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Unboxing the Chinese Blind Boxes among China's grown-up missing children: Probabilistic and elastic prosumption through mediated collection, exchange and resale of figurines

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Abstract

This paper situates the ‘Blind Box’ consumption, collection and prosumption practices in China within globalisation and the ‘media-mix’ fandom, which is to consume and resell media merchandise in opaque packages as probability goods. We re-centre the focus of fandom studies on the then much neglected ‘missing child’ and now the ‘emerging adult’ in a globalising world. We argue the Chinese emerging adult consumes, collects and resells Blind Boxes as a *generative* and *agentic* collection and fandom practice, defined as ‘probabilistic and elastic prosumption’ in a quasi-social and quasi-individual manner. We then critically examine and unpack the cultural production and meaning making process undertaken by collectors who also accumulate sociality and form identity

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through affective and economic investments, mediated collection and exchange of figurines in a post-socialist and consumerist society.

Keywords

prosumption, opaque selling, figurine collection, consumer culture, ACGN, fans, grown-up missing children

Introduction

With the proliferation of anime, comic, game and novel (ACGN) culture in East Asia, ACGN related products in China are powering up a booming creative economy built on IP exploitation and participatory fandom practices. The ACGN sector has contributed RMB19 Billion in 2020 with more than 0.5 Billion users (iiMedia, 2020). Amid the diversified consumption practices and (sub) cultural groups, merchandising is a significant contributor in the value chain of the creative economy, based on the exploitation of well-tested figurines which have a large and loyal fanbase. Such regular customers and enthusiasts frequently engage with and create communities around a certain brand, media and/or characters, termed as big IP in China.

We particularly refer to Pop Mart in this study as the central point where consumers purchase their Blind Boxes (*manghe* 盲盒)¹ in China (Figure 1). Toymaker Pop Mart International filed its IPO in Hong Kong in 2020, creating a series of media hype and carnivalesque sale records – Chinese young people are participating in the artificial and manufactured scarcity consumption for the abundant (see a review on ‘consuming consumerism’ in Willis, 2019). This has a formula widely adopted in the Chinese platform economy (Chen and Cheung, 2022). Over the past decade, Pop Mart has developed lines of dolls and collectible figurines and repositioned itself from a manufacturer of other companies’ IP to a developer and owner of proprietary IP products, notably, its Molly series (Wang, 2020).

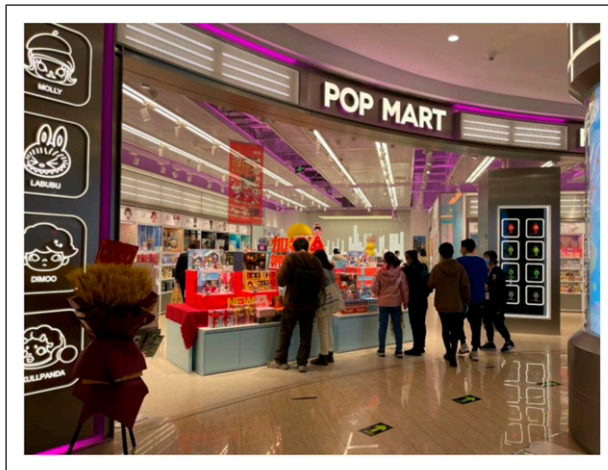


Figure 1. Collectors and resellers approaching the Pop Mart store, by Author.

In this study, we examine consumers' prosumption practices regarding collecting, mediating and (re)selling 'Blind Boxes' online and offline in China, an emerging marketing strategy termed as 'probabilistic or opaque selling' in business and operation management studies (Anderson and Celik, 2020; Fay, 2008). According to Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), '[P]rosumption involves both production and consumption rather than focusing on either one (production) or the other (consumption)' (p. 14). Prosumption now has more pre-eminence because of the development of the Web 2.0 and user-generated contents through social media platforms that allow individuals to produce and consume content (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Taking a cultural and ethnographical approach, we aim to make a critical and empirical contribution to consumption culture studies in a post-socialist China where new consumption culture and business models are being experimented but less critiqued. Informed by recent research on Chinese collection practices of material culture and the Chinese tradition of collecting, collection has always been understood as an essentially social activity (Williams, 2017), a way in which collectors develop their social prestige, relationships, business opportunities and beyond. It is a process of cultural production where tastes, skills and social capital are learnt, acquired and accumulated (Willis, 2019). Western theories on collecting (see Benjamin, 1968) and earlier psychoanalytical attempts tend to see collection as primarily an individual activity, where scholars interpret it in Freudian (anal-retentive/neuroticism) (Yiu and Chan, 2013) or Marxist terms (materialist fetishism, see critique in Chen, 2020). Such pathological analyses have been widely debated and critiqued for collection being reduced to a private activity. That said, we do not want to create a binary opposition between the east and the west as the dichotomous pair of collectivist versus individualist. Rather, we aim to examine both the social and individual motivations reflected from the Blind Box collection in China.

Fu and Zhao (2022) found that over 28.60% of Blind Box consumers are Gen-Z (those individuals born between 1997 and 2012). However, Fu and Zhao (2022) also found that 49.70% of Blind Box consumers are Millennial white-collar workers (those individuals born between 1981 and 1996). This supports the fact that the main Blind Box consumer groups are made up largely of young white-collar and Gen-Z individuals (Fu and Zhao, 2022). In our study, it is both Gen-Z and Millennial consumers that we are interested in, whereby Blind Boxes serve as channels for adult nostalgia (Cross, 2002), which we term 'the grown-up missing child' – those generations who had insufficient resources to access such objects during childhood (see literature review for further explanation). We situate the why, what and how Chinese consumers from these demographics collect Blind Boxes within a larger socio-cultural context. This correlates to three questions in our research, including the motivations behind collection, what sorts of figurines are collected and how value is attached to them in highly consumerist urban city life in China. We build our framework around these three research questions under our main focus on consumption culture, conceptualising cultural capital through consumption and sociality as one central socio-cultural dimension of Blind Box collection, and agency and authorial control as another, the latter of which includes both investment and indulgence, as economic and psychological sub-dimensions, respectively. In our research, these dimensions were decided based on both a phenomenon-driven inductive approach and a theory-driven deductive approach. As for the former approach, our research questions are grounded as we began with a participatory approach to Blind Box collection. As for the latter approach, we engaged with theories on collection in relation to cultural capital and sociality, and agency and authorial control, to adopt a social constructivist approach that critiqued the meaning-making process by and for the grown-up missing child participants who collect Blind Boxes.

It is important to note that, although we endeavour to provide an alternative and complementary understanding and interpretation of collection activities in a Chinese context, we do not want to create a binary opposition between the east and the west as the dichotomous pair of collectivist

versus individualist. Rather, we want to look at both the social and individual motivations reflected from such collections.

Literature review

The significance of Blind Box collection

Card and toy/figurine collection are not new to Chinese millennials. Small Raccoon Snack Noodle produced by Uni-President once created a card-collection mania in China's mainland with its 108-hero cards based on a Chinese classic novel, *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Figure 2). Western crazes like Beanie Babies, Pogs and Pokémon were equally well-known (Shen and Yang, 2020). What is intriguing about the Blind Box, is not merely the consumption of these figurines, but the business model of packing and selling these figurines in colourful and opaque boxes, wherein consumers do not know what they bought until they unbox. Blind Box is said to be adopted from a New Year custom in Japan when shopping malls package and bulk-sell shrouded, excess and unmarketable goods in a *fukubukuro* (lucky bag) with affordable price (Nuryakin and Munro, 2019). Likewise, Blind Box shares some similar features to *Gashapon* capsule toys/figurines found in Japanese



Figure 2. 108-Hero cards from *Outlaws of the Marsh*, by Author.

Gashapon machines, which share similar ‘mystery like’ properties in that the consumer does not know which figurine they will get. Given the close relationship between ACGN culture and its associated business models in Japan, this promotion strategy is quickly adopted in the Chinese ACGN market, unleashing its potential by erasing the time limit. This means the Blind Boxes can be sold all year round with ACGN-related merchandise, such as cards, badges, toys, figurines, outfits and shoes, what [Steinberg \(2014\)](#) termed as ‘media mix’. Even though the Blind Boxes are inspired by existing and well-known animated series and film blockbusters, the figurines are not based on storytelling but the presentation of individual figurines that can be detached from the original fannish consumption universe to make their own meanings among collector communities. Therefore, the release of such products is strategically engineered and controlled according to corporate schedules. This means toy manufacturers and brands, such as Pop Mart, can decide their own pace and roll out campaigns along the year with manufactured scarcity, paradoxically creating abundant products.

Toymaker Pop Mart International filed its IPO in Hong Kong in 2020, creating a series of media hype and carnivalesque sale records. This media hype formula of artificial scarcity and exclusivity has been widely adopted around the world by brands such as Jordan sneakers and Supreme brandmashing product lines. Over the past decade, Pop Mart has developed lines of dolls and collectible figurines and repositioned itself from a manufacturer of other companies’ IP to a developer and owner of proprietary IP products, notably, its Molly series ([Wang, 2020](#)). In this article, we will use Pop Mart as a case study to examine the consumer culture of Blind Boxes in China.

These Blind Boxes can be bought online where Chinese Ecommerce is taking the lead around the world with Alibaba and [JD.com](#) (see review, [Willis, 2019](#)) and their highly efficient delivery systems can almost deliver everything the next day in Chinese major cities. In his staggering and surreal depiction of Chinese contemporary city life, Paul [Willis \(2019\)](#) as an external observer witnessed a highly consumerist society that is filled with consumption and advertising everywhere, both online and offline (see also [Davis, 2013](#)). Shopping malls are open 24/7 where these Blind Boxes are being sold via both vending machines and online. As for the latter, it is almost a literal rewrite of the Asian alleys depicted in dystopian films such as *Cloud Atlas* or *Ghost in the Shell*, where people sell themselves on social media ([Willis, 2019](#): 60). This depiction provides the necessary context that requires a refreshed understanding of Chinese consumerist society.

Collection is thus crucial to consumption culture, which not only generates significant income but also creates a culture and space for sociality and identity formation ([Hooper-Greenhill, 1995](#)). Early scholarly literature on ‘hobby culture’ suggests that otaku merchandise, garage kits and the under-researched figurines, among other collective material products, also become complex post-modern and transmedia formations of identity-making ([Allison, 2006](#); [Condry, 2013](#); [Lamarre, 2009](#); [Rehak, 2012](#); [Steinberg, 2014](#)). With regards to these personal and social forms of prosumption, previous studies have also shown that such object-commodity culture has not only been engendered via indoor activities but has also been disseminated and circulated in urban social settings inside and outside the official distribution of collectibles ([Galbraith, 2013](#); [Geraghty, 2014](#); [Lamarre, 2018](#)).

In the Chinese context, studies in collection culture tend to focus on the antique market, for example, porcelain and ceramics ([Chen, 2018](#)), and modern ‘red relics’ from Maoist China ([Williams, 2017](#)). These studies provide cultural and sociological accounts along the age and class lines that are preoccupied with adult consumption and affluent classes who have the capital to make such investments. In addition, [Williams \(2017\)](#) argues that it is the remembrance and re-narration of the memories of the recent past that makes collection popular given the significant changes in Chinese society, namely transforming from a Maoist China to a more open market economy from

1978 onwards. However, the Blind Box is quite different from the ‘red relics’ since they are produced for sale/investment with a consumerist and neoliberal ethos after China’s four-decade opening up reform (Liu, 2021). Then what are the characteristics of these emerging adult consumers existing in today’s market? How to situate their consumption practices in terms of toys and merchandise from well-known TV and animation shows?

The grown-up missing child in Blind Box collection

We situate emerging adult Chinese toy-consumers and collectors of the Gen-Z and Millennial generations as ‘the grown-up missing child’ figuratively in the context of Blind Box consumption, building on Cross’s (2008) discussion of the grown-up missing child in consumption studies. In the West, millennial consumers were framed as ‘the grown-up missing child’ in the field of consumer culture more than 15 years ago (Langer, 2004; Martens et al., 2004). This is based on a critical analysis of the marketing and promotional strategies employed by toymakers and franchises that aim to portray the child as ‘innocent’ and the toy market as ‘profane’. The competing discourse of a ‘sheltered (and overprotected) child’ in China is largely due to moral panics that have always aimed to keep children away from ‘moral corruption’ and ‘market erosion’ – not only because of the quantity of such products but also because of their perceived negative qualities. Such ‘negative qualities’ have most recently been identified in research on Blind Boxes in the Chinese market by several researchers. Ma and Xu (2021) highlight, for instance, that the Blind Box market in China needs supervision, to protect consumers from issues such as gambling addiction and consumer fraud. They suggest that the government needs to regulate Blind Box companies so as to eliminate consumer victimization. Although Fu and Zhao (2022) also argue that the growth of the Blind Box market means problems such as fraud and ethical lapse deriving from the lack of laws and regulations to supervise the development of the boxes. As the dangers of gambling associated with Blind Box collection have already been well established in previous research, our focus is instead on the socio-cultural and agentic factors that influence the emerging adult collector, including cultural capital and sociality, individuality, and investment. Eastern millennial toy-consumers were often framed as ‘childish’ and ‘infantile’ because they could not have enough of such products based on a lack of them (Azuma, 2009). Such a conceptualisation fits well with the tension-laden and ambivalent discourses in Chinese mainstream media about edutainment and ‘play’, a pendulum-like stance swaying from support, suspicion to condemnation (Jiang, 2014; Chen, 2021b). However, the puritan Marxist discourse (often articulated homiletically) is less at ease with pro ‘economic construction’ and ‘consumption expansion’ national strategies in China (Chen, 2022).

In fact, a much-neglected fact is that China at the turn of the century was regarded as a new promise land both in terms of its production and consumption potential, for its cheap labour and a growing middle class (Langer, 2004). Langer (2004) documented vividly and in great detail how global brands such as Disney and McDonald’s toy sales created a craze and attracted criticism from state media at the time. The reason why we discuss the globalization of toys and making the missing children a crucial part of consumer culture is that children are embedded in the capitalist and consumerist processes where children are either framed as the ‘innocent’ to be protected or as the ‘development’ to be incorporated in late capitalism, or both. Childhood in China, especially in urban affluent families is a huge market where nostalgia has been used to (re)create a never-fully-gratified need for consumption that is targeting the single-child generation (Liu, 2016). As pointed out by (Steinberg, 2014), the media mix (film, merchandise, theme park, chocolate, etc.) is part and parcel that makes childhood and children a project for consumption, making China’s Gen Z and Millennial consumers a perfect research subject. Blind Box, as a proximate and relevant example that reuses the

merchandise from Japan's Otaku culture is best positioned to conduct a critical cultural analysis of the aforementioned target audience.

Azuma (2009) contends that merchandising is an indispensable practice and a key business model utilised by ACGN content producers. In fact, until this day, Japanese animation production companies still rely on ad hoc stakeholders to form 'committees' to co-produce animated comic sequels, including well-established studios. Some stakeholders are themselves merchandising manufacturers, such as toy companies, food and beverage manufacturers (Steinberg, 2014). This is partially a compromise under the competitive anime industry, as studios need to secure sponsorship to actualize their artistic creations in exchange of product promotion for their patrons. As mentioned above, Pop Mart adopts such a business model to better utilise established intellectual properties (IP) beyond national borders, while creating their own branded merchandise. Within the IP-supported proprietary ACGN industry ecology, there are differences between these distinct media formats as different consumption mode and technology control apply (Chen, 2020). For example, digital ACGN contents are now readily available online. Bilibili, as one of the most popular video-sharing sites in China mediating ACG contents also engage in such income streams through international co-production (Chen, 2020). Bilibili also hosts thousands of unboxing videos, which works as a promotional tool to create a prosumption ecology. Such an ecology has bridged the gap between the analogue and the digital in the sense that media texts in print closely associated with psychical sales and collection practices are now digitally mediated, archived and promoted among consumers (Tankel and Murphy, 1998). It is not a coincidence that the recent adult-centric analyses of ACGN prosumption (see Chen, 2021b) are primarily focused on Chinese millennial consumers. The metaphorical 'childhood and children' fits the emerging adults who are the 'grown-up missing children' (Grimes, 2015). They were 'missing' because they did not have the resources and financial means to consume these products when they were children. Now they choose to (re)collect these toys when they can. We argue that since the child culture industry has captured the grown-up missing child for full marketization, a pressing need is to bring in a historical perspective to examine the consumption culture among emerging adults as a 'becoming' process where consumers do not break neatly from one stage to another but are captured in the cradle-to-grave culture industries.

Theoretical framework

Cultural capital through sociality, agency and authorial control

The above cradle-to-grave culture industries have the grown-up missing child captive in the ecosystem and virtual spaces. As superimposing as it may sound, we also need to understand and wonder: are these grown-up missing children still 'blank slates in need of ethical instruction' (the sheltered child paradigm, Cross, 2004), or are they the romantically conceptualized Edenic innocents whose natural propensity for wonder should be indulged? We intend to probe what role consumers play in such a consumerist society and to understand what agency collectors and prosumers have through their own lived experiences. Therefore, we develop our own framework that bridges the gap between the exploited and agentic consumers, who have been long captured in a structure-agency dilemma conceptually.

Cross (2004) contends that such a dilemma perhaps speaks more of the expressed discontent with the world of work and mature sobriety of adulthood than that of childhood. That is possibly why the evoked childhood memories through media mix as a nostalgic domain of autonomous fantasy, has worked so well in constructing emerging consumer markets around the world. Here, since the products of media mix tend to be generational and social, we want to invoke Bourdieu's

conceptualization of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]; Turner and Edmunds, 2002) and contextualize such cultural production as a ‘becoming’ process. For Bourdieu, the process of cultural and social capital involves the collection of different symbolic elements, whereby ‘objectified cultural capital’ includes any material belongings that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. A sense of group identification and position (‘people like us’) is thus created when similar forms of cultural capital are shared with others. To put this into perspective, the collectors we investigated in this study demonstrate a significant presence in online communities and off-line stores, even though it is a niche market. In the age of digital media, where consumers are more and more believed to be active and participatory prosumers (Jenkins, 2006; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), numerous cases have demonstrated how subcultural groups not only accumulate and leverage social and even economic capital (Zhang and Negus, 2020; Chen 2021a). Such symbolic and expressive power are partially contributed by what Veblen termed ‘conspicuous consumption’. Therefore, such ‘Veblen hype brands and products’ rely heavily on artificial and manufactured scarcity and prestige, and the limited edition and exclusivity strategy works effectively. That is, when the price of such products goes up, sales also go up, which contradicts the traditional demand and supply theorem. This will be used in our case to further explain that the consumption of Blind Boxes is used as a way to *gain* and *signal* status, which is now orchestrated by market practices (Trigg, 2001).

In particular, we focus on the ‘authorial control’ acquired by collectors who both identify personally with their Blind Box collections and invest in Blind Boxes through promoting, purchasing or reselling them through social media and Ecommerce platforms. The authorial control is evident in the agentic calculations of Chinese collectors in the sense that they can transfer risks and potential loss to a community that they help cultivate and educate (Laugher, 2010). Here, we adopted a legal and cultural understanding of authorial control. It was used early in legal studies in terms of copyright control (Hamilton, 1994) and was later adopted to work as a business model that leverages consumer value co-creation through user-generated content. The term is also widely used in fandom studies literature as a cultural practice (Wellenreiter, 2015). Consumers maintain an authorial control when consuming and co-creating derivative works, as various media texts, as diverse as novels, games, and toys (Cover, 2006; Tychsen, 2008). Our analyses, therefore, builds on an agentic assumption of Chinese consumers who engage with ACGN prosumption in the digital age, going beyond a merely descriptive account of what is going on in the merchandising and collecting scene in China. We argue that the collectors under investigation have a double identity through engaging in consumption and reselling, as both consumers and prosumers. To be specific, they work as self-indulgent consumers, which underpins their overspending practices where thrill and excitement are still evident through shopping and possession. In addition, they work as calculative prosumers who curate, (re)sell and accumulate cultural and social capitals through digital social media management, discourse construction and consumer mobilisation. Our research traces how consumption patterns and new trends in taste adoption and diffusion can also transit between boundaries, in which consumers fuse and blend their cultural values and conscious decisions with affective engagements. Our assumption reflects the complexities and dynamic nature of culture in a Chinese post-socialist consumer society in transition.

Methodology

Given the socio-cultural dimension and economic sub-dimension of the research in relation to Blind Box consumption, we take a mixed-method approach to conduct a qualitative study.

Firstly, qualitative content analysis was used in this study, which can provide a comprehensive view of public discussions about Blind Boxes. According to Altheide (1996), qualitative content analysis enables researchers ‘to capture the meanings, emphasis, and themes of messages’ (p. 33). By using qualitative content analysis, the presentation of Blind Box information and discussions of this on Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) and Xianyu (Alibaba’s used goods Ecommerce platform) can be examined in detail. Important patterns of expression through posts relating to collection and sociality, agency and authorial control were extracted to help further reveal the characteristics of comments posted by Weibo and Xianyu users. The analysis generated distinct themes, each of which answers our three research questions: the motivations behind collection, what sorts of figurines are collected and how value is attached to them in the highly consumerist urban city life in China. This is in contrast to topics created from computational content analysis methodologies, as these themes were shaped by the human coder’s assessment of the content and directed toward our study objective. This allows the broader socio-cultural substance of events or terminology to be incorporated, and the hidden meaning of the comments to be understood. Furthermore, we coded the social media comments using directed content analysis, which is founded on prior theoretical work (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Similar to other content analyses, coding is used, with codes typically being derived from theoretically significant concepts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Accordingly, we used a deductive theory-driven method to code words associated with the theories of cultural capital and sociality, and agency and authorial control; at the same time being supported by our inductive analysis of the Blind Box raw dataset we collected. Since one of the key benefits of a directed content analysis is the ability to build upon and strengthen pre-existing theoretical frameworks, this method is well suited to the goals of the present investigation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Secondly, to verify if the themes identified in the social media comments matched with the demographics of the grown up missing child as a complementary method, we also conducted interviews with Gen-Z and Millennial Blind Box collectors with situated knowledge. Ethical approval and consent were obtained before the investigation. In total, we interviewed more than 10 participants with active engagement. Three sets of key questions were asked based on our theory-driven method: 1) their social and individual gains or losses from these activities; 2) their social engagement practices and strategies employed online and offline; 3) their individual motivations and daily practices of buying and collecting these Blind Boxes. Our task was to deduce attitudes and broaden the questions about the various themes from the experience of each participant. Key online and interview quotations were used to further illustrate salient points made against their own experiences. Pseudonyms were applied to both online usernames and offline names to protect the identities of the participants.

Cultural capital and sociality through the grown-up missing children’s collection

Blind Box is well integrated with the ACGN industries, fostering a large community culturally and an emerging industry economically. Therefore, Blind Box collection is a form of sociality that cannot be neglected, manifesting itself as a form of association formation between groups of Blind Box collectors. As Formanek (1991) argues, collecting is a cooperative and social activity that bonds people who share similar interests.

In order to bring together collectors, Pop Mart has held toy shows in Beijing and Shanghai for more than five consecutive years (Guanghua-Kellogg, 2020). Pop Mart promoted its Toy Fair in Shanghai, mentioning the words ‘(socially) current (潮 *cháo*)’ in its post (Pop Mart Weibo, 2021).

Pop Mart periodically promotes the opening of its new stores and exhibitions on its official Weibo page, using hastags to emphasize stores as 'physical spaces' for socialisation among fan collectors, which also boosts its search engine optimisation (SEO) as part of their algorithmic promotions. This in turn attracts fans' engagement. A collector uploads a video of a newly opened Pop Mart store with some of their favourite in-store figurine series, and other collectors are quick to join in the excitement with each other, with users commenting that they want to go together with friends or at least make plans with friends (Weibo, 2021). Evidently, collectors are forming a social network where there exists an 'awareness of a common group membership and the value connotations associated with it' (Tajfel, 1982: 2), at the same time, distinguishing themselves from non-participants, where exclusivity can be established.

These practices of socialisation through festivals or fairs echoes Otaku's practices of anime consumption, in which, very dispersed floating individuals only come together in masses during these specific events (Cooper-Chen, 2012). The global identification of these abstract crowds and temporary gatherings comes only into being as extensions of the collector's intimate private experience, which turns the faceless mass into identifiable social beings and groups. Similarly, the collection series' social networks become spaces of exchange that share immaterial content, resell collections and amplify the structures of knowledge about the symbolic capital of these objects (see section on collection and investment). This is part of the collector's participatory community interactions that happen both online and offline (Jenkins, 2008). It is also significant because as one of the interviewees expresses, 'Chinese people tend to do what they are told. If I am told to buy this because it is good for me, who am I to say no (a forced smile). This is how we think as a collective society' (Interview06, 2021). This makes such collection activities collective and social in the sense that they are learned, persuaded and cultivated. However, the forced smile gives away a sense of belonging to a shared community, together with the insider knowledge of a society, but more importantly, of a 'trade' of their own invention in the making.

Another interviewee informed us that collection was his way of pampering his girlfriend as a register for love and care and a hobby that allows them to spend some quality time together to curate and mingle (Interview04, 2021). This echoes another collector's experience of Blind Box collection as a family affair, who comments on Weibo that collection of Blind Boxes relates to her families love of these (Weibo, 2021). The collection then becomes a 'family possession', bringing together members of the same family. As such, collecting does not only form new social networks, that is, among friends but also assimilates existing ones. One interviewee who works as a teacher not only collected these figurines herself, but used them both as a 'pedagogical tool' and as a 'reward' to give to her students if they performed well, which in turn strengthens the student-teacher relationship (Interview03, 2021). The collection of these figurines then also becomes an 'incentive' among teachers and students, and becomes engrossed in the student-teacher relationship. Similarly, the interpersonal relationships that may develop as a result of collecting have been proven in past research (see Hooper-Greenhill, 1995). These collectors are members of a group where they feel belonging and social recognition.

We also have to acknowledge the fact that in-group identification and socialisation also involve gaining social and economic status and recognition. Positive feedback tends to grant collectors pleasurable gratification. Collectors are therefore positive about their socialized collections, particularly when they can result in strong interpersonal relationships. By voicing positive emotions about socialized collection, collectors can subsequently develop high self-esteem (Belk, 1991). In other words, it is very much about presenting themselves to others in society and on social media, so that they can construct their own subjectivities via approval-seeking. We now proceed to argue that

collecting Blind Boxes is both for the needs of group association and for self-identity, that is, uniqueness, exclusivity, individuality and autonomy.

Agency and authorial control through collection

There are also prime examples of Blind Box figurine collection as a form of individual identity formation, where collectors' and resellers' agency are evident. This can be seen through the recent release of the DIMOO Zodiac series with each toy figurine representing a certain star sign (Figure 3), capitalising on the already well-established astrology fandoms in China (Daxue Consulting, 2020). The Cancer figure, for instance, is representative of the Cancer zodiac, which is believed to have a sensitive, nurturing, instinctive, delicate, and vulnerable personality. As such, the figure has an attractive design with an almost innocent and sensitive expression on its face, two crab-like hands and crab-shaped hair. Likewise, the Aquarius figure sits in a beautiful golden cup of water and its hair also signifies water, which is representative of the Aquarius zodiac as the bearer of water, who heals with water or life (Figure 3). In this way, collecting Blind Box figurines not only builds on in-group identities (zodiac) but also allows their owners to attain a sense of personally associated distinctiveness.

On Weibo, users evidently demonstrate that collecting such figurines can offer a basis for agency and authorial control, allowing them to have a more fully individuated feeling (Jung, 1921) and distinction from others. Interestingly, Pop Mart advertises several of their series, for instance, the DIMOO Zodiac series, as arriving specially to be by the consumers' side (Weibo, 2021). User comments also display their affinity with these figurines as a sign of their own individual zodiac, with an emphasis on words such as 'my', 'I', 'match', or even commenting that they view this figurine as their 'favourite son' (Weibo, 2021). Such comments provide evidence that collecting is the basis of identity formation for many collectors, giving them that sense of individuality and diversity from others that they did not have as children. In other words, each collection is a palpable indication that the collector is unique in some way (Mine, 1988). One interviewee commented that what attracted her most about the DIMOO Zodiac series was exactly that she could identify with her own zodiac and the zodiac of those family members closest to her (Interview07, 2021). This assertion might be particularly distinctive since it is also compatible with superstition and long-



Figure 3. Zodiac series, by Author.

lasting Chinese beliefs that can affect the buying decision process when pursuing novelty in terms of chasing identities (Hernandez et al. 2008).

Likewise, on social media, the Pokémon series draws comments that emphasize the collector's unique relationship with the characters Pikachu or Bulbasaur (Weibo, 2021). Similarly for the DIMOO Life University series, for example, collectors also make comments to emphasise possession and identity, using words such as 'have' or 'got' (Weibo, 2021). Equally, on Pop Mart posts advertising the Yoki Gemstone Princess series, collectors are quick to make similar comments (Weibo, 2021). Even though Chinese society is believed to be a collectivist culture, a motive for collecting is, as expected, individualistic, possessive and even competitive. On the one hand, this could be because of the sense of satisfaction generated by the 'mystery element' and the 'manufactured uniqueness' of Blind Boxes. On the other hand, collecting these Blind Box figurines is sanctioning people to achieve an extended or enhanced *sense of self* through *amassing* and *controlling* crucial objects or experiences. One interviewee told us of an instance where he visited the Pop Mart store with the hopes of drawing the rare 'hidden' figurine in his favourite series, only then to find that his friend had drawn it instead. In his words, this felt like 'his friend now "owned" something he did not'. One, therefore, only has to look at the 'urge' for collectors to 'get' the hidden figurines in each collection as a way of saying through the collection, 'Look at what I own, and you don't' (Interview02, 2021).

One interviewee particularly enjoyed collecting those Blind Box toys with special individual characteristics and expressions that reminded her of childhood television shows (Interview02, 2021). Durand (2004) also discussed how the veneration of the image and the saturation of colours on the anime-style expressions of figurines help collectors to search for adapted stories and memories. This is partly due to their desire to linger in an alternative reality that is more colourful in cultural aesthetics and style than the one they are submerged in as adults. Equally, one of our informants describes how for some collectors the aesthetic function of these figurines serves to stimulate the imagination and the senses to their private spaces. Some collectors seek pleasure through the precision of colours, facial features, eye sizes, dresses and many other physical appearance traits, which augments the emotional energy of the collector. This is also because each Blind Box collection itself has been designed and differentiated to offer a sense of manufactured uniqueness, as the company offers collectors a one-of-a-kind creation. Thus, collections bestow a reified and intensified sense of individuality, autonomy and specialness upon those who own them.

One social media user also comments that they wish to regain their youth through collecting their 'baby' that they could not have during childhood (Weibo, 2021). One interviewee told us that her childhood in the 90s was caught up in China's emphasis on education as a key factor in its advancement of economic modernization. As such, she never had anything that made her feel unique, including toys, because she was just one of the millions of children caught up in the 'norm' of their parents' central focus on education in the hopes that their child would have a secure future, including private tuition, 'back door' entry into schools, and aspirations of study abroad (Interview03, 2021). Interestingly, one interviewee went on to say that as a child, her parents would not allow her to engage in card collection activities, such as Pokémon, which were popular with her classmates at the time. As a child, she admits she loved watching Pokémon on television any chance that she got and identified with the relationship between Pikachu and his trainer Ash (Interview02, 2021).

As such, collecting Blind Boxes is also a form of individual indulgence in Contemporary China because these boxes are targeted at consumers for whom nostalgia, a culture-bound condition, has become a noticeable practice. In a way, such indulgence in nostalgic possessions fills up the vacuum co-shaped by the collectors' excessive coddling as a child and the struggle to 'find' themselves in Chinese society today. One interviewee also told us that when she was younger, she was fanatical

with anything related to Harry Potter. As such, she now believed that a stable job and financial resources at this phase of her life has enabled her childhood tendency to collect Harry Potter Blind Box figurines, but also the yearning to reflect on younger life as an adult, as well as the more general nostalgic proclivity to use past collections to give significance to the present (Interview01, 2021) (Figure 4). In this respect, because of the lack of support among some Millennials and Gen Z, these ‘missing grown-up children’, when reaching the milestones of adulthood, have kept buying objects that allude to their childhood (Yang, 2003). This is a strong motivational factor for collecting these figurines. This vehicle further acts as a bolstering of the importance of collecting which will be unpacked more below as we proceed to examine collection as an individual economic utility, namely, investment.

Finally, one interviewee explained to us the individual thrills of collecting Blind Boxes as a form of agency and authorial control, where buyer uncertainty as to which figure they may have, leads them to poke, prod and shake the Blind Box in an attempt to ‘deduce’ the figure they are holding. She explained that there was an element of adventure to the process of arriving at the mall, entering the Pop Mart store and then combing through her favourite Blind Box series to guess which product might be inside (Interview08, 2021). Therefore, collection of these products is almost like an individual hunting act (Formanek, 1991) – the act of the search is both a challenge and a stimulation. What motivates individual collectors is exactly the amusement and excitement during the affectively designed process of trying to ‘get’ the object they most want (Long and Schiffman, 1997). In a similar vein, interviewees expressed that they got an individual thrill from the unboxing process, thus taking videos and pictures (as a material and affective evidence) to commemorate the occasion (Interview09, 2021).

Agency and authorial control through collection and resale as investment

We found that the concept of collection as investment raises a series of questions pertaining to what it means to acquire these Blind Box figurines within the context of agency and authorial control among the grown-up missing child. Unmistakably, Blind Box collection is not only seen as a sign of individuality but also as a material investment among grown-up missing child collectors. Such collectors tend to hope they will be lucky enough to get the most popular figurine associated with their own childhood nostalgia, which will likewise attract a similar demographic of buyer who

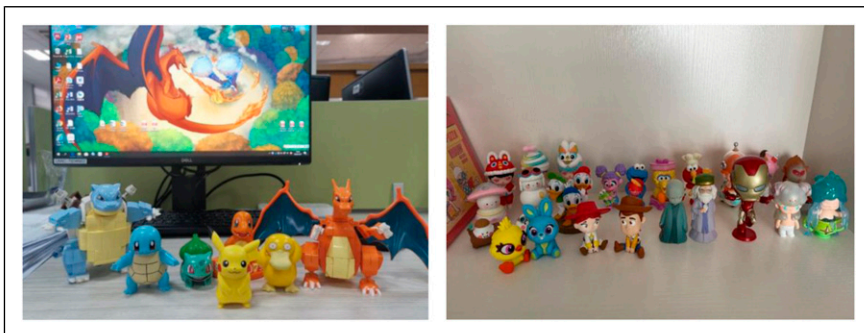


Figure 4. Pokémon (left) and famous figures from Western and Chinese movies and television (right), by author.

years for this nostalgia in order to sell it on at a higher price. One of our interviewees informed us that she particularly made a large profit from buying and reselling Blind Boxes from the Harry Potter series, one of the more popular series, sitting at the top of the search list for Pop Mart. This is because likeminded collectors can fall into a 'hunting' competition (Interview10, 2021). Such aggressive hunting behaviour engulfs not only unconscious but also conscious instincts since their game can symbolise a manufactured progress, in the sense that something exciting is happening. Collectors can be compensated with an 'award' by contending with other hunters (Long and Schiffman, 1997).

The 'Harry Potter with Hedwig' hidden figurine, which is the most popular in the series, has an original market price of RMB59, but it can resell for between RMB80 and 100. In this case, collectors of this series can become monetary sellers or 'investors'. Moreover, these sellers are not short of collectors, with numerous buyers asking for the hidden figurine (Xianyu, 2021). On the other hand, 'Dobby', 'Professor McGonagall' and 'Sirius Black', those less popular figures in the series, sell at a lower price (RMB40). Despite being sold lower than their original market price, it is also the resellers' strategy to draw buyers in. In this case, collection of Blind Boxes becomes engrossed in an economic profit-loss dichotomy. Moreover, as one of our interviewees states, she often notices that the demographic of her Xianyu buyers and resellers who add her and chat with her on WeChat (China's biggest instant messaging platform) are individuals ranging from 15 years of age to 30 years of age. These individuals also often inform her that their friends have had a lot of trouble obtaining the hidden figurines that she purposely resells at a higher price on Xianyu, and therefore they crave to show their friends that they finally 'got it' (Interview05, 2021). This responds to materialistic drives of craving among these grown-up missing children, just to feel that one can either 'gain profit' or 'win', which coincides with 'non-generous, envious, and possessive' conducts previously studied in research on exploring consumer collecting behaviour (Belk, 1995: 272), in addition to their gratifications gained through being socially distinct by possessing exclusive collections.

Nevertheless, if profit is the main reason for attainment and possession for some collectors, the collected items may also be lacking in the 'holiness' and 'accord' exposed in a 'true collection'. Thus, there is also an important exemption when collectors may upgrade a collection, the outdated items may then be sold or exchanged. We found numerous Xianyu posts offering collectors' the opportunity to bid for an exchange for brand new or unopened boxes (Xianyu, 2021). Prices vary, of course, depending again on the popularity of the figure. This is, we argue, not simply a case of monetary investment in these figurines, but instead gives the impression that it is the actual process of collection and exchange that is important for collectors, for if the collection is to 'finish' then it connotes the 'end' of their collection. In this way, there is a sense that upgrading the standards of one's collection can be achieved by diversifying into related collecting spaces, or even starting completely new kinds of collections. The endless refashioning of purchasing these objects gives them a sense of autonomy and agency that stimulates positive emotions. As Baudrillard acknowledges (Baudrillard, 2006: 97), these 'objects of passion' transcend their practical function, under the condition of private property, to enter into the symbolic personal world of the collector. As a result, they become 'possessed' by an imagery that establishes the rules of a constant game structure with special powers that stays alive by constantly acquiring new items. The personal values that the collectors assign to their objects can hardly be expressed in other realms, to the extent that only the collector *controls* the new structural order of these objects.

There is thus another exception when a dealer becomes disenchanted with an entire collection series and sells it off (Xianyu, 2021), perhaps in order to undertake a new and different collecting enterprise. As such the current collection completes its investment cycle. This can also be linked with a refusal to be part of anti-materialistic approach, in which the collector does not indulge the

‘soul’ of the series, and the possession is no longer driven by passion (but by monetary reward, and the ‘sudden’ loss of interest is an excuse for resale). The ‘soul’ of a series and passion for collecting it is one of the main ingredients of collecting objects (Belk, 1995: 441). A collection is essentially contingent on the nature of the value allocated to the objects, or ideas possessed. Durost (1932) argues that what qualifies the objects as a collection is that such objects should be related to other objects or ideas, or part of series, a whole, a class (p. 10).

As controlling as it may be, as demonstrated in the marketing and promotional discourses and through the very opaque business model of the Blind Boxes, collectors are not passive consumers who merely engage in excessive consumption. They also become resellers or exchange mediators online and offline. In doing so, they not only transfer the risk to a community in the making to avoid losing money (reselling with a price difference in favour of themselves) but also allow buyers/collectors both social and individual recognition within existing familial-social circles and new communities they help to create and maintain.

Our analyses has unveiled the agentic and elastic prosumptions of Chinese grown-up missing child consumers who engage with ACGN culture in the digital age, going beyond a merely descriptive account of what is taking place in the merchandising and collecting scene in China. We argue that the collectors under investigation have an *elastic identity* through engaging in opaque selling, consumption and reselling, as both consumers and prosumers. To be specific, they work as self-indulgent consumers underpinned by their overspending practices where thrill and excitement are still evident through shopping and possession. In addition, they work as calculative prosumers who curate, (re)sell and accumulate cultural and social capitals through digital social media management, discourse construction and consumer mobilisation. Our research tracks how consumption patterns and new trends in taste adoption and diffusion can also transit between boundaries, in which consumers fuse and blend their cultural values and conscious decisions with affective engagements. Our analyses thus demonstrate the complexities and dynamic nature of Chinese culture in a post-socialist consumer society in transition.

Conclusion

Through qualitative research concerning the collection of Blind Box figurines in China, we claim that the then missing child and now grown-up emerging adult does in fact have an interesting position with elastic identities. This in fact has implications for how the Chinese government may wish to proceed with Blind Box market regulation, because collection is a much more multifaceted and fluid enterprise than inferred by prior research, which largely states the dangers attached to Blind Box collection, including gambling and ethical issues. We have found that Blind Box collection for the grown-up emerging adult is instead underpinned by two key characteristics – cultural capital and sociality, and agency and authorial control – within which childhood nostalgia is entrenched. This is important, because it indicates that these collectors themselves are fans, as indicated by both their sociality and identity formation by means of purchasing figurines that have been promoted through media hypes and selling of established super-IPs based largely on childhood nostalgia. Moreover, consumers’ behaviour has been heavily influenced by the secondary markets that have developed around a figurine, which makes buying figurines a potentially profitable investment through authorial control, particularly uncovering a rare figurine that can sustain the media hype and then be sold at a higher price. Here, the probabilistic and elastic Blind Box prosumption builds on an opaque selling model and manufactured exclusivity to increase market share but is agentially and creatively used by collectors for sociality, individuality and investment where the missing child and now grown-up prosumers form their identities based on their

remembrance of an unfulfilled youth. We have teased out the creative, generative and productive activities of Blind Box collectors, as they re-sell figurines and integrate them into their social relationships and personal ‘collections’, where they find new meanings, values and uses.

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Note

1. Blind Box 盲盒 is also known as ‘mysterious box’, the translation of which adopts a marketing discourse in favour of excess consumption. We use ‘Blind Box’ which is more faithful to the translation of the original Chinese term and value-neutral.

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