

Original Paper

Indulging in Irrational Joy? Study on Blind Box Purchases across Age Cohorts

Jenny Lee¹

¹ Valley Christian Schools San Jose, CA 95111 United States

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Abstract

Blind boxes have become increasingly popular collectible products, using randomized contents, appealing designs, and limited or rare figures to encourage consumer engagement and repeat purchases. This study investigates the psychological, marketing, social, and financial factors that influence blind box purchasing behavior, with particular attention to impulsive purchasing and teenage consumers. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining a quantitative survey with a qualitative interview and comparing the findings with existing academic research. The survey examined participants' purchasing intentions, reactions to uncertainty, visual design preferences, emotional motivations, spending habits, and perceptions of collecting. Results showed that approximately 77% of blind box purchasers described their purchases as at least mostly impulsive, while 75% reported purchasing a blind box they had not originally planned to buy. Visual design was also a significant factor, with 86.54% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it influenced their purchasing decisions. Additionally, 76.9% reported spending more than intended at least occasionally, suggesting that blind box marketing may contribute to unplanned spending. These findings are consistent with research linking uncertain rewards, curiosity, emotional gratification, and gamification to impulsive purchasing. Overall, the study suggests that blind box consumption is influenced by an interaction of psychological, marketing, social, and financial factors. Further research using larger and more representative samples could provide greater insight into the long-term effects of blind box consumption, particularly among teenage consumers.

Keywords

Blind boxes, long-term effects, consumer purchasing behavior, influence factors

1. Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of blind boxes has grown significantly worldwide. First popularized in Japan and other parts of East Asia, blind boxes are collectible toy packages in which the specific item remains unknown until after purchase. Typically released as part of a themed collection featuring multiple characters or designs, blind boxes rely on the element of surprise to attract consumers. The anticipation surrounding the unboxing experience, combined with the desire to complete a full set or obtain rare items, has contributed to their widespread appeal. Furthermore, social media platforms and influencer-driven content have amplified this trend by encouraging repeated purchases and promoting blind box collecting as a popular consumer activity.

The randomized purchasing model of blind boxes has raised concerns because it incorporates psychological mechanisms similar to those found in gambling. The uncertainty associated with each purchase and the possibility of obtaining a rare or highly desirable item can encourage repeated buying, even when doing so may lead to irrational consumption. Research by Xia et al. (2025) found that uncertainty in blind-box purchases increased instant gratification and gambler's fallacy, which were associated with irrational consumption behavior. Consumers seeking a specific collectible may therefore purchase multiple boxes in pursuit of a desired item. Similarly, Wei and Yu (2025) found that gambling psychology and social relatedness were key motivations among blind-box consumers and that group interactions, including watching unboxing videos on social media, contributed to continued participation. These findings suggest that social media, online communities, and the uncertainty inherent in randomized purchasing can reinforce repeated purchasing behavior.

Despite the rapid growth of the blind box market, scholarly research on blind box purchasing behavior remains relatively limited, particularly with respect to adolescent consumers. Existing studies have primarily focused on consumer motivation and marketing strategies, leaving important questions about the psychological and behavioral factors influencing teenagers largely unexplored. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the marketing techniques used to attract teenage consumers, the psychological factors that drive repeated blind box purchases, and the broader financial and behavioral implications of this growing consumer trend.

2. Literature Review

Although existing research has established several important factors that influence blind box consumption—including uncertainty, emotional gratification, impulsive purchasing, scarcity, gamification, and social interaction—there remains a gap in understanding how these factors collectively influence teenage consumers. Research has shown that uncertainty can increase purchase intention through emotional value and can also increase impulsive purchase intention through curiosity and perceived luck (Zhang and Zhang; Zhang et al.). Research has also found that blind box designs can create game-like experiences that increase brand engagement and purchase intention (Miao et al.). However, much of the existing research has focused on adults, young consumers broadly, or populations outside the United States. For example, Lee et al. specifically examined U.S. adults, while several other studies have collected data from consumers in China. This makes it difficult to determine whether the same purchasing patterns apply specifically to younger consumers in the United States. Additionally, previous studies have often examined individual psychological or marketing factors separately rather than considering how multiple influences interact to shape purchasing behavior.

This study addresses these gaps by specifically examining the purchasing behaviors and motivations of teenage consumers while also incorporating perspectives from consumers of different age groups. Through a combination of quantitative survey data and qualitative interview responses, this research examines how factors such as impulsive purchasing, uncertainty, visual design, brand loyalty, emotional enjoyment, spending behavior, and social belonging influence consumers' decisions to purchase blind boxes. The survey also provides direct evidence of consumers' purchasing habits, including whether they make unplanned purchases, spend more than intended, continue purchasing after receiving duplicates, and feel encouraged to purchase additional products.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing literature by comparing primary data collected from consumers with findings from credible secondary sources. This comparison allows the research to determine whether patterns identified in previous studies—such as the relationship between uncertainty and impulsive purchasing—are reflected in the experiences of the participants in this study. Previous research has found a positive relationship between perceived uncertainty and impulsive purchase intention, with curiosity serving as a mediating factor (Zhang et al.). More recent research has similarly found that uncertainty can contribute to irrational consumption through mechanisms including instant gratification and gambler's fallacy, particularly when scarcity is perceived to be high (Xia et al.). The inclusion of participants recruited through both the researcher's personal network and Reddit also provides perspectives from individuals with different levels of familiarity and engagement with blind box culture.

By focusing on teenage consumers and examining psychological, financial, marketing, and social factors together, this research provides a more comprehensive perspective on blind box purchasing behavior. Rather than examining blind boxes solely as a form of collectible merchandise, the study considers them as a consumer product whose design and marketing may influence decision-making and purchasing behavior. Existing research supports this broader perspective: blind box design has been associated with gameful experiences and increased purchase intention, while uncertainty has been linked to emotional value and impulsive purchasing (Miao et al.; Zhang and Zhang). Research on U.S. adult consumers has additionally identified a recurring cycle of impulsive purchasing associated with uncertainty marketing in blind box collectibles (Lee et al.). In doing so, the research helps address the limited understanding of how younger consumers experience and respond to the increasingly popular blind box market.

The literature reviewed for this study draws from several academic disciplines, including psychology, economics, sociology, marketing, and consumer behavior. Psychological research was used to examine the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying blind box purchasing, particularly the roles of uncertainty, curiosity, anticipation, and impulsive decision-making. For example, Zhang et al. used the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework to examine how uncertainty affects consumers' emotions, cognition, and subsequent purchasing decisions. Research related to economics and consumer behavior provided insight into spending patterns, perceived value, purchasing intentions, and the financial factors that influence consumers' decisions. Zhang and Zhang, for example, found that uncertainty influences purchase intention partly through consumers' perceived emotional value. Marketing research contributed an understanding of how companies use product design, branding, scarcity, and randomized rewards to attract and retain consumers. Miao et al. found that the uncertain design of blind boxes can produce gameful experiences that increase brand engagement and purchase intention. Finally, research on the social dimensions of blind box consumption has helped contextualize collecting as more than an individual purchasing decision by examining the broader consumer experience surrounding blind box products.

Using research from economic, sociological, and psychological disciplines provided a more diverse perspective than relying on a single academic field. Blind box consumption is not solely an economic or psychological behavior; it involves the interaction of individual decision-making, financial behavior, marketing strategies, and social influences. For example, psychology can help explain why uncertainty and curiosity may increase the appeal of a blind box, while marketing research can explain how companies incorporate uncertainty into product design to encourage engagement and purchase

intention (Zhang et al.; Miao et al.). Research examining blind box consumers has also identified social and emotional motivations alongside gambling-related psychological mechanisms, further demonstrating that blind box consumption involves multiple interacting influences. By bringing these perspectives together, this study is able to examine blind box purchasing as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than reducing it to a single cause. This interdisciplinary approach also provides a stronger framework for comparing the primary survey and interview findings with existing research and identifying where the findings support, expand upon, or differ from previous studies.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods research design, combining both primary and secondary data to investigate the purchasing behaviors regarding blind boxes. Given the limited research on the issue, this study mainly relies on primary data collected through a Google Forms survey, while secondary data was gathered from credible online articles, academic publications, and industry reports to provide additional context and support for the findings.

The quantitative component consisted of a Google Forms survey that collected responses regarding participants' purchase motivation and decision-making, the design and aesthetic appeal of blind boxes, hedonic versus utilitarian values, spending habits and financial behavior, and psychological and social effects. The survey included a combination of multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions, allowing for the collection of measurable data that could be analyzed for patterns and trends. Survey participants were recruited through the researcher's personal network as well as through Reddit communities. Recruiting respondents from both sources helped broaden the participant pool and reduce the likelihood of obtaining responses from a single demographic or social group, thereby minimizing potential sampling bias.

The primary data collected from the survey was compared with secondary research obtained from credible online sources. These sources included news articles, market reports, and scholarly publications discussing consumer behavior, marketing strategies, psychological influences, and the growth of the blind box industry. Comparing primary findings with existing literature enabled the identification of consistent themes, similarities, and differences, strengthening the validity of the study's conclusions through data triangulation.

Although the use of online recruitment increased the diversity of participants, this study has several limitations. Because participants were recruited through convenience sampling rather than random sampling, the findings may not be fully representative of the broader population. Additionally, the relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported responses may limit the generalizability of the results. Nevertheless, the combination of primary survey data and secondary research provides a well-rounded analysis of the factors influencing blind box purchasing behavior, particularly among teenage consumers.

4. Survey Respondent Profile

The survey sample consisted primarily of female respondents (61%), followed by male respondents (37%), while 1% identified as nonbinary and 1% selected another gender identity. Because females make up a clear majority of the sample, the purchasing behaviors and attitudes identified throughout the study may more strongly reflect female consumers than the general population. This higher representation of female respondents may be consistent with research suggesting that gender

differences exist in responses to blind-box product design. A 2026 study found that female consumers placed greater emphasis on visual cues and emotional resonance in blind-box packaging than male consumers, suggesting that aesthetic and emotionally appealing designs may have particular influence on female consumers (Zhou & Mu, 2026). However, the demographic distribution of this survey alone cannot establish that females are more likely than males to purchase blind boxes, as the sample was not randomly selected and contained more female respondents to begin with.

With respect to age, the largest demographic was participants under the age of 18 (39%), followed by those aged 46–55 (24%), 56–65 (18%), 18–25 (9%), 26–35 (5%), 66 or older (3%), and 36–45 (2%). The large proportion of respondents under 18 is especially valuable because the primary focus of this study is teenage consumers. Their responses provide direct insight into the purchasing behaviors, motivations, and influences experienced by the population most frequently targeted by blind box marketing. However, the inclusion of older age groups also allows for comparisons between adolescent and adult consumers, helping determine whether purchasing motivations differ across generations.

Regarding marital status, 49% of respondents were single, 45% were married, and 6% selected another status. This relatively balanced distribution suggests that the survey captured perspectives from individuals with different lifestyles and financial responsibilities. Married respondents, particularly those with children, may be more likely to purchase blind boxes as gifts, whereas single respondents may be more likely to purchase them for personal collecting.

Responses regarding parental status were similarly balanced, with 52% reporting that they do not have children and 48% indicating that they do. This distinction is important because motivations for purchasing blind boxes may differ substantially between these groups. Parents may purchase blind boxes primarily for their children, while respondents without children are more likely to be purchasing for themselves. Comparing these groups can help distinguish between consumer behavior driven by personal interest versus purchasing on behalf of others.

Educational attainment showed that 45% of respondents had a high school diploma or less, 27% held a master's degree, 18% held a bachelor's degree, and 10% possessed a doctoral degree or higher. The relatively high percentage of respondents with a high school education is consistent with the large number of participants under 18, many of whom are currently enrolled in high school. At the same time, the inclusion of highly educated respondents broadens the range of perspectives represented in the sample and allows for analysis across varying educational backgrounds.

Employment status was nearly evenly divided, with 51% currently employed and 49% unemployed. Employment status may influence disposable income and purchasing frequency. Individuals who are employed may have greater financial flexibility to purchase blind boxes more frequently, whereas unemployed respondents—particularly teenagers and students—may face greater budget constraints but still be influenced by social media trends or peer pressure to participate in blind box collecting.

The survey found that 86% of respondents owned their home, while 14% rented. Although housing status was not a primary focus of the study, it serves as a general indicator of financial stability and stage of life. The large proportion of homeowners reflects the substantial number of older adult respondents in the sample. Since homeownership is often associated with greater financial security, this finding suggests that many respondents likely had the financial means to purchase discretionary items such as blind boxes. However, because nearly 40% of respondents were under the age of 18, housing status should not be interpreted as a direct measure of the financial independence of all participants, particularly teenagers who are likely living with their parents.

The sample was predominantly Asian (78%), followed by White (10%), Black or African American (4%), Mixed Race (3%), Hispanic (2%), Mexican (1%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1%), and 1% who preferred not to disclose their ethnicity. This demographic distribution is particularly relevant to the blind box market because blind boxes originated in East Asia and remain especially popular within Asian communities. As a result, the high proportion of Asian respondents may reflect greater familiarity with blind box products, brands, and collecting culture. While this provides valuable insight into a population that is highly engaged with the market, it also limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to populations with different cultural backgrounds.

5. Data Analysis

When asked whether they had ever purchased a blind box, 52% of respondents answered yes, while 48% answered no. The nearly even distribution is beneficial for the study because it includes perspectives from both consumers and non-consumers. Individuals who have purchased blind boxes provide firsthand insight into purchasing motivations and habits, whereas those who have not purchased them offer an important comparison group for understanding why some consumers choose not to participate in the trend. The fact that a slight majority had experience purchasing blind boxes also indicates that the survey collected responses from individuals familiar with the products being studied.

Among respondents who had purchased blind boxes, the results reveal a strong tendency toward impulsive purchasing. Over half of respondents (53.85%) described their purchases as mostly impulsive, while 23.08% indicated that their purchases were completely impulsive, meaning they decided to buy in the moment. In contrast, only 21.15% reported that their purchases were mostly planned, and just 1.92% described them as completely planned. These findings demonstrate that approximately 77% of blind box purchasers reported buying them impulsively, while fewer than one-quarter described their purchases as planned. This pattern is consistent with research by Zhang, Zhou, and Qin (2022), which found that perceived uncertainty in blind box products positively influences consumers' impulsive purchase intentions and that curiosity helps explain this relationship. Because consumers do not know which item they will receive before opening the package, purchasing decisions may be influenced by curiosity, excitement, and anticipation of a desirable reward rather than deliberate planning. Zhang and Zhang (2022) similarly found that uncertainty increases the emotional value associated with blind box purchases, including curiosity, expectation, and satisfaction, which can subsequently influence purchase intention. The predominance of impulsive purchasing therefore supports the study's hypothesis that blind box marketing can capitalize on psychological mechanisms associated with uncertain rewards. Rather than carefully budgeting or planning purchases, many consumers may make purchasing decisions in response to emotional excitement or the desire to obtain a particular figure or complete a collection. This finding is particularly relevant to teenage consumers because previous blind box research identifies young people as a major consumer group and suggests that the novelty and excitement associated with uncertain rewards can influence their purchasing behavior.

When asked whether they research a blind box series or its possible figures before making a purchase, 57.69% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, while 28.85% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 13.46% remained neutral. These findings indicate that although many purchases are impulsive, consumers still tend to gather information beforehand. This apparent contradiction suggests that impulsive purchasing does not necessarily occur without prior knowledge. Instead, consumers often

become familiar with a blind box series through social media, online communities, or promotional materials before encountering the product in a store or online marketplace. Researching the possible figures may increase anticipation and emotional attachment to specific collectibles, making consumers more likely to purchase when given the opportunity. Therefore, pre-purchase research may actually reinforce impulsive buying rather than prevent it.

Respondents were also asked whether they had ever purchased a blind box that they had not originally planned to buy after seeing it in a store or online. The results showed that 75% agreed or strongly agreed, compared with only 13.46% who disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 11.54% were neutral. This finding provides strong evidence that blind box purchases are frequently spontaneous. The high proportion of unplanned purchases supports earlier survey findings indicating that most blind box purchases are impulsive. It also aligns with psychological research on impulse buying, suggesting that product visibility, attractive packaging, and immediate availability can trigger purchasing decisions without prior intention (Lyer et al., 2020).

The visual appearance of blind boxes emerged as one of the strongest purchasing influences in the survey. 86.54% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the visual design or art style of a blind box series significantly affects whether they choose to buy it, while only 3.85% disagreed and 9.62% remained neutral. These findings demonstrate that aesthetics are a major component of blind box marketing. Character design, packaging, color schemes, and artistic style appear to play a significant role in attracting consumers before they even know which figure they will receive. This supports existing literature suggesting that companies intentionally invest in appealing visual identities to establish emotional connections with consumers and encourage collecting behavior. Because many blind boxes feature collaborations with well-known artists or recognizable intellectual properties, visual appeal becomes an important factor in differentiating one series from another.

When asked whether they would pay more for a blind box produced by a brand or artist they already follow, 55.77% answered yes, 30.77% responded maybe, and only 13.46% answered no. These findings indicate that brand familiarity significantly influences purchasing decisions. Consumers who already trust or admire a particular company or artist appear more willing to pay premium prices for their products. This reflects the role of brand loyalty in reducing perceived purchasing risk despite the randomized nature of blind boxes. Well-established brands may also benefit from stronger emotional connections with consumers, making buyers more willing to spend additional money in pursuit of exclusive or limited-edition collectibles.

One of the strongest findings relates to respondents' motivations for purchasing blind boxes. When asked whether they buy blind boxes primarily for emotional enjoyment rather than practical use, 80.77% agreed or strongly agreed, while only 1.92% disagreed and 17.31% remained neutral. This overwhelming majority demonstrates that blind boxes are purchased primarily as a source of entertainment, excitement, and personal satisfaction rather than for functional purposes. Unlike products designed to fulfill practical needs, blind boxes derive much of their value from the emotional experience surrounding the purchase, including anticipation before opening the package, the excitement of discovering its contents, and the satisfaction of collecting desired figures. This finding reinforces one of the central arguments of this study: blind boxes rely heavily on emotional rather than rational decision-making. The excitement associated with uncertainty and collecting creates psychological rewards that motivate continued purchasing despite the possibility of receiving duplicate

or less desirable items. For teenage consumers, who are generally more responsive to novelty, social influence, and emotional rewards, these marketing strategies may be particularly effective.

Respondents were asked whether they would continue purchasing blind boxes even if they already owned duplicate figures from the same series. Of the 52 respondents who had purchased blind boxes, 25 respondents (48.1%) indicated that it depends on the series, 18 respondents (34.6%) answered no, and 9 respondents (17.3%) answered yes. These findings suggest that most consumers make situational rather than automatic purchasing decisions. Nearly half indicated that their willingness to continue buying depends on factors such as the quality of the series, the desirability of the remaining figures, or the rarity of certain collectibles. Although only a small proportion stated that they would always continue purchasing despite duplicates, the fact that almost one in five respondents would do so demonstrates that duplicate items are not always a sufficient deterrent. This supports previous research suggesting that the desire to complete a collection or obtain rare figures can outweigh the inconvenience of receiving duplicate items.

When asked about their average monthly spending on blind boxes during the past year, 18 respondents (34.6%) reported spending \$1–\$20, 12 respondents (23.1%) spent \$21–\$50, 8 respondents (15.4%) spent \$51–\$100, and 3 respondents (5.8%) spent more than \$100. Additionally, 11 respondents (21.2%) indicated that they no longer purchase blind boxes. Overall, the findings suggest that blind box purchasing is generally a relatively low-cost hobby for most consumers, with nearly 58% spending no more than \$50 per month. However, the presence of respondents spending over \$100 each month demonstrates that a smaller segment of consumers invests substantially more in collecting. This pattern is consistent with collectible markets, where most buyers make occasional purchases while a smaller group of highly engaged collectors contributes a disproportionate share of spending.

Participants were asked whether purchasing a blind box makes them feel inclined to buy additional blind boxes or related merchandise. Responses were mixed: 16 respondents (30.8%) agreed or strongly agreed, 19 respondents (36.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 17 respondents (32.7%) were neutral. Unlike previous survey questions, these results do not indicate a strong overall tendency toward continued purchasing immediately after opening a blind box. Although nearly one-third of respondents experienced this effect, a slightly larger proportion disagreed. This suggests that while the excitement of opening a blind box may encourage additional purchases for some consumers, it is not a universal experience. Individual differences in collecting goals, self-control, and financial considerations likely influence whether consumers feel compelled to continue purchasing.

The survey also examined whether respondents had ever spent more money than they originally intended during a single shopping session. Twenty respondents (38.5%) reported that this occurred rarely, 17 respondents (32.7%) indicated it happened occasionally, and 3 respondents (5.8%) stated that it happened frequently. In contrast, 12 respondents (23.1%) reported never spending beyond their intended budget. These findings indicate that overspending is relatively common among blind box consumers. In total, 76.9% of respondents reported exceeding their intended spending at least occasionally. Although frequent overspending was uncommon, the high proportion of respondents who experienced occasional or rare overspending suggests that blind box purchases often exceed consumers' original intentions. This finding supports earlier evidence of impulsive purchasing and is consistent with research showing that randomized rewards and collectible incentives can encourage consumers to continue purchasing beyond their planned budgets (Zhang et al., 2022).

Respondents were also asked whether collecting or displaying blind box figures gives them a sense of identity or belonging to a community. 22 respondents (42.3%) agreed or strongly agreed, 17 respondents (32.7%) remained neutral, and 13 respondents (25.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. These results suggest that, for many consumers, blind boxes represent more than physical collectibles. Nearly half of respondents associated collecting with a sense of identity or community, reflecting the social aspects of the hobby. Online communities, social media platforms, collector groups, and trading events provide opportunities for consumers to share collections, discuss new releases, and interact with others who share similar interests. This sense of belonging may strengthen long-term engagement with blind box collecting and increase consumers' willingness to continue participating in the market.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the factors that influence blind box purchasing behavior, with particular attention to impulsive purchasing, uncertainty, product design, emotional enjoyment, spending habits, and social identity. The findings suggest that blind box consumption is driven by more than simply an interest in collecting. Among respondents who had purchased blind boxes, approximately 77% described their purchases as at least mostly impulsive, while 75% reported purchasing a blind box they had not originally planned to buy after encountering it online or in a store. Additionally, 86.54% indicated that visual design significantly influenced their purchasing decisions, and 80.77% reported purchasing primarily for emotional enjoyment rather than practical use. These findings are consistent with previous research linking uncertain rewards, curiosity, emotional gratification, and gamified product designs to impulsive purchasing behavior.

The results also demonstrate potential financial and behavioral effects. Although many respondents reported relatively low monthly spending, 76.9% indicated that they had spent more than originally intended at least occasionally. Some respondents also continued purchasing despite receiving duplicates, suggesting that the uncertainty and possibility of obtaining a desired figure can encourage repeated purchases. At the same time, the finding that 42.3% associated collecting with identity or belonging demonstrates that blind boxes can serve a social and emotional purpose beyond the physical product itself.

Overall, this research suggests that blind boxes combine uncertainty, appealing design, emotional gratification, and collectible incentives in ways that can influence consumer decision-making. While these findings should be interpreted cautiously because of the study's convenience sample and self-reported data, they contribute to understanding why consumers may make purchases they did not initially intend to make. Further research could focus more specifically on teenage consumers, use larger and more representative samples, and examine how repeated exposure to social media and blind box marketing affects purchasing behavior over time.

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