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BLIND BOX PACKAGING AS VISUAL PERSUASION: THE ROLE OF SURPRISE AND COLLECTIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRAK

Ekspansi global ritel blind box, yang dipelopori oleh perusahaan seperti POP MART, telah mengubah kemasan dari sekadar wadah pelindung menjadi agen persuasi visual yang aktif. Terlepas dari besarnya skala fenomena ini, kajian desain masih kurang memberikan perhatian pada bagaimana kemasan itu sendiri, bukan mainan di dalamnya, dirancang untuk menciptakan kejutan, antisipasi, dan perilaku mengoleksi dalam jangka panjang. Studi ini meneliti kemasan resmi blind box dari semesta The Monsters karya POP MART, termasuk seri Labubu, Exciting Macarons, dan Big Into Energy, dengan menggunakan analisis konten visual yang dipadukan dengan elemen analisis wacana multimodal. Dengan mengacu pada teori Emotional Design karya Don Norman sebagai kerangka teoretis utama, serta didukung oleh retorika visual, semiotika, dan hierarki visual, analisis ini mengidentifikasi bagaimana tipografi, warna, ilustrasi karakter, dan tata letak bekerja sama pada tingkat viseral, perilaku, dan reflektif untuk membangun narasi misteri yang persuasif sebelum proses pembukaan kemasan (unboxing). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa komposisi kemasan secara sengaja menahan informasi produk melalui hierarki tata letak dan efek permukaan seperti holographic foiling, sementara isyarat semiotik pada wajah dan postur karakter memberikan sinyal awal mengenai kepuasan emosional yang mendorong pembelian berulang dan minat untuk mengoleksi. Studi ini berkontribusi menghadirkan kerangka kerja berbasis desain untuk memaknai kemasan blind box sebagai teks visual yang persuasif, serta menawarkan implikasi praktis bagi desainer kemasan, ahli strategi merek, dan peneliti budaya konsumen dalam industri mainan koleksi.

Kata kunci: desain emosional; pengalaman konsumen; kemasan blind box; kolektabilitas; persuasi visual; semiotika.

ABSTRACT

The global expansion of blind box retail, led by companies such as POP MART, has transformed packaging from a protective container into an active agent of visual persuasion. Despite the scale of this phenomenon, design scholarship has paid limited attention to how the packaging itself, rather than the toy inside it, is structured to produce surprise, anticipation, and long-term collecting behavior. This study examines official blind box packaging from POP MART's The Monsters universe, including the Labubu, Exciting Macarons, and Big Into Energy lines, using visual content analysis combined with elements of multimodal discourse analysis. Drawing on Don Norman's Emotional Design as the primary theoretical lens, and supported by visual rhetoric, semiotics, and visual hierarchy, the analysis identifies how typography, color, character illustration, and layout

work together at the visceral, behavioral, and reflective levels to construct a persuasive narrative of mystery prior to unboxing. Findings show that packaging composition deliberately withholds product information through layout hierarchy and surface effects such as holographic foiling, while semiotic cues on the character's face and posture pre-signal an emotional payoff that sustains repeat purchase and collectibility. The study contributes a design-centered framework for reading blind box packaging as a persuasive visual text and offers practical implications for packaging designers, brand strategists, and researchers of consumer culture in the collectible toy industry.

Keyword: blind box packaging; visual persuasion; emotional design; collectability; semiotics; consumer experience

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Current Issues

Packaging has historically been treated as a secondary communication layer, subordinate to the product it contains. In the collectible toy industry, this hierarchy has reversed. Blind box packaging, characterized by opaque surfaces that conceal the specific figure inside, has become the primary site where persuasion occurs, because the buying decision is made before the product itself can be seen (Whyke et al., 2023). Blind boxes are a form of uncertainty marketing in which an aspect of the product offering is deliberately concealed to manufacture surprise and intrigue, a tactic with roots in nineteenth century trading cards but now operating at industrial scale through brands such as POP MART (Mason & Hollebeek, 2024).

The commercial scale of this phenomenon is considerable. POP MART recorded sales growth of 62.0 percent year on year in the first half of 2024, reaching 4.56 billion yuan, figures that illustrate the rapid expansion of what has been labeled the blind box economy (Zhang et al., 2025). This growth has not been confined to China. By 2024, nearly half of POP MART's revenue originated from international markets, driven substantially by characters such as Labubu, whose deliberately ambiguous, ugly cute design has proven able to cross cultural boundaries (Fullintel, 2025). The packaging accompanying these figures, exemplified by lines such as Exciting Macarons and Big Into Energy, is not a neutral wrapper but a carefully composed visual artifact that uses typography, holographic surface treatment, and character illustration to stage an emotional encounter before the box is opened.

Recent scholarship situates blind box consumption within addictive and uncertainty based reward structures. Demand for blind box collectibles has been linked to variable reward schedules comparable to the classic Skinner Box, in which unpredictable outcomes generate stronger repeat engagement than predictable ones (Hollebeek et al., 2024). Parallel research on Chinese collectors describes blind box consumption as a form of probabilistic and elastic prosumption, in which collectors mediate identity and sociality through the exchange and resale of figurines (Whyke et al., 2023). Studies of POP MART specifically argue that the brand has built emotionally resonant fandom around characters that possess no pre-existing narrative, relying instead on physical attractiveness, scarcity, and social hype distributed through platforms such as Douyin and TikTok (academia.edu, 2025).

These studies converge on a behavioral and marketing account of why consumers buy blind boxes, but they treat the packaging largely as a backdrop to psychological or economic mechanisms. What remains underexamined is how the packaging surface itself, as a designed visual object, is structured to produce the emotional and perceptual conditions that those mechanisms then exploit. This gap is significant because packaging is the first, and prior to purchase the only, point of visual contact between the consumer and the collectible. Aesthetic information communicated through packaging establishes a first impression that activates reward related responses before any product level information is available (Mugge et al., 2017, as cited in Tang et al., 2022), which means that the persuasive labor in blind box retail is concentrated almost entirely on the box, not the figure.

1.2 Theoretical Anchors

This study is anchored in Don Norman's *Emotional Design*, which proposes that objects are experienced and evaluated at three interacting levels: the visceral, an immediate and largely automatic response to appearance; the behavioral, concerned with usability and the pleasure of interaction; and the reflective, the layer of meaning, memory, and self-image that an object comes to represent over time (Norman, 2004). Blind box packaging is read in this study as an object engineered specifically to dominate the visceral level on first encounter, to choreograph a behavioral ritual of unboxing, and to feed a reflective layer of identity and collection that sustains repeat purchase.

Three supporting frameworks extend this analysis into the visual register. Visual rhetoric treats images and layout as forms of argument that shape interpretation and behavior, analogous to verbal persuasion but operating through imagery, color, and spatial arrangement (Mohd Adnan, 2025). Semiotics, drawing on Roland Barthes' account of the rhetoric of the image and Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of signs, is used to read how facial expressions, fur texture, and typographic style on the packaging function as signifiers of mischief, cuteness, or threat that consumers learn to decode across a brand's product line (Yturralde, 2022, as cited in Hidayat et al., 2024). Visual hierarchy, the deliberate

ordering of attention across a composition through scale, contrast, and placement, explains how a buyer's eye is guided from brand mark to character to mystery cue within seconds of encountering the box on a shelf.

1.3 Review of Related Studies

Existing research on blind box phenomena clusters around three areas. The first is consumer psychology and purchase intention, where studies link product uncertainty, perceived value, and scarcity to purchase intention using survey and experimental designs (Tang et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). The second is marketing and brand strategy, including case study accounts of POP MART's global expansion, its trademark and intellectual property strategy, and its use of local artists to build a distinctive aesthetic across sub-brands such as Skullpanda, Dimoo, and Molly (Alt Legal, 2025; popmartworld.com, 2025). The third is cultural and fan studies, which examine how collectors construct identity, sociality, and parasocial attachment to characters that carry no formal backstory, often through qualitative interviews and virtual ethnography (academia.edu, 2025; Whyke et al., 2023).

Adjacent to blind box research, the broader packaging design literature has developed strong theoretical resources for analyzing visual persuasion. Studies of food and beverage packaging document how color, shape, and curvilinearity carry connotative and semiotic meaning that consumers decode rapidly and often automatically (Spence, 2022). Work on postmodern and culturally inflected packaging applies Barthes and Peirce to read packaging as a sign system that transfers sensory and quality cues to the buyer before the product is touched (Rathnayaka, 2025). Other studies connect emotional and interestingness based design strategies directly to brand competitiveness in saturated packaging markets (Wang, 2023), and multisensory packaging research frames packaging as a holistic communication medium that narrates meaning through semiotics and visual rhetoric in combination (Karjalainen, 2007).

Across this literature, a consistent pattern emerges. Studies of blind box consumption analyze behavior and economics; studies of packaging design analyze visual rhetoric and semiotics, but typically for transparent, informative packaging where the product is visible. Blind box packaging is a distinctive hybrid case in which the entire persuasive function depends on concealment rather than disclosure, and this distinctive case has not yet been analyzed through a design centered, theory driven visual lens, which justifies the present study.

Table 1 summarizes the positioning of previous studies relative to this research.

Author(s) & Year	Focus	Key Finding	Gap Relative to This Study
Whyke et al. (2023)	Cultural studies of Chinese blind box collectors	Collecting as probabilistic and elastic presumption tied to identity and sociality	Focuses on collector practice, not packaging visual design
Mason & Hollebeek (2024)	Uncertainty marketing	Blind box collectibles use chance-based, variable-reward mechanisms similar to a Skinner Box	Behavioral/psychological framing; visual mechanisms not analyzed
Tang et al. (2022, Frontiers)	Purchase intention and product uncertainty	Visual aesthetic information shapes first impression and purchase decisions under uncertainty	Quantitative survey approach; no packaging-level visual coding
Academia.edu (2025), Pop Mart fandom study	Fan and brand loyalty studies	Filipino collectors form parasocial attachment to storyless POP MART characters via physical and social appeal	Interview/ethnographic; packaging not the unit of analysis
Spence (2022, Cognitive Research)	Food and beverage packaging semiotics	Color, shape, and curvilinearity carry rapidly processed connotative meaning on packaging	Transparent, product-visible packaging; not blind box context
Wang (2023)	Brand packaging and emotional design	Interestingness and emotional design strengthen brand competitiveness in saturated packaging markets	General brand packaging; concealment strategy not addressed

Tabel 1. Previous Studies

1.4 Research Gap and Novelty

The research gap addressed in this study is threefold. First, design scholarship on blind box packaging remains scarce relative to the scale of the phenomenon, with most existing work concentrated in marketing, psychology, and cultural studies rather than visual communication design. Second, Emotional Design has been applied extensively to digital interfaces and user experience but has rarely been used to interpret physical collectible packaging where the central design problem is the persuasive management of withheld information. Third, the visual strategies used across a single brand's sub lines, such as POP MART's Exciting Macarons, Big Into Energy, and core Labubu series, have not been compared systematically to show how a shared emotional design logic is varied across product launches.

The novelty of this study lies in constructing an integrated analytical framework that combines Emotional Design as the governing theory with visual rhetoric, semiotics, and visual hierarchy as complementary lenses, applied specifically

to the moment before unboxing. Rather than treating mystery as a purely psychological variable, the study treats it as a visual design strategy that can be read, coded, and compared across packaging artifacts, using POP MART's product range as a case through which to demonstrate this design centered reading.

1.5 Research Questions and Objectives

This study is guided by three research questions. First, how are visual elements on POP MART blind box packaging designed to construct emotional persuasion at the visceral, behavioral, and reflective levels. Second, how are surprise and mystery represented visually through layout, typography, and character illustration prior to the act of unboxing. Third, how do visual hierarchy and semiotic cues on the packaging support and sustain consumer collectibility.

Correspondingly, the study pursues three objectives: to identify the visual elements on blind box packaging that operate as emotional design cues; to analyze how surprise and mystery are visually constructed as persuasive strategies; and to explain the relationship between visual hierarchy, semiotics, and the collecting behavior that blind box packaging is designed to encourage. Theoretically, the study extends Emotional Design into a physical, concealment-based packaging context. Practically, it offers packaging designers and brand strategists a vocabulary for evaluating and refining blind box packaging as a persuasive communication tool.

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2.1 Research Design and Approach

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive design centered on Visual Content Analysis, supplemented by elements of Multimodal Discourse Analysis to account for the interaction between image and text on the packaging surface. Visual Content Analysis provides a systematic procedure for identifying and coding recurring visual elements across a sample of artifacts, while Multimodal Discourse Analysis supports the interpretation of how typography, imagery, and spatial layout combine to construct meaning that exceeds what either mode communicates alone. The combination is appropriate because blind box packaging is a compact multimodal text in which a small number of visual choices must carry substantial persuasive weight.

2.2 Research Object

The research object is official retail packaging from POP MART, with primary focus on The Monsters universe associated with the Labubu character, sampled across three sub-lines: the core Labubu blind box series, the Exciting Macarons series, and the Big Into Energy series. Supplementary reference is made to other POP MART intellectual properties, including Skullpanda, Crybaby, Hirono, Molly, and Sonny Angel, to contextualize whether identified visual strategies are specific to the Labubu line or characteristic of the brand's packaging system more broadly.

2.3 Data Sources and Collection

Primary visual data consist of high-resolution photographs of official packaging, including front-facing product shots, retail display photographs, and manufacturer product imagery. Photographs were selected to capture the packaging as encountered by a consumer at the point of sale, including in-store display contexts that show packaging arranged in volume on retail shelving. Secondary data include publicly available brand and product documentation used to verify series names, official terminology, and release context.

2.4 Coding Procedure

Coding proceeded in three stages. In the first stage, each packaging artifact was segmented into compositional zones, including the brand lockup, the series or product title, the character illustration, supporting graphic texture, and any rarity or variant indicators. In the second stage, each zone was coded for visual properties, including color, typographic style, scale relative to the composition, and surface treatment such as gloss, matte, or holographic foil. In the third stage, each coded zone was interpreted against the theoretical framework, assigning an Emotional Design level, visceral, behavioral, or reflective, and a semiotic sign type, icon, index, or symbol, to support thematic analysis in Section 4.

2.5 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates the four theoretical lenses described in Section 2 into a single coding instrument summarized in Table 2. Emotional Design provides the governing categories of visceral, behavioral, and reflective response. Visual rhetoric and semiotics provide the categories used to interpret what each visual zone argues or signifies. Visual hierarchy provides the procedure for establishing the order in which compositional zones are likely to be attended to, based on size, contrast, and placement.

Compositional Zone	Visual Property Coded	Emotional Design Level	Semiotic Sign Type (Peirce)
Brand lockup (POP MART / The Monsters)	Position, scale, consistency across releases	Reflective	Symbol

Series / product title	Typography style, holographic/foil effect, color	Visceral / Behavioral	Symbol / Index
Character illustration	Facial expression, posture, costume motif	Visceral / Reflective	Icon
Color field / background	Hue, saturation, gradient direction	Visceral	Icon / Index
Information/material label (e.g., "Vinyl Face")	Presence, bilingual treatment, placement	Behavioral	Symbol
Structural silhouette / die-cut form	Box shape, framed window, curtain motif	Behavioral / Reflective	Index

Tabel 2. Coding Categories of Visual Elements

2.6 Validity and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was supported through three measures. First, triangulation across the three sampled sub-lines allowed recurring patterns to be distinguished from line-specific stylistic choices. Second, coding categories were derived from established theory rather than invented post hoc, which constrains interpretive drift. Third, interpretations were checked against the secondary marketing and consumer-behavior literature reviewed in Section 1.3, to ensure that visual interpretations were consistent with documented consumer responses to the same packaging artifacts, rather than relying solely on the researcher's reading.

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This section discusses findings thematically, moving from compositional structure to the construction of surprise and finally to collectibility, and relates each theme back to the theoretical framework established in Section 2.

3.1 Visual Hierarchy and Packaging Composition



Figure 1. Official blind box packaging, front view: POP MART The Monsters – Exciting Macarons series (Source: product photograph, author's documentation, 2026).

As shown in Figure 1, the composition of the Exciting Macarons packaging follows a clear top-to-bottom hierarchy. The POP MART wordmark and The Monsters logo occupy the smallest scale but the highest position, functioning as a symbolic anchor of brand trust rather than a focal point. The series title, rendered in large, rounded, bubble-style lettering with a soft pink outline, occupies the visual center of the upper half of the box, claiming the largest single area of attention. Below it, the character illustration, a grey monster in a rabbit-eared costume baring a wide toothed grin, is positioned at roughly the same scale as the title text, creating a deliberate tie between the brand's emotional mascot and its product naming. This ordering, title and character sharing dominance while the corporate brand mark is subordinated, indicates a hierarchy designed to sell the experience and the character first, with brand recognition operating as background reassurance rather than the primary persuasive device.

This pattern recurs with variation across the sampled sub-lines. In each case, the character occupies the largest or second largest visual mass on the box, confirming that visual hierarchy in this product category consistently privileges character-led emotional appeal over conventional brand-led hierarchy, in which a corporate logo or product photograph would typically dominate.



Figure 2. Packaging layout analysis: POP MART The Monsters Labubu pendant blind box, house-shaped die-cut structure with framed product window (Source: product photograph, author's documentation, 2026).

Figure 2 illustrates a structurally distinct layout strategy used for the smaller Labubu pendant blind box. Here the packaging adopts a house-shaped silhouette rather than a standard rectangular carton, and a small framed window displays a single static image of the character rather than the figure itself. This layout choice performs two functions simultaneously: the architectural, house-like die-cut shape signals novelty and collectibility through form alone, distinguishing the box on a shelf even before any text is read, while the framed window creates a museum-like, curated presentation that elevates the contained object's perceived value. The pink and white color blocking divides the surface into clearly bounded zones, brand identity at the top, product image in a central frame, and product information along the lower band, which produces an orderly hierarchy that reads as premium rather than chaotic, despite the high density of information on a small surface.

3.2 Typography and Color Psychology



Figure 3. Typography analysis: holographic title treatment on the Big Into Energy series packaging (Source: product photograph, author's documentation, 2026).

Figure 3 shows the title lockup for the Big Into Energy series rendered in a holographic, foil-effect script that shifts color across the viewing angle. This typographic choice operates rhetorically rather than merely decoratively. A static color cannot communicate energy or transformation, but a holographic surface that changes appearance as the viewer moves performs the very quality the title names, making the typography an enactment of its own message. This is consistent with visual rhetoric's premise that form can argue independently of verbal content (Mohd Adnan, 2025). The accompanying Chinese sub-title, rendered in a blocky, comic-style font, signals energy and impact through angularity and weight, reinforcing the same connotation through a second typographic register.

Color use across the sampled packaging follows a consistent psychological logic tied to each sub-line's emotional positioning. The Exciting Macarons series uses soft pastel pink and cream tones associated with sweetness and comfort, paired with a brown textured background suggesting a baked, tactile surface, together coding the box as indulgent and approachable. The Big Into Energy series uses a warm coral-to-orange radial gradient radiating from the character, a color strategy commonly associated with excitement, urgency, and heat, which visually performs the series name. The Labubu pendant box (Figure 2) uses a saturated pink exterior with blue accenting, a combination that signals youthfulness and playful contrast rather than the softness coded in the Macarons line. These differentiated palettes show that color in this packaging system is not a generic brand constant but a variable deliberately tuned per release to match the intended emotional register of each sub-line, consistent with research showing that color and abstract visual features carry strong, rapidly processed connotative meaning in packaging contexts (Spence, 2022).

3.3 Character Illustration and Emotional Design



Figure 4. Character illustration analysis: *Big Into Energy* character pose and facial expression (Source: product photograph, author's documentation, 2026).

Figure 4 demonstrates how character illustration is engineered to operate primarily at Norman's visceral level. The character is rendered with narrowed, intense eyes, a wide grin of triangular teeth, and a posture with arms raised, a combination that simultaneously suggests mischief, excitement, and confrontation. Because this image is encountered before any product information is processed, it produces an immediate affective reaction, curiosity mixed with a small jolt of unease, that primes the viewer's emotional state ahead of conscious evaluation, precisely the function Norman attributes to visceral design (Norman, 2004).

At the behavioral level, the character's posture, leaning slightly forward with open arms, implies imminent action or readiness for interaction, which behaviorally rehearses the physical anticipation of opening the box. At the reflective level, the costume motif, an animal hood worn over a humanoid figure, recurs across the brand's sub-lines (compare Figures 1, 2, and 4), allowing a collector to recognize a shared design language across variants and to build a reflective sense of belonging to a coherent collectible universe rather than a series of unrelated products. This layered function across all three Emotional Design levels indicates that character illustration, more than any other compositional element, is the primary carrier of the brand's emotional design strategy.

Read semiotically, the character's face functions as an icon of an emotional state (excitement or mischief resembles the exaggerated facial features depicted), the holographic surface functions as an index of rarity or specialness (a visual cue that points toward, without literally depicting, exclusivity), and the recurring rabbit-eared hood functions as a symbol that has, through repetition across releases, become conventionally associated with the Labubu identity regardless of color or costume variation. This triadic reading, following Peirce, demonstrates how a single packaging surface layers multiple sign types to construct persuasion at more than one level of interpretation simultaneously.

3.4 Visual Persuasion through Surprise and Mystery Strategy

Surprise on blind box packaging is constructed visually rather than left to the viewer's imagination alone. Across the sample, none of the packaging displays a photograph of the literal item the buyer will receive; instead, each box displays either a single representative character (as in Figure 1) or a generic series identity (as in Figure 2's framed image, which depicts the line's signature pose rather than the specific unit inside). This withholding is itself a visual rhetorical strategy: by filling the space where product information would normally appear with emotionally charged character art instead, the packaging substitutes anticipation for information, redirecting the viewer's attention from what is missing to what is emotionally present.

The term Vinyl Face printed on the Exciting Macarons box (Figure 1), alongside the bilingual Chinese characters for the same term, functions as a partial information cue, confirming a material category without confirming a specific design, which calibrates uncertainty rather than eliminating it. This calibrated, rather than total, concealment is consistent with research on uncertainty marketing showing that some structured information, here, material type and series theme, is retained to reduce perceived purchase risk, while the specific outcome remains hidden to preserve the reward value of the reveal (Mason & Hollebeek, 2024).

3.5 Mystery, Curiosity, and Collectibility



Figure 5. Retail display and merchandising presentation: POP MART flagship store wall display showing repeated packaging modules and curtained presentation niches (Source: retail environment photograph, author's documentation, 2026).

Figure 5 extends the analysis from individual packaging to the retail environment in which collectibility is socially performed. The display wall organizes dozens of identical red modular units, each framed like a small theatrical stage with a curtain motif, repeating the brand's signature color and presenting figures as if on display in miniature shopfronts. This retail architecture performs visual hierarchy at an environmental scale: repetition itself becomes a persuasive device, signaling abundance, seriality, and a complete universe of variants worth collecting, while the curtained niches borrow the visual grammar of a reveal, a stage about to open, reinforcing the same mystery logic established on individual packaging. The repeated modular format also visually communicates completeness as an achievable goal, since a wall of uniform slots invites the viewer to imagine the set being filled, which is a spatial enactment of collectibility that individual packaging alone cannot achieve.

This finding supports Consumer Culture Theory's account of collecting as identity work performed partly through environments and rituals, not only through individual objects (Whyke et al., 2023). The retail display, in this reading, functions as an extension of the packaging's persuasive system rather than a separate marketing channel, because both rely on the same visual grammar of repetition, framing, and partial concealment.

3.6 Brand Identity and Cross-Line Consistency

Across Figures 1 through 5, a consistent brand identity system is visible despite considerable variation in color, silhouette, and theme between sub-lines. The recurring elements are the POP MART and The Monsters wordmarks in fixed positions, the rabbit-eared hood silhouette, and a consistent grin-and-wide-eyes facial template. This pattern indicates a brand strategy in which sub-line packaging is permitted significant seasonal and thematic variation, supporting the brand's frequent release cadence and limited-edition culture, while a small set of fixed visual anchors preserves brand recognizability across an otherwise highly varied product range. This balance between variation and consistency mirrors strategies described in studies of POP MART's collaboration with multiple local artists across distinct intellectual properties, where a shared production and packaging system unifies aesthetically diverse character designs under one recognizable retail identity (popmartworld.com, 2025).

3.7 Consumer Experience and Theoretical Contribution

Synthesizing the themes above, the packaging system analyzed in this study operationalizes Emotional Design not as a static set of pleasant aesthetic choices but as a sequenced experience. The visceral level is engaged at first shelf contact through character illustration, color, and surface effects (Figures 1, 3, and 4). The behavioral level is engaged through the implied physical ritual of shaking, guessing, and opening, supported by partial information cues such as the Vinyl Face label and the framed product window (Figures 1 and 2). The reflective level is engaged through cross-line brand consistency and the retail display's spatial performance of completeness and identity (Figure 5), which extend the emotional payoff beyond the moment of purchase into ongoing collecting practice.

This sequencing constitutes the study's central theoretical contribution: rather than applying Emotional Design's three levels as parallel, co-occurring properties of a single object, as is typical in digital interface research, the analysis shows that physical blind box packaging distributes the three levels across distinct moments and surfaces, shelf encounter, unboxing ritual, and post-purchase display, coordinated through a shared visual rhetoric and semiotic system. This temporally distributed model of Emotional Design extends Norman's framework beyond its original interface-centered context and offers a more precise account of how concealment-based packaging sustains persuasion over repeated purchase cycles, addressing the gap identified in Section 1.4.

3.8 Comparison with Previous Studies

These findings both confirm and extend prior research. Consistent with behavioral and psychological studies showing that uncertainty and variable reward sustain blind box purchasing (Hollebeek et al., 2024), this study shows that the packaging's visual design is what manufactures the conditions for that uncertainty to register as pleasurable rather than merely risky, through calibrated information withholding and emotionally charged character art. Consistent with cultural studies of POP MART fandom showing that consumers form attachment to characters without traditional narrative (academia.edu, 2025), this study shows that the packaging substitutes visual recurrence, consistent facial templates, costume motifs, and brand anchors, for narrative as the mechanism of recognition and attachment. The study extends these findings by demonstrating, through visual and semiotic coding rather than survey or interview methods, the specific compositional mechanisms through which these previously documented psychological and cultural effects are visually produced.

Table 3 summarizes the analytical findings discussed above.

Theme	Key Finding	Theoretical Link
Visual hierarchy	Character and series title dominate composition; corporate brand mark is subordinated but retained for trust	Visual hierarchy; Emotional Design (reflective)
Typography and color	Holographic and gradient effects enact thematic meaning rather than merely labeling it; palettes vary by release to match intended emotion	Visual rhetoric; Emotional Design (visceral)
Character illustration	Facial and postural cues operate across all three Emotional Design levels simultaneously; functions as icon, index, and symbol	Emotional Design; semiotics (Peirce)
Surprise and mystery	Concealment is calibrated, not total; category-level cues retained while specific outcome is withheld	Uncertainty marketing; visual rhetoric
Collectibility	Retail display architecture extends packaging's visual grammar (repetition, framing) to perform completeness and seriality at environmental scale	Consumer Culture Theory; collectibility
Brand identity	Fixed visual anchors (wordmark position, silhouette, facial template) preserve recognizability across highly varied sub-lines	Visual hierarchy; semiotics (symbol)

Table 3. Summary of Analytical Findings

3.9 Strengths and Limitations

The principal strength of this study is its design-centered, theory-driven reading of packaging artifacts that complements existing behavioral and marketing accounts of blind box consumption with a detailed account of the visual mechanisms involved. The principal limitation is that the analysis is interpretive and based on a purposive sample of POP MART sub-lines, which constrains generalization to other blind box brands or product categories such as food or stationery blind boxes, and does not include direct consumer response data such as eye-tracking or interview verification of the specific interpretive claims advanced in Sections 4.1 through 4.6.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how blind box packaging functions as a system of visual persuasion, using POP MART's Labubu, Exciting Macarons, and Big Into Energy lines as research objects analyzed through Visual Content Analysis informed by Emotional Design, visual rhetoric, semiotics, and visual hierarchy. The findings show that visual hierarchy on this packaging consistently privileges character illustration and series title over corporate branding, that typography and color are tuned per release to enact rather than merely label each sub-line's intended emotional register, and that character illustration functions as the primary carrier of Emotional Design, operating simultaneously at the visceral, behavioral, and reflective levels. Surprise and mystery are shown to be actively constructed through calibrated information withholding rather than left to chance, and collectibility is shown to be reinforced not only by individual packaging but by retail display architecture that spatially performs repetition, framing, and completeness.

Theoretically, the study contributes a temporally distributed model of Emotional Design that separates the visceral, behavioral, and reflective levels across distinct moments and surfaces in the blind box purchase cycle, extending Norman's framework beyond its original digital-interface context into physical, concealment-based packaging. Practically, the study offers packaging designers, brand strategists, and creative industry practitioners a concrete vocabulary and checklist for evaluating and designing persuasive blind box packaging, while offering consumer culture researchers a visual framework that complements existing behavioral and ethnographic accounts of blind box consumption.

This study is limited by its interpretive, purposive-sample design centered on a single brand, and by the absence of direct consumer verification data such as eye-tracking or interviews. Future research should test the proposed

temporally distributed Emotional Design model across additional blind box brands and categories, incorporate consumer-facing verification methods, and examine how the model extends to digital and livestream-mediated blind box formats, in order to establish the broader generalizability of the visual persuasion mechanisms identified in this study.

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