

# ***Exploring the Communication Mechanisms of Blind Box Consumption: A Comparative Study of Brand Marketing and Social Media Communication***

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**Abstract.** Blind box consumption has become an increasingly popular consumer phenomenon among Generation Z in recent years. Existing studies mainly focus on the uncertainty of blind box products themselves and the emotional value brought by such uncertainty, but they have not paid enough attention to the role of different communication channels in shaping consumers' purchase decisions. Based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework, this paper compares the influence of brand marketing exposure and social media communication on blind box purchase intention, and further analyzes four psychological variables, which are curiosity, fear of missing out, brand credibility and emotional attachment. By combining a literature review and an exploratory questionnaire, this study conducted an online survey among consumers aged 16–27 and finally obtained 33 valid responses. The findings show that social media exposure is significantly positively related to FOMO, engagement and continuous purchase intention, while the effect of brand marketing exposure is relatively weaker. In other words, blind box consumption is not only connected with product uncertainty itself, but also closely related to the communication environment in which consumers are immersed. Social media content intensifies consumers' emotions and social identity, and thus more easily drives purchase behavior.

**Keywords:** Blind box consumption, Social media communication, Brand marketing, Consumer psychology, Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR)

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, blind boxes, as a kind of chance-based collectible product combining uncertainty and surprise, have quickly become popular among Generation Z [1,2]. Blind box consumption is often accompanied by anticipation, excitement and emotional fluctuation. Some studies have pointed out that uncertainty can increase consumers' perceived value, instant gratification and social value, and thus enhance their purchase intention. However, at the same time, it may also trigger gambler's fallacies, scarcity effects and impulsive buying tendencies [1-3].

Moreover, blind box consumption is also deeply embedded in the contemporary communication environment. Existing digital marketing studies have shown that the authenticity, informational value and homophily of social media content can strengthen parasocial relationships between

audiences and content creators, and then influence brand credibility and purchase intention [4,5]. At the same time, fear of missing out has also been widely discussed as an important factor driving impulse purchase, especially in social media environments where people constantly see others' consumption displays and limited products [6,7].

Although existing studies have discussed blind box consumption from the perspective of uncertainty, emotional value and consumer psychology, systematic comparison between different communication channels is still relatively insufficient [1-3]. Few studies directly compare the role of brand marketing and social media communication in blind box purchase behavior [4,8]. Recent studies have already noticed factors such as group interaction, emotional energy and parasocial relationships in blind box consumption, but the differences between communication channels are still not fully discussed [5,8].

This paper investigates how brand marketing and social media communication influence blind box purchase intention among Generation Z. To address this question, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review with an exploratory online questionnaire among young blind box consumers. The collected data are analyzed mainly through descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify key patterns and relationships. Rather than providing strong causal conclusions, the study offers exploratory evidence on how communication-related factors may shape consumer responses. Theoretically, this research expands existing blind box studies by highlighting the role of the broader communication environment, rather than focusing only on product uncertainty. Practically, it provides useful insights for both brands and regulators by showing how digital communication may influence consumer attitudes and purchasing behavior.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Blind box consumption and consumer psychology**

Blind box consumption combines entertainment, uncertainty and emotional stimulation, so it has attracted increasing scholarly attention from behavioral economics and psychology. Existing studies find that uncertainty in blind box consumption does not necessarily weaken purchase intention. On the contrary, it may enhance consumers' perceived value and emotional arousal, making them more willing to buy [1]. Within the framework of uncertainty marketing, consumers can experience lottery-like instant gratification and may gradually form persistent purchase impulses because of gambler's fallacies [2,3].

At the same time, blind box consumption is also closely related to collecting culture and emotional investment. Some consumers do not only buy blind boxes for one-time entertainment, but also for completing a full series or obtaining rare items. This collecting behavior may strengthen their emotional attachment to the brand IP and reduce their sensitivity to price [8,9]. Recent studies have further emphasized the social dimension of blind box consumption. For example, activities such as joint unboxing, fan communication and discussion of hidden variants can generate emotional energy and make blind box consumption no longer purely transactional, but also social and symbolic [8].

### **2.2. Social media communication and blind box consumption**

With the rise of short-video platforms, livestreaming and social media, blind box consumption increasingly relies on online communication. Before making an actual purchase, many potential consumers have already been immersed in blind box culture through influencer unboxing videos,

user posts, second-hand trading groups and online discussions. In this sense, social media is not simply a platform for information transmission, but also an environment that shapes consumer desire and imagination [4,5].

Digital marketing research has shown that the authenticity, informational value and homophily of social media content can strengthen parasocial relationships between consumers and content creators. Once consumers feel emotionally close to influencers or content creators, they may become more likely to trust the products recommended by them and then increase their purchase intention [4,5]. What is more, social media also easily evokes FOMO. When users repeatedly see others posting rare blind boxes, limited editions or complete collections, they may feel that if they do not buy now, they will miss something important. Therefore, social media may stimulate impulse buying through social comparison, group identity and fear of missing out [6,7].

### **2.3. Brand marketing, storytelling and emotional attachment**

Compared with social media communication, brand marketing is more centralized and controlled. Official advertising campaigns, IP storytelling, offline store displays and licensed collaborations all help shape the image of blind box products. Many blind box brands create unique characters, stories and product worlds, so that consumers do not only buy a product, but also enter an emotional and symbolic universe [4,9].

Official marketing thus aims not only at stimulating immediate sales, but also at building long-term brand trust and emotional attachment. Research has shown that brand narratives and emotional connection can strengthen consumers' perception of brand credibility and then influence their purchase intention [4]. However, whether official marketing can trigger an immediate purchase impulse as effectively as social media remains open to debate. Some researchers believe that in blind box consumption, brand marketing mainly constructs the world view and emotional foundation of the product, while the actual buying impulse is more likely to be triggered by online word-of-mouth and community hype [8,9]. This suggests that different communication channels may work through different psychological pathways.

### **2.4. Theoretical framework and research gap**

The Stimulus–Organism–Response framework is useful for linking external stimuli, internal psychological states and behavioral outcomes [10]. In previous blind box studies, uncertainty itself has often been treated as a stimulus influencing purchase intention through variables such as perceived value and instant gratification [1-3]. This paper extends this framework by treating brand marketing exposure and social media exposure as two different kinds of external stimuli. It further discusses how these two stimuli activate curiosity, FOMO, brand credibility and emotional attachment, and then influence purchase-related behavior.

Overall, blind box consumption is a complex phenomenon integrating uncertainty marketing, collecting culture, social interaction and digital communication. Existing studies have paid more attention to product features and individual psychology, while fewer studies compare different communication channels in a systematic way. Social media may drive purchase through parasocial relationships, FOMO and group identity [4-7], while brand marketing is more likely to emphasize storytelling, credibility and long-term emotional connection [4,9]. Therefore, the lack of direct comparison between these two communication channels constitutes an important research gap, which this study attempts to address.

### 3. Methodology, findings and discussion

#### 3.1. Research design and sample

In order to compare the influence of brand marketing and social media communication on blind box consumption, this study designed a structured questionnaire based on the SOR model [10]. The target respondents were Generation Z consumers aged 16–27 who had purchased blind boxes within the last six months and passed the attention-check item. Through convenience sampling on social media, 134 responses were collected in total. After excluding respondents who had not purchased blind boxes, those outside the age range and those failing the attention-check item, 33 valid samples were finally retained.

Among these valid responses, the majority of respondents were female, and the age distribution was mainly concentrated in the 16–17 group. Most respondents had purchased blind boxes only one or two times during the last six months. Although the sample size is relatively small, it still provides some baseline evidence for exploratory research when combined with the literature review.

#### 3.2. Survey measures and variable operationalisation

All core variables in the questionnaire were measured through five-point Likert scales. Brand marketing exposure included four items, such as frequently paying attention to official advertisements, engaging with brand stories, following official releases and appreciating offline displays. Social media exposure also included four items, such as watching influencer unboxing videos, browsing user-generated content, participating in online discussions and following information about limited or popular releases.

The psychological variables included curiosity, FOMO, brand credibility and emotional attachment, and each of them was measured by three items. Behavioral variables included purchase intention, continuous purchase intention and impulsive buying tendency. In addition, this study also recorded respondents' purchase frequency during the past six months and their degree of involvement or interest.

Because of the small sample size, some scales showed relatively weak internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha suggested that emotional attachment and involvement had relatively acceptable reliability, while social media exposure, FOMO and continuous purchase intention were moderate. By contrast, brand marketing exposure, curiosity, brand credibility and purchase intention were below 0.5. In order to avoid overinterpreting unreliable composite scores, this paper mainly uses average scores and interprets the findings cautiously.

#### 3.3. Data analysis strategy

The cleaned data were analyzed in Jamovi. The analysis mainly included the following steps. First, data cleaning and coding were conducted by transforming Likert responses into numerical values and deleting invalid responses. Second, scale construction and reliability testing were carried out by computing mean scores and reporting Cronbach's alpha. Third, descriptive statistics were used to present the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum of each variable in order to show the general level of media exposure and psychological state. Fourth, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted among key variables, especially focusing on the relationship between social media exposure, brand marketing exposure, FOMO, emotional attachment, involvement and purchasing behavior.

Given the small sample size and the limited stability of some scales, this paper did not further conduct multivariate regression or mediation analysis. Therefore, all empirical findings in this study should be treated as exploratory.

### 3.4. Empirical findings

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of key variables

| Variable                      | Mean | SD   | Min  | Max  |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Brand marketing exposure      | 3.72 | 0.66 | 2.00 | 4.75 |
| Social media exposure         | 3.35 | 0.76 | 1.75 | 4.75 |
| Curiosity                     | 3.80 | 0.66 | 2.33 | 5.00 |
| FOMO                          | 3.29 | 0.85 | 1.67 | 4.67 |
| Brand credibility             | 3.81 | 0.60 | 2.33 | 5.00 |
| Emotional attachment          | 3.59 | 0.80 | 2.00 | 5.00 |
| Purchase intention            | 3.50 | 0.84 | 2.00 | 5.00 |
| Impulsive buying tendency     | 3.49 | 0.79 | 1.67 | 5.00 |
| Continuous purchase intention | 3.40 | 0.81 | 2.00 | 5.00 |
| Price sensitivity             | 3.56 | 0.80 | 1.67 | 5.00 |
| Involvement                   | 2.89 | 1.15 | 1.00 | 5.00 |
| Past purchase frequency       | 1.94 | 0.97 | 1.00 | 4.00 |

Table 2. Correlation matrix of selected key variables

| Variable                         | 1     | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    |
|----------------------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Brand marketing exposure      | 1.00  |      |      |      |      |      |
| 2. Social media exposure         | 0.25  | 1.00 |      |      |      |      |
| 3. FOMO                          | -0.03 | 0.51 | 1.00 |      |      |      |
| 4. Emotional attachment          | 0.05  | 0.19 | 0.31 | 1.00 |      |      |
| 5. Continuous purchase intention | -0.10 | 0.31 | 0.43 | 0.41 | 1.00 |      |
| 6. Involvement                   | 0.23  | 0.64 | 0.53 | 0.40 | 0.46 | 1.00 |

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the key variables. Overall, respondents reported a moderate level of both brand marketing exposure ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) and social media exposure ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ). Curiosity ( $M = 3.80$ ), brand credibility ( $M = 3.81$ ), emotional attachment ( $M = 3.59$ ), and purchase intention ( $M = 3.50$ ) were all above the midpoint of the scale, which suggests that respondents generally showed a medium to relatively high level of psychological engagement with blind box consumption. By contrast, past purchase frequency ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) and continuous purchase intention ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) were comparatively lower, indicating that most respondents were still light consumers rather than highly frequent buyers.

Table 2 shows the correlation matrix of the selected key variables. The results indicate that social media exposure is moderately positively related to FOMO ( $r = 0.51$ ), continuous purchase intention ( $r = 0.31$ ), and involvement ( $r = 0.64$ ). This means that respondents who were more frequently exposed to blind box content on social media were also more likely to experience fear of missing

out, become more engaged, and show stronger willingness to continue purchasing. In addition, FOMO is positively related to continuous purchase intention ( $r = 0.43$ ) and involvement ( $r = 0.53$ ), which suggests that fear of missing out may be an important psychological factor associated with stronger consumer engagement and repeated purchase tendencies.

Emotional attachment is also positively related to continuous purchase intention ( $r = 0.41$ ) and involvement ( $r = 0.40$ ), suggesting that respondents who formed stronger emotional bonds with blind box IPs or characters were more likely to stay involved and continue purchasing. By contrast, brand marketing exposure shows relatively weak correlations with most of the other variables. For example, its relationship with FOMO is close to zero ( $r = -0.03$ ), and its relationship with continuous purchase intention is slightly negative ( $r = -0.10$ ). This may suggest that official brand marketing mainly increases familiarity with blind box products rather than directly stimulating strong emotional reactions or immediate buying tendencies.

Taken together, these findings provide exploratory support for the argument that social media communication may play a more direct role than official brand marketing in shaping blind box-related emotions and behavioral tendencies. However, because of the small sample size and the limited reliability of some scales, these results should be interpreted cautiously and treated as preliminary rather than conclusive evidence.

### 3.5. Discussion

The findings of this study generally support the idea that social media communication, compared with official brand marketing, has stronger power in evoking emotions and behaviors in blind box consumption. Influencer unboxing videos, user-generated content and information about limited editions or hidden products strengthen consumers' parasocial ties and easily trigger FOMO [4-7]. FOMO is not only positively related to involvement and purchase frequency, but also likely to serve as an important psychological pathway through which social media affects purchase behavior. This can explain why social media exposure has stronger relationships with continuous purchase intention and engagement, while brand marketing seems relatively less effective in stimulating immediate behavior.

At the same time, emotional attachment also plays an important role in blind box consumption. Although emotional attachment is not strongly connected with brand marketing exposure in this study, it is positively associated with involvement and willingness to pay. This means that once consumers form emotional bonds with the brand IP or characters, they become more willing to invest in the products. It is worth noting that this emotional attachment may not be created through direct advertising only. More likely, brand marketing builds such attachment gradually through storytelling, character construction and world-building in the long run [4,9].

In other words, the difference between the two communication channels may lie not only in strength, but also in mechanism. Social media communication is more likely to trigger short-term emotion, social comparison and purchase impulse, while brand marketing may be more closely related to long-term emotional cultivation and symbolic meaning [4,8,9]. This distinction is important for both theory and practice.

Overall, this study highlights the necessity of distinguishing communication channels in blind box consumption research. It also provides several practical implications. On one hand, social media marketing should be more carefully regulated because it can intensify FOMO and impulse buying [6,7]. On the other hand, official brand marketing should focus more on storytelling and sustainable relationship-building instead of over-stimulating short-term consumption. At the same time,

consumer education on media literacy is also necessary in order to reduce the possibility that young consumers are excessively influenced by emotional and social pressure online.

### 3.6. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, the final sample only includes 33 participants obtained through convenience sampling, so it cannot represent the wider Generation Z population. Future studies should expand the sample size and adopt more systematic sampling strategies, such as random sampling or stratified sampling, to improve generalisability.

Second, several scales in this study show relatively low Cronbach's alpha, which means that their internal consistency is limited. Future research should use more mature and validated scales or add more items to improve measurement reliability.

Third, this study is based on cross-sectional self-report data collected at a single time point. Such data may be influenced by social desirability bias and cannot demonstrate causal relationships. Future research may adopt experiments or longitudinal designs to further test the influence path between communication channels and psychological states.

Finally, most respondents in this study are located in Chinese social media environments. Therefore, the findings may be affected by specific media habits and local blind box culture. Comparative studies across different countries, cultures or platforms may provide a fuller understanding of blind box consumption.

## 4. Conclusion

By combining a literature review and an exploratory survey, this study compares the influence of brand marketing and social media communication on blind box consumption. The findings show that social media exposure is significantly associated with FOMO, involvement and continuous purchase intention, while brand marketing exposure has relatively limited immediate psychological influence. The relationship between FOMO and both purchase frequency and involvement further shows that FOMO occupies a central position in blind box consumption.

Although the findings are limited by the small sample size and the weak reliability of some scales, this study still provides preliminary evidence for understanding the communication mechanisms behind blind box consumption. More importantly, it suggests that researchers should not only focus on product uncertainty itself, but also pay attention to the communication environment surrounding consumers. Social media has a particularly deep influence on emerging forms of consumption, and both brands and policymakers need to take this influence seriously in order to balance market development and consumer protection.

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