

A Study on the Mechanisms of the Emergence and Spread of the 'Blind Box Craze' from the Perspective of Quantum Propagation Theory—Taking Pop Mart as a Case Study

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Abstract:

Utilizing the conceptual framework of observational information collapse, the uncertainty principle, and the multidimensional universe within quantum propagation theory, this study conducts a data-driven textual analysis of user-generated content (UGC) on Xiaohongshu concerning the Pop Mart LABUBU series, exploring the underlying drivers of young people's sustained engagement in blind box consumption. The findings suggest that within a quantized information field, blind box consumption exhibits distinct characteristics of quasi-controllability, quasi-reality, and quasi-concealment, which effectively satisfy young people's psychological needs for a sense of control, security, and social identity. Through behaviors of purchasing, customizing, and "flexing" (displaying) designer toys, users obtain continuous positive affective feedback, sustain long-term consumption engagement, and ultimately catalyze the prevalent "blind box craze" phenomenon.

Keywords:

quantum propagation; blind boxes; Pop Mart; user-generated content; affective consumption; designer toys

1. Introduction

Blind boxes represent a category of cultural and creative consumer goods defined by inherent information asymmetry. While consumers hold general expectations of product categories before purchase, the specific design of a single item is only revealed after unboxing[1]. Unlike conventional commodity transactions governed by the deterministic logic of "what you see is what you get"[2], blind boxes achieve ontological confirmation only after transaction completion. This mechanism of delayed gratification delivers a hedonic consumption experience characterized by the dialectic between perceived controllability and random serendipity. Accordingly, blind boxes transcend the boundaries of traditional commodity exchange and function as effective cultural communication media, in which consumption behavior is inherently embedded within the entire dissemination process.

Pop Mart is the leading enterprise in China's designer art toy industry. By 2025, its iconic LABUBU series



has become the first domestic original Chinese IP to break the 10-billion-yuan revenue threshold, achieving a total revenue of 14.16 billion yuan[3][4]. Such outstanding commercial performance reflects strong market enthusiasm and cultural popularity. Social media data further validates this trend: LABUBU-related content on Xiaohongshu has accumulated over 600 million views, while the #LABUBU hashtag has generated more than 3 million monthly interactions. Existing evidence indicates that blind box consumption does not terminate with purchase; instead, user-driven dissemination often constitutes the core purpose of consumer acquisition. After unboxing, consumers actively engage in prosumer practices, including online content sharing, social toy swapping, and secondary customization.

Nevertheless, while Pop Mart's corporate strategy prioritizes offline physical retail expansion, the sustained popularity of the blind box phenomenon relies heavily on spontaneous user-generated content across social media platforms. In this digital communication field, the maintenance of informational uncertainty serves as the core driving force for continuous viral dissemination.

Against this backdrop, this study takes the LABUBU series as a case study and conducts a textual analysis of Xiaohongshu user-generated content. Grounded in the conceptual framework of quantum propagation theory—specifically the core dimensions of observational wave-function collapse, information superposition, and systemic uncertainty—this research explores the underlying motivations of young users' sustained engagement and deconstructs the formative mechanisms of the prevailing “blind box craze” phenomenon.

2. Theoretical Framework and Application

The “blind box craze” represents a social practice that binds individuals and relevant cultural communities. In *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx pointed out that social practice denotes the objective activity whereby the subject acts upon the object within a specific contextual setting[5]. Latour further emphasized that society is a hybrid network jointly woven by human and non-human actors, encompassing technology, materiality, and institutional arrangements[6]. Accordingly, the “blind box craze” is more than consumers' purchase and modification of commodities; it constitutes an entangled interactive practice between humans and objects, as well as among individual consumers[7]. These entangling interactions gradually cultivate aesthetic convergence and reinforce communal identity markers. As materialized tokens, blind box series of different styles externally reflect and transmit the cultural uniqueness of their groups. In this process, blind box products evolve from symbolizing the individual “I” to embodying the collective “we”.

Contemporary blind box practices, including figure swapping, custom remaking, and online showcasing, have massively migrated to virtual domains. Traditional analytical dimensions based on physical time and space are no longer sufficient to interpret these intertwined activities within the digital field. Quantum propagation theory offers a viable analytical framework for understanding information flow in digital spaces. The theory contends that the dissemination of digital information bears quantum characteristics: uncertainty, polymorphic superposition, and information collapse upon observation[8]. When users share blind box-related content in cyberspace, information is converted into digital codes composed of visual imagery, textual tags, and emotional weights, existing as computable and transmittable digital units. Young people's sustained engagement with blind box activities within digital spaces also embodies such quantum attributes:

2.1 The Ontological Uncertainty of the Object

An ontological inquiry into the blind box necessitates an examination of the "existence, essence, and structure" of the object[9].

Aristotle famously distinguished between "actual existence" and "potentiality" (existence as potential)[10]. Before unboxing, the product resides in a state of probabilistic uncertainty; while the overarching aesthetic and series theme are defined, the specific iteration remains an unobserved variable. This epistemic gap between the known and the unknown triggers a psychological "void-filling" impulse[11], where the physical concealment generates a sustained tension that catalyzes consumer curiosity.

Market mechanisms have strategically internalized and amplified this uncertainty. Merchants manipulate scarcity through calculated probability ratios (e.g., a 1:144 "hidden" variant) and deploy digital "box-shaking" interfaces to simulate tactile unboxing, ensuring that uncertainty persists within the virtual field. If uncertainty is the kinetic energy of this craze, it manifests empirically through high-frequency user discourse surrounding the "randomness experience."

P1: The inherent uncertainty of the blind box is a primary driver of sustained user engagement.

2.2 The Quantum Superposition of Subjectivities

The multiform superposition within blind box practices is manifested at three levels: the individual, the human-object relationship, and interpersonal interaction.

First, human subjects are intrinsically multifaceted. As Walt Whitman observed, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"[12]. Within a single consumer, multiple identities—such as "collector," "secondary creator," and "toy parent" (wa ma)—coexist in a state of subjective superposition. Self-complexity theory suggests that individuals construct multidimensional self-representations to buffer the pressures of a single identity; thus, the diverse roles enabled by blind boxes offer a mechanism to resist the "identity flattening" of the digital age[13].

Second, there is a superposition of meaning between humans and objects. On the one hand, through "prosumer" activities like customization and painting, players imbue objects with personal affective preferences[14]; on the other hand, the objects themselves—characterized by "therapeutic" and "cute" aesthetics—generate symbolic value beyond mere utility[15]. Together, these forces constitute a high symbolic density.[16]

Finally, interpersonal relationships are mediated through the superposition of objects. Marx noted that commodity fetishism causes "social relations between people to assume the fantastic form of a relation between things"[17]. Conversely, these objects point toward latent social networks. By engaging in "toy swapping," individuals enter a relational web where social standing and interpersonal ties exist in a state of superposition. Displaying rare figures in niche communities activates dopamine neurons in the ventral tegmental area[18], providing the neural reinforcement necessary for continued community participation.

P2-1: The superposition of subjective identities motivates sustained engagement.

P2-2: The symbolic richness of the object drives sustained engagement.



P2-3: The intensity of interpersonal connectivity facilitates sustained engagement.

2.3 The Collapse Effect of Spatial Observation

Within the space of concrescence, the "blind box craze" represents the transformation of information between "wave" and "particle" states, where observation collapses diffuse possibilities into crystallized consumer intent.

Individual observation triggers ontological collapse. Quantum propagation theory suggests that information possesses wave-particle duality[19]. A social media post regarding a blind box exists as a "wave"—a potentiality of coexisting meanings—until it is clicked[20]. Only upon being "observed" does it collapse into a definite "particle" of text and interaction. However, observations are not equal. Bourdieu's concept of habitus[21] explains this variance: only individuals who have internalized community-specific knowledge can achieve a meaningful "collapse." A layperson sees a generic post; a seasoned player possessing the "blind box habitus" decodes the specific probabilities and market value. By sharing this certainty, veteran players reduce exploration costs for others, accelerating community growth.

The contagion of the craze reflects quantum resonance. When a critical mass of individuals with similar habitus interact, multiple signal sources superimpose, creating a resonance that triggers algorithmic amplification. As Le Bon observed, collective attention is often tacitly endowed with value[22]. This explains how mass exposure catalyzes herd behavior through a mechanism of group psychology.

The intervention of "Super-Observers" achieves energy leaps. The participation of celebrities and KOLs provides an aesthetic endorsement that functions as a "super-observation"[23]. This reduces the "cultural distance"—for outsiders and shortens the decision-making path, driving cross-community consumption.

P3-1: The depth of individual habitus drives sustained engagement.

P3-2: The frequency of community interaction is a key driver of engagement.

P3-3: The intervention of "super-observers" facilitates energy leaps in engagement.

3. Research Methodology and Empirical Analysis

The drivers of sustained engagement in blind box consumption are inherently manifested within the spontaneous discursive practices of users. This chapter operationalizes the six propositions derived from the previously established theoretical framework. Utilizing a combination of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling and sentiment analysis, this study systematically examines User-Generated Content (UGC) related to the LABUBU series on Xiaohongshu. By triangulating theoretical propositions with empirical textual data, this research aims to deconstruct the generative mechanisms and influencing factors underlying the contemporary "blind box craze."

3.1 Operationalized Propositions

To ensure structural integrity, all operational definitions were rigorously derived from the theoretical frame-

work. These definitions underwent an independent review process by a panel of three subject-matter experts. The inter-rater agreement yielded a Content Validity Ratio (CVR) of 1.00, indicating a perfect consensus on the relevance and accuracy of the operationalized variables.

3.2 Data Acquisition and Preprocessing

Table of Operationalised Propositions

Dimension	Proposition	Textual Operational Definition	Example Keywords
Object Uncertainty	P1	Covers textual content related to blind box probability settings and the emotional perceptions triggered by uncertainty	gambling, hidden variant, disappointment
	P2-1	Includes narratives about blind box secondary modification and self-identity labeling within the fan community	toy parent, newbie, outfit redesign
Multiple Subject Forms	P2-2	Contains comments on blind box aesthetic evaluation and subjective emotional experience expression	healing, cute, aesthetic flaw
	P2-3	Encompasses textual records of blind box trading, swapping, social display and transaction negotiation	Figure swapping, collection hunting, mutual mailing
Spatial Observation Collapse	P3-1	Includes content concerning blind box quality control evaluation and practical unboxing skills	quality control, authenticity identification
	P3-2	Covers texts about initiating peer interaction and organising offline or online community activities	fellow collectors, community communication
	P3-3	Includes discussions on celebrity-related IP endorsement, brand cross-over collaboration, and traffic dissemination	celebrity endorsement, brand collaboration, content recommendation

Using Xiaohongshu as the data source, user text was collected from 24 April 2025 (the launch date of LABUBU's third generation) to 20 April 2026. Raw data comprising 3,451 entries was sampled in descending order by total engagement. After removing invalid characters, filtering out advertising and marketing content, and manually reviewing and deduplicating the data, 1,119 valid samples were obtained. We employed the Jieba word segmentation tool for Chinese text segmentation, utilised a customised domain-specific dictionary (covering community-specific terms such as 'customising dolls', 'modifying dolls', and 'showcasing dolls'), applied stop-word filtering (removing common function words while retaining action verbs, emotional terms, and aesthetic descriptors), and implemented a synonym normalisation process to prevent scattered word frequencies and misidentification of internet slang:



Table showing partial field cleaning

Raw text	Cleaned Results	Raw text	Cleaned result
SKULLPANDA looks absolutely brilliant	It looks absolutely brilliant	#Dimoo I've drawn until I'm exhausted	Pulled until I was exhausted
MOLLY is just too cute@ Xiaohongshu	So cute	Labubu POP MART@ Username	(Discarded)

Part-of-speech tagging and synonym normalisation section

Original text	Word segmentation results	After normalisation
It looks absolutely stunning;it is really stunningly beautiful	Absolutely gorgeous/ Stunning	Good-looking/Good-looking
I agonised over it for ages but finally bought it—I'm thrilled and satisfied	Hesitated/Bought it/ Thrilled/Satisfied	Hesitated/Bought/ Thrilled/Satisfied
It's brilliant!So cute,I'm hooked—totally sold on it	So satisfying/Cute/ Addictive/Must-have	Happy/Cute/Addictive/ Must-have

3.3 Word Frequency Analysis

The top 20 high-frequency keywords by weighted frequency are:purchase(444),cute(308),sell(281),draw(147),swap(125),attractive(121),acquire(100),modify(81),limited edition(66),happy(66),heart-fluttering(63),anticipation(60),cute(53),mould(51),soothing(50),texture(35),show off(26),blind box(24),looks(24),exquisite(18)

3.4 Sentiment Analysis

Emotional keywords were assigned corresponding weights;preceding intensifiers were identified and multiplied by coefficients;the results were then normalised to the range[-1,1]and categorised into three classes based on a threshold:positive(≥ 0.25),neutral(-0.25 to 0.25)and negative(≤ -0.25).A random sample of 200 texts was selected for manual review,yielding a Kappa coefficient of 0.81($p < 0.001$),indicating good reliability.The results show that positive sentiment predominates(56.3%),whilst neutral sentiment is predominantly found in second-hand trading posts,such as those labelled'local swap'(42.4%).Negative sentiment accounts for a very low proportion(1.3%),with texts primarily describing overpricing and disappointment regarding loot boxes.

Table of Basic Sentiment Weights and Reinforcement Word Coefficients

Type	Representative Terms
Positive(Score ≥ 0.25)	So cute(1.0)Heart-fluttering(0.9)Satisfaction(0.9) Absolutely gorgeous(1.0)Soothing(0.8)Lucky(0.8)

Type	Representative Terms
Negative Score ≤ -0.25	Devastated(-1.0)Broken(-0.9)Ugly(-0.9) Regret(-0.8)Overpriced(-0.5)Confused(-0.3)
Intensifiers	Super($\times 1.3$)Good($\times 1.2$) Very($\times 1.3$)Extremely($\times 1.4$)

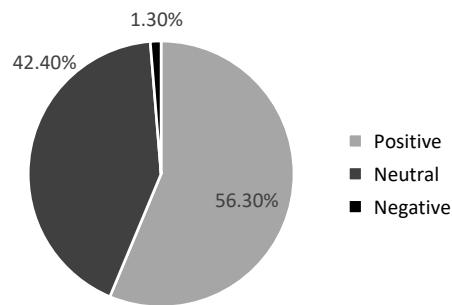


Figure 2 User Text Sentiment Distribution

3.5 LDA topic modelling

Unsupervised topic clustering was performed using the LDA model. The optimal number of topics was determined by perplexity and the UMass topic coherence coefficient (mean = -4.20). The results showed that when the number of topics $K=6$ (403.07, -3.4%), the model fit and topic discrimination were optimal. The clustering yielded six themes, with the proportions, from highest to lowest, being T5 (31.9%), T6 (21.9%), T2 (19.9%), T1 (13.0%), T3 (7.9%) and T4 (5.5%).

LDA Theme Model Results Table

Theme (UMass Coefficient)	Proportion	Core Feature Words	Subject (UMass coefficient)	Proportion	Core keywords
T1(-4.15)	13.0%	Hidden, good luck, regret	T4(-5.67)	5.5%	Experience, Discernment
T2(-3.82)	19.9%	Output, Interaction, Exchange	T5(-2.94)	31.9%	Cute, Adorable, Heart-fluttering
T3(-5.21)	7.9%	Same style, Lisa	T6(-3.41)	21.9%	Costume changes, alterations, clothing

3.6 Comparison and Verification: Propositions vs. Empirical Results

By triangulating the LDA thematic clustering results with the six theoretical propositions, this study verifies that P1, P2-1, P2-2, P2-3, P3-1, and P3-3 obtain robust semantic support from corresponding thematic clusters. In contrast, P3-2 fails to form an independent thematic cluster and can only be explained indirectly through cross-theme discourse. The hierarchical formation mechanism of the “blind box craze” is deconstructed as follows:

1. Primary Mechanism: Immediate Affective Healing through Aesthetic Consumption



The thematic findings of T5 strongly validate P2-2 concerning the symbolic richness of blind box objects. LDA results indicate that aesthetic and affective themes—centered on user descriptions of “cute”, “adorable”, “heart-fluttering”, and “healing” experiences—account for 31.9% of the total corpus, ranking as the dominant thematic dimension. Sentiment analysis further corroborates this result, with 56.3% of user-generated texts conveying positive affective valence. This demonstrates that the core driving force of blind box consumption lies in the immediate psychological gratification brought by the aesthetic design of blind box products.

2.Secondary Mechanisms:Identity Superposition and Object-Mediated Relationality

P2-1, which concerns the superposition of subjective identities, corresponds to thematic cluster T6 (21.9%). Featured by keywords such as “customization” and “outfit modification”, this cluster confirms that users construct multifaceted prosumer identities through secondary creation, which constitutes a critical pillar for sustained consumption engagement.

P2-3, focusing on interpersonal relational closeness, aligns with cluster T2 (19.9%). Dominated by terms including “reselling” and “figure swapping”, this dimension reflects object-mediated interpersonal interactions and community bonding within blind box fan circles.

3.Supplementary Mechanism:The Kinetic Energy of Ontological Uncertainty

P1 regarding product uncertainty is validated by cluster T1 (13.0%). This theme encompasses dual emotional expressions of positive pre-unboxing anticipation and negative post-unboxing regret. It indicates that the quantum uncertainty of blind box products generates continuous experiential tension via wave-function collapse during unboxing, functioning as a persistent supplementary driver of user engagement regardless of final outcomes.

4.Peripheral Factors and Discursive Diffusion

P3-1, representing individual community habitus depth, corresponds to cluster T4 (5.5%), which constitutes a niche yet professional dimension of community discourse.

P3-3 concerning super-observer intervention matches cluster T3 (7.9%). Although keywords such as “celebrity endorsement” and “collaboration counterpart” present clear semantic connotations, their low proportional share indicates that external influencer intervention serves only as a marginal driving factor.

Notably, P3-2 related to community interaction frequency does not form an independent cluster. This phenomenon stems from discursive diffusion: peer communication and communal interaction act as pervasive contextual discourse that overlaps extensively with all other thematic dimensions, making it algorithmically inseparable in LDA clustering.

Overall, the “blind box craze” is hierarchically driven by multiple factors. Primary motivation originates from the positive affective healing experience brought by the inherent aesthetic attributes of blind box products. Secondary sustaining power derives from users’ identity construction via secondary creation and intimate relational networks within niche fan communities. Product uncertainty serves as a supplementary experiential driver. By contrast, external intervention from celebrities and KOLs exerts limited influence with weak radiation effects. This empirical evidence further confirms that the blind box phenomenon remains a niche subcul-

tural discourse confined within fan groups and has not yet achieved cross-circle popular dissemination.

4. Conclusion

The “blind box craze” is far more than a commercial phenomenon; it is a spiritual “simulated game” that bridges a persistent “cultural divide.” Against the backdrop of the grand narratives of contemporary society—defined by systemic uncertainty—young people utilize blind boxes as a ritualistic tool to alleviate existential anxiety. Through the lens of quantum propagation theory, the act of observation transforms potentiality into certainty, which then circulates within specialized communicative loops. Modern media constructs a “dramaturgical window” [24] that transcends spatio-temporal boundaries, allowing individuals to glimpse lifestyles beyond their immediate social strata. This upward social comparison inevitably breeds a sense of relative deprivation and powerlessness, as individuals find themselves unable to accelerate the realization of self-worth through subjective agency alone. When macroscopic certainty remains elusive, the blind box serves as a mechanism for reconciliation. Through the integrated practices of purchasing, customizing, swapping, and “-flexing,” youth reclaim a sense of agency, security, and belonging—a continuous positive feedback loop that sustains the contemporary “blind box craze.”

4.1 Quasi-Controllability: Reclaiming Agency in an Uncontrollable Reality

Self-realization in the physical world is often constrained by rigid social and objective laws. As Hartmut Rosa observes [25], the temporal structure of late modernity leaves individuals in a state of chronic anxiety characterized by “goal suspension,” where satisfaction is perpetually deferred to an unattainable horizon. In contrast, the “collapse” (unboxing) of a blind box depends entirely on the subject’s intervention. It offers immediate feedback and instantaneous affective gratification. While reality is fraught with contingent uncertainty, the blind box operates within a finite set of known outcomes (standard and hidden variants). This design allows individuals to reclaim a sense of micro-level control over certainty. This allure is further amplified in digital spaces; for instance, the collective “guessing” of blind box contents on Xiaohongshu serves as a spectator ritual for wave-function collapse [26], where participants instantaneously share the thrill of certainty’s release.

4.2 Quasi-Reality: A Vessel for Projected Affect and Care

According to D.W. Winnicott’s theory of “transitional objects” [27], certain material items—colloquially referred to as “A-bei-bei” in local contexts—function as psychological anchors that mitigate separation anxiety. With their tactile, plush designs, blind boxes seamlessly embed themselves into the user’s daily geography—desks, commuter bags, and bedsides. Once the fundamental need for security is satisfied, the need for belonging and affection emerges, prompting individuals to treat these dolls as “babies” (nurturing play). Practices such as customizing dolls (gai wa) and furnishing dollhouses represent a form of subconscious simulated care, reactivating childhood “make-believe” memories in adulthood. This process bypasses the exorbitant costs of biological child-rearing in reality, providing a low-burden alternative for the release of nurturing desires. The digital realm, acting as a field of potentiality, solidifies this identity superposition; by documenting the doll’s “travels” and “daily life,” individuals complete a socialization loop as pseudo-caregivers within a virtual ecosystem.

4.3 Quasi-Concealment: The Dialectics of Self-Presentation and Social Buffer



A structural contradiction exists between the drive for self-validation and the fear of social exclusion[28]. Individuals yearn for visibility but dread the social backlash of excessive ostentation. Bernard Mandeville noted that the display of wealth in physical spaces is often visually intrusive and prone to hostile scrutiny[29]. Digital fields, however, offer a buffer: the "collapse" of meaning depends on whether the observer possesses the requisite habitus. To an outsider, a blind box post is merely a photo of a plush toy; its "wave-like" symbolic significance is not decoded as an aggressive signal of status. It is precisely this quasi-concealed nature that allows the "blind box craze" to be recognized by "those in the know" while evading the scrutiny and exclusion of those outside the circle. Through this low-frequency yet precise signal transmission, individuals achieve the ideal state of being "conspicuously seen" without being "critically scrutinized."

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