

What is the consumption psychology behind the popularity of blind boxes?

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Abstract: In recent years, blind boxes have rapidly risen as a new consumer product in the global market. Leveraging their unique "uncertainty" marketing model, they have successfully captured the attention of many consumers, particularly young people. The market size continues to expand, and related industries are developing rapidly. Against this backdrop, this paper delves into the consumer psychology behind the popularity of blind boxes. By analyzing the stimulation brought by uncertainty, social and identity factors, emotional and stress relief needs, marketing strategies, and psychological differences among various consumer groups, it reveals the intrinsic mechanisms that attract consumers to blind boxes. It also explores negative effects such as overconsumption and environmental impacts, providing insights for rational consumption by consumers and sustainable industry development.

Key words: blind box; consumer psychology; uncertainty; social identity; marketing strategy

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Introduction

In recent years, blind boxes have emerged as a highly popular consumer product, captivating the attention of a wide range of individuals, especially the younger generation. The blind box market has experienced remarkable growth, with numerous brands and products flooding the market. For instance, Pop Mart, a leading brand in the blind box industry, has seen its revenue skyrocket in recent years. In 2020, Pop Mart's annual revenue reached 2.5 billion yuan, a significant increase compared to previous years. This phenomenon has piqued the interest of researchers and marketers alike, leading to an in - depth exploration of the consumption psychology underlying the popularity of blind boxes^[1].

The concept of blind boxes is simple yet enticing. Consumers purchase a sealed box without knowing the specific item inside. Each series of blind boxes typically consists of a set of regular items and a few rare or hidden items, creating an element of surprise and anticipation. This marketing strategy has proven to be highly effective

in attracting consumers, leading to a significant increase in sales and brand awareness.

1. The Appeal of Uncertainty

1.1 The Dopamine - Driven Thrill

The element of uncertainty in blind boxes triggers a release of dopamine in the brain, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. When consumers purchase a blind box, they experience a sense of anticipation, not knowing what they will get. This anticipation builds up excitement, and when they finally open the box, the outcome, whether positive or negative, elicits a dopamine response. For example, when a consumer opens a blind box and discovers a highly - desired or rare item, the brain releases a large amount of dopamine, creating a strong sense of pleasure and satisfaction. This positive reinforcement encourages them to repeat the behavior, leading to increased purchases^[2-3].

Research has shown that the uncertainty associated

with blind boxes activates the brain's reward system in a similar way to gambling. In a study conducted by neuroscientists, participants were asked to engage in a task where they had to choose between certain and uncertain rewards. The results showed that the areas of the brain associated with reward, such as the nucleus accumbens, were more strongly activated when participants opted for the uncertain rewards. This finding suggests that the allure of blind boxes lies in the potential for a big pay-off, even if the probability of obtaining a rare item is low^[4].

1.2 The Gambler's Fallacy

Consumers often fall prey to the gambler's fallacy when purchasing blind boxes. The gambler's fallacy is the belief that if a particular event has not occurred for a while, it is more likely to occur in the next attempt. In the context of blind boxes, consumers may think that if they have opened several boxes without getting a rare item, they are more likely to get one in the next box. This fallacy leads them to continue purchasing blind boxes in the hope of finally obtaining the desired item.

For example, a consumer who has bought ten blind boxes from a series without getting the hidden item may believe that their luck is bound to change, and they are more likely to get the hidden item in the next purchase. However, in reality, each blind box purchase is an independent event, and the probability of getting a rare item remains the same regardless of previous attempts. This misperception can lead to excessive spending as consumers try to "beat the odds" and obtain the rare items.

2. Social and Identity - Related Factors

2.1 Social Bonding and Community

Blind boxes have become a significant social phenomenon, facilitating the formation of communities and social bonds among enthusiasts. Consumers often share their unboxing experiences on social media

platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. These unboxing videos can attract thousands or even millions of views, creating a sense of community among viewers. People who share an interest in blind boxes can connect with each other, exchange tips, trade items, and discuss their favorite series.

For instance, on YouTube, there are numerous channels dedicated to blind box unboxing. Some of these channels have amassed large subscriber bases, with viewers eagerly waiting for new unboxing videos. These channels not only provide entertainment but also serve as a platform for like-minded individuals to interact. In addition, many cities have blind box collectors' meet-ups, where people can gather in person to share their collections, trade items, and make new friends. This sense of community and social connection is a powerful motivator for consumers to engage with blind boxes^[5].

2.2 Self - Identity and Expression

Blind boxes allow consumers to express their individuality and self-identity. The items collected in blind boxes can be seen as extensions of the self, representing a person's interests, tastes, and values. For example, a consumer who collects a particular series of blind boxes featuring cute and colorful characters may be expressing their fun-loving and creative side. The act of collecting and displaying these items can also serve as a form of self-expression, allowing individuals to showcase their unique personalities to others.

Moreover, the pursuit of rare and exclusive items in blind boxes can enhance a consumer's sense of self-worth. Owning a limited-edition or hard-to-find blind box item can make a person feel special and unique. In social situations, these items can become conversation starters, and the owner may receive admiration from others, further boosting their self-esteem.

3. Emotional and Stress - Relief Aspects

3.1 Stress Relief and Escapism

In today's fast - paced and stressful world, many consumers turn to blind boxes as a form of stress relief and escapism. The act of purchasing and opening a blind box provides a brief moment of distraction from daily worries and responsibilities. The element of surprise and the positive emotions associated with getting a desired item can help reduce stress levels and improve mood.

For example, a student who is overwhelmed with schoolwork or a young professional facing work - related stress may find solace in buying a blind box. The excitement of not knowing what's inside the box and the potential for a pleasant surprise can provide a much - needed break from their routine. This emotional relief aspect makes blind boxes an attractive option for many consumers.

3.2 Nostalgia and Comfort

Blind boxes often feature characters and designs that evoke nostalgia, appealing to consumers' sense of comfort and familiarity. Many of the themes in blind boxes are based on popular childhood cartoons, toys, or cultural icons. For instance, a series of blind boxes featuring characters from classic 90s cartoons can trigger feelings of nostalgia in adults who grew up watching those shows.

This sense of nostalgia can be a powerful motivator for consumers to purchase blind boxes. It allows them to revisit happy memories from their past and provides a sense of comfort in the present. Nostalgia - driven purchases are not only about the physical item but also about the emotional connection and the feelings of warmth and security associated with the memories.

4. Marketing and Branding Strategies

4.1 Limited Editions and Exclusive Releases

Brands use limited - edition and exclusive releases as a powerful marketing tool to drive consumer interest in blind boxes. Limited - edition items are produced in small quantities, creating a sense of scarcity and urgency among

consumers. The fear of missing out (FOMO) drives consumers to purchase these items quickly, often at a premium price.

For example, Pop Mart regularly releases limited - edition blind box series in collaboration with popular artists, designers, or cultural events. These limited - edition series are highly sought after by collectors, and they often sell out within minutes of release. The exclusivity of these items makes them more desirable, and consumers are willing to go to great lengths to obtain them, whether it's waiting in long lines at stores or refreshing online shopping pages to be the first to purchase.

4.2 Brand Collaborations and Cross - Promotions

Brand collaborations and cross - promotions have also contributed to the popularity of blind boxes. By partnering with well - known brands, artists, or franchises, blind box manufacturers can tap into new customer bases and create unique and appealing products. For example, a collaboration between a blind box brand and a popular video game franchise can attract fans of the game who may not have been interested in blind boxes before.

These collaborations bring together different elements of popular culture, creating a synergy that appeals to a wider range of consumers. The combined brand power of the two entities can generate significant buzz and excitement in the market. In addition, cross - promotions often result in limited - edition or exclusive items that are highly collectible, further driving consumer demand.

5. Consumer Demographics and Differences in Consumption Psychology

5.1 Age - Based Differences

Younger consumers, especially Generation Z, are more likely to be attracted to the novelty, social aspects, and the element of surprise in blind boxes. They are more active on social media and are more willing to share their

unboxing experiences, which can lead to a viral spread of the blind box trend. Generation Z values self-expression and individuality, and blind boxes provide them with a platform to showcase these values.

Older consumers, on the other hand, may be more drawn to the nostalgic elements of blind boxes. They may be interested in collecting items that remind them of their childhood or past cultural experiences. Older consumers may also approach blind box purchases in a more calculated way, weighing the cost-benefit ratio more carefully compared to younger consumers who may be more impulsive.

5.2 Gender - Based Differences

In general, female consumers tend to be more interested in the aesthetic and emotional aspects of blind boxes. They may be attracted to the cute and colorful designs, and the emotional connection they can form with the characters. Female consumers are also more likely to engage in the social sharing aspect of blind boxes, using them as a way to bond with friends and express their feelings.

Male consumers, on the other hand, may be more interested in the collectible and competitive aspects of blind boxes. They may be more focused on completing sets, obtaining rare items, and engaging in trading and competition with other collectors. Male consumers may also be more likely to analyze the probabilities and strategies associated with blind box purchases.

6. The Dark Side of Blind Box Consumption

6.1 Addiction and Over - Spending

The addictive nature of blind box consumption can lead to over-spending and financial problems for some consumers. The dopamine-driven thrill of opening a blind box, combined with the gambler's fallacy, can make it difficult for consumers to stop purchasing. Some individuals may find themselves spending large amounts of money on blind boxes, exceeding their budget and

causing financial stress.

For example, there have been cases where consumers have accumulated large debts due to their blind box addiction. They may prioritize buying blind boxes over other essential expenses, such as rent, food, or bills. This over-spending not only affects their financial well-being but can also have a negative impact on their mental health and relationships.

6.2 Environmental Impact

The production and disposal of blind boxes also have an environmental impact. The boxes themselves, along with the packaging materials, contribute to waste. In addition, the production of the items inside the blind boxes, often made of plastic or other non-biodegradable materials, further adds to environmental pollution.

As the popularity of blind boxes continues to grow, the environmental impact becomes a more significant concern. The large-scale production of blind boxes requires significant resources, including energy, water, and raw materials. If not properly managed, the waste generated from blind boxes can end up in landfills or oceans, causing harm to the environment and wildlife.

7. Conclusion

The popularity of blind boxes can be attributed to a complex interplay of consumption psychology factors. The allure of uncertainty, social and identity-related aspects, emotional and stress-relief functions, and effective marketing strategies all contribute to their widespread appeal. However, it is important to be aware of the potential negative consequences, such as addiction, over-spending, and environmental impact.

For consumers, understanding the underlying consumption psychology can help them make more informed decisions and avoid excessive spending. Brands, on the other hand, should consider the long-term sustainability of their business models, both in terms of consumer well-being and environmental impact. By

balancing the excitement and allure of blind boxes with responsible consumption and production, the blind box market can continue to thrive in a more sustainable way. Future research could further explore the psychological

mechanisms at play in different consumer segments and cultures, as well as potential solutions to mitigate the negative impacts associated with blind box consumption.

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