

The Influence of Popular Trends on Generation Z Consumers' Blind Box Consumption

Ziyi Wang

School of Shipping Economics and Management, Dalian Maritime University, Dalian, Liaoning, 116026, China

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how popular trends shape Generation Z consumers' blind box purchasing. Motivated by rising concerns over trend-driven overconsumption, it examines the psychological pathways—herd conformity, social identity, and fear of missing out (FOMO)—through which trending culture affects buying decisions. A mixed-method design combines an online survey of 92 Gen Z blind-box buyers with semi-structured interviews of five avid collectors. Descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses are employed, alongside qualitative coding to contextualize quantitative patterns. Results show that social-media exposure and influencer "seeding" are positively associated with purchase frequency ($p < 0.01$); participation in collector communities relates to higher annual purchases ($p < 0.05$); and perceived scarcity significantly predicts impulsive buying ($\beta \approx 0.5$, $p < 0.01$). Over 60% reported impulse urges after unboxing content, 72% prioritized "hot" or limited styles, and 52.94% later regretted trend-induced purchases. These findings indicate that social dissemination, circle identity, and limited-edition strategies jointly elevate purchase intention via conformity, identity signaling, and FOMO, amplifying both sales and the risk of irrational consumption. The study contributes an integrated mechanism linking popular culture to consumer behavior and offers dual implications: firms should leverage trends with restraint and long-term brand building, while consumers benefit from budget discipline and cooling-off strategies.

KEYWORDS

Generation Z; Blind box consumption; Social media and influencer marketing; Social identity and herd conformity; FOMO and scarcity (limited-edition) marketing

1 Introduction

In recent years, blind boxes (trendy merchandise with random contents) have exploded in popularity among Generation Z consumers, becoming a prominent phenomenon in the youth market. Generation Z generally refers to those born between 1995 and 2010; they grew up in the digital age and are deeply influenced by social media and global popular culture. Blind boxes initially rose to prominence in the designer toy sector, and have now expanded into many industries such as stationery, beauty, and fast food. Their allure lies in the surprise and collectible value brought by "uncertainty." However, the underlying drivers of the blind box craze are not limited to the product's own appeal; they are closely tied to popular trends such as social media dissemination, influencer-driven product "seeding" (instilling desire), subcultural fads, and companies fueling scarcity-related buzz. In reality, some Gen Z individuals—by chasing the blind box trend—have engaged in overconsumption or even shown signs of addiction. This has prompted public reflection on "how popular trends influence young people's consumer decisions," and has spurred businesses and society at large to pay attention to the driving forces and potential issues behind the blind box craze.

Based on this, our study focuses on the mechanism by which popular trends influence Gen Z blind box consumption behavior, exploring which elements of popular culture significantly drive Generation Z to purchase blind boxes, and through what psychological processes (e.g. herd mentality, social identity, fear of missing out (FOMO)) these influences occur. On this basis, we attempt to distinguish between the rational consumption spurred by trends and irrational bandwagon behavior, and propose strategies to guide Gen Z toward rational consumption and help companies optimize their marketing. Through this research, on the one hand we enrich the theoretical understanding of the relationship between popular culture and consumer behavior; on the other hand we provide valuable practical insights for the blind box industry and consumer community.

2 Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1 Theoretical basis

Popular trends influence consumer decision-making through multiple psychological mechanisms. First, conformity (herd behavior) theory suggests that when a certain consumer behavior becomes a craze, individuals tend to follow the crowd to gain a sense of security. Second, social identity theory indicates that consumers will purchase products bearing symbols of popular culture to express their self-identity and integrate into specific groups. Additionally, the fear of missing out (FOMO) causes consumers to worry about missing hot trends and leads to impulsive blind box purchases.

These theoretical frameworks provide the basis for analyzing the connection between popular trends and consumer behavior.

2.2 Domestic research status

Existing domestic research confirms that blind box consumption is heavily influenced by popular culture. Wang Yu and Zhang Si (2021) found that Gen Z prefer blind boxes containing popular IP elements as a way to showcase their identity; Li Ji and Liu Min (2022) pointed out that ostentatious unboxing content on social media can trigger young people to make copycat purchases, and FOMO mentality leads to irrational consumption; Chen Hao and Wu Yiling (2023) showed empirically that blind boxes infused with trendy elements significantly increase purchase intention, and the need for social sharing plays a mediating role in this effect; Zhao Jing and Zhou Wei (2021) emphasized that the blind box craze is short-lived, and that young people's craze for limited editions is essentially a pursuit of being up-to-date with trends. They suggested that brands respond quickly to trends to maintain hype.

2.3 Foreign research status

Foreign scholars have also examined the blind box craze in the context of popular culture from various perspectives. Belk et al. (2020) noted that the sharing culture on social media has fueled the popularity of blind box "unboxing"; Kawano H. (2019) emphasized that popular international IP (intellectual property) is a core factor driving global youth consumption of blind boxes; Patrick et al. (2021) experimentally confirmed the role of FOMO in impulsive consumption of trend-driven products; Walliams (2022) discussed the phenomenon that trendy consumer goods have short life cycles, and young consumers repeatedly chase new items in a cycle.

Commentary: Overall, popular trends and blind box consumption among young people are closely connected. However, existing research still has shortcomings in areas such as differentiating the influence of specific trend elements and considering localization differences and long-term effects. This study will integrate the above literature to build an analytical framework, and through empirical research will further deepen the understanding of how popular trends affect Generation Z's consumer behavior.

3 Research methods

This study adopted a mixed-method approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. First, a questionnaire was distributed via online platforms to Gen Z individuals (born 1995–2010) with experience purchasing blind boxes, yielding 92 valid responses. The questionnaire covered: respondents' exposure to and awareness of popular trends (e.g. frequency of obtaining blind box information on social media, level of attention to popular IPs), blind box consumption behavior (e.g. purchase frequency in the past year, average monthly expenditure, main motivations), and psychological tendencies (e.g. conformity tendency, degree of FOMO, sense of community identity). We used SPSS to conduct descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis on the data in order to quantitatively examine the influence of trend factors on blind box consumption and the underlying psychological mechanisms.

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 avid blind box collectors (2 males, 3 females, aged 20–28) to explore the motivations behind the quantitative results. The interview questions covered whether they had ever made impulse blind box purchases due to social media or influencer recommendations; what psychological experiences they had during the purchase process (for example, worrying about missing out on limited editions); and whether they later regretted following the trend. Each interview lasted about half an hour. The researchers recorded and coded the interview content, and triangulated the qualitative findings with the survey results, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the internal mechanisms by which popular trends influence consumer behavior.

4 Analysis of the influence of popular trends on generation z's blind box consumption

Media Dissemination and Influencer Effect: Trending content on social media has a significant driving effect on blind box consumption. The survey showed that over 60% of respondents had felt purchase impulses after watching blind box unboxing videos or influencer recommendations on platforms like Douyin (TikTok) or Xiaohongshu. The intensity of social media use was positively correlated with their blind box purchase frequency ($p < 0.01$). Trending topics spread rapidly via short videos, Weibo, and other channels, heightening young people's curiosity and desire to try. In the interviews, many respondents mentioned, "Seeing someone pull a hidden-edition rare figure made me unable to resist trying my luck as well," reflecting that influencer demonstrations and user sharing can "seed" desire among Gen Z, triggering bandwagon purchases.

Subculture Circles and Identity: Blind box fan communities play an amplifying role in spreading the trend. The survey found that respondents who participated in blind box group chats had significantly higher annual purchase quantities than those who did not ($p < 0.05$). Within these circles, members gain a sense of belonging by flaunting their hauls and exchanging information, while also feeling peer pressure — when friends all acquire a new blind box release, individuals tend to follow suit to avoid falling behind. As one respondent said, “All my friends in the circle have it, and if I don’t, I feel out of place.” Evidently, the motivation for social identity drives Gen Z to follow trends in order to maintain their self-identity.

The questionnaire results further verified the influence of popular trends on Gen Z’s blind box consumption behavior. In the survey, about 52.94% of respondents stated that when browsing social platforms like Douyin or Xiaohongshu, they frequently see recommendations related to blind boxes, and 28.43% even believed they were strongly influenced by such recommendations. Additionally, 56.86% of respondents reported that bloggers they follow had recommended or showcased blind box products, indicating that promotion via social media and influencers has a profound impact on Gen Z’s blind box purchasing. About 43.14% of respondents said that their classmates and friends often discuss and share blind box collectibles, further confirming the important role of circle culture in Gen Z’s blind box consumption.

The survey also showed that approximately 72% of respondents would prioritize “popular” or “hot” styles, and 32.35% admitted to purchasing a blind box out of worry about missing a popular edition. These data indicate that Gen Z consumers are clearly driven by trends when buying blind boxes—especially in their strong demand for popular and limited-edition items—reflecting the important role of FOMO in purchase decisions.

From these data, it is evident that Gen Z’s blind box consumption is tightly linked to popular trends, with social media promotion and circle culture being key factors driving their spending. Moreover, consumers often experience regret while chasing trends: 52.94% of respondents in the survey said they had bought blind boxes due to a trend and later felt the purchase was unnecessary. This phenomenon reveals the presence of irrational behavior and impulsive buying traits in blind box consumption.

Limited-Edition Strategy and FOMO: Limited releases and hidden-edition scarcity marketing amplify consumers’ fear of missing out. 72% of respondents said that limited editions heighten their desire to purchase, as they worry about missing the opportunity to obtain a rare item. Statistical analysis also showed that perceived scarcity of blind boxes is significantly positively correlated with impulsive buying tendencies ($\beta \approx 0.5$, $p < 0.01$). The interviews revealed a similar phenomenon: when people heard that a series had only a very small number of hidden editions, they felt “if I don’t grab it now, it’ll be gone,” and thus they kept buying repeatedly. Clearly, scarcity-induced FOMO is one of the important factors driving Gen Z to spend lavishly.

In summary, social media dissemination, peer circle interaction, and limited-edition scarcity strategies overlap and collectively shape Gen Z’s enthusiasm for blind box consumption. These trends have boosted sales but also, to some extent, induced irrational impulse buying. Companies can leverage popular trends to achieve short-term performance gains, but if they rely too heavily on hype, they risk seeing consumer enthusiasm wane and facing a “here today, gone tomorrow” fad scenario.

5 Recommendations

For companies, it is advisable to make good use of trendy elements to stimulate the market while guarding against excessive hype. First, be keen in capturing popular IPs and trending topics and integrate them into blind box designs, using co-branding collaborations and similar methods to boost product buzz. Second, use social media marketing in moderation: leverage KOL (Key Opinion Leader) promotions and encourage consumers to share unboxing experiences to generate buzz, but avoid exaggerated advertising and overly aggressive “hunger marketing” to prevent consumer aversion. With limited-edition release strategies, maintain an appropriate balance—create a sense of scarcity in moderation while ensuring fair access to products, preventing scalpers from exploiting the situation and harming the consumer experience. In addition, focus on cultivating fan communities through online and offline events to strengthen customer loyalty. In short, while riding the trend wave, companies should keep a long-term perspective, winning word-of-mouth with quality products and experiences and avoiding damage to brand trust through short-sighted profit chasing.

For consumers, it is important to approach the blind box craze rationally and avoid blindly following the crowd. When faced with “planting grass” posts on social media, remain discerning—recognize that there may be marketing intentions embedded, and do not buy impulsively just because others are flaunting their purchases. Be skeptical of hype around limited editions: “missing out” does not equal loss, and you can control impulses by setting a cooling-off period before buying. When participating in collector circles, stick to consuming according to your own preferences and financial means, and do not take keeping up with others as a motive for buying blind boxes. Set a budget and enforce it strictly, to avoid spending beyond what you can afford in the pursuit of trends. If you find it hard to control your behavior, seek advice from family or professionals. Only by engaging with trends rationally can one enjoy the fun of blind boxes while

maintaining healthy consumption habits.

6 Conclusion and Outlook

This study revealed the profound mechanisms by which popular trends impact Generation Z's blind box consumption. The survey and interview results showed that popular factors such as social media dissemination, peer circle culture, and limited-edition marketing significantly heighten Gen Z's willingness to buy blind boxes by evoking herd mentality, social identity, and FOMO psychology, making them more prone to impulsive and irrational consumption. This finding explains the drivers behind the blind box craze, and also reminds us that trend-driven motivations have a dual effect: on one hand bringing vitality and opportunities to the market, but on the other potentially inducing problems like overconsumption, which deserves attention. Therefore, companies need to guide consumer rationality even as they chase trends, and consumers themselves should stay vigilant to avoid falling into blind conformity.

This study has its limitations. Due to the limited sample size and scope, the generalizability of the findings is constrained. Future research can expand the sample to include more regions and populations, and further compare the impacts of different types of trend elements on consumer behavior. In addition, longitudinal studies or experiments could be employed to examine the long-term effects of trend factors (for example, changes in consumer loyalty after the trend fades). Nonetheless, this study provides useful insights into the interaction between popular culture and young consumer behavior. As Gen Z increasingly becomes a main consumer force, in-depth research on popular trends and consumer psychology holds significant theoretical and practical value. In sum, how to stay rational while keeping up with trends will become an important issue that future consumer research and practice must continue to focus on.

References

- [1] Wang Yu, Zhang Si. Symbol Preferences and Identity Construction in Generation Z Blind Box Consumption [J]. *Youth Studies*, 2021(12): 34–41.
- [2] Li Ji, Liu Min. Study on Irrational Behavior in Blind Box Consumption from the Perspective of Popular Culture [J]. *Business Economics Research*, 2022(7): 66–72.
- [3] Chen Hao, Wu Yiling. Influence Mechanism of Trend Elements on Blind Box Purchase Intention in the Social Media Era [J]. *Modern Business*, 2023(4): 58–65.
- [4] Zhao Jing, Zhou Wei. *Symbolic Value and "Trend Cycle" in Trendy Toy Consumption* [J]. *Business Times*, 2021(10): 47–53.
- [5] Belk R. *The Joy of Unboxing: Surprise, Curiosity, and Collecting in Consumer Behavior* [J]. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 2020, 37(6): 747–753.
- [6] Kawano H. *Pop Culture and the Rise of Mystery Boxes in Global Youth Consumption* [J]. *International Marketing Review*, 2019, 36(5): 134–142.
- [7] Patrick V., Sharma P., & Dhal R. *FOMO and Impulsive Consumption: The Case of Trend-Driven Products* [J]. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2021, 31(2): 214–228.
- [8] Williams D. *The Short Life Cycle of Trendy Consumer Goods: A Study on Mystery Boxes* [J]. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 2022, 31(1): 19–27.
- [9] Zhang, Y., & Zhang, T. (2022). The effect of blind box product uncertainty on consumers' purchase intention: The mediating role of perceived value and the moderating role of consumption purpose. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 946527.
- [10] Whyke, T. W. (2023). Unboxing the Chinese blind boxes among China's grown-up "missing children". *Global Media and China*.
- [11] Vaudrey, R. K. (2022). A practice unpacked: Unboxing as a consumption practice. *Journal of Business Research*, 145, 843–852.
- [12] Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53, 101742.
- [13] Barton, B. L., Zlatevska, N., & Oppewal, H. (2022). Scarcity tactics in marketing: A meta-analysis of product scarcity effects on consumer purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing*, 98(4), 741–758.
- [14] Ladeira, W. J., Lim, W. M., de Oliveira Santini, F., Rasul, T., Perin, M. G., & Altinay, L. (2023). A meta-analysis on the effects of product scarcity. *Psychology & Marketing*, 40(7), 1267–1279.
- [15] Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(4), 1841–1848.
- [16] Hussain, S., Kaur, J., Akram, U., & Song, H. (2023). Fear of missing out (FOMO) and compulsive buying behavior: A moderated mediation model. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 73, 103334. (or latest article ID).
- [17] Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- [18] Pavlović-Höck, N. (2022). Herd behaviour along the consumer buying decision process—Experimental study in the mobile communications industry. *Digital Business*, 2(1), 100018.
- [19] Gong, X., Xu, L., & Zhou, Z. (2024). Unveiling the enigma of blind box impulse buying: Curiosity and SOR perspective. *Heliyon*, 10(7):56–59.