

Cross-Border Co-Branding And Community Identity Builds New Ip Vitality--Taking Pop Mart Blind Box As An Example

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Abstract. In the context of the rise of the blind box economy and the transformation of the consumer culture of Generation Z, cross-border co-branding has become a core strategy for brands to break through the circle barriers. This study takes Pop Mart's blind box co-branding as a case study to explore how it reconfigures brand growth logic through non-functional value, and to analyze the successful strategy of "reverse co-branding" and the behavioral mechanism of Generation Z's co-branding consumption to construct a community identity. Combined with the questionnaire research and case comparison analysis, it is found that: Blind Box co-branding inspires users to participate in the game through IP attraction and gamification mechanism (e.g. hidden model design), and builds a social closed-loop of "purchase-unboxing-exchange", which transforms the product into an identity of the circle; meanwhile, it promotes the rejuvenation and transformation of the traditional cultural IP through modularization deconstruction and user co-creation, and realizes the symbiosis of cultural value and commercial value. Research shows that co-branding consumption is essentially the accumulation of symbolic capital by Generation Z. Its value is anchored in community consensus rather than product functionality, and brands need to reshape their marketing strategies with the three-dimensional model of "emotional attachment-symbolic consumption-identity investment".

Keywords: Circle-building, Gamification design, Symbolic consumption, Brand breaking.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The explosive growth of the blind box economy in China's consumer market marks a profound change in the consumer culture of Generation Z. Data show that in 2024, China's trendy toy market trend and collectible toys retail sales totaled 465.7 billion yuan, of which the blind box products accounted for the largest proportion [1]. In this wave, Pop Mart has successfully constructed the ecological matrix of "IP x IP" by launching 30+ co-branded series annually, and has achieved a revenue of 13.04 billion RMB in 2024 [2]. Cross-border co-branding cases with Sanxingdui and Disney not only created a one-day sales record of over 100 million, but also spawned subcultural community behaviors such as "Redesign the blind box" and "Exchange the blind box", which pushed the paradigm shift of consumer behavior from commodity trading to identity.

1.2. Research Issues and Objectives

The core issue of this paper aims to explore how co-branded products can break through the traditional marketing framework through non-functional attributes to drive brand value-adding and positioning reshaping in the context of the blind-box economy that is reconfiguring the value of consumption. Focusing on this central question, the paper focuses on the following three research objectives.

First, decoding the consumer ideology of Generation Z and revealing the deep rooted mechanism by which Generation Z builds community identity through co-branding. Generation Z's fervor for blind-box co-branding has transcended the traditional logic of consumer pragmatism, presenting the characteristic of "consumption as a declaration of identity". The purpose of this article is to discuss how co-branding has become the "passport" for Gen Z to enter the subculture circle, how the value loop is constructed through the behaviors of unboxing and exchange of the toy in the community



interactions, as well as the differences in psychological motivation caused by the mechanism of the blind box.

Secondly, analyzing the Blind Box co-branding in gamification design, the innovative path of cultural symbols. The gamified design of the blind box manipulates probability, and the extremely low extraction rate of the hidden items inspires addictive challenges. Compared to traditional marketing techniques, the blind box's repurchase rate is clearly catching up, proving that it relies on ongoing engagement rather than one-off stimuli. Also through the design of emotional anchors, the blind box is transformed into an emotional experience game. Co-branding with traditional culture (e.g. Bubble Mart x Dunhuang, Bubble Mart x Sanxingdui) breaks down culture into trendy elements and lowers the threshold of cultural awareness.

Thirdly, analyzing the success factors of “reverse co-branding”, breaking through the theoretical limitations of traditional co-branding marketing, and summarizing the new paradigm of cultural IP marketing.

The explosion of reverse co-branding has challenged traditional co-branding's obsession with “brand parity”. This article will discuss the creation of a sense of conflict in contrast marketing, the use of cognitive conflict to trigger social communication fission, and the use of IP fan base by brands to achieve low-cost user acquisition. Breaking through the pursuit of matching degree in the traditional co-branding world, and constructing a ‘non-functional value-driven’ model, improve the three-dimensional theoretical framework of ‘emotion-symbol-identity’ in co-branding marketing, and provide a new path for small and medium-sized brands to develop with IP.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Traditional Theory of Co-branding and its limitations

Traditional co-branding follows the “value stacking” paradigm, there are two main categories, one of which is the theory of functional complementarity. Based on the resource-based view, it emphasizes the need for co-branding to meet the dual requirements of “brand fit” and “perceived utility value”, believing that the closer the match between co-branding brands fits, the better the brand co-branding is rated [3]. For example, Marvel x Uniqlo boosts T-shirt premiums through IP awareness, and its success relies on consumers' dual recognition of the product's functionality (wearing experience) and symbolic value (IP identity). The second is the emotional value theory, which advocates cultural symbols and emotional resonance, such as Vaseline × British Museum through the grafting of cultural symbols to enhance the user's emotional connection [4].

However, the above theory faces three limitation:

- (1). Insufficient explanatory power, it is difficult to explain the phenomenon of “low match and high popularity” (e.g., RuiXing×Moutai “Soy Latte” sales exceeded one hundred million on the first day), and this kind of co-branding relies on contrast marketing rather than functional complementarity [5].
- (2). Single dimension of value, excessive focus on functional/emotional value at the product level, ignoring the value of community identity constructed by Gen Z through their behaviors [6].
- (3). Methodological shortcomings, reliance on static measures of consumer attitudes and lack of data capture of dynamic behaviors such as community interactions and second-hand transactions [7].

2.2. Innovative Mechanisms for Blind Box Co-branding

Gamified Consumption: Hidden model design activates the “gambler's psychology”, and the perception of scarcity shifts buying behavior from “demand-driven” to “challenge-addicted” [3]. Compared to traditional limited edition marketing (e.g. Uniqlo UT), blind boxes continue to stimulate repurchases through probability manipulation.

Social Closure Building: The community fission effect of behaviors such as unboxing, exchanging, and redesigning, forming a subcultural symbol exchange network. This type of behavior makes co-branded products “social currency” for accessing circles, with their value depending on community recognition rather than functionality [8].

2.3. IP Symbol Consumption Mechanisms

IP co-branding of young brands such as Pop Mart influences consumers through the path of “IP attachment - self and brand connection - brand loyalty” [9]. The key logic of this is “symbolic consumption”, where consumers buy the identity and IP label behind the co-branding rather than the product's functionality. This strategy breaks the traditional co-branding reliance on “brand parity” and offers brands the possibility to break the circle. Co-branding under this model will generate brand loyalty as consumers get emotionally attached to the IP, revealing the value of IP co-branding sales beyond that of a single brand.

2.4. Gen Z Behavior Explained: A Paradigm Shift from Consumption to Identity Investment

The essence of Generation Z's co-branding consumption is the accumulation of “symbolic capital”, which is characterized by two main features:

1. Social identity visualization. Economic capital is demonstrated through purchasing a complete set of blind boxes, and cultural capital is highlighted through the handmade altered dolls, both of which together constitute the community hierarchy identity [6]. This fits with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, but Gen Z emphasizes the “demonstrability” of capital (e.g., the number of likes on a list).
2. Decentralization of value assessment. Co-branded product premiums are determined by community consensus rather than brand-side pricing. For example, Pop Mart's hidden models command a premium of more than 10 times on the secondary market, and their value is anchored in the perception of community scarcity [7].

Existing studies mostly use interviews to describe the phenomenon, but lack the validation of the chain mechanism of “unboxing data-community status-brand loyalty”, not to mention the quantification of the impact of non-functional values (e.g., social assets) on the long-term growth of the brand.

2.5. Research Gaps

The established literature has three limitations. First, over-reliance on the functional/emotional dichotomy, ignoring the independent value dimension of “social assets”; Second, it favors static attitude measurement and lacks dynamic tracking of community behavior; Third, the long-term impact of “cultural deconstruction” on IP value has not been answered.

3. Research Methodology

In this study, by using the method of “questionnaire + case comparison”, the author will construct a three-dimensional motivation model of “emotion-symbol-identity” and focus on revealing:

1. Break the traditional “functional complementary” type of co-branding, focusing on the “reverse co-branding” of the symbolic consumption will drive the brand to break the circle
2. How Gen Z builds “circle passes” through co-branded consumption
3. Quantitative relationship between community interaction frequency and brand loyalty
4. Critical conditions for cultural symbol deconstruction to add/dissipate IP value.

This will promote the transformation of co-branding theory from a “marketing tool” to a “cultural practice” paradigm, and provide a reference path for the sustainable development of cultural IP.

This study focuses on the purchase of Pop Mart co-branding and the consumption behavior of 18-30 years old Generation Z, with a focus on consumption motivation, community behavior and value recognition. The questionnaire was independently designed and contained 18 multiple-choice questions and one short-answer question, divided into five sections: basic information, co-branding experience, blind box socialization, value experience, and never purchased a blind box additional questions. The questionnaire was distributed through social media platforms and 130 questionnaires were collected. See table 1 for details.

Table 1. Questionnaire

Questions		Options				
Basic information	1. Your gender is	female	male	other		
	2. Your age is	Under 18s	18-22	23-26	27-30	Over 30s
	3. Have you ever bought Pop Mart or its co-branded blind box products?	Have purchased Pop Mart's own IP products (Molly, Dimoo, Yuki)	Have purchased Bubble Mate co-branded products (Disney, Harry Potter, etc.)	Both own and co-branded IPs have been purchased	None of them have been purchased (skip to question 16)	
Co-branded Experiences	4. Whether you normally have little interest in blind boxes but will choose to follow or try them because they are co-branded to a favorite IP	Yes	No			
	5. Which of the following types of co-branding do you care more	Traditional cultural IP (Forbidden City, Sanxingdui, etc.)	Trendy art IP (designer co-branding, etc.)	Anime and manga game IP (Japanese anime, etc.)	Famous movie and TV IP (Disney, Marvel, etc.)	Other brand crossovers (Ruixing Coffee, Coca-

	about (multiple choice)					Cola, etc.)
	6. Does a co-branded blind box affect your purchasing power	Yes, the co-branded models are more worthwhile	Depends on the specific co-branded object and design	No, it's no different from the regular model		
	7. For what would you buy a co-branded blind box (multiple choices allowed)	Favorite co-branded brands or IPs	Nice blind box design, want to collect	Love the Pop Mart brand and will buy whatever the brand comes out with	just thought it would be fun to open a blind box.	
	8. What do you think is the difference between a co-branded blind box and a regular blind box (multiple choice)	Co-branded models increase your interest and involvement	Co-branded models are more creative	Co-branded models are more desirable	Co-branded models are more valuable on the secondary market	there is no difference
	9. Would you choose to buy the whole box at once?	Co-branded or regular models are both possible	Will only buy a box favorite co-branded models	Just the regular ones .	Never	
Blind box socialization	10. Will you share the results of opening a blind box on Little Red Book or WeChat?	Often	Sometimes	Never		
	11. Which	Exchange the toys	Redesign the toys	Discussing the	Buy a second	Never

	h of the following behaviors have you engaged in (multiple choice)			“ugly” and “dislike” items in the community.	-hand blind box	
	12. Does the blind box itself have more commodity or emotional value than practical value to you	Yes	No			
	13. Does the special model incentivize you to make repeat purchases	Yes	No	Don't care		
Value Experience	14. What do you consider to be the “commodity value” of the co-branded blind boxes (multiple choices allowed)?	The design and quality of the product itself	Cultural significance of co-branded IPs	Premium space in the secondary market	Topics to discuss with friends	The Emotional value of opening blind boxes
	15. What do you think is the main difference between Pop Mart co-branding and traditional brand co-	The excitement of the blind box mechanism	Stronger collector's value	Co-branded IPs are more youthful and have certain subcultural characteristics	there is no difference	

	branding (e.g. Uniqlo, etc.) (Multiple choice)					
	16. Your attitude towards frequent co-branding is	Support, will come across a co-brand I'm interested in	Antipathy, too much co-branding is fatiguing	not matter		
	17. Anything else you'd like to add about the Blind Box or its co-branded blind boxes (suggestions, tweets, expectations)					
No additional questions purchased	18. The reason you have not purchased a blind box is	No favorite design	Haven't come across a favorite co-branded theme	Prices are too high	Not interested in blind box	impractical
	19. Which improvements might entice you to try	Collaborate with favorite movie/game IPs	limited edition	Improvement of the external design of the blind box	Etc.	

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Data Analysis

4.1.1. Consumer Motive

As Figure 1 shows, the fourth question data shows that 100% of users pay extra attention to brands because of co-branding.

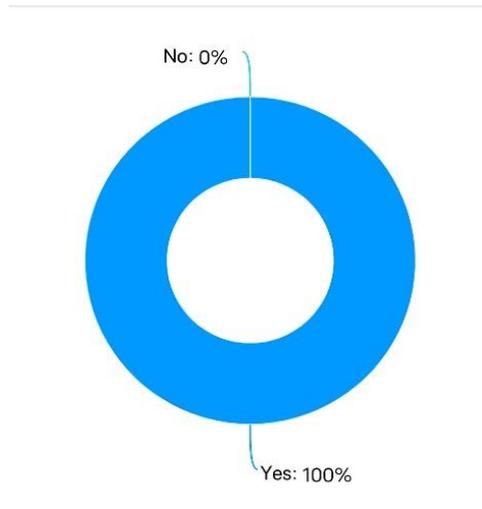


Figure 1. Whether you normally have little interest in blind boxes but will choose to follow or try them because they are co-branded to a favorite IP

As Figure 2 shows, question 6 data shows that 62.5% of users would boost their purchasing power for a co-branded blind box.

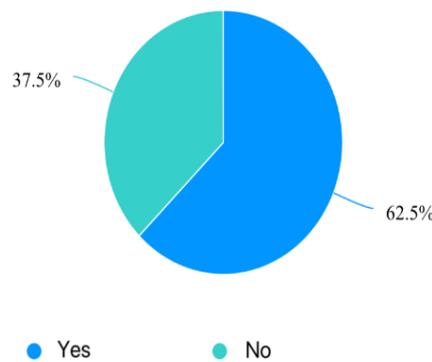


Figure 2. Does a co-branded blind box affect your purchasing power

As Figure 3 shows, question 8 data shows that 87.5% of users believe that co-branded models increase interest and engagement

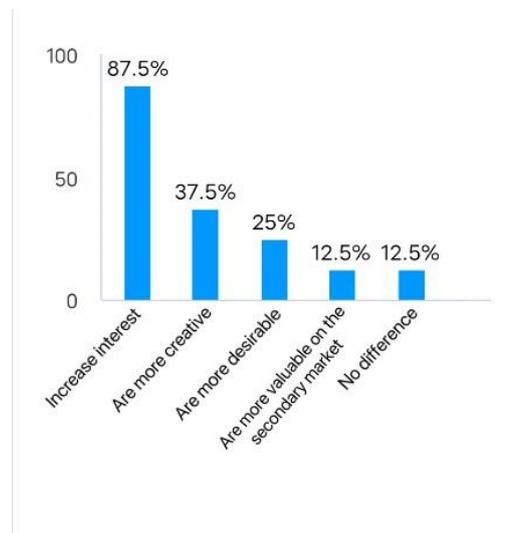


Figure 3. What do you think is the difference between a co-branded blind box and a regular blind box

As Figure 4 shows, question 19 data shows that 100% of users who have not tested a blind box product are willing to try a co-branded blind box

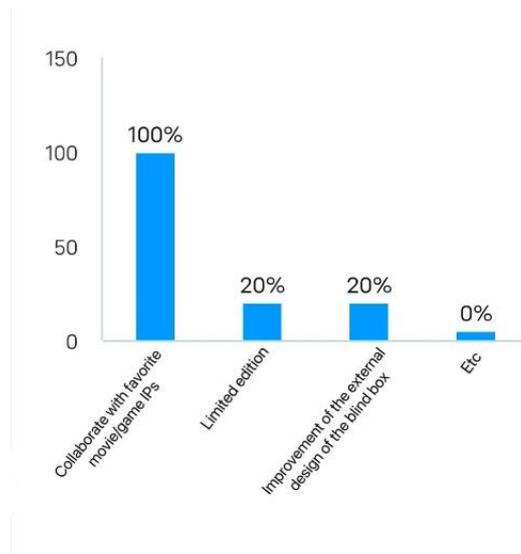


Figure 4. Which improvements might entice you to try

From the above data, it can be concluded that the reverse co-branding blind box that Pop Mart has been carrying out can significantly influence consumers' purchasing decisions and willingness to pay, which directly proves that the added value of the co-branding has an effect on the enhancement of purchasing power, indicating that the co-branding is the key to attracting the attention of consumers, and that the attention will be directly converted into purchasing intention. At the same time, it proves that co-branding can effectively break down the cognitive barriers of the category and turn potential users into actual consumers, and the unique design and IP appeal can stimulate the consumption impulse.

4.1.2. Non-functional Value

As Figure 5 shows, question 12 shows that 100% of consumers agree that the emotional value of the blind box itself is higher than its practical value

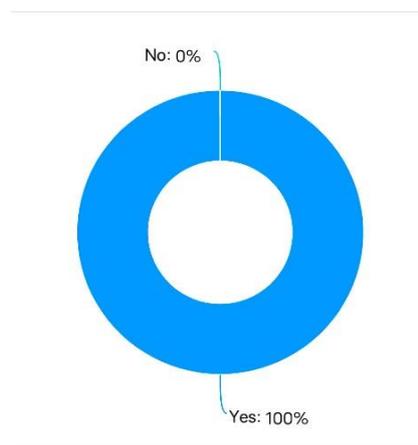


Figure 5. Does the blind box itself have more commodity or emotional value than practical value to you

As Figure 6 shows, question 10 shows that only 12.5% of consumers have never engaged in any form of blind box socialization

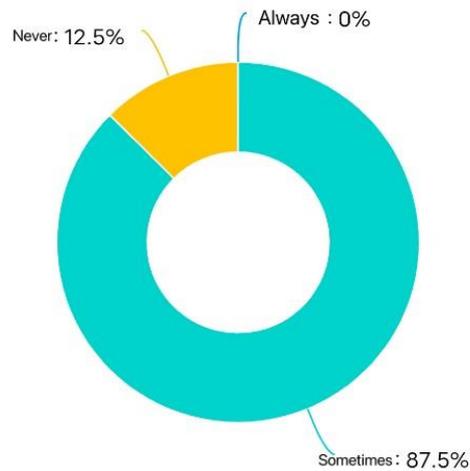


Figure 6. Will you share the results of opening a blind box on Little Red Book or WeChat
As Figure 7 shows, question 14 shows that users have a variety of experiences and perceptions of the value of blind boxes.

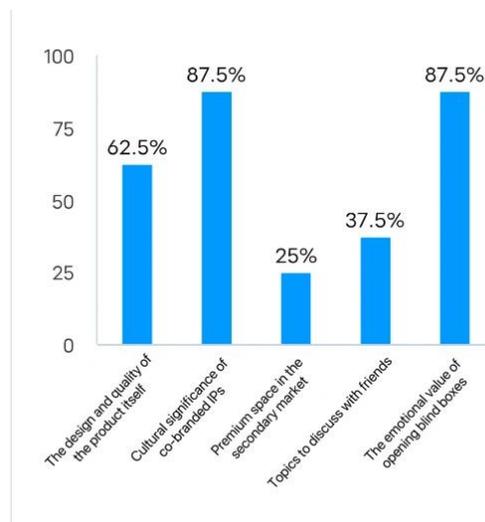


Figure 7. What do you consider to be the “commodity value” of the co-branded blind boxes

The questionnaire data clearly shows that non-functional value is the core factor driving blind box consumption. Consumers treat opening a blind box as an emotional game, essentially paying for the “emotional experience” rather than the “functionality” of the product. The blind box experience empowers social conversation, emphasizes the sense of belonging to the Gen Z community, and becomes a “hard currency” for social interaction. At the same time, users attach great importance to the cultural significance of the co-branded IPs, and have cultural symbolic identity, which confirms the symbolic consumption mechanism of IP co-branding, and the consumer's purchasing motivation has been transformed from “owning commodities” to “possessing symbols”.

4.1.3. Co-branding Preferences and Design Differences

As Figure 8 shows, question 5 shows that youthful IPs such as animated films and movies are the most popular among the Generation Z.

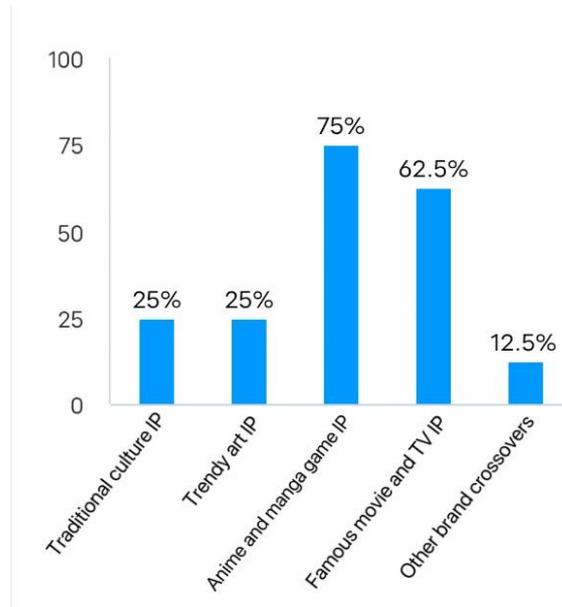


Figure 8. Which of the following types of co-branding do you care more about

As Figure 9 shows, question 15 shows that consumers choose to consume co-branded blind boxes over traditional brands mainly because of the gamified design of the blind boxes and the youthfulness of the IP.

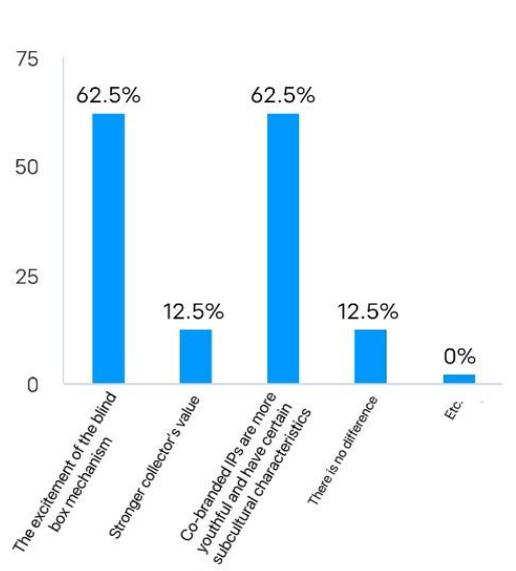


Figure 9. What do you think is the main difference between Pop Mart co-branding and traditional brand co-branding

As a result, the blind box stimulates consumers' "gambler's mentality" through probability design, which is in sharp contrast to the traditional co-branding's "certainty in the box", and the "unknown surprise" of opening the blind box is described as an "emotional rollercoaster" by users, and the value of the process far exceeds the value of the result, whereas traditional co-branding lacks this kind of interactive design. And the youthful IP co-branding accurately meets the cultural identity needs of Generation Z, which has the effect of awakening feelings and fusing trends. At the same time, it can lower the threshold of cultural awareness to realize the circle-breaking dissemination, while traditional co-branding often maintains the "elegant" expression, which is difficult to reach the young groups.

4.2. Key Conclusions

The logic of Generation Z consumption has changed. The essence of co-consumption is the capital accumulation of symbols and the construction of a circle identity through purchases. The co-branded blind box has become the “social currency” of Generation Z. The value is anchored in the consensus of the circle, and the consumption consciousness of Generation Z has changed, the commodities of young brands are no longer centered on the traditional “functional value”, but have shifted to the “emotional demand”. Gamification design enhances consumer engagement and consumer behavior is elevated to an emotional game.

Brand breakthroughs have a new path. Reverse co-branding is dominant, attracting non-core users by co-branding with external images and consolidating its own users by co-branding its own image with external brands. Brands use IP fans to create cognitive conflict, low-cost drive social communication. Successful IP co-branding = cultural accuracy + youthful design + openness to user participation.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key Conclusions

The consumer consciousness of Generation Z has changed dramatically, from “functional satisfaction” to “symbolic capital accumulation”. Through co-branded consumption to realize the “declaration of identity”, the motivation for consumption goes beyond the function of the product and refers directly to the accumulation of symbolic capital. For Generation Z, the essence of consumption is the projection of circle belonging and cultural identity. The value of a blind box as a “passport” to a specific subcultural community is determined by community consensus, for example, the premium level of a hidden item's off-brand pricing.

Blind Box takes the act of consumption and escalates it into an emotional game through the experience of unknowns and the probability of hidden payments. The key attraction is the “gambler's mentality” and the “unlocking of the narrative”, rather than the practicality of the product. This mechanism design subverts the traditional “function-primary” logic of co-branding, and pushes consumption from “transaction” to “game”.

The innovation of symbolic culture is transformed from “static heritage” to “dynamic material”, and the innovation of cultural symbols is realized through budding deconstruction and modular design . Generation Z aspires to complete the expression of cultural identity in consumption, and carries out secondary creation through redesigned. Transform the brand's preset symbols into personal narratives, thus creating a symbiosis of value between the brand and the user.

Reverse co-branding breaks the circle by creating social topics through cognitive conflicts, leveraging IP fan communities to realize low-cost value dissemination, and relying on the fission of “unconventional combinations” rather than the “brand equivalence” of traditional co-branding.

Meanwhile, this study proposes the model of “emotional attachment - symbolic consumption - identity investment”. Successful youthful co-branded products should have three things: gamification experience and IP attachment drive brand loyalty, co-branded products can serve as a circle identity, and users can accumulate community capital through social interaction. The model breaks through the traditional “function-emotion” divide and establishes social assets as the core dimension, providing a new framework for Gen Z consumption.

5.2. Practical Implications

The Blind Box co-branding is not only a consumer revolution, but also mirrors the values of Generation Z. Generation Z aspires to construct identity, compete for discourse, and deconstruct traditional symbols through consumption. If brands want to be successful in the future, they need to change from “function providers” to “meaning co-creators”, establish a balanced mechanism of “youthful design, cultural boundary-keeping, and user openness”. Enhance user participation, build a

platform for user co-creation, turn consumers into “value partners”, find a balance between commercial innovation and cultural responsibility, and make co-branding more than just marketing.

5.3. Research Limitations and Perspectives

There are several limitations to this study. The sample size of the questionnaire is small and the coverage of the sinking market is insufficient, the study focuses on short-term consumption behavior and fails to track the long-term impact of co-branding on brand loyalty, it has a time-span limitation, and the study is based on the consumption context of the Chinese Generation Z, and the applicability to the overseas European and American cultural markets is doubtful.

Future research should expand the sample to third- and fourth-tier cities, continue to observe the long-term impact of the co-branding strategy on brand equity, explore the possibility of transplanting the blind-box mechanism in other fields, and carry out comparative research on the consumption logic of the European and American markets.

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