

The Rhetorical Criticism of the Fantasy Theme in Blind Box Consumption: Taking Pop Mart's Labubu Series Blind Boxes as an Example

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As a signature blind box series from Pop Mart, Labubu has emerged as a globally popular collectible. Its distinctive features of “religious metaphor” and “emotional resonance” have fueled its worldwide appeal. Through the lens of Fantasy Theme Rhetorical Criticism (FTRC), the Labubu series transforms plastic figurines into “enchanted relics” carrying mystical narratives. This symbolic transformation achieves symbolic convergence by fulfilling contemporary youth’s psychological needs—rebelliousness, loneliness, conformity, and a sense of control.

Keywords: Fantasy Theme Rhetorical Criticism, Pop Mart, blind box consumption, fantasy type, fantasy themes

Introduction

Labubu was initially an elf-like creature created by artist Kasing Lung. Following Lung’s collaboration with toy brand How2work, the 2D character was transmuted into three-dimensional collectibles. In 2018, Pop Mart secured exclusive licensing rights and launched the series publicly. Labubu’s breakthrough came with Pop Mart’s innovative vinyl plus plush iterations. The craftsmanship profoundly harmonized with Labubu’s forest-spirit lore, amplifying the IP’s core essence and triggering a global buying frenzy. Labubu now stands as both a new benchmark for Chinese cultural IP “going global” and a microcosm of Pop Mart’s internationalization strategy.

Fantasy Theme Rhetorical Criticism (FTRC) is a rhetorical criticism method advocated by American communication scholar Bauman, which reveals people’s perception of social reality reflected between the lines through the analysis of discourse rhetoric. This kind of cognition is formed in the repetition of discourse among group members and is used as a group cognitive schema to actively interpret issues or events. In his seminal 1972 work *Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality*, Bauman established this paradigm. FTRC employs core theatrical elements (scene, agent, act, agency, and purpose) to dissect communal fantasies (Chai & Li, 2012). The analytical process follows a micro-to-macro trajectory: fantasy themes, fantasy types, and rhetorical vision. As an interpretive framework, FTRC has been extensively applied to studies of group decision-making, organizational communication, and social movements (Zuo, 2024).

At present, research on the blind box phenomenon mainly focuses on themes, such as consumer behavior (probability addiction mechanism), business operation (IP incubation model), or youth subculture (circle culture characteristics); scant scholarly attention has examined this phenomenon through the theoretical lens of fantasy theme rhetoric (Huang & Yuan, 2021). The global popularity of Labubu blind boxes is inseparable from the

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visual characteristics displayed by the Labubu itself, as well as the text and following phenomena of the consumer group when it spreads, all of which are in line with the group's experience of building reality. In fact, the blind box can be regarded as a rhetorical device carrying the fantasies of the group, and the "religious metaphor" and "emotional attachment" behind its fantasy narrative are well worth exploring. This article will combine the relevant texts on Labubu blind box' official website and social media to deeply analyze the rhetorical criticism techniques and effects of the fantasy theme it embodies.

Rhetorical Criticism Analysis of the Fantasy Theme of Labubu Blind Boxes

Persona Theme

Labubu, with his signature bared teeth, pointed ears, and big tongue, has an odd and somewhat cute appearance, more accurately described as "weirdly adorable", and is set as a mischievous, gluttonous, inquisitive, slightly evil but not inherently bad elf.

Just as people have various social titles in real life, Labubu blind boxes also have specific role titles, which serve as the starting point for rhetorical fantasy. As a member of the "Secret Forest", "Holy Light", and "Temple" societies, Labubu plays different roles. It can be a priest, a guardian, a prophet king, a relic guardian, or an elf king. These terms directly borrow or imply related words from the fields of religion, mythology, and the occult. As Fan Jiakai (1992) put it in *An Appreciation of English Rhetoric*, "a proper noun serves as a bridge connecting the common features of different contexts and quickly builds new associations with the existing ones" (p. 115), and the formation of this linguistic system promotes the creation of fantasy worlds, replacing reality with fictional worlds. The lofty, unknowable and transcendent meanings carried by these words deepen the consumers' fantastical construction of this product, and the simple background statement gives people enough space to endow themselves with the desired spiritual power.

Labubu's signature teardrop eyes, mouth-less design, and simple, abstract body strip away intense emotional expression and are closer to the perception of a "spirit" or "icon". Compared to other cute toys, Labubu inspires a greater feeling of awe among consumers. The most striking example is Labubu's "Skull Fever" series. This collection incorporates significant dark elements into its designs, transforming culturally taboo symbols from Chinese tradition—such as skulls, blood, and death—into Gothic aesthetics. In his book *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman points out that under the conditions of modern social change, interpersonal relationships have gradually evolved from a source of emotional nourishment into a form of cost and consumption (Bauman, 2000). Complex interactions require time to cultivate, and deep connections demand emotional investment. Yet, for modern individuals burdened by weary minds and bodies, these demands often feel excessively heavy. Consequently, this pervasive loneliness requires an outlet. Within this rhetorical framework, people take for granted the notion that emotional needs can be satisfied through material consumption. This transforms the instinctive desires for companionship and belonging into relationships of commodity exchange—buying plush toys quite naturally emerges as a viable solution.

Setting Theme

Labubu's presence in the public eye has been achieved through both online and offline shopping and viewing stores, the wave of social media dissemination, and the fanning of economic speculators.

Labubu's emotional consolation and story sanctification rhetoric have won over a large number of consumers. Against the backdrop of a global economy still in recovery—marked by high employment pressure

and widespread economic stagnation—many yearned for the bygone era of indulging in high-value purchases. At first, Labubu’s low-price strategy not only satisfied consumers’ desires, but also provided them with some emotional care. Moreover, by opening physical stores and theme pop-up stores, it created immersive Labubu fantasy-themed experience spaces, further enhancing the appeal of the scenario theme.

On social media platforms, the company continued to spread the fantasy-themed content of the Labubu blind box through short videos, pictures, and other forms, creating an online virtual fantasy-themed atmosphere. This background setting, combined with hunger marketing tactics, has enabled Labubu to quickly gain popularity and thus increase its selling price. Sensing opportunity, economically astute actors linked its speculative value to notions of preservation and premium pricing, triggering scalping activities. Consequently, the original consumption motives—quasi-religious devotion, adoration of cuteness, and emotional solace—were no longer pure. It is a plastic version of “Moutai” investment mythology, essentially a “consumption bubble” manufactured by capital.

In the past, consumption bubbles were usually associated with high-value items in the real estate sector. However, on one hand, to promote a younger consumer base and on the other hand, to make it affordable for people, Labubu has become an appropriate rhetorical vehicle and has rapidly spread in the current context.

Action Theme

To target specific demographics and attract more consumers, Labubu’s official team and marketers have established a set of practices resembling those of religious organizations. These practices are taught to potential customers, selling them specific ideologies and behaviors.

The hidden settings in the blind box increase the appeal to purchase. With a low probability of obtaining these hidden items, consumers develop a “gambling”-like psychological drive to gain a sense of control, striving to collect the entire series or secure the hidden edition through repeated purchases. This rhetorical strategy transforms material consumption into a symbolic practice of value recognition, making the purchase act a ritual of joining the Labubu fantasy community.

For example, marketing copy employs parallel structures, such as “Missing out equals regret”, “Owning equals uniqueness”, and “Completing the set equals fulfillment”. Through rhythmic repetition, these phrases reinforce cognitive associations, using metaphor to frame probability as a “game of fate”. The hidden edition cleverly exploits the sacred relic-like quality of “scarcity”, rhetorically equating its low appearance rate with rarity and exclusivity. The commercial hype and the unique characteristics created by Labubu’s later hunger marketing have greatly elevated the status of the hidden edition. Coupled with the stimulating effect of herd mentality on the frenzied collecting behavior, the religious-like piety and persistence are even more prominent.

Rhetorical Type: Fantasy-Based Community Interaction

The Labubu series elevates plastic dolls into “elvish relics” that carry mysterious narratives and achieves symbolic convergence (Chai & Li, 2012) based on this symbolic concept.

First, Pop Mart immerses consumers in the fantasy of the figurines’ tangible existence through vigorous online campaigns—such as the “Fairy Cheerleading Dance” and “ZIMOMO Chief Dance”—combined with live performances at POPLAND, its urban theme park. Next, Pop Mart used Labubu and MOKOKO as singers, created songs for them, and opened exclusive IP accounts on social media platforms to expand the scope of the fantasy audience, laying the foundation for community interaction. Finally, the fantasy community was officially established. Within the community, consumers are keen to share the process of opening blind boxes and the

results of their collections, much like religious believers' acts of "witnessing miracles", "sharing divine grace", or "fulfilling vows" to the community. During the display, consumers will also use the jingles that are exclusive to the Labubu to express uniqueness. The power of symbolic convergence is reflected in the fact that the consumer group shares a common "belief", loves Labubu and "sacred objects" or collectibles, participates in common "rituals" (draw boxes and share), and forms a cohesive community.

Notably, Labubu's community activities have gained international traction, with cross-cultural interactions expanding Labubu's metaphysical implications. In Chinese tradition, some figurines with fierce faces are often placed at the entrance of the house, such as the door or window sill, to have the effect of "subduing evil with evil". The sharp teeth and small expressions of the Labubu remind people of auspicious creatures like the Pi Xiu, so its Beijing-exclusive fridge magnets are made of stone lions and door nails. In Thailand, in a series of sacred Sanskrit inscriptions, it is regarded as a mascot with the same wealth-attracting meaning as the Pi Xiu. We can also catch a glimpse of good luck from translations in Western markets. For instance, the Thai-hidden version is translated as "Good Luck to You", and the New Year limited "peace and joy" is translated as "Best of Luck".

Rhetorical Vision: The Silent Rebellion of the Childlike Utopia

Kasing Lung emphasizes that elves like Labubu emerge not from void; they are the intense emotions, fragments of memory, or pure "childlike innocence" lost by human children, living beings condensed and materialized in the crevices of the real world. This setting echoes the deep longing for innocence in contemporary people's hearts. Today, Labubu is not just an ordinary doll, but a spiritual refuge for urbanites to escape reality. The owner of the Labubu uses the doll as a medium for self-projection, building a utopia from which one can escape reality and find a sense of identity and a brief sense of belonging. For instance, in an era of efficiency and involution, the dark aesthetics of Labubu's Skull Fever series caters to consumers' need for cathartic release, endorses Gen Z's "embrace of shadows", and uses furry doll bodies to cover up direct criticism, essentially a soft resistance to mainstream cultural norms.

The meticulous care audiences devote to Labubu vividly embodies this whimsical utopia. Audiences treat Labubu as if they were living children—encasing them in protective plastic shells, then meticulously adorning the figurines. This game of make-believe has quickly become popular in the adult world, creating a utopia of childlike fun that undergoes a silent rebellion against the rationalism and efficiency of the adult world.

Cloaked in fantasy narratives, this implicit assumption obscures the utilitarian nature of consumption, enabling consumers to unwittingly internalize commercial logic through emotional immersion. But by taking advantage of emotional comfort and rebellious psychology, merchants have successfully incorporated this series of dolls into a new consumption symbol, creating a "rebel—consume—rebel again" cycle, ultimately reinforcing the logic of emotional consumption dominance.

Conclusion

Labubu's success is the result of a systematized rhetorical fantasy. From constructing elf mythology to fabricating resale miracles, Labubu blind boxes manufacture rhetorical illusions through multidimensional strategies—visual, linguistic, and cross-media. Within this fantastical system, consumer cognition of the elf universe and behaviors are all fantasy-driven. Consumers actively participate in the construction of the fantasy when purchasing and playing with the Labubu blind box, and behaviors, such as modifying the doll and showing

the box are spreading and reinforcing this fantasy. The seemingly childlike narrative is actually the result of a game between capital logic and emotional needs such as loneliness and childlike utopia rebellion.

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