

Emotion-Driven and Community Construction: A Study on Adolescent Social Practices in "Guzi Economy" under the Uses and Gratifications Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study employs the Uses and Gratifications Theory to investigate the emotional drivers and community-building logic behind adolescents' engagement in the "guzi economy." Through netnography, in-depth interviews, and case analysis, findings reveal that adolescents achieve emotional projection via the randomness of blind box consumption and symbolic possession, forming a closed loop of "emotional demand → consumption practice → community feedback." Guzi communities construct subcultural spaces through shared interests and terminological barriers but face risks of emotional loyalty alienation under capital intervention (e.g., a limited-edition guzi sold for ¥72,000). The research extends the Uses and Gratifications Theory to material consumption, proposing a dynamic "Emotion-Community-Capital" model to guide blind box market regulation and adolescent cultural practices.

KEYWORDS

Emotion-driven; Community construction; Blind box Mechanics; Subcultural identity; Capital co-option

1 Introduction

Amid the globalization of ACG culture and digital consumption expansion, the "guzi economy"—centered around anime, gaming IP merchandise—has become a key medium for Generation Z's emotional compensation and community identity. iResearch (2023) data shows China's ACG industry reached ¥221.9 billion in 2023, with guzi consumption growing at 27.6% annually, reflecting adolescents' "paying-for-love" cultural practice. While prior studies analyzed consumption motives through symbolic consumption (Baudrillard, 2000) and identity formation (Ban Jianwu, 2009), they inadequately explain how emotional demands translate into sustained consumption via community interaction or critically examine capital's co-option mechanisms.

Anchored in the Uses and Gratifications Theory and mixed methods, this study addresses three core issues: How do adolescents achieve emotional healing through guzi consumption? How do guzi communities maintain subcultural cohesion amid self-governance and capital penetration? How does commercial logic alienate emotional loyalty via limited-edition marketing and algorithmic recommendations? Findings indicate the guzi economy embodies a contest between emotional management systems and capital accumulation: blind box mechanics trigger instant gratification, community collaboration reduces costs, while platform algorithms commodify "collection-displaying" behaviors (#晒谷), forging a closed loop of "emotional investment → community feedback → capital appreciation." The ¥72,000 auction of a Haikyuu!! limited-edition badge epitomizes consumerism's complete co-option of subcultural resistance (Hebdige, 1979).

Theoretically, this research constructs a dynamic "Demand-Behavior-Gratification" model for material consumption. Practically, it offers pathways to regulate blind box markets and enhance media literacy education, balancing youth's emotional redemption and rational survival in the digital age.

2 Consumption traits and industrial Chain analysis of the Guzi Economy

2.1 Conceptualization and product forms of "Guzi"

"Guzi" (谷子) derives from the Japanese loanword "グッズ" (goods), denoting officially licensed ACG merchandise (Liu Fanhuahua, 2024). Its evolution from subcultural jargon to mainstream symbol mirrors ACG's cultural permeation. As physical bridges between fictional worlds and reality, guzi manifest as badges ("吧唧"), acrylic stands, flowing acrylic art ("流麻"), and art boards, transforming IP content into tangible emotional symbols. Badges, for instance, feature character "柄图" (design patterns) and copyright markings, fulfilling collectors' desire for symbolic possession while enhancing value through limited numbering or special effects (e.g., glow-in-the-dark, holographic). Notably, guzi designs evolve with media technology—from prints to dynamic flowing acrylics and AR-enabled stands—increasingly blurring virtual-real boundaries through immersive experiences.

2.2 Industrial Chain Structure and capital dynamics

The guzi economy operates via a closed-loop chain: "IP incubation → merchandise development → distribution → community operations." Upstream, IP creators (animation studios, game developers, virtual idol agencies) cultivate emotional attachment through character/story development. Midstream licensed manufacturers embed IP symbols into products, employing blind boxes and limited releases to create scarcity. Top IPs like Genshin Impact and Ensemble Stars! adopt dual-track sales: regular items via e-commerce and limited editions at conventions or themed stores to fuel "scarcity-driven" frenzies. Downstream channels blend online-offline models: venues like BOM Xifanli (BOM 嘻番里) and Bailian ZX Creative Wonderland (百联 ZX 创趣场) deploy themed displays for photo-driven consumption, while platforms like Xianyu (闲鱼) and Pinduoduo host secondary markets featuring "proxy buying" and "group purchases" (拼团). CIC Burning (2022) notes capital's triple-path co-option: IP investment, distribution control, and monopolistic pricing for rare items, standardizing subcultural "love-driven" practices into profit engines.

2.3 Adolescent consumer profile and behavioral traits

Generation Z (15–25 years) constitutes the core consumer base, exhibiting dual logics of "emotion-driven collecting" and "socially-oriented consumption." iResearch (2023) shows 72.3% purchase guzi due to "emotional resonance with characters," with average holdings exceeding 50 items, reflecting philatelic tendencies. Ritualistic behaviors—"eating guzi" (购买), "unboxing" (拆谷), and "display arranging" (摆阵)—transform consumption into immersive experiences. Socially, guzi serve as both community currency and status markers: "showing off collections" (#晒谷) attracts peer engagement while rare-item displays assert hierarchy (Liu Senlin, 2022). Notably, minors (12–18 years) display pronounced conformity—once guzi trends emerge in classrooms, peer pressure drives participation, even triggering irrational behaviors like dietary budgeting or loans. This coexistence of "emotional necessity" and "social coercion" reflects the guzi economy's duality: a tool for self-expression and a structural trap co-created by capital and peer dynamics.

3 Emotional drivers: consumption motivations under uses and gratifications theory

3.1 Typology of emotional demands

Guzi consumption externalizes adolescents' emotional needs into three dimensions: stress-relief, emotional projection, and self-indulgence. Stress-relief compensates for real-world pressures—academic competition, workplace burnout, and social constraints—through unboxing thrills and collecting's orderliness. Comments like "buying guzi is my only escape from thesis deadlines" (Douban's "Guzi Support Group") validate consumption's anxiety-alleviating function (Zeng Xin, 2021). Emotional projection builds parasocial bonds: consumers treat "oshi" (自推, favorite characters) as companions or idealized selves, achieving "symbolic possession" via merchandise. Ensemble Stars! players attaching character badges to backpacks ("like he walks with me") align with Hochschild's (1983) "emotional labor"—maintaining virtual bonds through material investment. Self-indulgence prioritizes sensory/aesthetic gratification: exquisite designs (e.g., flowing acrylic's light effects) enable "paying-for-beauty" self-empowerment. Xiaohongshu "unboxing videos" tagged "#aesthetics-over-utility" or "#instant-mood-booster" reveal emotion's dominance over practicality.

3.2 Usage behaviors: constructing an emotional closed loop

Adolescent consumption displays ritualistic and symbolic traits. Blind box mechanics exploit the "gambler's fallacy": consumers repeatedly purchase hoping for "hidden editions," transforming unboxing into sustained emotional investment. For Light and Night's limited guzi (0.5% hidden rate), players loop purchases with self-promises like "stop if I get it, else continue." Collecting builds emotional integrity through philatelic accumulation—aiming for "full illustration sets" (全图鉴) of a character—systematizing fragmented purchases. Bilibili's "Guzi Collections Bot" videos showcasing "complete sets" gain self-fulfillment and peer validation. Symbolic possession spatializes consumption: displays on desks/shelves elevate private items into "character presence" proofs. Such spatial reconstruction strengthens individual-character bonds while social media sharing (#MyGuziWall) converts private emotions into public performances.

3.3 Gratification feedback: pathways to emotional value

Gratification manifests as instant and extended fulfillment. Instant gratification delivers dopamine surges: discovering an oshi item in blind boxes, tactile pleasure from flowing acrylics, or limited-edition purchase triumphs. Microblog posts like "Got the hidden edition! Life complete!" validate short-term emotional compensation. Extended fulfillment arises from long-term accumulation: collection scale ("100-guzi walls"), rarity (¥72,000 Nishinoya badge), and community prestige ("dedicated oshi lords" 厨力太太) build identity capital for sustained returns. Crucially, gratification self-reinforces

"addictive" cycles—initial emotional compensation through consumption sparks new demands (e.g., "collecting all works by one artist") via community interactions (swapping/group buys), forming a "consume → gratify → re-consume" loop. As Katz (1973) posited, media (here, guzi) usage not only satisfies demands but actively generates new ones.

4 Community construction: interaction mechanics and functions of Guzi culture

The guzi economy's sustainability relies not only on individual emotional projection but also on community systemic interactions. Rooted in shared interests, these communities transform dispersed consumers into collective actors through online-offline rule-making and cultural production, forming a "consume → socialize → reproduce" ecosystem. This process exemplifies the "social needs" dimension of Uses and Gratifications while revealing subcultural autonomy amid capital-technological pressures.

4.1 Community formation logic: from shared interests to rule barriers

Guzi communities cohere through ACG-based affinity. Adolescents adopt "oshi" as identity tags, building trust via "dōki" (同担, oshi-sharing peers). This bond stratifies through symbolic capital: holders of rare guzi ("dedicated oshi lords") gain influence, while others sustain communities via labor (proxy buys, fan art) (Wang Xuebing, 2024). Crucially, terminological barriers fortify group boundaries—jargon like "pre-confirmation" (提确, advance transaction confirmation) or "h-price" (h价, inflated resale pricing) excludes outsiders via decoding failure. A university anime club survey found 72% of non-members felt "term complexity causes communication anxiety," with only 15% willing to engage (Liu Senlin, 2022).

4.2 Interaction practices: from virtual carnival to physical immersion

Interactions blend online-offline spaces. Online, Microblog's "#GuziDiary" builds emotional solidarity via UGC: "unboxing videos" and "collection photography" earn "digital rewards" (likes/comments), stimulating further participation in a "display → validate → re-display" loop. QQ groups act as information hubs: "group buys" (拼车) and "guzi swaps" (换谷) lower costs—e.g., a Genshin Impact Tartaglia limited-edition group filled 200 slots in 3 minutes. Offline, themed-store visits and convention trades materialize virtual ties: consumers at Beijing's BOM Xifanli socialize via badge exchanges or photo sessions ("面基" / mianji, offline meetups), strengthening belonging. Critically, community rules reshape consumption: the controversial "bundling" (捆物出谷, pairing unpopular guzi with popular ones)—though criticized as "forced consumption"—evolves into a "folk law" for allocating scarce resources under collective acquiescence, reflecting capital's erosion of subcultural autonomy (Yu Baogang, 2014).

4.3 Functional reconfiguration: emotional support, economic collaboration, cultural production

Guzi communities transcend instrumental collaboration, functioning as emotion-economy-culture triads. Emotionally, "dōki" form empathy alliances: Douban's "Guzi Depression Support Group" reframes "sunk-cost anxieties" (e.g., "eating instant noodles to buy guzi") into noble "love-driven sacrifice" via collective catharsis (Hochschild, 1983). Economically, internal trust systems emerge: Xianyu's "guzi credibility scores"—based on transaction histories and swap reviews—prioritize high-score users in rare-item auctions, partially replacing platform guarantees. Culturally, fan creations extend IP vitality: Bilibili creator "Guli Quankai" (谷力全开) deconstructs official narratives through unboxing videos. Their series "Badge Literature: When Guzi Become Love Interests" (1M+ views) elevates consumption into postmodern cultural critique.

5 Conclusion

Under the Uses and Gratifications framework, this study deciphers the emotional drivers and community-building logic behind adolescent guzi consumption. Findings reveal a dynamic loop: "emotional demands → consumption practice → community reinforcement." Adolescents achieve stress relief and parasocial bonding through blind box randomness (Zeng Xin, 2021) and symbolic possession (Baudrillard, 2000), exhibiting emotion-led consumption. Guzi communities fortify boundaries via jargon (e.g., "pre-confirmation," "h-price") while sustaining subcultural cohesion through collaborative economies (Ban Jianwu, 2009), expanding IP meanings via UGC. However, latent structural alienation exists—commercial capital co-opts emotional loyalty into profit tools (e.g., ¥72,000 Haikyuu!! auction) through limited editions and algorithmic promotion, confirming consumerism's subcultural co-option (Yu Baogang, 2014;

Hebdige, 1979). Theoretically, this research extends Uses and Gratifications to material consumption, validating its applicability to youth subcultural consumption, while proposing guzi communities' "emotion-economy-culture" multifunctionality as a typological supplement to subcultural studies. Practically, it suggests governance frameworks—blind box probability transparency, jargon standardization, media literacy—to balance regulation, community autonomy, and cultural guidance. Future research should conduct cross-regional comparisons and quantitative analyses, exploring virtual idols/metaverses' impacts on consumption models. Ultimately, the guzi economy embodies youth's emotional resistance to atomized existence yet reveals deep tensions between subcultural practice and capital logic, urging academia to acknowledge cultural legitimacy while cautioning against structural alienation's erosion of subjectivity.

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