

Research on the influencing mechanism of impulsive consumption of trendy toy brands: a case study of LABUBU

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Abstract. To systematically study how trendy toy brands trigger and promote consumers' impulsive purchasing behavior, this research takes the phenomenal IP—LABUBU as a case, adopts a cross-platform and multi-source qualitative data collection method, and deeply analyzes consumers' psychological motivations and behavioral performances under multiple dimensions such as emotion, social interaction, and collection. By sorting out user comments, graphic sharing, and media reports on platforms including Xiaohongshu, Zhihu, Douyin, Weibo, and news websites, combined with existing literature theories, this study constructs a comprehensive analytical framework. The research finds that the influencing mechanisms of impulsive consumption induced by trendy toy brands can be mainly summarized into three categories: Design Preference and Emotional Value; Playability and Social Attributes; Collectibility and Global Popularity. Each category of mechanism is supported by specific cases and real consumer feedback. This study not only theoretically reveals the formation path of irrational decision-making in trendy toy consumption behavior and makes up for the lack of empirical research in this field, but also practically provides consumers with reference dimensions to identify and reflect on their own impulsive consumption tendencies, and offers enlightenment for brand owners' marketing strategies and market management. Future research can further extend to the perspectives of corporate marketing strategies and regulatory policies to form a more comprehensive understanding.

Keywords: trendy toy brands, impulsive consumption, digital payment, emotional needs, Generation Z

1. Introduction

At an auction in 2025, LABUBU, a mint-colored vinyl doll, was sold at a sky-high price of 1.08 million yuan. Subsequently, with the promotion of many celebrities at home and abroad, the image of LABUBU spread rapidly on global social media. Within just four months, this single product with an initial price of 99 yuan was once speculated to 5,000 yuan or even higher. Things have become increasingly uncontrollable. People have started to snap up this "ugly" doll blindly, and the price of a set (6 pieces) in the secondary market has reached 1,400-1,850 yuan. This seems to have become a trend and even a frequent topic among friends. So what exactly causes people to engage in global impulsive consumption of something they may not even like?

Existing literature on impulsive consumption has focused on live-streaming e-commerce, companion shopping and other aspects, but research on trendy toy brands is obviously insufficient. Trendy toy brands have distinct characteristics: they take independent IP as the core, integrate art, design and street culture, and

mainly provide light luxury creative products with collection value, emotional resonance and personalized expression for minors. Based on these new characteristics, we need to study in what aspects or what opportunities they provide to trigger impulsive consumption, and the researchability of their mechanisms is very profound. Here we choose to use LABUBU as a classic case for case study.

As a top IP under Pop Mart, LABUBU greatly drove its revenue in 2024. In the same year, the scale of China's trendy toy market was 76.3 billion yuan, and it is expected to reach 87.7 billion yuan in 2025. Consumption is mainly dominated by Generation Z. Driven by emotional value and social currency, the market is developing in the direction of globalization, full-category, high-premium collection, and rational retracement. This indicates that people are increasingly willing to spend money to purchase emotional value and pay for products that can provide them with spiritual entertainment. This has become the main reason for the skyrocketing popularity and serious premium of LABUBU.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on impulsive consumption

Impulsive consumption refers to unplanned and irrational purchasing behavior of consumers stimulated by external factors, characterized by suddenness and non-necessity. Its core manifestation is the lack of a clear shopping plan in advance, with temporary decisions driven by the external environment or internal emotions. It is mainly reflected in the fact that when people shop with virtual currency, they do not have as clear a consumption concept of a string of numbers as they do with paper money, which easily leads to neglecting price factors when shopping or placing orders on a whim. Most of these purchases will lead to regret after a period of time. Existing studies have shown that nowadays consumers learn information through social media, read others' reviews, refer to the recommendations of opinion leaders, and generate purchasing intentions in the process of interacting with others and being influenced by communities [1]. Digital payment tools are gradually changing college students' consumption cognition and behavioral patterns by blurring the pain of transactions and simplifying the payment process [2]. Nowadays, the increasing rise of e-commerce live streaming is reshaping people's purchasing decision-making behavior. As mentioned earlier, those anchors play the role of opinion leaders, and coupled with the digital payment tools used by people, the phenomenon of impulsive consumption has become more widespread among people. In addition, Li Tianyi also studied the impact of loneliness and scarcity on impulsive consumption. He divided loneliness into two dimensions: social loneliness and emotional loneliness, and explored their different impacts on impulsive consumption willingness under two scenarios: time scarcity and quantity scarcity [3].

2.2. Research on trendy toy brands

Trendy toy brands take original IP as the core, focus on trendy culture and artistic design, highlight collection/emotional/social value, and target Generation Z and adult groups as cultural consumption brands. Different from traditional children's toys, their core is to sell IP personality + emotional resonance + circle recognition. Essentially, they take toys as the carrier, integrate art, design, and trendy elements, and emphasize scarcity, design sense, artistry, and collection value. Existing studies have shown that with the continuous rise of new consumer groups dominated by Generation Z, the trendy toy economy has gradually evolved from a small group's "niche hobby" to mass consumption, and has also become a new growth pole of the cultural economy. From IP blind boxes to plush toys, and then to anime peripheral cards, building blocks, etc., this consumption phenomenon derived from the two-dimensional culture has quietly become a new carrier for young people's emotional projection and identity recognition [4]. The rise of trendy toy brands is by no means

groundless. Their various IP images are determined after professional design. The diversified rise of contemporary social culture and the rapid progress of information technology have made the current economic entities have a common point, that is, digital user experience. This requires trendy toy brands to pay more attention to viewing problems from the user's perspective than before, integrate user experience into the design of trendy toy brand images, and create trendy toy brands that are more in line with the aesthetic orientation of Generation Z [5]. Excellent trendy toy products will surely arouse everyone's desire to buy, which inevitably leads to trendy toy brands playing an important role in the birth of impulsive consumption.

3. Research design

In order to deeply and meticulously reveal the specific connection and mechanism between trendy toy brands and impulsive consumption, this study adopts an in-depth single-case study method under the qualitative research paradigm. The case study method is good at exploring "how" and "why" questions, and can provide a panoramic and contextual understanding of complex phenomena, which is very suitable for analyzing the typical and extreme social consumption phenomenon of LABUBU. This study selects LABUBU as the core case mainly based on the following two considerations: First, typicality and extremeness. LABUBU is one of the IPs that have triggered the widest range, deepest degree, and highest social discussion of impulsive consumption in the trendy toy field in recent years. Its sharp price fluctuations, high market popularity, and distinct consumer behaviors collectively reflect many irrational characteristics of trendy toy consumption, making it an excellent sample for studying the mechanism of impulsive consumption. Second, accessibility and richness of data. LABUBU's huge popularity has left a large number of traces on the Internet, providing sufficient and diverse primary and secondary data for this study. This study comprehensively collects nearly a hundred videos, copies, more than 200 netizen comments, and official evaluations from social platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Sohu, Zhihu, and Douyin. Then, the thematic analysis method is adopted for research. First, all collected texts and comment data are repeatedly read and familiarized; second, open coding is carried out to extract primary concepts; then, through continuous comparison and classification, initial concepts are grouped to form more abstract themes; finally, three core themes are refined, supported by typical consumers' original words, to construct the discovery framework of this study. This bottom-up analysis method aims to maximize the authenticity of consumers' voices and naturally emerge theoretical explanations from their narratives.

4. Research findings

Through the systematic analysis of multi-platform data, this study summarizes the influencing mechanisms of impulsive consumption triggered by the trendy toy brand LABUBU into the following three interrelated and mutually reinforcing core categories: Design Preference and Emotional Value; Playability and Social Attributes; Collectibility and Global Popularity.

4.1. Design preference and emotional value

Design Preference and Emotional Value specifically refers to the concept of triggering positive emotional resonance among users through vision, interaction and function in user experience and brand design, so as to establish emotional connections (Table 1). Its core is to go beyond basic functions, satisfy users' sense of security, satisfaction and self-actualization, so as to construct a unique user experience with high loyalty, high stickiness and brand memory points [6]. LABUBU's "ugly and cute" characteristics are extremely prominent: asymmetrical facial features, slightly weird smile curves, and deliberately retained hand-made traces. These

visual elements that seem to be flaws actually construct a unique aesthetic recognition. People have not been exposed to such dolls before, and the emotional value is specifically reflected in the sense of contrast of this doll that makes people more and more obsessed, and unconsciously regard it as their own "spiritual companion". More importantly, this unique aesthetics has become an excellent container for consumers' emotional projection. People are willing to carry a LABUBU with them as a "companion" during daily commutes and trips. These factors have prompted LABUBU to occupy a more important position in people's lives. The novelty of LABUBU's inherent "rebellious" label [7] has greatly attracted consumers' attention. Under its various counter-intuitive settings, it has highlighted the trend of its personality in this regard. On the premise that we have never been exposed to such items, its sudden appearance has brought us a great sense of contrast, so the follow-up trend triggered by it has been so rapid and extensive.

Table 1. Consumers' evaluations of their design preferences and emotional value

Category	Consumer Comments
Design Preference and Emotional Value	@YouTuber A: Its "imperfect" characteristics are interpreted as a concrete expression of modern people's loneliness. Through behaviors such as renaming, changing clothes, and carrying it around, users project workplace pressure and social anxiety into it, forming an emotional compensation mechanism of "adult infantilization". For example, 44% of buyers said that placing it on the work station can relieve work pressure.
	@YouTuber B: In fact, people nowadays are quite lonely in their hearts, so they like to find a companion who doesn't speak but can listen to them.
	@YouTuber C: Labubu takes the soft rubber grotesque image, blind box scarcity mechanism and cross-border co-branding to create emotional resonance, stimulating young people's enthusiasm for collection; its unique aesthetic and interactive experience have even attracted tech leaders to post the same style on social platforms, recognizing its innovative value of integrating trendy toys with culture, and highlighting the influence of Chinese creative IP. Its blind box design uses unknown surprises to stimulate excitement and form dissemination on social media; from art installations to trendy clothing, Labubu expands scenarios, becoming a symbol for young people to express personality and emotion, and also making the traditional toy industry radiate digital vitality.
	@YouTuber D: Labubu takes the soft rubber grotesque image, blind box scarcity mechanism and cross-border co-branding to create emotional resonance, stimulating young people's enthusiasm for collection; its unique aesthetic and interactive experience have even attracted tech leaders to post the same style on social platforms, recognizing its innovative value of integrating trendy toys with culture, and highlighting the influence of Chinese creative IP. Its blind box design uses unknown surprises to stimulate excitement and form dissemination on social media; from art installations to trendy clothing, Labubu expands scenarios, becoming a symbol for young people to express personality and emotion, and also making the traditional toy industry radiate digital vitality.

4.2. Playability and social attributes

Table 2. Consumers' evaluation of its playability and social attributes

Category	Consumer Comments
Playability and Social Attributes	<p>@YouTuber E: Labubu's strong social attributes have formed close connections among players. Players meet offline because of Labubu, sharing the surprise of unboxing, the creativity of modifying dolls, and the interesting stories of exchanging hidden editions. "Making friends through dolls" has formed a unique social circle, making Labubu a "hard currency" in the circle.</p> <p>@YouTuber F: The popularity of Labubu is both accidental and inevitable. With its funny expressions and cute appearance, its sustained popularity relies on brand collaborations. Labubu is no longer a toy now, but more like a means of communication for a social group and a trendy culture.</p> <p>@YouTuber G: Why is Labubu so popular? First, because of its "ugly cute" image, overseas young people of Generation Z prefer such a personalized style. At the same time, it has more social attributes (emotional value and investment value) and blind box mechanism, satisfying the deep-seated needs of contemporary young people for personality, art and emotional projection.</p> <p>@YouTuber H: The difference between Labubu and ordinary toys is that it doesn't seem to rely on being "good-looking" to survive, but it still has become a popular trendy toy that everyone rushes to buy. When the social value of a commodity far exceeds its physical attributes or use value, whether it is "good-looking" is actually no longer important. Labubu has a large and extremely active fan community. Players are keen to share unboxing, collection displays, box-shaking skills, doll modification works and find like-minded people on major social media. This spontaneous dissemination and interaction form a strong word-of-mouth effect and sense of belonging. At the same time, owning rare Labubu (especially hidden editions or large dolls) is an important social capital and status symbol in the trendy toy circle. It can highlight the collector's taste, financial resources (or luck) and status in the community, satisfying the needs for showing off and recognition. This is the embodiment of economist Robert Frank's theory that "the value of some commodities does not lie in their use itself, but in the distinction they can bring to the holders in the group". The success of Labubu also shows that in the current consumer society, the significance of commodities has deviated more and more from the source, and is no longer determined by the production side, but by consumers.</p>

Playability and Social Attributes refer to the sense of immersion, challenge, achievement and desire for exploration brought by games to players (Table 2), which determines whether the game is interesting and replayable; Social Attributes refer to the relationship network for communication, cooperation, competition and sense of belonging among people in games or applications [8]. LABUBU dolls support DIY dressing. Buyers can dress up their dolls according to their own preferences, which greatly increases their playability. For example, @Lin Qianyu Nicky shared photos of herself with LABUBU on Weibo and mentioned changing clothes for it in the comment area, which received 401 reposts and 5,827 likes (as of January 4, 2026). Under the influence of Generation Z, more and more people in most people's social circles have purchased LABUBU products, and it has become an unavoidable topic in daily communication. At this time, if they do not own a

LABUBU, they will have inner thoughts such as inferiority in social interactions, which can fully reflect its social attributes. In addition, since it is sold in the form of blind boxes, the sense of uncertainty and popularity of blind boxes can make it a social currency. Sharing unboxing experiences and exchanging box-drawing skills can quickly find like-minded people. Due to its high playability and practical social functions, it also leads to a surge in people's enthusiasm for purchasing it, and lays the foundation for the emergence of impulsive consumption behavior. Playability and Social Attributes trigger impulsive consumption by satisfying psychological satisfaction, showing personality, social currency needs and instant pleasure experience. Playability brings the desire to possess through uniqueness and artistic sense; Social Attributes, such as the demand for trendy toys to be "seen", turn consumption from practical functions to identity symbols through internet celebrity effect and group identity [9], thus leading to addictive purchase.

4.3. Collectibility and global popularity

Table 3. Consumers' evaluation of its collectibility and global popularity

Category	Consumer Comments
Collectibility and Global Popularity	@YouTuber I: Labubu's emotional value is full. Labubu is not bought to use, eat, or drink; it is completely an emotional consumption. Just for the sentence "I have this one." The multiple combinations of "brand co-branding + IP collaboration + trendy culture" endow it with inherent topicality and social communication power. It is characterized by a low official price but a very small quantity, making it highly collectible.
	@YouTuber J: #Labubu boosts China's cross-border e-commerce# It not only promotes the development of China's trendy toy industry but also rapidly shortens the process of internationalization.
	@YouTuber K: The Labubu IP has existed for many years, but it has to be said that the global popularity of Labubu in the past two years is inseparable from the publicity and follow-up of celebrities. Labubu has further opened up more markets through marketing and hype.
	@YouTuber L: Citibank recently released an in-depth survey covering five countries: China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Japan, interviewing about 1,500 consumers. The core signal given by the report is very clear: Pop Mart's global user base is still growing explosively, and it is transforming from a "blind box-selling company" to a global "IP operation giant". Why are people willing to keep paying? Not just for the surprise of opening boxes. The survey found that "gift-giving" and "collecting hobbies" are the top motivations for global consumers. In the Chinese market, consumers pay more attention to the "emotional value" and "stress-relieving attributes" of products; while in the US, UK and Australian markets, people care more about "value for money". 87% of people said they are very likely to make another purchase within the next three months.

Collectibility and Global Popularity refer to the potential of items to be preserved, studied and appreciated for a long time due to their scarcity, historical and cultural value, artistic beauty or special significance, reflecting the holder's cultural taste and investment choices (Table 3); Global Popularity refers to the degree to which something is widely discussed, pursued and circulated internationally, usually driven by information dissemination, the internet and market demand, measuring its popularity trend in a specific period [10]. The popularity of LABUBU began with the auction of a mint-colored LABUBU at a sky-high price of 1.08 million

yuan, followed by a shortage of supply, which together promoted LABUBU to develop in the direction of high collection value. Its various co-branded models and limited editions (Thailand cultural tourism version, Singapore Merlion version, etc.) are highly collectible. At the beginning of its popularity, Thai actress LISA first posted relevant content to make it popular in the Southeast Asian market. Later, European and American A-list celebrities such as Rihanna and David Beckham posted their LABUBU collections one after another, adding to its global popularity and pushing the trendy toy craze to a wider range. This small cross-border "collaboration" has built a bridge between the star-chasing circle and the trendy toy circle, promoting the trendy toy craze to a broader market. Under this endorsement effect, LABUBU's global popularity soared, directly becoming the most popular topic in the world at that time. This also provides sufficient data for us to summarize the influencing mechanisms of impulsive consumption through this phenomenon. Collectibility (sense of scarcity, hidden editions) and Global Popularity (social currency, group resonance) jointly induce consumers' impulsive purchase by creating the anxiety of "missing out if not buying now", enhancing self-identity and generating emotional resonance [8]. The logic behind this phenomenon is that merchants use blind box mechanisms and other means to make consumers place orders frequently to obtain uniqueness and fill emotional gaps, even ignoring the intrinsic value of the products.

5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1. Conclusion

Taking LABUBU as a typical case, this study reveals the core influencing mechanisms of impulsive consumption of trendy toy brands through the analysis of multi-platform data, namely the interrelated and mutually reinforcing system of Design Preference and Emotional Value, Playability and Social Attributes, and Collectibility and Global Popularity. Relying on unique designs to build emotional connections, satisfying social needs with high interactivity and circle recognition, and creating consumption anxiety through scarcity and global popularity, trendy toy products jointly promote consumers' unplanned and irrational purchasing behavior. This finding confirms the consumption trend of "emotional value first" led by Generation Z, and also provides the underlying logic for understanding the explosive growth of the trendy toy economy.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

At the theoretical level, on the one hand, it breaks through the traditional framework of "individual psychological mechanism dominance" in impulsive consumption research, incorporates social environment and consumption scenarios into the analysis, and reveals the multi-dimensional action path of "individual psychology - social interaction - global communication", making up for the empirical gap of existing research on emerging consumption fields such as trendy toys. On the other hand, for trendy toy brands, it enriches the research dimensions of trendy toy brands, clarifies the driving role of the three core values of IP personification, social symbolization and collection scarcity on consumption decisions, and provides a new theoretical perspective for analyzing the premium logic and consumption addiction mechanism of "non-practical" commodities.

5.3. Practical implications

At the practical level, on the one hand, for trendy toy brands, strategies can be optimized focusing on the three core mechanisms: strengthen the emotional recognition of IP design and differentiated characteristics such as "ugly cute" and "rebellious"; build player communities and encourage interactive behaviors such as DIY and

sharing orders to deepen social attributes; reasonably use co-branding and limited editions to maintain scarcity, and enhance global popularity with the help of celebrity effects and cross-border communication to achieve the dual growth of brand value and market scale. On the other hand, for consumers, it provides reference dimensions for identifying impulsive consumption, helping them rationally distinguish between "emotional needs" and "blind follow-up", avoiding falling into irrational consumption due to social anxiety and scarcity panic, and guiding them to express personality and identity through commodities more reasonably.

5.4. Research limitations and prospects

The research perspective has limitations. It only analyzes from the consumer's perspective, does not involve the design of brand marketing strategies and the formulation of government regulatory policies, and fails to fully present the whole-chain influencing factors of impulsive consumption of trendy toys. The singleness of case selection may affect the universality of the conclusions. This study only takes LABUBU as a sample. Trendy toy brands with different positioning and different audiences may have differentiated consumption driving mechanisms, lacking multi-case comparison and verification.

Future research can be extended to the dual perspectives of brands and governments to explore the regulatory role of marketing strategies and regulatory policies on impulsive consumption; increase case samples of different trendy toy brands and different consumer groups to carry out cross-case comparative research; combine quantitative research methods to construct a quantitative model of influencing factors of impulsive consumption, so as to achieve a more comprehensive and accurate interpretation of trendy toy consumption behavior.

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