



The 20th National and International Conference
"Strengthen knowledge to drive education and integrate across sciences for sustainable development"
December 3, 2025 Online Via Zoom

GLOBAL MEETS LOCAL: BLIND BOX CONSUMPTION AS CROSS-CULTURAL RITUAL AMONG BANGKOK YOUTH

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Abstract

This study adopts a theoretical perspective of cross-cultural communication to delve into the consumption practices of the Chinese brand Pop Mart's blind box products among the youth demographic in Bangkok, Thailand. Utilizing a mixed-methods research approach that combines questionnaire surveys (385 valid samples), in-depth interviews (30 core consumers), focus group discussions (2 groups of 6–8 people each), and a three-month digital ethnography observation, it systematically analyzes the consumption behaviors, cultural adaptation, and identity construction processes of Bangkok youth within the context of global cultural flows. The research finds that Bangkok youth are not passive recipients of global cultural products; instead, they transform blind box consumption into a communication ritual with local characteristics through creative cultural practices. Specifically, the study reveals three key findings: First, consumers creatively integrate global IP symbols with local Thai cultural elements through a "cultural translation" mechanism, forming unique cultural hybrids. Second, the behavioral sequence of "purchasing–waiting–unboxing–sharing" constitutes a complete ritual process, which not only satisfies individual emotional needs but also constructs a shared system of meaning at the community level. Finally, the core driver of consumption is the pursuit of symbolic value (including social capital, cultural identity, and emotional solace), a finding that deepens our understanding of contemporary youth consumption motivations. This study contributes at both theoretical and practical levels: theoretically, by proposing a "bottom-up glocalization" analytical framework, it enriches cross-cultural communication theory; practically, it provides actionable strategic recommendations for the international development of the cultural and creative industries.

Keywords: Blind Box Economy, Cross-Cultural Communication, Symbolic Consumption

Introduction

In the context of contemporary globalization, the transnational flow of cultural products has become a common phenomenon. China's creative industries, particularly trend toy brands represented by Pop Mart, have achieved significant global market expansion within just a few years through the innovative "blind box" business model. This phenomenon transcends traditional trade categories, becoming a cultural communication practice worthy of in-depth exploration. According to industry reports, the global trendy toy market has nearly tripled in size over the past decade, with the Southeast Asian market performing particularly well (NPD Group & The Toy Association, 2024). As an industry leader, Pop Mart's overseas revenue grew rapidly from less than 100 million RMB in 2019



to nearly 1 billion RMB in 2023, demonstrating strong growth momentum (Frost & Sullivan, 2023).

However, there is a noticeable theoretical gap in existing research. Most literature either analyzes the business model of blind boxes from a marketing perspective or explores the consumption stimulus brought by “uncertainty” from a consumer psychology standpoint, yet rarely examines it systematically within the theoretical framework of cross-cultural communication. This research gap makes it difficult for us to understand: How are global cultural products received, interpreted, and reconstructed within specific local contexts? What active role do young consumers play in this process?

This study builds on James W. Carey’s ritual view of communication and Jean Baudrillard’s theory of symbolic consumption to construct an integrated analytical framework. Carey (2005) views communication as a ritual that sustains social existence, rather than merely a process of information transmission. This perspective provides important insights for understanding the community dimension of blind box consumption. Baudrillard’s (1970) discussion of symbolic value helps us look beyond the use value of products and delve into their significance as identity symbols and cultural capital. Simultaneously, glocalization theory provides a conceptual tool for understanding the dynamic interaction between the global and the local.

Researching the blind box consumption practices of Bangkok youth holds multiple significances. On one hand, Thailand, as an important economy in Southeast Asia, reflects new trends in regional cultural development through the cultural practices of its youth. On the other hand, Bangkok’s characteristic of multicultural convergence makes it an ideal field for observing cross-cultural communication. Through systematic investigation, this study will reveal how blind box consumption becomes a communication practice for youth to construct identity and build community, thereby deepening our understanding of the cultural adaptation process in the context of globalization.

Research Objectives

1. To characterize the consumption motivations and cultural interpretation patterns of blind boxes among young people in Bangkok
2. To identify the ritualistic nature of unboxing practices and their role in constructing collective identity within trendy toy communities
3. To examine the symbolic values consumers seek through blind box purchases and their underlying social-psychological motivations

Scope of the Research

1. **Population Scope:** Focus consumers residing permanently in Bangkok, requiring experience in purchasing Pop Mart blind box products and participation in related online or offline community activities. This group is selected based on their characteristics as digital natives and their active consumption participation.

2. **Variable Scope:** Core variables under investigation include consumption frequency and expenditure, purchase channel preferences, IP selection tendencies, degree of community participation, cultural identity expression, etc., while also paying attention to the internal relationships between these variables.



3. **Time Scope:** Focus on the development stage from 2016 to the present. This period corresponds to the key phase of Pop Mart's global expansion and is also an important stage for blind box culture in Thailand, from its introduction to its peak.

Literature Review

This study is built upon three interrelated theoretical traditions. By sorting out and integrating them, a unique analytical perspective is constructed.

First, the theory of symbolic consumption provides the foundation for understanding the essential value of blind boxes. Baudrillard (1970), in *The Consumer Society*, profoundly pointed out that modern consumption is essentially the consumption of symbols. In the digital age, symbolic consumption presents new characteristics. Furthermore, studies on youth consumption in East Asia provide a crucial comparative context. Research on Japanese "kawaii" (cute) culture reveals its deep integration into various consumption domains, from character goods to fashion, serving as a means for youth to construct identity and seek emotional comfort (Kinsella, 1995). Similarly, the "Matatabi-sur" (collecting) culture in Japan, evident in phenomena like Gachapon and sticker collecting, shares similarities with blind box consumption in its emphasis on serialization, completeness, and the thrill of randomness (Okada, 2023). In South Korea, the "Sontak" (hand-tearing) culture, particularly prevalent in the consumption of K-pop albums and photocards, demonstrates a parallel ritualistic practice of unboxing, collecting, and trading, which strengthens fan community bonds and embodies a pursuit of symbolic capital (Lee, 2022). These comparative cases highlight that the pursuit of symbolic value and the formation of collecting rituals are prominent features of contemporary youth consumption culture across Asia, providing a broader framework for analyzing the Bangkok case.

Secondly, the ritual view of communication provides an important perspective for understanding the social function of blind box consumption. Carey (2005) challenged the traditional transmission model of communication, emphasizing that the essence of communication lies in the creation and maintenance of shared beliefs. This view was further developed by Liu Jianming (2018), who explicitly stated that "ritual is the ontology of communication, not a metaphor." From Durkheim's (2006) research on the social functions of religious rituals to Rosenbluh's analysis of the ritual nature of media events, this theoretical tradition helps us recognize that the various practices in blind box consumption (collecting, displaying, exchanging) are essentially modern rituals through which participants construct and experience a sense of community belonging.

Third, glocalization theory helps us grasp the complexity of global cultural flows. This theory emphasizes the creative combination of global forces and local characteristics. In the field of multinational corporation research, Fan Hui and Zhang Wenjie (2020) distinguished three cross-cultural management strategies: localization, global integration, and glocalization. Pop Mart's successful practice demonstrates a unique glocalization path—by maintaining the core business model (blind box) and universal aesthetics ("cute" economy), while actively integrating local cultural elements, achieving a balance between global recognition and local relevance.

Although these studies provide important insights, there are still noticeable gaps: First, there is a lack of in-depth focus on the consumption practices of Southeast Asian youth; second, consumption behavior is seldom explicitly analyzed as a cross-cultural communication practice; finally, the active role of consumers in the cultural adaptation process is underemphasized. This study aims to fill these gaps and advance relevant



theoretical discussions through empirical research.

Research Methodology

1. Research Approach

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, adopting a qualitative-dominant strategy with quantitative support. This design aims to uncover general patterns and correlations in consumption behaviors through quantitative data, while simultaneously using qualitative data to delve into the underlying cultural motivations, emotional experiences, and processes of meaning-making. The integration of both methods achieves complementary advantages: the breadth of quantitative research combines with the depth of qualitative inquiry to form a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional explanation of the research problem.

2. Research Procedure and Data Collection

A sequential design was implemented, proceeding as follows:

- Phase 1: Questionnaire Survey. A sample size of 385 participants, determined using the Taro Yamane formula, was surveyed. Participants were required to meet specific criteria (permanent residence in Bangkok, with experience purchasing Pop Mart blind boxes and participating in related online or offline community activities). The questionnaire collected demographic information and measured core variables including consumption frequency, expenditure level, purchase channel preferences, IP selection tendencies, community participation degree, and cultural identity expression. To ensure the reliability of the measurement instrument, the scale sections of the questionnaire pertaining to attitudes and behavioral tendencies will be subjected to reliability analysis using SPSS software, calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess internal consistency. An alpha coefficient above 0.7 is considered the acceptable threshold.

- Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection. This phase aimed to deepen and explain the preliminary quantitative findings.

- In-depth Interviews: 20-30 core consumers were purposively selected from the survey participants for semi-structured interviews, exploring in depth their consumption motivations, the ritualistic sense of unboxing, and processes of cultural interpretation.

- Focus Groups: Two focus group discussions (each with 6-8 participants) were conducted to observe consensus, differences, and meaning negotiation within the community through member interaction.

- Digital Ethnography: Participatory observation was carried out for 3-5 months in major online blind box communities (e.g., Facebook groups, Line chats) to document consumers' sharing behaviors, discursive patterns, and community interactions, obtaining first-hand data closest to the authentic context.

- Quantitative Data Analysis: Questionnaire data were primarily analyzed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation) to depict the basic characteristics and behavioral patterns of the sample.

- Qualitative Data Analysis: Transcripts from interviews and focus groups, along with ethnographic notes, were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved a three-step procedure of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify, refine, and summarize core themes, allowing for a systematic interpretation of the data.



Research Results

The analysis reveals three significant patterns in Bangkok youth's blind box consumption. First, cultural reinterpretation emerges as participants actively localize global IPs by connecting characters like Molly and Labubu to Thai cultural references and personal experiences. Second, consumption demonstrates strong ritual characteristics, with the unboxing process evolving into a structured performance involving anticipation, revelation, and social sharing. Third, symbolic value drives consumption decisions, where hidden editions function as social capital and complete collections signify community status. The questionnaire data shows that 78% of participants prioritize emotional satisfaction over practical utility, while interview transcripts reveal that community recognition outweighs individual possession as the primary motivation for continued engagement.

Discussion

Our findings provide a meaningful contrast to and extension of the existing body of research on blind boxes, which has predominantly been anchored in marketing and consumer psychology frameworks. Previous studies have effectively illuminated the potent role of "uncertainty" and the "gambling mechanics" in stimulating purchase impulses and fostering addictive consumption patterns (e.g., Wang & Lee, 2022). Others have analyzed the "collector's mindset" and the efficacy of "scarcity marketing" (e.g., limited editions) in driving sales. While these perspectives are valuable for understanding the immediate commercial success of the blind box model, they often implicitly frame the consumer as an individual subject to psychological stimuli—a problem-solver seeking novelty or a risk-taker pursuing a dopamine rush.

Our study, grounded in cross-cultural communication and ritual theory, reveals a fundamentally different picture. The "uncertainty" emphasized in marketing studies is transformed in the Bangkok context from a mere psychological stimulus into the very source of ritual tension that binds the community together. The act of collecting is not merely an individual pursuit of completeness but a social process of "cultural bricolage," where global symbols are actively reassembled with local meanings. Therefore, what prior research categorized as marketing tactics (scarcity, randomness) are, from our participants' perspective, the essential raw materials for constructing shared rituals and producing cultural hybridity. This shift in perspective—from viewing blind box consumption as a commercial transaction driven by psychological triggers to understanding it as a cultural practice facilitating identity work and community building—constitutes the core theoretical contribution of our study. It suggests that the sustainability of cultural products like blind boxes in global markets may depend less on the refined application of psychological principles and more on their capacity to provide a flexible ritual framework and symbolic resources for localized meaning-making.



The results of this study deepen our understanding of contemporary consumption culture across multiple dimensions and advance the development of related theories. First, the research findings challenge the simplistic understanding of cultural globalization as a homogenizing process. Bangkok youth are not passive recipients of global cultural products; instead, through active symbolic work, they transform them into resources for expressing local identity. This finding resonates with, but also extends, glocalization theory—what we observe is not merely the combination of global and local, but a bottom-up process of cultural innovation. Through daily practices, consumers reconfigure the power relations of cultural resources, providing a new perspective for understanding cultural dynamics in the era of globalization.

Second, the study deepens the application of the ritual view of communication in consumption research. The ritual nature of blind box consumption is reflected not only in the regularity and symbolism of its behaviors but also in its ability to create and sustain community. The shared experience of unboxing, online display and communication, and offline exchange gatherings constitute a complete ritual system that strengthens the collective consciousness of the community through regular performances. This finding extends the ritual view of communication from the traditional field of media studies to the field of consumption practices, expanding the explanatory scope of the theory.

Third, the study updates the contemporary connotations of symbolic consumption theory. In the context of digital communities and the experience economy, the mechanisms for creating and circulating symbolic value have undergone significant changes. This study finds that symbolic value is realized not only through possession but also through participation and sharing; it is transmitted not only through the object itself but also amplified through social interaction. This shift requires us to reconsider Baudrillard's classical theory and pay more attention to the interactive and processual characteristics of symbolic consumption.

It is worth noting that the theoretical contributions of the research are closely linked to its practical significance. For the cultural and creative industries, understanding the creative role of consumers is crucial—success no longer depends solely on the accuracy of cultural output but also on whether it can provide space and resources for localized meaning production.

Recommendations

1. Recommendations for the application of research results: Cultural and creative brands should develop community-focused strategies that accommodate local interpretation and support consumer-driven content creation.

2. Recommendations for future research: Future studies should examine blind box consumption across different cultural contexts and explore longitudinal effects on identity formation.

Acknowledgement

This research has received support from several individuals and institutions. Special thanks are extended to all the Bangkok youth who participated in the study; their generously shared experiences and insights form the foundation of this research. Gratitude is also due to the supervisory team for their careful guidance during the research design and theoretical construction phases. Thanks are extended to Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University for providing research resources and an academic environment. Simultaneously, appreciation is



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expressed to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the initial draft of the research, which significantly improved its quality. All omissions in this study are the sole responsibility of the author.

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