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How Perceived Similarity between Travel Destinations and Hometowns Influences Consumer Experience in Online Travel Blind Boxes: The Mediating Role of the Aha Moment

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Abstract: The blind box market is fast-growing, from toys, baseball cards, and vibrant second-hand products to the recent growing tourism market, becoming the latest trend sweeping through China, not only in offline retailing but also online businesses and e-commerce. For young consumers, the element of mystery is a big part of the fun that not everyone can obtain the most special and desirable products. The present research aims to elucidate how travel blind boxes attract young consumers in terms of their psychological connections to travel destinations. In particular, building upon psychological distance theory, this study examines the relationship between perceived similarities between travel destinations and hometowns and the attraction of travel blind boxes. Contributing to the existing literature that mainly describes the phenomenon of the blind box craze but often fails to identify its underlying mechanisms, the present study advances our understanding of such trendy marketing practices by investigating the mediating role of the “aha moment” and the boundary conditions of electronic word-of-mouth recommendations and price sensitivity.

Keywords: perceived similarity; aha! moment; travel blind box; word-of-mouth recommendations; price sensitivity



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1. Introduction

Blind box sales initially referred to a sales model where products are packaged in sealed boxes, and consumers cannot determine the specific item before purchasing and opening the box [1]. The blind box market is fast-growing, from toys, baseball cards, and vibrant second-hand products to the recent growing tourism market, becoming the latest trend sweeping through China, not only in offline retailing but also online businesses and e-commerce. This is especially the case for young consumers; the element of mystery is a big part of the fun since not everyone can obtain the most special and desirable products. Since Pop Mart launched the Molly blind box series, the blind boxes have sparked a craze amongst young people. According to the “Player Spending Power Ranking”, nearly 200,000 young consumers spend an average of 20,000 RMB annually on collecting blind boxes, with some enthusiastic collectors spending nearly a million RMB in a year. From an interactive marketing perspective [2,3], blind boxes offer consumers the opportunity of an interactive experience through active participation and engagement in the buying process, stimulating consumer emotional responses, including curiosity and excitement [4,5]. It is also a trendy phenomenon that young consumers do not want to leave behind [6]. Thus, blind boxes in e-commerce are valuable co-creation processes between marketers and consumers through interactive processes [7–9].

Blind box sales have become widely observed in business practices, such as Pop-Mart and loot boxes, and have gained much attention from academic research to understand the phenomenon [10]. For instance, Chen et al. (2020) examined how to optimize pricing and design loot boxes from the perspective of revenue maximization in video game

companies [11]. Extant research on blind box sales mainly focuses on consumer curiosity, perceived uncertainty, perceived risk, and perceived value. Research shows that curiosity is primarily induced by the appeal of mystery and directly or indirectly influences consumers' shopping motivations [12]. The uncertainty of blind boxes induces a craving for mystery in consumers, thereby triggering purchasing intention. By inducing uncertainty in blind box design, it can activate unique product experiences related to perceived hedonic value [13] and introduce price moderation effects to examine the gamification effects of blind box designs [14]. Scholars have explored the bidirectional effects of uncertainty on consumer hedonic and utilitarian values during product purchases, incorporating the mediating effect of surprise induced by uncertainty [1]. There are limited studies on travel blind boxes, and such studies have mainly focused on consumers' perceptions of novelty, curiosity, perceived risk, and other aspects [15]. Mystery tourism, as a form of travel experience, has a history spanning several decades. Early mystery tourism typically involves secret destinations and hidden travel activities, aiming to provide a unique sense of surprise and exploration. According to Torres-Lapasió et al. (2006), the concept of mystery tourism first emerged in the mid-20th century and gradually gained popularity worldwide [16]. The essence of such tourism lies in its uncertainty and exploratory nature, which is similar to the core concept of the modern blind box market. This study views blind boxes as a contemporary form of mystery product, sharing the core characteristics of surprise and exploration with historical mystery tourism products. With the development of travel blind boxes, consumers now have more autonomy in choosing travel dates and methods, so uncertainty is increasingly reflected in the selection of destinations. For most travelers, the destination is a decisive factor [15]. Destinations in the travel blind box pool that have lower perceived similarity to the consumer's hometown evoke different emotional responses. In tourism studies, similarity is used to assess the perceived similarity of the images of a group of countries or regions [17]. In light of the characteristics of travel blind boxes, the following research questions have been proposed: How does perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometowns influence the attraction of travel blind boxes for young people?

Contributing to the extant literature on consumer travel destination research [18,19], the present research explores the influence mechanisms of perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometowns on the appeal of travel blind boxes. We introduce the emotional experience of the consumer "aha moment" elicited by perceived similarities between travel destinations and hometowns to examine its impact on the attraction of travel blind boxes. Additionally, we consider the moderating effects of destination word-of-mouth recommendations and price sensitivity. By constructing a research model, this study explores the relationship between the perceived similarity of travel destinations and hometowns. A total of 464 valid questionnaires were collected, and the data analysis involved the use of statistical methods, including analysis of variance, the PROCESS macro, and linear regression analysis. The research results indicate that the perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometowns negatively influences traveling blind box attraction. The greater the perceived difference between a traveler's desired destination and their hometown (the less similarity), the stronger the attraction of travel blind boxes. The "aha moment" serves as a mediator between these factors. When travelers encounter destinations in the wishful surprise destination pool that differ significantly from their hometown, they experience an "aha moment", thus enhancing the attraction of travel blind boxes. Additionally, destination word-of-mouth recommendations and price sensitivity positively moderate the relationship between the "aha moment" and traveling blind box attraction. This research contributes to developing online travel platforms by expanding the range of potential travel destinations, thereby reducing return rates and providing a foundation for informed decision-making.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Travel Blind Box in E-Commerce

Blind box sales have gradually become a trend among various enterprises, with many well-known brands launching special edition collaboration blind boxes. For example, Starbucks has introduced coffee blind boxes in certain markets, Nike has launched limited edition sneaker blind boxes, Meituan has offered meal blind boxes on its delivery platform, and Lego has released a series of mini-figure blind boxes. Similarly, online travel platforms have introduced travel blind boxes to enhance the enjoyment and excitement of traveling, thereby attracting more and more young consumers. In April 2021, several online travel platforms launched a “flight ticket blind box” promotion targeting consumers aged 18 to 26, with prices of these boxes ranging from 66 to 99 RMB. This campaign attracted over 20 million participants. In October 2021, Fliggy released a report showing that 80% of consumers born in the 1990s participated in the “air ticket blind box” activity. The novelty and excitement of travel blind boxes have garnered significant enthusiasm from young people, reflecting changes in their consumption needs and patterns associated with air travel. Ctrip’s introduction of blind box tickets with random destinations and dates has achieved significant commercial success. Subsequently, many online travel platforms have introduced various types of travel blind boxes to engage consumers in value co-creation [20]. China United Airlines has implemented an air ticket blind box lottery, which allows customers to select a desired destination for a surprise before completing their purchase. This increases the likelihood of reaching a desired destination. Blind box types also include one-way and round-trip blind boxes.

Unlike gaming blind boxes such as Pop Mart and loot boxes, online travel blind boxes offer practical value, such as tickets. Moreover, consumers can return their travel blind box if they are unsatisfied [21]. With the development of travel blind boxes, consumers can choose travel dates and modes, leaving travel destination as the only variable. For most tourists, the travel destination is a decisive and important factor [15]. Consumer affective experience plays an important role in leisure activities, including tourism [22]. According to place attachment theory, the cognitive and emotional bonds between individuals and tourist destinations influence their construction of local culture and image, as well as their sense of pride and belonging to the place. Young people have relatively weak emotional connections with their current places of residence in a short period of time [23]. In contrast, they have stronger emotions for their hometowns. When there are more significant novelties and differences between unknown tourist destinations and their hometowns, these destinations will have a stronger attraction for young people, thereby increasing their willingness to purchase travel blind boxes. [23] As the saying goes, “there are two things children should get from their parents: roots and wings.” The root is the source of growth for all things and the navigation mark on the path of life. Additionally, consumers’ travel practices and destination choices are increasingly influenced by recommendations and opinions from friends on social media [24].

For young consumers, the emotional connections they maintain with their hometown are stronger than with their current place of residence [25]. Young people who relocate for work or study often bring local specialties from their hometown, reflecting their profound emotional ties to it. In contemporary society, young people face considerable life pressures, which makes regular travel an ideal means to alleviate stress. However, they often lack a specific travel destination in advance. Under this circumstance, travel blind boxes offer a novel opportunity for them with a pool of potential surprising destinations. These boxes not only cater to the curiosity of young people to explore unknown places but also facilitate an implicit connection to various destinations, potentially evoking a profound emotional response toward certain locations. This innovative travel mechanism aligns with the youth’s pursuit of novelty and enjoyment while also providing new growth opportunities for the blind box market.

2.2. Perceived Similarity between Travel Destinations and Hometown

Similarity is central to cognitive processing. Similarity is a brute perceptual process that we share with the entire animal kingdom [17]. This view of similarity has important implications for the way we model human thinking, as similarity is demonstrably important across many areas of cognition. We store experiences in categories largely based on their similarity to a category representation or to stored exemplars [26]. In tourism studies, similarity is used to assess the perceived similarity of the images of a group of countries or regions [27]. Every city has its own image, such as the world-renowned landscape of Guilin, known for its picturesque scenery; “Yiwu Commodity City”, known for shopping; Zibo, known for its delicious barbecue; Tianshui, Gansu, known for its spicy hotpot. This study refers to the evaluation of the similarity between the image of a travel destination stored in one’s memory and that of one’s hometown.

When evaluating travel destinations, young consumers typically consider two main criteria: the novelty of the destination and the richness of the diverse activities offered. The perception of these criteria is moderated by two types of information: extensive spatial distance information and specific activity content information. Spatial distance refers to the physical distance from a location. Scholars believe that spatial distance forms the spatial basis for other dimensions of distance [28]. In the context of tourism, the relationship between distance and travel intentions should not be viewed merely as a simple “distance decay” phenomenon; it may also produce a “distance catalysis” effect. The pursuit of distance by tourists reflects their aesthetic and emotional needs and serves as a source of travel emotional experience. Specifically, tourists may develop curiosity and desire for destinations that are perceived as distant and less similar to their hometowns, which can evoke curiosity [29]. Research shows that young people tend to prefer more distant destinations. However, when both types of vacation information are available, they are more inclined to choose destinations offering a greater variety of activities, regardless of spatial distance [30]. Sentiment toward their hometown plays a crucial role in young people’s travel decisions. They often evaluate the similarity of a destination based on their hometown’s culture, history, and personal memories. Young people use this perceived similarity to determine whether a destination can satisfy their pursuit of novelty and unique experiences. Psychological distance is the subjective perception of distance from oneself, the present moment, and the current location. This concept is based on psychological distance theory, which posits that psychological distance affects individuals’ cognition and judgment of events [31]. According to this theory, young consumers’ perceived similarity between a travel destination and their hometown influences the psychological distance. Thus, while young consumers may initially consider perceived spatial distance, their final decision emphasizes cultural and emotional resonance with their hometown, prioritizing a distinctive travel experience [30]. The image of the destination has the most significant impact on tourists. The lower the perceived similarity between a destination and their hometown, the higher the cognitive and emotional evaluation young people have for travel destinations [32]. The contrast between the familiar hometown and the unknown distant destination highlights the novelty and diversity of the destination, further stimulating young consumers’ interest and purchasing intention. Young consumers seek diversity and novelty in their travels to enhance overall happiness and joy [30]. They enjoy adding fun to their trips by participating in various activities [33], choosing different movie sequels to watch [34], and exploring diverse options in traveling [35]. This trend reflects young people’s desire for diversity as a means of escaping the routine of daily life. Destinations with low similarity to the hometown image fulfill this need by offering novel and stimulating activities. When young people find travel destinations with low similarity to their hometown in travel blind boxes, especially when these destinations starkly contrast with their hometown, they feel a stronger attraction, thereby increasing the appeal of the travel blind box.

H1: *Low perceived similarity between the travel destination and hometown enhances the attraction of travel blind boxes.*

2.3. Aha Moment

The “aha moment” is typically accompanied by positive emotional responses and signifies a moment of sudden clarity and insight when individuals recognize the solution to a problem, often with a sense of surprise [36]. For instance, one might experience an “aha moment” when suddenly recognizing a melody and identifying the song. Similarly, when choosing a travel destination, young people may feel they have found the ideal spot in the wishing pool, especially if it is dissimilar to their hometown, thereby resolving the travel dilemma and evoking an immediate sense of joy and excitement.

The “aha moment” comprises two primary processes: one is the solution process, emphasizing the suddenness and certainty of problem resolution; the other is the emotional state, characterized by positive emotions. Traditionally, most researchers consider suddenness and certainty as the defining features of the “aha moment”, a view reflected in early studies measuring subjective insight [37]. However, there is no consensus in the research community regarding the most crucial dimensions defining the “aha moment.” Different researchers have employed varied methodologies, which makes it challenging to compare results directly. In measuring the suddenness and certainty in the problem-solving process of “aha moments”, Bowden [38] used a scale related to suddenness, while Ammalainen and Moroshkina (2021) provided participants with a complex description of the “aha moment” [39]. Both papers used similar stimuli (anagrams) and paradigms (providing hints), but only Bowden found an effect of hints on the “aha moment.” These differences in results might be due to the varied measurement methods, highlighting the diverse characteristics of the “aha moment.” Suddenness is a process feature describing the instant of problem resolution. Although the scale of the “aha moment” includes suddenness, it emphasizes emotional characteristics and the positive impact of the solution process. Regardless of the definition and interpretation, the “aha moment” is associated with a positive emotional experience. Curiosity is a positive emotional response. When consumers encounter travel destinations that are dissimilar to their hometowns, it often stimulates their curiosity, leading to a positive emotional experience [40]. Hall et al. (2024) linked the “aha moment” with advertising enjoyment, emphasizing positive emotional and cognitive reactions [41]. Caprioli et al. (2023) connected the “aha moment” with perceived product creativity and attraction, underscoring a sense of surprise [42]. As a crucial motivation for tourists in destination selection, perceived destination attraction [43] is closely related to tourists’ emotions [44]. When consumers see different destinations in a travel blind box, they experience varying emotional responses. The similarity between the destination and the consumer’s hometown affects these emotional responses, which in turn influences the attraction of the travel blind box. Specifically, when the travel destination is less similar to the consumer’s hometown, they may experience an “aha” moment—discovering a new place where they may feel pleasantly surprised that they want to visit. This reaction enhances the attraction of the travel blind box. In contrast, when the destination is highly similar to the consumer’s hometown, the “aha” moment is less likely to occur, and the attraction of the travel blind box correspondingly decreases. Therefore, we propose the following research hypothesis to explore the mediating role of the “aha moment” between perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown and the traveling blind box attraction:

H2: *The negative effect of perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown on travel blind box attraction is mediated by the ‘Aha!’ moment.*

2.4. Travel Destination Word-of-Mouth Recommendations

Word-of-mouth recommendations for travel destinations involve tourists’ comprehensive evaluation of a destination after visiting, which they subsequently communicate

positively to others. This process plays a crucial role in the selection of travel destinations for potential tourists and trusted sources.

Research on word-of-mouth recommendations primarily focuses on the influencing factors and intentions behind such recommendations. Most scholars analyze these factors from the perspectives of experience, altruism, and personal interests, among others. Broadly speaking, they can be categorized into three main types. Firstly, recommendations are driven by positive consumer experiences, wherein satisfied customers voluntarily recommend a good service to assist other consumers or support the business [45]. Secondly, recommendations are influenced by strong social connections, as customers engage in word-of-mouth recommendations due to their ties with other consumers [46,47]. Thirdly, personal benefits motivate recommendations, as businesses stimulate consumer engagement by providing economic incentives [46]. Word-of-mouth recommendation intentions primarily put emphasis on positive recommendations, which influence consumers' repurchase behaviors and the purchase decisions of information-seeking consumers [48]. From both emotional and relational perspectives, customer psychological attachment significantly impacts word-of-mouth recommendations. Positive word-of-mouth recommendations strongly influence consumer purchase decisions and contribute to maintaining customer loyalty [48]. However, there is limited research that treats word-of-mouth recommendations as the dependent variable while examining them as a moderating variable in influencing factors or recommendation intentions.

The distinctive characteristics of tourism products, such as their geographical and experiential nature, make it difficult for tourists to make accurate evaluations before purchasing. This undoubtedly increases the perceived risk for young travelers. Moreover, in today's society, with excessive noise and information asymmetry, some destination-related organizations and tourism companies tend to exaggerate their promotional efforts. Young travelers have discounted trust in tourism advertisements and other marketing methods, while their trust in word-of-mouth recommendations increases. Travelers increasingly rely on online travel reviews or recommendations from friends and family to plan their trips [49]. The choice of travel destinations is more easily influenced by social recommendations compared to other products. Traveling blind boxes provide tourists with uncertain travel destinations. When consumers see destinations recommended positively by friends and family in the pool of desired destinations, it enhances their expectations and sense of surprise, thereby increasing the attraction of traveling blind boxes.

H3: *When destination word-of-mouth is low, the 'Aha!' moment's mediating effect on the relationship between perceived similarity and travel blind box attraction weakens.*

2.5. Price Sensitivity

Price sensitivity is derived from economic theory, referring to the degree of perception and response of individual consumers when faced with price changes in products or services [50]. Price sensitivity plays a complex role in young travelers' selection of travel products [51].

Young consumers with varying levels of price sensitivity exhibit distinct differences in consumer behavior, loyalty, perceived value, and emotions. Price significantly influences the decision-making process of young travelers and is closely related to their purchasing behavior [52]. It is also one of the most influential tools for tourism managers [53]. Price sensitivity not only mediates the relationship between nostalgia and consumers' intention to travel but also influences consumers' product loyalty, with different levels of price sensitivity leading to varying levels of loyalty. James et al. found that, compared to customers with high price sensitivity, those with low price sensitivity are more likely to exhibit loyalty, enjoy full-service experiences, purchase value-added services, and spend more money [54]. Petrick et al. (2005) found that consumers with low price sensitivity are more likely to become loyal customers, purchase value-added services, and invest more effort and money in the target enterprise or brand compared to those with high price

sensitivity [54]. On the other hand, consumers’ perceived value and understanding of products are major factors influencing price sensitivity. In a study on customers in the tourism industry, James (2005) found that consumers with higher levels of price sensitivity perceive higher value. Price sensitivity can enhance consumers’ perceived value and positively influence their repeat purchase behavior [55]. The factors influencing consumers’ price sensitivity include their understanding of products, consumer experiential feelings, quality, and economic brand image. When consumers have a good experience, they generate positive, joyful emotions, reduce their attention to price information, and may even be more willing to pay a higher price for it. Fullerton (2005) argued that consumers with higher levels of price sensitivity tend to make commitments in a relationship based on personal interest, while customers with lower price sensitivity are more likely to make emotional commitments to the supplier [56]. Travel blind boxes offer not only hedonic value but also practical value by providing travel tickets. Cronin et al. (1997) explained from the customer’s perspective that there is a positive correlation between perceived value and perceived product attraction [57]. The diversity of consumers with different levels of price sensitivity implies that price sensitivity plays a certain moderating role in the relationship between the “aha moment” and travel blind box attraction.

H4: *When price sensitivity is high, the ‘Aha!’ moment’s positive impact on travel blind box attraction strengthens.*

The literature review has enabled the definition of 4 research hypotheses, leading to the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

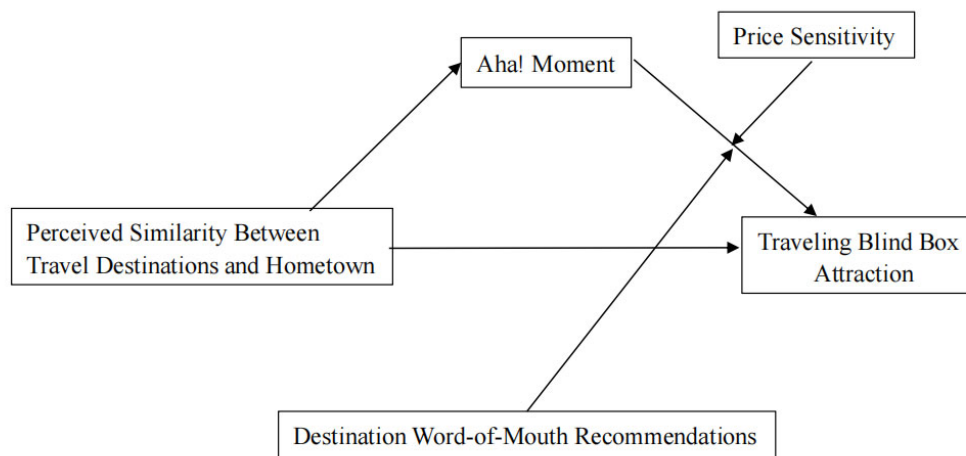


Figure 1. Research Model.

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection

To examine whether different outcomes of unboxing travel blind box videos in the survey questionnaire affect the subjects and, consequently, the experimental results, a pre-survey was conducted with 100 questionnaires collected on the Credamo online survey platform. The results indicated that the different outcomes of unboxing blind boxes had little impact on the subjects. The formal questionnaire was distributed through the Credamo online survey platform, with participants receiving compensation of 3 RMB upon completion. Before answering the questions, participants watched a video to simulate the experience of opening a travel blind box aimed at enhancing their comprehension of the travel blind box. A total of 598 questionnaires were distributed, and after excluding invalid responses such as failing attention check questions, having excessively short completion times, or consistently selecting the same response option, a total of 464 valid questionnaires were collected. The sample was composed of 167 males (36 percent) and 297 females (64 percent). Most respondents (91.2%) were educated at the university level, 72.4 percent

earned 5000 RMB or more per month, 54.5 percent traveled two or three times per year, and 67.5 percent planned trips lasting 4–7 days. A more complete demographic profile of the respondents is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Variables	Categories	n	%
Age	<18	2	0.4%
	18–26	172	37.1%
	27–40	252	54.3%
	41–60	34	7.3%
	>60	4	0.9%
Gender	Male	167	36%
	Female	297	64%
Education	Associate’s degree or below	41	8.8%
	Bachelor’s degree	345	74.4%
	Master’s degree or higher	78	16.8%
Average monthly income	RMB 0–1000	12	2.6%
	RMB 1001–3000	58	12.5%
	RMB 3001–5000	58	12.5%
	RMB 5000 or more	336	72.4%
Occupation	Public officials (including civil servants and personnel of institutions other than teachers)	37	8.0%
	Teacher	16	3.4%
	Business management personnel	248	53.4%
	Workers (including migrant workers)	11	2.4%
	Farmers	18	3.9%
	Students	82	17.7%
	Others	52	11.2%
Annual travel frequency	0 or 1 time(s) per year	47	10.1%
	2 or 3 times annually	253	54.5%
	3 or more times annually	164	35.3%
Planned travel duration	1–3 days	43	9.3%
	4–7 days	313	67.5%
	8–15 days	88	19.0%
	15 days or more	20	4.3%
Whether purchased a travel blind box	Yes	241	51.9%
	No	223	48.1%

3.2. Measures

To measure the validity of the questionnaire, each measurement scale of the conceptual constructs in the survey was designed according to the study objectives and a literature review, referencing established scales from previous studies. All measurement items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Measurement items for perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometowns were derived from Hong, J.H.J. et al. (2020) and Caprioli, S. et al. (2023) [30,42]. The “aha moment” was assessed using three items derived from Caprioli, S. et al. (2023) [42]. Destination word-of-mouth recommendations were assessed using three items derived from Andersen, C. et al. [58,59]. Price sensitivity was assessed using four items derived from Cao Li et al. (2016) [60]. Traveling blind box attraction was assessed using three items derived from [42] items are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Measurement Items and Scale Sources.

Variable Names	Measurement Items	Survey Items	Source
Perceived Similarity Between Travel Destinations and Hometown	What is the overall similarity between the destination you most want to visit and your hometown?	WSH	[30,42]
Aha! Moment	I experienced an instantaneous sense of joy. I experienced an “Aha!” moment instantly! I instantly felt a sense of joy and contentment.	AHA1 AHA2 AHA3	[42]
Destination Word-of-Mouth Recommendations	My relatives and friends encouraged me to travel to this destination. My relatives and friends recommended this destination to me. My relatives and friends have shared or communicated information about this destination with me.	WOM1 WOM2 WOM3	[58,59]
Price Sensitivity	Price is the primary influencing factor for my choice of travel blind boxes. I prioritize the price of travel blind boxes. I will compare the prices of travel blind boxes across different online platforms. If there are price differences among travel blind boxes on different platforms, I will be very concerned.	PS1 PS2 PS3 PS4	[60]
Traveling Blind Box Attraction	I find travel blind boxes very appealing. Travel blind boxes have successfully captured my interest. Travel blind boxes hold no attraction for me.	ATT1 ATT2 ATT3	[42]

4. Results

Data collected using the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 28.0 software packages. Specifically, first, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to verify the relationship between perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown and the attraction of traveling blind boxes. Second, the mediating effect of the “aha moment” was examined using the PROCESS macro. Finally, moderation effect analyses of destination word-of-mouth recommendations and price sensitivity were conducted using linear regression analysis.

4.1. Reliability and Validity Analyses

Before analyzing the data, it is essential to conduct reliability and validity analyses. Firstly, the reliability of the data was tested by SPSS 27.0. Cronbach’s α coefficients for the “Aha moment”, destination word-of-mouth recommendations, price sensitivity, and traveling blind box attraction were all above 0.7, indicating good reliability of the scales. Secondly, AMOS 28.0 was employed for confirmatory factor analysis and discriminant validity testing of the data. As the scales used in this study were adapted from existing literature and translated to fit the Chinese context, they possess good content validity. Fit indices indicate a good model fit (PCMIN/DF = 2.335, CFI = 0.972, TLI = 0.963, RMSEA = 0.054). The results of confirmatory factor analysis are presented in Table 3. All factor loadings for the variables were above 0.5, the average variance extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5, and the composite reliability (CR) values were above 0.7, indicating good convergent validity of the scales. The square root of each variable’s AVE was greater than its correlation coefficients with other variables, as shown in Table 4, indicating good discriminant validity of the scales.

Table 3. Reliability and Validity Testing.

Variable Names	Items	Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
Aha! moment	AHA1	0.742	0.554	0.788	0.786
	AHA2	0.732			
	AHA3	0.652			
Destination Word-of-mouth recommendations	WOM1	0.714	0.590	0.811	0.809
	WOM2	0.710			
	WOM3	0.785			
Price sensitivity	PS1	0.886	0.730	0.915	0.915
	PS2	0.881			
	PS3	0.902			
	PS4	0.888			
Traveling blind box attraction	Attraction1	0.691	0.556	0.790	0.787
	Attraction2	0.698			
	Attraction3	0.747			

Table 4. Discriminant Validity.

	Price Sensitivity	Traveling Blind Box Attraction	Aha! Moment	Destination Word-of-Mouth Recommendations
Price sensitivity	0.854			
Traveling blind box attraction	-0.034	0.746		
Aha! moment	0.006	0.743	0.744	
Destination word-of-mouth recommendations	0.061	0.224	0.149	0.768

Note: Bolded entries represent the square roots of AVE (Average Variance Extracted), while entries below the diagonal are the correlations between variables.

4.2. Model Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1. Main Effects

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with “Aha! moment” and “Traveling blind box attraction” as dependent variables, as presented in Table 5. The findings indicate that the main effect of perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown is significant for both “Aha! moment” and “Traveling blind box attraction.” Specifically, the “Aha! moment” exhibited a significant elevation in the high perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown group compared to the low perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown group ($M_2 = 6.083$, $SD = 0.167$, $VSM_3 = 5.815$, $SD = 1.043$, $VSM_4 = 5.857$, $SD = 0.824$, $VSM_5 = 6.157$, $SD = 0.556$, $VSM_6 = 6.191$, $SD = 0.648$, $VSM_7 = 6.327$, $SD = 0.729$; $F(5.450) = 4.942$, $p < 0.001$); traveling blind box attraction in the high perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown group was significantly higher than that in the low perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown group ($M_2 = 6.333$, $SD = 0.609$, $VSM_3 = 5.759$, $SD = 0.995$, $VSM_4 = 5.548$, $SD = 0.747$, $VSM_5 = 6.075$, $SD = 0.505$, $VSM_6 = 6.264$, $SD = 0.649$, $VSM_7 = 6.312$, $SD = 0.771$; $F(5.450) = 7.109$, $p < 0.001$). The results support H1.

Table 5. Main Effects Analysis.

	Outcome Variables	F-Value	p-Value	Partial Eta Squared
Perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown	Aha! moment	4.942	0 ***	0.052
	Traveling blind box attraction	7.109	0 ***	0.073

Note: Covariate—Whether purchased a travel blind box, residence being hometown, perceived spatial distance between the most desired destination and hometown, type of traveling blind box, annual travel frequency, purpose of travel—knowledge enhancement, broadening horizons, purpose of travel—business activities, planned travel duration; *** $p < 0.001$

4.2.2. Mediation Effects Analysis

Mediation effects analysis was conducted to test H2, with perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown as the independent variable, traveling blind box attraction as the dependent variable, and “Aha Moment” as the mediating variable, using Bootstrap procedure with a sample size of 5000 and a model of four. The findings of the analysis indicated that the “Aha Moment” significantly influenced traveling blind box attraction ($\beta = 0.520, t = 13.301, p < 0.001$), and the 95% confidence interval for the mediation effect did not include zero (LLCI = 0.0594, ULCI = 0.1692), with a mediation effect size of 0.1150. This indicates a significant mediating effect of the “Aha Moment”, as shown in Table 6. The results support H2.

Table 6. Mediating Effect of “Aha Moment”.

Mediation Path	Effect	Bootstrap Estimate	Indirect Effect 95% Confidence Intervals	
			LL	UL
Perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown—Aha moment—Traveling blind box attraction	0.1150	0.0285	0.0594	0.1692

Note: Covariate—Whether purchased a travel blind box, residence being hometown, perceived spatial distance between the most desired destination and hometown, type of traveling blind box, annual travel frequency, purpose of travel—knowledge enhancement, broadening horizons, purpose of travel—business activities, planned travel duration.

4.2.3. Moderating Effects Analysis

A moderating effects analysis was conducted to test H3, with the “Aha Moment” as the independent variable and the traveling blind box attraction as the dependent variable. Covariates included whether they had purchased a travel blind box, their residence being their hometown, the perceived spatial distance between the most desired destination and hometown, the type of traveling blind box, annual travel frequency, the purpose of travel—knowledge enhancement, broadening horizons, and purpose of travel—business activities, and planned travel duration. Regression analysis findings indicated that the interaction term between the “Aha Moment” and destination word-of-mouth recommendations significantly influenced the traveling blind box attraction ($\beta = 0.125, p < 0.001$). This suggests a significant moderating effect of destination word-of-mouth recommendations on the relationship between the “Aha Moment” and the traveling blind box attraction, as shown in Table 7. As shown in Figure 2 specifically. Therefore, H3 was supported.

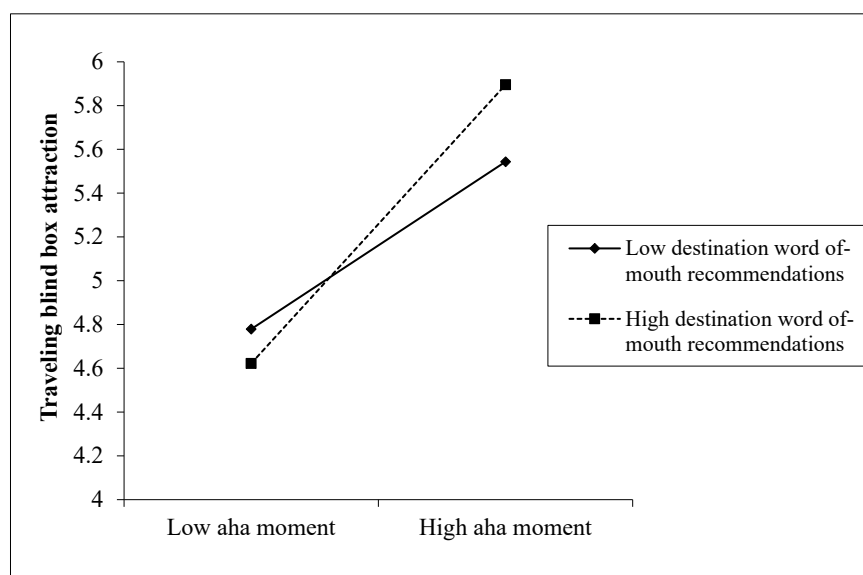


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Destination Word-of-Mouth Recommendations on the Relationship between the “Aha Moment” and Travel Blind Box Attraction.

Table 7. Moderating Effect of Destination word-of-mouth Recommendations.

	Traveling Blind Box Attraction		
	M1	M2	M3
	β	β	β
Whether purchased a travel blind box	−0.103 *	−0.025	−0.023
Residence being hometown	−0.122 **	−0.068	−0.064
Perceived spatial distance between the most desired destination and hometown	0.051	0.054	0.048
Type of traveling blind box	0.068	0.043	0.037
Annual travel frequency	0.205 ***	0.156 ***	0.151 ***
Purpose of travel—knowledge enhancement, broadening horizons	0.103 *	0.047	0.034
Purpose of travel—business activities	−0.162 ***	−0.057	−0.050
Planned travel duration	0.083	0.055	0.059
Destination word of-mouth recommendations		0.055	0.066
Aha moment	0.533 ***	0.524 ***	
Aha moment×Destination word of-mouth recommendations	0.125 ***		
R ²	0.148	0.412	0.427
ΔR ²	0.148	0.264	0.015
F	9.906 ***	31.743 ***	30.621 ***
ΔF	9.906 ***	101.574 ***	11.818 ***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

A moderation analysis was conducted to examine the moderating effects of price sensitivity on H4. Regression analysis was performed with the “Aha Moment” as the independent variable and travel blind box attraction as the dependent variable. The results indicated that the interaction between the “Aha Moment” and price sensitivity significantly influenced travel blind box attraction ($\beta = 0.078, p = 0.045 < 0.05$), suggesting a significant moderating effect of price sensitivity on the relationship between the “Aha Moment” and travel blind box attraction, as shown in Table 8. As shown in Figure 3 specifically. Therefore, H4 was supported.

Table 8. Moderating Effect of Price Sensitivity.

	Traveling Blind Box Attraction		
	M1	M2	M3
	β	β	β
Whether purchased a travel blind box	−0.103 *	−0.035	−0.029
Residence being hometown	−0.122 **	−0.073	−0.066
Perceived spatial distance between the most desired destination and hometown	0.051	0.059	0.064
Type of traveling blind box	0.068	0.050	0.044
Annual travel frequency	0.205 ***	0.163 ***	0.168 ***
Purpose of travel—knowledge enhancement, broadening horizons	0.103 *	0.053	0.058
Purpose of travel—business activities	−0.162 ***	−0.053	−0.057
Planned travel duration	0.083	0.052	0.052
Price sensitivity		−0.019	−0.032
Aha moment		0.536 ***	0.516 ***
Aha moment×Price sensitivity			0.078 *
R ²	0.148	0.410	0.415
ΔR ²	0.148	0.261	0.005
F	9.906 ***	31.444 ***	29.143 ***
ΔF	9.906 ***	100.302 ***	4.030 *

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

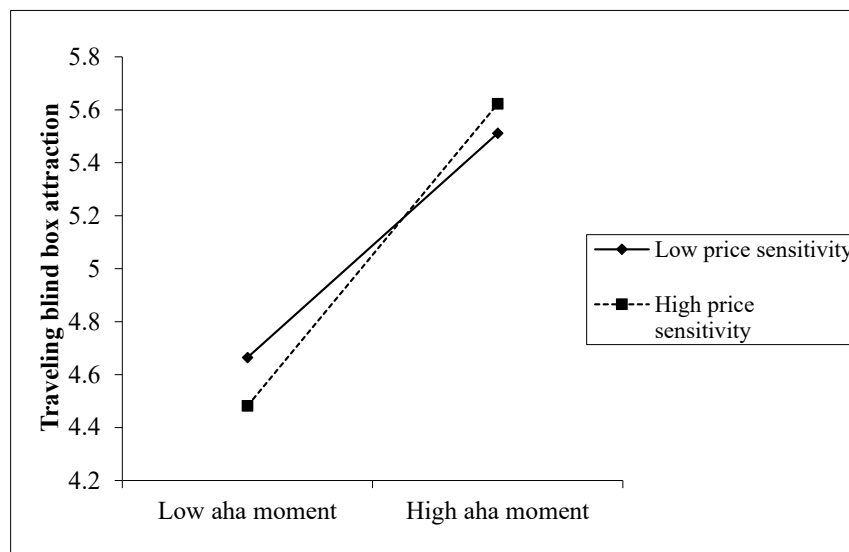


Figure 3. Moderating Effect of Price Sensitivity on the Relationship between the “Aha Moment” and Traveling Blind Box Attraction.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Research Conclusions

This paper focuses on travel blind boxes, examining the relationship between young consumers’ perceived similarity from their travel destinations to their hometown and the attraction of travel blind boxes. The findings indicate that, firstly, the perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown negatively influences the traveling blind box attraction. Hypothesis 1 is supported. The lower the perceived similarity between the travel destination and the hometown for young travelers, the stronger the attraction of the travel blind box will be. Secondly, the “Aha Moment” mediates the relationship between the perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown and the traveling blind box attraction. Hypothesis 2 is validated. When young travelers encounter destinations in the wishful surprise destination pool that are dissimilar to their hometown, they experience an “Aha Moment”, thereby enhancing the attraction of travel blind boxes. Thirdly, destination word-of-mouth recommendations positively moderate the relationship between the “Aha Moment” and the traveling blind box attraction. Hypothesis 3 is confirmed. When young travelers encounter destinations recommended by word-of-mouth, the attraction of travel blind boxes is heightened. Lastly, price sensitivity also positively moderates the relationship between the “Aha Moment” and the traveling blind box attraction. Hypothesis 4 is validated. For young consumers who are more sensitive to price, the higher their price sensitivity, the stronger the attraction to travel blind boxes when they see destinations dissimilar to their hometown in the wishful surprise destination pool.

5.2. Research Contributions

The present study makes important contributions to consumer research in online traveling blind box research by identifying the underlying mechanism and boundary conditions [61]. First, our empirical findings verified the relationship between perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown and traveling blind box attraction. Against the backdrop of blind box sales becoming a hot topic of research, studies specifically focusing on travel blind boxes are relatively scarce. Most articles on blind box sales concentrate on consumer psychology aspects such as curiosity, perceived value, and perceived risk [15], with very few studies specifically exploring travel blind boxes. Even those that mainly focus on consumer-perceived uncertainty rather than exploring perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometowns. Hill et al. (2016) were the first to identify that curiosity is primarily an emotional state triggered by the appeal of mystery

and to explain how curiosity, directly and indirectly, affects consumer shopping motivation. The uncertainty of mystery boxes fosters a desire for mystery, which in turn stimulates the urge to purchase [12]. By inducing uncertainty in mystery boxes, their design can activate unique product experiences related to perceived hedonic value [13] and introduce the moderating effect of the product price to test the gamification effect of mystery box design [14]. Some researchers, based on the hedonic-utilitarian shopping value theory, have explored the dual effects of uncertainty on consumers' hedonic and utilitarian values when purchasing products and included the mediating effect of consumer surprise induced by uncertainty [1]. This paper fills this research gap by fundamentally examining the attraction mechanism of travel blind boxes. At the same time, previous research has primarily focused on the relationship between perceived similarity and interpersonal attraction [62]. This paper extends the scope of perceived similarity research by applying it to the relationship between perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometowns and how this similarity influences the attraction of travel blind boxes.

Second, our research examined the mediating effect of the "Aha Moment". It delved into the intermediary role of the "Aha Moment" between the perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown and traveling blind box attraction. The research found that the lower the perceived similarity between the destination and the hometown imagery, indicating a sense of dissimilarity, the stronger the "Aha Moment" experienced by young consumers, leading them to perceive the traveling blind box attraction as stronger. This finding may be attributed to the fact that travel destinations dissimilar to their hometown provide consumers with a novel experience, triggering an "aha moment" for young consumers. This paper further elucidates the psychological mechanisms at play when young people choose travel blind boxes, not only expanding the research scope of the "Aha Moment" but also contributing new insights and perspectives to related literature.

Finally, the paper delves into the moderating effects of destination word-of-mouth recommendations and price sensitivity, providing crucial insights into the constitution of traveling blind box attraction. Unlike game-type blind boxes such as Pop Mart or loot boxes, travel blind boxes possess uniqueness as they are essentially travel tickets, offering both hedonic and utilitarian value. The research reveals that destination word-of-mouth recommendations and price sensitivity positively moderate the relationship between the "Aha Moment" and the traveling blind box attraction. In other words, the stronger the destination word-of-mouth recommendations, the greater the traveling blind box attraction. Word-of-mouth recommendations entail consumers acquiring destination-related information from others, and when these recommendations are more favorable, especially from trusted sources, young consumers' expectations towards the destination are heightened, consequently perceiving the traveling blind box attraction as stronger. Simultaneously, higher price sensitivity enhances the attraction of the traveling blind box. Young people with high price sensitivity may prioritize the utilitarian value and cost-effectiveness of travel blind boxes. When the utilitarian value and cost-effectiveness of travel blind boxes are high, their attraction to young consumers is also increased. This paper deeply investigates the boundary conditions and mechanisms of travel blind box attraction operation, providing a more valuable reference for the destination selection of travel blind boxes on online travel platforms.

5.3. Managerial Implications

As consumer consumption patterns change, young consumers not only focus on the utilitarian value of products but also pay increasing attention to the hedonic value they provide. Travel blind boxes, as an emerging sales model, have quickly gained popularity since their introduction. However, research on their operating mechanisms and boundary conditions remains insufficient. This paper aims to assist online travel platforms in providing consumers with more satisfactory wishful surprise destination pools, effectively reducing consumer return rates and providing decision-makers with robust

decision-making foundations. Specifically, this paper provides the following insights for online travel platforms:

Firstly, online travel platforms typically focus on the departure locations entered by young tourists, often overlooking their hometowns. Most online travel platforms typically require tourists to input their places of departure without paying much attention to their hometowns, providing more destination options different from tourists' places of departure. However, the research demonstrates that when young travelers see destinations in the wish surprise destination pool that are dissimilar to their hometown imagery, they experience an "aha moment", thereby enhancing the traveling blind box attraction. This provides a cue for online travel platforms: they can add some destinations that are dissimilar to tourists' hometowns in the destination options of travel blind boxes. Doing so may increase consumer satisfaction because travel blind boxes themselves entail uncertainty, and even if tourists fail to draw their most desired destination, it does not increase the likelihood of tourists returning the product.

Secondly, online travel platforms prioritize word-of-mouth recommendations for destinations in the wishful surprise destination pool. Young tourists, in particular, are more inclined to trust destination recommendations from friends and family. Research indicates that destination word-of-mouth recommendations can positively moderate the attraction of the traveling blind box. When young tourists discover locations recommended by their friends and family in the wishful surprise destination pool, even if they are not their first-choice destinations, they still generate a certain level of appeal. This provides a crucial suggestion for online travel platforms: enhancing tourist satisfaction by increasing the recommendation level of destinations. In the future, online platforms can take measures such as rewarding referrals from friends to amplify the strength of destination word-of-mouth recommendations.

Lastly, decision-makers lay stress on the price differences of travel blind boxes across various online travel platforms, but more importantly, they pay attention to the changes in cost-effectiveness brought about by these differences. Research findings indicate that price sensitivity positively moderates the "Aha Moment" and attraction of travel blind boxes. Young travelers with high price sensitivity may be more concerned about the practical value and cost-effectiveness of travel blind boxes. For travelers with varying levels of price sensitivity, managers can implement incentive policies to enhance consumers' perception of practical value, such as point redemption systems or travel accumulation programs. These measures not only increase consumer engagement but also enhance their perception of practical value, thus strengthening the attraction of the traveling blind box.

6. Limitations and Research Prospects

This study still has some limitations. Firstly, although the research aimed to explore the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the traveling blind box attraction, attraction does not directly equate to actual purchase behavior. Attraction only refers to the extent to which travel blind boxes appeal to travelers, while converting this attraction into actual purchase behavior is the critical issue. For online travel platforms, actual purchase behavior is more important. If future research could obtain data from travel platforms to study the actual purchase behavior, it would greatly enhance the value of this study. Secondly, although the study aimed to explore the mechanisms and boundary conditions of travel blind box attraction, it only considered the perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometowns while overlooking other potential factors, such as destination safety and the diversity of activities. Then, the variables primarily focused on the destination itself, while other factors such as travel purpose, mode of transportation, and value-added services (e.g., hotel vouchers) were insufficiently considered. Future research could benefit from a more comprehensive experimental design. Finally, the factors influencing the relationship between perceived similarity between travel destinations and hometown and the traveling blind box attraction are complex and varied. Besides the mediating role of the "aha moment" and the moderating effects of word-of-mouth recommendations and price

sensitivity considered in this paper, factors such as consumer personality traits, preferences, and travel experiences can serve as moderators, while perceived practical value and cost-effectiveness can act as mediators affecting the research outcomes. Future research might integrate multiple factors to explore the issue and understand the mechanisms affecting the attraction of blind travel boxes more deeply and comprehensively.

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