The Labubu Craze: Marketing Strategies, Consumer Risks, and Pathways to Sustainability

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Abstract. This study will explore the marketing model of one of the most successful intellectual properties of Pop Mart in the global limited-edition toy market - Labubu, as well as its future sustainability. By examining the brand background and current popularity of Labubu, the study determines the potential strategies for its rapid development and explores the risks that may threaten its long-term viability. The analysis will apply the two mature marketing frameworks of 4P (Product, Price, Price and Promotion) Marketing Mix and AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire and Action) marketing model to study how Pop Mart positions Labubu to attract consumers' attention. At the same time, this article will focus on highlighting potential challenges, such as irrational consumption, secondary market speculation behaviors, and the negative impacts of counterfeit products, all of which may undermine the uniqueness and sustainability of the brand. This research will propose solutions to these problems from both individual and corporate perspectives. This research will not only showcase Labubu's unique marketing model and provide ideas for long-term brand loyalty, but also aims to enhance the overall discussion on sustainable marketing strategies in modern consumer culture.

Keywords: Labubu; 4P Marketing Mix; AIDA model; Sustainable marketing; Brand loyalty.

1. Introduction

The creator of Labubu is the Hong Kong illustrator Kasing Lung. It was not originally a toy, it made its debut in the 2015 picture book "The Monster" and was inspired by Nordic mythology [1]. It was initially produced in small quantities by the Hong Kong brand How2Work and was offered to enthusiasts in an art toy form. The "Bloom LaBuBu" released in 2018 was one of the representative products of the How2Work era, presenting a more "exhibition and collection-level" aesthetic orientation. A turning point occurred in 2019 when Pop Mart reached an exclusive partnership with How2Work and launched the "The Monsters" limited edition box series [2]. Labubu moved from a niche art toy into the large-scale retail system, initiating the commercial stage of "IP operation + limited edition box mechanism". In October 2023, Pop Mart released the "Exciting Macarons" series, upgrading the image to the popular "ugly cute" plush hangers. With its small and distinctive design, it laid the foundation for subsequent popularity.

2. Marketing Models of Labubu

To conduct an analysis at both the structural and behavioral levels in order to comprehensively evaluate Labubu's rapid popularity, two mature models from marketing theory will be adopted: the 4Ps (Product, Place, Price, Promotion) Marketing Mix and the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) marketing model.

2.1. 4Ps Marketing Mix

The 4Ps marketing mix is a classic marketing theory framework used by enterprises to systematically formulate marketing strategies. It consists of four core elements: product, price, place, and promotion [3]. Pop Mart has met the needs of consumers in the target market through these four aspects, and has achieved a competitive advantage in the market for developing the Labubu product.

2.1.1 Product

A product refers to the goods and services provided by a company to consumers. Since joining the Pop Mart family in 2019 and being sold as a product, the "THE MONSTERS" series featuring Labubu has a total of 300 different colors, shapes and sizes. Multiple theme series have also been launched, such as "Big into Energy", "Have a Seat", "Exciting Macaron" and "Fall in Wild", etc. These doll pendants are usually sold in the form of blind boxes. In simple terms, each one is sealed and the contents remain a mystery until the consumer purchases and opens it. Just looking at the product category "Vinyl Plush Pendant Blind Box", each different series has a corresponding number of items with a specific theme, appearance and size. To be more specific, a "Whole Box" of a certain theme consists of 6 to 14 basic styles + 1 secret edition. The height (excluding the lanyard) is usually between 10.5 cm and 17 cm. Additionally, each Labubu has a specific name, such as LOVE, LUCK, LOYALTY, and there are hundreds of such names. The vinyl material face is attached to the body of the plush toy, along with its distinctive design of big eyes, pointed rabbit ears, and a mischievous grin revealing nine teeth. This creates an "scary cute" contrast aesthetic, which is highly recognizable visually.

2.1.2 Price

Price refers to the value that a company assigns to its products. According to the price data collected from the official website of Pop Mart, the prices of Labubu's Vinyl Plush items vary. The single purchase items are generally more expensive than the limited edition box items, and there is a significant price difference between the two. The single purchase version of Labubu Vinyl Plush, such as the ANGEL IN CLOUDS Vinyl Face Doll, costs approximately CNY (China Yuan) 1299, while the single purchase price of Time to Chill is about CNY 399. In contrast, the box-type Vinyl Plush items, such as The Monsters: Have a Seat series, have a retail price ranging from CNY 99. The main reason for this difference is that box items are mass-produced and sold randomly, targeting an affordable price point and relying on the psychological drivers of "extracting surprises" and "collecting sets". Therefore, their pricing is lower. On the other hand, single purchase items are usually limited editions or designer collaborations, with more complex materials and craftsmanship, and higher artistic and collectible value. Thus, their pricing is significantly higher. Meanwhile, although the retail price of the box items is low, rare characters can be sold for hundreds of dollars on the secondary market. While single purchase high-end items lock in the collection audience through premium pricing during the retail stage. This reflects Pop Mart's pricing stratification strategy.

2.1.3 Place

The Place is where the company sells its products. In China, the "sales locations" of Labubu are entirely within a highly integrated multi-channel network. Pop Mart has hundreds of physical stores in major cities, which are usually located in shopping centers with high foot traffic. At the same time, thousands of vending machines have been deployed at transportation hubs and retail centers, providing consumers with convenient and impulsive purchasing opportunities. At the same time, the online channel also plays an indispensable role. Pop Mart's official application, official website, and flagship stores on China's mainstream platforms such as JD, Douyin and Tmall offer services for customers to order and have the goods delivered to their homes or pick up in-store after placing an order. In addition to the retail business, a unique Popland experience space has also been opened in Beijing, featuring theme amusement facilities such as Labubu's Adventure Forest, allowing fans to not only select their favorite products but also immerse themselves in the brand's IP culture while doing so [4].

In terms of global expansion, Pop Mart has entered 30 countries and regions, with 550 physical stores and 2,500 robot stores worldwide. It also operates multiple cross-border e-commerce platforms such as Amazon, Shopee and Lazada, including social e-commerce channels like TikTok Shop, and has covered consumers in 90 countries with its brand [5].

2.1.4 Promotion

A promotional activity usually refers to the measures taken to attract customers, including advertising, sales promotion and internet marketing, etc. The promotion of Labubu by Pop Mart can be analyzed from the perspective of consumer psychology and behavior. It mainly utilizes three mechanisms: "scarcity, surprise, and identity recognition" to drive consumers to make purchases. Firstly, the blind box mechanism creates an "unexpected" surprise. Consumers cannot know the specific style before opening the box. This psychological stimulation similar to gambling prompts them to repeatedly purchase in order to obtain hidden editions or favorite characters. Secondly, limited release and Drop culture strengthen the "scarcity effect", making consumers worry about missing a limited opportunity and never being able to obtain it again, thereby accelerating their decision-making for purchase. Finally, Pop Mart strengthens social recognition and identity symbols through celebrities, social media, and user-generated content. Consumers not only purchase the product itself but also acquire a sense of belonging that aligns with "trend culture".

What is even more significant is that one of the main driving factors behind Labubu's sudden popularity is the influence of celebrities. The celebrity effect refers to the impact that celebrities have on consumers' attitudes and purchasing behaviors through endorsements, exposure, and social media influence. Celebrity endorsements can attract a large amount of public attention, stimulate consumption, and influence the decisions of young audiences, sometimes even leading to irrational purchases [6]. Many celebrities and influencers have showcased the Labubu character, thereby increasing its popularity and appeal among young consumers. This indicates that celebrities play a crucial role in connecting cultural symbols with the consumer market. In April 2024, a member of the globally renowned female group BLACKPINK -- Lisa, showcased her Labubu pendants on Instagram, which quickly spread among her over 100 million followers [7]. This action attracted extensive media coverage and sparked intense interest among consumers. Since then, the related topic of Labubu has also rapidly gained popularity on various social media platforms, with many celebrities and influencers joining the trend, making "luxurious bags with Labubu pendants" a popular trend among the younger generation.

2.2. AIDA Marketing Models

After completing the 4Ps analysis, it is still necessary to further understand the psychological transformation process of consumers from cognition to purchase. The AIDA model developed in the late 19th century can complement this perspective [8]. This is a classic framework of effect levels, which explains consumers' decisions through four consecutive stages: attention, interest, desire, and action. It reveals how Pop Mart guides consumers' behavior.

2.2.1 Attention

Attention refers to the process of attracting consumers' attention through promotional information or creative stimuli. When Pop Mart was trying to attract the attention of consumers, it utilized the personality trait of "novelty-seeking", which is characterized by individuals' tendency to pursue new experiences, explore unfamiliar stimuli, and exhibit higher behavioral activity when facing new environments [9]. It is closely related to the dopamine-related reward system, which strengthens behaviors driven by curiosity and makes individuals inclined to take risks or engage in exploratory consumption. In the context of consumer behavior, the rapid popularity of Bubblemate's Labubu can be regarded as an application of the novelty-seeking tendency. Firstly, Pop Mart's offline stores and vending machines have highly saturated and highly recognizable store decoration and product packaging designs, creating a visual impact in public spaces and quickly capturing the attention of potential consumers. The wide variety of products makes customers think "Even if I don't buy it, I'll go in to have a look".

Secondly, through diversified communication methods and the ingenious use of the lottery box mechanism as well as continuous role redesign, the company stimulates consumers' innate desire for novelty. By providing unpredictable results and unique collection versions, Labubu activates customers' "uncertainty" and "surprise" in their exploration, as well as the psychological activities of "frustration" of not getting the preferred style and even "trying again". This psychological mechanism explains why consumers repeatedly purchase Labubu products, and also indicates that novelty-seeking has become an important driving force for its viral market success.

2.2.2 Interest

The interest is on attracting consumers by providing relevant information and highlighting the benefits of the product or service. The phenomenon of Labubu's huge popularity can be explained by the fan economy. The fan economy is an economic model centered around the fan community, and its value creation relies on the fans' emotional investment, consumption behavior, and group identification. Unlike traditional consumption, the fan economy emphasizes the deep emotional connection between fans and their idols, brands, or IP. Fans are not only purchasers of products but also participants in community activities, disseminators of cultural symbols, and co-creators of value [10]. This unique interactive relationship makes fans both consumers and drivers, thus forming a sustainable and circular economic model of benefits.

First of all, the character of Labubu is endowed with the personality traits of "having an unusual appearance but a kind heart". Pop Mart also echoed this personality through its unique artistic design featuring "a funny face but a soft body". This conveyed the concept of "one should not judge a person by their appearance" and resonated emotionally with the fans. For many fans, Labubu is not just a collectible toy, but also a cultural symbol that represents individuality and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, Labubu's initial popularity was largely attributed to the star effect, but the sustained popularity of this trend does not solely depend on the star's signature products. The star effect and the fan economy are logically related. Under the influence of the star, fans transform their admiration for the idol into concrete actions, such as purchasing the same products and jointly spreading the cultural value of Labubu on social media and communities. Thus, it can be seen that the star effect is the trigger point, while the fan economy is the internal mechanism that drives the continuous expansion and long-term maintenance of the Labubu craze.

2.2.3 Desire

Desire is the preference that marketers stimulate in consumers, transforming interest into the desire to possess. Pop Mart has aroused the desires of many consumers through the strategy of "hunger marketing". Hunger marketing is a marketing tactic that deliberately creates a sense of scarcity of products to stimulate consumers' purchasing desires. Its core lies in making consumers believe that the products are "in short supply" or "rare and fleeting", thereby triggering a strong sense of anticipation and the emotion of "fear of missing out" (FOMO). Even though this scarcity is sometimes artificially created, it can significantly enhance the product's appeal and sales volume [11]. Pop Mart often releases limited edition, collaboration editions, or regional limited editions, making some styles of Labubu difficult to obtain. Fans are further stimulated to accumulate and engage in profitable resale during successive rounds of purchasing. This artificially created scarcity not only drives the popularity of Labubu in the primary market but also rapidly amplifies its value in the secondary market. Prices often double or even multiply, and they are sold on second-hand platforms, fully demonstrating the ability of hunger marketing to extend the product's popularity and commercial value.

2.2.4 Action

Finally, actions represent the behavioral responses of consumers. Pop Mart drives consumers' actions through convenient shopping experiences and diverse purchasing channels. The popularity of Labubu led to a shortage of its limited-edition box products most of the time. Therefore, Pop Mart will replenish the stock in offline stores, vending machines, online e-commerce platforms and cross-border channels from time to time to allow consumers with purchase intentions to "seize the opportunity" to make purchases. Pop Mart also has a points system. Purchasing any product can earn points, which can be used to offset the amount at any time in the future, enabling consumers not only to complete a single purchase but also gradually form a continuous consumption habit.

3. Potential Risk of Labubu Trend

After analyzing with the 4Ps and AIDA models, it was understood that the unique product design, precise market positioning, and in-depth understanding of consumer psychology of Labubu were among the various factors contributing to its unexpected popularity. However, any successful marketing and consumption phenomenon often comes with potential risks. When popularity and demand grow rapidly, issues such as irrational consumption patterns, market bubble trends, and imbalance between supply and demand may arise. Thus, following a comprehensive analysis of the underlying factors contributing to its success, it is equally important to critically investigate the potential risks and challenges that Labubu might face.

3.1. Irrational Consumption Behavioral

In the current Labubu craze, the risks associated with irrational consumption behavior accompanying the blind box market have also expanded. This behavior not only manifests in excessive purchasing and impulsive decisions, but also involves continuously investing funds due to "gamblers' fallacy" and falling into the sunk cost trap. For instance, many consumers mistakenly believe that "the more you buy, the more likely you are to draw the hidden item", so they continuously increase their spending under the dual influence of short-term pleasure and scarcity promotion. Or, after not getting their favorite style, they feel frustrated and then purchase with the mindset of "try again". In the context of Labubu, consumers, on the one hand, seek the "instant opening" pleasure, while on the other hand, the scarcity of the items and the speculation in the secondary market amplify this, leading to irrational impulses that may result in overspending. This is "instant gratification and the gambler's fallacy both positively drive irrational consumption behavior" [12]. The ultimate outcome is that short-term satisfaction is exchanged for long-term regret: consumers pursue pleasure in the craze, but when they calm down and see a pile of "trophies", they realize that the financial investment is far from matching the emotional return, leaving only regret and pressure. Thus, it can be seen that the risks brought by the Labubu craze are not limited to short-term financial burdens, but may also shape an unhealthy consumption culture that relies on instant gratification and is easily manipulated by scarcity over the long term.

3.2. Secondary Market

The long-term supply from Labubu's official channels failed to meet the huge demand, leading to irrational consumption behavior and the rapid development of the second-hand market. As a trendy toy box, Labubu has a limited release quantity, and some styles are rare and hidden editions. Ordinary consumers often face the dilemma of "not being able to get them" when purchasing at the retail price. At the same time, the influence of social media and celebrity effects has continuously amplified the public's desire for collection and the tendency to show off, motivating more people to want to "must-have" specific styles or rare versions to keep up with the current trend. Therefore, for consumers who urgently want to obtain such items and some "investment buyers" who expect the future value to continue to rise and are willing to bear the premium cost, the second-hand market is the only important way for them to obtain the desired styles. In the second-hand market, consumers can resell, exchange or trade the items they have obtained from the manufacturer for other consumers after purchasing the collectible boxes [13]. When the demand for second-hand goods in Labubu is huge, some "scalpers" will emerge to take advantage of the situation. They will stockpile, hire people to queue, and even use automated programs to purchase rare or popular styles in large quantities during the official release, and then resell them at a high price in the secondary market. This operation directly raises the purchase threshold for ordinary consumers, making it more difficult for those who really want to collect to buy Labubu at the retail price. They can only be forced to accept the second-hand market price after the scalpers raise the price. In fact, the official price of Labubu is already at the edge of what consumers can afford. Consumers who haven't been able to get the styles they like in Labubu can only "force themselves" to buy the designated premium styles in the second-hand market; and some rare or limited edition Labubu items have been inflated to several thousand or even tens of thousands of CNY. The act of exploiting consumers' fondness for Labubu to make huge profits is quite frustrating. This kind of speculative behavior by scalpers is also an important reason for the persistently high prices of second-hand goods.

3.3. Pirated products

Due to the huge market demand and the interference from the second-hand market, a large number of counterfeit products called "Lafufu" have emerged in the market. According to the warning from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, "Lafufu" as a counterfeit product poses serious potential risks. Fake goods often have not undergone any formal safety tests or certifications, so there is no guarantee that the materials do not contain harmful chemical components, such as inferior dyes and plastics, which may cause long-term harm to the health of users. These dolls are usually small in size and have poor manufacturing quality. Due to the low quality of the materials, the counterfeit products are prone to cracking or falling off parts during use. If these fragments are accidentally swallowed by children, it will cause airway obstruction and pose a serious risk of suffocation [14]. More importantly, the appearance of "Lafufu" is extremely similar to that of the genuine Labubu. In the second-hand market and non-formal channels, it is difficult to distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit. Consumers may unknowingly purchase dangerous products. Therefore, the potential risks of “Laufufu” extend beyond physical harm, including consumer fraud and safety hazards, which require the attention of collectors and ordinary consumers alike.

4. Sustainability strategies

After analyzing the potential risks of the Labubu craze, the next step will be to explore its sustainable development path. This topic involves not only the shaping of values at the consumer level, but also the strategic measures taken by enterprises in improving sales mode, AI technology preventionl and social responsibility promotion.

4.1. Individual Level

In order to enable Labubu to achieve long-term development, at the consumer level, a firm consumer value system should be established. Consumer values refer to the relatively stable judgment criteria held by individuals during the consumption process, which can determine how consumers evaluate the significance of products or services to themselves and weigh the necessity of consumption. In the realm of consumer culture, power serves as a pivotal social force that shapes individuals' perceptions of control, social comparison dynamics, and their quest for validation, ultimately dictating their values and priorities. However, power does not always come from people, it can also be found in things like markets and the media. Within the "Labubu craze," the combination of market hype, fake scarcity, and social media dynamics works as an externalized system of power that subtly influences and guides how consumers make choices [15]. When consumers allow these forces to determine their choices, they may lose their autonomy and fall into irrational consumption behaviors. Therefore, consumers must resist the influence of these external pressures. When purchasing blind box products, they should adjust their expectations by actively checking the extremely low probability indicated on the packaging for the hidden items. When making purchasing decisions, one should also consider one's own circumstances and maintain a clear and rational value orientation. Avoid the situation where "the more you consume, the more you want", and thus fall into a cycle of blind purchasing.

4.2. Enterprise Level

The development of modernist culture exhibits the characteristics of a "speculative bubble", which means that the value of a commodity expands under the promotion of the system and the market, and then depreciates due to changes in trends [16]. Similarly, the Labubu craze can also be regarded as a speculative bubble in the cultural commodity market. Excessive scarcity often triggers speculative bubbles in the secondary market, ultimately damaging consumer trust and the long-term value of the brand. To prevent Labubu from being "famous only for a short time", Pop Mart played a decisive role.

4.2.1 Sales Mode

First of all, to reduce extreme resale premiums and prevent the actions of speculative resellers to protect the willingness of genuine collectors to participate in the market, Pop Mart can strategically increase product supply to ensure that Labubu can balance market demand and alleviate speculative fluctuations. On the other hand, in order to promote the sustainable development of Labubu, Pop Mart can adopt a new and more structured sales policy: time-limited promotions, in order to balance market demand with the long-term value of the brand. It usually refers to a promotional activity that is only valid within a limited or pre-defined time window. Time-limited promotions can effectively accelerate consumers' purchase decisions through time pressure, even when there is no scarcity of quantity [17]. Based on this theory, in practice, Pop Mart can set a three-day pre-sale mechanism for limited edition or co-branded products on its official website. During this period, the account associated with each mobile phone number can only make one order operation, and the pre-sale price is slightly lower than the regular price. After the pre-sale period ends, the products will resume the previous rush purchase model and normal prices, and start the offline pickup or mail delivery process. This "first time-limited then quantity-limited" mixed model can not only utilize the purchase acceleration effect brought by time limitation but also effectively curb scalpers' hoarding and excessive speculation in the secondary market, thereby enhancing consumers' sense of fairness and satisfaction, and ultimately helping Pop Mart maintain its popularity while achieving long-term sustainable development of the brand. Thus, when consumers can easily purchase the products they like from Laphubu, the behavior of irrational consumption will decrease. The counterfeit products "Lafufu", which infringe on intellectual property rights and appear in the second-hand market or non-official channels, will naturally decrease as well. While protecting the rights and interests of consumers, it also protects the brand's own copyright.

4.2.2 AI Technology Prevention

Pop Mart can also introduce artificial intelligence (AI) technology as a defense tool to control the scalpers who use robots to snatch limited edition Labubu for high-price resale. Scalpers usually use cloud mobile devices (with a capacity of up to 100,000+ QPS) or script tools to batch purchase. In simple terms, ordinary users click at most a few times per second, while scalpers can click up to tens of thousands of times per second, causing the page to crash or the inventory to be sold out instantly [18]. To address this risk, Pop Mart can deploy an AI-based monitoring system to analyze user behavior in real time. If the system detects an abnormal request path, such as skipping the addition to the cart and directly placing an order, or the order placement time being far below the normal range, it will be judged as abnormal traffic. In addition, AI can also enhance identity verification mechanisms such as verification codes through adaptive learning models, thereby continuously evolving to counter new robot strategies.

After the automation operations are blocked, scalpers will start to hire real people through crowdsourcing platforms, or disguise themselves as ordinary users and control dozens of real mobile phones simultaneously using one computer to evade technical protection. AI detection technology can assess risks from multiple aspects, such as identifying abnormal terminals like group control devices; analyzing the operations of newly registered accounts to identify suspicious accounts; and judging whether the operation process is reasonable, such as whether there are abnormal behaviors like "instant order placement" and "repeated failure retry". This forward-looking approach to the use of AI not only ensures that ordinary consumers have equal access to Labubu products, but also enhances Labubu's competitive edge and demonstrates the company's sense of responsibility in maintaining the sustainable development of Labubu.

4.2.3 Social Responsibility Promotion

Pop Mart should reduce the emphasis on highlighting the scarcity features of the limited edition products of Labubu in its online marketing campaigns, and deliberately control the supply quantity to create a situation where the supply is lower than the demand, thereby triggering consumers' anxiety and prompting them to make purchases. The sustainable development of the brand not only relies on short-term stimulating effects, but also depends on maintaining accessibility and participation for mainstream consumers. Instead of over-hyping, Pop Mart should focus on more meaningful aspects regarding the public opinion risks of Labubu. These topics could include what innovative designs the new series will have, or aspects related to social responsibility, such as the next Labubu model will use environmentally friendly materials, or launching a charity series called "Smile With Labubu", donating a portion of the series' proceeds to impoverished children, etc. While alleviating consumers' anxiety, creating a positive image for Labubu is an important step in extending the lifecycle of Labubu as a cultural and commercial symbol.

5. Conclusion

In order to analyze how Labubu has rapidly evolved from a niche art toy into a global cultural phenomenon, this paper employs the marketing model of the 4P and AIDA framework for analysis. However, promotional activities based on scarcity, the uncertainty of limited edition boxes, and the promotion of the fan economy also bring significant risks, including irrational consumption, speculative secondary markets, and the proliferation of counterfeit products. To ensure consumer trust and develop Labubu's long-term brand value, a balanced approach is needed. At the consumer level, cultivating rational values can reduce impulsive behavior; while at the enterprise level, Pop Mart must adopt diverse strategies, such as improving sales mechanisms, implementing artificial intelligence-based anti-buying systems, and undertaking social responsibility initiatives. By integrating innovation with responsibility, the proposed strategy aims to promote the sustainable development of the Labubu product line. Moreover, this study seeks to provide valuable insights for other similar products or services that are committed to long-term sustainability.

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