

Bandages, Cardboard, and the Weight of Feeling: Reading Hirono and Inosoul as Emotional Objects in Pop Mart's Blind Box Culture

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How to cite this paper: Menon, D., & Fernandes, M. (2026). Bandages, Cardboard, and the Weight of Feeling: Reading Hirono and Inosoul as Emotional Objects in Pop Mart's Blind Box Culture. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 696-714.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.1410033>

Received: September 18, 2026

Accepted: October 26, 2026

Published: October 29, 2026

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Abstract

Blind boxes have moved, in the space of a few years, from a novelty item to one of the defining shapes of contemporary collectible culture, and the small vinyl figures sealed inside them have started to carry an emotional weight that their production cost alone cannot explain. This article examines how Pop Mart's designer figure Hirono functions as an instrument of emotional branding within blind box collectible culture, and asks the question existing research has mostly left alone: why does a mass-produced object feel less like a purchase and more like a companion to the people who own it? Using Hirono as the central case and Pop Mart's Inosoul as a contrasting counterpart, the study combines a comparative design analysis with a small set of semi-structured interviews with Hirono collectors. It is organised around six emotional themes the two IPs share: solitude, masking, seeking, fragility, protection, and identity. Drawing on Donald Winnicott's account of transitional phenomena (applied here as a cautious analogy for adult collecting) and Susan Fournier's brand relationship theory, this article argues that Hirono's outward-facing aesthetic of bandages, cardboard, and visible damage gives collectors a legible surface onto which private feelings of concealment and endurance can be projected, while Inosoul, built around internal stillness rather than external wounds, resolves the same six themes inward and throws Hirono's outward orientation into relief. Read across all six themes rather than one or two, the comparison suggests that emotional branding does not operate on a single register even within a single brand: two IPs can share an almost identical emotional vocabulary and still invite very different kinds of attachment, because the way a feeling is allowed to be expressed shapes how it can be taken up, not only which feeling is being expressed. The interview material further indicates that emotional identification

is not the only route into collecting; a socially motivated route, driven by visibility, scarcity, and trend participation, runs alongside it. The findings extend blind box scholarship beyond purchase-driven uncertainty by suggesting that a figurine's emotional character may shape how collectors relate to it once the box has been opened, a possibility that future work with long-term collectors of both IPs should test.

Keywords

Emotional Branding, Blind Box Collectibles, Pop Mart Hirono, Transitional Object, Brand Relationship Theory, Comparative Case Analysis

1. Blind Boxes, Uncertainty, and the Limits of What Scarcity Explains

Blind boxes have gained enough popularity that by now they are rather self-explanatory: they are sealed boxes containing figures from a themed series, and it is up to the buyer to discover which figure is inside. The idea originates from the Japanese *fukubukuro*, or “lucky bag,” and has become a trademark of modern collecting (Wei & Yu, 2025). Pop Mart, established in Beijing in 2010 (TechNode, 2025), is responsible for making this concept a global business. By the end of 2025 it was running 630 retail stores and 2637 Robo Shops (vending machines) across 20 countries and regions, and overseas markets accounted for 43.8% of its revenue of 37.12 billion yuan (China Daily, 2026; Guangming Online, 2026). What can be noted about Pop Mart's goods is that they do not consist of uncertainty alone, which is merely the mechanism of supply. What people are looking for in a product series is the emotional register behind each figure's design.

Among Pop Mart's various collections, Hirono occupies a role that is both distinctive and unusually legible. Designed by the Chinese artist Lang and released in 2021 (Pop Mart, 2021), Hirono is a small, subdued figure of a boy assembled from bandages, patched cardboard, and muted colors. Figure 1 shows the materials that give the character this look: bandages, wooden sticks, strings and patched cardboard. Pop Mart's own introduction presents Hirono as introverted, occasionally naughty and often meandering without a clear direction (Pop Mart, n.d.), and Lang has talked about the character's origins in an interview published by Pop Mart (Pop Mart Official, 2024). That reticence is what makes Hirono a strong case study in emotional branding: a character built almost entirely out of the effort to evoke feeling without explaining it.

Hirono is the key case in this article. It is, however, in contrast to Inosoul that Hirono's design logic becomes visible. Designed by Yixiu and released in 2024 (Pop Mart, 2024b; The Toy Chronicle, 2024), Inosoul occupies much of the same emotional space as Hirono, loneliness, concealment, fragility, yet renders it differently. Comparing the two characters allows an important distinction to surface: different IPs can invite different types of attachment even when they share themes,

because attachment depends both on what a character represents and on the manner in which the representation is permitted to appear.



Figure 1. Hirono's material vocabulary: bandages, wooden sticks, strings and patched cardboard. (Photograph by the author)

The larger objective here is that blind box scholarship should advance beyond its current sphere of attention, which concerns mostly the psychology of uncertainty, the gambler's fallacy, the scarcity effect, hedonic anticipation (Lee, Wyllie, & Brennan, 2025; Xia et al., 2025). These ideas explain why people continue to purchase blind boxes in the first place, and they do so well. They say very little, however, about why a particular object is retained once acquired: why a collector will keep one Hirono for several years while a dozen figures from the same shelf are boxed up and resold. The second question is about attachment rather than acquisition. This is where Hirono is instructive, because the qualities that make it popular and the qualities that make it difficult to part with turn out, on closer examination, to be different.

To make the argument precisely, this article looks beyond Hirono as an isolated case and considers Hirono alongside Inosoul across six emotional themes that cut across both IPs: solitude, masking, seeking, fragility, protection, and identity. For each theme, the analysis asks how two figures marketed by the same company approach the same emotional material. This allows the article to shift from describing Hirono's aesthetics to explaining why they work.

A scope note is needed at the outset. The central argument of this article concerns emotionally motivated collecting, the route by which a figure comes to function as a personal object. The interview material gathered for this study also surfaced a second, socially motivated route, driven by visibility, trend participation, and scarcity. That second route is real and is treated on its own terms in Section 6.2, but it is not the phenomenon the six-theme framework is designed to explain, and the two should not be read as competing accounts of the same behaviour. The attachment claims made below rest on the design comparison and on the accounts of Hirono collectors; no Inosoul collectors were interviewed (Sections 4.3 and 6.4).

2. Possessions, Transitional Objects, and Brand Relationships

Emotional branding has been used in marketing literature since the 1990s to describe the practice of connecting a brand to its customers affectively, so that the bond rests on feeling rather than on product function alone (Hasibuan et al., 2025). The concept of the extended self, developed by Belk (1988), provides a psychological basis for this approach, suggesting that people use possessions to constitute and communicate identity. Applied to the blind box, buying a Hirono figure means not merely acquiring an item but making a claim about oneself through the object one keeps.

The wider literature on material culture and possession attachment gives this argument firmer footing. Work on material culture treats objects as carriers of social meaning and not as inert commodities (Appadurai, 1986), and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that people value the household objects closest to them mainly for what they mean, for the memories, relationships and sense of self they hold, rather than for their use. In consumer research, Kleine and Allen (1995) showed that possessions people count as part of who they are tend to be tied to their past and to other people, and Ahuvia (2005) described how loved objects help consumers build and reconcile their identity narratives. Schiffenstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim (2008) go a step further and ask what design can do to foster such attachment. None of this work concerns blind boxes, but it establishes that adults do form strong, identity-laden attachments to mass-produced things, which is the premise the argument below relies on.

Two further theoretical resources refine this picture and address the gaps that Belk's framework leaves open. The first is Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic account of the transitional object. Winnicott (1953) used the term for an infant's first "not-me" possession, typically a blanket or soft toy, which sits between inner life and the external world and helps the child manage separation from the mother. It is a claim about early development, and Winnicott himself noted that the object is not mourned when it loses its importance; its function spreads instead across play, art and cultural life (Winnicott, 1953, 1971).

Applying the concept to adult collectors therefore calls for care. The developmental literature still debates how far the idea holds even in childhood (Litt, 1986), and nothing here assumes that an adult relates to a vinyl figure as an infant does to a blanket. The term is used as an analogy. Like a transitional object, a Hirono figure is an owned thing that is neither wholly the collector's invention nor simply a product, and it can hold feelings its owner has not put into words. That adults form strong attachments to possessions is shown by the consumer-research work cited above (Kleine et al., 1995; Ahuvia, 2005); Winnicott is used only to name one function such an attachment can serve. On this reading, collectors who identify with Hirono are drawn less by how well the bandages are sculpted than by what the bandages denote, concealment, injury, endurance, feelings they recognize but cannot easily articulate. The analogy also frames the Hirono-Inosoul comparison: an infant insists on one particular blanket, and

the comparison asks a similar question of collectors, namely which of two objects close in feeling they reach for, and what that says about what they need the object to do.

The second resource is [Susan Fournier's \(1998\)](#) work on consumer-brand relationships, which holds that consumers do not merely prefer brands but form relationships with them that follow the contours of human ones. In her account the brand acts as an active partner that supplies meaning, and relationship quality is described through facets such as love and passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy and brand partner quality, alongside a range of relationship forms that change over time ([Fournier, 1998](#)). This article uses the framework selectively and does not try to measure relationship quality. Two ideas do the work: self-connection, meaning the extent to which a brand supplies meanings a consumer uses to express who they are, and the way a relationship deepens over time, which is what makes repeat buying more than habit. Fournier theorized brands and no single objects, so the framework is applied at the level of the IP: collectors relate to Hirono or Inosoul as a character that continues across releases, not only to the one figure in the box. Where Winnicott's analogy concerns what a single object can hold, Fournier's framework concerns what a continuing relationship with a brand provides. Section 6.3 returns to this once the six-theme comparison has supplied the material it needs.

Hirono's refusal to sweeten its emotions can be placed against two bodies of work, one on cuteness and one on "healing" culture. Cute objects are popular largely because they produce positive feeling ([Nittono et al., 2012](#)), and Japanese kawaii culture has long treated soft, childlike forms as a source of everyday comfort. Some of the other research based on this topic cautions that cuteness is not simply benign, because it aestheticizes smallness and powerlessness and invites tenderness towards an object that asks for nothing in return. Hirono keeps much of this vocabulary, a small boy with oversized eyes, but withholds its reward: the face is guarded, the body is bandaged, and the viewer is not invited to feel better. What the figure refuses is cute affect, not cute form. The same refusal can be read against Zhiyu (治愈, "healing") culture, the Chinese rendering of the Japanese *Iyashi*, a label attached to media and goods that promise comfort. Cute elements have been shown to produce a healing effect in consumer research ([Chou, Chu, & Chen, 2022](#)), so in the dominant Zhiyu register comfort and cuteness tend to work together. Alongside it sits a counter-register, sang culture, which voices exhaustion and pessimism in place of the official call for positivity ([Tan & Cheng, 2020](#)). Hirono can be read as sitting between the two, offering company without consolation: it does not cheer the collector up, but it does not leave them alone with the feeling either. This fits the interview material, in which P1 and P2 describe recognition and not cheering up, and it sharpens the paper's contribution, since it suggests that a figure can heal by acknowledging a feeling without resolving it. The reading is an interpretation of one IP drawn from a small sample, and the article does not claim that Hirono belongs to sang culture or that collectors experience it as "healing" in the industry's sense.

3. Why This Comparison Matters: Reading Two Figures through Six Shared Themes

Juxtaposing Hirono with another Pop Mart IP is not an exercise in academic neatness but an analytical step that makes Hirono's emotional workings visible in the first place. Examined in isolation, a single figure risks being described only in terms of its attributes, plaster, cardboard, a downturned face, without any account of why those attributes elicit the responses they do. Viewed through Inosoul, however, a figure made by a different artist in a different year in a different design language but working the same emotional ground, Hirono's choices appear as one possible rendering of solitude, masking, and vulnerability rather than the only one.

The six themes were derived from the material rather than imposed on it (Section 4.2). Solitude, masking, seeking, fragility, protection, and identity recur in one form or another across the series examined in this study (**Table A1**), which makes them a stable basis for comparison rather than categories fitted to a conclusion after the fact. They are also plausibly among the emotional states attached to objects people keep rather than discard (an interpretation offered here, not an established finding): the blanket that outlives its use, the photograph that survives a move, the figure that stays on the shelf long after its series has left the market. Reading Hirono and Inosoul this way holds the emotional content roughly constant while varying the means of expression.

This distinction has practical consequences for how purchasing is understood. If attachment were a matter of emotional content alone, any figure associated with sorrow or loss would be interchangeable in its appeal. Collector behaviour suggests otherwise: people queue at opening time, trade duplicates with strangers online, and hunt specific secret editions (see [Wei & Yu, 2025](#), on group interaction in blind box consumption). The comparative analysis proposed here is therefore narrower in focus. It does not set out to analyze the sadness Hirono represents, but how sadness is translated into a sequence of visual signs, and how that translation is read. This is a semiotic claim in the ordinary sense of the term: product forms carry meanings that consumers read and act on ([Mick, 1986](#)), and the visual domain of a product shapes response at several levels, from aesthetic impression to semantic interpretation and symbolic association ([Crilly, Moultrie, & Clarkson, 2004](#)). Reading a bandage as concealment or a glow as interiority is therefore an interpretive act that the design invites, and not a property the object simply has.

This is also where emotional branding becomes more than a marketing device. A collector who has come to trust Hirono's emotional register does not evaluate each release from scratch; they measure the new figure against their accumulated experience of the brand, much as a reader returns to an author for a style they have learned to expect. The blind box format intensifies this, since the buyer knows neither what they are choosing nor which figure they will receive. Someone bonded to Hirono's emotional world is not simply acquiring a figurine but wagering on which member of an already familiar emotional family will be in the box. This offers one possible explanation for behaviour that otherwise looks puzzling: continued purchasing after

most of a series is owned, the resale of duplicates to fund further boxes, and resale markets in which duplicates and sought-after figures change hands.

4. Method

This study combines two forms of evidence. The primary method is a qualitative comparative design analysis. Figures from each IP were paired around the six recurring themes, and each pair was read for how design, naming, and implied narrative diverge even where the underlying feeling is shared. Figures were selected on the criterion that both IPs offered a clearly comparable treatment of the theme in question; where several candidates existed, the release most explicitly named for that theme was chosen. Analysis drew on official Pop Mart product imagery and descriptions (Pop Mart, 2021, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; full list in **Table A1**) alongside the physical figures, where available.

4.1. Analytical Corpus

The design analysis rests on twelve figures, six from each IP, taken from five blind box series. **Table A1** (Appendix) lists every figure with its series, release date and the official Pop Mart product page used to identify and describe it. For Hirono, four figures (Cuckoo, Amnesia, Marionette and The Ghost) come from The Other One Series, released on 1 October 2021 (Pop Mart, 2021); one (Unspoken) comes from the Mime Series (Pop Mart, 2023); and one (Fort) comes from the Shelter Series, released on 19 July 2024 (Pop Mart, 2024a). For Inosoul, five figures (The Lonely Light, The Portrait, The Wax Seal Vow, The Moving Castle and The Ghost's Sanctuary) come from the In the Still Room Series, released in June 2025 (Pop Mart, 2025), and one (Lost) comes from the Lucid Dreams Series, released on 19 April 2024 (Pop Mart, 2024b).

The corpus is a purposive selection and not a census of either IP. Each series page lists the full regular lineup, and candidates for a theme were drawn from those lineups; other Hirono series, such as Reshape, Echo and Little Mischief, were not analyzed. Because the paired figures come from different series and different years, some of the differences reported in Section 5 may owe as much to the concept of a particular series as to the design logic of the IP, a limitation taken up in Section 6.4. The pairing is also uneven in time: the Hirono figures date from 2021 to 2024 and the Inosoul figures from 2024 to 2025. Pairings drawn from contemporaneous series (for example, Hirono's Shelter Series of July 2024 against Inosoul's Lucid Dreams Series of April 2024) would reduce this confound and are proposed for future work.

4.2. Coding Procedure

Coding of the figures followed three steps. First, for each figure the name, the visible design (posture, props, materials, color and expression) and the wording of the series page were noted in a working table. Second, the six themes were derived from that material and not imposed on it: the emotional vocabulary that recurred in figure names and series descriptions across both IPs was grouped, and the

groups were refined until each was clearly represented in both IPs, which produced solitude, masking, seeking, fragility, protection and identity. Each figure was then assigned to the single theme that its name and design most directly pointed to and, where more than one figure could stand for a theme, the one most explicitly named for that theme was kept. Third, alternative interpretations were tested pair by pair by asking which other theme the figure could plausibly be read under, and whether moving it would change the comparison.

Three cases show how this worked. Cuckoo could have been read under Seeking because of its clock, but its mask-like composure and its name led to its being kept under Masking. The Ghost could sit under Solitude, but its plain-sheet gesture towards disappearing is closer to a statement about who the figure is, so it was kept under Identity. Fort could be read as Fragility, since the figure shelters something exposed, but the act of shielding is what defines it, so it was placed under Protection. These are judgement calls, and other readers may place some figures differently; Section 6.4 acknowledges this.

The interview transcripts were coded separately. Each transcript was read in full and the reasons participants gave for starting to collect and for keeping or selling figures were noted; participants were then grouped by the reason they emphasized most, which gave the two clusters reported in **Table 1** (emotional identification, and social or trend-driven collecting).

Table 1. Interview participants for data collection on Hirono.

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Recruitment route</i>	<i>Collecting duration</i>	<i>Approx. figures owned</i>	<i>Dominant motivation</i>
Participant 1	Instagram	Span of 6 months	16	Emotional identification
Participant 2	Instagram	Span of 4 months	10	Emotional identification
Participant 3	Face-to-face	1 month	14	Social/trend-driven
Participant 4	Face-to-face	2 months	20	Social/trend-driven
Participant 5	TikTok	Span of 3 months	30	Emotional identification

Note. Participants were eligible if they were aged 18 or over and owned at least one Hirono figure, whether as a beginner or an advanced collector. Interviews were conducted in English, partly through social media platforms (Instagram and TikTok) and partly in person. With participants' permission, interviews were documented in written notes from recordings and face to face meetings. The notes are stored securely and kept confidential. Participants received a verbal explanation of the study, were told that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time, and gave verbal consent to the collection and use of the information they shared. Collecting duration ranged from one to six months, so all participants were relatively new collectors.

4.3. Interview Protocol

To supplement the design analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Hirono collectors recruited through Instagram, TikTok and through face-to-face contact within local collecting circles. Interviews lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and were conducted between June, 2025 and July, 2026. Participants were asked about how they first encountered Hirono, what they re-

membered about acquiring particular figures, which figures they had kept or re-sold, and what, if anything, the figures meant to them. Responses were transcribed and grouped inductively, producing two motivational clusters: emotional identification and social or trend-driven collecting. **Table 1** summarizes the five participants. Participants gave informed consent and are identified here only by number. The sample is small and self-selecting, and the interview material is used illustratively rather than as a basis for generalization; this limitation is discussed further in Section 6.4. No Inosoul collectors were interviewed, so the interview material speaks to attachment to Hirono only.

5. Reading Hirono against Inosoul: A Six-Theme Comparative Analysis

Taken individually, each pair below tells a small story about a single emotion. Taken together, they build the larger argument of this study: that Hirono and Inosoul work from the same raw material but carry it out in different styles of emotional branding. **Table 2** summarizes the comparison (**Table A1** lists the series and official product page for every figure); **Figure 2** shows the physical features that recur across Hirono figures, and **Figure 3** sets out each Hirono-Inosoul pair side by side under its theme. The discussion that follows takes each pair in turn.

Table 2. Hirono and Inosoul compared across six shared emotional themes.

Theme	Paired figures		
	<i>Hirono</i>	<i>Inosoul</i>	<i>Point of divergence</i>
Solitude	Unspoken - bandaged, holding a small companion, expression withheld	The Lonely Light - loneliness signaled by a small inner glow	Aloneness as an outward condition vs. an interior state
Masking	Cuckoo - a composed face assembled under pressure of time	The Portrait - gilded, formal, worn with composure and freely expressed	The mask as necessity vs. the mask as ornament
Seeking	Amnesia - caught mid-search, half-turned, reaching, overwhelmed with emotions	Lost - walking with unhurried certainty but still motivated to take new paths	Search as compulsion vs. search as practiced habit
Fragility	Marionette - arms moved by strings from outside	The Wax Seal Vow - frailty sealed, protected, ceremonial by wax	Fragility exposed vs. fragility enclosed
Protection	Fort - an enclosed body shielding something smaller to protect	The Moving Castle - a portable fortress carried along to avoid stillness	Protection as sacrifice vs. protection as infrastructure
Identity	The Ghost - a plain sheet, a child's gesture toward disappearing without doing completely	The Ghost's Sanctuary - a built space made to hold the unseen and can be hidden easily	The wish to vanish named vs. the wish to vanish housed



Figure 2. Hirono's described features - Cardboards, Bandages, Patches and Sticks. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 3. Hirono and Inosoul in six shared emotional themes. (Source: PopMart)

5.1. Solitude

Hirono's Unspoken depicts a bandaged figure still holding a small stuffed companion, with an expression that reveals nothing of what is happening inside. The title suggests that the feeling present is one the character cannot put into words.

Inosoul's counterpart, *The Lonely Light*, renders the same idea through a small inner glow. Where Inosoul's solitude issues from within the character, Hirono's is registered on the character's outward state.

5.2. Masking

Hirono's *Cuckoo* is arguably the most literal treatment of masking in either case. The face is set in a calm that is closer to the suggestion of an expression than to an expression itself, much as one composes a face before leaving home. A clock attached to the figure adds pressure: time keeps moving and does not wait, and behind the composure the figure is hiding disappointment. The name reinforces the point. Like the bird in a cuckoo clock, the figure appears on cue, so its composure reads as something produced under time pressure and not as something felt, and Hirono is less putting on a mask than manufacturing a face because no ready-made one is available. Inosoul's *The Portrait* treats concealment as ornament rather than necessity. It is gilded and formal, and it is worn with composure rather than reluctance. Yet the figure clearly expresses its disappointment at being still and lost in thought. The two figures therefore ask different questions: Hirono's asks what it costs to keep wearing an untrue face, and Inosoul's asks how one comes to be at peace with wearing one.

5.3. Seeking

Hirono's *Amnesia* catches the figure mid-search, half-turned and reaching rather than at rest. The searching reads as compulsive more than purposeful, closer to an itch that cannot be resolved than a plan being carried out. Inosoul's *Lost* treats the same idea more calmly. The figure is walking rather than groping, coat drawn against unnamed weather, and moves with the unhurried certainty of someone who seems to know where they are going, though not without a fear that the path may be the wrong one. The difference lies in why each keeps moving. Hirono's seeker searches because stopping feels unbearable; Inosoul's wanderer keeps going because moving towards a goal is what it has learned to do.

5.4. Fragility

Hirono's *Marionette* presents a figure held by strings, its arms moved by forces outside itself. If the strings were let go, control would be lost and the boy would collapse, which points to a need for outside support at the moment it is most needed. Inosoul's *The Wax Seal Vow* presents the same frailty as something protected. The figure is vulnerable but safeguarded, moulded in wax that gives it stability and a certain ceremony, although too much pressure or heat would undo it. Both characters are fragile; Hirono's fragility is legible on the surface, while Inosoul's is folded inward.

5.5. Protection

Hirono's protector, named *Fort*, shows the boy standing inside a small, brick-walled structure that shields something even smaller and more exposed than him-

self. The protection on offer is active and effortful: Hirono guards what needs guarding without waiting to be healed first, which is exactly what makes the gesture feel costly rather than easy. Inosoul's *The Moving Castle*, reframes protection as architecture rather than posture, a small, portable fortress carried rather than merely occupied, shelter built to travel with its owner rather than left behind as a fixed structure. Where Hirono's protection is a stance one body takes toward another, Inosoul's is something built and carried: protection as infrastructure rather than protection as sacrifice.

5.6. Identity

Identity is perhaps the clearest demonstration of why Hirono can be read, cautiously and by analogy, in relation to the transitional object for adult collectors (Section 2). Hirono's *The Ghost* shows the figure under a plain white sheet, a child's gesture toward disappearing, standing beside an even smaller ghost, a companion in the same wish rather than a solitary figure. Inosoul's *The Ghost's Sanctuary* takes the same image of invisibility and gives it shelter, a built space designed to hold the unseen feeling. Hirono's contribution is the rawer one: it does not resolve the wish to disappear; it names it and sits with it.

5.7. The Pattern across the Six Pairs

In all six pairs the same pattern emerges, which **Figure 4** summarizes as an outward-inward axis. Hirono is externally oriented, expressing emotion through bandages, restraint, and visible damage; Inosoul is internally composed, an inner glow, a mastered mask, a settled destination, a sealed vow, a carried shelter, a built sanctuary. The two IPs draw on the same emotional core, but Hirono functions as a mirror held up to what is concealed, while Inosoul presents the same material as it might look once brought to equilibrium. Neither is less authentic than the other; they serve different emotional needs, which is why the same person may want Hirono on one day and Inosoul on another without contradiction.



Figure 4. The outward-inward axis: six shared themes resolved in opposite directions by Hirono and Inosoul. (Model created by Author)

Two qualifications apply. First, “outward” and “inward” are interpretive summaries of the six pairs, not features read off the figures in advance, which is why they do not appear in the column headings of **Table 2**. Second, the pattern is not uniform. The Portrait shows visible disappointment despite its composure (Section 5.2), and Lost is still marked by fear that the path may be wrong (Section 5.3); both are tensions within Inosoul’s “inward” resolution, and Fort (Section 5.5) is as much about enclosure as exposure. These cases suggest a tendency rather than a clean binary.

6. Discussion: Emotional Branding, Attachment, and the Repeat Buy

6.1. Emotional Identification as a Route into Collecting

The analysis indicates, above all, that Pop Mart’s approach to storytelling does not translate identically across its IPs, even where the underlying themes are alike. Hirono’s particular contribution to Pop Mart’s emotional branding lies in its refusal to sweeten what it represents. Where much collectible toy design falls back on cuteness as its dominant strategy, Hirono leaves wounds unhidden, bandaged, patched, visible, offering collectors an object that does not oblige them to feel better. This echoes, by analogy, Winnicott’s account of transitional phenomena: an object valued not because it dispels a feeling but because it holds it without judgement.

The interview material supports this reading for part of the sample. Several participants described Hirono as a meaningful fixture in their lives, framed explicitly in terms of emotional resonance. One collector said:

“Hirono got me through depression.” (P1)

Another described the recognition that initiated their collecting:

“I saw myself in Hirono, which is why I started collecting the figurines, because I related to the emotions Hirono was portraying through them.” (P2)

For these collectors, Hirono extends beyond being a collectible and becomes a means of emotional identification. This is the route the six-theme framework is designed to explain: the figure supplies a visual language for feelings that are otherwise difficult to articulate, and the collector’s attachment forms around that legibility.

6.2. A Second Route: Social Influence, Visibility, and Scarcity

A second cluster of participants described motivations of a different order, tied to popularity, visibility, and trend participation rather than to emotional recognition. One explained:

“Hirono is a very popular blind box and there are a lot of people buying it. I also saw K-pop idols wearing it as bag charms, which is why I felt like buying them as well.” (P3)

Another put it more directly:

“Felt like getting on the bandwagon because everyone has been buying them

lately.” (P4)

These accounts point to a mechanism the design analysis does not capture. Here the figurine’s value is constructed partly through its circulation: owning Hirono becomes a way of participating in a trend, belonging to a community, or avoiding the sense of being left out. Fear of missing out, limited availability, secret editions, and social media visibility all encourage repeated purchasing and accumulation beyond what was originally intended, and the uncertainty of the format adds a cycle of anticipation and reward that can take on a gambling-like character.

This pattern is familiar from work on social influence. Reference groups shape which products and brands people adopt (Bearden & Etzel, 1982), and people often follow what others are seen to do, either to choose well or to be accepted (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Collecting has a social side as well: Belk (1995) treats it as a shared activity as much as a private one, and research on blind boxes reports similar group dynamics (Wei & Yu, 2025). P3’s reference to K-pop idols wearing Hirono as bag charms and P4’s “bandwagon” describes influence of this kind, which the design analysis in Section 5 has no way of registering.

It is worth being explicit about how the two routes relate. They are not rival explanations of a single behaviour, and they are not mutually exclusive within a single collector. A person may arrive at Hirono through a trend and later develop an attachment of the kind described in Section 6.1, just as someone who arrives through emotional recognition may become progressively more invested in the collecting culture around it. What the six-theme framework explains is why, once the emotional route is taken, one IP rather than another comes to hold that role. What it does not explain, and does not claim to, is why a given collector enters through one door rather than the other.

6.3. Durability and the Psychology of the Repeat Buy

This brings the argument to a gap in blind box scholarship. Scholars have made real progress in explaining why people buy blind boxes repeatedly, through scarcity pressure, the gambler’s near-miss effect, and the pleasure of not knowing (Lee, Wyllie, & Brennan, 2025; Xia, Xu, Zhang, & Yuan, 2025). Far less attention has been given to why a particular IP remains relevant to a collector once it is owned. Hirono’s case suggests one possible explanation, offered here as a hypothesis rather than a finding: the character may achieve a kind of emotional sustainability by withholding information, leaving collectors room to project meaning onto it. This restraint also works commercially. An object that resolves its own emotional proposition has, in a sense, finished its work the moment the buyer understands it; an object that keeps a feeling open leaf something still to return to.

Understood this way, emotional branding is not about producing a feeling at the point of sale but about designing objects with a durable emotional charge, a different design problem from the one scarcity-focused theory addresses, and one that matters for a business dependent on repeat purchase at precisely the point where novelty has stopped working. Once a collector owns a complete series, nov-

elty may have little left to offer. What may bring them back to the next release is the predictability of the emotional register: the form has changed, but the feeling they have come to expect is still there. This would be brand loyalty operating at the level of affect rather than object, and plausibly more durable than loyalty built on scarcity, though the present study does not compare the two. It also suggests why the six-theme framework has more than descriptive value: a brand that has reliably worked the same emotional themes across successive releases has developed an emotional signature its buyers can recognize before the box is even opened. Fournier's (1998) framework helps name what is at stake. Self-connection, the extent to which a brand supplies meanings a consumer uses to express who they are, is what P1 and P2 describe when they speak of recognizing themselves in Hirono. The idea that a relationship deepens over time is what separates a repeat buy from habit: a collector who returns for the next Hirono release is renewing a relationship with a character, not only buying a figure. The framework also sharpens the Hirono-Inosoul contrast, since the two IPs offer different meanings for self-connection, one that makes private concealment visible and one that presents composure already achieved. Because every interviewee was a recent collector, the evidence here concerns how such a relationship begins, not how it deepens.

6.4. Limitations

It is important to be frank about the constraints of this analysis. A qualitative comparative study organised around six themes can establish that Hirono and Inosoul handle shared emotional material differently and can show why that difference matters for attachment. It cannot establish why a given collector prefers Hirono's externalization to Inosoul's internalization, nor how such preferences shift over time as emotional needs change. The interview component is small, five participants, self-selecting, recruited through channels likely to over-represent engaged collectors, and is used illustratively rather than as evidence of distribution across the collector population. Questions of prevalence and change over time would require larger samples and longitudinal design. Winnicott's account of transitional phenomena was formulated for infants and is used here only as an analogy, and Fournier's framework was built to explain relationships with brands rather than with individual objects; neither was formulated to explain why a single brand might produce emotional tools in two opposing registers at once. The design corpus is also small and drawn from different series and years (Table A1), so differences between the two IPs may partly reflect differences between series. Coding of both the figures and the interviews was interpretive, and other readers could reasonably place some figures under a different theme (Section 4.2). Multi-IP emotional branding, and the psychology of sustained blind box purchasing, both remain open to further research. The interviews were conducted only with Hirono collectors, so the claim that the two IPs invite different kinds of attachment rests on the design comparison and on inference from Hirono collectors' accounts, not

on attachment data from both groups. All five participants had been collecting for between one and six months, yet owned between 10 and 30 figures each, so their accounts reflect early-stage collecting and say little about attachment that persists over years. Interviewing collectors of both IPs, including long-term collectors, is the most direct way to test the central claim. The design pairs also come from different artists, series and years, and pairings from contemporaneous series would help separate IP-level design logic from series-level concept.

7. Conclusion: What Hirono Keeps Holding, Box after Box

Hirono is not simply a cleverly designed toy. It is a small container for feelings that are difficult to put into words: concealment, injury, the wish to disappear, and the impulse to protect someone while still wounded oneself. Read against Inosoul across all six themes, that design logic becomes considerably sharper than it appears when Hirono is considered alone. The pattern is consistent across the six pairs, though not without exceptions (Section 5.7), and can be stated at a higher level than the individual pairs allow: Hirono resolves each theme outward, on the surface of the body, while Inosoul resolves the same theme inward, as composure already achieved. Both routes arrive at the same handful of human feelings; what differs is the manner of the journey, not the destination.

The implications extend past the aesthetic and into the economics of collecting. By making objects in which feeling remains visible rather than resolved, Hirono gives collectors a reason to return to the same figure repeatedly but not as something exhausted but as something that, by analogy with Winnicott's transitional phenomena, still holds what the transaction alone could never deliver. Stated practically, this may be why repeat buyers come back: an object left open keeps sending them to the same source of feeling. On this account, emotional branding is not a supplement to a well-made product but very nearly constitutes the product, treating the material components as instruments for reaching an otherwise interior feeling.

There is a broader methodological implication, one this article has modelled rather than merely asserted. Two objects aimed at the same public, produced by the same firm, and working the same six emotions can nonetheless invite different attachments. Emotional content alone therefore cannot explain why a particular person cares about a particular object. Equally important, perhaps more so, is the manner in which the emotion is permitted to appear bandaged or glowing, masked under pressure or worn with composure, restlessly searching or quietly arrived, bound by strings or sealed by a vow, shielding at cost or sheltering by design, named as a wish or housed as a space.

The interview material adds a final qualification to that claim. Hirono's appeal operates across two interconnected dimensions, the personal and the social. On a personal level, the figures provide a visual language for emotions that are otherwise hard to articulate. On a social level, their popularity, visibility, scarcity, and cultural circulation supply additional reasons to buy and to keep buying, as par-

ticipants who described “getting on the bandwagon” make plain. These motivations are not mutually exclusive, and collectors move between them. The significance of Hirono therefore lies not only in what the figures emotionally represent, but in the social environment that lends those representations visibility and desirability and the framework offered here is intended to explain the first of these, while acknowledging that a full account of blind box collecting will need both.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

Table A1. Analytical corpus: figures, series and official Pop Mart product pages used in the design analysis.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>IP</i>	<i>Figure</i>	<i>Series</i>	<i>Product page</i>
Solitude	Hirono	Unspoken	Mime Series (2023)	Pop Mart (2023)
	Inosoul	The Lonely Light	In the Still Room Series (June 2025)	Pop Mart (2025)
Masking	Hirono	Cuckoo	The Other One Series (1 Oct 2021)	Pop Mart (2021)
	Inosoul	The Portrait	In the Still Room Series (June 2025)	Pop Mart (2025)
Seeking	Hirono	Amnesia	The Other One Series (1 Oct 2021)	Pop Mart (2021)
	Inosoul	Lost	Lucid Dreams Series (19 Apr 2024)	Pop Mart (2024b)
Fragility	Hirono	Marionette	The Other One Series (1 Oct 2021)	Pop Mart (2021)
	Inosoul	The Wax Seal Vow	In the Still Room Series (June 2025)	Pop Mart (2025)
Protection	Hirono	Fort	Shelter Series (19 Jul 2024)	Pop Mart (2024a)
	Inosoul	The Moving Castle	In the Still Room Series (June 2025)	Pop Mart (2025)
Identity	Hirono	The Ghost	The Other One Series (1 Oct 2021)	Pop Mart (2021)
	Inosoul	The Ghost's Sanctuary	In the Still Room Series (June 2025)	Pop Mart (2025)

Note. Labels in the last column refer to the Pop Mart entries in the reference list, which give the full address of each official product page.