

Will Labubu be a keeper like Hello Kitty and Pokemon?

Toy fads come and go, though a few become cultural icons. Those that stand the test of time have some special qualities in common.

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In the history of collectible toys, several have achieved immense popularity and set cultural trends: Tamagotchi, Disney Tsum Tsum, pet rocks, Troll dolls, Gundam, Beanie Babies, Hello Kitty and Pokemon. Each has reached the status of a cultural phenomenon of its time.

And now, Labubu. The furry plush toy that looks like a cuddly bunny with a mischievous, serrated-toothed grin has led to eager collectors huddling outside shopping malls across the island. From Funan to VivoCity, the scene repeats itself: people queuing for timed entries, sharing stories and strategising their purchases.

The trend ignited in Singapore and across the world in April 2024 when Blackpink's Lisa posted an Instagram video of her cuddling a giant Labubu toy and accessorising her designer bag with Labubu pendants. Before that, Labubu had been under the radar after it was created by artist Kasing Lung in 2015 as a character in a series of stories – The Monsters – and licensed to toymaker Pop Mart in 2019.

The sight of adults – professionals, housewives, students and even seniors – queuing for a “toy” might seem puzzling. But in Singapore's collecting culture, where Hello Kitty plush sets from value meals once caused traffic jams and unexpected chaos and Pokemon cards can still command hefty prices, Labubu is a new chapter in consumers' enduring fascination with collectible toys.

Combined with the power of social media and other celebrities following suit, including Lisa's fellow band member Rose posting a photo of her with her Labubu on Instagram, Labubu frenzy has reached new heights of popularity as a cultural icon of the digital age where stars have immense influence on consumer trends.

Will Labubu retain its star power and become an enduring icon, similar to Hello Kitty, who was created 50 years ago? Despite several decades of the world pre-social media under her collar, the Kitty critter has managed to retain its popularity in the digital era, finding a new legion of fans on TikTok.

It also raises other questions: how do some collectibles become cultural phenomena? What distinguishes those that endure from those whose star wanes?

THE RISE OF HELLO KITTY AND POKEMON

Hello Kitty, toy company Sanrio's perennial “it girl” since the 1970s, exemplifies how some beloved collectibles can have enduring popularity.

The cute cat started with a simple narrative and a clean design aesthetic, allowing collectors from different age groups and backgrounds to project their own identities and values to create emotional connections with the character.

This minimal backstory also provides flexibility, allowing the brand to more easily adapt Hello Kitty's offerings to changing cultural tastes and establish new brand collaborations across geographies and ages to stay relevant. These periodic updates allow the character to evolve with the times, while maintaining a familiar core identity.

In contrast, Pokemon took a different path, with ever-growing rosters of new creatures and expanding story worlds. This allowed for a rich form of self-expression, as collectors can select creatures and curate teams of their favourite Pokemon to reflect their individual tastes and aspirations.

Both Hello Kitty and Pokemon emerged in alignment with prevailing cultural shifts. The



The Labubu universe is complex with its multi-faceted, layered character personalities that appeal to contemporary consumers. Its imagination, curiosity about the world and playful sense of mischief combine to provide a fantastical backdrop for creative storytelling, according to the writers. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Hello Kitty phenomenon began in Japan in the 1970s, at a time when kawaii culture – emphasising cuteness, childlike innocence and simplicity – offered emotional comfort and connection during rapid economic expansion and urbanisation.

Pokemon, meanwhile, came out of the 1990s era of handheld gaming – cue, the rise of the Game Boy console – and rising global popularity of Japanese pop culture and anime.

These show how collectible trends can gain initial momentum by resonating with the cultural interests of the times.

HOW LABUBU TAPS TODAY'S TRENDS

In Labubu's case, it taps today's zeitgeist – the desire to harness collectibles as a form of self-expression. Such objects allow people to showcase their identities, personalities and values. Labubu's distinct mix of cute and edgy elements has coincided well with aspects of current cultural moments, including self-expression and the global influence of celebrities and K-pop through social media.

Labubu's appearance also appeals to a modern cultural taste, combining elements of cuteness – bunny-like ears – and edginess, with its horror-movie grin, as a kind-hearted character who accidentally does bad things.

The result is an eye-catching contrast that appeals to today's collectors. This flexibility and openness to distinct interpretations offers collectors an open-ended canvas to creatively imbue their own meanings, identities and aspirations through the character and showcase this to others with similar interests.

Labubu's pendants also double as bag charms, perfectly dovetailing with one of the latest trends in the fashion world, providing a mobile form of cultural cachet that extends beyond shelf display or one's home.

This process elevates the collectible from a simple toy to a cultural symbol that resonates on a personal, emotional level.

A contrast to this are the Beanie Babies, which also reached similar heights of popularity in the 1990s. These cute toys were deliberately under-stuffed with pellets, making them feel more “real”, and were based on animals, with names such as Splash the



Blackpink's Lisa hugging a Labubu toy. The trend ignited in Singapore and across the world in April 2024 when she posted an Instagram video of herself cuddling a giant Labubu toy and accessorising her designer bag with Labubu pendants. PHOTO: LABUBUOFFICIAL/INSTAGRAM

Orca Whale and Spot the Dog. The toymaker hit on the idea of restricting distribution, such as allowing only selected stores to sell a limited number of each character per month. This tactic turned it into a hot toy with high resale value.

This also coincided with a major cultural development – the rise of the internet in the late 1990s. Tags on the toys linked to the maker's website, creating one of the first business-to-consumer websites.

But the popularity of the Beanie Babies dwindled, partly due to the brand's emphasis on product scarcity rather than creating a narrative or providing a way for collectors to build meaningful connections with the characters.

True, each Beanie Baby came with a birthdate and poem, but the characters weren't woven into a cohesive story world that facilitated sustained consumer engagement. Many collectors shifted their attention to other rising collectible trends, most notably Pokemon.

Other factors that contributed to Labubu's success reflect today's consumer culture. These

include blind box packaging: sealed packages that contain a random, mystery item from a collection.

This packaging tempts customers to buy these boxes repeatedly until they get the exact item they want. This “reward uncertainty” makes the experience engaging. Getting that item you want after multiple attempts creates another boost in positive reinforcement.

The psychology behind blind boxes centres on surprise and uncertainty, creating a sense of excitement and pleasure. This marketing tactic may not be entirely new, as it resembles Fukubukuro, or lucky bags, which originated from Japan's department stores in the 1900s. But it aligns particularly well with today's trend of unboxing videos and shared experiences on social media.

The communal aspect adds to Labubu's overall appeal. The midnight and pre-dawn queues at malls have become social gatherings where enthusiasts share stories and acquisition strategies. Communities have formed online and offline.

So acquiring Labubu is not just about buying a toy – it offers street cred, a cultural badge that grants entry to a larger community of like-minded enthusiasts on a shared cultural journey.

VEHICLES FOR SELF-EXPRESSION

A common theme in enduring cultural icons such as Hello Kitty and Pokemon, also potentially seen in Labubu, is that they provide collectors with interpretive freedom and a vehicle for self-expression.

It's also important for brands and designers to focus on their consumers, for example by adapting to cultural shifts, creating ways for self-expression and maintaining emotional appeal (such as Hello Kitty and Pokemon), rather than being overly focused on the product itself, like Beanie Babies.

Cultural icons tap universal themes that have everlasting appeal – such as adventure, friendship, aspiration and hope – allowing characters to create strong emotional connections with the audience that transcend generations, cultures and geographies.

These themes also tap a range of personal values, allowing for personal expression and emotional connection. Hello Kitty is about friendship and kindness, while Pokemon taps into adventure and growth. These relatable themes form the foundation of each character's universe, continuing to evolve with cultural shifts over time to adapt to changing tastes.

There are elements of friendship and adventure in Labubu as well. But the Labubu universe is more complex with its multi-faceted, layered character personalities that appeal to contemporary consumers. Its imagination, curiosity about the world and playful sense of mischief combine to provide a fantastical backdrop for creative storytelling.

It is too soon to declare Labubu the next Hello Kitty. But Labubu's current trajectory – based on its evolution, dedicated fanbase and lack of serious new contenders (at least for now) – suggests that this mischievous creature has a promising future.

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