

An Analysis of the Causes Behind the Popularity of Skin Consumption in Mobile Games: A Case Study of "Honor of King"

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the factors contributing to the popularity of skin consumption in mobile games, with a focus on the case of "Honor of Kings." By analyzing the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of skin consumption, this study aims to provide insights into the underlying mechanisms driving this phenomenon. The research employs a qualitative approach, including case studies and interviews, to explore the motivations and behaviors of players. The findings highlight the significance of player psychology and social dynamics in skin consumption, offering practical implications for game developers and marketers.

KEYWORDS

Mobile games; Skin consumption; Consumer behavior; "Honor of Kings"; Gaming industry

1 Introduction

1.1 Research background

The report elaborates in detail on the vigorous development of China's game industry driven by policy support, technological progress and the growth of user demand. Analyze the number of skins in mobile games on various platforms and explore the reasons for the popularity of "Honor of Kings". This article uses the data from the "2023 China Game Industry Report" to illustrate the market size and growth trends. Introduce "Honor of Kings", "Source Information Impact", and "Peacekeeping Elite". The wide audience of popular mobile games such as "Honor of Kings" highlights the rapid growth of skin revenue. For instance, the data comparison from 2023 to 2024 reveals the huge potential and popularity of the mobile game skin consumption market. At present, there are still some problems in the current research. There are not enough research literatures on skin consumption. Research on skin consumption in various fields is not very mature either. Based on the "Three Recognition" framework, cognition, identification, and subscription, this paper deeply analyzes the consumption path of "Honor of Kings" players when purchasing skins, explores the complex factors behind consumption decisions, and provides theoretical and practical basis for the healthy development of the game industry and rational consumption by players.

1.2 Research questions

What are the main motivations for players to purchase game skins?

How do cognitive, emotional and social factors affect skin consumption?

What implications do these findings offer to game developers and marketers?

Theoretical significant: Theoretically, it has expanded the application field of the "conspicuous consumption" theory and injected a new perspective into the research of virtual commodity consumption. Enrich the research scope of consumption theory and promote the development of consumption theory in the virtual economy field. Furthermore, the "Three Identifications" theory is added. The three identifications refer to the process by which players go from recognizing this skin to identifying with it and then to subscribing to it. These two theories are very reasonable because they are the main factors in exploring the craze for skin consumption. Players all know about the skin first before making a purchase. It is even more reasonable to add the motivation and psychological aspects of skin consumption. Understand the necessity of players' consumption fever from different theoretical perspectives.

Practical significant: From the perspective of players, media literacy should be strengthened: popularize knowledge of consumer psychology, identify symbolic consumption traps, and set up consumption cooling-off periods and early warning mechanisms. Advocate cultural consumption: Extend cultural experiences by integrating skins, support players in creating their own content, and reduce blind comparisons. From the perspective of manufacturers, cultural design should be deepened: explore the core of traditional culture, collaborate with professional forces to ensure the accuracy of symbols, and avoid superficial design. And optimize the pricing operation, implement tiered pricing, introduce a public welfare exchange mechanism, and disclose the cost and benefit. Technological transparency: Develop a value assessment

system, publicize design data, and enhance player trust.

From the perspectives of the industry and society, ethical standards should be established: restricting competitive marketing, supporting products with prominent cultural value, and establishing industry supervision and certification mechanisms. Cultural scenarios should be expanded: to support cultural protection, promote the integration of "games + culture and tourism", and achieve the linkage between consumption and cultural inheritance. Dynamic monitoring and regulation should be carried out: analyze the correlation between consumption data and mental health, establish a tripartite dialogue platform, and guide rational decision-making.

1.3 Research content and research methods

Introduce the case analysis method and take the limited skin of the Year of the Snake in "Honor of Kings" as an example to study the marketing effect; Interview method: Select players at different consumption levels for interviews to obtain information; Elaborate on the innovations from aspects such as research perspectives, method integration, data mining and analysis, and application of achievements, such as multi-dimensional cross-analysis, multi-method collaborative research, establishment of data analysis models, and provision of detailed practical guidance, etc.

1.4 Research innovation points

First, the innovation of the research perspective, seeking the reasons for the current craze in mobile game consumption from the literature. More research has been focused on industries such as finance, food, and film and television. However, not many scholars have taken the lead in the field of mobile games starting from this point, explore the causes of its consumption in mobile games. Second, the innovation of research ideas. Previous academic research mainly focused on content and form. This literature mainly studies the case of the limited skin for the Year of the Snake in "Honor of Kings" to explore the marketing level and reasons.

2 The influence of traditional culture on consumer skin psychology

Academic research on the consumer psychology of "Honor of Kings" focuses on the interaction mechanism between traditional Chinese culture and consumer behavior. It pointed out that the game is designed by integrating the four major cultural psychological aspects. First, take advantage of the mentality of seeking common ground and following the crowd as well as the mentality of seeking victory: The achievement system and the star element skin system satisfy players' desire to show off, transforming skins into social capital. The second is the mentality of seeking integrity: Launching the "6-yuan skin"^[1] to lower the consumption threshold, leveraging the Confucian concept of frugality of "restraining oneself and returning to propriety", and using a low-price strategy to break through the psychological defense of users. For instance, "Yang Jian's Dimensional Pride" skin, priced at 6 yuan, achieved sales of 50 million. The fifth is the root complex: Deeply embedding traditional cultural elements, and stimulating national emotional resonance through historical figure prototypes and mythological narratives. The skins of "Zhen Ji", such as "Wandering in the Garden, Startling Dreams", combine opera culture with virtual images to enhance emotional consumption^[2]. Reference significance: The research reveals why so many players are attracted by the skin, which is similar to my topic. All were attracted and purchased in various ways. Shortcomings: The theoretical depth is limited, mostly remaining at the level of phenomenon description, without delving deeply into the conflict between cultural psychology and consumerism. Lack of cross-cultural comparison: Without comparing how Western games (such as "League of Legends") handle cultural elements, it is difficult to highlight the uniqueness of Chinese consumer psychology. Insufficient dynamics: The impact of the changes in the values of Generation Z players on their consumption psychology has not been tracked, such as the deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional cultural symbols by Generation Z. Existing research provides a solid empirical basis for understanding local game consumption. However, it is necessary to combine critical theory and the perspective of intergenerational differences to further explore the dynamic evolution of cultural psychology in the digital economy.

Regarding the research on game skin consumption, the existing literature mostly focuses on consumer psychology and business logic. Qin Lanjun (2020), starting from the "mirror stage" theory, reveals the mechanism by which players construct self-identity through virtual characters, providing a theoretical basis for understanding game identity^[3]. Baudrillard's (2006) theory of symbolic consumption has been widely applied to analyze the symbolic meaning of virtual goods, pointing out that the essence of players' consumption of skins is to achieve social distinction through symbolic differences^[4]. By integrating multi-disciplinary theories and combining the case of "Honor of Kings", it is further demonstrated that virtual fashion consumption is a two-way product of merchants' profit strategies and players' psychological needs, enriching the research dimensions of virtual consumption in the digital age.

The aesthetic pursuit of virtual avatars by players is the fundamental driving force for skin consumption. In the consumer society, body aesthetics have extended from the real world to the virtual realm, and games have refined the

design of hero skins. For instance, muscle lines and clothing details are used to shape heroes into "visual symbols", satisfying players' projection of their idealized selves. Attract groups interested in traditional cultural symbols with Oriental aesthetics. This demand for "personalized customization" of virtual avatars is directly transformed into skin purchase behavior, becoming the underlying logic of skin consumption in mobile games. Skin consumption has become an "emotional outlet" for players to fight against the discipline of reality. The game has established a dual mechanism of "low threshold release - high consumption display" through a price gradient ranging from 6 yuan to 288 yuan^[5] low-priced skins reduce decision-making costs with a "sense of inclusiveness", giving players the illusion of "free choice". High-priced skins create "identity privileges" through scarcity, satisfying players' symbolic breakthrough from the constraints of real social classes. This design takes advantage of the "need for respect" and "need for self-actualization" in Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, transforming consumption behavior from "entertainment expenditure" into a "declaration of freedom", and promoting players to form "unnecessary but frequent" consumption habits. This is related to the study of the causes of skin consumption fever. Skin consumption has evolved into a virtual mirror image of the real social hierarchy. High-priced skins, with their price barriers and exclusive identifiers, have become the "digital MEDALS" of players' economic strength. In the social circle, the owner establishes the "upper status" through skin display, while ordinary players are forced to participate in the "symbolic arms race" to avoid social discrimination. This virtual stratification based on consumption is essentially a typical manifestation of Baudrillard's statement that "symbolic consumption creates social distinction" - data shows that players in "Honor of Kings" who own more than three high-priced skins have a social activity level 65% higher than that of ordinary players, confirming the value of skins as "social capital". So with higher-quality skin, you will log in more frequently because skin gives you a sense of superiority. The interaction between game mechanics and skin effects has created the cognitive bias that "consumption equals power". Although the skin does not enhance attributes, the cool special effects and motion optimization will strengthen the player's "operational confidence", and at the same time trigger the "proficiency misjudgment" of teammates. This kind of psychological suggestion drives players to obtain social recognition in competitive scenarios through consumption, forming a closed loop of "purchasing skins → frequent use → obtaining positive feedback". Game developers bind consumer behavior with competitive achievement through mechanism design, further amplifying the consumption motivation. The essence of the mobile game skin consumption craze can be revealed through four major characteristics. It is that capital has transformed virtual goods into "multi-dimensional demand solutions" through "symbol industrialization". Then, by adding the theoretical system of cognition, identification and subscription first, the causes of the skin consumption craze can be thoroughly understood. Understanding this logic helps reveal the essence of the game economy - when virtual symbols become the yardstick for measuring value, rational consumption needs to go beyond surface temptation and examine the capital manipulation and psychological alienation behind consumption behavior^[5].

When the consumption of mobile game skins is booming, it can also encounter bottlenecks. The underestimation of players' subjectivity will have an impact. The research focuses on the manipulation of consumption by capital, but pays less attention to the active resistance behavior of players. For instance, some players might refuse to purchase skins due to their aversion to consumerism, or reconstruct the meaning of skins through secondary creations, mods and other means. This kind of "reverse deconstruction" has not been included in the analytical framework, resulting in a one-sided understanding of the consumption relationship. The second is the absence of cross-cultural comparison. The research focuses on the domestic mobile game market, lacking comparisons with markets in Europe, America, Japan, Republic of Korea, etc. For instance, the skin consumption in "League of Legends" places more emphasis on personalized design, while "Honor of Kings" focuses on the implantation of cultural symbols. The cultural psychology behind this difference has not been explored, making it difficult to highlight the uniqueness of the local consumption logic in China. Due to the limitations of dynamics and data support, the research is based on static cases and does not track the changes in consumption trends in recent years. Meanwhile, some of the conclusions lack some relatively representative data, and currently, not many people conduct research on mobile games. The ambiguity of policy recommendations, but no specific countermeasures have been proposed for game developers, regulatory authorities or player groups. For example, how to guide manufacturers to reduce the "symbol stratification" design through policies, or how to enhance players' media literacy through education, the research has not conducted in-depth discussions, weakening the practical guiding value. These are some of the shortcomings and confusions.

3 Method of my research

3.1 Case analysis of skins in honor of kings - taking the limited skin for the year of the snake as an example

In January 2025, six exclusive skins for the Year of the Snake were released in Honor of Kings. According to Sensor Tower data, global mobile game users spent approximately 6.34 billion US dollars in February 2025. Among them, "Honor of Kings" retained the top revenue title thanks to the Spring Festival activities and exclusive collaboration content. The

combined revenue in January and February set the highest record since 2025.

During the Spring Festival, the daily active users (DAU) exceeded 100 million, and the discussion volume on social platforms soared, further boosting the paid conversion rate. This was achieved through user activity and paid conversion rates. It is estimated that during the Spring Festival event, the sales of skins increased by more than 50% year-on-year, and the sales of a single limited edition skin may reach hundreds of millions of yuan.

Judging from the sales of individual skins, the Snake Year limited skins of different heroes perform differently. Daji's "Wish for Harmony among All Beings" topped the sales chart with a 53.1% increase, thanks to the extremely high popularity and player base of the hero itself. LAN's "Wish to Shine across the Nine Provinces" and Yu Ji's "Wish to Shine in the Year" followed closely with increases of 50.8% and 34.8% respectively. Nuwa's "Wish to Shine Through the Ages", CAI Wenji's "Wish to Shine Through the Gathering of Fortune and Prosperity", and Si Kongzhen's "Wish to Shine Through the Stability of Mountains and Rivers" have relatively low sales, but they have also gained a certain market share among players. This sales disparity is influenced by various factors such as the popularity of heroes, skin design, and player preferences, providing a reference basis for subsequent skin planning.

3.2 Players' feedback has an impact on the marketing effect of the limited skin consumption craze

According to the rating situation, the rating of the limited skin for the Year of the Snake by the Hupu app shows that this year marks the first time that all skins have achieved a score of over 8 points, with an average score of 8.4 points, second only to the Year of the Tiger series and ranking second among the multi-age series. Among them, Yu Ji's "Wish to Shine with Abundance Every Year" scored as high as 9.0 points, Nuwa's "Wish to Shine with Prosperity for a Thousand Years" scored 8.6 points, and LAN, Si Kongzhen, Daji, and CAI Wenji's skin scores were all 8 points or above.

The limited skin for the Year of the Snake has sparked widespread discussions on various social media platforms. At 00:00 on the evening of January 28th, the skin was launched on time. A large number of players flocked to the client to start the "flash sale mode". At the same time, topics and hot posts related to the "King's Snake Year Limited Skin" emerged one after another on various social platforms, and three of them ranked in the top five of the hot search list. The high-quality CG video of the Snake-limited skin on Bilibili has accumulated nearly 3 million views within just a few days, accompanied by a large number of bullet comments. Players expressed their love and anticipation for the new skin. The number of views, comments and likes of videos about the limited skin for the Year of the Snake on the Douyin platform is also considerable. For instance, the video related to the limited skin for the Year of the Snake by Nuwa has over a million views, tens of thousands of comments and more than 800,000 likes.

3.3 The success of cultural integration

Integration of traditional cultural elements. Therefore, the theme of the limited edition skin for the Year of the Snake this time is "Wish to Shine upon the Nine Heavens". Through collaboration with the Department of History at Peking University, the team has presented six ancient "wish" concepts through modern skin design, covering a wide range of contents from the eternal peace of the country and the prosperity of wealth. Each skin incorporates unique elements of magic treasures. The special facial "makeup and styling" such as the character's pattern design not only enhance the character's beauty but also allow players to feel a strong cultural atmosphere when experiencing the game. For instance, Nuwa, as a mythological figure with a human head and a snake body, her skin "Wish to Shine for a Thousand Years" is designed with a holy air, perfectly recreating the image of a deity in people's minds. Moreover, her three skills are highly oppressive, making it the skin with the most "snake" elements in this series.

3.4 Marketing strategies effectively contribute to the popularity of skin consumption

The first one is the pricing strategy. This Year's limited edition skin for the Year of the Snake belongs to the "Wish to Illuminate the Nine Heavens" set, consisting of 6 sets, and all of them are of legendary quality. After players activate the Good Luck Card, they only need 590 points to purchase the first set of Snake-limited skins, and the remaining 5 sets each cost 890 points, which is even cheaper than the regular epic skins. This cost-effective pricing strategy has lowered the purchase threshold for players, enhanced the appeal of the skins, significantly increased players' acceptance of the skins, and attracted many players to purchase multiple sets of skins, effectively boosting sales.

The second is social bundling marketing. The game introduces features such as team consumption rebates and shared couple skins, leveraging the social relationships among players to encourage them to make purchases. For instance, some couples born in the 1990s have been affected by this, spending an average of over 800 yuan per day. Meanwhile, the time-limited sales, scarcity and collection mechanism of skins have also stimulated players' purchasing desire. For instance, the Snake Year skin adopts a "segmented unlocking" mechanism. Collecting all five can activate the full-screen effect, inducing players to spend over 2,000 yuan in total. These marketing strategies accurately grasp the psychology of players. Through social interaction and consumption incentives, they enhance players' participation and purchasing motivation, achieving the maximization of marketing effects.

This is a bar comparison chart used to show the number of game skins of different qualities on New Year's Eve in 2023 and on New Year's Eve in 2025. The horizontal axis of the chart shows four different skin quality categories, from left to right: Honor Collection, Legend, Epic, and Hero. The vertical coordinate represents the number of skins. The scale starts from 0, with intervals of 1, up to 7.

In the chart, the blue bars represent the number of corresponding quality skins on New Year's Eve of 2023, and the orange bars represent the number of corresponding quality skins on New Year's Eve of 2025. By observing the height differences of columns of different colors, it is possible to intuitively see the changes in the quantity of various quality skins at these two different time points. For instance, whether the quantity of skins of different qualities remains the same or increases or decreases over two years can be clearly demonstrated through the height contrast of the columns.

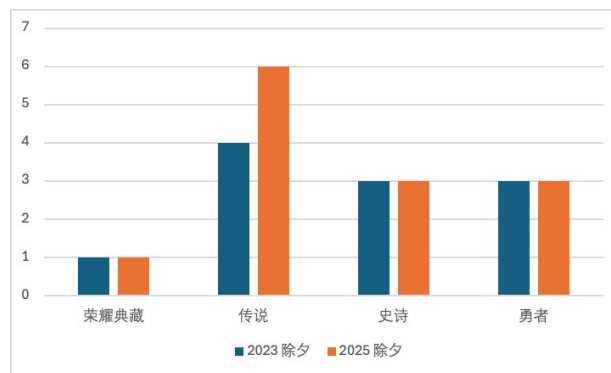


Figure 1 Source: Honor of Kings, Economic Research Institute of Guosen Securities

Comparison of skin quality categories

Honor Collection: The number of skins released on New Year's Eve of 2023 and 2025 was both 1, with little change. This indicates that the release quantity of this quality skin remained stable at these two time points. It might be due to its high acquisition difficulty and high-end positioning that the release frequency is not easily increased. **Legend** has it that the number of New Year's Eve celebrations will be 4 in 2023 and 6 in 2025, showing a significant increase. It indicates that the game developer has intensified the release of the legendary quality skin during this period. This might be because the quality skin has a high popularity, which can not only meet players' demands for high-quality skins but also bring good profits. **Epic:** The number of New Year's Eve in 2023 and 2025 is both 3, remaining the same. It indicates that the launch strategy of epic quality skins is relatively stable. As a relatively common medium-quality skin, its production rhythm remains at a certain level. The number of heroes on New Year's Eve in 2023 and 2025 remains at 3, with no change. This means that the launch scale of the Brave Quality skin has not been adjusted over the past two years, possibly considering that its positioning and audience demands are relatively fixed.

From the perspective of time span, from New Year's Eve of 2023 to New Year's Eve of 2025, except for the increase in the number of legendary skins, the number of other quality skins remains consistent. This might be related to the operation strategies of the game at different stages. For instance, during these two years, the game developers might have discovered through market research that players' demand for legendary skins was on the rise, so they intensified the launch efforts. It might also be an attempt to attract players' attention and boost consumption by increasing the number of high-quality (legendary) skins at this special time point of New Year's Eve.

This is a table picture showing the interview content. the table revolves around the question "When you purchase skins, do you pay more attention to the appearance design". special effects or social attributes?" Expand. The responses of 15 individuals were recorded in sequence in the table. Each person's response clearly expressed their preference for one of the aspects such as appearance design, special effects or social attributes when purchasing skins. Through the expressions of different individuals, diverse viewpoints and tendencies were presented.

Sort out and statistically analyze the answers of the 15 respondents:

- **Focus on appearance design:** The 1st, 4th, 7th, 10th, and 13th respondents clearly stated that they attach more importance to appearance design, totaling 5 people. They believe that a good-looking appearance, design that conforms to aesthetics and incorporates unique cultural elements can bring a sense of pleasure and are the primary factors attracting purchases.

Focus on special effects: The 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, and 14th respondents emphasized the importance of special effects, totaling 5 people. They think that cool skill effects, attack effects, etc. can enhance the visual impact, improve the operation experience and ignite the game atmosphere.

Focus on social attributes: The 2nd, 5th, 9th, 12th, and 15th respondents highlighted social attributes, totaling 5 individuals. They say that unique and rare skins can attract others' attention, become a social topic, share in the community and gain likes and envy, which is helpful for showing personality and making good friends.

Question : When you purchase skins, do you pay more attention to the appearance design, special effects or social attributes?
The first person said: "I definitely value the appearance design more. A good-looking skin can make me feel happy when playing games, just like changing myself into a super cool outfit. It's so appealing to look at."
The second person said: "Social attributes take priority." When I display unique and rare skins in the game, they can attract the attention of other players and make me more prominent in the game's social circle."
The third person said: "Special effects are the key to me. The cool skill effects not only have a strong visual impact but also enhance my operation experience in the game, making me feel that my combat power has doubled."
The fourth person said: "The appearance design ranks first. If the style and color combination of the skin don't match my aesthetic sense, no matter how dazzling the special effects are, I have no interest in buying them."
The fifth person said: "The social attribute is what I care about. Having a skin that others don't have can become a topic of discussion during team formation and guild communication, enhancing my social status."
The sixth person said: "I think special effects are the most important. Because the magnificent special effects when releasing skills can instantly ignite the game atmosphere and make me play more immersed."
The seventh person said: "In my opinion, the appearance design must be given top priority. A skin that fits the hero's setting and has a unique aesthetic appeal can make me love this hero even more."
The eighth person said: "It must be the special effects that determine everything. For instance, when playing marksman, the super cool attack effects can make each shot more rhythmic. It's really enjoyable to play. The feeling of getting one health is great. It's super fun to play."
The ninth person said: "It must be that the social attribute is the key point. Do you know? Sharing my rare skins in the game community and getting likes and envy is such a great feeling. In this way, many people will come to add me as a friend or play with me."
The tenth person said: "The appearance design is the first step that attracts me. If the skin looks ordinary, I won't consider it later. Moreover, having skin and not having skin are two different feelings."
The eleventh person said: "In my opinion, it must be the special effects that are the motivation for me to buy skins. For example, the special effects of the mage's ultimate move dazzling and brilliant, it can make the entire battle situation more exciting."
The twelfth person said: "It must be that the social attribute is the key point. Do you know? Sharing my rare skins in the game community and getting likes and envy is such a great feeling. In this way, many people will come to add me as a friend or play with me."
The thirteenth person said: "No matter which game I play, I think the appearance design attracts me the most, especially the design that incorporates unique cultural elements, which is very charming."
The fourteenth person said: "The quality of the special effects directly determines whether I buy it or not. Good special effects make the release of skills smoother and the operation feel different."
The fifteenth person said: "It seems that the social attribute is very crucial. I hope to show my personality through skins and make more like-minded game friends. This is my original intention and mission when playing games, which is for happiness."

Figure 2

4 Conclusion : the significance for research and practice

This research takes "King of Glory" as a case study and uses case analysis and interview methods to explore the reasons for the popularity of mobile game skins from three levels: cognitive, emotional, and social. Research has found that when players purchase skins, their attention to appearance design, special effects, and social attributes is diverse. Games promote consumption through strategies such as cultural element integration, tiered pricing, and social bundling. In addition, it is rumored that the number of skins is expected to increase significantly between 2023 and 2025. This study expands the application of theories such as "conspicuous consumption" in the field of virtual consumption, providing theoretical and practical references for players' rational consumption, manufacturers' optimization strategies, and the healthy development of the industry.

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