

Coded Surprises: A Symbolic Design Framework for Luxury Accessories Blind Boxes to Activate Chinese Gen Z's Initial Brand Engagement

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03. Research design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore Chinese Gen Z's sensory and symbolic experiences with luxury blind boxes.

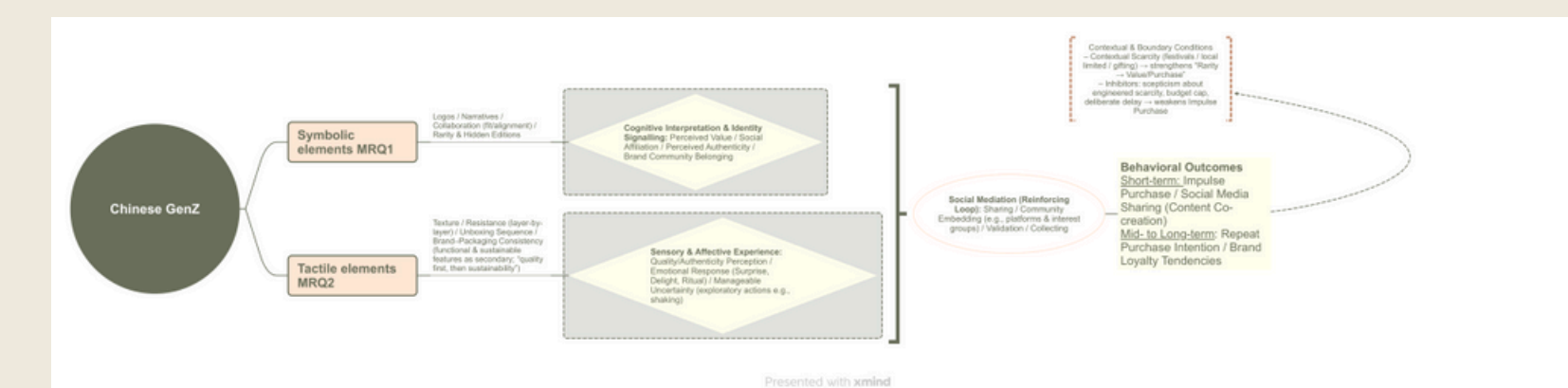
- Narrative Inquiry
- Semi-structured
- Interviews Purposive Sampling (n=8)
- Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns in emotional responses and meaning-making processes. The design prioritizes depth and context, adhering to ethical standards while acknowledging limitations in generalizability due to its focused, qualitative nature.

05. Recommendation

- Symbolic Co-creation: Move beyond overt scarcity tactics. Co-create culturally meaningful narratives with subcommunities and enhance transparency to build genuine value.
- Tactile Innovation: Bridge the online tactile gap by developing digital tools like AR tactile simulators to allow sensory exploration before purchase.
- Social Empowerment: Launch initiatives like metaverse galleries on platforms like Xiaohongshu to turn customers into co-creators and amplify brand reach through community.

The Closed-Loop Model



Symbolic Interaction
Consumers actively decode brand symbols (logos, colors) for identity construction and community belonging.

Critical Engagement: Gen Z demonstrates a rational attitude of both pursuing and critiquing scarcity strategies.

Tactile Experience
Dynamic tactility (unboxing resistance, layered sequences) forms the foundation for assessing quality, authenticity, and triggering emotions (surprise, delight).

Social Amplification
Social interaction acts as the key nexus linking symbolism and tactility. Through community sharing and feedback loops, initial positive impressions are transformed into sustained brand loyalty.

04. Results/Findings

1. The Symbolic Path: Decoding Meaning for Identity & Belonging Consumers derive value by interpreting deeper meanings:

- Brand Narratives: Engaging with the story and heritage of the luxury brand.
- Cultural Codes: Identifying and appreciating embedded cultural symbols.
- Perceived Rarity: Valuing the exclusivity of limited-edition and hidden items.

Outcome: This process facilitates identity construction and a search for social belonging, which is then amplified through social sharing.

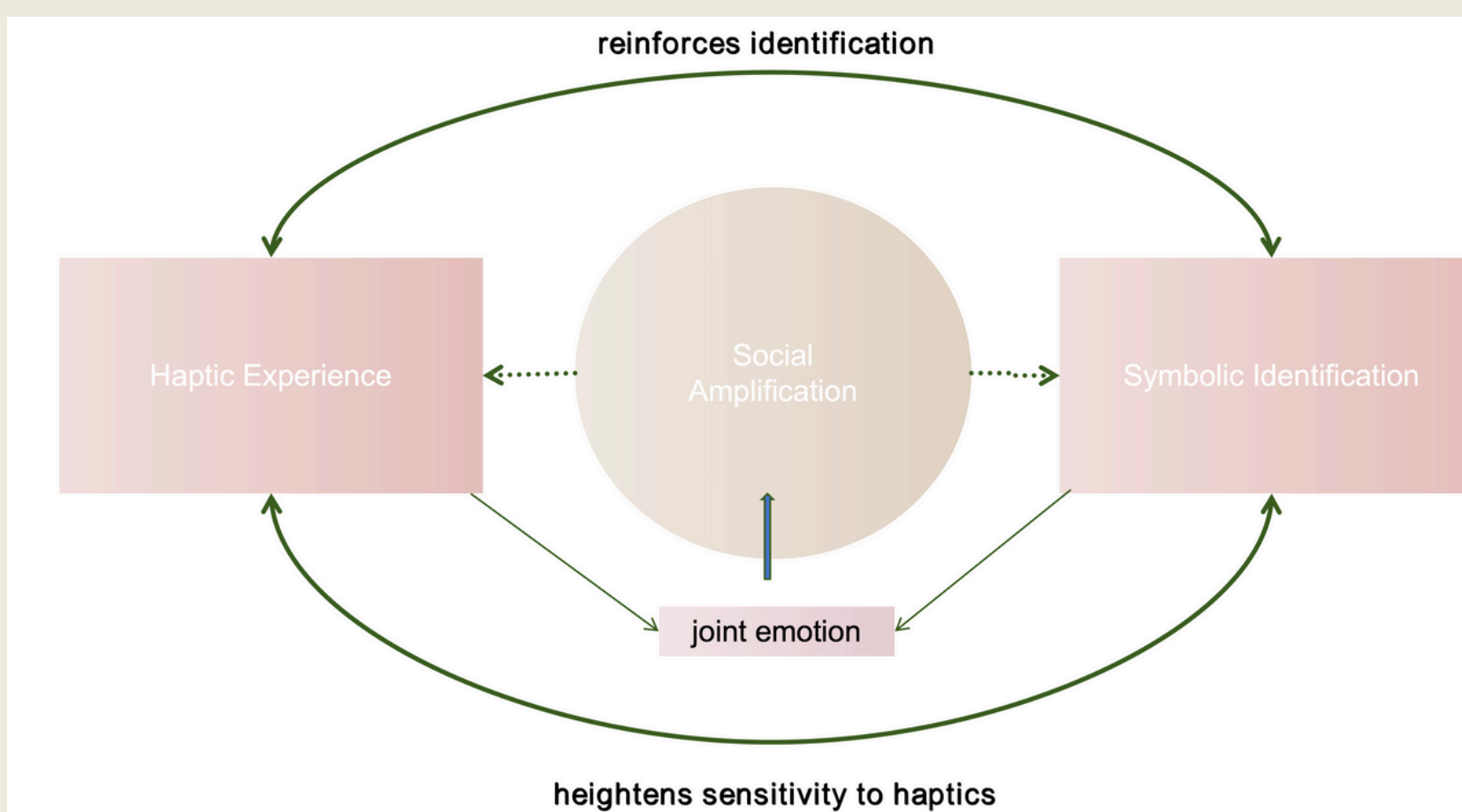
2. The Sensory-Tactile Path: Physical Interaction & Instant Emotion The tangible experience triggers immediate emotional and behavioral responses:

- Material Quality: The premium feel of the product and packaging.
- Unboxing Resistance: The deliberate physical effort that builds anticipation.
- Layered Rituals: The multi-step process of revealing the item, prolonging excitement.

Outcome: These elements instantly generate emotions like surprise and delight, driving impulse purchases and motivating social media engagement (e.g., sharing unboxing videos).

06. Conclusion

The initial brand interaction between Chinese Gen Z consumers and luxury accessory blind boxes is a cyclically driven process deeply integrated by symbolic interpretation (meaning), tactile experience (materiality), and social sharing (amplification). This research not only provides a more refined theoretical framework for understanding consumer behavior in emerging consumption contexts but also offers practical and actionable strategic guidance for brands in terms of sensory innovation, symbolic co-creation, and community engagement.



01. Introduction

Luxury brands in China are leveraging blind boxes to engage Gen Z consumers through surprise and sensory appeal. However, a disconnect often exists between symbolic narratives and tangible quality, undermining long-term brand equity. This study addresses the lack of a theoretical framework explaining how sensory and symbolic elements integrate during initial unboxing to construct brand meaning. Using a narrative inquiry approach, it develops a dual-path model integrating Symbolic Interactionism and Sensory Marketing to provide actionable strategies for fostering emotional resonance and brand loyalty in the Chinese luxury market.

02. literature

This literature review identifies a critical theoretical gap in understanding luxury blind box consumption. While **Symbolic Interactionism** explains how social interactions construct long-term brand meaning, and **Sensory Marketing Theory** captures the immediate emotional impact of tactile unboxing experiences, neither alone fully explains this hybrid phenomenon.

The review argues for a complementary dual-theory framework to analyze how fleeting sensory triggers (e.g., material quality, haptic feedback) and enduring symbolic narratives (e.g., cultural codes, rarity) intertwine during the unboxing moment to shape Chinese Gen Z's brand perception and engagement.

