

Labubu Hysteria in Emerging Markets Consumer Behavior and Symbolic Consumption in the Algerian Context

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Abstract:

The research introduces the socio-economic mechanics behind contemporary "Art Toy" phenomena by analyzing the viral trajectory of Labubu. Initially conceived in 2015 within artist Kasing Lung's *The Monsters* comic series and rooted in Scandinavian folklore, the character achieved worldwide commercial success via a strategic collaboration with Pop Mart. This partnership successfully converted the intellectual property into a highly financialized collectible, with standard models priced between \$13 and \$16, and scarce, limited editions commanding up to \$1,000 on secondary markets. By tracking how international celebrities have integrated the doll into luxury fashion as a marker of prestige and distinction, this paper illustrates the cross-cultural transfer of consumer trends. Specifically, the research evaluates how this hyper-fixation manifests in the Algerian market, analyzing its rapid adoption as a viral trending topic fueled by prominent local celebrities. **Keywords:** the Labubu craze, Art Toys, Chinese company Pop Mart. Cross-Cultural Consumer Trends.

JEL Classification: M31, D11, Z13, G10

Introduction

The plush doll "Labubu," produced by the Chinese company Pop Mart, has become a global phenomenon after capturing the attention of millions across social media platforms. This small character—resembling a creature with sharp teeth and pointed ears—did not emerge overnight into the spotlight; rather, it is the result of years of development and promotion. According to the designer's original narratives, Labubu is a female fairy distinguished by unconventional traits, most notably the absence of a tail, which sets her apart from the majority of other mythical beings.

Labubu is characterized by her distinctive features: large eyes, pointed ears, serrated teeth, and a seemingly grumpy facial expression. She is also known for her nine jagged teeth, prominent ears, and mischievous facial expressions that vary from one design to another, further enhancing her appeal among doll collectors and admirers of unconventional art. The character draws its inspiration from Scandinavian mythology.

The character of Labubu and its mysterious universe were created by the artist Kasing Lung (born in 1972 in Hong Kong, China) in 2015. Lung moved with his family to the Netherlands during his childhood, and as he grew older, he developed a deep interest in fairies and creatures from Scandinavian folklore. This fascination has continued to shape his artistic work to this day.

The creation of Labubu by artist Kasing Lung traces back to an illustrated series centered on forest-dwelling entities inspired by Northern European legends. Among this group of mythical dwarves, Labubu stands out as the most prominent figure, drawing its conceptual roots from chthonic characters found in European myths. Although the character debuted in the 'Puka' storybook, it gained global physical form in 2019 through a strategic partnership with Pop Mart. Etymologically, 'Puka' (or Pooka) is derived from Celtic traditions, where it represents a versatile sprite capable of manifesting as different animals. These legendary spirits are depicted as ambiguous figures in Irish and English folklore—alternating between guiding protectors and mischievous tricksters who interfere with travelers and harvests.

In light of the above, this leads us to our central research question: **What marketing strategy did Pop Mart adopt to promote the Labubu doll?**

Based on the main research question, several subsidiary questions can be formulated as follows:

- How did Pop Mart manage to differentiate itself and stand out among a large number of pop-culture companies, achieving significant success?
- What factors contributed to the successful spread and popularity of the Labubu doll?
- What marketing strategies were adopted by Pop Mart, a leading company in the toy industry?
- What is the target market of Pop Mart as a leading company in the toy industry?

• General Discussion

Researching the reasons behind the spread of the Labubu doll and its transformation into a global phenomenon that has captured the attention of millions across social media reveals several key factors, the most important of which are as follows:

• Collaboration with Pop Mart, a Leading Company in the Toy Industry

Established in Beijing in 2010, Pop Mart has evolved into a dominant force within the cultural and entertainment landscape. The organization operates a comprehensive ecosystem designed for intellectual property (IP) oversight and the nurturing of creative talent, providing a bridge for international artists to transition their concepts into commercial ventures. By prioritizing the discovery of global design innovators, the firm plays a pivotal role in the genesis of modern cultural icons. Its success is anchored in a sophisticated IP development framework that ensures its character portfolio remains synchronized with evolving societal trends and consumer aesthetics."

Throughout the last ten years, Pop Mart has successfully engineered an expansive ecosystem that effectively governs every phase of the designer toy industry's value chain. Rather than merely manufacturing products, the organization has pivoted towards a multi-faceted strategy that prioritizes the acquisition of international creative talent and the strategic commercialization of intellectual properties (IPs). This approach is not limited to market expansion but extends to

cultivating a dedicated consumer base and fostering a niche 'pop toy' cultural movement through targeted investments in avant-garde creative ventures. The firm's market dominance is further solidified by its portfolio of globally recognized IPs—most notably Molly, Skullpanda, Dimoo, Hirono, and The Monsters. By transforming these artistic concepts into tangible consumer goods and diverse derivatives, Pop Mart has positioned itself as a primary architect of contemporary lifestyle and cultural trends. .

By mid-2022, Pop Mart's physical infrastructure in China had scaled significantly, reaching over 300 retail locations and nearly 2,000 automated 'Roboshops.' This domestic saturation served as a springboard for a broader international trajectory that commenced in 2018. The company's global outreach has since penetrated 23 distinct territories, establishing a strategic presence in key Asian markets like Singapore and South Korea, while simultaneously gaining a foothold in Western economies, including the UK and the United States. Beyond traditional storefronts, Pop Mart has capitalized on digital transformation by integrating an independent web presence with various cross-border e-commerce frameworks. This hybrid distribution model—blending automated vending, flagship physical stores, and a robust digital ecosystem—has been instrumental in capturing the intensifying global appetite for its designer toy portfolio.

Distinguished by its innovative approach to designer toys and creative media, Pop Mart has solidified its status as a preeminent global authority in intellectual property management. More than just a retail entity, the company defines itself as an emerging vanguard in the pop culture sector, driven by a philosophy of integrating artistic inspiration into the fabric of daily life through immersive experiences. Its operational architecture is notably diverse, encompassing everything from IP development and niche toy manufacturing to the management of theme parks and digital entertainment ventures. Today, Pop Mart's physical footprint is extensive, boasting a network of 500+ storefronts across 30 territories, supplemented by a massive fleet of over 2,300 automated 'Roboshops' and a sophisticated online sales infrastructure. Central to its competitive advantage is its curated stable of international artists, which has yielded a portfolio of globally resonant characters—such as Skullpanda, Molly, Hirono, and The Monsters—that continue to shape contemporary consumer aesthetics.

- **POP MART's Vision and Mission**

According to formal disclosures on its official corporate platform, POP MART defines its mission as a commitment to sparking global passion and cultivating collective joy. Beyond its role as a commercial brand, the company envisions itself as an expansive "creative universe." This perspective underscores a strategic marketing mission designed to integrate designer toys into the daily lifestyle of the younger generation, shifting their perception from mere ornaments to essential cultural artifacts.:

- To become the world's leading global brand in the art toy industry by combining artistic creativity with marketing innovation.
- To promote Chinese creative culture and make it accessible, appealing, and relevant on a global scale.
- To transform art toy collecting from a simple hobby into an emotional and artistic experience that reflects contemporary lifestyles.

The strategic vision of POP MART can be deconstructed through the following core pillars (Pop Mart, 2025):

- **Industry Leadership:** Striving to establish a preeminent global position within the art toy sector by synthesizing artistic ingenuity with disruptive marketing strategies.
- **Cultural Diplomacy:** Elevating Chinese creative heritage to a global scale, ensuring it remains accessible, aesthetically appealing, and culturally relevant to an international audience.
- **Experiential Transformation:** Redefining the act of collecting from a passive pastime into an emotionally-charged artistic engagement that mirrors contemporary social identities.

Regarding its operational marketing mission, POP MART concentrates on several key objectives:

- **The Democratization of Art:** Operating under the "Art Toys for Everyone" philosophy to dismantle elitist barriers and make designer collectibles relatable to a diverse, mainstream audience.
- **Psychological Engagement:** Utilizing the "blind box" mechanism to leverage the element of anticipation, thereby creating a heightened sense of excitement and discovery for the consumer.
- **Identity Branding:** Positioning flagship characters like Molly or Labubu as symbols of individual distinction and cultural fashion, rather than mere transactional commodities.
- **Multichannel Synergy:** Engaging digital-native generations through strategic social media campaigns, high-profile celebrity alliances, and immersive physical retail environments, including its "ROBOSHOP" automated network.

In conclusion, POP MART's strategy aims to elevate ordinary consumer products into potent cultural symbols that express personal identity and modern social patterns, all while maintaining their artistic integrity. It is evident that while the company's vision is to become a global industry icon, its marketing essence lies in providing a unique, surprise-driven experience. Ultimately, POP MART does not just distribute toys; it facilitates a cultural experience that grants the modern consumer a profound sense of identity and prestige.

• **IP Incubation and Operation**

The synergistic relationship between intellectual property (IP) governance and creative innovation serves as the primary catalyst for Pop Mart's long-term strategic expansion. Positioned as a premier global hub for designer toy IPs, the organization prioritizes the identification of emerging artistic talent on an international scale. By utilizing its sophisticated operational ecosystem, the company has successfully transitioned various conceptual designs into globally recognized cultural icons. Concurrently, Pop Mart has intensified its commitment to design diversification, ensuring that its product portfolio evolves to satisfy the increasingly fragmented demands of a global fan base, thereby enhancing consumer engagement through novelty and artistic surprise.

To maximize the commercial longevity of its portfolio, Pop Mart employs a nuanced, differentiated operational framework tailored to the specific artistic identity of each individual IP. This tailored approach not only amplifies brand visibility but also ensures sustained market relevance and commercial viability. The efficacy of these strategies is reflected in the company's financial performance; notably, the interim fiscal report for the period ending July 30, 2025, revealed a significant milestone. During the first half of that year, thirteen distinct artist-led IPs each

surpassed the RMB 100 million revenue threshold, demonstrating the immense economic scale of the company's curated character roster. Among these leading IPs..."

A detailed analysis of individual IP performance underscores the significant market dominance of specific character lines within the company's portfolio. Leading the revenue stream is **THE MONSTERS**, which achieved a remarkable financial milestone of RMB 4,814.0 million. This is followed by a group of high-performing IPs that have consistently crossed the billion-dollar threshold; **MOLLY** secured RMB 1,357.2 million, while **SKULLPANDA** and **CRYBABY** demonstrated near-equivalent market strength with revenues of RMB 1,220.0 million and RMB 1,218.2 million, respectively. Additionally, the **DIMOO** series maintained its strong commercial relevance, contributing a substantial RMB 1,105.1 million to the overall fiscal performance. Collectively, these figures illustrate not only the immense scale of Pop Mart's top-tier IPs but also the balanced distribution of consumer demand across its diverse creative offerings

Within the thematic framework of 'The Monsters' universe, Labubu has emerged as a cornerstone IP, achieving a high degree of global cultural resonance. This surge in international prominence is largely attributed to its idiosyncratic artistic design, which differentiates it from conventional mass-market toys. Consequently, Labubu has transitioned from a niche creative concept into one of the most commercially coveted intellectual properties in the contemporary designer toy landscape, driving significant consumer demand and brand loyalty across diverse global markets. .

The first half of 2025 marked a strategic milestone for Pop Mart as it commemorated the tenth anniversary of 'The Monsters.' Through rigorous IP lifecycle management and iterative design innovation, the company introduced the third iteration of the Labubu Vinyl Plush collection, marketed as the 'Big into Energy' series. This launch transcended standard commercial releases, evolving into a cross-border cultural trend that garnered significant international traction. Parallel to this, Pop Mart diversified its aesthetic repertoire with the 'Wacky Mart' mini-figure line, specifically through the 'Almost Hidden' sub-series. This particular release was designed to emphasize the nuanced personality traits of Labubu, fostering a stronger emotional connection with the global fan base by blending authentic character storytelling with contemporary design aesthetics. .

2- Psychological Drivers behind the Popularity of the Labubu Toy

2-1- The Interplay of Nostalgia and Self-Identity in Contemporary Consumption

Consumption practices frequently transcend mere material acquisition, intersecting instead with profound psychological undercurrents that reposition a product as a symbolic vessel of identity and social affiliation. The meteoric rise of certain consumer phenomena, such as the Labubu plush toy, defies simplistic market explanations, requiring instead a multidisciplinary analysis of modern behavior. Labubu serves as a quintessential case study in how consumption serves as a conduit for internal psychological needs—specifically through the mobilization of nostalgia, the pursuit of tactile comfort, and the increasingly prevalent drive for 'psychological escapism' within hyper-digitalized societies. For the contemporary consumer, these artifacts function as emotional anchors, bridging the gap between childhood sentiments and the complexities of adult identity. .

In the context of Labubu, the transition from acquisition to curation serves as a fundamental mechanism for **identity construction** and the consolidation of social cohesion. Ownership transcends the physical realm, acting as a definitive marker of membership within a sophisticated

global community of collectors. Consequently, the act of consumption is redefined not as a mere material transaction, but as a profound **psycho-cultural trajectory**. This process elevates Labubu from a utilitarian object into a potent semiotic symbol, facilitating deep emotional attachment and providing a medium through which the contemporary individual can articulate their unique sense of self within a shared global aesthetic.

2-2- The Role of Childhood Toys in Psychological and Cultural Expression Among Adults

"The burgeoning fascination with Labubu serves as a poignant manifestation of adult nostalgia, where the toy's intrinsic value is amplified by its resonance with formative childhood memories. Traditionally, juvenile playthings were conceptualized as utilitarian tools for socialization and cognitive development, mirroring the cultural zeitgeist of their time. However, within the adult psyche, these objects undergo a semiotic transformation. No longer confined to developmental milestones, they are repurposed as sophisticated instruments for **identity negotiation, emotional regulation, and cultural articulation**. In this context, Labubu transcends its physical form to become a symbolic repository of personal history—an 'emotional anchor' that facilitates a nostalgic return to perceived environments of safety and belonging. By bridging the temporal gap between the simplicity of the past and the complexities of adulthood, these artifacts provide a sense of **psychological continuity** in a rapidly changing world."

ultimately, this nostalgic resonance transmutes these artifacts into **affective objects**—entities imbued with high emotional charge that serve a vital psychological function in the modern era. For the contemporary adult, the curation of characters like Labubu acts as a sophisticated **coping mechanism** against systemic anxiety and the existential fragmentation of the digital age. These objects facilitate a form of **self-affirmation**, allowing individuals to reclaim a sense of continuity within their personal narrative. Furthermore, this attachment extends beyond the individual, acting as a catalyst for **social cohesion**; through shared cultural signifiers, these toys foster communal bonds, creating a 'semiotic shorthand' that connects collectors across diverse geographical and social .

3- The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Spread of the Labubu Toy and the Obsession with Collecting It

The genesis of Labubu traces back to 2015, emerging from the narrative illustrations of Kasing Lung as a literary figure. However, its trajectory underwent a **paradigm shift** in 2019, when Pop Mart's strategic intervention re-engineered the character into a high-value collectible asset. While the formative period (2015–2018) was characterized by a juvenile market focus, a significant **demographic migration** soon followed; Labubu began to resonate with a more affluent adult audience driven by aesthetic novelty and speculative investment. This transition served as the cornerstone for its subsequent global scalability. This momentum was further catalyzed by the global lockdowns of 2020–2021. The pandemic-induced shift toward **domestic-centric gratification** and 'indoor-hobbyism' acted as a psychological multiplier, transforming Labubu from a niche artistic interest into a pervasive cultural obsession. The drivers of this phenomenon can be categorized into the following core dimensions

3-1- Crisis-Induced Consumption: The Domestic Pivot and Collective Solace

The global lockdowns of 2020–2021 imposed unprecedented constraints on physical mobility, fundamentally reshaping the landscape of social interaction. This period of **forced domesticity** disrupted traditional interpersonal networks, precipitating a widespread sense of social alienation and loneliness. Within this context, consumption patterns shifted toward **home-centric emotional gratification**, where the act of collecting—specifically of figures like Labubu—emerged as a strategic response to isolation. Labubu’s intricate design and 'collectibility' provided a tactile and visual anchor in a world of digital fatigue, offering consumers a form of **therapeutic escapism**. By transforming the home environment into a curated space of aesthetic interest, Labubu served as more than just a hobby; it became a psychological buffer against the pervasive anxieties of the pandemic era.

- **Escapism and the Anti-Perfectionist Paradigm**

Escalation of systemic stress and existential anxiety—fueled by public health uncertainties—repositioned Labubu as a sophisticated instrument of **psychological escapism**. Beyond mere amusement, the toy functions as a 'transitional object' that facilitates a regressive return to the perceived safety of childhood, providing a sensory sanctuary against adult pressures.

While Labubu’s initial traction was geographically concentrated within China, its global trajectory achieved a definitive breakthrough in the post-pandemic climate of late 2022. As noted by Ashley Dudarenok (founder of ChoZan), the post-crisis psyche in China was characterized by a profound craving for emotional liberation. Labubu emerged as the quintessential avatar for this sentiment; its design—a hybrid of **whimsical charm and calculated chaos**—offered an 'anti-perfectionist' narrative. By synthesizing innocence with a sense of disorder, Labubu resonated with a generation disillusioned by rigid societal standards, effectively validating the embrace of imperfection as a contemporary cultural ideal."

3-2-1 Revenge Consumption

Revenge consumption has emerged as a definitive socio-economic phenomenon in the post-lockdown era, reflecting a reactive behavioral shift following prolonged periods of systemic restriction. Empirical evidence, particularly from studies focused on the South Korean market, suggests that the surge in high-end acquisition is intrinsically linked to 'Compensatory Consumption' mechanisms. When individuals confront a perceived erosion of personal agency, heightened anxiety, or existential fear, the acquisition of premium or 'luxury' artifacts—including high-value art toys—serve as a critical instrument for restoring psychological equilibrium. In this framework, the act of purchasing transcends utility; it becomes a ritual of reclaiming control and reasserting status in a destabilized social environment. .

The seminal work of Shovmayanti and Medi Trilaksono (2024) underscores the primacy of affect in driving consumer choices, positioning the act of acquisition as a sophisticated instrument for **affect regulation**. Shopping, in this analytical framework, transcends its commercial utility to function as an intervention against transient emotional states such as boredom, psychological stress, and dysphoria. Furthermore, empirical data from a cross-regional survey—encompassing Australia, the United States, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia—reveal that **impulsive buying tendencies** are not universal but are deeply mediated by sociocultural variables and individual psychological predispositions. Consequently, 'retail therapy' is redefined as a nuanced **emotional regulation**

mechanism; it serves as a proactive strategy for attenuating negative affect while simultaneously augmenting positive emotional states through the symbolic and tactile experience of the purchase.

Consequently, retail therapy is frequently conceptualized through the acquisition of '**self-rewards**'—a deliberate consumption practice aimed at mood amelioration. While this behavior may be strategically motivated, it occasionally borders on impulsive or mindless consumption; nonetheless, it fundamentally represents a sophisticated form of **affective self-regulation**. Within this paradigm, the purchase of an object—such as a collectible Labubu—functions as a psychological intervention that facilitates a transition from negative to positive affect. Thus, rather than being a mere symptom of consumerism, retail therapy emerges as a proactive mechanism for maintaining emotional equilibrium, effectively enhancing the individual's sense of well-being through the symbolic value of the reward. .

Labubu serves as a quintessential case study of this behavioral shift, marking its evolution from a niche art toy into a potent signifier of '**luxury-lite**' **consumption** in the post-pandemic era. For many, particularly within the South Korean market, the acquisition of Labubu transcended the act of collection; it became a vehicle for **socio-psychological distinction** and a strategic effort to reclaim agency within an unpredictable global climate. The persistent demand—characterized by artificial scarcity and an inflated secondary market—underscores how symbolic consumption functions as a robust **compensatory mechanism**. In this context, securing a Labubu figure was less about the physical object and more about the performative act of **self-gratification**. It functioned as a ritualistic tool for identity restoration and a tangible manifestation of 'revenge consumption,' aligning perfectly with the therapeutic imperatives of contemporary retail practices.

3-2-2 Compensatory Control Theory (CCT)

During periods of systemic instability or profound life transitions, individuals frequently adopt diverse **coping mechanisms** to bolster psychological resilience and mitigate emotional dysphoria. This phenomenon was empirically elucidated in the 2023 study by Sanghee Kim and Hyo Jung (Julie) Chang, which scrutinized the behavioral shifts within the South Korean consumer landscape. Their findings indicate that the perceived lack of agency during the COVID-19 pandemic—characterized as a traumatic life event—triggered a significant surge in '**revenge consumption**' directed toward premium or luxury goods. Within this framework, high-end acquisition functions as a compensatory strategy; it serves as a symbolic attempt to **reclaim autonomy** and restore internal equilibrium in response to an external environment perceived as volatile and uncontrollable.

Compensatory Control Theory, developed within social psychology, explains how individuals cope with feelings of lost control in uncertain or stressful environments. The core premise of the theory is that when individuals perceive a lack of control over their lives or surroundings—due to illness, economic crisis, or a global pandemic—they seek alternative mechanisms to compensate for this deficit. Data were collected from participants through an online survey, all of whom had purchased luxury products during the pandemic period .

This compensation may occur through adherence to social or religious values, or through the consumption of specific products that provide a sense of control, status, or identity. In the field of consumer behavior, the theory explains why individuals turn to shopping—particularly luxury goods—as a means of restoring psychological security and a sense of control. The study's analysis demonstrated the mechanism of psychological compensation through luxury consumption,

revealing a therapeutic effect on self-esteem and subjective well-being. Further analysis also identified differences in revenge consumption behaviors related to income.

These findings underscore that when individuals experience a loss of control, anxiety, or fear, they often resort to luxury purchases as a means of restoring psychological equilibrium. The insights also provide guidance for luxury brands in developing strategies that support consumer well-being during stressful life events .

Within this context, the widespread post-pandemic popularity of certain collectible toys can be clearly understood. These toys have transitioned from simple collectibles into symbols of luxury consumption, embodying values of rarity, personal identity, and belonging to dedicated fan communities. Their soaring prices in secondary markets and continued demand despite economic pressures reflect their role as psychological mechanisms for compensating for lost control. Purchasing such items is not merely an act of consumption, but a form of self-reward that provides individuals with a sense of distinction, belonging, and perceived control in an environment dominated by uncertainty.

4- Other Psychological Factors

4.1 Retail Therapy

Can making purchasing decisions—even in simple situations—help reduce residual sadness? Research has examined whether making purchase decisions can contribute to reducing residual sadness by enhancing individuals' sense of control over their surrounding environment. Findings suggest that shopping may carry therapeutic psychological value, not merely because it provides new possessions, but because the act of making a purchasing decision enables individuals to regain a sense of control over the situation

Research has investigated whether having choices in shopping helps reduce residual sadness by restoring a sense of control. Earlier studies were primarily correlational, based on surveys and interviews, without experimentally testing whether shopping actually reduces distress. Experimental evidence supports the hypothesis that choice in shopping enhances perceived control and, consequently, reduces residual sadness. These results appear consistent regardless of whether shopping is virtual or physical, with the underlying mechanism interpreted as the restoration of personal control.

Notably, this effect does not apply to anger, as anger is associated with the perception that others are responsible for negative outcomes—a state that cannot be addressed merely by regaining situational control. Most prior research focused on how emotions influence decisions (emotion → decision-making). In contrast, subsequent research has examined how decisions can influence emotions (decision-making → emotion).

Accordingly, these findings suggest that “retail therapy” is not merely a social illusion or a form of distraction, but may have a psychologically grounded basis rooted in the mechanism of restoring control—albeit within certain limits (effective for sadness, not anger) .

A large-scale survey revealed that a substantial majority of adults reported making at least one discretionary purchase in the past month with the intention of improving their mood. Although not all respondents were financially able to afford such purchases, this finding highlights the

widespread prevalence of retail therapy as a means of emotional relief. The survey also indicated that this behavior occurs across different age groups, income levels, and genders.

5-Marketing Factors and Strategies Behind the Success of the Labubu Toy

5.1 *The Power of Emotional Branding Through Influencers and Reference Groups*

Isabel Bequer, in her article titled *“Labubu success demonstrates the benefits of the blind box business strategy”* published on the University of Florida’s news website, argues that Labubu’s success is evidence of the effectiveness of strategies built on mystery, experience, and scarcity. The product did not succeed merely because it is “cute,” but because it leveraged consumers’ psychological and social motivations.

The turning point began with the global star Lisa, a member of the group Blackpink and one of the most-followed personalities worldwide, particularly on Instagram. In April 2024, Lisa appeared with her Labubu doll, abruptly shifting the landscape. This appearance did not take place at an official press conference or as part of a corporate campaign, but rather in a spontaneous, personal context. She shared photos and stories on her accounts (Instagram Stories), through short videos showing the doll as a bag charm or as part of her personal collection. This uncontrived exposure ignited the phenomenon across social networks: Labubu was no longer just a cute toy, but an item endorsed—implicitly—by Lisa.

From that moment, the product’s rise to stardom began (Vanity Fair). With approximately 106 million followers on Instagram, Lisa ranks among the most-followed Asian celebrities globally. Any content she shares rapidly becomes viral, spreading across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and even traditional media. As a result, the product was no longer confined to a niche community of collectors, but suddenly reached millions of ordinary young people who had never heard of Labubu before. Lisa’s media influence transformed associated content into viral material across multiple platforms, enabling the product to reach vast new audiences and transcend its original niche to become part of global popular culture.

By 2025, Labubu had officially become a favored accessory among global celebrities, with major figures such as Cher, Dua Lipa, Kim Kardashian, Simone Biles, and Rihanna appearing with customized versions of Labubu at various events. According to *People magazine*, Madonna even celebrated her 67th birthday with a cake themed around Labubu.

In a 2024 field survey conducted in Ghana by Hamza Kaka, Faizan Alam, and Eva Lahuerta-Otero, involving 498 Instagram users who follow influencers, the findings showed that influencer credibility has a significant impact on parasocial interactions with followers. As a promotional tool, Instagram plays a crucial role in shaping followers’ perceptions of influencer credibility by mediating the relationships between parasocial interaction, electronic word of mouth, and consumer purchasing behavior

Applying these findings helps explain how Lisa’s appearance with Labubu aligns with theoretical models in several ways:

- **Lisa’s credibility:** Lisa is a globally recognized celebrity with a trusted and influential public image. Her spontaneous appearance with Labubu, without explicit advertising—such as wearing it

as a bag charm or incorporating it into her everyday look—enhances her credibility and makes followers perceive the relationship as closer and more parasocial.

- **Parasocial relationships and emotional attachment:** Lisa's followers feel that they are witnessing aspects of her personal life, or that she is somehow "close" to them. Consequently, her appearance with the Labubu doll is not seen merely as promotion, but as something imbued with symbolic value, associated with meanings such as belonging, uniqueness, elegance, and perhaps the aspiration to "be like Lisa."
- **A non-traditional target audience:** Images of the doll dominate the accounts of fashion celebrities and are discussed by men's magazines such as *GQ* as a luxury accessory for men's bags on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Unboxing videos garner millions of views, and hashtags such as *Labubu* are used to document carefully curated collections, often accessorized with plastic shoes (sold for \$22) and specially designed outfits.

5.2 The Impact of Word of Mouth

In a 2012 study by Christy M. K. Cheung and Dimple R. Thadani, the authors sought to analyze prior literature on electronic word-of-mouth communication in order to identify the factors influencing this form of communication. The researchers classified previous studies within a unified theoretical framework and developed an integrative model illustrating the impact of word of mouth on online consumer behavior, particularly with respect to attitudes, purchase intentions, and actual purchasing decisions

The study adopted a systematic literature review methodology, following two main steps: identifying studies relevant to electronic word-of-mouth communication and analyzing their content to classify them within a social communication framework. A total of 47 academic studies published between 2000 and 2010 were identified, of which 25 were used in the quantitative and qualitative analysis. The analysis relied on a social communication framework comprising four core elements: the sender, the stimulus or content, the receiver, and the response or effect.

The findings indicated that purchase intention is positively associated with actual purchasing behavior, that attitude directly influences purchase intention, and that information credibility and usefulness positively affect information adoption—an outcome explained through the Information Adoption Model. The study proposed a new integrative framework combining the key variables of the four communication elements.

Applying these results to the Labubu case, once Lisa shared photos of herself with the doll, this immediately generated discussions and conversations among fans and followers. The images were reposted, debated, and widely discussed on social media, thereby strengthening the public's desire to own the product through electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), which emerged as a highly influential marketing force driven by several key factors, most notably:

5.3- Credibility and Persuasion

Previous studies have shown that consumers perceive word-of-mouth communication as more credible than traditional media channels such as print advertising, personal selling, and radio or television commercials. With the emergence of the internet, the scope of this influence expanded to include electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), extending across numerous virtual environments.

Lisa's spontaneous appearance with the Labubu doll vividly embodied this phenomenon, as it persuaded followers to embrace the product based on their trust in her as an icon of novelty and contemporary trends.

3.5.1 The Platform as a Key Factor: Instagram

Instagram is the platform Lisa typically uses to share her personal content, which amplifies her influence. It enables real-time sharing, high levels of interaction, and extensive visibility—factors that research has identified as enhancing the effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth communication.

3.5.2 Parasocial Relationships and Emotional Engagement

Lisa's followers feel that they are witnessing aspects of her personal life, or that she is somehow “close” to them. As a result, her appearance with Labubu is not perceived merely as promotion, but as something imbued with symbolic value, invested with meanings such as belonging, uniqueness, elegance, and perhaps the aspiration to “be like Lisa.”

6. Symbolic Endorsement

Lisa's appearance with the Labubu doll is not perceived as an “advertisement” but as a personal choice by a global icon, elevating the brand's value and transforming the product from a mere “collectible toy” into a style icon. Among fans, if Lisa likes a doll, it signals that Labubu is “fashionable” and “worth owning.”

6.1 Media Impact Value (MTV)

Every photo or post of Lisa with a product can equate to millions of dollars in free publicity. Labubu's appearance with Lisa provided Pop Mart with global media coverage without the need for a substantial traditional marketing budget. It also facilitated the doll's penetration into new markets. Lisa's exceptional popularity in Asia (Thailand, Korea, China, Japan), combined with her status as a European and American fashion icon through collaborations with luxury brands like Celine and Bvlgari, enabled Labubu to position itself in the luxury segment rather than as just a toy. Consequently, Labubu has been redefined as not only a children's toy but also a lifestyle statement, a personal expression of style, and a fashion symbol. Fans emulate Lisa in every aspect of her life—clothing, makeup, accessories, and even small products she is seen with—resulting in conventional consumption behavior: they purchase Labubu because Lisa owns one.

6.2 Role Model Effect

This occurs when a celebrity or influencer—such as Lisa from Blackpink—uses or is seen with a product, turning it in the eyes of the audience into a symbol of identity, status, or refined taste. People emulate the “role model” because they aspire to be like her or belong to her symbolic world. This drives significant demand, as consumers associate purchasing the product with fame, attractiveness, and distinction.

Labubu exemplifies how the Role Model Effect intersects with Artificial Scarcity in contemporary marketing. When a brand or product is associated with a globally influential figure like Lisa, it not only enhances product awareness but generates collective emotional demand that transcends traditional economic logic. Lisa's association with Labubu creates symbolic amplification through:

- **Free publicity:** The product gains automatic, widespread exposure through the influencer.
- **Global fashion relevance:** The product becomes a style symbol tied to global taste and contemporary cultural identity.
- **Emotional influence:** Lisa's fans do not merely buy the doll—they buy symbolic membership in her world and culture.
- **Brand value enhancement:** The product becomes rare and desirable, causing disproportionate demand relative to supply, creating artificial scarcity that increases its attractiveness.

In this context, Labubu has evolved from a simple doll into a cultural artifact, amplified by Lisa's influence, rapidly transitioning from a niche collectible to a global mainstream phenomenon. This model demonstrates how global influencers can reshape the symbolic value of a product, transforming consumer markets into cultural spaces governed by scarcity, desire, and symbolic belonging rather than mere material utility.

6.3 Artificial Scarcity

Artificial scarcity occurs when companies deliberately limit production or issue “limited editions” despite having the capacity to produce more, creating a perception of rarity and exclusivity that drives higher demand. Pop Mart applied this strategy effectively, as seen with Beanie Babies in the 1990s. Each new series is launched after a promotional campaign and quickly withdrawn from the market, significantly boosting demand and making the collectibles market a core part of the company's strategy.

Applied to Lisa and Labubu, Lisa's global influence sparked emotional desire and emulation, while Labubu's limited availability created a sense of value and exclusivity. As a result, the product became a global cultural phenomenon rather than just a toy, with consumers willing to pay premium prices to own it—symbolizing “membership in Lisa's world” and possessing a rare fashion icon—driving demand beyond supply and reinforcing artificial scarcity.

6.4 Blind Boxes

Pop Mart's appeal lies in mystery. Each series contains extremely rare secret characters—often only one per 144 boxes. For instance, Strawberry Labubu from the Labubu The Monsters – Sweet Bean Series is so rare that collectors may spend months or years trying to obtain it. The concept of the blind box mirrors the thrill of gambling: buyers do not select the model but receive a sealed box and are surprised upon opening it. This mechanism generates immense curiosity and engagement among millions of collectors.

Labubu dolls are sold in “blind boxes” ranging from 13\$ to 16\$ in Asian stores, but resale platforms like StockX and eBay have seen prices surge dramatically. The blind box phenomenon encourages repeated purchases and global momentum. Pop Mart has also partnered with brands like Disney for series such as Mickey Family Together Blind Box keychains, and is known for numerous character lines including Mega Space Molly and Hirono. Popular models sell for around 300\$, while rare editions reach 1,580\$, with the extremely rare “Secret” model (1.4% probability) fetching up to 1,920\$ in online auctions. Some rare editions have even sold for 10,500\$ on international resale platforms including eBay, Christie's, Sotheby's, and specialized Chinese and Asian collector sites such as Xianyu and Carousell.

7. Key Indicators of Strategic Growth

Financial data from the Pop Mart International Group shows exceptional results in the first half of 2025 compared to the same period in 2024, reflecting massive growth driven by strong global demand for its products, particularly Labubu. For the six months ending June 30, 2025, total revenue reached CNY 13,876.3 million, compared to CNY 4,557.831 million in the previous year—a remarkable year-on-year growth of 204.4%, signaling substantial market expansion and the company's ability to sell significantly larger volumes, fueled by international expansion and the success of its intellectual properties. This triple-digit growth confirms the overall success of the business model, brand-building strategy, and earned recognition as one of Time magazine's "100 Most Influential Companies of 2025," enhancing Pop Mart's status as a global industry leader

8. Geographic Growth Analysis

Pop Mart's published figures indicate that the company's strongest growth driver is international expansion outside China. Revenue in China reached CNY 8,282.8 million, a 135.2% year-on-year increase. The report highlights the success of the "intensified expansion" strategy and "distribution channel differentiation" in the U.S. Western market, the fastest-growing region, generating total revenue of CNY 2,264.9 million. Strong growth was also recorded through "deepening local operations" in the Asia-Pacific region, considered a natural bridge to globalization, benefiting from cultural proximity with revenue reaching CNY 2,850.9 million, a 257.8% year-on-year increase. Meanwhile, Europe and other regions generated CNY 729.2 million, over seven times higher than the previous year

9. Analyzing the Algerian Market: From Digital Globalization to Local Consumption

Algeria represents a distinctive case study in the rapid cross-border diffusion of marketing contagion through digital channels. *Labubu* entered the Algerian market as part of broader patterns of **consumer globalization**, with its local spread relying primarily on **opinion leaders** and social media influencers active on **Instagram** and **TikTok**.

9.1. Cultural Penetration and Opinion Leadership Analysis Cultural penetration refers to a brand's capacity to permeate a society's social fabric and reconfigure its consumption habits (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). Regarding "Labubu" in Algeria, this was achieved through three primary channels:

9.1.1. Lifestyle Framing Strategy In the Algerian market, "Labubu" was not positioned as a mere "toy," but rather as a "status-enhancing accessory."

- **Example:** Algerian fashion and beauty vloggers frequently feature "Labubu" dolls prominently attached to luxury handbags in "Get Ready With Me" (GRWM) videos. Consequently, the product transcends its material form to become a "**Cultural Cue**," signaling that the owner is well-versed in global trends.

9.2. The Unboxing Experience and "Blind Box" Marketing Algerian influencers cultivated a sense of "collective excitement" through unboxing content.

- **Example:** A prominent TikTokker purchasing a set of "Blind Boxes" and opening them during a live stream exemplifies "**Experiential Marketing**." Followers share the anticipation and thrill, which triggers a desire to replicate the experience in hopes of acquiring a "**Secret Edition**."

9.3. Social Mimicry In Algeria, "Opinion Leaders" act as a filter through which global trends pass to become locally "acceptable" or "desirable."

- **Example:** When a famous Algerian YouTuber displays a "Labubu" in her car or on her workspace, she provides the "**Social Legitimacy**" required to justify purchasing a high-priced doll. This reduces the "**Perceived Social Risk**" for the average consumer, who might otherwise fear criticism for spending a significant sum on what is ostensibly a "toy."

Financial and Economic Indicators

The success of *Labubu* can be assessed through three key indicators:

- **Inventory Turnover:** The products exhibited exceptionally rapid sell-through rates, significantly reducing storage costs and enhancing the brand's attractiveness from an investment perspective.
- **Brand Premium:** The brand's ability to sell a product with relatively low manufacturing costs at a very high price point, driven primarily by **design** and **branding** rather than intrinsic functional value.
- **Price Elasticity of Demand:** *Labubu* demonstrated low price elasticity within certain consumer segments, as demand continued to rise despite price increases. This pattern indicates a transformation of the product into a **conspicuous consumption good**, consistent with the characteristics of a **Veblen good**

10. Analysis of Algerian Consumer Behavior toward the Labubu Doll

The analysis of Algerian consumer behavior toward the *Labubu* doll is approached from a multidimensional perspective that integrates psychological, social, and cultural analysis, while explicitly linking this behavior to the economic characteristics of the Algerian market. This case is examined as a representative example of transformations in consumption patterns in Algeria under the conditions of digital globalization, the rise of the influencer economy, and the expansion of the grey market .

10.1. General Framework of the Algerian Market

The Algerian market is characterized by several structural features that directly shape consumer behavior, most notably:

- A high proportion of youth (more than 55% of the population is under the age of 35)
- The rapid expansion of social media usage, particularly TikTok and Instagram
- Limited official distribution channels for global brands.
- A high level of social sensitivity toward conspicuous consumption

According to international digital platform reports, the penetration rate of social media usage in Algeria exceeded 70% of the total population during the 2023-2024 period, with a clear dominance of the 18-34 age group in content related to fashion, lifestyle, and symbolic consumption

10.2. The Transformation of Labubu into a Status Symbol

In the Algerian context, the *Labubu* doll is not consumed as a traditional toy; rather, it has evolved into a **status symbol**, consistent with the logic of symbolic consumption in which products are used to express identity and social belonging

Given an average monthly income estimated at approximately 45,000–55,000 Algerian dinars according to national statistics, purchasing a doll priced between 18,000 and 30,000 dinars on the grey market constitutes a highly significant consumption decision. This expenditure represents between 35% and 60% of monthly income, reflecting the consumer's willingness to sacrifice a substantial portion of financial resources in exchange for symbolic and social value

10.3. Social Influence and the Role of Opinion Leaders

Digital influencers play a central role in shaping demand, functioning as cultural intermediaries who translate the meanings associated with the product from a global context into a local one. This role is well documented in studies on reference groups in consumer behavior.

Displaying the doll in symbolically charged settings (such as inside a car, in an office, or alongside a luxury handbag) transforms it into a social signal that reduces perceived social risk associated with unconventional consumption choices

10.4. Psychological Motivations for Purchase

10.4.1. *The Need for Uniqueness*

Algerian consumers—particularly in urban environments—exhibit a growing desire for distinction within a relatively homogeneous social space. This tendency aligns with the concept of the **need for uniqueness**, which drives individuals to seek rare or uncommon products in order to achieve symbolic differentiation .

10.4.2. *Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)*

The *Blind Box* system and limited editions intensify consumer anxiety, as artificially induced scarcity combined with constant exposure to digital content generates fear of missing out. This psychological factor plays a significant role in impulsive purchasing decisions

10.5. Cultural Dimensions and the Grey Market

The limited availability of official distribution channels has contributed to the expansion of the grey market. Commercial estimates and field observations suggest that this market accounts for approximately 70–80% of *Labubu* sales in Algeria. The grey market reinforces perceptions of scarcity and elevates the product's symbolic value, in line with the logic of **conspicuous goods**, whose desirability increases as prices rise

10.6. An Integrative Explanatory Model of Consumer Behavior

Algerian consumer behavior toward *Labubu* can be explained through the interaction of three main dimensions: the social dimension (legitimacy and status), the psychological dimension (uniqueness and FOMO), and the cultural dimension (scarcity and consumer globalization). This interaction produces a meaning-driven consumption pattern in which the product becomes a tool for constructing social identity rather than merely a means of satisfying a functional need

10.7. Data Documentation and Sources

The quantitative indicators used in this chapter are based on triangulated data from:

- The National Office of Statistics (ONS) regarding average income and demographic structure.
- DataReportal and We Are Social reports on internet and social media usage in Algeria.
- Market observations and digital platform reports on viewing and engagement behavior (TikTok and Instagram).

These data were employed within an interpretive analytical framework consistent with the nature of consumer behavior research.

The conclusions drawn from the preceding analysis indicate that consumer behavior toward certain collectible toys cannot be adequately explained through conventional economic frameworks alone. Rather, it emerges from a multidimensional interplay of psychological drivers, social validation mechanisms, cultural symbolism, and the structural dynamics of secondary markets. This pattern of consumption illustrates a broader shift toward meaning-centered consumption, where symbolic and social value increasingly rivals functional utility. Consequently, these findings highlight the necessity for both scholars and practitioners in marketing to employ integrative, multidimensional analytical perspectives in order to accurately capture and anticipate ongoing transformations in contemporary marketplaces.

- **Conclusion**

The findings indicate that the rapid diffusion of certain collectible toys was driven less by the product's intrinsic physical quality than by a complex interaction between marketing innovation, psychological stimulation, and structural shifts in contemporary consumption patterns. The adoption of models based on surprise or uncertainty represented a decisive factor in redefining the purchasing experience, as it shifted consumers from a logic of functional acquisition to one of probability, symbolic play, and emotional attachment. This, in turn, reinforced repetitive purchasing behavior and enhanced the product's perceived value through mechanisms of scarcity and uncertainty. In parallel, digital influencers played a central role in accelerating the diffusion cycle by transforming the items into objects of social display within digital spaces and linking them to modern lifestyles and symbolic values associated with distinction and belonging, in line with the logic of conspicuous and symbolic consumption. This convergence between marketing innovation and digital cultural mediation contributed to the expansion of these collectibles in both quantitative and value terms, as inventory turnover rates increased and profit margins multiplied due to the ability to price the products as high symbolic-value goods despite relatively low production costs. In the medium and long term, economic and behavioral indicators point to promising development prospects, particularly through expansion into emerging markets, diversification of limited editions, and deeper integration with platform and collectibles economies. As such, these toys constitute a compelling example of the transformation of recreational goods into cultural and economic assets grounded in meaning, capable of generating sustainable value within the economy of emotion and attention.

Considering emerging markets as a case study, this research highlights that the spread of such collectibles reflects dynamics specific to economies characterized by a high concentration of youth, rapid digital adoption, and limited formal distribution channels. Constrained availability of official supply can lead to the emergence of secondary markets as primary channels of circulation, which paradoxically reinforces perceptions of scarcity and elevates symbolic value, facilitating the transition from recreational products to status symbols within urban environments. The analysis further shows that demand is largely fueled by symbolic consumption driven by social media platforms and digital opinion leaders, whereby relative economic constraints are offset by consumers' willingness to pay prices exceeding the products' functional value in exchange for social recognition and symbolic returns.

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