

A Research on the “Mystery Box Economy” from the Perspective of the Play Theory of Mass Communication--A Case Study of Pop Mart

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Abstract: Mystery box consumption is a new consumption pattern in recent years, and the rise of "Mystery box Economy" is closely related to the intrinsic logic of the game. From the perspective of the play theory of mass communication, the formation of "Mystery box Economy" has three elements worthy of attention. First, the game setting restricts the consumption scene of Mystery boxes. Second, the psychological motivation of games just corresponds to that of the Mysterybox consumption. Third, players' self-identity and group-identity are confirmed and strengthened in the course of the game

Key Words: Mystery Box; the Play Theory of Mass Communication; Games; Pop Mart

1. Introduction

Mystery boxes have rapidly become familiar to consumers as the art toymaker Pop Mart floated on the Hong Kong stock exchange in December 2020. With its shares more than doubling in price on their first day of trading, valuing the company over HK\$100 bn, Pop Mart was also regarded as “the first share of Mystery box”.

Mystery box means that the seller puts the doll in a box without any reminder. Only after the purchase, can the buyer randomly or intuitively pick one and open it to see what is inside. The toys inside typically come from the animation peripheral products (like Micky Mouse), IP of film and television works (like Harry Porter) and dolls independently designed by designers (like the Molly and Pucky series by Pop Mart), which range in price from 29 to 89 yuan. Since the introduction of the Mystery box, there has been an alarming rise in its consumers and operating revenues. According to

the consumption ratings of the post-1995 shopaholics published by Tmall, China's largest online shopping platform, Mystery boxes have gained extreme popularity among the Chinese young consumers. As a leader in the Mystery box industry, Pop Mart's registered members reached a staggering 26 million in 2022 and their re-purchase rate reached 58%. In 2022, Pop Mart's revenue reached 4.6 billion yuan and achieved five years of growth consecutively. Notably, Pop Mart's overseas business has expanded substantially with a year-on-year rise of 147.1%. At present, the number of stores in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and overseas regions has increased to 43 with 120 robot stores and 13 cross-border e-commerce platforms. While continuing to expand the Asian Market, Pop Mart opened its first physical store in Britain, New Zealand, the USA and Australia respectively in 2022. ^[1]

From the perspective of the market, why are consumers so crazy about Mystery boxes? What kind of player psychology does Mystery box satisfy? William Stephenson's play theory of mass communication provides a good perspective for understanding this phenomenon. This paper discusses the above problems based on this theory.

2. The Composition of the Game: the Scene Design of Mystery Box Consumption

William Stephenson, an American scholar, made a systematic and theoretical reflection on the relationship between communication and games. In his well-known book *The Game Theory of Mass Communication*, he stated, "The best thing about mass communication is to allow readers to immerse themselves in subjective games." ^[2] With time passing by, his so-called "reader" is not only a reader, but also a collection of audiences, netizens, game players and other media users. Stephenson provides a new perspective for the study of mass communication from the perspective of social communication psychology, and from this perspective, "Mystery box craze", as a communication phenomenon, can be seen as an ingenious combination of the elaborate design of game sessions and the players' game psychology.

As a self-consistent world, a game has a most important feature—the presetting of the whole game world, that is to say, before players join the game, all the rules have been set and built into the game machine or the game software. "The Mystery box is the product of emotional experience design. With the stability of daily life, people begin to pursue spiritual needs, and Mystery boxes come into being and are developed." ^[3] As far as the purchase of Mystery boxes is concerned, consumers must accept the rules of play before the purchase. First, Mystery boxes are picked at random. The consumer must accept the outcome, which is similar to "fate" whether he or she likes it or not. Second, the purchase is irreversible. After payment, the buyer picks one immediately. If the inside figurine is not a one he or she wants, he cannot refund it. Clearly, accepting the rules of play is a prerequisite for the purchase of Mystery boxes, which is similar to the underlying gambling spirit of "taking the gamble and accepting the loss". Therefore, consumers usually accept the result willingly when they pick one that they already have or are not satisfied with. It can be seen that under the

restriction of the game rules, the individual is the approver and acceptor of the rules, which also means that the individual enters a prescribed situation to guide his own behavior. This is no different from the participation in the online games.

As mentioned above, from the perspective of communication, the purchase of blind boxes is also a game communication. Its main purpose is for entertainment. "the purpose of communication is not to accomplish anything, but only a part of achieving satisfaction and happiness."^[4]

Therefore, the main value of blind box consumption lies in the realization of individual satisfaction and happiness. However, in the context of new media, the value of blind box consumption has been extended. On the one hand, the value of blind box consumption has shifted from individual satisfaction and happiness to group communication and group identification. The consumer groups of blind boxes on the Internet has made blind box purchase a social currency and players can achieve their virtual social images, such as a mother, a blind box master, a trend player and so on. socializing in the virtual world. On the other hand, blind boxes also play a real monetary role in the actual economic benefits, and those "limited editions" and "hidden editions" will be sold in the second-hand market at a much higher price than the initial price.

3. Composition of Game Psychology: Psychological Factors of Mystery Box Consumption

In a sense, most communication occurs for the purpose of fun and recreation. People play games to seek happiness and satisfaction. From the perspective of game communication, the game psychology of Mystery box consumption is related to the following psychological motivations.

The fast-paced life of modern society makes everyone driven by life and bear all kinds of pressure. "Mystery box consumption, as a microeconomic behavior embedded in social structure, is a kind of perceptual consumption, irrational consumption."^[5] In this situation, people will naturally relieve their pressure of real life in playing games, because "game is everyone's tour in disguise, which helps to leave behind all the worries and obligations in real life; game is an episode of everyday life, which is isolated from everyday life and the real world; game is everyone's voluntary behavior, which makes a clean break with work and moral obligations. In a sense, game has no interests involved and it only provides a temporary spiritual satisfaction. While gaming can be a serious thing, the seriousness doesn't really matter. The rich aesthetic feeling of the Mystery box design and the setting of the game scenes are in line with the needs of modern people to seek relaxation and decompression.

"From the perspective of economic sociology, Mystery box consumption includes both economic factors and non-economic factors".^[6] In terms of the aesthetic level of the Mystery box design, most of the figurines have unique images, different from the traditional dolls. The figurines designed by different designers present different

aesthetic styles. Taking Pop Mart as an example, at present, the design of the company's Mystery boxes mainly comes from independent designers or the contracted designers of the company, such as the hottest and most representative Molly and Pucky series. The other characters come from some well-known animation and film IP works like Harry Potter, Mickey Mouse, Hello Kitty and so on. As of the first half of 2020, the number of IP in operation reached 93, including 12 self-owned IP, 25 exclusive IP and 56 non-exclusive IP. The various aesthetic designs of these different series cater to the needs of different consumers, thus forming a target for all.

The purpose of subculture research is to “learn about social groups that are separate”^[7] Hence, there are a small number of “bright boxes” on the market, that is, people can clearly know what kind of dolls are in the boxes when they pay for it. But interestingly, “blind box” is still more popular than “bright box”. And even to some extent, the reason why blind boxes are popular is the “blind”: before opening the box, people can never know what is in the box. Therefore, the surprise caused by the uncertainty of opening the box at the moment, the expectation of taking small bets to win big in gambling, and people's curiosity about the unknown have become the selling point of the blind box.

4. Game and the Construction of Youth Subculture: Mystery Box Use and Identity

The consumption and use of Mystery boxes are not only the emotional projection and pressure release of individuals, but also the participation of games and the satisfaction of curiosity.

Regarding self-identity in "Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity", Charles Taylor mentioned: "The self of a person can be based not on himself but only in the relationship with certain interlocutors, then I am the self."^[8] In other words, the concept of self must be formed in the relationship and interaction with others. "The consumption demand of modern youth groups no longer satisfy with physiological needs and safety needs, begin to pursue high-level Peak experience"^[9] Mystery box players get recognition and evaluation from others through sharing their dolls, interacting with others who have the similar preference in the trending community, and communicating with others about the dolls in forums, microblogs, Bilibili website and other online communities, and thus identify with and affirm their imagination. For example, those people who made their efforts to successfully dress up their dolls will get the positive evaluation from others after they share the photos of their dolls on the Internet, and thus gain recognition and confidence about their own hands-on ability; after getting hidden or limited version dolls, they would like to discuss and share photos in the group, or leave impression on others by sharing a lot of photos after collecting many dolls, so that they could create and maintain their identity.

In addition to confirming themselves, forming or strengthening self-identity, blind box players also form group identity to some extent via the consumption and use of blind boxes. The so-called group identity refers to the fact that members of the group have

common goals or hobbies and enjoy common interests, so they form more consistent views and emotions on events and people outside their group. As far as blind box players are concerned, they could form an interest group because of their common interest in consuming and playing those dolls. The development of social networks makes it easy for players to find friends and form a community. In general, the group identity of blind box players in the community is manifested from the following two aspects : first, obtain social support within the group, making the blind box consumption, a niche consumption form, be magnified and presented, to form the feeling and emotional experience of ' I 'm not alone ', and thus confirm themselves as a member of the blind box group ; second, form a strong ' we ' consciousness in the relationship between their groups and the external world, that is, the blind box players and the groups that do not play the blind box, to separate their own groups from other groups, so that they form a youth subculture belonging to the minority group.

5. Conclusion

Mystery box products meet the emotional experience needs of consumers, can drive market consumption, and promote the steady growth of the experience economy.^[10]In the context of " entertainment to death, " the Mystery box players and the impact they have caused are only a part of social culture. However, how to think about and explore these phenomena from a theoretical perspective is a realistic concern and position that academic research should have. Propagation of theories of play is an important perspective to study these phenomena, and it should not be ignored.

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