consumers, this study finds that the influence of IP collaboration far exceeds that of social media marketing, underscoring the commercial success of Pop Mart's artist IP strategy. Furthermore, limited-edition releases and the extremely low probability of obtaining a "hidden" item intensify a gambling-like psychology, fostering a pattern of repeated purchases. The majority of interviewees reported experiencing intense emotional fluctuations during the unboxing process, which is in line with the theoretical mechanism that uncertain rewards can trigger addictive behavior. Notably, while consumers were generally aware of these marketing manipulations, they continued to purchase driven by a need for emotional projection and community belonging. They also demonstrated limited autonomy through secondary market transactions and proxy unboxing services. The study reveals that hunger marketing constitutes a systematic form of manipulation built on IP emotional connection, probability stimulation, and scarcity anxiety, trapping consumers in a cycle of rational awareness and irrational behavior. Consequently, the authors urge companies to enhance the transparency of hidden item odds and propose applying the blind box's "emotional drive mechanism" to innovate the marketing of intangible cultural heritage products, potentially revitalizing traditional consumer markets..

Keywords: Blind Box Economy; Hunger Marketing; Scarcity Marketing; Consumer Behavior.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the blind box consumption model—centered on the appeal of “unknown surprises”—has rapidly risen in China’s consumer market. Pop Mart leveraged this trend to expand from a small cultural shop into a vast commercial empire with stores and vending machines across major shopping centers. In doing so, it has profoundly reshaped the ecosystem and norms of collectible toy consumption, opening a new chapter in the cultural and artistic toy industry [1]. This transformation was fueled not only by Pop Mart’s IP-driven ecosystem, blind box mechanisms, community marketing, and omnichannel strategies, but also by the evolving values and behaviors of its core consumers—the younger generation [2]. Within this new consumption model, entertainment has replaced material utility, and emotional fulfillment has surpassed material acquisition, catering to young consumers’ pursuit of experiential living and subjective well-being [3]. Understanding the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive consumer engagement in the blind box economy, and how these mechanisms shape perceptions of brand marketing strategies, is therefore of both theoretical and practical significance. It provides insights into contemporary consumer culture, informs evaluations of marketing ethics, and offers guidance for promoting healthier consumption patterns. Building on existing research that has analyzed business models and described purchasing behaviors through big data, this study focuses on the deeper psychological motivations and emotional experiences of individual consumers. Using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Pop Mart

customers, it explores their purchasing journeys, emotional responses, decision-making logic, and reflections on brand strategies. Drawing on prior findings that emphasize emotional gratification, social needs, and collecting desires as key drivers of blind box consumption, the study examines how scarcity-based tactics—such as limited releases, hidden-item probability settings, and the pacing of series updates—shape consumer decisions, emotional experiences, and behavioral patterns at the individual level [4]. It further evaluates consumers' awareness of these strategies, their attitudinal responses, and the ways they exercise agency or develop coping mechanisms under the influence of marketing practices.

2. Research Methods

This study utilized in-depth interviews as its primary method to systematically examine the consumption behaviors and motivations of a diverse occupational cohort aged 15 to 25. All participants joined voluntarily and provided informed consent before the interview, which included permission for audio recording.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed. Ten customers were randomly selected at Pop Mart retail stores for interviews. The sample consisted of 5 males and 5 females, including 6 students, 2 office workers, 1 civil servant, and 1 food service employee, aiming to cover a range of professions within the youth consumer group. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews based on a pre-designed guide covering three core dimensions: channels and motivations for initial brand contact, specific decision-making processes and influencing factors, and post-purchase feelings and satisfaction. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each to ensure the collection of rich, qualitative data. Researchers prepared 6 questions; here are the questions.

How did you first learn about Pop Mart blind boxes?

Did this channel of discovery increase your desire to purchase?

When you decide to buy blind boxes, how many do you purchase at once?

What factors lead to your desire to repurchase blind boxes?

Please describe your psychological feelings during the unboxing process.

What is your reaction if you don't get the desired style? How does it affect your subsequent purchasing behavior?

Given the rapid development of social media, the ways in which people receive information have diversified. Brands now frequently purchase promotional marketing on social platforms, leading consumers to encounter product information online. This study focuses on the brand's "hunger marketing" strategy. Consequently, Question 2 is designed to understand how the brand shapes product online and control customer purchase desire. The formulation of Questions 3 and 4 stems from the unique "blind box" mechanism. Investigation revealed that a single Pop Mart blind box contains one item, yet a series features multiple regular items and the potential for a hidden item. This "11/N" probability mechanism potentially stimulates purchase desire, a core aspect these questions aim to explore. Recognizing that Pop Mart's hunger marketing extends beyond online promotion, this research also sought to identify its implicit presence within the blind box design itself. The "1/N" mechanism, intrinsically controlling item quantity, was identified as a key feature. Therefore, Questions 5 and 6 were designed to investigate, through interviews, whether this controlled scarcity further stimulates consumer purchasing desire. The study's sampling strategy was deliberately designed. Acknowledging that the primary consumer gender demographic skews female, a 50/50 gender split was implemented to ensure diversity and incorporate male perspectives. As the core audience for blind box culture is youth, the primary interview group consisted of students. However, observations at Pop Mart offline stores revealed some customers who appeared distinct from the typical demographic. Inquiries identified them as generally older individuals from various professions. Interested in their viewpoints and aiming to enrich the interview findings, these individuals were also included in the study.

Finally, as blind box culture is not yet considered mainstream—with most participants engaging with it casually rather than dependently, and its integration into daily life being minimal for the majority—the study was designed to be respectful of participants' time. It involved only a few key questions, resulting in concise interviews lasting approximately thirty minutes.

3. Finding

In examining exposure channels, this study considers how people come to know about blind boxes and the psychological cues that influence them. Among students, most encountered blind boxes through social media trends and followed them as a form of fashion. A smaller group was drawn in because Pop Mart collaborated with their favorite intellectual properties (IPs), such as video games or anime. For other occupational groups, online advertising was the main driver of purchases. IP collaborations appear to be the strongest motivator of consumer demand, while general media exposure has a weaker impact. Accordingly, Pop Mart has invested in paid promotion on social platforms and endorsements from celebrities and influencers. Although IP collaborations target specific consumer segments, they generate substantial revenue. Pop Mart's 2024 annual report shows that its artist IP business reached RMB 11.12 billion, a 130.6% increase from RMB 4.82 billion in 2023, raising its share of total revenue by 8.8 percentage points to 85.3% [5].

In interviews on purchasing volume, this study focused on the likelihood and drivers of repeat purchases. Non-student consumers typically bought only one blind box, motivated more by internet culture than genuine interest. By contrast, students—especially those attracted by IP collaborations—were the main group engaging in multiple or repeat purchases. As of 2020, Pop Mart managed 93 IPs, including 12 proprietary, 25 exclusive, and 56 non-exclusive IPs [5]. This wide portfolio, along with the continuous introduction of new collaborations, attracted diverse fan bases. Some consumers purchased repeatedly to complete an entire series, while others bought multiple units hoping to obtain a favored design. However, one common theme emerged across repeat buyers: “limited supply.” Pop Mart deliberately restricts product quantities and leverages the low-probability mechanism of blind boxes to trigger consumers' gambling-like impulses, thereby driving repeated purchases.

In exploring psychological responses, this study analyzed how the blind box opening process influences emotions. Building on earlier findings about marketing cues, the results show that the low-probability mechanism strongly stimulates consumer behavior. Many respondents described feelings of “nervousness,” followed by intense but short-lived emotional swings—whether excitement or disappointment—after opening a box. This aligns with the psychological principle of “uncertainty.” The core appeal of blind boxes lies in uncertainty: consumers pay a fixed price for a sealed product without knowing which design they will receive. Neuroscience research shows that uncertainty triggers dopamine releases up to 30% higher than predictable rewards, making blind boxes particularly addictive. This also resonates with modern consumption patterns. In today's fast-paced and high-pressure society, especially among Generation Z, consumers seek emotional comfort and self-expression through purchases. The IP characters embedded in blind boxes—ranging from cute anime figures to unique artistic designs—foster strong emotional connections with buyers [6].

4. Implications

4.1. Innovation in Marketing Models

Pop Mart's reinvention of both online and offline marketing aligns closely with contemporary consumer psychology. Traditional marketing relied heavily on offline sales, with store assistants guiding customer choices. With the rise of e-commerce, however, many physical stores suffered unprecedented revenue losses. Yet Pop Mart's offline outlets continue to perform strongly. Field observations suggest this success lies in a consumer-oriented model: staff rarely interfere with product selection but remain available for assistance, while products are clearly categorized to simplify choices. Stores are also visually distinctive, with striking décor and signage that make their purpose

obvious even to newcomers. Online, rather than engaging in direct celebrity endorsements or livestream “hard selling,” Pop Mart leverages a subtler approach. Influencers and celebrities integrate products naturally into their posts and videos, allowing consumers to perceive blind boxes as cultural symbols of fashion, thereby encouraging organic, trend-driven purchases. In addition, Pop Mart’s collaborations with diverse IPs—including anime, gaming, and art—refresh the brand’s visual identity and expand its consumer base. The intellectual property content, value, emotional trust, spiritual consumption and fan interaction all positively influence consumer psychology and behavior [7].

4.2. The Role of “Distance”

Products that are harder to obtain create a sense of “distance” that heightens consumer desire. This study finds that hunger marketing significantly shapes purchasing behavior, especially when combined with urgency-inducing tactics [8]. By creating perceptions of rarity, brands encourage impulsive, and sometimes irrational, online purchasing decisions [9]. Consumers who succeed in acquiring scarce items often report intense psychological gratification. This dynamic is closely linked to broader societal pressures in contemporary China. Rapid development, population growth, and an increasingly competitive education and job market have heightened stress levels, particularly among students and young professionals. Many seek emotional compensation and stimulation to cope with these pressures. Blind boxes offer exactly this: the gambling-like thrill of low-probability outcomes, but with far smaller financial risks than actual gambling. This makes consumers more willing to spend. The findings suggest that non-essential goods retailers can adopt similar strategies by wrapping products in an element of mystery—for example, selling items with varied appearances in concealed packaging with randomized odds, effectively applying the blind box model. This generates emotional excitement and adds perceived value. The same approach could even revitalize traditional cultural products, expand their consumer base and give intangible cultural heritage (ICH) items a “new life.” However, scarcity-based strategies also entail risks. Excessive shortages may alienate customers, while secondary market price inflation, competition from substitutes, and consumer dissatisfaction with scarcity tactics can suppress long-term demand [10].

5. Conclusion

Through in-depth interviews with Pop Mart consumers, this study systematically examined the mechanisms by which scarcity-based marketing strategies shape blind box purchasing behaviors. Findings reveal that Pop Mart’s collaborations with well-known IPs effectively trigger emotional resonance, thereby significantly amplifying purchase intentions. Compared with social media advertising, IP-based emotional connections exert a stronger influence on consumer decision-making. In parallel, strategies such as limited releases and the inclusion of low-probability “hidden” editions exploit consumers’ innate curiosity and anticipation of uncertainty. This gambling-like mechanism drives repeated purchases. Most consumers reported clear emotional fluctuations during the unboxing process. Although many recognized the manipulative nature of these tactics, they often struggled to resist emotional impulses, reflecting a paradox of “rational awareness” coexisting with “addictive behavior.” Some attempted to regain agency through secondary-market trading or outsourcing box openings. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of addictive mechanisms within the blind box economy and empirically validates the relevance of uncertainty-reward theory in contemporary consumption contexts. It advances consumer psychology research and highlights the need for businesses to balance marketing innovation with ethical responsibility. Practical implications include recommendations for measures that safeguard consumer rights.

This study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and concentrated in first-tier cities, limiting generalizability. While interviews allowed for rich subjective insights, they are vulnerable to recall bias. Future research could expand sample size and geographic diversity, employ longitudinal designs to capture the evolution of consumer behavior over time, and incorporate

experimental methods to more rigorously test causal links between scarcity marketing and addictive consumption.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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