

BLIND BOX PREFERENCES UNDER UNCERTAINTY: A POSITIONING-SCHEMA-VALUE MODEL WITH SELF-DETERMINATION MOTIVATION

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual article develops an integrative model to explain the formation of consumer preferences for blind boxes in conditions of uncertainty through the linkage of brand strategy, consumer cognitive structure, and motivational orientation. The purpose of this study is to formulate the process mechanism whereby brand positioning shapes brand schema, schema helps consumers interpret uncertainty, and the results of that interpretation accumulate into perceived value, which then drives preference. The method used is narrative conceptual synthesis to integrate literature on positioning and brand meaning, schema-based information processing, perceived value theory, and Self-Determination Theory. The synthesis results in a Positioning–Schema–Value model with four testable propositions: (1) brand positioning positively influences the formation of brand schema, (2) brand schema positively influences perceived value of blind boxes, (3) perceived value positively influences consumer preferences, and (4) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation moderate the relationship between perceived value and preferences. This model explains why uncertainty can be interpreted as a source of emotional and symbolic value, and why consumers with similar levels of perceived value can show different strengths of preference. In conclusion, managing blind box preferences requires consistent positioning that aligns with the target schema and motivational level settings to increase value without reinforcing harmful impulsivity. This framework provides a theoretical basis for further empirical testing through survey-based SEM or experiments.

Introduction

The blind box or mystery box phenomenon has developed into a global consumption trend characterized by the sale of products in sealed packaging so that consumers do not know the contents of the product before purchase. This uncertainty-based characteristic creates an emotional experience of curiosity, surprise, and pleasure when opening the product (unboxing) (Wei & Yu, 2025). In terms of the market, blind boxes have shown significant growth, driven by the search for new experiences, elements of mystery, and random reward mechanisms that increase consumption appeal (X. Xu et al., 2025).

The most notable development of blind boxes has occurred in Asia, particularly in China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. In China, blind boxes are not only popular for collectible toys but are also adopted in the tourism sector as a destination marketing strategy (Cruz et al., 2025a; Ren & Ma, 2024). Japan shows strong cultural integration of surprise-based consumption through various collectible products that are attached to the identity of modern consumers (Turner, 2023). In Indonesia, the adoption of blind boxes has begun to increase, but academic studies on the formation of consumer preferences are still limited. Cultural factors and symbolic values are thought to influence the acceptance of blind boxes, while legal studies emphasize the need for consumer protection due to the uncertainty of transaction values (Amin et al., 2023; Yusoff & Razak, 2023).

The increase in blind box adoption in Indonesia is also related to the digital ecosystem that encourages impulse buying and experience-based consumption through unboxing content on social media. However, the nature of the Indonesian market is not entirely identical to that of China or Japan due to differences in collective consumption patterns, price sensitivity, and the symbolic value attached to collectible products (Yusoff & Razak, 2023; Yusran & Santoso, 2020). Under these conditions, the formation of blind box preferences has the potential to be influenced by a combination of brand factors, consumer cognitive structures, and social pressures, thus requiring a more integrated conceptual model than simply discussing trends or legal aspects (Amin et al., 2023).

From a consumer behavior perspective, blind boxes fall into the category of complex uncertainty-based consumption. Uncertainty has been shown to influence consumer decision-making, both through cautious behavior and irrational tendencies such as instant gratification and gambler's fallacy (Zhang, 2024). In certain contexts, uncertainty is actually sought after by consumers as a source of pleasure and emotional stimulation (Balzano & Vianelli, 2023). These findings suggest that blind boxes operate in a unique psychological space, where uncertainty functions not only as a risk but also as a source of emotional value.

In addition to uncertainty, blind boxes are generally marketed through scarcity cues such as limited editions, the probability of rare items, and rapid series release cycles. These scarcity cues reinforce perceptions of value and decision urgency, while also increasing emotional tension that makes consumers more responsive to the experience of surprise than to utilitarian evaluation alone (Balzano & Vianelli, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). In uncertainty-based marketing literature, scarcity often interacts with consumers' cognitive interpretation processes, not only assessing "what are the benefits," but also

"how difficult it is to obtain" and "what it means socially" when an item is considered rare or prestigious (Kim et al., 2020).

In such conditions, brand positioning plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' initial perceptions. Clear and consistent positioning helps consumers build expectations regarding the quality, symbolic meaning, and experience offered by blind boxes (Abrantes & Ali, 2023). Positioning also influences category structure and the learning process of consumers in evaluating new or ambiguous products. However, because information about blind boxes is limited prior to purchase, consumers rely not only on positioning, but also on cognitive schemas stored in memory to interpret uncertainty and predict the value that may be obtained (Calder & Tybout, 1987; Zhang & Scott, 2024).

Mechanistically, positioning provides initial "meaning cues" that help consumers place blind boxes into specific categories (e.g., premium-exclusive, cute collectibles, or IP collaborations). These cues are then processed through schemas stored in memory containing brand associations, previous series experiences, and quality expectations so that consumers can build value predictions even when product information is incomplete (Calder & Tybout, 1987; Cruz et al., 2025; Zhang & Scott, 2024). In other words, positioning serves as symbolic input, while schemas act as an "interpretation engine" that reduces ambiguity and directs evaluation toward perceived value.

Consumer evaluations of blind boxes then accumulate into perceived value, which reflects a holistic assessment of functional, symbolic, and emotional benefits. In surprise-based products, the emotional and symbolic dimensions tend to be more dominant than utilitarian value (Holbrook, 1987; Deighton, 2007). However, high perceived value does not always result in the same preferences among individuals. Self-Determination Theory explains that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations determine how strongly perceived value is converted into preferences (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consumers with intrinsic motivation are more responsive to pleasure and exploration, while consumers with extrinsic motivation are more sensitive to social factors such as status, trends, and community recognition (Duong et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2020).

Although research on blind boxes continues to evolve, most studies still discuss uncertainty, marketing strategies, or consumer motivation separately. Research that integrates brand positioning, cognitive schemas, perceived value, and motivation into a single integrated conceptual framework to explain preference formation is still limited. This lack of integration creates two important gaps. First, many studies discuss blind boxes as phenomena of uncertainty and emotion (e.g., curiosity, surprise, or the joy of unboxing) without explaining how brand strategies shape the cognitive structures that enable uncertainty to be interpreted as a "valuable experience" (Wei & Yu, 2025; X. Xu et al., 2025). Second, studies emphasizing social factors such as community trends or FOMO often fail to position motivation as a psychological mechanism explaining why consumers with similar perceived value levels can form different preferences (Duong et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2020).

This article offers a conceptual contribution through the Positioning–Schema–Value model, which explains the gradual process of preference formation: positioning

shapes brand association maps, schema processes these associations to reduce uncertainty, and perceived value becomes an evaluative bridge to preference (Holbrook, 1987; Deighton, 2007; Calder & Tybout, 1987). An additional novelty lies in the use of Self-Determination Theory to explain preference variation through the moderation of intrinsic (enjoyment, exploration) and extrinsic (status, social recognition) motivational orientations relevant to collecting practices and unboxing performativity (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In practical terms, this model helps blind box brands design consistent positioning, build narratives that align with target consumer schemas, and organize scarcity cues and community activities to increase perceived value without encouraging impulsive consumption behavior that is detrimental to consumers (Amin et al., 2023; Balzano & Vianelli, 2023). Therefore, this article aims to develop a conceptual Positioning–Schema–Value model to explain the formation of blind box preferences under conditions of uncertainty, with motivation based on Self-Determination Theory as a moderating mechanism. This model is expected to contribute theoretically to the literature on uncertainty-based consumption and provide practical implications for managing positioning and consumer experiences with blind box products. The conceptual framework of this study is summarized in Figure 1, which maps the Positioning–Schema–Value–Preference flow and the moderating role of SDT-based motivation.

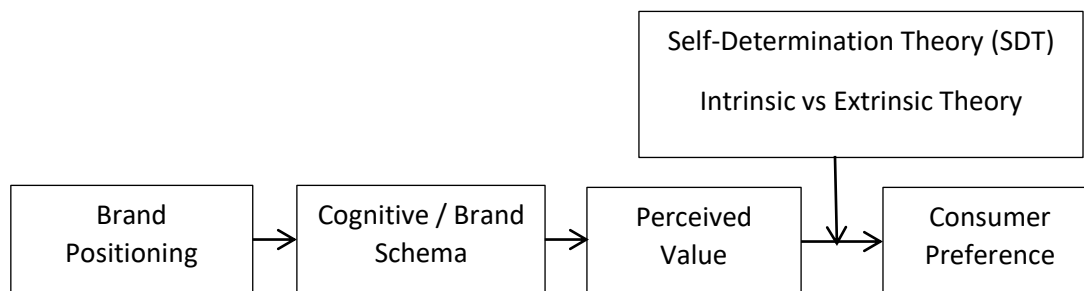


Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Positioning–Schema–Value–Preference with SDT Moderation

Research Objective

This conceptual study aims to develop an integrative model that explains how brand positioning shapes cognitive schema, how schema influences perceived value, and how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation moderates the relationship between perceived value and consumer preference for blind boxes under conditions of uncertainty.

Proposed Propositions

- P1: Brand positioning has a positive effect on the formation of consumer brand schemas.
- P2: Brand schema positively influences the perceived value of blind boxes.
- P3: Perceived value positively influences consumer preferences for blind boxes.
- P4: Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation moderate the relationship between perceived value and consumer preference.

Study Design

This article is a conceptual study with a narrative conceptual synthesis design to construct a theoretical model of consumer preference formation for blind box products under conditions of uncertainty. The narrative conceptual synthesis approach was chosen because the blind box phenomenon is multidimensional and does not yet have a single established theoretical consensus. Unlike systematic literature reviews that focus on aggregating empirical findings, the conceptual approach allows for cross-theory integration, particularly marketing theory, consumer psychology, and motivation, to construct a coherent explanatory mechanism (Deighton, 2007). In the context of uncertainty-based consumption, this approach is relevant because the research objective is not to compare statistical effects, but to explain how preferences are formed through interacting cognitive and motivational processes.

Core Constructs and Model Scope

The model was developed from four main constructs: brand positioning, cognitive schema, perceived value, and consumer preference, with motivation based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the mechanism that influences the conversion of value into preference. The placement of positioning as an initial association trigger follows the literature on positioning and brand meaning formation (Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). The role of schema as an interpretation mechanism is based on studies of consumer information processing and social learning (Bandura, 2001). Perceived value is treated as a holistic evaluation that includes functional and hedonic dimensions (Holbrook, 1987). The moderation of intrinsic–extrinsic motivation refers to SDT in explaining behavioral goal orientation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This model is deliberately limited to consumers' internal psychological mechanisms and brand symbolic strategies, without including external factors such as actual price, income, or market regulatory pressures. This limitation is made to keep the focus of the analysis on the preference formation process, rather than on the final purchase decision or post-purchase behavior. Thus, the model is more relevant for explaining why consumers prefer blind boxes, rather than how often or how much they buy.

The placement of the four main constructs in a single causal flow reflects a process-oriented approach in consumer behavior research, in which preferences are viewed as the gradual result of meaning formation, interpretation, and value evaluation, rather than as an instant response to marketing stimuli. This approach is in line with the contemporary view that experience-based and uncertain consumption requires an explanatory framework that simultaneously integrates cognitive and affective aspects (Qiu et al., 2024; Zhang & Scott, 2024). To maintain conceptual consistency and validity, each inter-construct relationship was evaluated based on logical appropriateness, cross-disciplinary literature support, and explanatory coherence.

The resulting propositions are not intended as final causal claims, but rather as a theoretical framework that can be tested, revised, or enriched through future empirical research (Feng et al., 2024).

Literature Identification and Selection

The unit of analysis for this study is scientific literature relevant to: (a) blind box/mystery box consumption and uncertainty-based marketing, (b) cognitive mechanisms and schema formation, (c) hedonic value evaluation, and (d) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in consumption. The literature was selected based on its relevance to the model constructs and theoretical contributions, with priority given to foundational references and contemporary research in the context of blind boxes (Qiu et al., 2024; Ren & Ma, 2024; X. Xu et al., 2025)

Operationally, literature identification was conducted through targeted searches on databases and scientific search engines commonly used in marketing and consumer behavior studies, namely Scopus, Google Scholar, and SpringerLink. The search prioritized publications from 2019–2025 to capture contemporary research developments on blind boxes and uncertainty-based marketing, but foundational literature underlying the theoretical construction (e.g., related to schema, value, positioning, and SDT) was included even if it was outside that time frame (Bandura, 2001; Holbrook, 1987; Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deighton, 2007).

Keywords were used in combination with Boolean operators (AND/OR) and term variations, including: "blind box" OR "mystery box" OR "uncertainty-based consumption"; "brand positioning" OR "brand meaning"; "cognitive schema" OR "brand schema" OR "memory schema"; "perceived value" OR "hedonic value" OR "experiential value"; and "self-determination theory" OR "intrinsic motivation" OR "extrinsic motivation". The selection was made to build a core corpus consisting of 60 primary sources, namely studies that directly provide definitions, mechanisms, or relationships between constructs relevant to the Positioning–Schema–Value model and the blind box context.

The inclusion criteria included: (1) peer-reviewed articles or academic book chapters discussing blind boxes/mystery boxes or uncertainty-based consumption; (2) studies explaining positioning and the formation of brand meaning/expectations; (3) studies on schemas and consumer information processing relevant to the interpretation of uncertainty; (4) studies on perceived value with an emphasis on hedonic-symbolic value; and (5) SDT-based intrinsic–extrinsic motivation studies relevant to experiential, collection, or community consumption (Qiu et al., 2024; Ren & Ma, 2024; X. Xu et al., 2025). Exclusion criteria include non-scientific sources that have not undergone peer review as primary references, as well as studies that cannot be mapped to the preference formation mechanisms that are the focus of the model.

Synthesis Procedure

Conceptual synthesis was conducted in four stages. First, definitions of constructs and conceptual boundaries were extracted from the core literature to ensure consistency in terminology and the semantic domain of each construct (Bandura, 2001; Holbrook, 1987; Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). Second, the relationships between constructs were mapped to form the mechanism flow Positioning → Schema → Value → Preference as a step-by-step explanation of preference formation under uncertainty (Qiu et al., 2024; Zhang & Scott, 2024). Third, the moderation mechanism of SDT motivation is formulated to explain the variation in the strength of the relationship between perceived value and preference based on intrinsic and extrinsic orientation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Fourth, the entire integration is locked into a conceptual proposition that can be tested in further empirical studies (e.g., SEM or experiments) (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Feng et al., 2024).

Outputs

The research output is an integrated conceptual model along with theoretical propositions that explain the formation of consumer preferences for blind boxes in conditions of uncertainty, while also paving the way for empirical testing in subsequent research (Qiu et al., 2024). Thus, the main contribution of this study lies in providing an explanatory framework that bridges the gap between brand strategy and consumer psychological responses in the context of uncertainty. This model is not only relevant to blind box research but can also be applied to other product categories that rely on surprise, probability, and emotional experience as their main value propositions.

Results and Discussion

Theoretical Integration in the Formation of Blind Box Preferences Under Uncertainty

This study develops a conceptual framework that explains how consumer preferences for blind box products are formed under conditions of uncertainty through the integration of three main mechanisms, namely brand positioning, cognitive schema, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This integration aims to address the limitations of previous studies, which tended to discuss blind boxes partially from the perspectives of psychological uncertainty, hedonic value, and marketing strategies without integrating them into a comprehensive preference formation process.

In the context of blind boxes, uncertainty is not merely a risk, but an inherent part of the product's value proposition. Consumers buy not only physical objects, but also emotional experiences characterized by curiosity, anticipation, and the possibility of obtaining unexpected results (Wei & Yu, 2025; Xu et al., 2025). Therefore, preference formation cannot be explained solely through a utilitarian or rational approach, but requires the integration of cognitive structures, symbolic brand meanings, and consumer motivational orientations.

Brand Positioning as the Initial Trigger for Associations in Conditions of Uncertainty

In the developed model, brand positioning is positioned as the initial mechanism that forms basic associations regarding brand identity, values, and experience promises. Conceptually, positioning is understood as a structure of meaning that distinguishes a brand from other alternatives and guides consumers in interpreting market stimuli (Sujan & Bettman, 1989; Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). In the context of blind boxes, this function becomes even more crucial because consumers do not have direct access to product information before purchase.

When positioning is communicated consistently, for example through narratives of exclusivity, curated quality, or a specific fictional world, consumers build implicit expectations about the possible contents and experiences they will obtain. Positioning thus functions as a cognitive anchor that replaces product information that is not explicitly available. These findings are in line with recent research showing that strong positioning can reduce ambiguity and increase consumer trust in new or opaque products (Abrantes & Ali, 2023; Feng et al., 2024).

Conversely, unstable positioning or positioning that is inconsistent with consumers' actual experiences has the potential to cause brand dilution, namely the weakening of core brand associations, which leads to increased risk perception (John, Loken, & Joiner, 1998; Keller & Sood, 2003). In the blind box industry, which is characterized by repeated series releases, cross-brand collaborations, and limited edition variations, this risk becomes even greater if positioning is not managed in a disciplined manner. Therefore, the results of this study confirm that positioning is the initial foundation that determines the direction of the formation of consumers' cognitive structures toward blind boxes.

Cognitive Schema as a Mechanism for Interpretation and Reduction of Uncertainty

Associations formed through positioning are further processed through cognitive schemas, which are knowledge structures that enable consumers to organize information, evaluate attributes, and predict risks and benefits (Calder & Tybout, 1987; Bandura, 2001). Schemas are formed from past experiences, social learning, and symbolic exposure to brands and product categories.

In the context of blind boxes, schemas play an important role as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty. Because information about the product contents is very limited, consumers rely on established schemas to estimate possible outcomes, curation quality, and likely satisfaction. Recent research shows that strong and relevant schemas enable consumers to process uncertainty more efficiently and reduce the cognitive load of decision-making (Zhang & Scott, 2024; Qiu et al., 2024).

When consumer schemas align with brand positioning, uncertainty tends to be interpreted as a "pleasant mystery" rather than a threat. Conversely, a mismatch between schemas and positioning triggers schema violation, which can reduce trust and worsen evaluations (Simonson et al., 2001). These findings reinforce the view that schemas not only function cognitively but also mediate consumers' emotional responses to uncertainty.

Perceived Value as a Cognitive-Emotional Evaluative Outcome

The results of the theory integration show that perceived value emerges as an evaluative outcome of the interaction between positioning and schema. The value perceived by consumers in blind boxes is multidimensional, encompassing functional, symbolic, social, and emotional benefits. However, unlike utilitarian products, the emotional and symbolic dimensions tend to be more dominant (Holbrook, 1987; Deighton, 2007).

In blind boxes, emotional values such as curiosity, the excitement of opening the packaging, and the satisfaction of obtaining a rare item are often more decisive than functional values. When schemas support positive interpretations of uncertainty, perceived value increases because consumers view uncertainty as part of a valuable experience. Recent research also shows that product structures based on variation and scarcity can increase perceived value if consumers are able to build reasonable expectations (Cruz et al., 2025; Qiu et al., 2024).

Thus, perceived value functions as an evaluative bridge connecting cognitive structure with consumer preference tendencies.

Self-Determination Theory and the Role of Motivation as a Moderator of Preference

The final stage in the preference formation model is the conversion of perceived value into consumer preference, which is moderated by consumers' motivational orientation as described in Self-Determination Theory. SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, which is driven by personal enjoyment and meaning, and extrinsic motivation, which is driven by external goals such as status and social recognition (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In the context of blind boxes, intrinsic motivation is reflected in the search for emotional experiences, exploration, and personal satisfaction from the surprises obtained. Conversely, extrinsic motivation is reflected in the search for collector status, ownership of rare items, and the performativity of unboxing on social media (Xu, 2025). The results of the theoretical integration indicate that motivation determines how strongly perceived value is translated into actual preferences.

Thus, two consumers with the same level of perceived value may exhibit different levels of preference depending on the dominance of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. These findings explain variations in consumer behavior that cannot be explained solely through cognitive evaluation.

Conceptual Model of Blind Box Preference Formation

Based on the above theoretical integration, the conceptual model developed in this study follows the brand positioning process of forming initial associations and brand mental maps. These associations are processed in cognitive schemas to interpret uncertainty. Schemas form perceived value as a cognitive-emotional evaluation.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations moderate the relationship between perceived value and consumer preference. This model confirms that consumer preferences for blind boxes are the result of simultaneous interactions between brand strategy, cognitive structure, value evaluation, and motivational orientation.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study expands the positioning literature by positioning it as a mechanism for managing uncertainty, not merely market differentiation. Additionally, this study confirms the central role of cognitive schemas in uncertainty-based consumption and integrates Self-Determination Theory as an explanation for variations in consumer preferences.

Practically, these findings suggest that effective blind box strategies must maintain positioning consistency, build narratives aligned with target consumer schemas, and activate relevant motivations in a balanced manner. On the other hand, social implications highlight the importance of managing impulsive and addictive consumption risks in uncertainty-based product categories.

Conclusion

This conceptual study aims to develop an integrative model that explains the formation of consumer preferences for blind boxes in conditions of uncertainty through the mechanisms of brand positioning, cognitive schema, perceived value, and the moderating role of motivation based on Self-Determination Theory. Based on the theoretical integration conducted, this objective can be achieved through the formulation of a conceptual flow that places preferences as the result of a gradual process, rather than an instant response to marketing stimuli.

The main conclusion of this study is that brand positioning serves as an initial trigger that shapes brand association maps and provides a framework of meaning for consumers when faced with limited information on blind box products. Consistent positioning allows consumers to build initial expectations that are then processed through cognitive schemas to interpret uncertainty in a more structured manner. Thus, uncertainty is not merely perceived as a risk, but can be internalized as part of a valuable experience.

Furthermore, cognitive schemas act as interpretive mechanisms that bridge brand associations with value evaluations. Schemas enable consumers to reduce ambiguity, build predictions about possible outcomes, and integrate cognitive and emotional aspects in product assessments. This process produces holistic perceived value, where emotional and symbolic dimensions play a dominant role in surprise-based consumption contexts such as blind boxes.

This study also concludes that perceived value does not automatically result in uniform preferences among consumers. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations determine how strongly perceived value is converted into preference. Intrinsic motivation strengthens preferences through the pursuit of pleasure, exploration, and emotional satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation strengthens preferences through social goals such as status, community recognition, and symbols of prestige. Thus, Self-Determination

Theory plays an important role in explaining variations in consumer preferences in conditions of relatively equal value.

Overall, this study concludes that consumer preferences for blind boxes are the result of the simultaneous interaction between brand symbolic strategies, consumer cognitive structures, cognitive-emotional value evaluations, and individual motivational orientations. The Positioning–Schema–Value model with motivational moderation developed in this study provides a conceptual framework that answers the research objectives while enriching the theoretical understanding of uncertainty-based consumption.

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