

Why Consumers Love Blind Boxes

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Abstract: With the increasing prevalence of the blind box economy, blind boxes have become a commonplace "necessity" in our daily lives, replacing their previous status as mere non-essential. Despite blind boxing becoming ubiquitous, there has been minimal research into the motivations behind why consumers are drawn to this trend. Against this background, this research will primarily utilize secondary data, complemented by a questionnaire survey, to analyse the factors driving consumers' fondness for blind boxes and analyze the factors contributing to the appeal of Blind Boxes, focusing on the popular Brand IP Marketing developed by Blind Box publishers and the "Blind Box-Funky Group" established by consumers. This study adopts the "STEPPS" theoretical framework and on this basis, also divides the reasons for the popularity of blind boxes into two aspects: user- perceived and blind box corporate offerings. It is found that Social currency and Emotions are the two main aspects of the popularity of blind boxes. Furthermore, our findings suggest that the external triggers that blind box companies intentionally create for consumers also contribute a lot. Our findings provide guidelines for the blind box companies in managing the rationale behind the Blind Box consumer market and offer fresh insights for its future development.

Keywords: Blind Box, Social currency, Brand IP Marketing

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

A blind box is a toy package in which consumers are unaware of the exact product style beforehand, and the toys are randomized. The blind box originated in Japan, known as mini-figures, and became popular in Europe and the United States under the name of a blind box. The concepts of art and collectability are the main focus of these imported products. The domestic development of the blind box industry began around 2010, and primarily centered around trendy toys and anime dolls. In recent years, trendy toy IPs have disrupted the domestic market through the sale of "blind boxes". These low-priced items offer high re-purchase rates and strong consumer appeal. The 2020 launch of Bubble Mart sparked investment interest in the industry, leading to the emergence of popular IPs such as Dimoo and Skullpanda. With many competitors entering the market, the industry is thriving. According to the latest data from Sullivan, China's video game market is expected to hit £3.9 billion in 2021, marking a year-on-year growth of 38.6%, with a CAGR of 24.0% over the next five years. The Blind Box category will reach £1.1 billion in 2021, an increase of 83.0% year-on-year, becoming the main growth driver for the industry [1].

In recent years, the blind box industry has gradually expanded to various fields, such as cosmetics, snacks, and stationery. This has attracted an increasing number of consumers. However, its contents are often non-essential. Nonetheless, blind boxes have recently captured the attention of young people, particularly young professionals, via social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo. Blind boxes for clothing, vegetables, bouquets, and leftovers suggest that the once discretionary item is now becoming a necessity that intervenes in our daily lives and has an impact on our behaviour, particularly among young wage earners. These indicate that blind boxes are now impacting our daily lives as essentials and influencing our daily routines. In recent years, blind boxes have gained popularity as a commodity that diverges from traditional sales strategies by utilising the betting model to arouse consumer curiosity and encourage purchase and repeat purchase. As highlighted within the 2020 Cross-border Export Consumption Trend Report, which was released by CBN Data, online consumption of blind boxes has gained significant momentum, with a consumption growth rate exceeding 400%. As a result, the blind box market is advancing at an unprecedented pace [2].

1.2. Research Question

This study will examine the factors contributing to customers' attraction to blind boxes, focusing on two main areas: social currency and marketing strategies employed by vendors of blind boxes.

In a research conducted by Prof. Christopher K. Hsee from the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago, participants were willing to receive electrical shocks in testing the electricity discharge of red and blue ballpoint pens. This phenomenon is referred to by Prof. Christopher K. Hsee as the "Pandora Effect"[3]. One of the most intriguing features of a blind box is its resemblance to the "Pandora effect". Prior to opening, one can only be certain that a small figurine is contained within, leaving the specific type unknown. This induces the Schrodinger's effect, creating a sense of ambiguity and excitement that draws people in, compelling them to discover the contents inside. The unknown creates uncertainty and the allure of surprise motivates consumers to open Pandora's Box. Simultaneously, the trend of blind boxes is rooted in consumers projecting emotions onto the merchandise associated with a particular image. Consumers draw on their own experiences to add a personal interpretation to the emotions represented by the symbolic intellectual property. In addition to meeting customers' psychological and emotional needs, the social aspects of blind boxes should not be disregarded. Popular among young adults, blind box enthusiasts naturally form a community to develop an exclusive environment and cultivate a distinctive culture through displaying, exchanging, and trading. Blind box enthusiasts actively engage on social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Microblogging, and TikTok.

1.3. Research Aim and Object

In the current blind box economy, blind boxes are likely to be the future of new product marketing. This includes blind box e-commerce online, blind box gift boxes, and offline blind box machines. These options present innovative ideas to bring new direction to brand marketing. By examining the primary reasons behind the widespread appeal of blind boxes, we can provide a reference point for the continued advancement of the "blind box economy". This will enable blind box merchants to offer superior goods and services, resulting in an enhanced consumer experience and greater prospects for the growth of the blind box economy.

2. Methodology

This study focuses on the rapid development of the "blind box economy" and analyzes the reasons why consumers prefer blind boxes from two aspects: emotional marketing and Jonah Berger's "STEPPS" theory. In this regard, we choose to combine quantitative and qualitative research methods,

based on post-positivism, emphasizing Put into practice as the foundation, but not completely dependent on data, so to a certain extent, subjectivity is recognized.

In order to further understand the reasons why consumers love blind boxes, this paper is based on the literature research method with secondary data, collecting the existing Research organizations in the last three years to extract effective information, supplemented by survey research method to ensure that there is a full range of multi-angle research and analysis. The literature research method specifically refers to the blind box theme based on the formulation of the subject of research, based on social research and reference literature to get first-hand information, and then appropriate, all-round grasp of "why consumers love the blind box" the difficulty of the subject of the research focus, and at the same time, grasp the development of the blind box economy in recent years. Survey research method refers to the use of questionnaires, case studies, information testing and other scientific research methods to understand the phenomenon of "Blind Box Fever" in a comprehensive and systematic way on the basis of the existing information, inviting the relevant people to fill in the answers, and then carrying out the recycling and organizing, statistics and research. After collecting a sufficient amount of effective information, we will purify, integrate and summarize it to obtain the knowledge with universality and timeliness. The questionnaire method is utilized to check for gaps and make up for unknown data and answers to questions.

Limitations: The group studied is one-sided (college students), regional limitations, mainly observed in Macau, and Guangzhou, not taking into account all regions of the country, limited representativeness, but will be improved through secondary data, the questionnaire was released with the restriction that college students fill it out, and it does not represent other age groups.

Ethical issues: prior to the questionnaire to inform the purpose of the study, to obtain the informed consent of those who fill out the questionnaire, the questionnaire will not be disclosed during the study or violate any of their privacy, in the case of interviews, the interviewee can be discontinued at any time they want to participate in the interviews, the data of this study can only be used for the study itself, cannot be used for any other purpose, and will comply with all the ethics of the study. Collection of secondary data, the information data collected is through legal means, all from public repositories, as permitted and authorized, and will not violate any ethical guidelines.

3. Literature Review

"The Influence of Perceived Value and Gamification on The Purchase Intention of Blind Box Purchase" suggests that (1) Functional, Emotional, Economic, and Overall Perceived Value positively affects the purchase intention of Blind Box Purchase. (2) Gamification obviously has a positive effect on the perceived value and the purchase intention of blind box consumption. It is mainly analyzed by questionnaire and quasi-experimental methods from the aspect of Perceived Value; "Consumption of Blind Boxes: Ritualised Experience Based on Emotional Connection" by Lei Shi and Weiping Zhou generates considerable economic benefits.

Previous research has established that the popularity of blind boxes is due to the emotional resonance of the consumer and has mostly explored the reasons for the popularity of the blind box subject on a psychological level. However, to date, the marketing efforts of blind box brands, such as PopMart, have received very little attention in the research literature. This piece of research investigates both perspectives; the consumer's perception of the blind box from the consumer's perspective as well as that of the brand. This research explores the attraction of blind boxes from both consumer and brand perspectives.

Previous studies have largely analyzed objective phenomena and utilized secondary data, lacking practical demonstration and leaving gaps in experiential knowledge. In this study, this research opted to utilize secondary data and conducted a case study using the university scene as the subject. Participants systematically gathered data and information pertinent to the blind box economy to

conduct comprehensive research, specifically exploring the reasons behind consumer enthusiasm for blind boxes. When technical terms were first used, their abbreviations were explained. The language used throughout was clear, objective and value-neutral, employing passive tone and avoiding first-person perspectives. An academic format was strictly followed with precise word choices and proper grammatical construction. The research investigated the underlying factors contributing to customers' affinity for blind boxes within the blind box market.

4. Conceptual Model

4.1. Analysis of the "STEPPS" Theory

STEPPS is a set of six factors introduced by Jonah Berger in his book *Why Things Catch On* [4], aimed at explaining and forecasting the popularity of products, ideas, or behaviors. STEPPS is an abbreviation for the following six elements:

Social Currency is the tendency for social currency to make us more likely to discuss with others. Triggers means the stimuli that immediately jog people's memories and make them think of pertinent content. The appearance, flavor, and audio of a product may attract individuals and cause it to become a popular point of discussion. The collective populace also plays a significant role.

Emotion, objectively refers to whether or not individuals share something in a manner that triggers their emotions, which then motivates them to take part in an activity. Typically, high-arousal emotions such as surprise, excitement, humour, anger, and anxiety are more likely to inspire individuals to share.

Public means whether individuals can perceive or observe the actions of others and subsequently imitate them is a factor in determining the impact. Additionally, whether information shared among individuals can provide useful solutions to problems or enhance lifestyles is of practical value. Lastly, the embedding of an interesting narrative while sharing can increase the appeal and memorability of the information being shared.

Your product or idea should possess adequate "Social Currency", have "Triggers" and instill "Emotions" and "Public" connotations. "Public" is then integrated into a "Story". Based on the STEPPS theory, this study will concentrate on the causes behind customers' inclination towards blind boxes in the context of Social Currency. At the same time, these six points can be divided into two main aspects, as shown in figure 1 below. Triggers, Practical Value and Stories are provided by the company to the user, while in the user's perspective, it is more favoured to be perceived using social currencies, emotions and publicity. These two aspects are the cornerstones of the analyses in the following sections, which are based on both corporate offerings (Brand IP Marketing) and user perceptions (Funky-Group).

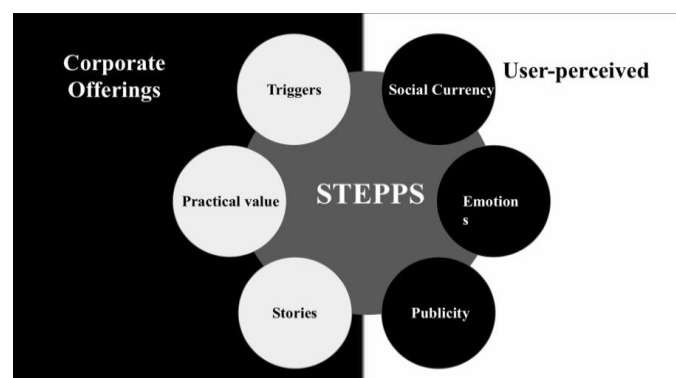


Figure 1: "STEPPS" Classification

4.2. Unique Selling Proposition & Emotion Selling Proposition

Emotional marketing concerns using emotional promotions, emotional advertising and similar strategies in brand marketing to achieve business objectives. It centres on consumers' emotional needs and differences as the core of the marketing strategy. Please note that the original text already adheres to the above principles, thus there are minimal improvements required.

If "social currency" refers to consumers spontaneously associating with specific social attributes or labels, then emotional marketing is an approach taken by blind box companies to understand why consumers gravitate towards them. The USP is a marketing perspective that highlights a company's unique selling point.

In response to mass consumption in the 1940s, Rosser Reeves developed the concept of Unique Selling Proposition (USP), which gained popularity in the 1950s [5]. It relates to identifying a distinctive and appealing idea or theme linked to a particular art pursuit. The aim is to promote this theme or selling point through copywriting and design in the advertisement, with the objective of capturing the attention of the target market and eliciting their inclination to partake in the art activity.

The USP concept comprises three fundamental components: First, each advertisement should identify and refine the benefits that the products offer, providing the public with a clear understanding of the theme, particularly the benefits. Second, the advert theme must be distinct and novel, different from what competitors have proposed. Third, the theme should be powerful enough to emotionally engage the public, effectively capturing their attention to steer their consumption patterns. Thirdly, the theme content should possess the ability to captivate the public, effectively garnering their attention and influencing their buying behaviour.

Subsequently, some individuals were influenced by the USP and introduced the ESP, or emotional sales proposition, where emphasis on the advertising appeal is placed on emotions, leading the public to have favourable emotional experiences as consumers. By harnessing affinity, the impact of advertising is strengthened. ESP theory is crucial to modern marketing success. This theory, which stands for emotion selling proposition, places emphasis on emotions in advertising, leading to positive consumer emotional experiences and enhancing the impact of advertisements through affinity. When the advertising theme centres on emotions, the unique selling proposition (USP) transforms into an ESP.

Through ESP and USP theories, we examine the endeavours of blind box retailers to enhance the blind box purchasing experience for users, as a supplementary standpoint to the "EMOTION" of the "STEPPS" theory.

5. Discussion

5.1. "Funky Groups" in Social Currency

The concept of "social currency" was first proposed by French sociologist Bourdieu, who used the term to describe real and potential resources that originate from social networks and groups, and exist both virtually online and offline[6]. Jonah Berg conducted an extensive study of social currencies and determined that, just as people can purchase goods or services using conventional currency, social currencies could result in more favourable feedback and a more positive image. The widespread availability of the internet and mobile devices has eliminated geographic and identity barriers, disrupting the previous disordered pattern of socialization. Interest and emotion serve as the foundation of the "circle" culture, with interest serving as the glue that binds these groups together. This identity-based network of circles appeals to a broad range of people, resulting in an expansion of interaction and space.

At the level of social psychology, identity presents itself as an individual's acknowledgement of the particular social group to which they belong. As a member of the group, one acquires a certain value and emotional significance through group interactions. Objective evaluations should be excluded in favour of value-neutral language. Among the various community relationships, the interest relationship is particularly noteworthy. Individuals seek out like-minded people according to their own personalities and preferences. They then congregate into diverse interest communities through communication and interaction. French scholar Michel Maffesoli coined the term "neo tribe" to refer to micro-groups that form based on shared interests, tastes, and emotions. These groups are characterized by their fluidity and ability to both come together and disperse almost accidentally. Maffesoli argues that this kind of emotional tribe is "less rigid than traditional organizational forms, instead evoking a particular atmosphere and state of mind best expressed through lifestyle." [7]. With the emergence of new and attractive products, the iterative upgrading of fast-moving consumer goods, and the promotion of products through social media, people's consumption patterns and choices have been deeply influenced, leading to the emergence of consumption behaviors that are more tribal and exclusive. According to a study, 57% of Generation Z individuals stated that they "must possess what others have and not be disliked by their peers," prompting group consumer behaviour of following the trend within their social circle and maintaining a common language [8]. For individuals in Generation Z who experience loneliness and seek a sense of belonging, the purchase of blind boxes as collectibles exceeds basic needs and assumes the role of symbolic commodities. The primary motivation for purchasing blind boxes is to evoke a specific emotional response and experience. As a consequence, blind boxes have evolved into a sort of social currency for forging connections among consumers, creating engaging communities. Blind box consumption engenders a shared "fun community" and a feeling of belonging to the "blind box tribe".

The widespread popularity of "blind boxes" and their inherent probability grants them social currency. The "blind box" craze allows people to connect with others while displaying their blind box trinkets, thus fostering a sense of belonging. People feel a sense of identity as "blind box enthusiasts" or "Ou Huang" through exhibiting their blind box ornaments. For instance, sellers utilise idle fish and other websites to vend their surplus blind box products. Additionally, Clamour features blind box unboxing videos that offer opportunities for players to converse and exchange insights on buying tips and tricks to acquire their preferred blind box. This is an excellent approach to augment the "fans" potential demand and steer consumers towards purchasing blind boxes. Furthermore, "swap" and "change" have emerged as novel ways for consumers to socialise through blind boxes. They exchanged or traded the dolls they didn't like through the second-hand platform. Furthermore, they shared tutorials on "doll customization" via the video platform, which generated a greater interest in the content and consequently led to more purchases. Social factors can incentivise further spending and even lead to impulsive purchases.

Only among those who are knowledgeable in the field of blind box toys can the true value of rarity, status and style be appreciated, maximising the product's potential. Blind Box is part of the socialisation network for interesting groups. Individuals who are interested in Blind Box create their own social space within the network. Blind Box also serves as a new type of currency, accelerating social communication, fostering a stronger sense of identity and belonging, and creating an emotional ripple effect among viewers.

5.2. Consumption of Experiences with External Triggers

"The Hook Model" was developed by Nir Eyal, author of *Hooked*. The key question of the Hook Model is: what do you rely on to attract users to use your product [9], i.e. external triggers. Pearls form in mussels because the sand particles that enter the oyster are wrapped in layers of perlage, and over the years they become smooth pearls. Mussels do not produce pearls out of thin air, because of

the "invasion" of a grain of sand, triggering the physiological response of the mussels, and addiction is the same reason, there is a need for a "trigger".

Blind Box focuses not only on material consumption but also on experiential consumption. The immersive experience is created through the overall atmosphere of the scene, which mobilises the customer's five senses - visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile - in order to provide a cognitive immersion experience for consumers. PopMart is a prominent brand in China's blind box market with diversified sales channels including Tmall, WeChat, BoxBreak mini-programme, Paqu app, and physical stores such as large shops and robot shops.

As a popular toy with both cultural and economic attributes, the dissemination of cultural attributes relies heavily on the realisation of economic attributes, so it is crucial that the consumption scenario is daily. Diversified sales channels create a rich consumption scene, which is conducive to promoting more consumers to participate in the experience and consumption. In the questionnaire of this study, 91.2 per cent of consumers said that the reason for entering the blind box for the first time was due to the good experience of offline shops. Currently, the sales channels of blind boxes are mainly focused on online apps, directly-managed shops in shopping malls and vending machines in shopping malls. For the experience-based consumer products of blind boxes, the experience value of blind boxes can be fully embodied in offline consumption scenarios such as large-scale shops and robotic shops, where attention-grabbing decorations and stores that satisfy the demand of consumers for "Netflix snagging points" can fully reflect the experience value of blind boxes, while stores that attract attention and satisfy the demand of consumers for "Netflix snagging points" can fully reflect the experience value of blind boxes. Attention-grabbing decorations and shops that meet consumers' needs for "Netflix hotspots" are more attractive and appealing to consumers.

In addition, daily consumption scenarios are also an effective way to integrate the blind box into daily life. Therefore, the operation department of the cultural and creative blind box needs to focus on the investment and operation of offline shops and robot shops. Take PopMart as an example: PopMart is located in the core of a busy commercial area in a first or second-tier city, and generally chooses a place with a high concentration of traffic near the escalator, and the black and gold shop is composed of a "POP MART" logo with golden LED lights, which can be found at a glance among the neighbouring shops. A cartoon character with blonde curls, green eyes, a little girl with a beak, and a window full of dolls, it's hard not to stop people, and the external visual trigger is thus formed. Compared to online e-commerce, the experience of offline physical shops is irreplaceable. The future of the physical shop needs to continue to innovate, to create interesting immersive experience content, to have the experience that can trigger the memory points of the consumer base.

5.3. Brand IP Marketing

For any business, the most straightforward and instinctive aim is undoubtedly to enable users to spend money. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand PopMart's success in retaining customers. Bubble Mart is a prime example worth studying as it effectively encourages customers to make repeat purchases. If it is a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) product, the mechanism is much simpler as a "product + reminder" approach can be adopted. However, for low-frequency toys that offer little value, how can users be encouraged to continuously invest in them? The "1 to N + continuously renewed IP" model propels PopMart's constant blood production while exhibiting objectivity by excluding any subjective evaluations.

However, over time, IP has been adapted into an outstanding marketing concept. Brands, products, and individuals with content derivatives, popularity, and topics can now be considered as IP. The value of IP extends beyond commercial value and encompasses the emotional value of users and their continued consumption of the product or service. Afterwards, driven by the appeal of its fan base, it will break through further barriers and eventually form a network-wide fan base. In today's Internet

age, IP marketing has developed in the context of pan-entertainment. Popular IPs carry a significant number of fans' emotional desires and cultural identities, generating high attention, creating its own traffic flow and effects of dissemination.

PopMart carries out "horizontal and vertical combination" in IP development. Vertically, IPs with warm market response, led by Molly, launch 6 to 8 series per year, while IPs with average sales launch 2 to 4 series per year, and launch holiday models and co-branded models from time to time, such as Molly's wedding model in cooperation with "I Only Like You". For example, the Molly wedding model with "I Only Like You", the limited edition model of "The Son of Tomorrow", and a series of FMCG products such as Ponds, Flavors, Nivea, etc., have been launched to ensure the heat and freshness of the IP. Horizontally, it constantly develops new IPs for market testing. There is an in-house team of about a hundred designers, and 80% of the products in the stores are independently developed by contracted designers. Assuming you're not a Molly fan, or one day you really don't like Molly anymore, you'll find a constant stream of other new blind boxes to pick from at PopMart.

In the era of explosive growth of information, contemporary young people's free time is becoming more and more fragmented. They don't see so much time to reacquaint themselves with an IP with a grand worldview, which gives an opportunity for trendy toys such as IPs that are not based on a story. For example, Molly, a little girl with short curly hair and a pouty mouth, is one of the hottest trendy toy images today. It contributes 11.9% of PopMart's sales, according to the company's 2020 fiscal year report. But Molly is in fact an IP image without story connotation, its circle is more by virtue of the popularity of the beautiful appearance to attract the attention of the younger generation, but also can not be separated from the "social animal" emotions, with more and more post-1990s into the "middle-age crisis With more and more post-90s entering the "mid-life crisis", while working hard to earn a living, and at the same time flirting with the "social animal", the "decompression" industry came into being, and "Molly" is completely in line with the 3B theory of advertising (Baby, Beauty, Beast), which completely hits the hearts of young people who are full of pressure, and it's easy for people to get the idea of buying one and putting it on their desk to relieve pressure.

But not every IP has no story behind the marketing, blind box with the help of IP marketing, in broadening the audience at the same time, the blind box for the IP again publicity campaign, both mutually beneficial. Such as Youku and AliFish launched the "Country Love" derivative product tide play blind box, country love IP and blind box linkage caused many senior TV fans to follow. Blind box marketing based on IP, sent the sentiments of this generation, through different kinds of derivatives, into the people's field of vision, personal preferences into daily life using the form of products, greatly enhance the value of IP marketing, diffusion of brand influence.

6. Conclusion

The spiral of silence is a theory within political science and mass communication. The theory describes the phenomenon that when individuals express their ideas and opinions, they are more likely to actively participate if they observe widespread support for their views. Conversely, when they perceive indifference or opposition towards a particular viewpoint (which may be subject to attack from a group of people), even if they personally agree with it, they tend to remain silent [10].

The theory proposes that the silence of one side of an opinion allows the other side's viewpoint to gain traction, creating a spiral effect wherein one side's voice becomes increasingly dominant while the opposing side grows progressively quieter. It presumes that most people wish to avoid the isolation that may arise from holding certain attitudes and beliefs alone.

The theory proposes that the silence of one side of an opinion allows the other side's viewpoint to gain traction, creating a spiral effect wherein one side's voice becomes increasingly dominant while the opposing side grows progressively quieter. This perspective is endorsed by Hannah. According to Arendt, human action is diverse, and similar to labour that supports life and work that upholds

production within society. The action upholding diversity and plurality within society is a fundamental aspect of human existence. In modern times, individuals find it challenging to feel content with such varied and diverse activities. In a society where efficiency and performance are valued above all else, individuals tire of facing an array of choices. They long to find a sense of belonging and fear the anxiety of decision-making in their daily lives. Blind Box has thus expanded beyond the confines of sales logic to offer a wider range of essential items, catering to these needs for security and certainty. It is important to provide a straightforward approach for the various options we encounter in modern life - "The blind box is as good as it gets." That is why milk tea surprise boxes, wear surprise boxes, takeaway surprise boxes, and similar products have emerged and gained popularity.

Additionally, online platforms' directed consumption and the promotion of the "surprise box economy" by capital have infiltrated individuals' daily lives by utilizing intellectual property competition and strategies centred around ideology, leading to the potential for individuals unknowingly falling into consumption traps. As a strategy to attract young consumers, in the past two years, the trend of "blind boxes" has spread to various industries, from toys to food and beverage, beauty, tourism, literature, and blogging. However, there are concerns regarding false advertising, manipulative marketing techniques such as starvation marketing, live blind boxes, and other disruptive practices that threaten the integrity of the industry. Therefore, for this "fairy tale market", it is crucial to establish more stringent regulations and legal boundaries for the future.

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